

Negative Workplace Gossips, Social Inclusion and Team Cohesion: Does Inclusive Leadership Reduces the Prevalence and Impact of Negative Workplace Gossip

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ABSTRACT

Aim of the Study: This study analyzes the impact of negative workplace gossips on social inclusion and team cohesion with the moderating role of inclusive leadership among the employees of advertising agencies of Pakistan.

Methodology: Data was collected through self-reported questionnaire to ensure the confidentiality of the respondents. Questionnaires were distributed to 200 employees who are working in advertising agencies a total of 160 questionnaires were returned.

Findings: the result shows that negative workplace gossips affect the team cohesion with the mediation of social inclusion. The results also depicted that inclusive leadership plays the buffering role between the relationship of negative workplace gossips and social inclusion.

Conclusion: This study shows that that negative workplace gossips affect the social inclusion and team cohesion and strategies should be design at organizational level in order to minimize the negative workplace gossips and inclusive leadership plays a very vital role in minimizing negative workplace gossips.

Keywords: Workplace Gossips, Social Inclusion, Inclusive Leadership.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Negative Gossips attain a lot of attention in organizational behavior research. It is defined as the informal and negative communication about a third person during his/her absence. It seems like an enjoyable or harmless activity but it has the deep impact on social inclusion and team dynamics (Dores Cruz, 2021). The negative gossips stems from the interpersonal conflicts, tendency of comparing each other and organization politics (Kuo et al., 2020) and have the adverse effects on adhesiveness and inclusion in workplace culture (Ellwardt et al., 2012).

Negative gossips undermines the social inclusion as targets of gossips feels that they are disliked and isolate themselves resulting in decrease level of belongingness and participation (Wu et al., 2018).Gossips

foster the culture of insecurity and suspicion where employees don't trust each other and resist in sharing ideas due to the fear that they might be misjudged (Feinberg et al., 2014). It also intensifies the stereotyping and worsen the inclusion issues (Kniffin & Wilson, 2005). It has been observed that employees who are often exposed to negative gossips are at the greater chance of facing emotional exhaustion, dwindling self-esteem and decreased level of organization commitment (Decoster et al., 2013; Abbas and Tariq, 2024).

Nowadays inclusive leadership becomes a vital aspect of the organization (Hewlett & Marshall, 2024) as this style of leadership fosters the positive environment which promotes equality, feeling of worthiness, respect of the diversity and team cohesiveness (Alvesson & Einola, 2024; Noor et al., 2024). Inclusive leadership enhances the positive communication among the team members, promotes the team collaboration with mutual respect, encourages open communication and trust among the team members (Choi & Rainey, 2024; Aqdas et al., 2024).

Affective Events Theory (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) can explain the phenomena of negative gossips at workplace, it suggests that different events at workplace triggers certain emotions in employees that leads towards the attitudinal and behavioral outcomes. Negative Gossip is considered as an event in the organization for the target of gossip, the gossiper and the bystander.

The first one is the target of gossip who feels embarrassment when they come to know about that they are being gossiped, the second one is the bystanders who feels the mistrust and discomfort in the environment as they feel that in future they can also become the target and the last one is the gossiper who may temporarily feels the validation of their selves but remain in guilt or fear that they might be caught about the gossip that they have done.

Employees who are targeted of gossips they feel insecure, angry and stressed and withdraw their participation and become disengaged that leads to decreased self-esteem, job satisfaction, organizational commitment and team cohesion and in severe cases employee turnover due to the toxic environment.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Negative gossips, Social Inclusion and Team Cohesion

Negative gossips at workplace are defined as negative assessments about an absent colleague. Gossips due to its negative effects gained a lot of attention in research as it adversely effects the knowledge sharing among team members and also badly affects the employee behaviors so it's very important to address this issue (Liu, 2024; Zou et al., 2020).

Negative gossips are considered as one of the prime factors of creating toxic environment it not only spread quickly but it also damages the relationships among colleagues, creating distrust and hinders the team building and cohesion (Bushman & Huesmann, 2006). As team building relies on trust and collaboration but negative gossips creates the division among the team members and hinders the effective communication (Robinson & O'Leary-Kelly, 1998) effecting creativity and problem solving skills as targets of gossips develops the sense of insecurity while raising their voice (Edmondson, 1999) it also negatively effects the credibility of the management making it more difficulty to foster motivation and alignment within the team (Martinescu et al., 2014).

Negative gossips intensify the toxic work environment leading towards low morale and high turnover at workplace (Foster, 2004). So negative gossip at workplace is a very serious issue that results in negative outcomes for both employee and organization it increases level of stress, diminishing job satisfaction and decreases the team cohesion (Ellwardt et al., 2012).

H1: There is a negative relationship between gossips and team cohesion.

Social inclusion is characterized by the sense of belongingness and being valued in a group but targets of gossips feels that they are not liked by other people and remain isolated (Wu et al., 2018). Negative

gossips escalate a culture that is based on suspicion and insecurity that hinders the participation and collaboration among the employees (Feinberg et al., 2014) and it also intensifies the biasness that promotes more issue regarding social inclusion (Kniffin & Wilson, 2005).

H2: There is a negative relationship between gossips and social inclusion.

Previous studies shows that there is a positive association between social inclusion and team cohesion as high level of inclusion within the team results in strong communication and interpersonal relationships, they perform better and have the greater commitment within the team (Haslam et al., 2009) because team with higher level of inclusion leads towards higher task orientation and overall team performance becomes better (Lindsley et al., 2010).

In organizations where inclusive practices are implemented their teams become more creative and it increases the problem solving skill (Page,2007) .So it has been assessed that social inclusion at workplace enriched the team satisfaction, increases the respect and team cohesion (Bastian et al. ,2014)

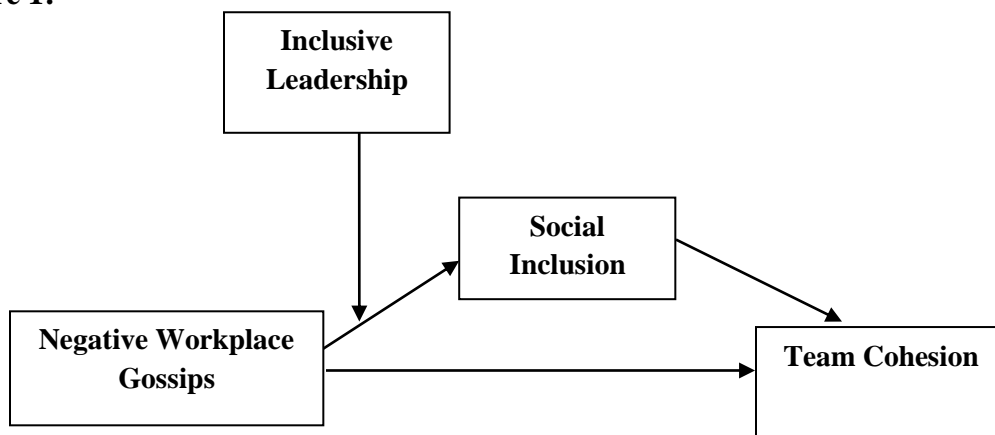
H3: There is a positive relationship between social inclusion and team cohesion.

2.2 Moderating role of Inclusive Leadership

Inclusive leadership gained a substantial attention from last few years as it plays a significant role in fostering the positive work environment and also in promoting the diversity and enhances the team performance (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Higgs, 2009; Ryan & Haslam, 2007).As inclusive leadership style is characterized by increasing employee participation, respects and values the diversity, reduces the implications of stereotyping and encourages the individual identity acceptance (Roberson & Perry, 2021). Inclusive leadership promotes the openness of communication, trust and active listening (Carmeli et al., 2010) that can help in minimizes the effects of gossips on social inclusion.

H4: There is a moderating role of inclusive leadership between the relationship of gossips and social inclusion such that in presence of inclusive leadership the relationship becomes weaker and vice versa.

Figure 1:



3. METHODOLOGY

Data was collected through self-reported questionnaire to ensure the confidentiality of the respondents. For this an informed consent was obtained in order to ensure the participants that their response will be used only for research purpose, The response was taken on 5 point likert scale with 1 indicating strongly disagree and 5 indicating strongly agree.

Questionnaires were distributed to 200 advertising agencies employees and a total of 160 questionnaires were returned having the response rate of 88% .47% of respondents had an educational level of masters or

above, 38 % had a bachelor's degree, and 15% percent had diplomas. There were more male (63.3%) than female (36.7%) respondents. The majority of respondents (65.4%) were married. 43% of respondents were between the ages of 20 and 30 years, 36% were between 31 and 40 years, 21% were between 41 and 50 years.

3.1 Instrumentation

3.1.1 Workplace Negative Gossips

Three items were adopted from Chandra and Robinson (2009). Sample items include “*In the past 6 months, others (e.g., coworkers and/or supervisors) communicated damaging information about me in the workplace*” etc. The scale was reliable for this study with a Cronbach alpha value of 0.85.

3.1.2 Inclusive Leadership

Thirteen items were adopted by Ashikali (2019). Sample items include “*Encourages me to discuss diverse viewpoints and perspectives on problem-solving with colleagues*”, “*Makes sure I have the opportunity to express diverse viewpoints*”, “*Stimulates me to exchange different ideas with colleagues*”. The scale was reliable for this study with a Cronbach alpha value of 0.81.

3.1.3 Social Inclusion

Ten items for measuring social inclusion was adopted by Leemann et al. (2022). Example items include “*I feel that what I do every day is significant*”, “*I get positive feedback on what I do*”, “*I belong to a group or community that is important for me*” etc. The scale was reliable for this study with a Cronbach alpha value of 0.79.

3.1.4 Team Cohesion

Ten items for measuring team cohesion was adopted by Hoegl and Gemunden (2001). Example items include “*All members are fully integrated in our team*”, “*There are many personal conflicts in our team*”, “*Our team is sticking together*” etc. The scale was reliable for this study with a Cronbach alpha value of 0.74

4. RESULTS

Table 1: Means, standard deviations, and correlations (N=160)

	M	SD	1	2	3	4
1.Negative Workplace Gossips	3.55	.570	1			
2.Inclusive Leadership	3.24	.496	-.614**	1		
3.Social Inclusion	3.21	.331	-.256*	.528**	1	
4.Team cohesion	3.12	.451	-.486**	.562**	.324*	1

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

First, correlations between study variables were assessed (see Table 1). Workplace negative gossips and team cohesion was negatively correlated, suggesting that respondents who experience gossips at workplace had a lower team cohesion. Similarly negative gossips and social inclusion was negatively correlated where as social inclusion is positively correlated with team cohesion, suggesting that respondents with greater feeling of social inclusion display higher team cohesion. Next, the Process macro was used for regression analysis, (see Table 2).

Table 2: Mediation Analysis

	Coeff	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI	R-sq	F
Outcome Variable=Social Inclusion								
Negative Workplace Gossips	-.4974	.0705	7.0532	.0000	-.3582	-.6366		
							.7463	132.26
Outcome Variable=Team Cohesion								
Social Inclusion	.4250	.0682	7.6977	.0000	.3903	.6597		
Negative workplace Gossips	-.5482	.0703	-10.7330	.0000	-.8936	-.6159	.5326	28.6668
TOTAL, DIRECT, AND INDIRECT EFFECTS								
Total effect of X on Y	-.4936	.0717	-6.8837	.0000	-.6352	-.3520		
Direct effect of X on Y	-.7548	.0703	-10.7330	.0000	-.8936	-.6159		
Indirect effect of X on Y								
Social Inclusion	-.2611	.0609			-.1592	-.3898		

Referring to table 3, it has been confirmed that negative workplace gossips and team cohesion have a significant negative relationship with the Coeff value of -.4974, $T > 1.96$ and the p-value < 0.001 . Hypothesis 1 is therefore accepted. The result of testing Hypothesis 2 shows that the relationship between negative workplace gossips and social inclusion is negatively significant as the coefficient value is -.5482, $T > 1.96$ with the p-value < 0.001 , hence hypothesis 2 is accepted. Results also depicted that there is significant positive relationship between social inclusion and team cohesion with the Coeff value of .4250, $T > 1.96$ and the p-value < 0.001 . hence hypothesis 3 is also accepted. Social inclusion also mediates between the relation of negative workplace gossips and team cohesion. Hence hypothesis 4 is also accepted.

Table 3: Moderation Analysis

	Coeff	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI	R-sq	F
Outcome Variable=Social Inclusion								
Inclusive Leadership	.3990	.2340	1.7049	.0001	.5632	.8612		
Negative Workplace Gossips	-.3218	.2662	-.4574	.0080	-.6475	-.4040		
int_1	.2129	.0567	2.3913	.0281	.1409	.2248	.8694	755.428

Conditional effect of X on Y at values of the moderator(s):

IL	Effect	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
3.2697	.2473	.0839	2.9488	.0037	.0817	.4129
3.9416	.3231	.0492	6.5687	.0000	.2260	.4202
4.6135	.3989	.0266	14.9879	.0000	.3464	.4515

The table 3 findings show that inclusive leadership moderates between the relationship of negative workplace gossips and social inclusion with the coefficient value of .2129, $T > 1.96$ and the p-value < 0.05 .

5. DISCUSSION

The finding of this study are aligned and supports the previous studies that depicts gossips results in negative outcomes (Decoster et al., 2013) and decreases the team cohesion and performance but inclusive leaders can play a crucial role in diminishing the negative effects of gossips (Michelson & Mouly, 2002) as these leaders promotes the positivity in working environment, also appreciate the open communication ,they have the quick response towards fixing the conflicts, and controls the gossips at workplace in order to foster the positive workplace culture (Shore et al., 2011). As an inclusive leader enhances the sense of belongingness at workplace that creates a healthy and positive working conditions which helps in controlling the gossips at workplace (Ely et al., 2011).

So when it comes to building cohesive teams inclusive leaderships becomes very important as it promotes the respect, belongingness and everyone in the team feels they are valued so it enhances the overall performance of the team because team members who feels social inclusion perform a lot better and it brings the best out of them. Such teams can faces the challenges easily and help each other sorting out the problems because they supports each other and are committed towards their team.

6. CONCLUSION

By fostering inclusive leadership style organizations can minimize the negative gossips at workplace so organizations should promote open and transparent communication, develop the team-building interventions that should consist the structured activities that can help team members in developing the cohesiveness among them. Equip and train leader on skills through which they can identify gossips and helps in maintaining the positive team culture.

6.1 *Limitations and Future Direction*

This study implies the cross-sectional design so for deeper assessment longitudinal study design should be used. The sample size is small so more representative sample size will better address the issue of generalizability. Future research should focus on the determinants of gossips at workplace; it is suggested to analyze the role of gender and personality type on gossips.

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Conflict of Interest

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