

## **Managers' positive gossip makes subordinates feeling better**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Every story has two sides, so does gossip. Unlike prior studies which condemn gossip, our research analyses whether managers' gossip benefits subordinates. Our view is, positive gossip contains positive meaning, implying a sense of positiveness and recognition. Based on the commitment theory, we hypothesize that managers' positive gossip acts as commitment facilitator, providing a sense of recognition to subordinates, and that subordinates appreciate such recognition by showing commitment towards their managers. To collect research data, anonymous questionnaires are distributed to 117 managers and 201 subordinates from five industries in Taiwan. Research hypotheses are examined via bootstrapping and structural equation modelling techniques. Research findings first affirm the aforementioned hypotheses. Due to the influence of commitment, subordinates perceive more well-being, team empowerment and job embeddedness. Interestingly, managers' negative gossip does not decrease or increase subordinates' commitment towards managers. Our research is the first of its kind to investigate why managers' gossip acts as commitment facilitator, with statistical analysis and explanation. Research findings have contributed to the literature by explaining gossip valence and its implication on subordinates. Such knowledge also helps to search for continuous improvement of employee performance and reduce the bias associated with workplace gossip.

**KEYWORDS:** Commitment; Managers; Negative Gossip; Positive Gossip; Subordinates.

## INTRODUCTION

Gossiping is a common social phenomenon, as it is part of human nature. In the workplace, gossiping is not only ubiquitous but also provides a channel of information exchange. On the one hand, empirical studies have shown that 14% workplace coffee-break chat is gossip and about 66% of general conversation between employees is related to social topics concerning talk about other people (Cole & Dalton, 2009). People may spend great amount of their time in talking about social topics and up to two-thirds of all conversations refer to the third parties (Dunbar, 2004). Employees are also found to produce, hear or participate in evaluative comments about someone who is not present in the conversation (Kuo, Chang, Quinton, Lu & Lee, 2015). On the other hand, managers often hold instrumental positions in the company's social networks that enable them to get hold of exclusive information, and that enable them to hold legitimate rewarding and punishing power, thus their gossiping behaviors may hold more credibility and weight than those of same-level co-workers (Erdogan, Bauer & Walter, 2015; Kurland & Pelled, 2000).

Gossip's influence at work has been investigated from evolutionary needs (Kniffin & Wilson, 2010), social-organizational dynamics (Noon & Delbridhe, 1993), and other perspectives (for a review, see Grosser, Lopez-Kidwell, Labianca, & Ellwardt, 2012). Over the last decade, scholars have made valuable contribution to the understanding of gossip formation (Kurland & Pelled, 2000), gossip's antecedents and its moderating/mediating effect on behavior (Grosser *et al.*, 2012; Kniffin & Wilson, 2010) and gossip's influence on organization (Farley, Timme, & Hart, 2010; Wu, Birtch, Chiang & Zhang, 2016). Despite considerable progress, scholarly work on workplace gossip remains limited, particularly the gossip-related interaction between managers and subordinates. Prior studies tend to focus on how gossip affects group dynamics and organizational performance (Noon, & Delbridge, 1993; Kniffin & Wilson, 2010). More recently, scholars are keen to examine the nature of gossip valence (*c.f.* positive/negative gossip; Grosser *et al.*, 2012) and the impact of gossip on employees (Wu *et al.*, 2016). But to our knowledge, scholars seem not interested in analyzing whether managers are gossipers and how subordinates respond to managers' gossip (with the exception of gossiping workplace; Ellwardt, 2011; Ellwardt *et al.*, 2012). We know little about how subordinates respond to managers' gossip, or whether subordinates' interpretation of managers' gossip affects consequent attitude and experience at work. Indeed, further research is crucial, not only because gossip is a prevalent type of informal communication that is likely to play a central role in employees' work life, but also because, if not being managed well, gossip can damage teamwork (Kniffin & Wilson, 2010),

breach employee's psychological contract and causes cynicism (Kuo *et al.*, 2015) and ultimately, both managers and subordinates may suffer from a gossip-rampant workplace. Following the same logic, a more specific understanding of gossip-related interaction between managers and subordinates is required if organizations wish to better support their employees at work.

To close the aforementioned knowledge gap, this present study aims to understand the role of managers' gossip and its influence to the subordinates. Our study contributes to the literature in several ways. First, we offer a new account based on gossip perspective and propose that managers' positive gossip makes subordinates feel better. Informed by the commitment theory (Meyer & Allen, 1991), we propose that managers' positive gossip provides a sense of recognition to subordinates, and subordinates appreciate such recognition by showing commitment towards their managers. Second, unlike prior studies which analyze general gossip (e.g. Farley *et al.*, 2010; Wu *et al.*, 2016), we examine the impact difference between positive- and negative- gossip on subordinates. Third, following the influence of commitment, we hypothesize that subordinates are likely to perceive more psychological well-being, team empowerment, and job embeddedness. Fourth, we provide a new direction for gossip research; to our knowledge, our study is the first of its kind to examine the gossip-related interaction between managers and subordinates; by scrutinizing the effects of gossip occurred within the managers-subordinates hierarchy, we advance these literatures. Lastly, by connecting managers' gossip and subordinates' experience via the characteristics of commitment (*cf.* affective commitment; Mowday, Porter & Steers, 1982), our research findings shall contribute to the refinement of gossip theories and offer practical insights to the managers in gossip management.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS**

### **Workplace gossip and its valence**

In layman's terms, gossip is an informal conversation about other people who are absent at the scene. Gossip is often mistaken by rumor, as both are results of societal interaction that most people would like to avoid or fall victims to. Although gossip and rumor seem overlapped, they vary in distance and validity. Rumors are often about persons and events (i.e. greater distance between rumor speaker and target persons/events), whereas gossip is strictly about other individuals that are personally known by both the gossiper and the gossip recipient (Rosnow, 2001). Gossip may be based on a known fact, but rumor is always unsubstantiated, making its validity less certain (DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007). Following this line of research,

the current study defines *workplace gossip* as an idle talk between colleagues, as it occurs when one colleague engages in informal and evaluative communication with another colleague(s) about the absent colleague(s). Similar definitions are adopted in prior studies (e.g. Grosser *et al.*, 2012; Wu *et al.*, 2016).

To extend this line of research, we propose that the occurrence of workplace gossip is pertinent to several contextual conditions. These are: i) *Sociability*: Only when two or more colleagues (interacting parties) have developed a congenial relationship through a level of socialising, is gossip more likely to emerge (Rosnow, 2001); ii) *Shared frames of reference*: Colleagues from the same unit and department tend to be familiar with each other's values and thinking styles, and they may share similar frames of reference. When the conformity between colleagues is formed and the consensus increases, the likelihood to engage in gossip rises (Kurland & Pelled, 2000); and, iii) *Privacy protection*: Gossiping provides good privacy to speakers (i.e. gossipers); simply put, colleagues who engage in gossiping can easily avoid accountability and freely express their views without fear of discovery (Rosnow, 2001).

Workplace gossip has started to draw research attention recently. For instance, gossip has been found to serve multiple functions simultaneously. These functions are, *getting information, gaining influence, releasing pent-up emotions, providing intellectual stimulation, fostering interpersonal intimacy, and maintaining group values and norms* (Grosser *et al.*, 2012). Empirical studies suggest that over 90% of the employees in the United States and Western Europe engages in at least some gossip activity on the job, and that male colleagues engage in gossip with just as many people as female colleagues do (Ellwardt, 2011; Ellwardt *et al.*, 2012). Moreover, gossip can be seen as a dynamic process and its effect depends on the interaction between gossiper, listener/respondent, and target (*gossip triad*; Michelson, Iterson & Waddington, 2010). Gossip helps to deliver a more accurate, experiential truth than objective explanations, and individual may adjust their behavior along with the received information via gossip (Levin & Arluke, 1987). Gossip is crucial to the societal development, as the constant flow of information within the society helps society members to evaluate pieces of information from different perspectives and then interpret it according to their own knowledge base (McAndrew *et al.*, 2007). Namely, gossip has merits, not only disseminating information between individuals, regulating behavior in organization, but also helping individuals to understand the environmental events.

Workplace gossip has also been analyzed from diverse perspectives, including: job relevance (Kuo *et al.*, 2015), behavioral consequence (Wu *et al.*, 2016) and gossip valence (Grosser *et al.*, 2012). These prior

studies have different research aims but jointly, they have affirmed the role of valence – an important but neglected area of gossip studies. To continue this line of research, the current research is particularly interested in the nature of gossip valence, with four reasons outlined below: i). Workplace gossip can be positive (e.g. gossiping a colleague’s diplomacy in handling customer complaints, which improves overall customer satisfaction), or negative (e.g. gossiping a colleague’s incapability in handling complaints, which aggravates the severity of complaints); ii). Both positive- and negative- gossip episodes involve interpersonal interactions and comprise at least three parties (gossiper, recipient & victim), and gossiping can be viewed as relational-behavioral process, and gossip valence affects this process (Grosser *et al.*, 2012); iii). Gossip can be both positive and negative simultaneously, as explained by DiFonzo and Bordia (2007) that either positive or negative gossip often depends on whether one is viewing the gossip from the employee’s perspective or the organization’s perspective; and, iv). Considerable research attention has been paid to gossip’s consequence but not the nature of gossip (Rosnow, 2001). Overall, the majority of gossip studies focus on the side of employees, without considering the hierarchy in organization (with the exception of gossiping workplace; Ellwardt, 2011; Ellwardt *et al.*, 2012). Although gossip valence is of significance, prior studies tend to put more weight on negative gossip (Wu *et al.*, 2016) and less attention on positive gossip (DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007). We know little about whether managers are gossipers, or whether managers produce positive- or negative- gossip. To respond to the knowledge gaps stated above, the current study aims to examine whether managers are gossipers and how subordinates respond to managers’ gossip through the context of hierarchy. Toward this end, we now turn our attention to discussing the gossip-related interaction between managers and subordinates.

### **Managers’ gossip and subordinates’ commitment towards managers**

Do managers gossip in the workplace? How do subordinates respond to managers’ gossip through the context of workplace hierarchy? To respond to these two questions, we propose an overarching framework (see Figure 1) connecting managers and subordinates via the concept of commitment. The rationale is explained as follows.

< Insert Figure 1 About Here >

To begin with, we believe that both managers and employees gossip, as the ubiquity of gossip makes it an activity that every member experiences in the organization (Kniffin & Wilson, 2010). Gossip facilitates

teamwork by increasing the levels of reciprocity, trust and reputation between teammates (Sommerfeld, Krambeck & Milinski, 2008), implying that, if being managed well, gossip becomes an efficient method to improve team cohesion and performance. Managers' gossip can be positive or negative, because it can help fostering interpersonal intimacy (see gossip's multiple functions in: Grosser *et al.*, 2012) or accumulate momentum for cynicism (see job-related gossip's effect in: Kuo *et al.*, 2015). Negative gossip is also found to cause embarrassment and discomfort to the gossip victims (Foster, 2004) and ruin victims' reputation and credibility at work (Cole & Dalton, 2009).

Next, positive gossip contains positive meaning, implying a sense of positiveness and recognition (Kuo *et al.*, 2015). Following this logic, we assume that managers' positive gossip provides a sense of recognition to subordinates, and subordinates appreciate such recognition by showing commitment towards their managers. In layperson's terms, when A comments B positively, B is also likely to interact with A positively. When subordinates feel "recognized" by their managers through positive gossip, subordinates shall appreciate such recognition by demonstrating affective commitment towards their managers in return. The commitment theory (Meyer & Allen, 1991) is now adopted to discuss our assumption further.

Meyer and Allen explain commitment as a psychological state, comprising: *affective-*, *continuance-* and *normative-* components. Mercurio (2015) extends Meyer and Allen's explanation and posits that affective component is the main essence of commitment; ii). Affective commitment refers to the employee's emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in the organization and its goals. Affective commitment results in the employee "wanting" to remain in the relationship (Clugston *et al.*, 2000); iii). Affective commitment is operated on reciprocity; when an individual employee enjoys her/his work, s/he is likely to feel good and be satisfied with the job. In turn, this increased job satisfaction is likely to add to her/his feeling of organizational commitment (Veličković *et al.*, 2014); and, iv). Affective commitment acts as a psychological attachment to the organization. Meyer and Allen (1991) describe this attachment as psychological state, which affects how individuals evaluate their managers, colleagues, and the organization, and how individuals respond to the organization. For instance, a sense of commitment for the job may occur when an employee feels a strong emotional attachment to the organization and managers, and to the work that s/he does. When the attachment is strong, s/he will most likely identify with the organization's goals and values, and s/he genuinely wants to be there. Following these studies, we decide to focus on the affective commitment, i.e. the most crucial element of commitment in the existing research.

In sum, prior studies have offered diverse perspectives to explain the nature of affective commitment, and analyzed how affective commitment operates in the workplace. Following this logic, we assume that managers' positive gossip produces a sense of recognition to the subordinates; and when subordinates feel recognised, they are more likely to pay back what they receive from their managers (*cf.* reciprocity; Veličković *et al.*, 2014), and one of the possible reciprocity is that subordinates are more likely to demonstrate affective commitment towards their managers. In contrast, we argue that managers' negative gossip provides limited or no support to the subordinates. This is because negative gossip is usually sensitive and stealthy (Dunbar, 2004). Negative gossip causes embarrassment and discomfort to the victims (Foster, 2004) and can be utilized to ruin the credibility of victims (Cole & Dalton, 2009). Following this logic, managers' negative gossip seems to bring more harm and no merits to their subordinates; consequently, as subordinates do not feel recognized by their managers, they probably will not develop a psychological attachment to their managers, and there is probably no motive for subordinates to demonstrate affective commitment towards their managers. As such, we propose:

H1. Managers' positive gossip is positively related to subordinates' affective commitment towards managers.

H2. Managers' negative gossip is negatively related to subordinates' affective commitment towards managers.

For the sake of clarity, a conceptual framework (Figure 1) is developed to illustrate the research hypotheses.

### **Subordinates' affective commitment and experiences**

Recently scholars have examined the impact of gossip at the organizational level, e.g. gossip affects organizational performance (Wu *et al.*, 2016) and gossips causes cynicism in the organization (Kuo *et al.*, 2015). Although these findings have advanced the knowledge of gossip, we still know little about the impact of managers' gossip. To close this knowledge gap, we thus investigate how managers' gossip affects individual subordinates and their experiences at work, via examining three pertinent variables. These variables are: *psychological well-being* (Diener *et al.*, 1985; Dodge *et al.*, 2012), *team empowerment* (Kirkman & Rosen, 2000; Spreitzer, 1995) and *job embeddedness* (Crossley *et al.*, 2007; Mitchell *et al.*, 2001). (*note.* These three variables are found to affect employees' experience and thus have important implication to our study. These variables will be discussed in due course). In the current study, we argue that, when subordinates feel supported via managers' positive gossip and show commitment towards managers,

they are likely to perceive more psychological well-being, team empowerment and job embeddedness. By linking subordinates' commitment to the three specific variables, we are keen to advance these literatures. We now turn our attention to analyzing how these variables are related to subordinates' affective commitment.

Psychological well-being is a subjective state of balance regulated by positive and negative life events, and both personal values and development opportunity affect this state of balance (Dodge *et al.*, 2012; Ryff, 1989). Following this logic, an employee's psychological well-being may be related to his/her relationships with other colleagues and the place s/he works for. More specifically, when subordinates feel supported via managers' positive gossip and show affective commitment towards their managers, subordinates' state of balance becomes more positive. This is because when showing commitment towards managers, subordinates are more likely to recognize their managers, leading to a more positive overall experience in the workplace. In contrast, when showing no commitment towards managers, subordinates are less likely to recognize their managers, leading to a less positive experience.

An empowered employee has authority and responsibility to make decisions, rather than waiting to get approval from managers (Spreitzer, 1995); in an empowered team, each member proactively participates in decision-making, and members may self-organize around team-manager(s) instead of reporting to team-manager(s) (Somech, 2005). Team empowerment is also related to organizational support and self-perception in organization (Kirkman & Rosen, 1999, 2000). Following this logic, when subordinates feel supported via managers' positive gossip and show commitment towards their managers, they may perceive their teams more competent. This is because when showing commitment towards managers, subordinates feel they are working with managers and making joint decisions with managers (instead of taking orders from managers); consequently, subordinates are likely to perceive their teams more empowered.

Job embeddedness is the collection of forces that influence employee retention; specifically, organizational commitment is the core of job embeddedness, indicating an employee's intent to stay in the organization (Mitchell *et al.*, 2001). Both *on-the-job* and *off-the-job* forces act to bind people to their jobs, predicting the likelihood of voluntary turnover (Crossley *et al.*, 2007). Following this logic, we believe that, when subordinates feel supported via managers' positive gossip and show affective commitment towards managers, they may feel more enmeshed in their jobs. This is because when showing commitment towards managers, subordinates show organizational commitment too (as managers are vital organizational figures).



When subordinates show commitment towards both managers and organizations, their intent to leave the organization becomes lower and, for the same reason, they are more likely to stay in the organization.

Based on above reasoning, we propose that, when showing affective commitment towards managers, subordinates are more likely to have positive experience at work, perceive their teams competent and stay in organization. As such, we propose:

H3. Subordinates' affective commitment towards managers is positively related to their perception of psychological well-being (H3a), team empowerment (H3b) and job embeddedness (H3c).

### **Positive gossip and outcome variables: The mediating role of affective commitment**

In earlier discussion, we have proposed that managers' gossip facilitates subordinates' commitment (H1 & H2), and that such commitment facilitates three research variables (H3a, b, c). To the best of our knowledge, our study is the first of its kind to investigate how managers' positive gossip makes subordinates feel better, via the proposed mediating effect of commitment. We now turn our attention to explaining the rationale underlying the proposed mediating effect.

Commitment is often conceptualized as a prominent type of psychological attachment and it manifests a process of an individual's self-concept, evaluation and recognition towards targets (Meyer & Allen, 1991). In the current study, we are interested in subordinates' affective commitment towards managers and we believe that three principles are related to the conceptualization above. These three principles are: i). The concept of commitment involves three components: *cognitive* (e.g. subordinates should take instructions from managers), *evaluative* (e.g. my manager has leading qualities) and *affective* (i.e. I respect my manager). These components jointly denote subordinates' perception of psychological emotional attachment towards managers, as clarified by Meyer and Allen (1991). Meyer and Allen also indicate that an employee who is affectively committed strongly identifies with the organizational goals and desires to remain a part of the organization; ii). The concept of commitment towards managers is both relational and comparative (Mowday *et al.*, 1982), because it defines how one individual (e.g. subordinate) is relative to another individual (e.g. manager), and explains how a subordinate (lower rank of position) is compared to the manager (higher rank of position); and, iii). Mercurio (2015) states that affective component is an enduring, demonstrably indispensable and central characteristic of organizational commitment.

Next, we argue that managers' positive gossip may facilitate psychological well-being, team empowerment and job embeddedness, with the following reasons: i). Managers' positive comment provides a sense of positiveness and recognition to the subordinates (*cf.* earlier discussion of positive gossip; Kuo *et al.*, 1985), and such cognition helps to improve psychological well-being (Diener *et al.*, 1985); ii). Managers' positive comments may contain useful know-how and acts as a good advice to the subordinations (*cf.* informational support; Wills, 1985), and subordinates with sufficient information and support from their managers tend to feel empowered at work (Kirkman & Rosen, 1999, 2000); and, iii). Managers' positive comments often involve membership recognition and organizational commitment (Wills, 1985). Scholars have indicated that organizational membership and commitment towards organization are found to predict job embeddedness (Mitchell *et al.*, 2001).

Moreover, we would like to propose that subordinates' affective commitment (towards managers) facilitates the aforementioned variables (i.e. psychological well-being, team empowerment and job embeddedness), as this is because subordinates with higher levels of commitment tend to feel psychologically intertwined with their personal role in organization (Ellemers *et al.*, 2004) and have a higher sense of shared fate with the organization and those belonging to it (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). We believe that such commitment can motivate subordinates to devote more effort to their own job, creating a positive impact on individual well-being. In contrast, we believe that subordinates with lower levels of commitment may feel psychologically separated from the fate of their organizations and decrease their job motivation, generating a negative impact on individual experience at work. In addition, empirical evidence has indicated that employee commitment towards the organizations is positively related to their well-being (Dodge *et al.*, 2012; Ryff, 1989), team empowerment (Kirkman & Rosen, 2000; Somech, 2005) and job embeddedness (Crossley *et al.*, 2007; Mitchell *et al.*, 2001). Based on the above reasoning, we propose that managers' positive gossip shall have a positive relationship with the outcome variables via the mediating effect of subordinates' commitment. As such, we propose:

H4. Subordinates' affective commitment toward managers mediates the relationship between managers' positive gossip and subordinates' perception of psychological well-being (H4a), team empowerment (H4b) and job embeddedness (H4c).

## METHODOLOGY

## Sample and procedure

The current research was approved by the institutional research ethics committee, prior to the data collection. Employees from multiple industries in Taiwan were recruited *as per* grant criterion. These industries included: manufacturing, information technology, finance, retailers and general services. These industries are different in nature, but they all have well-organized personnel system (e.g., Zhao, Xia, He, Sheard, & Wan, 2016) and offer researchers a good opportunity to observe the interaction between managers and subordinates (e.g., Xu, Xu, & Robinson, 2015). Following this logic, we believe that the organizations in these industries fit our research needs.

To facilitate successful data collection, we recruited organisations from the industries aforementioned, explaining our research aim, data collection method and research confidentiality policies. With the approval of organisations, we posted our research invitation on their internal bulletins, so prospective participants (both managers and subordinates) could contact us to participate in the research. Vouchers were used as incentives to stimulate the participation rates. We then contacted these managers and corresponding subordinates directly, via a random sampling technique, so either managers or subordinates were unaware of who had been invited to take part in the research. Once participants agreed to participate, we emailed them with questionnaires, and made explicit our research aim, research team, contact details, confidentiality policy, and we emphasised the voluntary nature of participation in a covering letter. For the sake of confidentiality and data analysis, the questionnaires were coded in identity numbers for matching manager–subordinate dyads prior to distribution. Participants were then advised to return their completed questionnaires to the research team directly to ensure anonymity of responses to further reduce avoid social desirability effect (Nederhof, 1985).

The unit of data analysis was determined as the managers and subordinates being one dyad-set (i.e. managers and their corresponding subordinates), because such analytic unit allows closer examination on dynamics within the dyad and follows similar prior studies (e.g. Kuo *et al.*, 2018; Liu *et al.*, 2013).

To tackle the influence of common method variance (CMV) in data collection, we adopted a two stage time-lagged strategy: Managers first responded to the questions of gossip engagement and after two months, subordinates responded to the questions of affective commitment towards managers, and perception of their psychological wellbeing, team empowerment and job embeddedness. All responded to the demographic questions. Questionnaires were coded before distribution and the human resources departments assisted in

recording identity numbers and the respondents' names to match manager-subordinate dyads. Overall, 322 pairs (dyad-set) of questionnaires were distributed to the participants, and 201 pairs (117 managers; 201 subordinates) returned to the researchers, indicating a response rate of 64.29%.

To examine the phenomenon of non-independence in raw data, a series of ANOVAs were carried out and the findings showed no difference in managers' positive gossip ( $F(116, 84)=1.26, ns.$ ), managers' negative gossip ( $F(116, 84)=1.21, ns.$ ), subordinates' affective commitment towards managers ( $F(116, 84)=1.05, ns.$ ), psychological well-being ( $F(116, 84)=1.33, ns.$ ), team empowerment ( $F(116, 84)=1.14, ns.$ ) and job *embeddedness* ( $F(116, 84)=1.01, ns.$ ). These findings jointly affirmed no violation of independence within the data, indicating a good sign of further data analysis (Liu, Kwan, Wu, & Wu, 2010). Finally, the demographic profile of 117 managers was of: average age (43.39 years old), average tenure (14.21 years), education levels (67.52% undergraduate & 22.22% graduate) and gender ratio (63.25% male). The demographical profile of 201 subordinates was of: average age (34.93 years old), average tenure (7.36 years), education levels (79.10% undergraduate) and gender ratio (49.25% male).

## Measures

We created Chinese versions for all measures following the commonly used *Translation-back translation procedure* (Brislin, 1970), and three bilingual experts of management science were invited to examine the clarity of scale items, and revisions were made accordingly. Five standardized scales were used in the survey. Managers responded to: *workplace gossip*, whereas subordinates responded to: *affective commitment towards managers, psychological well-being, team empowerment, and job-embeddedness*. All measures used the same response scale, ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The details now follow:

**Workplace gossip.** We adopted a scale to measure managers' gossiping behavior (Kuo, 2014; six positive gossip items;  $\alpha=0.83$ ; six negative gossip items;  $\alpha=0.86$ ). All items were preceded by a statement: *Have you recently gossiped about x of your subordinates* (x= specific type of gossip). Sample items of positive gossip include: *excellent work performance, commitment of professional ethics and good emotional management*. Sample items of negative gossip include: *carelessness and poor work engagement, inexperience and poor job knowledge, and lack of demonstration of job morality*. Higher scores represented a higher frequency of participation in specific type of gossip.

*Affective commitment towards managers.* We adopted a scale to measure subordinates' commitment towards managers (Clugston *et al.*, 2000; five items;  $\alpha = 0.77$ ). Sample items include: *I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career with my managers, I really feel as if this Managers' problems are my own, and I feel emotionally attached to my line managers.* Higher scores represent a higher level of affective commitment toward managers.

*Psychological well-being.* We adopted a scale to measure subordinates' perception of psychological well-being (Diener *et al.*, 1985; five items;  $\alpha = 0.81$ ). Sample items include: *In most ways my life is close to my ideal, the conditions of my life are excellent, and so far I have gotten the important things I want in life.* Higher scores represented a higher level of psychological well-being.

*Team empowerment.* We adopted a scale to measure subordinates' perception of team empowerment (Kirkman *et al.*, 2004; twelve items;  $\alpha = 0.90$ ). Sample items include: *The team I work for is very important to me, I am confident that my team can do the job well, and Our team is an important asset to the organization.* Higher scores represented a higher level of team empowerment.

*Job embeddedness.* We adopted a scale to measure subordinates' perception of job embeddedness (Crossley *et al.*, 2007; seven items;  $\alpha = 0.85$ ). Sample items include: *I'm too caught up in this organization to leave, I feel tied to this organization, and I am tightly connected to this organization.* Higher scores represented a higher level of team empowerment.

### **Control variables**

At the early stage of data analysis, we attempted to control for a variety of demographic characters of managers and subordinates. These were: gender, age, job tenure and educational levels. Yet, the association between demographic characters and corresponding variables were either weak or inconsistent (this phenomenon is common in general social science research; *see further discussion in: Podsakoff et al.*, 2012). We then adopted SEM to examine the potential influence of demographic characters on the conceptual framework (Figure 1), by incorporating demographic characters into the framework (we described this process as the controlled model). Results showed that, compared to the conceptual framework, the controlled model did not affect the direction and significance of all the pathways (co-efficiency). The SEM findings were consistent with Podsakoff *et al.*'s viewpoint and affirmed that these control variables were generally non-significant and did not affect research variables. For the sake of parsimony and clarity, the control variables were thus omitted from the analysis reported below.

## FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

To prepare the data for statistical analysis, the descriptive statistics of all research variables are calculated and presented in Table 1. In line with our expectation, managers' gossiping behavior is found to correlate with different research variables. Specifically, managers' positive gossip was correlated with subordinates' affective commitment towards managers ( $r = .21, p < .01$ ), psychological well-being ( $r = .15, p < .05$ ), and team empowerment ( $r = .14, p < .05$ ). Managers' negative gossip was not correlated with any variables, including: affective commitment towards managers ( $r = .09, ns.$ ), psychological well-being ( $r = -.03, ns.$ ), job embeddedness ( $r = .11, ns.$ ) and team empowerment ( $r = .07, ns.$ ). Subordinates' affective commitment towards managers was correlated with psychological well-being ( $r = .39, p < .001$ ), team empowerment ( $r = .47, p < .001$ ) and job embeddedness ( $r = .58, p < .001$ ). Managers' positive gossip was also correlated with managers' negative gossip ( $r = .39, p < .001$ ).

<Insert Table 1 About Here>

### Analysis of the conceptual framework model

A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was applied to all research variables. The conceptual framework (hypothetic 6-factor model; Figure 2) was compared with alternative models, including one 5-factor model, two 4-factor models, one 3-factor model, one 2-factor model and one 1-factor model (see Table 2 for details). CFA revealed that the 6-factor model provided a sound fit to the data; specifically, it had a significantly better fit than the 5-factor model ( $\Delta\chi^2 = 204.75, p < .001$ ), first 4-factor model ( $\Delta\chi^2 = 301.91, p < .001$ ), second 4-factor model ( $\Delta\chi^2 = 443.65, p < .001$ ), the 3-factor model ( $\Delta\chi^2 = 686.94, p < .001$ ), the 2-factor model ( $\Delta\chi^2 = 798.77, p < .001$ ) and the 1-factor model ( $\Delta\chi^2 = 942.15, p < .001$ ). Taken together, the hypothetic model represented the best fit to the data ( $\chi^2 (120) = 221.17, p < .001, CFI = .95, IFI = .95, TLI = .93, RMSEA = .06$ ).

< Insert Table 2 and Figure 2 Here >

As per reliability, the composite reliability (CR) of research variables ranged from 0.67 to 0.88. All reliability coefficients were higher than .65, indicating that the composite reliability of all variables was acceptable for further analysis (Fornell & Larker, 1981). In respect to validity, the average variance extracted (AVE) of all measured variables ranged from 0.42 to 0.71. Almost all AVEs of research variables were higher than 0.50, indicating that the convergent validity of all variables was satisfactory (Fornell & Larker,

1981). The AVE of “subordinates’ affective commitment towards managers” was 0.42, which was slightly lower than the conventional threshold (0.50) and thus we decided to accept it for further analysis.

As per the influence of common method variance (CMV), we first adopted Harman's single factor test to examine the influence, in which all variables were merged into one factor. Results showed poor fit, i.e. one single factor of merging all variables was inappropriate for data analysis ( $\chi^2 (135) = 1163.32, p < .001, RMSEA = .19, CFI = .46, IFI = .46, TLI = .39$ ). Yet, due to the insensitivity of Harman’s test in CMV examination (*see further discussion in: Podsakoff et al., 2012*), we also adopted an Unmeasured Latent Construct Method (ULCM) to examine the potential influence of CMV. ULCM indicated no change in any of the correlative path coefficients or significance levels, and the *Chi-square* difference test was not significant ( $\Delta\chi^2 (1) = 0.27, p > .05$ ). To sum, the influence of CMV was carefully examined and the results showed a very slim probability of such influence.

### **Analysis of the research hypotheses**

We applied a structural equation modelling technique to examine the fitness of conceptual framework (i.e. research hypothetic model) and to examine the relationships among six research variables. The results indicated that the model fitness was satisfactory ( $\chi^2 (130) = 264.32, p < .001, CFI = .93, IFI = .93, TLI = .92, RMSEA = .07$ ), and that the relationships among variables were congruent with our expectation. Specifically, managers’ positive gossip was found to positively predict subordinates’ affective commitment towards managers ( $\beta = .20, p < .05$ ), whereas managers’ negative gossip showed no impact on subordinates’ affective commitment towards managers ( $\beta = .05, ns.$ ). These figures indicated that managers’ positive gossip is positively related to subordinates’ affective commitment towards managers, and that managers’ negative gossip is not related to subordinates’ affective commitment towards managers. Taken together, the first hypothesis is supported and the second hypothesis unsupported.

Next, subordinates’ affective commitment towards managers was found to positively predict psychological well-being ( $\beta = .62, p < .001$ ), team empowerment ( $\beta = .79, p < .001$ ) and job embeddedness ( $\beta = .71, p < .001$ ). These figures jointly indicated that, when subordinates showed affective commitment towards their managers, they were likely to perceive higher level of psychological well-being, team empowerment and job embeddedness. Following this finding, the third hypothesis is supported.

We conducted both mediation- and bootstrapping- analysis to examine the fourth hypothesis, and the conventional confidence level (95% CI) was set to examine the significance of direct effects and indirect effect. We first added lines to link managers' positive gossip to three outcome variables in the conceptual framework (i.e. research hypothetic model), and we referred this new model as alternative model. The three outcome variables were: psychological well-being ( $\beta = .12$ ), team empowerment ( $\beta = .03$ ) and job embeddedness ( $\beta = .01$ ). As the fitness of alternative model was very similar to the fitness of conceptual framework and remained satisfactory ( $\Delta\chi^2(124) = 258.44, p < .001, CFI = .93, IFI = .93, TLI = .91, RMSEA = .07$ ), we conducted bootstrapping analysis to further examine the mediation effect (Table 3). Findings indicated that subordinates' affective commitment towards managers mediated the relationship between managers' positive gossip and subordinates' psychological well-being (Indirect effect = .12,  $p < .05$ ), job embeddedness (Indirect effect = .14,  $p < .05$ ), and team empowerment (Indirect effect = .15,  $p < .05$ ). These figures jointly indicated that, although managers' positive gossip generated a direct positive impact on three outcome variables, such impact was also transferrable via the mediator, i.e. subordinates' affective commitment towards managers. As such, the fourth hypothesis is supported.

<Insert Table 3 About Here>

## DISCUSSION

Building on the commitment theory (Meyer & Allen, 1991), we have proposed a novel perspective of gossip and found that managers' positive gossip provides a sense of positiveness and recognition to their subordinates, and subordinates appreciate such recognition by demonstrating affective commitment towards their managers. Subordinates' commitment also mediates their perception of psychological well-being, team empowerment and job embeddedness. Our study not only provides new insights to the literatures but also shifts attention to the role of managers' gossip, an important but neglected area in the gossip studies.

### Contribution to the literature

Responding to calls to explore possible gossip's influence in organizations (e.g., Kuo *et al.*, 2015; Ellwardt *et al.*, 2012), we developed a novel conceptual model (Figure 1) outlining how managers' gossip may be related to subordinates' attitudes and behaviors – particularly, the influence of managers' positive gossips is related to subordinates' perception of positiveness and recognition, and such perception helps subordinates to show commitment towards managers. Our conceptual model differs from past research



which has primarily adopted an organizational perspective wherein gossips are analysed by identity (Farley *et al.*, 2010) or group dynamic approaches (Kniffin & Wilson, 2010). While identity and group dynamics are undoubtedly linked to gossiping behavior, our research adopts a more individual perspective and the results illustrate that the source of gossip also matters. Specifically, we have found that managers' gossip is related to several research variables, which has contributed to gossip literature in several ways.

Unlike prior studies which focus on gossiping phenomenon in organizations (Kuo *et al.*, 2015) and its influence on performance (Kniffin & Wilson, 2010), our research findings have pointed out an important role of hierarchy (manager's gossip vs subordinate's perception). In the context of *hierarchy*, specifically, we argue that managers often hold higher positions in organizations and thus their words and deeds are meaningful and influential to the subordinates. Our argument can be further justified via social exchange theory (Homans, 1958); the theory posits that human relationships are formed by the use of a subjective cost-benefit analysis and the comparison of alternatives. Following this logic, when managers' gossip contains a sense of recognition and subordinates acknowledge such sense, subordinates may show commitment towards managers, i.e. manager's recognition *in exchange of* subordinate's commitment. To sum, our research has implied that subordinates do take managers' gossip seriously, and that hierarchy is an important factor to the influence of gossip at work.

Next, although managers' gossip facilitates subordinates' commitment towards managers and we have provided statistical evidence to explain the facilitation mechanism; actually, only positive gossip shows facilitating effect on commitment, while negative gossip does not show any aggravating effect on commitment. This phenomenon is rather interesting and deserves further discussion. Based on the commitment theory (Meyer & Allen, 1991), one can readily comprehend the relationship between positive gossip and commitment facilitation, and such relationship can also be interpreted via the concept of reciprocity (Veličković *et al.*, 2014). On the other hand, however, why negative gossip shows no effect on commitment? In order to respond to this question, several reasons are proposed. These are: i). *fear of revenge*: Broadly speaking, people may refrain from revenge if they feel it is unwise or risky to do so (Miller, 1998). When subordinates feel unpleasant about managers' negative gossip, they may not necessarily engage in revenge such as showing no commitment towards managers and organizations. This is because subordinates are unable to predict how managers will tackle their revenge, they may also worry about the aftermath; ii). *responsibility of managers*: Subordinates may feel normal when managers criticise their performance, as

managers are expected to act as “supervisors”, monitoring the performance of subordinates. Namely, when subordinates appreciate managers’ responsibility and recognize its legitimacy, they are more likely to accept negative gossip and treat such gossip as part of managerial responsibility, rather than personal attack. Following this logic, subordinates may not necessarily decrease their commitment towards the managers; and, iii). *level of subtlety*: negative gossip is usually sensitive and stealthy (Dunbar, 2004). Its influence may be too subtle to be diagnosed quantitatively, or its impact on commitment is not straightforward so cannot be measured directly. Duly, the aforementioned three reasons are still hypothetical in nature and deserve further examination.

Interestingly, we have found that managers’ positive gossip is correlated with their negative gossip, and that subordinates’ affective commitment towards managers mediates the relationship between managers’ positive gossip and subordinates’ perception of three outcome variables. These variables are: *psychological well-being, team empowerment and job embeddedness*. Our research findings are linked to prior studies and hence can contribute to the knowledge advancement. First, Kniffin and Wilson (2010) indicate that gossip is ubiquitous across organizations, and that general employees may produce, hear or participate in evaluative comments about someone who is not present in the conversation (Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Kuo *et al.*, 2015). Our research findings have added a new line to the literature that managers also gossip, and they engage in both positive- and negative- gossip. Second, prior studies identified the valence of gossip (Grossee *et al.*, 2012) and examined the impact of gossip valence (DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007). Although prior findings are important and valuable, our results have extended the knowledge of gossip valence. Specifically, we have provided statistical evidence to explain that only managers’ positive gossip is capable of affecting subordinates’ commitment towards managers, and that only managers’ positive gossip is related to subordinates’ perception of psychological well-being, team empowerment and job embeddedness. Third, although subordinates’ commitment has a mediating effect on three variables, its effect varies. Subordinates’ commitment has shown a strongest effect on team empowerment, followed by job embeddedness and psychological well-being; namely, the mediating effect is not universal, subject to the nature of variables.

Finally, our research has affirmed the importance of gossip valence (positive vs. negative) and provided statistical evidence to echo prior research arguments (*c.f.* DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007; Grosser *et al.*, 2012). Our research has highlighted the role of hierarchy and discussed its potential relevance to the gossip’s influence, in line with social exchange theory (Homans, 1958). To our knowledge, our research is the first of its kind to

link gossip with workplace hierarchy. Identifying the valence of gossip and its influence to the subordinates has helped to advance the theoretical understanding of workplace gossip. Such knowledge also helps to search for continuous improvement of employee performance and potentially reduce the bias associated with workplace gossip.

### **Practical implications**

Research findings have important implications for the broader work on gossip management, especially when conventional wisdom often implies that managers should cultivate a distance from subordinates to preserve their dignity and authority. For managers in organizations, our research findings have offered a new viewpoint that engaging in a positive gossip with staff may actually improve team dynamics and make their subordinates feel better. We are of the view that gossip can be a diagnostic tool for managers, if it is being utilized sensibly. Grosser *et al.* (2012) indicate that informal communication (e.g. gossip) may act as an early warning device that alerts the attentive managers to potential problems such as conflicts within work teams or trust issues between labor and management. Following this logic, it would be practical for managers to be connected to informal communication network in organizations, so they are able to know things they would not otherwise have known. We do not encourage managers to abuse gossip (e.g. spying their employees through gossips), as it is unethical and may breach the codes of management practices; however, we still believe that gossip has its merit and can be a reasonable channel for gathering information from both inside and outside of organizations.

Informal communication (e.g. gossip) plays a crucial role in human society and facilitates group dynamics as social glue; specifically, it fosters group cohesion and helps to police deviant behaviour (Dunbar, 2004). Gossip is a common type of informal communication (DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007), so we surmise it will continue to be part of human life and it is not likely to disappear in the workplace. Following this line of research and our research findings, it becomes necessary to recognize this specific type of human behavior, and we would like to recommend team leaders and managers to appreciate the value of gossip and learn from workplace gossip. Our research has implied that managers who gossip positively about subordinates can be a good thing, such as fostering a culture of team commitment and empowerment. Through the effect of positive gossip, managers can also raise subordinates' spirits and make them feel better.

### **Research limitations**

As the data were gathered from employees in Taiwan, the findings reported here may be sample-specific and in need of replication. Due to the limited research resource, only three outcome variables (psychological well-being, team empowerment, job embeddedness) were investigated here and thus the implications of our research findings on other types of attitudes and behaviors may be compromised. In different settings, other factors such as identity and manager-subordinate relationship, might become relevant. For instance, receiving positive gossip about co-workers is found to increase commitment as it nurtures identity in groups, i.e. positive gossip is prosocial behavior that strengthens group identity (Dunbar, 2004). Colleagues with close relationship are more likely to gossip (DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007).

The current research design does not allow researchers to examine whether the manager selectively gossips to the employee who is more committed to him/her, or whether the manager's gossip engagement makes employees more committed. In addition, one may also criticize that our small sample size lacks statistical power to detect small effects, so whether positive gossip really matters in reality is still unknown. Future studies may take these factors into consideration and examine their relevance to workplace gossip.

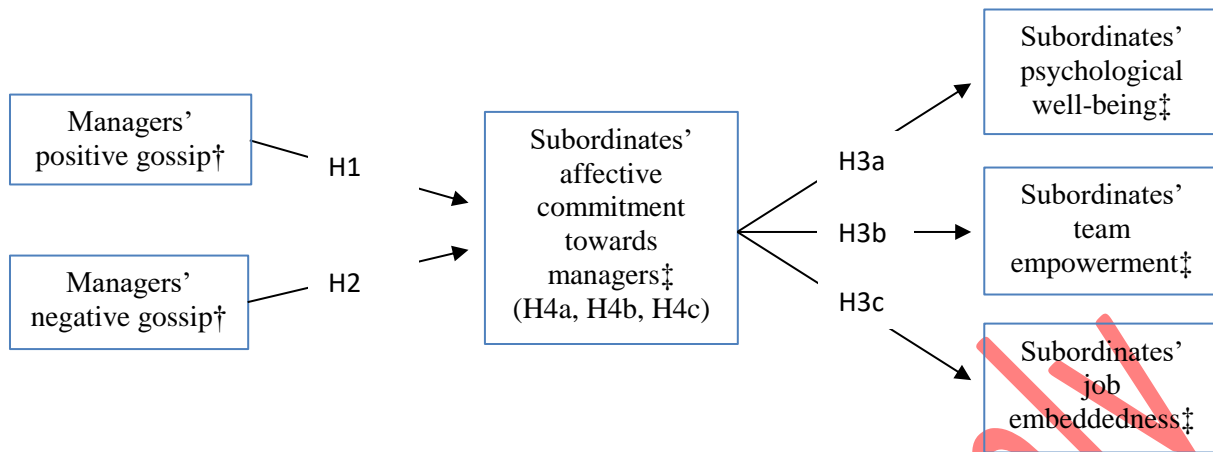
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**Figure 1.** Research conceptual framework

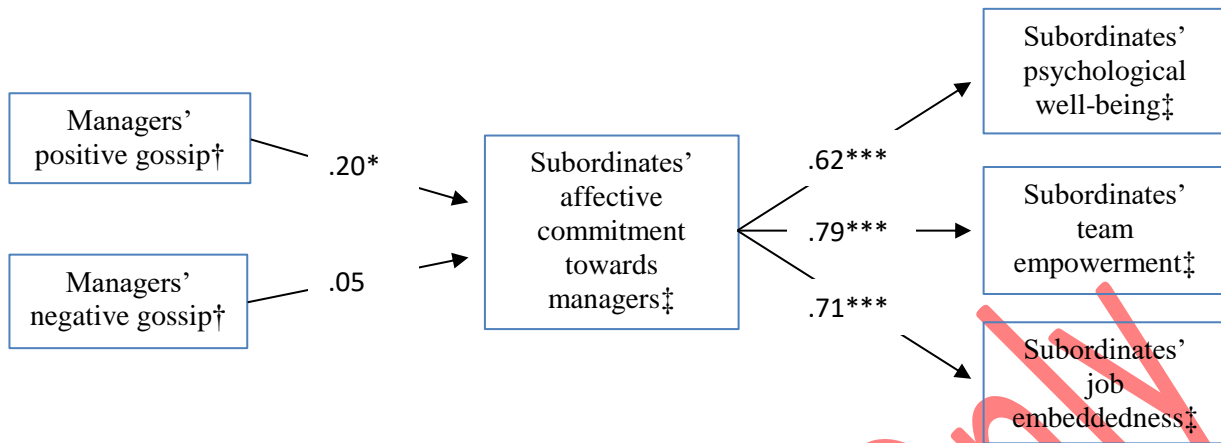


Note. Variables with † sign were responded by the managers, whereas variables with ‡ were responded by the subordinates.

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**Figure 2.** Path analysis diagram



Note. Variables with † sign were responded by the managers, whereas variables with ‡ were responded by the subordinates. Standardized parameter estimates ( $\chi^2(120) = 221.17$ , CFI = .95, IFI = .95, TLI = .93, RMSEA = .06; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ ).

**Table 1.** Summary of descriptive statistics

Items	Means	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
<b>Controlled Variables</b>															
1. Subordinates' age	34.99	8.44													
2. Subordinates' gender	1.53	0.50	-.05												
3. Subordinates' tenure	7.25	7.47	.72***	.04											
4. Subordinates' educational level	2.96	0.47	-.23**	.12	-.19**										
5. Managers' age	43.05	8.02	.41***	-.08	.37***	-.15									
6. Managers' gender	1.36	0.48	-.13	.24**	-.16	.06	-.08								
7. Managers' tenure	13.60	9.15	.33***	.02	.50***	.22*	.64***	-.13							
8. Managers' educational level	3.16	0.55	.07	.16	.05	.24**	-.15	-.19*	-.27**						
<b>Independent Variables†</b>															
9. Managers' positive gossip	5.18	0.60	-.11	-.11	-.04	-.03	.02	-.07	.06	.04					
10. Managers' negative gossip	4.31	0.92	-.15*	-.01	-.19**	-.09	.04	.06	-.04	-.04	.39***				
<b>Mediating Variable‡</b>															
11. Subordinates' affective commitment towards managers	4.33	0.82	-.06	.14*	-.10	.08	.03	.02	-.01	-.10	.21**	.09			
<b>Dependent Variables‡</b>															
12. Psychological well-being	3.79	0.86	.11	.06	.10	-.05	.02	.15	.06	-.22*	.15*	-.03	.39***		
13. Job embeddedness	3.56	0.83	.01	-.21**	.01	-.12	.09	-.08	.10	-.22*	.10	.11	.47***	.37***	
14. Team empowerment	4.38	0.63	-.19**	-.14*	-.19**	0.5	-.07	.05	-.12	-.16	.14*	.07	.58***	.39***	.49***

Note: Variables with † sign were responded by the managers, whereas variables with ‡ were responded by the subordinates (\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ ).

**Table 2.** Comparison of hypothetical model and alternative models

Model	Factor	$\chi^2$	df	$\Delta \chi^2$	CFI	IFI	TLI	RMSEA
Hypothetical Model†	6-factor	221.17	120		0.95	0.95	0.93	0.06
Model 1	5-factor	425.92	125	204.75	0.84	0.84	0.81	0.11
Model 2	4-factor	523.08	129	301.91	0.79	0.80	0.75	0.12
Model 3	4-factor	664.82	129	443.65	0.72	0.72	0.67	0.14
Model 4	3-factor	908.11	132	686.94	0.59	0.60	0.53	0.17
Model 5	2-factor	1019.94	134	798.77	0.53	0.54	0.47	0.18
Model 6	1-factor	1163.32	135	942.15	0.46	0.46	0.39	0.19

Note. †. Hypothetical model (conceptual framework) comprises six research variables as shown in Figure 1;

Model 1: Managers' positive gossip and negative gossip are merged as one factor;

Model 2: Subordinates' psychological well-being, team empowerment, and job embeddedness are merged as one factor;

Model 3: Managers' positive gossip, Managers' negative gossip, and subordinates' affective commitment towards the managers are merged as one factor;

Model 4: Managers' positive gossip, Managers' negative gossip, subordinates' affective commitment towards the managers, and psychological well-being are merged as one factor;

Model 5: Managers' positive gossip, Managers' negative gossip, subordinates' affective commitment towards the managers, and psychological well-being, and team empowerment are merged as one factor;

Model 6: All variables are merged as one factor.

**Table 3.** Bootstrapping: indirect effects of mediation analysis (Monte Carlo)

Path	$P_{MX}$	$P_{YM}$	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	Total Effect	Confidence interval of indirect effect	
			$(P_{YX})$	$(P_{MY}P_{XM})$	$(P_{YX} + [P_{YM}P_{MX}])$	Lower bound	Upper bound
MPG → SC → psychological well-being	.20 ***	.62 ***	0.00	0.12 *	0.12 *	.0018	0.236
MPG → SC → job embeddedness	.20 ***	.71 ***	0.00	0.14 *	0.14 *	0.022	0.262
MPG → SC → team empowerment	.20 ***	.79 ***	0.00	0.15 *	0.15 *	0.023	0.285

Note. MPG= Managers' positive gossip; SC= Subordinates' affective commitment towards the managers (\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ ).

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