

Gossip 2.0: The role of social media and moral attentiveness on counterproductive work behaviour

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Abstract

This study investigates how negative workplace gossip (NWG) affects counterproductive work behaviour (CWB) through emotional exhaustion. We seek to advance a more nuanced view of negative gossip regarding CWB by exploring the contingency roles of social media (SM) and moral attentiveness (MA). With the use of multisource, time-lagged data from 306 information technology (IT) professionals and their supervisors, we highlight the importance of SM and MA in understanding how individuals react to negative gossip. Our results indicate a positive relationship between negative gossip and CWB mediated by emotional exhaustion. Notably, we found that the use of SM in the workplace strengthens the positive relationship between negative gossip and employees' emotional exhaustion. In addition, the indirect effect of gossip on CWB via exhaustion was moderated by individuals' moral attentiveness. Finally, we describe the implications for managers and promising avenues for future research.

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KEYWORDS

conservation of resources (COR) theory, counterproductive work behaviour (CWB), moral attentiveness (MA), negative workplace gossip (NWG), social media (SM)

INTRODUCTION

Here is a short question for you next time you go to work: 'Do you want to know what people say about you?' Suspicion and apprehension would most likely take over the possible excitement of obtaining new information. In fact, this type of unsolicited insider information is usually referred to as gossip. As an early definition equates gossip to 'be a boon-companion, to make oneself at home' (Oxford English Dictionary), research has shown that tale-bearing can indeed prove beneficial for regulating individual socialising processes (Hafen, 2004; Noon & Delbridge, 1993) and alleviating occupational stress (Waddington & Fletcher, 2005). However, more in line with its Shakespearian meaning, gossip has been massively associated with destabilising and organisationally disruptive phenomena (Kim et al., 2019; Wu, Kwan, et al., 2018).

Research has reported deleterious psychological and organisational impacts of negative gossiping (Chandra & Robinson, 2010; Danziger, 1988; Michelson et al., 2010). The main goal of the present study, however, is to go beyond anecdotal evidence and modelling that includes a collection of correlates and grounds organisational gossip in a theoretical framework. Specifically, it focuses on the consequences of being a gossip target from the perspective of motivational dynamics. Although research has emphasised the role of affective processes (Martinescu et al., 2019; Michelson et al., 2010), much remains to integrate cognitive processes to further our understanding of gossip outcomes.

Drawing from the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll et al., 2018), we explore how negative gossip, from the standpoint of the gossip target, threatens personal integrity and fuels emotional exhaustion and subsequent counterproductive behaviours as adaptive reactions. We argue that gossip is an 'unwanted leak' that threatens individual control over information, a would-be asset that leads instead to emotional distress (Vermunt & Steensma, 2001). This perspective of gossip is consistent with the COR theory, which links psychological dysphoria to feelings of resource depletion. In this case, gossip corresponds to stealing a piece of information meant to remain part of a private stock of valuable personal energy resources. With the use of energy resources, we refer to COR-based taxonomy, defining them as resources that can be used to obtain other resources, but that may become valued in and of themselves. They include money, credit and knowledge (Hobfoll, 2001). We argue that such theorising provides a relevant framework for exploring the complex network of relationships between workplace gossip and counterproductive work behaviour (CWB).

As prior research indicates, using social media (SM) platforms, people can quickly disclose personal information to others and share opinions about it (Dunbar, 2004; Emler, 1994). Accordingly, gossiping on SM is expected to have the potential to hurt an employee due to its prolonged online (Dooley et al., 2009) existence (e.g. information can be shared again and again), and anonymity allows the gossipier to become 'invisible' resulting in psychological strain (Coyne et al., 2017). We, therefore, investigate the adverse impact of gossip on emotional exhaustion in the context of the workplace use of SM, a vector of gossip amplification.

Additionally, given the harmful effects of gossip on work outcomes, it is morally unacceptable (Cuonzo, 2008). And this needs to be studied by integrating ethical aspects that might enhance

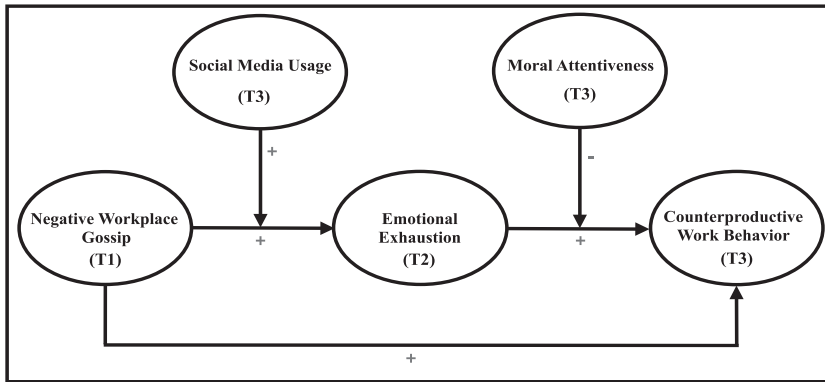


FIGURE 1 Proposed conceptual model of study

our knowledge to investigate gossip and its impact on CWB. While moral attentiveness (MA) has appeared as an important construct to examine ethical decision-making, employees differ in the amount of attention paid to morality and moral aspects of life (Reynolds, 2008). For this reason, our model integrates the results from affective-based gossip research, suggesting that MA, a personal resource from a COR perspective, moderates the impact of emotional exhaustion on the individual proclivity for CWB.

In summary, the main expected contributions of the present study are three (see Figure 1). First, it adds to the literature by considering gossip as a correlate of CWB, a relationship still in need of more empirical investigation. Second, it broadens the notion of gossip by incorporating the role of SM. In today's workplace, SM is indeed more than an informational tool, as it also shapes perceptions and behaviours. Third, this study enriches COR-based research, as it includes MA as a personal resource that conditions the link between gossip and negative organisational outcomes.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

For two decades, gossip has received considerable scholarly attention in various fields, including sociology (Baumeister et al., 2004), psychology (Foster, 2004; Rosnow, 2001), human resource management (Liu et al., 2020) and ethics (Decoster et al., 2013). Overall, gossip is primarily associated with purposeless or malicious conversations (Foster, 2004). A pervading phenomenon (Hallett et al., 2009), workplace gossip is formally defined as an 'informal and evaluative talk in an organization about another member of that organization who is not present' (Kurland & Pelled, 2000, p. 429). For Arno (1980), gossip is information about new, deviant traits or behaviours of other people. This has been related to verbal tactics that influence social relations (Guerin & Miyazaki, 2003). Typically, workplace gossip aims at the target's privacy and usually involves content that is sensitive, personal or cannot be revealed publicly (Kuo et al., 2015), such as divorce, affairs and stigmatisation (Kuo et al., 2015; Michelson & Mouly, 2002). This unfavourable disclosure may hurt, demote or harm employees' reputations (Kuo et al., 2015).

It has recently been shown that gossip can have positive effects, helping to diffuse emotionally charged interpersonal relationships and boosting group motivation (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2011; Ben-Ze'ev & Goodman, 1994; Dores Cruz et al., 2019; Feinberg et al., 2012). However, it should be noted that this positive literature stems mostly from experimental psychology. In contrast,

most applied management studies emphasise gossip as a sneaky work stressor (Wu, Birtch, et al., 2018). Thus, gossip emerges as a perceived threat to reputation, dignity and respect, with an impact on psychological health (Chandra & Robinson, 2010; Georganta et al., 2014; Kuo et al., 2015). However, much remains to be done to provide a coherent theoretical framework beyond identifying gossip correlates and relationships.

From negative gossip to CWB

The COR theory can be used to explain the relationship between negative workplace gossip (NWG) and CWB. Thus, we propose that the targets of negative NWG have a strong motivation to engage in counterproductive work activities as a reaction to negative gossip. CWBs (theft, sabotage, absence, verbal abuse, withholding of effort, lying, refusing to cooperate, destroying the work process and physical assault) are volitional behaviour that harm or intend to harm organisations or organisation members (Cohen et al., 2013; Spector, 2011). Two main types of CWB have been identified in the literature: individual-directed and organisation-directed (Bennett & Robinson, 2000). Spector and Fox (2002) stated that CWB is a broad index of deviant acts, with a common thread of being antithetical to workplace norms and harmful to the organisation and its members. Harming others is considered a moral violation and is very costly for organisations (Mount et al., 2006). Specifically, organisational behaviour issues affect a company's bottom line the way that CWB do, with estimates across the globe suggesting that CWB cost billions of dollars (Bennett et al., 2019; Carpenter et al., 2021). Despite the pervasiveness and cost of CWB, our current knowledge of CWB remains limited, specifically in relation to negative gossip.

In addition to triggering psychological dysfunctions, including stress, anger, resentment and hostility (Strauman & Higgins, 1988; Wu, Kwan, et al., 2018), research suggests that NWG is a symptom of resource depletion that triggers employees' CWB (Lian et al., 2014). According to Salin (2001), employees' negative gossip is a potential social stressor in the workplace, stating that they may have a negative response in such unfavourable work situations. Indeed, workplace stressors have been found to drain employees' personal resources, thus reducing their capacity to control negative behaviour (Baumeister & Heatherton, 1996). Hence, individuals can be expected to expend their current resource bases to regain depleted resources and to avoid further resource loss caused by unfavourable work environments (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001).

At this point, the impact of NWG is relevant to COR's theoretical emphasis on the role of context in the process of individual resource development or preservation. Specifically, the theory highlights how the nature of the workplace environment can be instrumental in providing *resource passageways*, defined as 'ecological conditions that either foster and nurture or limit and block resource creation and sustenance' (Hobfoll et al., 2018, p. 106). Studies have highlighted the impact of physical, that is, tangible, environmental factors on the COR process (Alvaro et al., 2010; Westman et al., 2004). Yet, the ecology of resource preservation can also relate to the subjective context of perceptions, such as a gossiping environment, a strenuous experience for individuals. Hence, while potentially harmful to the organisation, individuals can consider CWB as resource-protective responses to fend off resource depletion feelings in an unfavourable work environment (Hobfoll et al., 2018; Krischer et al., 2010; Taylor et al., 2017).

Discussing and sharing organisational members' personal information, who are absent at work, threatens employees' interpersonal relationships with others because they perceive that they do not have control over their private information. Control over personal information is a potential resource available to employees (Vermunt & Steensma, 2001). Therefore, victims of negative gossip

may be stressed by losing control over valuable resources. To relieve stress in employees, they are involved in CWB (Tepper et al., 2004). Employees might do so directly, such as by damaging or stealing company property, and indirectly, by ignoring or speaking badly about individual members (Hobfoll & Shirom, 2000; Spector & Fox, 2005). On the basis of this, we hypothesise the following:

Hypothesis 1 *Negative workplace Gossip relates positively to counterproductive work behaviour.*

The mediating role of emotional exhaustion

Emotional exhaustion is defined as ‘feelings of being emotionally overextended and depleted of one’s emotional resources’ (Maslach, 1993, pp. 20–21). That is, an employee’s emotional ‘tank’ is low in energy (Babakus et al., 1999). Indeed, a taxing psychological process, it is expected that the link between NWG and CWB is due to emotional exhaustion, a symptomatic state of resource depletion. Hence, research has found that gossip is an antecedent of emotional exhaustion (Babakus et al., 1999). On the other hand, there is a positive and significant relationship between emotional exhaustion and CWB (Aghaz & Sheikh, 2016). These findings are consistent with the literature that links adverse work situations to negative work outcomes (Aryee et al., 2008; Cole et al., 2010; De Clercq et al., 2018). COR theory offers a theoretical explanation for how interpersonal mistreatment causes emotional exhaustion (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Negative gossip is covert and indirect in nature because it occurs in the absence of the target (Wu, Birtch, et al., 2018; Wu, Kwan, et al., 2018), and the target generally observes that he/she is the recipient of this behaviour because gossipers and listeners may avoid making direct eye contact or quickly stop the conversation when the target approaches (Foster, 2004). When employees perceive that their reputation and social relationships with others are at stake due to negative gossip, it may become more difficult to focus on their daily life (Shackelford, 1997) because of their efforts with preoccupations to handle the situation (Lim & Tai, 2014).

Negative gossip could cause employees to become angry or annoyed, especially if the gossip is not true, and they might need to expend resources (e.g. attention and time) to cope with the situation, such as identifying the gossiper, justifying their behaviours and elucidating the truth (Liu et al., 2020). In this process, employees’ personal resources are depleted, leaving victims without sufficient resources to deal with stressful situations, culminating in emotional exhaustion (Lee & Ashforth, 1993; Liu et al., 2020).

Following emotional exhaustion, individuals may engage in organisationally deviant behaviour in an effort to protect limited resources (Liang & Hsieh, 2007). For example, they may ignore customers, refuse to fulfil work demands or take longer breaks than permitted (Maslach & Pines, 1977). In case employees do not have sufficient personal resources to deal with emotional exhaustion via direct avoidance, they may handle emotional exhaustion in more ‘active’ ways, including purposely misplacing a critical document to temporarily avoid completing a demanding task. Similarly, emotionally exhausted individuals are more likely to act rudely towards colleagues, say hurtful things or make fun of others in the workplace (Banks et al., 2012). Employee’s CWB appears in the form of such aggression towards individuals as an outcome of emotional exhaustion at work (Jones, 1980). This aligns with COR conceptualisation, suggesting that when an individual’s resources get exhausted, they enter into the defensive mode and become more aggressive (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Individuals may also engage in CWB-I as an attempt to build resources by ‘lashing out’, which provides them a sense of control. Accordingly, they are much likely to harm other individuals (Bolton et al., 2012).

Employees’ exposure to emotional exhaustion can function as a causal mechanism that connects adverse work situations, such as mistreatment to work outcomes (Aryee et al., 2008; Cole et al., 2010;

De Clercq et al., 2018). Meanwhile, as a work stressor, gossip is also considered an antecedent of emotional exhaustion that requires significant social readjustment and adaptation, a draining of resources (Babakus et al., 1999). Considering the logic of COR theory, we argue that psychological distress may result when employees experience stress due to the loss of personal resources caused by NWG (Hobfoll, 1989). Therefore, employees may engage in counterproductive activities to relieve stress and reduce resource loss. Specifically, exposure to negative gossip implies that the target has a damaged reputation and faces a stressful situation (Shackelford, 1997) that can increase pressure on employees' behaviour, which leads to emotional exhaustion. When they perceive threats of loss of personal resources or are unable to gain returns on their invested resources, emotional exhaustion can further heighten their feelings leading to CWB. On the basis of the above-mentioned argument that NWG influences emotional exhaustion, we expect that emotional exhaustion will mediate this positive effect. In other words, NWG may act as a work stressor that may induce employees' emotional exhaustion by depleting their personal resources. Subsequently, emotionally exhausted employees are more likely to engage in CWB. Accordingly, we propose the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 2 *Emotional exhaustion mediates the positive relationship between negative gossip and CWB.*

SM as a moderator

As channels of information sharing, SM refers to any digital platform, website or app that enables people to create and share content, discuss and connect with each other (Abolfathi et al., 2022). These include platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and other similar interactive websites (Shah et al., 2019; Tartari, 2015). In today's work environment, SM has revolutionised interpersonal exchange, from face-to-face to the use of an array of web-based applications (Cain & Fink, 2010; Chang & Hsiao, 2014), thus reshaping society at all levels (Forbush & Foucault-Welles, 2016; Pekkala et al., 2022; Sah & Karpinski, 2016; Van Dijck & Poell, 2013).

SM have been found to be useful in enhancing interpersonal collaboration, improving the socialisation process, knowledge sharing (Mohamed et al., 2017) as well and increasing employees' productivity (Brzozowski, 2009; Liu et al., 2014). On the other hand, SM has also gained the reputation of reducing individual and organisational productivity and increasing disturbances (Cao et al., 2016). For instance, a recent survey declared that the 'use of social media networks (made) people's lives worse' (Alvaro et al., 2010). Specifically, research suggests that using SM during work can cause employees to experience more burnout (Charoensukmongkol, 2016). Borrowing from the occupational health psychology literature, researchers have argued that SM facilitates the development of positive attitudes towards cyberbullying, which increases the likelihood of cyberbullying perpetration (Barlett et al., 2014). Farley et al. (2016) demonstrated that workplace bullying occurs 'at work', but perpetrators and targets do not need to be physically co-located for cyberbullying to occur. Similarly, Barlett et al. (2018) explain that SM platforms that allow greater anonymity (e.g. Yik Yak and Whisper), the extent to which a perpetrator's identity is concealed, have higher risks of propagating negative gossip.

Aside from contributing to deteriorating psychological health (Cunningham et al., 2021; Schodt et al., 2021), dubious comments on SM can also damage reputations of employees and clients. Through SM, identified, and anonymous, individuals feel empowered by an unrestricted flow of information (Amedie, 2015) that contributes to spreading rumours and unchecked assertions (Dodig-Crnkovic & Anokhina, 2008). SM posts are permanently accessible once published; therefore, they can be repeatedly viewed and seen by a much larger audience (Farley et al., 2016).

This process has been related to increased interpersonal conflicts, lower morale and the annihilation of trust between workers and managers (Chung & Koo, 2015; Hughes et al., 2012). Specifically, online gossip negatively impacts cohesion and engagement (Okazaki et al., 2014; Syrek et al., 2018). Valkenburg et al. (2006) suggested that people tend to experience lower self-esteem when they receive negative remarks from friends on SM. This is consistent with a research survey (Pew Research Institute, 2013) reporting that about 10% of the participants were fed up with the 'drama' and gossip spread by their Facebook 'friends'.

In line with COR theory, we argue that in an environment where organisational members extensively and freely use SM, they are more likely to be victims of negative gossip. This increases the possibility fear of future sharing and a faster flow of information that requires more emotional resources (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001) to cope with gossip, thus suffering greater emotional exhaustion. Indeed, environmental demands that act as work stressors can threaten or deplete an individual's valued resources. In this study, NWG is a commonly encountered environmental demand (stressor). Consistent with COR theory, individual personal resources are depleted in dealing with the stressor, which leaves limited resources available for work demands (Hobfoll, 2011). This resource loss can lead to emotional exhaustion (Murtaza et al., 2022). Accordingly, we predict that the relationship between NWG and emotional exhaustion will strengthen in case of SM usage is high in the workplace because the exposure of (mis)information (among SM friends) as a stressor can cause strain (First et al., 2021; Wolfers & Utz, 2022). When individuals receive frequent (mis)information, unrestricted and anonymous comments on SM, this can create a stressful situation, and employees struggle to deal with this situation. However, in dealing with this stressful situation, employees expend additional resources, as they may further use SM to respond/explain or share their situation on SM networks. This may divert them from their primary work assignments, and ultimately, they experience being highly emotionally exhausted. In contrast, an environment where organisational members do not frequently use SM platforms might be less likely to take unwanted comments. They do not need additional resources to invest in coping with gossip and may therefore be less emotionally exhausted.

Our arguments were also confirmed by Han et al. (2020), who explained that excessive use of SM at work could cause burnout. For this reason, we argue that SM usage may influence the relationship between NWG and emotional exhaustion; that is, SM can strengthen this link. This study developed a framework in which emotional exhaustion mediates the influence of NWG on CWB, and SM is a moderator that amplifies the effect of NWG on emotional exhaustion. It is logical to perceive that employees who use excessive SM and experience NWG experience a higher level of emotional exhaustion, leading to counterproductive activities. Thus, it can be reasonably proposed as a moderated mediation model; that is, the indirect effect of NWG on CWB via emotional exhaustion will be moderated by SM usage. On the basis of the above elements, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3 (a) *Social media usage moderates the strength of NWG on CWB mediated by emotional exhaustion, such that (b) the mediated relationship is stronger under high usage of social media at work than under low usage of social media.*

The role of MA

MA refers to 'the extent to which an individual chronically perceives and considers morality and moral elements in his or her experiences' (Reynolds, 2008, p. 1028), which is a trait-like characteristic. MA corresponds to a two-dimensional construct, including (1) perceptual MA

(the identification of moral aspects of daily experiences) and (2) reflective MA (the extent to which an individual frequently takes into account moral issues). Perceptual MA refers to perceived information, whereas reflective MA is concerned with analysis and action-taking. Perceptual and reflective components assist chronic attention towards moral content (Reynolds, 2008). Prior research suggests that MA is positively related to work outcomes. For example, MA has a host of positive benefits such as ethical behaviours (Van Gils et al., 2015) and moral imagination and creativity (Whitaker & Godwin, 2013) and social responsibility (Wurthmann, 2013). Dawson (2018) found that individuals with higher MA tendencies are more likely to believe that ethical and social responsibility are important. Reynolds (2008) stated that individuals with high levels of MA tend to be more interested in ethical issues of daily and organisational life, whereas individuals with low levels of MA tend to be indifferent to moral issues.

Prior research suggests morally attentive people are less likely to behave deviantly (Khan et al., 2022). From a theoretical side, MA illustrates how a resource is defined within a COR-based perspective. Specifically, a resource 'confounds' (Halbesleben et al., 2014, p. 1337) with its outcome. In other words, a resource is a motivational asset that helps achieve the objective(s). In our case, MA fits the definition of a personal resource, as part of an individual pool of assets deemed essential to perform. Hence, a strong sensitivity to moral clues or aspects can compensate for resource loss caused by excessive cognitive demands between NWG and CWB. Under this theory, we might expect individuals to respond more negatively to work environments that induce NWG when they have fewer resources to buffer against adverse life events (Hobfoll et al., 2018).

To cope with the excessive demand for NWG, employees benefit from access to personal resources that protect them from the adverse effects of gossip. Individuals with fewer resources are more vulnerable to resource loss and experience stronger psychological distress (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001); thus, they may engage in counterproductive activities. However, sensitivity to moral aspects can create important resource gains in the presence of stressful circumstances (i.e. negative gossiping), as reflected in employees' greater resilience. An adequate backup of personal resources enables them to retain their resource reservoirs even under stressful and exhausting work conditions (Hobfoll, 2014). In other words, individuals who possess more significant levels of personal resources may have a greater ability to maintain and mobilise their resources and deal with stressful situations at work. This argument is consistent with prior work that indicates that individuals at high levels of MA are less inclined towards unethical behaviour (Reynolds, 2008).

From the COR theory perspective, we argue that greater sensitivity to moral aspects can buffer resource-depleting circumstances. Hence, individuals with higher levels of MA are less likely to engage in CWB as an expression of NWG-induced emotional exhaustion (Khan et al., 2022). Instead, when confronted with negative gossip, targets make efforts to successfully handle the perceived threat to psychological well-being, ruined reputation and stature (Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Treadway et al., 2005).

A moderated mediation relationship implies that negative feelings due to NWG serve as a cause for increased negative work behaviours of employees. Simultaneously, MA provides a buffering effect to intervene in the indirect adverse effects of NWG on CWB. Employees with high levels of MA can cope well with their negative work environment without experiencing stress. Conversely, individuals with low levels of MA are vulnerable to falling victims to job stress due to their experience of negative gossip, which leads to compromised ethical standards. Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 4 (a) *Moral attentiveness moderates the mediating effect of emotional exhaustion in the relationship between NWG and CWB such that (b) the mediated effect is weaker for employees with high levels of MA than for those with low levels of MA.*

METHOD

Context and data

To test our hypotheses, we invited employees and their supervising managers working in 66 software houses and call centres (IT sector) in three main cities of Pakistan to participate in the present study. The IT sector offers a wide range of services for computing strategies and problem-solving for both public and private organisations. The participants were technical (engineers, software developers, programmers) and non-technical (marketing and sales, human resources, accounts and admin) staff. According to a computer science degree hub study (2017), SM use in the IT sector is pervasive. Research access was gained through personal and professional contacts of the first author, who made these organisational units available for sampling. A cover letter explaining the purpose and scope of the study assured respondents of strict anonymity and that participation in the study was voluntary. In Pakistan, English is taught as a major compulsory subject in schools and is the medium of instruction for all university education. Except for entry-level jobs, in which almost no education is required, every person employed in Pakistan can read and understand English. Moreover, English is the official working language in Pakistan, and individuals working in software houses have education at the high school and university levels to perform such duties. Thus, given the sampling frame, we did not have to translate the questionnaire into its native language. This practice has been validated by previous research conducted on Pakistani samples (Abbas et al., 2014; Bouckennooghe et al., 2015; Butt et al., 2005).

Data were collected using multiple surveys at three different points in time from both employees and their immediate supervisors, with 2-month gaps to minimise common method variance (CMV) concerns (Podsakoff et al., 2003). At Time 1, we sent a survey to employees in which the NWG and demographics were measured. At Time 2, we measured the employees' emotional exhaustion. At Time 3, employees' supervisors completed a questionnaire comprising items related to CWB. At the same time, T3 employees were invited to complete a questionnaire, in which SM and MA were measured. All employees completed questionnaires containing identity codes to allow their responses to be matched with their supervisors.

All participants were assured of their complete anonymity. At T1, a total of 989 questionnaires were distributed to employees, with a return rate of 73% ($n = 722$). We followed the procedure proposed by Lee et al. (2018), in which one supervisor completes for only one subordinate to control for potential supervisor effects. At Time 2, a total of 722 questionnaires were distributed. Of 722 employees surveyed, 449 were returned with the response of 62%. At Time 3 (T3, 2 months after T2), employees who completed at T1 and T2 were asked to report their MA and SM usage. At the same time (T3), we received 411 completed questionnaires (57% of 722) from supervisors. The final sample came from different departments of 17 call centres (26%) and 49 software houses (74%). A minimum of one and a maximum of 11 respondents responded to each software house/call centre ($M = 3.61$ per organisation, $SD = 1.78$). After matching employees' surveys with corresponding supervisor surveys and disregarding non-usable (missing values) questionnaires, the final sample consisted of 306 paired questionnaires.

Measures

NWG

NWG was measured using three items adapted from Chandra and Robinson (2010). Responses ranged from (1) *never* to (5) *daily*. The sample items are 'In the past six months, others (e.g. coworkers and/or supervisors) communicated damaging information about me in the workplace' and 'In the last six months others (e.g. coworkers and/or supervisors) spread unfavorable gossip about me in the workplace'.

Emotional exhaustion

Emotional exhaustion was measured using an 8-item subscale of the English version of the Oldenburg Burnout Inventory OLBI (Demerouti, 1999; Demerouti et al., 2010; Demerouti & Nachreiner, 1996). A sample item includes 'During my work, I often feel emotionally drained'. The scale was measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from (1) *strongly disagree* to (5) *strongly agree*.

CWB

We used a 19-item scale from Bennett and Robinson (2000). The scale comprises two CWB dimensions. The first dimension has 7 items measuring employee behaviour towards the organisation, and the sample item is 'Taken an additional or longer break than is acceptable at your workplace'. The second dimension comprising 12 items was related to employee's behaviour towards other individuals at work, and the sample item is 'Said something hurtful to someone at work'. Responses were collected on a frequency scale (1 = *never*, 5 = *daily*) asking supervisors how often their employee remain engaged in listed behaviours during present job. In this study, we considered this scale as a whole.

Use of SM

The use of SM at work was measured using five items adapted from Ali-Hassan et al. (2015). Responses were measured using a frequency scale ranging from (1) *never* to (5) *daily*. The scale was modified in terms of scaling options from a 7-point to a 5-point frequency scale. The validity and reliability of the 5 modified scales were checked, as suggested by Heggestad et al. (2019). Sample items include 'In my organisation, I use social media to get acquainted with colleagues who share my interests'.

MA

We used Reynolds (2008) 12-item scale to evaluate MA. Of these, seven relate to perceptual MA (e.g. 'Many of the decisions that I make have ethical dimensions'), and five are about reflective MA (e.g. 'I think about the morality of my actions almost every day'). The 5-point Likert scale ranging

from (1) *strongly disagree* to (5) *strongly agree* was used. Owing to the high correlation ($r = .77$) between the two dimensions, we reported results with the overall scale (e.g. Dawson, 2018).

Control variables

Previous research has confirmed the role of individual characteristics in determining workplace deviance. For example, age, gender and education have been found to be significantly related to employees' deviant behaviour. Older employees are less likely to steal from the organisation than their counterparts (Kumi, 2013). Similarly, another study found a significant role of such demographic characteristics, that is, gender and marital status, in predicting employees' deviant behaviour at work (Chernyak-Hai et al., 2019). It is also evident that employees with more job experience are less likely to exhibit CWB (Gruys & Sackett, 2003). Such deviant employee behaviour may relate to an individual's status at work (Aquino & Douglas, 2003). On the basis of this evidence, we controlled for individual characteristics that affect employees' CWB in the current study.

Overview of analysis

We performed a series of confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) to test the convergent and discriminant validity of the measurements. After discriminant validity was established, regression analysis was performed to test the direct and indirect effects using SPSS. PROCESS macro model 4 was used to test the mediating effect of emotional exhaustion. Finally, to test the moderated mediation hypotheses, we ran PROCESS Macros models, 7, 14 and 21 (Hayes, 2017). We used 5000 bootstrap samples with 95% biased-corrected confidence intervals (Williams & MacKinnon, 2008) to test the moderated mediation hypotheses in our proposed model. The effect is considered significant if, in the CI, zero is not included between the lower and upper limit values. To ensure that multicollinearity was not an issue in our sample, we performed collinearity diagnostics using variance inflation factors (VIFs). The VIFs for all variables were less than 1.5 (below the critical value of 10), typically considered acceptable (Hair et al., 2006).

CFA

A five-factor measurement model was tested against alternative models, including (1) a four-factor model (workplace gossip and emotional exhaustion combined), (2) a three-factor model (NWG, emotional exhaustion and SM combined), (3) a two-factor model (NWG, emotional exhaustion, SM and MA combined) and (4) a single-factor model with all items loaded on a common latent factor (CLF). The results showed that our hypothesised five-factor model provided a significantly better fit to the data than alternative models (see Table 1). The CFA results indicated that the five study variables had satisfactory discriminant validity. The average variance extracted (AVEs) of constructs ranges from .67 to .85 ($>.5$), and the maximum shared variance (MSV) was found between .08 and .24. Discriminant validity is supported as AVEs are greater than the squared correlation coefficient of the respective paired constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Hair et al., 2010). In an alternative model, CWB and MA were divided into two factors (CWB-I and CWB-O) and (MA-P and MA-R), respectively. As the correlation between the two dimensions of

TABLE 1 Results of confirmatory factor analysis

Model	Description	χ^2	df	χ^2/df	p-value	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR	Change from hypothesised model	
										$\Delta\chi^2$	Δdf
1	Five-factor model	245.287	220	1.117	.112	.995	.994	.020	.0249		
2	Four-factor model	589.859	224	2.672	.031	.937	.929	.072	.0624	344.572	4
3	Three-factor model	1042.649	227	4.593	.000	.859	.843	.107	.0829	452.790	3
4	Two-factor model	1962.130	229	8.568	.000	.701	.670	.155	.1344	919.481	2
5	One-factor model	2975.389	230	12.936	.000	.527	.479	.195	.1701	1013.259	1

Abbreviations: CFI, comparative fit index; RMSEA, root mean square error of approximation; SRMR, standardised root mean square residual; TLI, Tucker–Lewis index.

each construct was high (.69 and .77, respectively), we proceeded with the single overall dimension of CWB and MA. The five-baseline model showed an excellent fit index compared with the alternative model. Thus, the baseline five-factor model was retained. Our CFA results indicated that this model was a good representation of the data (CMIN/DF = 1.117, comparative fit index [CFI] = .995, Tucker–Lewis index [TLI] = .994, root mean square error of approximation [RMSEA] = .020, standardised root mean square residual [SRMR] = .024).

CMV

Testing for CMV was performed to rule out any likelihood of relationships between study variables suffering from self-report bias. Harman's single factor method (Podsakoff & Organ, 1986) with unrotated principal axis factoring analysis indicated that a single factor explained 33% of the variance, less than 50% in our data. Furthermore, following Gaskin (2016) recommendations, we used the CLF technique to examine the existence of common method bias, where we added a CLF in our model. We compared the standardised regression weights of all items for models with and without CLF. The CLF test did not identify differences in regression weights that exceeded the threshold of .20 (Gaskin, 2016; Podsakoff et al., 2003; Serrano Archimi et al., 2018). Additionally, we run a chi-square difference ($\Delta\chi^2$) test between the constrained and unconstrained models, where all paths from the CLF are constrained to zero (Gaskin, 2016; Podsakoff et al., 2012). The results of the chi-square difference test show [$\Delta\chi^2 = \chi^2_{\text{constrained}}(219) = 243.643 - \chi^2_{\text{unconstrained}}(220) = 245.824$, $\Delta = \chi^2(1) = 2.181$ ($p = .139$)] that the amount of shared variance across all variables is not significantly different from zero. A non-significant chi-square difference indicated no substantial bias, and the bias factor was removed from subsequent analyses (Gaskin, 2016; Jaber & Oftedal, 2020).

RESULTS

Table 2 summarises the descriptive statistics, including the means, standard deviations, bivariate correlations and scale reliabilities.

As the correlations shown in Table 2 indicate, work experience only had a significant negative correlation with CWB ($r = -.11, p < .05$). The effect of work experience was then controlled when emotional exhaustion was tested as a mediator between NWG and CWB. In the mediation analysis, work experience reveals non-significant effect on CWB ($b = -.003, SE = .007, n. s.$). The NWG was significantly related to CWB ($b = .251, SE = .053, p < .001$). Thus, Hypothesis 1 is supported. The NWG showed a positive and significant association with emotional exhaustion ($b = .283, SE = .056, p < .001$). Emotional exhaustion was also positively related to CWB ($b = .301, SE = .051, p < .001$). These findings confirm (Hypothesis 2): mediation of emotional exhaustion.

Moderated mediation testing

On the basis of the methodological approach of Welsh et al. (2014), we performed moderated mediation analysis to test our moderated mediating hypotheses. The coefficient estimates for the moderated mediation model for CWB are presented in Table 3. To test stage one moderated mediation, we used Model 7 in SPSS PROCESS Macro (Hayes, 2018). The results, that is, interaction effect = .14, $CI = [.064, .208]$ validated the Hypothesis 3, suggesting that the relationship between NWG and emotional exhaustion was significantly moderated by SM use. Therefore, Hypothesis 3a is supported.

Further, the mediated relationship of emotional exhaustion between NWG and CWB was moderated in the first stage by SM. The conditional indirect effect for this first stage moderated mediation model at low (conditional indirect effect = $-.059, CI = [-.020, .148]$), and high level (conditional indirect effect = $-.151, CI = [.074, .240]$) of the moderator is significant. Specifically, the indirect of NWG on CWB through emotional exhaustion was positively moderated by SM usage. That is indirect effect increases as the moderator value increases (see Figure 2). In Figure 2, the indirect effect was plotted along with an accompanying 95% CI and a region of significance (Bauer & Curran, 2005). The 95% bootstrap CI for the index of moderated mediation was $[.017, .092]$. Therefore, Hypothesis 3b is also supported.

To test the moderated mediation, as outlined in our theoretical diagram, we used Model 14 in SPSS PROCESS (Hayes, 2018). In Hypothesis 4, the relationship between emotional exhaustion and CWB was significantly moderated by MA (interaction effect = $-.13, CI = [-.195, -.070]$). Therefore, Hypothesis 4a is supported. Additionally (Hypothesis 4b), the mediated relationship of emotional exhaustion between NWG and CWB was moderated in the second stage by MA.

The conditional indirect effect for moderated mediation model at low (conditional indirect effect = $.224, CI = [.114, .347]$) is significant, and high level (conditional indirect effect = $.043, CI = [-.051, .146]$) of the moderator is insignificant. In particular, the indirect of NWG on CWB through emotional exhaustion was negatively moderated by individuals' MA. That is, the indirect effect decreases as the MA value increases (see Figure 3). Figure 3 graphically illustrates the magnitude of this indirect effect at the levels of the moderator, along with an accompanying 95% CI and a region of significance. The 95% bootstrap CI for the index of moderated mediation was $[-.107, -.015]$. Therefore, Hypothesis 4b is also supported.

Finally, we tested the full model using Model 21 in the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2017), with emotional exhaustion mediating the effects of NWG on CWB, SM moderating between NWG and emotional exhaustion and MA moderating between emotional exhaustion and CWB. We calculated the conditional indirect effect using 5000 bootstrap samples to establish a 95% confidence interval around the conditional indirect effects. As shown in Table 3, we found a significant interaction between NWG and emotional exhaustion by SM ($b = .14, CI = [.064, .208]$) and between emotional exhaustion and CWB by MA ($b = -.13, CI = [-.195, -.070]$).

TABLE 2 Means, standard deviation and correlations

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	
1. Gender	—	—	—											
2. Age	36.94	9.33	-.15**	—										
3. Education	2.42	.62	.09*	-.05	—									
4. Job position	—	—	.07	.13*	-.04	—								
5. Work experience	9.88	6.49	-.00	.14**	-.05	-.01	—							
6. Marital status	1.44	.49	.09*	.78**	.00	-.05	-.76**	—						
6. NWG	1.91	.97	.07	-.03	.07	.02	.07	.08	—					
7. Emotional exhaustion	2.05	1.02	.07	.01	.14**	-.03	.05	.01	.39**	—				
8. CWB	1.96	1.00	.04	-.04	.09	-.08	-.11*	.03	.35**	.40**	—			
9. Social media	1.94	.99	.03	.01	.07	-.06	-.01	.00	.23**	.37**	.29**	—		
10. Moral attentiveness	2.81	1.52	.02	-.06	.06	.14**	.08	.06	-.11*	-.10*	-.26**	.04	—	
													.04	
														(.94)

Note: $N = 306$. All 10 relationships were tested on a level (1-tailed) of significance. The reliability (Cronbach's alpha) estimates are shown in italics along the diagonal.

Abbreviations: CWB, counterproductive work behaviour; NWG, negative workplace gossip.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

TABLE 3 Coefficient estimate for the moderated mediation model for counterproductive work behaviour

Variables	First stage				Second stage			
	Dependent variable = emotional				Dependent variable = counterproductive			
	Exhaustion				Work behaviour			
	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i> -value	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i> -value
Constant	2.087	.112	18.52	.001				
Work experience	−.006	.007	−.633	.526				
Negative workplace gossip	.284	.056	5.071	.001				
Social media	.290	.052	5.414	.001				
Negative workplace gossip × social media	.140	.036	3.735	.001				
Constant					1.517	.150	10.087	.001
Work experience					−.003	.007	−.375	.707
Negative workplace gossip					.250	.053	4.531	.001
Emotional exhaustion					.301	.051	5.760	.001
Moral attentiveness					−.160	.031	−4.907	.001
Emotional exhaustion × moral attentiveness					−.134	.032	−4.128	.001
R²	.314				.342			
F	34.545***				31.317***			

Note: *N* = 306. Unstandardised regression coefficients are reported:

**p* < .05.

***p* < .01.

****p* < .001.

Our results show that the indirect effect of NWG on CWB is significant only in the case of a high frequency of SM and low level of MA, with the 95% confidence intervals computed using bootstrap estimates excluding zero. The index of moderated mediation was significant (index = −.018, CI = [−.035, −.004]). Therefore, we established overall support for our hypothesised model.

DISCUSSION

In this study, we developed and tested a moderated mediation model for CWB and negative gossip. Specifically, we explored the moderating role of SM in the relationship between negative gossip and CWB, a link mediated by emotional exhaustion. Viewed as a loss of control over one's information, the present study is framed within the COR theory, with gossip as a determinant of emotional exhaustion. Furthermore, our model includes MA, a personal resource, as a second moderating variable, where MA buffers the impact of emotional exhaustion on subsequent CWB.

The model proposes a number of hypotheses: (1) negative gossip at work is positively related to employees' CWB, (2) emotional exhaustion mediates the relationship between NWG and CWB, (3) SM moderates the NWG–CWB link and (4) MA moderates the relationship between NWG and CWB. A time-lagged, multisource field survey of IT professionals supported our study

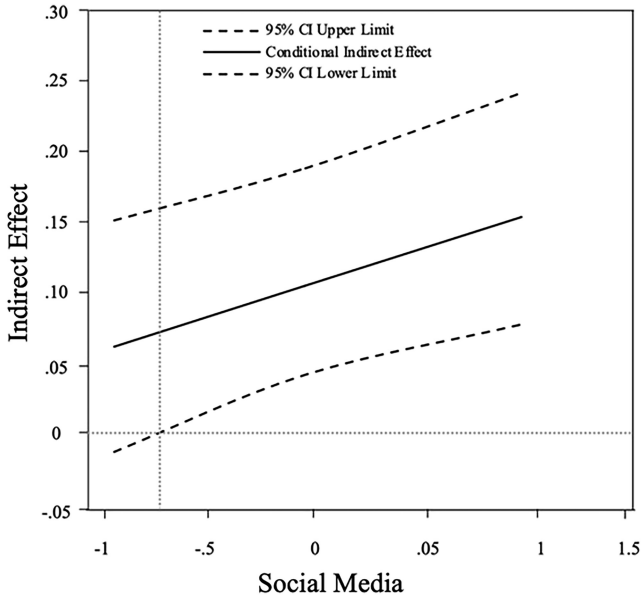


FIGURE 2 The indirect (i.e. mediated by emotional exhaustion) relationship between negative workplace gossip (NWG) and counterproductive work behaviour (CWB) at levels of high frequency of social media usage among employees, with 95% CI. The *horizontal dotted line* denotes an indirect effect of zero. The *vertical dotted line* represents the boundary of the region of significance.

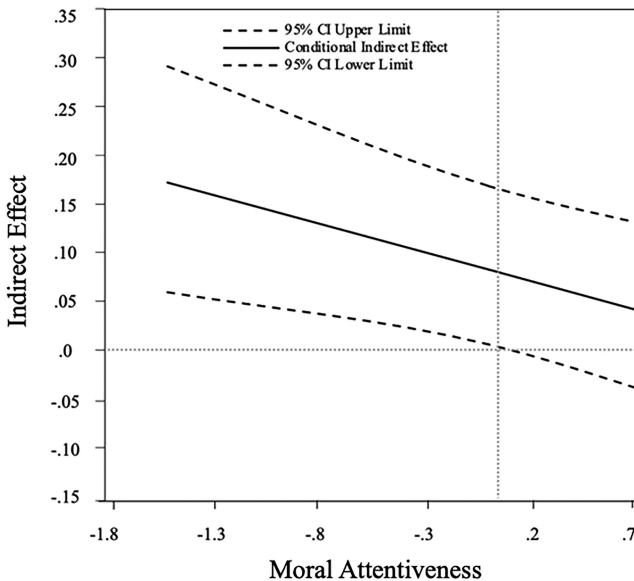


FIGURE 3 The indirect (i.e. mediated by emotional exhaustion) relationship between negative workplace gossip (NWG) and counterproductive work behaviour (CWB) at the levels of moral attentiveness among employees, with 95% CI. The *horizontal dotted line* denotes an indirect effect of zero. The *vertical dotted line* represents the boundary of the region of significance.

hypotheses. Thus, we found that negative gossip predicts CWB among IT professionals and that emotional exhaustion mediates the effect of NWG on CWB, particularly when the use of SM is high. However, we also found that the effect of NWG on CWB was less for gossip targets who were high in MA.

Theoretical implications

This study enriches and deepens our understanding of the relationship between NWG and CWB by validating emotional exhaustion as an effective mediator of the positive NWG-to-CWB relationship. Consistent with COR theory, we argue that emotional consumption arising from dealing with negative gossip may cause employees to feel depleted in terms of psychological resources, and they become emotionally exhausted. Emotionally exhausted employees are then involved in CWB to conserve resources and reduce emotional exhaustion (Penney et al., 2011). Importantly, we believe that damaging conversations about someone who is not present can be a toxic virus that spreads and ultimately deteriorates an organisation's environment. In reaction, employees are motivated to engage in CWB to compensate for the psychological loss and frustration incurred by negative gossip (Fox & Spector, 1999).

In addition to the mediating process discussed above, this study contributes to understanding the critical role of SM in spreading negative gossip. It challenges the existing scholarship, which generally highlights the 'bright side of social media' (Kietzmann et al., 2011; Kumar et al., 2016; Sabate et al., 2014) while joining calls to examine its potential dark side (Baccarella et al., 2018; Wong, 2017). Our results suggest that employees can use SM to spend their time on other activities, in particular, negative gossiping about co-workers, supervisors and the organisation and commenting on and sharing others' private information freely and quickly. Therefore, we argue that sharing negative comments about others on SM platforms enhances the chances of hurting people's feelings of emotional exhaustion (Skeels & Grudin, 2009), which is in line with the findings of previous studies (Amedie, 2015; Van Zoonen et al., 2017) that SM has negative consequences such as work and life conflicts, interruptions and anxiety from increased exhaustion.

The results also indicate that MA is a personal resource that buffers the relationship between emotional exhaustion and CWB. This suggests that attentiveness to ethics plays a role as a resource for facing stressful situations (Khan et al., 2022), such as negative gossip. This finding suggests that MA counters the negative spiralling incurred by the ill-perceived impact of gossip, which is further relayed by emotional exhaustion. Considering the perspective of COR theory (Hobfoll, 2002), we contribute that negative gossip as a work stressor can threaten or actually hurt feelings, damage employees' reputations, affect privacy, create conflict between co-workers and be destructive to the workplace. Resources are also depleted in the process of dealing with negative gossip, and this resource loss can lead to negative behaviours such as CWB. However, this resource loss can be recovered by the resource gains obtained from an individual's value of morality or moral elements. For example, morally attentive individuals are more aware of morality and moral aspects of life and are thus expected to demonstrate greater moral behaviour (Reynolds, 2008) in response to negative gossip. Individuals with high MA are likely to consider ethics and the implications of their actions (Reynolds, 2008). A moral context and positive personal characteristics may show an enhancement pattern in ethical decision-making and avoiding CWB. Morally attentive individuals automatically perceive and understand matters in terms of morality and therefore may be more sensitive to ethical behaviours (Erkutlu & Chafra, 2017) instead of engaging in CWB. This is consistent with past studies showing that high MA is associated

TABLE 4 Bootstrap results for the conditional indirect effects

Condition	Indirect effect	BootSE	Boot LL 95% CI	Boot UL 95% CI
Low social media, low moral attentiveness	.0830	.0574	-.0270	.1994
Low social media, high moral attentiveness	.0162	.0216	-.0248	.0616
High social media, low moral attentiveness	.2122	.0530	.1141	.3208
High social media, high moral attentiveness	.0413	.055	-.0498	.1321

Note: Unstandardised regression coefficients were also reported. The bootstrap sample size was 5000.

Abbreviations: CI, confidence interval; LL, lower limit; UL, upper limit.

with less unethical behaviour (Khan et al., 2022; Sturm, 2017) and higher moral encouragement (Afsar et al., 2019). Further, this research supports the premise of Reynolds (2008) that individuals high in MA are expected to behave ethically, as it corresponds with their awareness of what is 'the right thing to do'.

Using a moderated mediation framework, this study demonstrated that the mediating effect of emotional exhaustion varies depending on the frequency of SM usage and the individual's level of MA (see Table 4). The moderated mediation model test revealed that SM usage and MA played a critical moderating role in mediating the relationship between NWG, emotional exhaustion and CWB. In other words, the indirect effect of NWG through emotional exhaustion increases when employees are highly engaged in SM usage and less sensitive to moral aspects. Our findings suggest that MA buffers CWB against the negative effects of NWG. The results of the current study suggest that, in the case of a high level of SM usage, the indirect effect of NWG on CWB through emotional exhaustion changes based on the individual's level of MA. Even when the frequency of SM usage was high, this indirect effect decreased when the level of MA was high. This finding supports the COR theory's perspective that a high frequency of SM usage enhances unhealthy discussion (NWG) about others, leading to negative feelings and counterproductive behaviour. At the same time, sensitivity to moral aspects as personal resources decreases the extremity of violent reactions generated by perceived negative gossip. These results are consistent with those of a recent study by Khan et al. (2022), which suggests that MA buffers individuals' responses to a negative work environment.

Managerial implications

The results of this study have several important implications. NWG is not a visible, transparent behaviour; rather, it is more private and hidden in nature, making it more challenging to analyse and regulate. Negative gossip spreads uncontrollably and causes irreparable damage to employees' reputations. Accordingly, employers can take several steps to establish healthier and happier work environments. For instance, managers can interact frequently with organisational members to better understand what is happening in the workplace. Regular interaction and healthy communication with employees may effectively minimise negative gossip. Managers can educate employees about the impact of their words and how they should refrain from conversations that negatively influence others. Managers can also energise employees with challenging tasks so that they have fewer opportunities and less time to engage in gossip behaviour (Tan et al., 2021). From a legal point of view, if an employee is not guilty, they can sue for defamation of character, making this case more serious. The extensions of codes of ethics would include increasing awareness of the phenomenon, encouraging effective communication campaigns and implementing appropriate training and orientation programmes.

As CWB remains detrimental to organisational effectiveness, managers should take the initiative to discourage such negative behaviour (Bolino & Klotz, 2015). The findings confirmed that when individuals experience stressful environments, such as NWG, they respond by showing CWB. Such negative behaviour could be towards the organisation because individuals may blame it for not providing them with favourable work conditions. Alternatively, it could be an attempt to draw organisational attention to the problem (Spector et al., 2006). However, more importantly, individuals may engage in CWB towards co-workers because it is the individuals who are the prime perpetrators of negative gossip against them. The conflicts among individuals are more likely to predict CWB against people compared to the organisation (Bruk-Lee & Spector, 2006). Interpersonal issues can motivate employees to react more negatively to people because of the nastiness they experience originating directly from colleagues (Pearson et al., 2005). To avoid such negative reactions towards co-workers, managers should provide interventions such as civility, respect and engagement at work (CREW) because such training remains beneficial in such situations of workplace mistreatment (Leiter et al., 2011). By providing such training, managers can not only limit gossip behaviour but ensure employees remain civil towards colleagues and avoid the desire for retaliation.

Deleterious effects of SM have been confirmed by European Commission (2018) report and SM officials (Baccarella et al., 2018), as users tend not to question the short-and long-term implications of the behaviours. Thus, managers could establish processes to regulate the use of SM during working hours, as reporting tools can tell what kind of websites employees visit and the amount of time spent on them (Tootoonchian et al., 2008). Educating about the use of SM can also be improved to make employees more sensitive and responsible (Stafford & Mearns, 2009).

Owing to the role of MA, organisations can actively encourage ethical behaviour in the workplace (Treviño et al., 2006). For instance, MA can be enhanced by offering organisational rewards and strong control systems (Whitaker & Godwin, 2013). Within social learning, where effective moral functioning is attained, people will not only build greater MA but also confidently endorse similar approaches for future ethical issues (Afsar et al., 2019). Organisations can arrange regular moral and ethical seminars/training and confidence-building programmes to minimise the NWG and enhance employees' MA to discourage IT professionals from engaging in CWB. Additionally, managers can introduce mindfulness meditation to fight NWG (Babalola et al., 2019).

Finally, our study found a negative association between work experience and CWB. Individuals with more experience tend to have a lower level of CWB than those with less work experience. Experienced employees may have higher MA, follow ethical rules and, therefore, do not engage in counterproductive behaviours. These results are consistent with the previous research, for example, Ones and Dilchert (2013), that shows significant negative relationship between work experience and CWB.

Limitations and future extensions

The main limitation is that NWG, emotional exhaustion, SM usage and MA were reported by employees. However, with the use of the guidelines suggested by Podsakoff et al. (2003), we considered several steps to minimise the issue of social desirability and CMB. First, we relied on the voluntary participation of our respondents and ensured their total anonymity to counter any socially desirable response tendencies. We also collected our data with 2-month intervals to eliminate the possibility of CMV bias. In addition to Harman's single-factor test (Podsakoff et al., 2003), we performed a CLF test (Gaskin, 2016; Serrano Archimi et al., 2018) that determined that this

study had little or no effect on such bias. Despite these steps helping alleviate some concerns over common method biased, we were unable to infer causality between the constructs in our model. Future research may be replicated using a longitudinal design and other data collection methods to investigate the hypothetical model, which might reveal interesting dynamic relationships among the current study constructs. For instance, NWG may hinder employees' ability to focus on their work assignments, thus increasing their intention to show CWB over time. Based on the current findings, future longitudinal designs will offer great opportunities to uncover dynamic relationships over time.

We collected data from Pakistan in the IT sector, which may limit the generalisability of the findings. There may be cross-cultural differences in gossip. Therefore, it would be valuable to replicate this study in other cultural contexts. For instance, individualism versus collectivism can be included in existing models to study the influence of workplace gossip.

The existing literature suggests that individual differences affect ethical decision-making (Bass et al., 1999). In this research, we included MA as a guide to ethical behaviour in reactions to negative gossip. Future research may consider other individual-level factors, such as moral emotions (Walker & Jackson, 2017), and mindfulness in order to investigate how individuals react differently in response to occupational mistreatment.

Owing to the high correlation between the two constructs of MA (perceptual and reflective), we tested the overall moderating effects of individuals' sensitivity to moral aspects. However, previous research has suggested that high MA is strongly related to low ethical leadership (Erkutlu & Chafra, 2017). Moreover, the reflective MA sub-dimension decreases the effects on followers' unethical behaviour (Miao et al., 2019; Reynolds, 2008; Wurthmann, 2013). Therefore, it would be interesting to examine the moderating role of both dimensions (perceptual and reflective) of MA between NWG and CWB.

Finally, we suggest further exploration of the role of MA as a buffer against emotional exhaustion. In the present study, MA was measured once at T3. Considering the weight of perceived loss dynamics (Hobfoll et al., 2018), it would be of interest to check the resilience of individual morals that can be expected to wear out over time. This would enrich affective-based research on the gossip process.

CONCLUSION

To summarise, this study advances our knowledge about the relationship between NWG and CWB by integrating the mediating effect of emotional exhaustion and the moderating effects of both the usage of SM and MA. It also demonstrates that COR theory is a useful framework for understanding the role of MA as a personal resource that helps to make ethical decisions to counter NWG and CWB.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

ETHICS STATEMENT

All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and national research committee.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding authors upon reasonable request.

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