

Whispers in the Team: Understanding the Link between Work Team Gossip and Team Creativity via Emotional Exhaustion and Employee Silence Through a Two-Waved Study in Pakistan's IT Sector

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Abstract

This study addresses a pervasive challenge hindering creativity in IT sector, an industry reliant on innovation. Anchored in the Conservation of Resources Theory, the study investigates the obstructive role of negative work team gossip in team creativity, unraveling a sequential mediation process involving emotional exhaustion and employee silence. Utilizing a questionnaire-based approach, time-lagged data were gathered from 307 employees across seven IT sector companies in Islamabad. The results underscore the detrimental influence of work team gossip, both directly impeding team creativity and indirectly operating through the sequential mediation of emotional exhaustion and employee silence. Beyond contributing to the knowledge base, this study provides practical insights for IT company management, emphasizing the imperative to address and mitigate work team gossip to foster a conducive environment for team creativity in the IT sector. Recognizing emotional exhaustion and employee silence as pivotal mediators guides actionable interventions for cultivating a more innovative and collaborative work culture.

I. Introduction

In today's era, the Information Technology (IT) sector stands as a cornerstone for the progress and development of any country. Its significance lies in its transformative power, shaping the way societies operate, business's function, and individuals interact (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014; Isaacson, 2014). The IT sector plays a pivotal role in fostering innovation, driving economic growth, and facilitating global connectivity (Sikdar et al., 2020). At the heart of this dynamic industry is creativity. The IT sector thrives on the inventive ideas and problem-solving capabilities of its workforce (Ciriello et al., 2018; Cai et al., 2020). Creativity is the engine that propels technological advancements, leading to breakthroughs in software development, artificial intelligence, and other cutting-edge fields. In essence, creativity is "the process of generating novel solutions to defined problems in specified contexts that have value" (Morris (2020, p. 169). Its relevance in the IT sector cannot be overstated; the industry heavily relies on employee creativity for developing groundbreaking solutions and staying competitive in a rapidly evolving landscape (Cai et al., 2020). The significance of creativity extends beyond individual contributions, influencing the sector's ability to drive innovation, shape economies, and ultimately contribute to the overall progress of nations.

Considerable research efforts have been dedicated to unraveling the complex factors that either foster or impede creativity in organizational settings (Ouyang et al., 2021). Factors that promote creativity often include a supportive work environment (Wang et al., 2022), open communication (Yao & Liu, 2023), and diverse teams (Hundschell et al., 2022) that encourage the exchange of ideas. Conversely, inhibiting factors may involve rigid hierarchies (Moppett, 2021), fear of failure (Lin et al., 2023), and a lack of psychological safety (Huang & Liu, 2022). One noteworthy factor that can hinder creativity, particularly in the IT sector, is workplace gossip. Workplace gossip entails the informal sharing of information, frequently of a negative or speculative nature, about colleagues (Kurland & Pelled, 2000). Its nature is often characterized by informal discussions in break rooms or digital platforms. Workplace gossip falls under the broader category of workplace incivility, which encompasses disrespectful behaviors in the professional realm (Martin & Hine, 2005). Negative gossips within IT teams can create a toxic environment, eroding trust and psychological safety (Ayers, 2012; Sun et al., 2023). This, in turn, stifles open communication, hampers the free exchange of ideas, and impedes the collaborative synergy essential for creativity (Liu et al., 2020). Recognizing and addressing workplace gossip becomes imperative for nurturing a positive and innovative work culture within IT sector companies.

The literature on workplace gossip reveals two significant gaps that impede a comprehensive understanding of its dynamics. Firstly, the majority of studies have predominantly focused on the outcomes of workplace gossip at either the individual level (e.g., Xie et al., 2020) or organizational level (e.g., Ye et al., 2022). Consequently, the impact of workplace gossip at the team level remains largely unexplored, leaving a critical void in our understanding of how negative gossip within work teams may hinder creativity. This gap is particularly noteworthy in the context of IT companies, where collaborative teamwork is essential for innovation and problem-solving (Sikdar et al., 2020). Failing to address workplace gossip at the team level overlooks its potential influence on team dynamics and creativity, which are paramount in such industries. Secondly, existing research highlights the detrimental impact of workplace gossip on creativity (e.g., Zhou et al., 2019; Yao et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2020), yet the underlying processes and mediating variables are unclear. Identifying these mediating mechanisms is crucial for comprehending the intricate ways in which gossip hinders creativity. Bridging these gaps not only advances scholarly understanding of the gossip-creativity relationship but also holds practical implications for promoting positive team environments and innovation within IT companies.

In addressing the identified research gap, the present study takes a dual approach. First, it delves into the realm of work team gossip, specifically exploring the impact of gossip within work teams on creativity—an area that has been relatively under-researched. Second, the study proposes a novel sequential mediating model, positing that emotional exhaustion and employee silence act as intermediary variables in the gossip-creativity relationship. Emotional exhaustion refers to a state of profound fatigue and emotional depletion resulting from prolonged exposure to demanding or stressful work conditions (Maslach, 1982). In the context of workplace gossip, negative discussions within work teams may contribute to emotional exhaustion among team members (Liu et al., 2020; Zeng et al., 2022; Murtaza et al.,

2023). Employee silence, on the other hand, involves withholding ideas or concerns due to perceived risks or negative consequences (Pinder & Harlos, 2001). The relationship between emotional exhaustion and employee silence is intricate, as the emotional fatigue experienced by individuals may lead to a reluctance to express oneself openly, resulting in increased silence in gossip targets (He et al., 2018; Khan et al., 2021). Thus, the study proposes that emotional exhaustion serves as a precursor to employee silence, forming a sequential mediation pathway that elucidates the intricate mechanisms through which work team gossip may hinder creativity.

While various management theories, including Social Exchange Theory (Homans, 1961), Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 2010), and the Job Demands-Resources Model (Demerouti et al., 2001), could potentially offer insights into the relationship between workplace gossip, emotional exhaustion, employee silence, and team creativity, the present study has opted for the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory as its overarching framework. COR theory posits that individuals strive to acquire, protect, and conserve resources, including personal resources such as time, energy, and cognitive capacity. In the context of the study, workplace gossip is viewed as a potential threat to these resources. Negative gossip may deplete emotional resources, leading to emotional exhaustion. This emotional exhaustion, in turn, prompts individuals to conserve their remaining resources, manifesting as employee silence. Consequently, the conservation of resources becomes a central theme linking the variables—workplace gossip initiates a resource threat, emotional exhaustion signifies the resource depletion, and employee silence is a resource-preserving response. Through this lens, COR theory provides a comprehensive understanding of the intricate dynamics between workplace gossip, emotional exhaustion, employee silence, and their collective impact on team creativity within organizational contexts.

This research holds significant importance for both academic scholarship and practical applications within the workplace. Firstly, by focusing on workplace gossip within work teams, this study contributes to a relatively underexplored area of research. Most studies in the literature have centered on workplace gossip's impact on individual creativity, while this research uniquely probes its effects on team creativity, recognizing the collaborative dynamics inherent in work teams. Additionally, this study innovatively examines the interconnectedness of work team gossip, emotional exhaustion, employee silence, and team creativity, providing a comprehensive exploration of these variables and their relationships. Furthermore, by conducting the research in the unique socio-cultural context of the IT sector in Pakistan, this study acknowledges and addresses the potential influence of distinct cultural variables on workplace gossip and its consequences. The findings of this study are poised to not only advance academic understanding but also offer valuable insights for practitioners in the IT sector. By unraveling the intricate dynamics of workplace gossip and its effects on team creativity, this research equips organizations and leaders with actionable knowledge to foster positive team environments and enhance overall creativity in the workplace.

Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

The Conservation of Resources Theory

The COR theory, developed by Hobfoll (1989), serves as a comprehensive framework in organizational psychology, offering profound insights into the complex interplay between individuals and their resource environment. At its core, COR theory posits that individuals are intrinsically motivated to acquire, protect, and conserve resources—ranging from tangible assets to intangible elements like time, energy, and social support (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll & Freedy, 1993). Stress, according to COR theory, arises when there is an actual or perceived threat of resource loss or depletion (Hobfoll, 2011). In response to stressors, individuals engage in resource-related behaviors, striving to either accumulate new resources or prevent further losses. This dynamic process of resource investment, protection, and recovery is integral to understanding how individuals adapt and cope in various life domains, particularly within the workplace (Hobfoll, 1989; Halbesleben et al., 2014). The theory has been instrumental in elucidating the impact of stressors such as job demands, role ambiguity, and interpersonal conflicts on individuals' well-being, job satisfaction, and overall resilience (Hobfoll et al., 2018). The versatility of COR theory extends its application beyond understanding individual responses to stress, providing valuable insights for researchers and practitioners grappling with the complexities of resource dynamics in organizational settings (Cooper & Quick, 2017).

Workplace Gossip

Workplace gossip, a pervasive and informal communication phenomenon within organizational settings, involves the exchange of information, often of a personal or speculative nature, about colleagues (Kurland & Pelled, 2000). It serves as a dynamic and nuanced social process that can occur in various contexts, including break rooms, hallways, or through digital platforms (Sun et al., 2023). The prevalence of workplace gossip is undeniable, permeating workplaces globally and cutting across industries and organizational hierarchies (Tan et al., 2021; Dores Cruz et al., 2021). Despite its ubiquity, the current status of research on workplace gossip is evolving, with scholars increasingly recognizing its multidimensional nature and impact on organizational dynamics (Wax et al., 2022). Workplace gossip holds relevance as a complex interpersonal communication tool that can shape organizational culture, influence perceptions, and impact employee relationships (Foster, 2004). The consequences of workplace gossip are diverse and can have profound effects on individuals and organizations alike. On one hand, it can foster social bonding, informal learning, and the dissemination of information (Tassiello et al., 2018; Jolly & Chang, 2021). On the other hand, negative consequences may include the spread of misinformation, the erosion of trust, and the creation of a toxic work environment (Sun et al., 2023). Hence, recognizing the intricate balance between the positive and negative aspects of workplace gossip is crucial for organizations seeking to manage communication dynamics and cultivate a healthy workplace culture (Lee & Barnes, 2021).

Workplace Gossip and Team Creativity

Creativity, in a general sense, is the ability to generate original and valuable ideas, solutions, or expressions that go beyond conventional thinking (Runco & Jaeger, 2012). When applied

to work teams, creativity takes on a collaborative dimension. It involves the collective effort of team members to pool their diverse skills, perspectives, and experiences in order to generate innovative solutions or approaches to challenges (Shin & Zhou, 2007; Carmeli & Paulus, 2015). In teams, creativity is not just about individual brilliance but also about the synergy and interaction among team members (Reiter-Palmon, 2017). Team creativity is crucial for fostering an environment where collaboration and innovation thrive (Rodríguez-Sánchez et al., 2017). It promotes a culture that encourages the exploration of new possibilities and the integration of different viewpoints, leading to more robust problem-solving and the development of novel solutions (Wang et al., 2019; Reiter-Palmon, 2017; Huang & Liu, 2022). Without team creativity, a group may find itself stuck in routine methods and unable to adapt to changing circumstances. The absence of fresh ideas and perspectives could hinder progress, limit innovation, and leave teams ill-equipped to tackle the complexities of the modern workplace (Reiter-Palmon, 2017).

Negative workplace gossip serves as a formidable obstacle to creativity within an organizational setting, creating an environment marked by distrust and apprehension (Attiah & Alhassan, 2022). When people engage in negative or disparaging gossip, it fosters a culture of fear (Tebbutt & Marchington, 1997; Haugen & Brandth, 2015) that stifles the open exchange of ideas. The sharing of creative thoughts becomes restrained, as individuals may hesitate to contribute innovative suggestions due to the perceived risks associated with potential gossip (Heng-Bo, 2018; Liu et al., 2020). Moreover, workplace gossip can erode trust and morale, reduce productivity, heighten anxiety, cause divisive team dynamics, hurt feelings, damaged reputations, and increase attrition due to a toxic work environment (Kurland & Pelled, 2000), promoting a divisive environment that hinders collective efforts for creative problem-solving. The presence of gossip can also create a distraction (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012), diverting employees' focus from constructive tasks to interpersonal concerns. In this way, negative workplace gossip acts as a disruptive force, impeding the free flow of ideas and hindering the collaborative dynamics required for an organization to harness its full creative potential (Zhou et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2020). Thus, based on this discussion, the following is hypothesized:

H1: Work team gossip is negatively related to team creativity

The Mediating Role of Emotional Exhaustion

Emotional exhaustion is a psychological state characterized by a profound depletion of emotional resources, resulting from prolonged exposure to stressful or demanding situations, often within the workplace (Maslach, 1982). Various factors contribute to emotional exhaustion, including high job demands, lack of control, role ambiguity, interpersonal conflicts, and insufficient support systems (Demerouti et al., 2001; Lee et al., 2011; Edmondson et al., 2019). Individuals experiencing emotional exhaustion may exhibit symptoms such as fatigue, cynicism, reduced enthusiasm for work-related tasks, and a diminished sense of personal accomplishment (Lee et al., 2011; Thompson et al., 2020). At the individual level, emotional exhaustion can lead to burnout, decreased job satisfaction, and compromised mental well-being (Alharbi et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2020). Organizationally, it is associated with higher turnover rates, reduced productivity, and an overall negative impact on employee

performance (Madigan & Kim, 2021). Current research on emotional exhaustion underscores its significance within the organizational psychology landscape. Scholars are actively exploring its antecedents, manifestations, and consequences, aiming to develop strategies that organizations can employ to prevent or alleviate emotional exhaustion and create healthier, more resilient work environments.

Within the framework of COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989), emotional exhaustion emerges as a crucial mediator in elucidating the link between workplace gossip and creativity. Imagine workplace gossip as a resource-draining force, depleting individuals' emotional reserves within the organizational setting (Xie et al., 2020). As negative information circulates, the emotional toll accumulates, leading to a state of emotional exhaustion (Liu et al., 2020)—a condition where individuals experience fatigue and diminished emotional well-being due to prolonged exposure to resource-depleting stressors (Maslach, 1982). Emotional exhaustion, a central tenet of COR theory, disrupts cognitive processes essential for creativity (Opoku et al., 2023). It hampers the cognitive flexibility (Lemonaki et al., 2021) and divergent thinking (Okabe, 2022) required for innovative problem-solving and idea generation. Thus, workplace gossip, by depleting emotional resources and triggering emotional exhaustion, indirectly impedes creativity by compromising the cognitive vitality necessary for the creative processes. Drawing from the insights in this discussion, it is apparent that emotional exhaustion operates as a pivotal mediating mechanism in the intricate dynamics between work team gossip and team creativity. Hence, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H2: The negative relationship between work team gossip and team creativity is mediated by emotional exhaustion

The Mediating Role of Employee Silence

Employee silence refers to the intentional withholding of thoughts, opinions, or concerns by individuals within an organizational context (Pinder & Harlos, 2001; Knoll et al., 2013). This phenomenon often stems from various factors, including fear of reprisal, perceived futility in sharing input, hierarchical power structures, or a lack of psychological safety (Dyne et al., 2003; Chou & Chang, 2020). At the individual level, employee silence can result in increased stress, reduced job satisfaction, and a diminished sense of personal well-being. Organizationally, it can lead to a stifled culture, hampering creativity, innovation, and overall organizational learning (John, S. P., & Manikandan, 2019; Hao et al., 2022). The current status of research on employee silence indicates a growing acknowledgment of its pervasive influence on workplace dynamics (Morrison, 2023). Scholars are actively exploring the antecedents and consequences of employee silence, seeking to unravel the complex interplay of factors contributing to this behavior. The literature is evolving to offer insights into strategies that organizations can employ to foster open communication, cultivate a supportive environment, and mitigate the negative outcomes associated with employee silence (e.g., Dong & Chung, 2021; Jungst, 2023).

Based on the COR theory, employee silence could function as a mediating mechanism in the relationship between workplace gossip and creativity. Negative workplace gossip, as a kind of workplace incivility (Martin & Hine, 2005), may act as a resource drain (Ye et al., 2022), depleting the social and emotional resources of targets. As individuals experience

workplace incivility (in the form of gossips), they may choose to remain silent as a strategy to conserve their psychological resources, avoiding potential conflicts or negative repercussions (Madhan et al., 2022; Srivastava et al., 2023). This intentional maladaptive coping strategy of remaining silent, driven by the need to protect emotional resources, restricts individual creative performance (Rashid & Rizvi, 2020; Lee et al. 2022), thereby impeding the collective creativity of the entire team. Consequently, the mediation of employee silence accentuates the resource-depleting nature of workplace gossip, hindering the collaborative and communicative processes necessary for team creativity. The COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989) lens suggests that the conservation of emotional and social resources, achieved through employee silence, plays a crucial role in shaping the impact of workplace gossip on the creative potential of a team. Considering the points discussed, the following hypothesis is posited:

H3: The negative relationship between work team gossip and team creativity is mediated by employee silence

The Sequential Mediation Role of Emotional Exhaustion and Employee Silence

According to the COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989), the intricate interplay between workplace gossip, emotional exhaustion, and employee silence can be understood as a sequential mediation process influencing team creativity. Workplace gossip, acting as a resource-draining stressor (Yao et al., 2020), may initiate the sequence by depleting emotional resources within a team. This resource depletion, in turn, could lead to emotional exhaustion in targets (Wu et al., 2018; Zeng et al., 2022), creating a state of fatigue and diminished emotional well-being among team members. As emotional exhaustion takes hold, individuals may resort to employee silence as a coping mechanism to conserve their remaining psychological resources, avoiding potential conflicts or negative repercussions (He et al., 2018; Khan et al., 2021). The sequential mediation suggests that workplace gossip not only directly affects emotional resources but also triggers a cascade of events, ultimately influencing team creativity through the sequential mediation of emotional exhaustion and employee silence. Hence, given the context provided, the hypothesis below is derived:

H4: The negative relationship between work team gossip and team creativity is sequentially mediated by emotional exhaustion and employee silence

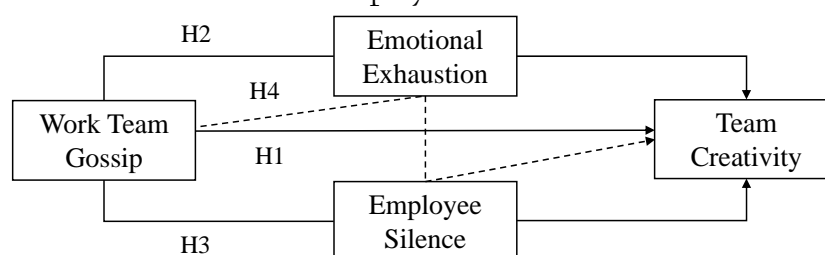


Figure 1: Research model

Methodology

Measures

The questionnaire utilized in this study comprised five sections and was crafted in the English language, amalgamating scales developed by previous researchers. The assessment of work team gossip employed Chandra and Robinson's (2009) three-item workplace gossip scale,

which was adapted to align with the study's context. Participants responded on a five-point scale, ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (daily). Emotional exhaustion was gauged through four items derived from Hu and Yeo's (2020) scale, originally developed by Demerouti and colleagues (2001). Responses were recorded on a five-point scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Employee silence was evaluated using five items adapted from Van Dyne et al.'s (2003) defensive silence scale, with responses ranging from 1 (never disagree) to 5 (very frequently). Team creativity was measured with three items borrowed from Tiwana & McLean's (2005) study, and participants indicated their responses on a five-point scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Participants and Procedure

With the escalating trend of IT in Pakistan, a country currently home to over 2000 IT companies with a continually increasing number each year, this study focused on gathering insights from the dynamic landscape of the IT sector. Data for the research was meticulously collected from seven prominent IT companies based in Islamabad. In the initial phase, senior managers of these companies were approached, and their permission for data collection was earnestly sought. Once consent was obtained, the research team targeted lower and middle-level employees during their regular work hours. The purpose and voluntary nature of the survey were explained to the employees, ensuring transparency in the data collection process. Subsequently, those who willingly consented to participate were handed surveys, which they completed on the spot. To express gratitude for their participation, all employees contributing to the study were offered sweets as a token of appreciation. This comprehensive methodology facilitated the exploration of diverse perspectives within both the managerial and employee levels, providing valuable insights into the interplay of work team gossip, emotional exhaustion, employee silence, and team creativity within the IT sector.

To mitigate the potential impact of common method bias, the data collection process was conducted in two phases. During the initial wave (T1), participants were invited to provide their assessments of negative work team gossip and express their individual perspectives on team creativity. Out of 500 distributed questionnaires, 401 were deemed usable following their return. In the subsequent wave, participants were asked to evaluate their encounters with emotional exhaustion and employee silence. A total of 401 questionnaires were distributed, yielding 307 usable responses. Consequently, the overall usable response rate reached 61%. The participant demographics highlight a diverse composition. In terms of gender, the majority are male (60.5%), while females constitute 39.5% of the total respondents. Regarding age distribution, the largest group falls within the 25-34 age range (45.2%), followed by the 35-44 age group (30.1%), and the 45-54 age group (24.7%). Educational backgrounds vary, with 70.3% holding a master's degree and 29.7% having a bachelor's degree. Tenure in the organization is diverse, as 55.2% of participants have 2 to 5 years of experience, 30.8% have 1 year or less, and 14.0% have 6 to 9 years of tenure.

Results

Given that the data for assessing each of the study variables originated from a single source, there is a possibility of common method bias. To investigate this, Harman's One-Factor Test was conducted. The results of Harman's One-Factor Test on the dataset do not strongly

indicate a significant presence of common method bias. While the first factor, with an initial eigenvalue of 6.725, explains 44.837% of the total variance, it falls slightly below the conventional 50% threshold often associated with common method bias. Additionally, as subsequent factors contribute less to the cumulative variance, the analysis suggests that common method bias is not a predominant issue in the study. The dataset exhibits a more balanced distribution of variance across factors, mitigating concerns about the influence of a single dominant factor.

Table 1 presents comprehensive statistics and correlations for key constructs, including mean, standard deviation (SD), skewness, and kurtosis for work team gossip (WTG), emotional exhaustion (EE), employee silence (ES) and team creativity (TC). The Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values are included to assess multicollinearity, with all values below 5, indicating minimal multicollinearity. The correlation matrix, denoted by Pearson correlation coefficients, reveals significant associations between constructs, with noteworthy correlations such as WTG and EE ($r = .58, p < .01$), WTG and ES ($r = -.59, p < .01$), EE and TC ($r = -.33, p < .01$), ES and TC ($r = -.61, p < .01$), WTG and TC ($r = -.68, p < .01$). Distributional characteristics, evaluated through skewness and kurtosis, indicate a moderate departure from normality for the independent and mediator variables, with skewness and kurtosis values within acceptable bounds. Overall, these results provide a thorough overview of central tendency, variability, distribution, interrelationships, and potential multicollinearity among the key constructs in the study.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Correlations of Key Constructs

	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	VIF	WTG	EE	ES	TP
WTG	4.20	.60	-.74	1.73	1.77	(.77)			
EE	4.01	.60	-.51	.33	1.76	.58**	(.73)		
ES	3.95	.67	-.81	.88	1.78	.59**	.58**	(.83)	
TC	2.15	.74	.82	.86	-	-.33**	-.61**	-.68**	(.80)

Note: ** $p < .01$, α values appear in parentheses, N = 307

Table 2: Hypotheses Testing Results

Direct relationships							
	beta	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI	
WTG → EE	.58	.04	12.66	.00	.49	.67	
WTG → ES	.41	.05	7.07	.00	.30	.35	
WTG → TC	-.13	.06	-2.04	.04	-.26	-.00	
EE → ES	.41	.05	6.92	.00	.29	.52	
EE → TC	-.36	.06	-5.70	.00	-.49	-.23	
ES → TC	-.45	.05	-7.80	.00	-.57	-.34	
Indirect relationships							
	beta	bootSE	bootLLCI	bootULCI			
WTG → EE → TC	-.21	.04	-.30	-.13			
WTG → ES → TC	-.19	.04	-.28	-.10			
WTG → EE → ES → TC	-.10	.02	-.16	-.06			

In Table 2, the hypothesis testing outcomes for direct associations reveal the strength and significance of relationships among the four research constructs. Positive and statistically significant coefficients characterize the links between WTG and EE ($b = .58$, CI [.49, .67]), WTG and ES ($b = .41$, CI [.30, .52]), as well as EE and ES ($b = .41$, CI [.29, .52]). Conversely, a noteworthy negative beta coefficient is evident for the relationship between WTG and TC ($b = -.13$, CI [-0.26, -.007]). Indirect relationships also stand out, with negative beta coefficients for simple mediations: WTG \rightarrow EE \rightarrow TC ($b = -.21$, CI [-.30, -.13]) and WTG \rightarrow ES \rightarrow TC ($b = -.19$, CI [-.28, -.10]), along with the sequential mediation WTG \rightarrow EE \rightarrow ES \rightarrow TC ($b = -.10$, CI [-.16, -.06]). These findings offer insightful perspectives into the collective influence of variables on team creativity. As a result, Hypotheses 1, 2, 3, and 4 are firmly substantiated, supported by robust and compelling evidence derived from the analysis.

Discussion

This research aimed to empirically validate a sequential mediation model rooted in COR theory, involving workplace gossip, emotional exhaustion, employee silence, and team creativity as key variables. Findings from a two-wave data collection demonstrated that emotional exhaustion and employee silence, both as individual variables and in sequence, played a mediating role in the inverse relationship between workplace gossip and team creativity. By investigating workplace gossip at the team level, this study's results build upon the work of Liu et al. (2020), expanding our understanding by showcasing that emotional exhaustion serves as a mediator in the gossip-creativity relationship.

Theoretical Implications

This study contributes significantly to existing literature in several dimensions. Firstly, it diverges from previous research on workplace gossip, which predominantly focused on the individual level. Earlier studies primarily examined its impact on targeted employees' in-role and out-of-role behaviors, such as knowledge hiding and political behavior, from a resource-based perspective aiming to preserve current resources by reducing work dedication (e.g., Cheng et al., 2022; Yao et al., 2020). In contrast, this study, grounded in Hobfoll's (1989) COR theory, breaks new ground by exploring the impact of workplace gossip at the team level. It investigates how such gossip affects the psyche and behaviors of targets, resulting in a collective decrease in team creativity. This departure from the individual-focused approach offers a novel perspective on the ramifications of workplace gossip, emphasizing its broader implications for team dynamics and creativity.

Secondly, this study unravels the intricate mechanism involving not one but two mediators through which negative workplace gossip influences political acts. In alignment with COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989), it underscores the significant loss of resources triggered by negative workplace gossip. This resource depletion sets off a chain reaction, leading to emotional exhaustion and employee silence, ultimately resulting in undesirable team-based behaviors. The study's findings shed light on negative work team gossip as a resource-consuming experience, causing emotional exhaustion and silence in targets, consequently impeding team creativity. By emphasizing these mediators, the study underscores the critical role of resource conservation and provides valuable insights into the dynamics of team creativity within the context of negative workplace gossip.

Practical Implications

The revelation that emotional exhaustion and employee silence sequentially mediate the relationship between work team gossip and team creativity carries profound practical implications for organizational management. First and foremost, organizations must acknowledge the detrimental impact of work team gossip on emotional exhaustion. To mitigate this, fostering a positive team environment becomes paramount. Implementing targeted interventions, such as stress management programs (Alizadeh et al., 2023), employee assistance initiatives like therapies and counselling (McFarland & Hlubocky, 2021), or team-building activities (Ratanasiripong et al., 2021), can address the emotional toll resulting from workplace gossip. Organizations should strive to cultivate a culture that discourages gossip and promotes open communication channels (Yao et al., 2020), as this not only aids in reducing emotional exhaustion but also contributes to a healthier and more supportive work atmosphere. Moreover, recognizing employee silence as a subsequent mediator underscores the imperative for organizations to proactively address communication barriers. Encouraging team members to express their ideas, concerns, and feedback without fear of reprisal (Wang et al., 2020) is crucial to breaking the silence induced by workplace gossip. Initiatives such as regular team meetings (Kauffeld & Lehmann-Willenbrock, 2012), anonymous suggestion boxes (Yu et al., 2022), or assertiveness communication training programs (Omura et al., 2017) can be instrumental in fostering a culture that values and encourages open communication. By understanding and strategically addressing the sequential mediation process involving emotional exhaustion and employee silence, organizations can tailor interventions to enhance team creativity, thereby contributing to a more innovative and productive work environment that supports the overall goals and success of the organization.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study is subject to some limitations that warrant consideration for future research. The reliance on data exclusively collected from individual employees raises concerns about common method bias, potentially affecting the study's internal validity. To enhance generalizability, future researchers are advised to adopt a multi-source data collection approach, incorporating perspectives from both team leaders and members. Additionally, the study primarily focused on how work team gossip hinders creativity, opening avenues for exploring reverse causation. Future investigations should examine whether lower team creativity might trigger increased workplace gossip. The cross-sectional nature of the study limits its ability to capture the dynamic nature of variables like work team gossip, which may fluctuate due to contextual influences. Employing methodologies such as experience sampling and diary studies in subsequent research could provide a more nuanced understanding. Furthermore, the study concentrated on emotional exhaustion and employee silence as mediators, recognizing that alternative variables like job insecurity or psychological contract breach could contribute to the mediation process. Future research should broaden the scope of mediators for a comprehensive view of underlying mechanisms. Lastly, this study was rooted in COR theory only. Future research could explore alternative theoretical frameworks like Social Exchange Theory, Organizational Justice Theory, and Ego Depletion Theory for a

more comprehensive understanding of the complex interplay between workplace gossip and team creativity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, our investigation has shed light on a prevalent obstacle within the IT sector, an industry at the forefront of innovation. Drawing from the COR theory, this study has probed into the obstructive role of work team gossip in team creativity, revealing a nuanced sequential mediation process involving emotional exhaustion and employee silence. Employing a questionnaire-based methodology, it gathered time-lagged data from Islamabad-based IT sector employees. Our findings emphasize the dual impact of negative work team gossip: directly hindering team creativity and operating indirectly through the mediation of emotional exhaustion and employee silence. Going beyond a mere contribution to the knowledge base, this study offers pragmatic insights for IT company management, accentuating the critical need to address and mitigate work team gossip for the cultivation of a conducive environment fostering team creativity in the IT sector. The recognition of emotional exhaustion and employee silence as pivotal mediators provides actionable guidance for interventions aimed at nurturing an even more innovative and collaborative work culture within the ever-evolving landscape of the IT industry.

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