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Gossip in the workplace and the implications for HR management: a study of gossip and its relationship to employee cynicism

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Gossip is a common phenomenon in the workplace, but yet relatively little is understood about its influence to employees. This study adopts social information theory and social cognitive theory to interpret the diverse literature on gossip, and to develop and test hypotheses concerning some of the antecedents of gossip, with an aim of developing knowledge of the relationship between gossip and employee behaviour in the workplace. The study analysed survey data in a two-stage process, from 362 employees across a range of industries in Taiwan. The findings revealed that job-related gossip predicted employee cynicism and mediated the relationship between psychological contract violation and cynicism, and that non-job-related gossip showed a similar but weaker effect to employee cynicism. The contribution made by this paper is of value to both the academic subject domain and managers in Human Resources. First, we have identified two constructs of gossip, job-related and non-job-related gossip not previously reported and a validated scale has been created. Second, we have confirmed that these different constructs of gossip impact differently on employee behaviour and therefore HR managers should be cautious about gossip in the workplace, as it can cause cynical behaviour amongst employees.

Keywords: abusive supervision; employee cynicism; gossip; human resource management; psychological contract

Introduction

Gossip is a common phenomenon at work. Virtually all employees find themselves producing, hearing or otherwise participating in evaluative comments about someone who is not present in the conversation. Gossip is often seen as informal, casual or unconstrained conversation or reports about other people, typically involving details that are not confirmed as being true (Foster, 2004; Kurland & Pelled, 2000). Scholars indicate that 14% workplace coffee-break chat is actually gossip and about 66% of general conversation between employees is related to social topics concerning talk about other people (Cole & Dalton, 2009). Thus, gossip provides a channel of informal communication and information exchange, although the information conveyed in gossip may not be accurate or complete.

False and incomplete information, such as that transmitted via gossip, triggers employee cynicism (ECN) (Abraham, 2000; Anderson & Bateman, 1997), while McAndrew, Bell, and Garcia (2007) posits that positive gossip facilitates information transmission and group dynamics. These findings suggest that gossip and employee behaviour are somehow connected. Surprisingly, despite the connection, researchers do not appear very interested in gossip and its role and influence in employee behaviour and

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the literature on gossip–cynicism is also limited, with the exceptions of Kurland and Pelled (2000) and Kuo (2010). Furthermore, from a human resource management perspective, there is a need to conduct further research on the role of gossip in the workplace, as through a better understanding of the antecedents of gossip and its relationship to employee behaviour, managers and leaders can monitor the formation of gossip and respond appropriately to alleviate any resulting negative impact on employees. Specifically, this study adopts social information theory (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978) and social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1988) to help interpret the diverse literature on gossip, and to develop and test hypotheses concerning some of the antecedents of gossip, with the aim of contributing to knowledge on the relationship between gossip and behaviour in the workplace.

Gossip: construct, formation and effect at work

Foster (2004) defines gossip as the practice of producing, hearing or participating in evaluative comments about someone. In the workplace, gossip is often regarded as idle talk about other colleagues who are absent and, interestingly, researchers seem to have mixed views of how gossip actually gets started and the role it plays. Michelson, Irterson, and Waddington (2010) suggest that gossip is a dynamic process and the effects of gossip depend on the interaction between gossiper, listener/respondent, and target, i.e. the gossip triad. For gossip to occur, three contextual conditions have been identified: *sociability*, *shared frames of reference* and *privacy protection*. First, in acquaintance-type relationships, gossip rarely takes place, as neither party is certain of the other's disposition on anything, making it unsafe to engage in value discussions. Only when the interacting parties have developed a congenial relationship through a level of socialising, is gossip more likely to emerge (Rosnow, 2001; Rosnow & Georgoudi, 1985). Second, as gossip fulfils the human need to belong, group settings can provide a thriving ground for gossip (Ben-Ze'ev, 1994). This is often because members from the same or cognate groups are familiar with each other's values and ethics and share frames of reference. As the conformity and consensus between two parties increases, the likelihood to engage in gossip also rises (Kurland & Pelled, 2000). Third, gossip may not necessarily become public information, therefore gossipers can avoid accountability and freely express their views without fear of discovery. Thus, privacy provides a sound place for emotional release without the fear of being culpable or held liable for one's remarks (Rosnow & Georgoudi, 1985). Hence, once the privacy of speakers is protected, gossip is more likely to occur.

From a different perspective, McAndrew et al. (2007) suggest that gossip is a necessary function of society because the constant flow of information within a network of human exchange needs to evaluate situations to assist people in making sense of their environment. Through gossip, people become able to look at pieces of information from different perspectives and interpret it according to their own knowledge base. Gossip facilitates critical thinking as a social sense-making tool (Bok, 1982). Similarly, Levin and Arluke (1987) claim that gossip includes positive information, and that gossip can deliver a more accurate, experiential truth than objective explanations. More specifically, positive gossip facilitates group member cooperation, and that the levels of reciprocity, trust and reputation between individual members are also enhanced (Sommerfeld, Krambeck, & Milinski, 2008). Negative gossip however, is effective for increasing the intimacy of social bonds (Bosson, Johnson, Niederhoffer, & Swann, 2006). Thus, gossip provides an effective way to learn and validate social guidelines and norms.

Interestingly, other researchers suggest that gossip is essentially negative and stealthy, e.g. sensitive, personal or cannot be unveiled in public (Leaper & Holliday, 1995). The information discussed as gossip is meant to be private (Foster, 2004). Indeed, gossip has received pejorative criticism and all cultures and societies experience similar scandalous effects of gossip (Rosnow & Georgoudi, 1985). Gossip may cause embarrassment and discomfort to employees, as gossip often involves private and sensitive issues (Foster, 2004) and may be used to ruin the reputation and credibility of colleagues and competitors (Cole & Dalton, 2009). There are also many instances when gossip may have had negative consequences for the person targeted, especially when the gossip is entangled with fantasies of jealous, antagonistic or over-zealous individuals (Rosnow, 2001). In addition, the relationship between two parties (the gossipers) may have subtle impact on the influence of gossip. Grosser, Kidwell-Lopez, and Labianca (2010) argue that when the two gossipers have a close or intimate friendship they may engage in both positive and negative gossip. Conversely, if the gossipers have an instrumental relationship as general colleagues or social contacts, they are more likely to engage in merely positive gossip.

New construct of workplace gossip and its role in employee behaviour

In this research, we are interested in the role of gossip at work. To further analyse the role of gossip, we suggest that gossip shall be re-conceptualised into *job-related gossip* (JRG) and *non-job-related gossip* (NJG). We propose that JRG and NJG differ in their relationship with employee behaviour, for the following reasons. First, gossip may not necessarily tell the truth and cause problems (Dunbar, 2004). Very likely, if the gossip *per se* is not related to the job but to general social factors (such as relationship with girl-/boyfriend, children's problem at school), an employee may not treat gossip seriously in the workplace and may not vehemently respond to the source of gossip such as colleagues or the organisation. Second, DiFonzo and Bordia (2007) described gossip as superfluous and insignificant. The purpose of gossip is to entertain and to amuse. Following this logic, if the gossip *per se* is not related to the job but to someone's personal life (such as massive debts or drug use), an employee may not necessarily attribute the pressure of that gossip to his/her colleagues or organisation. Very likely, at the individual level, the influence of NJG may be less salient at work than the influence of JRG. Finally, gossip at work may impact upon the perceptions of status, power and esteem (Rosnow, 2001). JRG shall have higher tendency (or possibility) to influence employee's behaviour, as JRG is directly associated with the job, colleagues and/or the workplace.

As employee behaviour is many and varied, it is unfeasible to examine all types of workplace behaviours, and so this research focuses on a specific behaviour – ECN, which is characterised by frustration, hopelessness and disillusionment, as well as contempt towards and distrust of business organisations, executives and/or other objects in the workplace (Andersson, 1996), the justification for this choice is as follows. To begin with, recent studies indicate that cynicism is one of the most significant factors in organisational performance (Kuo, 2010; Oreg & Berson, 2011). Scholars also suggest that the changing nature of work and work organisations, particularly the unmet expectation of the workplace has also encouraged a rise in cynicism (Pate, Martin, & Staines, 2000). Moreover, cynicism may undermine leaders, institutions and HR strategies. For instance, cynics at work distrust the motives of the leaders, and employees with cynical views may feel that their employers will exploit their contributions (Abraham, 2000; Kanter & Mirvis, 1989). In short, although earlier studies of cynicism were wide ranging, their findings collectively imply that cynicism affects employees, is related to poor employee

performance and leads to poorer organisational performance. For the same reason, we believe that focusing on ECN and analysing its connection with gossip is crucial to both academic researchers and HR practitioners. This paper now turns to examine the construct of ECN and, more importantly, to analyse the proposed gossip–cynicism relationship.

Employee cynicism and the proposed gossip–cynicism relationship

ECN is conceptually different from constructs such as job satisfaction and trust. Cynicism is anticipatory and outwardly directed, whereas job satisfaction is retrospective and self-focused (Wanous, Reichers, & Austin, 1994). Andersson explained that trust is one's expectation that the word, promise or statement of another party can be relied on, whereas cynicism is an attitude consisting of a self-belief and affective component such as hopelessness and disillusionment.

Cynicism has been studied and defined in a variety of ways, including dispositional conceptualisations (Cook & Medley, 1954), negative attitudes regarding unmet expectations of authorities (Andersson, 1996; Kanter & Mirvis, 1989) and cynicism as an individual and organisational phenomenon (DeCelles, Tesluk, & Taxman, 2013). Dean, Brandes, and Dharwadkar (1998) defines cynicism as a negative attitude towards one's employing organisation, comprising three dimensions: (1) a belief that the organisation lacks integrity; (2) a negative affect towards the organisation; and, (3) tendencies to exhibit disparaging and critical behaviour towards the organisation. Dean et al.'s definition has provided a clear and comprehensive construct of cynicism and inspired a series of cognate research such as Kuo's (2010) analysis of cynicism influence and the development of a cynicism scale for Chinese employees/population. Hence, we have adopted Dean et al.'s definition of cynicism in this research.

Cynicism has been proposed as a paradigm of employee–employer relations as a result of longer working hours, work intensification, ineffective leadership and management, new deals in the workplace, and the continual downsizing and delayering of organisations (Bunting, 2004). For instance, after repeated exposure to mismanaged change efforts and an unpleasant working environment, employees may accumulate negative emotions and engage in disparaging behaviour towards their organisations (Wanous et al., 1994). During a period of unsuccessful organisational development and defective changes, employees with cynicism beliefs tend to attribute such events to their managers, leaders and officials. These employees simply distrust the management policies and disbelieve that their voices are heard by their managers, leading to lower or even no performance (Wanous, Reichers, & Austin, 2000). Similarly, Andersson and Bateman (1997) reveal a correlation between cynicism, organisational citizenship behaviour and compliance with unethical requests. Stanley, Meyer, and Topolnystsky (2005) also state that employees with higher cynicism are more likely to doubt their managers' strategies and to suspect the intention underlying these strategies. Cynicism is often triggered by business practices such as lay-offs and inflated salaries commanded by corporate executives, creating an implicit sense of alienation and frustration towards the organisation may be displayed through cynicism (Andersson & Bateman, 1997; Cartwright & Holmes, 2006). The preceding discussion has also implied that gossip is a plausible antecedent to cynicism. This paper now examines the formation of ECN through social information theory and social cognition theory.

Salancik and Pfeffer (1978) provide a valuable contribution to understanding ECN via their social information theory. This theory posits that the social context has two salient effects on individual attitude, behaviour and needs. First, the social context provides a direct construction of meaning which acts as a guide for socially acceptable reasons for

action. Second, the social context focuses an individual's attention on certain information, making that information more salient, and provides expectations concerning individual behaviour and the logical consequences of such behaviour. Thus, social values, environmental factors and relationships with others all influence individual perceptions, attitudes and behaviours. Social information theory does not explain the mechanism nor direction of influence, but Pollock, Whitbred, and Contractor (2000) suggest that social context and individuals are like ties and nodes in a wider network. Individuals need ties to fulfil their social/psychological needs, whereas ties need nodes to form the foundation of a network. Following this, it seems logical to support the gossip–cynicism relationship, predicated on the following reasons: (1) gossip contains contextual information shared by the gossipers and bystanders (DiFonzo, Bordia, & Rosnow, 1994), (2) gossip requires social context as a means of information transmission (Rosnow & Georgoudi, 1985) and, (3) people may collect valuable information from gossip and guide their behaviours accordingly as an extension of social information theory. In addition, people may interpret gossip as a malicious attack and thus resent or retaliate against the source and location of the gossip, the workplace, with the purpose of defending their self-esteem and to reassure themselves (cf. self-affirmation theory; Sherman & Cohen, 2006).

In addition, Bandura's (1988) paper on social cognitive theory indicates that portions of an individual's knowledge acquisition are directly related to observing others within social interactions, experiences and external media influences. People do not learn new behaviours solely by trying them and either succeeding or failing, but rather, people learn and behave by watching what others do, by listening to what others say. Therefore, the gossip–cynicism relationship can be proposed, based on the following reasons: (1) people evaluate gossip carefully as it affects them in diverse ways, e.g. reputation and credibility (Foster, 2004), (2) gossip may contain unfavourable information against a particular person and thus bring about detrimental effects on one's social interactions with others, such as colleagues at work (McAndrew et al., 2007) (3) if individuals have seen other colleagues suffering as a result of gossip, then when they experience gossip in person, they may be more cautious with their own words and deeds, thus extending social cognitive theory. For instance, when facing gossip such as false information, individuals may feel stressed and uncomfortable with their organisation (the location of the gossip) and, consequently, alienate themselves from the organisation. In addition, a recent study (Chang, Kuo, Su, & Taylor, 2013) has found that organisational dis-identification (a type of alienation) is correlated with workplace deviance. This finding offers a preliminary but crucial clue to supporting the gossip–cynicism relationship.

In summary, although social information and social cognitive theories differ in nature, both theories provide support for the proposed gossip–cynicism relationship. Social information theory helps explain the foundation of gossip–cynicism relationship, whereas social cognitive theory helps clarify the mechanism of how and why negative gossip may lead to ECN. Furthermore, following the aforementioned analysis and dichotomy of gossip at work (JRG vs. NJG), we suggest that JRG and NJG differ in their relationship with ECN. To begin with, as NJG is not related to the job, employees tend to pay less attention to NJG and may not respond to the source of gossip vehemently. As NJG is more related to personal life, employees may not attribute the pressure of that gossip such as colleagues or the organisation. Different from NJG, JRG may have higher possibility to influence employees' perception and their behaviours at work, as it is linked to their job and the people they work with (e.g. colleagues, customers). Thus, two specific hypotheses are proposed as follows:

- H1: Job-related gossip has a stronger effect on employee cynicism.
H2: Non-job-related gossip has a weaker effect on employee cynicism.

(These two hypotheses suggest that, compared to NJG, JRG is more likely to predict cynicism.)

Antecedents of job-related gossip and non-job-related gossip

In order to underpin the development of the hypotheses, two antecedents of JRG and NJG, psychological contract violation (PCV) and abusive supervision (AS), are outlined below for completeness.

Psychological contract describes an individual's beliefs, shaped by the organisation regarding the terms of an exchange between an individual and the organisation (Rousseau, 1995). Robinson (1996) defines psychological contract as the employee's perception of what they owe to their employers and what their employers owe to them. The interpretation of psychological contract between employee and employer may not be necessarily shared by both parties as it is highly perceptual and subjective. Scholars also indicate that the differences in perceptions may result in one party believing that the other has violated the terms of the contract. Employees' perceptions of the obligations established at the time of employment may change as the years of employment increases; hence, employees tend to attribute increasing perceived obligation from their employer while their own perceived obligation decreases (Robinson, Kraatz, & Rousseau, 1994). In light of Robinson et al.'s view, one can regard PCV as an emotional and affective state that may follow from the belief that one's organisation has failed to adequately maintain the psychological contract. Robinson et al. also indicate that violation leads to low organisational commitment, less organisational citizenship behaviour and poor job satisfaction.

In addition, the relationship between violation and ECN may be explained by social exchange theory (Homans, 1958) further. An employee develops and maintains a transactional psychological contract by exchanging transactional resources such as work productivity (performance) for a certain amount of payment (reward). An employee also develops and maintains a relational contract by exchanging relational resources such as proactive work behaviour and loyalty for better quality relationships with leaders and managers (Dulac, Coyle-Shapiro, Henderson, & Wayne, 2008). When violation occurs (a sign of unbalanced exchange), individuals are prone to feel frustrated and disappointed about the organisations. Such frustration and disappointment may consequently convert into JRG; for instance, *Mr X said that the company does not really appreciate the effort from employees, Mrs Y said that the organisation should do more to support their employees and someone said that line managers only favour the persons who can achieve sales targets*. Very likely, when the organisation violates its obligations, the employees are likely to feel frustrated at work, have poor attitude towards their jobs and behave against the organisation, such as cynicism attitude and behaviour against their colleagues and organisation. The employees may also use gossips to cope with their negative emotions and feelings against their organisations. Thus, we propose the following hypotheses:

- H3: Psychological contract violation predicts job-related gossip and employee cynicism.
H4: Job-related gossip mediates the relationship between psychological contract violation and employee cynicism.

In addition to PCV, AS warrants discussion as an antecedent of JRG and NJG based on the following reasons. To begin with, AS focuses on the personal perception towards the employee's immediate managers, while PCV is concentrated on an overall evaluation of the whole organisation. Through analysing both organisational and personal-level variables, a better understanding of the antecedents of gossip will be reached.

Moreover, AS refers to the extent to which managers are perceived to engage in sustained displays of hostile verbal and non-verbal behaviours (Tepper, 2000). Examples of AS behaviour may include explosive outburst (e.g. slamming doors, yelling at someone for disagreeing), using derogatory language (e.g. 'idiot', 'useless'), threatening (e.g. job insecurity, promotion opportunity) and non-verbal behaviour (e.g. ignorant attitudes or aggressive eye contact). Zellars, Tepper, and Duffy (2002) found that AS can have a negative effect on organisational citizenship behaviour, and that it can act as a mediator of the perception that an employee holds towards his or her organisation. Zellar et al. continued that, when AS occurs, employees tend to denigrate the reputation of their organisation and refrain from pro-social behaviour at work. Following this reasoning, it can be suggested that when receiving AS, employees may develop a negative attitude against their managers and organisation, which in turn becomes negative behaviour at work such as cynicism.

An AS–employee relationship may also be explained by leader–member exchange theory (Deluga, 1998), which asserts that leaders develop an exchange with their subordinates, and that the quality of these leader–member exchanges influences the subordinates' responsibility, influence over decisions, access to resources and performance. Thus, the application of leader–member exchange theory to the current research would indicate that AS may relate to JRG and NJG, because AS has been found to produce a sense of incongruence between individual members and their organisation. Such a sense of incongruence then evolves and becomes a motivation for gossip. For example, *Mr X said that the manager was totally useless and he just has a leg in the boardroom*, and *Mrs Y said that the manager should be sacked as he has no subject knowledge and receives no respect in the team* (both examples above are JRG). *Mr X said that the manager was an alcoholic and recently divorced, explaining why he always shouted to his subordinates*, and *Mrs Y said that the team leader just broke up with her boyfriend and hence was very moody at work* (both examples above are NJG).

In summary, when AS occurs, employees tend to refrain from citizenship behaviour and form negative attitude against their organisation. As AS causes stress and disappointment, the employees may use gossip (both JRG and NJG) to cope with their negative emotions and feelings against their organisations. Thus, we propose the following hypotheses:

- H5: Abusive supervision predicts employee cynicism.
- H6: Abusive supervision predicts job-related gossip and non-job-related gossip.

Furthermore, as NJG has a weaker effect on ECN (*please refer to the discussion of the Hypothesis 2*), we propose the following final hypothesis:

- H7: Non-job-related gossip shows a weaker mediating effect on the relationship between AS and employee cynicism.

Research framework

To consolidate the seven hypotheses and clarify the associations between the research variables, an integrative framework (hypothetic research model) has been developed (see

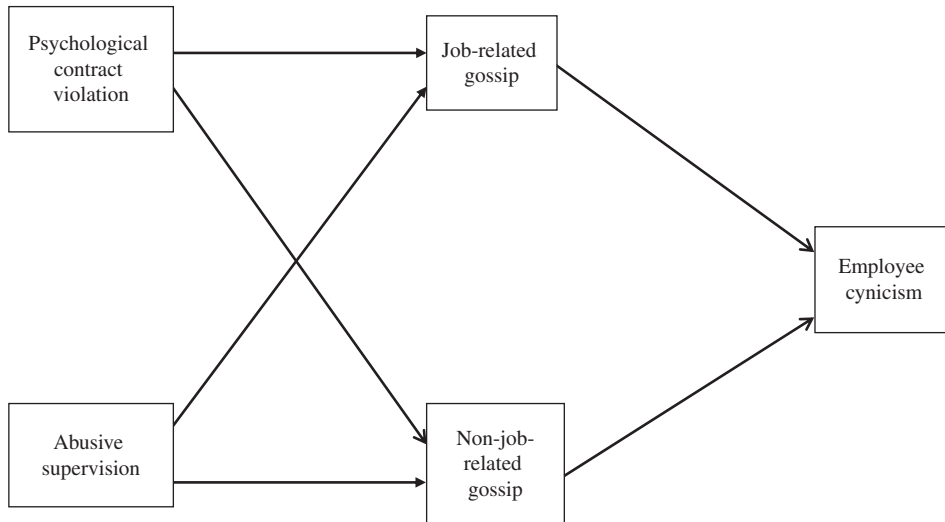


Figure 1. Hypothetic research model.

Figure 1). This framework is informative in several ways. First, a new concept of workplace gossip has been developed, comprising the two dimensions: JRG and NJG. Second, two antecedents of gossip are proposed: PCV and AS. Specifically, PCV predicts JRG and ECN, whereas AS predicts JRG, NJG and ECN. Finally, JRG mediates the relationship between PCV and ECN, and NJG does not mediate the relationship between AS and ECN.

Method

Sample and procedure

To enhance the external validity of data collection, authors considered different types of businesses and sizes of organisation during participant recruitment. Authors focused on the industries in Taipei – the capital of Taiwan, per the research grant criteria of the National Science Council of Taiwan. Authors contacted 34 business companies from different industries, and 26 companies agreed to participate in the research and provide data access.

To improve the sample representativeness, authors distributed different numbers of questionnaire copies to different organisations, subject to their organisational sizes. Specifically, large organisations (with more than 1000 staff) received 50 copies, medium organisations (with 100 to 1000 staff) received 20 copies and small organisations (with less than 100 staff) received 10 copies. Authors dispatched all the questionnaires to the HR managers of each company and these managers then distributed copies to their employees using the snowball sampling technique (a similar technique has been adopted by Chang et al., 2013).

To ameliorate the effects of common method variance (CMV) resulting from the utilisation of self-rated measures, the authors collected the data in two stages. CMV emerges when self-rated measures are simultaneously used, as in some cases the observed relationships between variables are inflated, jeopardising the reliability of data analysis (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). Specifically, four research variables

(i.e. PCV, AS, JRG and NJG) were measured at Stage 1 and ECN at Stage 2, which was conducted one month after Stage 1.

At Stage 1, 450 copies of the questionnaire were distributed and 392 were returned. At Stage 2, the questionnaires were distributed to all those who had responded to Stage 1 and 362 copies were returned, yielding a gross response rate of 79.11%. The breakdown of responses across the sample was as follows: large organisations (3 companies, 126 copies), medium organisations (10 companies, 138 copies) and small organisations (13 companies, 98 copies). The research sample (362 copies) was gathered from five industries: manufacturing (42), finance (50), IT (44), services (131) and civil departments (89).

The sample comprised a wide range of employees including junior and senior managers and also non-managerial and low-skilled staff. Incentives were provided in the form of a nominal fee NT\$100 (£2 approximately) to each participant to thank them and raffle tickets for book vouchers were used as incentives to stimulate the questionnaire response rate.

A series of analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests were conducted to examine whether internal heterogeneity exists between Stage 1 and Stage 2 groups. Results showed no significant difference in gender ($\chi^2(0.95, 1) = 0.19, p > 0.05$) ($p < 0.05 @ 3.84$) and age ($\chi^2(0.95, 42) = 33.63, p > 0.05$) ($p < 0.05 @ 55.76$) between the respondents at Stage 1 and Stage 2. Thus, the Stage 2 data set was used for statistical analysis and hypothesis testing. Demographic details of the participants were as follows: gender (male = 34.25%, female = 65.75%) and age bands (≤ 20 years = 0.01%, 21–30 years = 46.96%, 31–40 years = 19.89%, 41–50 years = 21.55%, ≥ 51 years = 11.05%). The mean age of the participants were 34.95 years old (SD = 10.71). Control variables included gender, age and working tenure. These control variables were incorporated into the data analysis process, and the findings suggested no significant correlation with ECN and gossip.

Measures

We adopted three standardised scales, but we also developed two scales for the survey:

Psychological contract violation. This survey adopted the PCV scale (Robinson & Morrison, 2000) to measure employees' experiences of PCV (nine items; $\alpha = 0.92$). Sample items include *I feel my organisation betrays me* and *the way that my organisation treats me is frustrating*. Responses were recorded using a six-point Likert scale (1 = extremely unsatisfied, 6 = extremely satisfied). Higher scores represent a higher occurrence of PCV in the workplace.

Abusive supervision. Tepper's (2000) scale was used to measure employees' experiences of AS (15 items; $\alpha = 0.90$). Sample items include *My line manager disrespects and is rude to me* and *my line manager intrudes into my privacy*. Responses were recorded using a six-point Likert scale (1 = never, 6 = always). Higher scores represent a higher occurrence of AS in the workplace.

Both PCV and AS scales were originally written and validated in English, so the questions (scale items) were translated into traditional Chinese for the survey, with a back-translation procedure to ensure language equivalence and appropriateness. We invited two bilingual experts in Management studies to examine the validity and clarity of scale items, and revisions were made accordingly.

Employee cynicism. Kuo's (2010) scale was adopted to measure the experiences of ECN in the workplace. This scale was developed in line with ECN (Cole, Bruch, & Vogel, 2006) and workplace cynicism (Dean et al., 1998). There were total eight items ($\alpha = 0.90$) and all items were preceded by a statement: *'In the place/company I work for ...'*. Items

included (1) *some colleagues are suspicious of other people's opinions and behaviours*; (2) *some colleagues only look after their own business and interests*; (3) *some colleagues deliberately let you make mistakes without telling you what's going wrong*; (4) *some colleagues look down on others due to their seniority or authority*; (5) *some colleagues resent when being oppressed by the organisation*; (6) *I disdain people when they play games against my performance*; (7) *some colleagues deliberately criticise and/or sneer at others*; and (8) *some colleagues adopt a muddle-along approach to deal with unreasonable demands*. Responses were recorded using a six-point *Likert* scale (1 = extremely disagree, 6 = extremely agree). Higher scores represent more experiences of ECN in the workplace.

Gossip at work. The literature review supported the view that gossip at work should be re-conceptualised into two dimensions: JRG and NJG. Following this, prior gossip studies (e.g. Foster, 2004; Kurland & Pelled, 2000) were revisited to develop a new workplace gossip scale, in line with the three-staged scale development process (Hinkin, 1995). Three independent samples were also adopted to facilitate the development process (see Table 1). Details are as follows:

At Stage 1 (item generation), we collected the information of gossip at work using Sample 1, asking these employees to provide any gossip that they heard in the past three months. Stage 1 gathered 372 gossip comments, yielding the average rate of 3.54 gossips from each employee. Based on the gossip concept (Kurland & Pelled, 2000), authors re-categorised these gossips into 187 JRG and 185 NJG. The former included, for instance, performance-, capability-, colleague relationship-, moral- and emotion management-related gossips. The latter included, for instance, life events-, social relationships-, children-, family-, marriage- and affair-related gossips. Three HR managers were invited to inspect all gossips, with an aim to improve the content validity and representativeness of selected gossips (items). Finally, 24 items were selected for the next stage analysis.

At Stage 2 (scale development), an exploratory factory analysis was conducted using Sample 2. The results suggested four principal factors (eigenvalues = 8.56, 3.08, 2.01 and

Table 1. Independent samples for the new gossip scale development (three stages).

	Sample 1	Sample 2	Sample 3
Development stage (purpose) ^a	Stage 1 (item generation)	Stage 2 (scale development)	Stage 3 (scale evaluation)
Sample size	105	228	305
Gender ratio (female/male) ^b	64/38	142/86	179/124
Sampling technique	Convenience sampling (full-time employees)	Same as Sample 1	Same as Sample 1
Age bands (years old) ^b			
≤ 25	28	42	47
25–34	42	109	148
35–44	19	40	56
≥ 45	12	37	53
Working tenure (years) ^b			
< 1	25	57	66
1–3	39	66	95
4–6	21	42	58
≥ 7	17	63	84

^a In line with the three-stage scale development process (Hinkin, 1995), these three samples were adopted from our parallel research projects and hence independent from the main study sample.

^b Total numbers may not equate to the sample size, due to missing values.

1.36, respectively; variance percentage = 35.69%, 12.84%, 8.36% and 5.66%, respectively; Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.87, 0.88, 0.82$ and 0.77 , respectively; cumulative variance percentage = 62.54%). Factor 1 was largely related with JRG (more negative comments), Factor 2 was largely related with NJG (more positive comments), Factor 3 was largely related with NJG (more negative comments) and Factor 4 was largely related with NJG (more positive comments). To refine the findings further, we adopted the guidance of Tabachnick and Fidell (2007), i.e. factors with lower loadings (< 0.33) were omitted. Four items with cross-loading on multiple factors were also omitted. This data deduction process led to 20 items for the next stage analysis.

At Stage 3 (scale evaluation), in line with prior gossip taxonomy (Kurland & Pelled, 2000) and data deduction techniques (Hall, Snell, & Foust, 1999), two parcels of main factors were created. Parcel 1 included all JRG (both positive and negative comments), and Parcel 2 included all NJG (both positive and negative comments). To examine the structure of these newly created parcels (Hinkin, 1995), a hierarchical confirmatory factor analysis (HCFA) was conducted using Sample 3. Specifically, LISREL8 (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1993) was adopted and the findings discovered that the two-parcel model ($\chi^2 = 655.45, p < 0.001, df = 165$, normed-fit index (NFI) = 0.92, comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.94, incremental fit index (IFI) = 0.94 and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.08; composite reliability = 0.87 and 0.85, respectively) outperformed the four-factor model ($\chi^2 = 989.98, p < 0.001, df = 164$, NFI = 0.90, CFI = 0.92, IFI = 0.92 and RMSEA = 0.11). These findings supported a good model fitness of the newly created parcels. The authors then converted these parcels into a gossip scale. Finally, a new workplace gossip scale was developed (see Table 2), including two

Table 2. Workplace gossip scale.

<i>Dimensions and items</i>	<i>Cronbach's α</i>
Job-related gossip	0.97
1. Colleague's excellent job performance	
2. Colleague's diligence and dedication to work	
3. Colleague's credibility in job role and experience	
4. Colleague's good interpersonal skills	
5. Colleague's demonstration of job morality	
6. Colleague's poor job performance	
7. Colleague's carelessness and poor work engagement	
8. Colleague's inexperience and poor job knowledge	
9. Colleague's poor interpersonal skills	
10. Colleague's lack of demonstration of job morality	
Non-job-related gossip	0.89
1. Colleague's recent joyful life events such as purchasing a house or car	
2. Colleague's recent sorrowful life events such as illness or car accident	
3. Colleague's new friendship or love relationship	
4. Colleague's lying to or betrayal of their partners	
5. Colleague's poor interaction with children	
6. Colleague's good interaction with children	
7. Colleague's divorce, separation and marital problems.	
8. Colleague's engagement or getting married.	
9. Colleague's good relationship with family	
10. Colleague's poor relationship with family	

Note: All items were preceded by a statement: *Have you recently talked about x gossip in the workplace* ($x =$ a specific type of gossip). Responses were recorded using a six-point *Likert* scale (1 = never, 6 = always). Higher scores represented a higher frequency of x gossip participation.

dimensions: JRG ($\alpha = 0.97$) and NJG ($\alpha = 0.89$). All items were preceded by a statement: *Have you recently talked about x gossip in the workplace* ($x =$ a specific type of gossip). Responses were recorded using a six-point *Likert* scale (1 = never, 6 = always). Higher scores represented a higher frequency of x gossip participation.

Results

The descriptive statistics, correlations and reliability coefficients of the research variables are shown in [Table 3](#). The statistics revealed that PCV was positively correlated with AS ($r = 0.48, p < 0.001$), JRG ($r = 0.12, p < 0.05$) and organisational cynicism ($r = 0.31, p < 0.001$). AS was positively correlated with JRG ($r = 0.23, p < 0.001$), NJG ($r = 0.19, p < 0.001$) and ECN ($r = 0.19, p < 0.001$). JRG was positively related with NJG ($r = 0.57, p < 0.001$) and ECN ($r = 0.21, p < 0.001$). These preliminary findings showed significant inter-correlations between the research variables.

We adopted Harman's single factor test to examine the potential CMV bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003). All the research variables were first merged into one factor, and the results showed poor fit, suggesting that one single factor of merging all variable was inappropriate for data analysis ($\chi^2(230) = 4796.65, p < 0.001$, RMSEA = 0.23, NFI = 0.66, CFI = 0.68, IFI = 0.68, standardised root mean square residual (SRMR) = 0.18). We then adopted an unmeasured latent construct method to measure the potential influence of CMV as recommended by Podsakoff et al. (2003). Chi-square difference test was not statistically significant ($\Delta\chi^2(1) = 3.64, ns$). Results were consistent with the findings of Harman's single-factor test. To simplify, the influence of CMV was very slim and hence the research data set should be accepted for further data analysis.

Analysis of the measurement model

Confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) were undertaken on all research variables. The hypothetic model (five-factor) was then compared with alternative models, including two four-factor models, one three-factor model and one two-factor model and one one-factor model (see [Table 4](#)). CFAs revealed that the hypothetic model provided a sound fit to the data; specifically, the five-factor model had significantly better fit than was the first four-factor model ($\Delta\chi^2 = 97.52, p < 0.001$), second four-factor model ($\Delta\chi^2 = 1243.96, p < 0.001$), three-factor model ($\Delta\chi^2 = 1511.43, p < 0.001$), two-factor model ($\Delta\chi^2 = 3096.68, p < 0.001$) and one-factor model ($\Delta\chi^2 = 4018.82, p < 0.001$). Taken together, the hypothetic model represented the best fit to the data ($\chi^2(220) = 776.93, p < 0.001$, RMSEA = 0.08, NFI = 0.92, CFI = 0.94, IFI = 0.94, SRMR = 0.07).

With regard to the reliability, the composite reliability of all measured variables are as follows: PCV (0.89), AS (0.93), JRG (0.87), NJG (0.85) and ECN (0.85) (see [Table 5](#)).

Table 3. Means, standard deviations and correlations ($N = 362$).

Variables	Mean	SD	α	1	2	3	4
1. Psychological contract violation	2.49	0.99	0.92				
2. Abusive supervision	1.73	0.76	0.90	0.48***			
3. Job-related gossip	3.13	0.78	0.86	0.12*	0.23***		
4. Non-job-related gossip	2.70	0.80	0.87	0.09	0.19***	0.57***	
5. Organisational cynicism	3.71	0.96	0.90	0.31***	0.19***	0.21***	0.14**

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 4. Comparison of the model fitness

<i>Model</i>	<i>Factors</i>	χ^2	<i>df</i>	$\Delta\chi^2$	<i>RMSEA</i>	<i>NFI</i>	<i>CFI</i>	<i>IFI</i>	<i>SRMR</i>
Hypothetic model	Five-factor model: PCV; AS; JRG; NJG; ECN	776.93	220		0.08	0.92	0.94	0.94	0.07
Model 1	Four-factor model: PCV; AS; JRG and NJG merged; ECN	875.35	224	97.52	0.09	0.91	0.93	0.93	0.09
Model 2	Four-factor model: PCV and AS merged; JRG; NJG; ECN	2021.79	202	1243.96	0.16	0.82	0.84	0.84	0.11
Model 3	Three-factor model: PCV and AS merged; JRG and NJG merged; ECN	2289.26	227	1511.43	0.16	0.81	0.83	0.83	0.11
Model 4	Two-factor model: PCV, AS, JRG and NJG merged; ECN	3874.51	229	3096.68	0.21	0.71	0.73	0.73	0.16
Model 5	One-factor model: PCV, AS, JRG, NJG and ECN merged	4796.65	230	4018.82	0.23	0.66	0.68	0.68	0.18

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

All the composite reliabilities were higher than 0.75, indicating that the composite reliability of all variables was satisfactory (Fornell & Larker, 1981). With regard to the validity, the average variance extracted (AVE) of all measured variables are as follows: PCV (0.63), AS (0.73), JRG (0.58), NJG (0.49) and ECN (0.50). All AVEs were close or higher than 0.50, indicating that the convergent validity of all variables was satisfactory (Fornell & Larker, 1981).

Examination of the hypotheses

To examine the research hypotheses, we conducted structural equation modelling (SEM) using the LISREL8 (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1993) (see Figure 2). Results revealed that the hypothetical research model fits the data well (χ^2 (223) = 806.18, $p < 0.001$; χ^2/df ratio = 3.61; Byrne, 1989; Carmines & McIver, 1981; Marsh & Hocevar, 1985). Alternative fit indices were also satisfactory (RMSEA = 0.08, NFI = 0.92, CFI = 0.94, IFI = 0.94, goodness-of-fit statistic (GFI) = 0.90). The findings of SEM analysis are informative in several ways. To begin with, JRG had a stronger effect on ECN ($\beta = 0.28$, $p < 0.001$), and NJG had no significant effect on ECN ($\beta = -0.01$, ns). These findings suggest that, compared to NJG, JRG is more likely to predict cynicism. Results also

Table 5. Summary of the validity analysis.

<i>Research variables</i>	<i>Composite reliability</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>
1. Psychological contract violation	0.89	0.63	<i>0.24</i>	<i>0.02</i>	<i>0.01</i>	<i>0.10</i>
2. Abusive supervision	0.93	0.49	0.73	<i>0.06</i>	<i>0.04</i>	<i>0.03</i>
3. Job-related gossip	0.87	0.13	0.25	0.58	<i>0.37</i>	<i>0.04</i>
4. Non-job-related gossip	0.85	0.11	0.21	0.57	0.49	0.02
5. Employee cynicism	0.85	0.32	0.18	0.20	0.15	0.50

Note: Bold diagonal data represent the AVE of variables; italic data (upper-right triangle) represent the shared variances of variables; underlined data (lower-left triangle) represent the correlation coefficients (Φ) of variables.

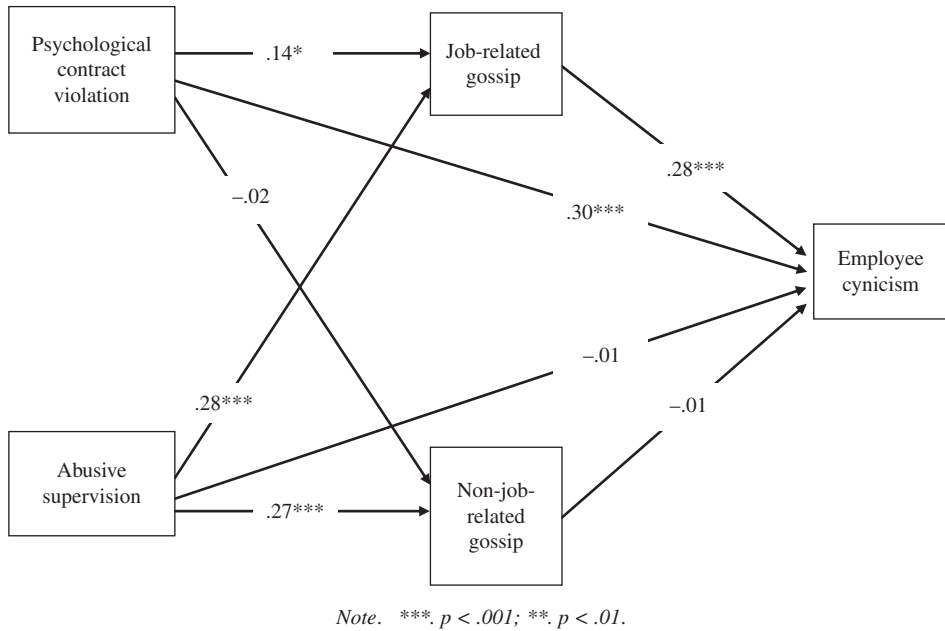


Figure 2. Summary of SEM and mediation analysis.

indicated that PCV predicted JRG ($\beta = 0.14, p < 0.05$) and ECN ($\beta = 0.30, p < 0.001$), and that AS predicted JRG ($\beta = 0.28, p < 0.001$) and NJG ($\beta = 0.27, p < 0.001$). In addition, AS predicted cynicism ($\beta = 0.13, p < 0.05$) independently, and such predicting effect was reduced when JRG was introduced ($\beta = -0.01, ns$; this phenomenon implies a sign of mediating effect and is discussed next). Thus, these SEM findings have provided ample support to Hypotheses 1, 2, 3, 5 and 6.

To examine the mediating effect of JRG (Hypothesis 4) and NJG (Hypothesis 7), we regarded the integrative research framework (Figure 1) as the theoretical model, and we then compared it against alternative models by adding possible pathways (see Table 6) (cf. Anderson & Gerbing, 1988; Kelloway, 1998). Specifically, Model 1 added a PCV→ECN pathway ($\Delta\chi^2 = 28.35, p < 0.001$; pathway $\beta = 0.29, p < 0.001$), Model 2 added an AS→ECN pathway ($\Delta\chi^2 = 3.92, p < 0.05$; pathway $\beta = 0.13, p < 0.05$) and Model 3 added both PCV→ECN and AS→ECN pathways ($\Delta\chi^2 = 28.38, p < 0.001$; pathway

Table 6. Summary of mediation analysis.

Model	χ^2	df	$\Delta\chi^2$	Δdf	RMSEA	NFI	CFI	IFI	β
Theoretical model	806.18	223			0.08	0.92	0.94	0.94	
Model 1: Added PCV→ECN pathway	777.83	222	28.35***	1	0.08	0.92	0.94	0.94	0.29***
Model 2: Added AS→ECN pathway	802.26	222	3.92*	1	0.08	0.92	0.94	0.94	0.13*
Model 3: Added PCV→ECN pathway Added AS→ECN pathway	777.80	221	28.38***	2	0.08	0.92	0.94	0.94	0.30*** -0.01

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

$\beta_{PCV \rightarrow ECN} = 0.30, p < 0.001$; pathway $\beta_{AS \rightarrow ECN} = -0.01, ns$). When compared to the theoretical model, Models 1, 2 and 3 shared similar fit indices but the pathway β values changed. Specifically, the β value of PCV \rightarrow ECN pathway increased ($\Delta\beta = 0.01$), whereas the β value of AS \rightarrow ECN pathway decreased ($\Delta\beta = -0.14$; PCV and ECN correlation coefficient = 0.48, $p < 0.001$). These findings are informative in several ways. To begin with, PCV and AS directly predicted ECN (supported by Hypotheses 3 and 5), but they also predicted cynicism via JRG (supported by Models 1 and 2). In terms of their predicting effect, PCV outperformed AS (supported by Model 3). In addition, findings of the model comparison analysis suggested that Model 1 (partially mediated model) should be supported, due to its significant $\Delta\chi^2$ against the theoretical model (best fit across three models). Finally, based on these findings, Hypotheses 4 and 7 should be supported.

Discussion

The current research draws insights from social information and social cognitive theories as a theoretical extension to explain the gossip–ECN relationship. We regard ECN as an attitude where an organisation lacks integrity and employees engage in disparaging behaviour against their colleagues and the workplace. We also regard workplace gossip as idle talk about the personal or private affairs of others at work. Based on the literature review, we found a variety of different views regarding the influence of gossip, some researchers regard gossip as positive, whereas others regard it as negative (e.g. Bok, 1982; Foster, 2004; Leaper & Holliday, 1995; McAndrew et al., 2007). Hence, we conducted this new research to further discuss and examine the role and influence of gossip in the workplace.

In this paper, we reviewed literature on gossip and proposed that the construct of workplace gossip should be re-conceptualised into two components, JRG and NJG. This proposal was rigorously examined by the research and supported by the survey data. We also proposed seven research hypotheses and all were supported. Overall, the findings have enriched the understanding of the link between gossip and ECN over and above what we know from previous empirical studies of gossip (Kurland & Pelled, 2000; McAndrew et al., 2007). Compared to the previous studies which focused on the function of gossip (Foster, 2004; Michelson et al., 2010) and gossip influence (Cole & Dalton, 2009; DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007), our research has provided a further and more systematic perspective to interpret the gossip–ECN relationship.

Prior studies on gossip have often referenced gossip as facilitator of behaviour. For instance, gossip facilitates critical thinking as a social sense-making tool (Bok, 1982), and gossip includes positive information and delivers a more accurate experiential truth than objective explanation (Levin & Arluke, 1987). Similarly, gossip is essentially negative and cannot be unveiled in public (Leaper & Holliday, 1995), and gossip has received pejorative criticism with all cultures and societies experiencing similarly scandalous effects of gossip (Rosnow & Georgoudi, 1985). These findings are valuable and help interpret the influence of gossip. Yet, our research has found that whether gossip leads to a positive or a negative outcome is related to the essence of that gossip. Our findings suggest that, compared to NJG, JRG has a stronger effect on ECN. JRG also demonstrated a stronger mediating effect on the relationship between PCV, AS and ECN. Our findings suggest that if the gossip is about work performance, capability and other job-related events, it may cause cynicism and hence negative outcome. If the gossip is nothing to do with the job, the chance to cause cynicism is significantly reduced.

Prior studies on ECN have often referenced organisational justice (Dean et al., 1998; DeCelles et al., 2013; Kanter & Mirvis, 1989) as its dominant theoretical foundation. While we agree with those prior studies that injustice may facilitate ECN, our research has proposed a new perspective to explain the formation of ECN by identifying a new crucial variable: *workplace gossip*. Managers should not underestimate the significance of workplace gossip, as previous studies and our research have found that different types of gossip are associated with different outcomes. Specifically, our findings have affirmed that JRG is a valid and strong ingredient, contributing to the formation of ECN.

In addition, this paper has contributed to the gossip–ECN knowledge over and above what was known from prior studies of gossip (Kurland & Pelled, 2000; McAndrew et al., 2007). Specifically, our research discovered two antecedents of workplace gossip: PCV and AS. Although both factors predicted cynicism independently, PCV actually showed a stronger effect on cynicism when two factors were present at the same time. This phenomenon is rather interesting, as it implies that PCV indeed affects general employees; to be exact, violation not only facilitates JRG but also causes cynicism via JRG. One of the possible reasons underlying this phenomenon may be that unlike AS its influence mainly occurs in the workplace and may decrease after work (Tepper, 2000; Zellars et al., 2002), employees may still feel (or be influenced by) the experience of PCV after work or outside the workplace (Robinson et al., 1994).

From the perspective of human resources management, we have conducted new research to examine the role of gossip in the workplace, in order to better understand the antecedents of gossip and its relationship to employee behaviour. Managers and leaders can monitor the formation of gossip and respond in a timely manner which may alleviate any resulting negative impact on employees. This paper now turns to discuss the implications of our research findings for human resource management.

Management implications

Sommerfeld, Krambeck, Semmann, and Milinski (2007) state that gossip facilitates the level of reciprocity and contributes to group dynamics. However, this research found that JRG not only predicted ECN but also mediated the relationship between PCV and ECN. Another finding was that both AS and PCV predicted JRG. Based on these findings, the authors suggest that managers should be cautious about JRG in the workplace, as such gossip affects their workforce and causes cynical behaviour amongst employees. If applicable, a clear HR policy or practice should be implemented to reduce the occurrence of JRG in the workplace. If this policy or practice is not applicable, at least, a work ethos of anti-job gossip should be created, promoted and sustained.

Managers and team leaders need to pay more attention to their own supervision and managerial style, as the research findings have shown that employees' experiences of AS showed a strong effect on JRG and NJG. Therefore, the authors suggest that managers and team leaders may use existent appraisal systems (e.g. personal development review (PDR), annual reviewing process) to analyse their own supervision and managerial style. If any inappropriate or uncomfortable styles of management were discovered or commented on by the employees, managers and team leaders should be directed towards management and supervision training, so that they are equipped with the latest management skills and, more practically, lead and support their employees and teams in an appropriate and effective manner.

This research found that PCV predicted JRG, and that JRG predicted ECN. The authors make two specific suggestions to general HR practitioners. The first suggestion concerns the recruitment of new employees. Apart from the job specification, an additional

role analysis should be provided in the recruitment policy and/or application package. With such information in mind, the prospect employees can stand in a better position to analyse whether they fit the role, e.g. the job content/demands, the people they are going to work with and the organisation they are going to work for. The second suggestion is for the management of current employees. Managers and team leaders may wish to use different occasions to observe and investigate the expectation and needs from their employees. These occasions may include, for instance, appraisal schemes, monthly team meetings, department away days and other formal and informal events. It is our hope that these two suggestions may form the best synergy to improve the mutual understanding between the organisation, managers and employees and, ultimately, contribute to the employees' psychological contract towards their organisations.

Limitation and future directions

We originally planned to measure gossip antecedents and gossip dimensions separately. However, as HR managers of the participants thought that our two-stage data collection procedure was already troublesome and disruptive to their employees, we measured the antecedents and gossip simultaneously, so the causality between these variables cannot be concluded. Future studies may focus on this causality so that the *PCV-AS-JRG-NJG relationship* can be examined further.

To avoid CMV bias, we measured gossip (JRG, NJG) at Stage 1 and ECN at Stage 2. Although the findings revealed that JRG predicted ECN, we could not ignore a possibility of a reverse prediction that ECN predicts JRG, or ECN and gossip are interactive (see *rumour influence* in DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007, Chapter 2). Perhaps, NJG offers a means of revenge for cynical employees, especially in the aftermath of AS. Another issue to be recognised is that this research did not measure the tenures of employees, age of companies or manager-subordinate relationship. How these factors impact on the occurrence of gossip and likelihood of ECN remains unclear and hence requires further research.

Moreover, only one outcome variable ECN was measured and the impact of organisational-level variables, such as marketplace competitiveness, were not investigated in relation to gossip. Perhaps also, organisations struggling to survive may be more prone to negative gossip and ECN. Similarly, although JRG and NJG are found to have different relationships with ECN, we cannot assert whether the findings are applicable to other outcome variables, such as organisational identification and citizenship behaviour, which are found to be crucial in influencing organisational performance (Chang et al., 2013). Finally, Abraham (2000) indicates that cynicism may be related to personality, so we recommend future studies to consider personality factors, so that the knowledge of ECN may continue to be advanced.

Conclusion

Gossip is a common phenomenon in the workplace, but yet relatively little is understood about its influence to employees. This study adopts social information theory (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978) and social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1988) to help interpret the diverse literature on gossip, and to develop and test hypotheses concerning some of the antecedents of gossip, with an aim to contribute to the knowledge of the gossip-employee behaviour relationship within the workplace. The study analysed survey data completed by 362 full-time employees from a range of industries in Taipei, Taiwan. A two-stage

process of data collection was adopted to alleviate the potential bias of CMV on data mining and interpretation. The findings revealed that JRG predicted ECN and mediated the relationship between PCV and cynicism, and that NJG showed a similar but weaker effect to ECN. Two antecedents of workplace gossip were also identified: PCV and AS. Based on these findings, the authors suggest that managers should be cautious about gossip in the workplace, as it affects their workforce and causes cynical behaviour amongst employees.

Disclosure statement

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