

# An eye for an eye: does subordinates' negative workplace gossip lead to supervisor abuse?

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Drawing upon affective events theory, the authors propose that the subordinates' negative gossip acts as a targeting affective event which leads to supervisor negative emotions. In turn, such negative emotions provoke supervisors to exhibit abusive behavior toward their subordinates. Additionally, the authors propose that an affective dispositional factor, namely, supervisor emotional regulation, moderates the hypothesized relationships. Using multisource data and a moderated-mediation model, the authors find that the supervisor's perception of the subordinates' negative workplace gossip is associated with abusive supervision through the supervisor's negative emotions. Moreover, the supervisor's emotional regulation mitigates the relationship between such negative gossip and the supervisor's negative emotions. The paper aims to discuss this issue.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Data were collected from employees (e.g. subordinates) and their immediate supervisors in organizations representing a variety of industries (e.g. finance, health care, information technology, public safety and human services) located in three cities in China. Respondents were recruited from different professional online forums with the offer of free movie tickets in return for participation.

**Findings** – Using multisource data and a moderated-mediation model, the authors find that the supervisor's perception of the subordinates' negative workplace gossip is associated with abusive supervision through the supervisor's negative emotions. Moreover, the supervisor's emotional regulation mitigates the relationship between such negative gossip and the supervisor's negative emotions, but not the relationship between the supervisor's negative emotions and abusive supervision.

**Research limitations/implications** – Like all studies, the current one is not without limitations. First, the data were collected using a cross-sectional research design, which limits the interference of causality among the hypothesized relationships in the model. Future research work should apply alternative research designs such as a daily diary or longitudinal data collection (Shadish *et al.*, 2002), in order to support the validity of the study.

**Practical implications** – In practical terms, abusive supervision is recognized as a destructive workplace behavior that is costly to organizations (Mackey *et al.*, 2017; Martinko *et al.*, 2013). Thus, it is important for organizational management and practitioners to understand the reasons why supervisors exhibit abusive behavior toward subordinates.

**Social implications** – Through this study, higher management must understand harmful effects of subordinates' workplace negative gossip, it must be recognized as other types of workplace mistreatment (rudeness and incivility), establishment and enforcement of the code of conduct can prevent negative workplace gossip prevalence in the workplace.

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments and comparable ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. This study is funded by National Natural Science Foundation of China (Nos 71373251, 71910107003, 71871209 and 71422014).



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**Originality/value** – This study has contributed to the organizational behavior literature in several aspects. First, most studies have examined the consequences of abusive supervisor through subordinates victimization, current study contributes in the ongoing stream of research by examining antecedents of abusive supervision through subordinates' social victimization (e.g. negative workplace gossip) of supervisors.

**Keywords** Quantitative, Negative emotions, Emotional regulation, Abusive supervisor, Negative workplace gossip

**Paper type** Research paper

The term abusive supervision refers to “subordinates’ perceptions of the extent to which supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical content” (Tepper, 2000, p. 178). This abusive behavior includes passing negative remarks and expressing anger at subordinates (Tepper, 2000, 2007). Past research found that supervisor abusive behavior leads to numerous unfavorable work outcomes, including lower job satisfaction (Tepper *et al.*, 2004), withdrawal behavior (Mawritz, Dust and Resick, 2014; Mawritz, Folger and Latham, 2014), reduced job performance (Harris *et al.*, 2007) and intentions to quit (Duffy *et al.*, 2006), that cost organizations millions of dollars annually (Tepper *et al.*, 2006). Given the severe consequences of abusive supervision, it is essential to understand why supervisors become abusive to subordinates (Aryee *et al.*, 2007; Mawritz *et al.*, 2012; Tepper *et al.*, 2017). Understanding what triggers supervisor abusive behavior will help organizations to minimize the cost and prevalence of such destructive behavior in the workplace.

At this point, only a limited number of studies have explored the predictors of abusive supervision (Martinko *et al.*, 2013; Mawritz, Dust and Resick, 2014; Mawritz, Folger and Latham, 2014; Tepper, 2007). These limited studies have mainly focused on contextual factors such as organizational injustice (Aryee *et al.*, 2007), organizational hostile climate (Mawritz, Dust and Resick, 2014; Mawritz, Folger and Latham, 2014), psychological contract violations (Hoobler and Brass, 2006) and organizational aggressive norms (Restubog *et al.*, 2011), while only a few studies have paid attention to the subordinates’ deviant behaviors (e.g. counter-productive behavior directed at supervisors, avoidance of supervisors and organizational deviance) as potential predictors of supervisor abuse at work (Lian *et al.*, 2014; Mawritz *et al.*, 2017; Simon *et al.*, 2015). Recently, Brady *et al.* (2017) distinguished between the subordinates’ workplace deviance and negative gossip. Unlike workplace deviance, which is rare and condemned by witnesses, negative gossip is common in the workplace and does not violate organizational norms. Given the distinct nature of gossiping, Brady and his colleagues emphasized that research should consider how negative gossip impacts the supervisor’s work-related behavior (e.g. abusive behavior).

To date, research work has investigated the influence of negative workplace gossip on the proactive and citizenship behaviors of the target (Wu *et al.*, 2016, 2018). A recent study suggests that employees tend to take interest in negative gossip about their supervisors (Brady *et al.*, 2017). However, we have limited knowledge about how negative gossip affects supervisor work-related behavior. Based on affective events theory (AET) (Weiss and Cropanzano, 1996), this study extends the literature by arguing that the supervisor’s perception of the subordinates’ negative gossip in workplace settings (affective events) is likely to induce supervisor negative emotions (affective reactions), which subsequently trigger supervisor abusive behavior (behavioral reaction).

We do not assume that all supervisors will react to similar affective events in similar ways. AET posits that individuals’ specific abilities can help to explain variations in their emotions and behaviors (Weiss and Beal, 2005; Weiss and Kurek, 2003). In particular, the literature on abusive supervision suggests that affective dispositional factors can impact supervisor behavior at work (Martinko *et al.*, 2013). Accordingly, this study suggests that an affective dispositional factor, supervisor emotional regulation, offers a potential boundary

condition to the relationship between negative gossip and abusive supervision. The term emotional regulation refers to one's ability to manage emotions either by changing perceptions of the stressful situation or by manipulating the emotional expression to a negative situation (Grandey, 2000; Gross, 1998a, b). Specifically, we suspect that emotional regulation by the supervisors helps them control their negative emotions and abusive behavior when confronted with the perception of negative gossip by their subordinates. In doing so, we make three contributions to the literature.

First, the current study contributes to research on the antecedents of abusive supervision by examining the subordinates' negative workplace gossip and the supervisor's negative emotions. Second, the available literature on gossip focuses on the motives and functions of workplace gossip (e.g. Farley *et al.*, 2010; Grosser *et al.*, 2010; Mills, 2010) and thus lacks a theoretical framework on how negative gossip about supervisors triggers negative emotions and behaviors in them. We extend the literature on gossip by exploring the consequences of the subordinates' negative workplace gossip from the perspective of supervisor abusive behavior at work. Third, we incorporate the supervisors' emotional regulation as a moderating variable in order to address the question of why all supervisors do not turn out to be abusive in the response of perceiving negative gossip at work. As a result, we propose a moderated-mediation model by investigating the moderating effects of supervisor emotional regulation on the indirect relationship between perceived subordinates' negative gossip and abusive supervision (see Figure 1).

### Understanding subordinates' negative workplace gossip

Workplace gossip is defined as "informal and evaluative talk in an organization, usually among no more than a few individuals, about another member of that organization who is not present" (Kurland and Pelled, 2000). Negative workplace gossip is distinguished from inter-related constructs (e.g. social talk and rumors) which are often speculative, lack legitimacy, less evaluative and easily ignored in the workplace (Brady *et al.*, 2017). Whereas, negative gossip is more legitimized, evaluative talk and specifically damages the reputation of the absent third party (Eder and Enke, 1991; Grosser *et al.*, 2010; Sommerfeld *et al.*, 2008; Wu *et al.*, 2016). The damage from such gossip is unavoidable, offensive and agitates the target's aggressive behavior at work. Considering the heightened severity attached to employees' negative gossip, it is worthwhile to study its impact on supervisor abusive behavior.

Several reasons have been determined explaining why employees engage in gossip, including facilitating the information sharing process (Dunbar, 1996; Mills, 2010), making a social circle (Dunbar, 1996; Eder and Enke, 1991), gaining coercive power (Kurland and Pelled, 2000), creating power dynamics within organizations (Van Iterson and Clegg, 2008) and exerting one's control over people at work (Farley *et al.*, 2010). Moreover, prior studies have also attempted to identify the potential targets of workplace gossip and, in doing so, have determined that low-status organizational members take an interest in workplace gossip about an organizational member, who is higher in the formal status

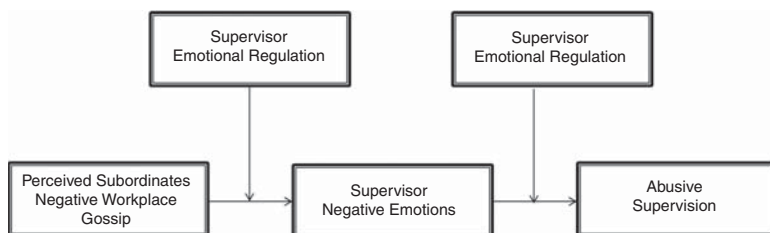


Figure 1.  
Moderated-mediation  
model

(McAndrew *et al.*, 2007). Specifically, a supervisor's status in the organization makes them a likely target for gossip by subordinates of that supervisor. For instance, Ellwardt *et al.* (2012) found that negative gossip about managers increases when employees notice the frequent absence of their managers. In addition, negative gossip about a supervisor has been found to be a strategic tool used by subordinates to make alliances with one another (Brady *et al.*, 2017; Tebbutt and Marchington, 1997; Tucker, 1993). Thus, negative workplace gossip can have beneficial consequences for employees (as participants) but harmful effects on the supervisor (as a target). In summary, research has documented that organizational leaders are potential targets of their subordinates' negative workplace gossip. What is unclear is how the perception of such gossip affects the supervisors' emotional as well as behavioral reactions, in particular, abusive supervision. Given that research has shown that negative workplace gossip has a significant negative effect on the target's work behaviors, including proactive behavior and OCBs (Wu *et al.*, 2016, 2018), it is plausible to assume that this form of workplace targeting is also likely to affect the supervisors' behavior at work.

### **Theoretical background and hypothesized relationships**

#### *Perceived subordinates' negative workplace gossip and supervisor negative emotions*

Meta-analytical evidence has shown a strong relationship between perceived workplace mistreatment and negative emotions (Bowling and Beehr, 2006). Furthermore, these negative emotions are also strongly associated with aggressive and counter-productive work behaviors, particularly if such negative emotions are the result of perceived targeting from organizational members (Lim *et al.*, 2018; Sakurai and Jex, 2012). Despite these findings, the theory is silent on whether abusive supervision is likely to occur when supervisors perceive victimization via the subordinates' negative gossip and experience negative emotions.

As discussed above, negative gossip related to a supervisor is most likely to come from supervisor's immediate employees (i.e. those directly supervised by the criticized supervisor) (Brady *et al.*, 2017; McAndrew *et al.*, 2007). In fact, Salin (2001) has named employee negative gossip as one potential social stressor in the workplace; stating that because of this, supervisors may have a negative emotional response in such situations. Moreover, Eissa and Lester (2017) found that supervisor frustration (a type of negative emotion) leads to supervisor abusive behavior. Considering these research perspectives, it is logical to expect that both the subordinates' negative gossip and supervisor negative emotions are significant experiences for supervisors in any organization, though an investigation of the impact of such specific constructs on supervisor abusive behavior has been overlooked. We state that supervisor negative emotions may arise through the perceived negative gossip of subordinates, resulting in supervisor retaliatory behavior in the form of abusive supervision.

Negative emotions are the emotional reactions to a negative situation in the workplace. Generally, people are likely to experience negative emotions once they perceive unfair actions (Bowling and Beehr, 2006) or experience incivility (Sakurai and Jex, 2012). Prior research has found that many factors related to negative emotions in the workplace, including employees rejecting (Smart Richman and Leary, 2009) or violating social status, tend to arouse negative emotions (Ohbuchi *et al.*, 2004). That is, negative emotions arise as soon as an individual's reputation is being damaged by negative workplace situations. Similarly, perceiving negative gossip from subordinates, such as negative evaluative talk that threatens reputations (Baumeister *et al.*, 2004; Hess and Hagen, 2006; Mawritz *et al.*, 2017; Sommerfeld *et al.*, 2008), harms well-being (Wu *et al.*, 2018) and negatively affects organizational-based self-esteem (Wu *et al.*, 2016) lead supervisors to experience negative emotional response.

Furthermore, in line with AET (Weiss and Cropanzano, 1996), negative workplace gossip can be demonstrated as an affective event that is characterized by the employees' silent treatment (Robinson and O'Leary-Kelly, 1998; Tepper and Henle, 2011) and indirect attacks (Robinson and Bennett, 1995) that may give rise to supervisor negative emotions. In this vein, this gossip becomes liable for creating supervisors fear that their reputation may have been damaged. Consequently, AET argues that negative gossip by subordinates at work serves as an affective event, e.g., raising doubts about reliability and performance, and is damaging to the targeted supervisors' emotions. Hence, we hypothesize:

- H1. Perceived subordinates negative workplace gossip is positively associated with supervisor negative emotions.

#### *Supervisor negative emotions and abusive supervision*

Abusive supervision involves non-physical forms of hostility toward subordinates (Lian *et al.*, 2012) that may include public humiliation, debasing and refusing to speak with the subordinates (Tepper, 2000). AET (Weiss and Cropanzano, 1996) demonstrated that emotions stimulate behaviors. Consequently, it is reasonable to argue that supervisors' negative emotions may elicit abusive behavior toward subordinates. This assumption is supported by prior research showing that negative emotional responses lead to aggression (e.g. Averill, 2012; Chen and Spector, 1992; Fox and Spector, 1999). Furthermore, based on the emotion-centered model of workplace behavior (Spector and Fox, 2002), negative emotions are likely to trigger counter-productive work behavior (Spector and Fox, 2005; Sakurai and Jex, 2012). Thus, consistent with research on workplace aggression, this study predicts a similar relationship between supervisors' negative emotions and abusive supervision.

Negative emotions include intense feelings such as anger and disgust that are difficult to control. It has been found that individuals feel difficulty in controlling unpleasant emotions that lead to negative reactions or aggressive behaviors (Fox *et al.*, 2001; Harvey and Harris, 2010; Yang and Diefendorff, 2009). Negative emotions have been shown to be associated with anti-social behaviors and coworker abuse in the workplace (e.g. Harvey and Harris, 2010; Spector, 1997). Recently, Eissa and Lester (2017) found that the supervisor frustration is significantly associated with abusive supervision. Thus, based on empirical and theoretical evidence, we predict that supervisor negative emotions (as an emotional response to the subordinates' negative gossip) lead to abusive supervision. Thus, we hypothesize:

- H2. Supervisor negative emotions are positively associated with abusive supervision.

To thoroughly explain the hypothesized model, we propose that supervisor negative emotions mediate the relationship between perceived subordinates negative workplace gossip and abusive supervision. Previous research determined that perceiving stressful situations tended to elicit negative emotions that further predict anti-social behavior at work (Karatepe *et al.*, 2009; Martínez-Iñigo *et al.*, 2007). This is consistent with AET (Weiss and Cropanzano, 1996), which is based on an "event → emotional reaction → behavioral reaction" framework. Thus, based on AET, we propose that supervisor negative emotions (an emotional response), will mediate the relationship between the subordinates' negative gossip (an event) and abusive supervision (a behavior). Accordingly, we hypothesize:

- H3. Supervisor negative emotions mediate the relationship between perceived subordinates negative workplace gossip and abusive supervision.

#### *The role of supervisor emotional regulation*

Gross (1998a, b) proposed a model of emotional regulation to examine how one's ability to regulate emotions helps one cope with stress. Emotional regulation refers to an individual's

ability to modify emotions and recover from stressful situations (Harms and Credé, 2010; Salovey and Grewal, 2005; Wong and Law, 2002). Gross (1998a, b) theorized that individuals regulate emotions in two stages. The first stage is called antecedent-focused emotional regulation, referring to when people modify the situation or their perception of a situation in order to regulate their emotions. The second stage is called response-focused emotional regulation, referring to when individuals suppress their emotions. In other words, when faced with a stressful event, people can adjust their appraisal of the event and/or modify their internal emotional reaction to the event. We propose that a supervisor's emotional regulating ability buffers the effect of perceptions of negative gossip on negative emotions and on subsequent abusive behavior.

AET (Weiss and Cropanzano, 1996) emphasizes that affective dispositional factors affect one's ability to manage negative emotional and behavioral reactions at the time of perceiving negative events at work. Emotional regulation as an affective dispositional factor deals with a person's ability to modify their perceptions of a workplace event and their emotional and behavioral reactions to it (Bai *et al.*, 2016; Gross, 2014). Individuals with high emotional regulation have the ability to resist a situational threat (Grandey, 2000; Caprara *et al.*, 2008) and manage their negative emotions in order to engage in appropriate workplace behavior (Wang *et al.*, 2011). In contrast, people with low emotional regulation are likely to react to negative events by displaying negative emotional and behavioral reactions. Consequently, we posit that supervisors with high emotional regulation will be less sensitive to subordinates negative workplace gossip, resulting in decreased levels of negative emotions, which is consistent with research showing that individuals high in emotional regulation exhibit fewer negative emotions, when perceiving a negative affective event (Eisenberg *et al.*, 2001). Therefore, high emotional regulation leads supervisors to experience lower negative emotions by altering their perceptions of the attention paid to negative gossip. Additionally, we argue that supervisors with high emotional regulation are less likely to be provoked by negative emotions and are thus less likely to engage in abusive behavioral responses. Accordingly, we have developed the following three-part hypothesis:

- H4a.* Supervisor's emotional regulation moderates the relationship between perceived subordinates' negative workplace gossip and supervisor negative emotions, such that the positive relationship will be weaker when supervisor emotional regulation is high.
- H4b.* Supervisor's emotional regulation will moderate the relationship between supervisor negative emotions and abusive supervision, such that the positive relationship will be weaker when supervisor emotional regulation level is high.
- H4c.* Supervisor's emotional regulation moderates the indirect effect of perceived negative workplace gossip on abusive supervision via supervisor negative emotions, such that the indirect effect is weaker when supervisor emotional regulation level is high.

## Method

### *Sample and procedure*

Data were collected from employees (e.g. subordinates) and their immediate supervisors in organizations representing a variety of industries (e.g. finance, health care, information technology, public safety and human services) located in three cities in China. Respondents were recruited from different professional online forums with the offer of free movie tickets in return for participation. Initially, employees were asked to complete a survey reporting on their perceptions of abusive supervision along with demographic information. Following that, these employees invited their supervisors to complete a supervisory survey which measured perceived negative workplace gossip from subordinates, negative emotions,

emotional regulation and demographic information. Steps were taken to assure the anonymity and accuracy of participant responses (Eissa and Lester, 2017; Greenbaum *et al.*, 2012; Judge *et al.*, 2006). Each survey was administered online. The surveys were sent to employees first, and then the employees forwarded the supervisory part of the survey to their immediate supervisors. All participants were assured that employees and supervisors could only view their own relevant sections of the survey. At the end of the online survey, we recorded the IP addresses and the time stamps associated with the submissions, in order to confirm that each matching respondent pair completed the survey separately.

In total, 680 employees were invited to participate in this study. Responses were obtained from 392 employees and 346 supervisors. We omitted 20 respondents due to incomplete responses or responses that recorded the same answer for all the constructs. Consequently, the final sample consisted of responses from 326 employee and supervisor dyads, for a response rate of 47.9 percent. Based on the employees' responses, 46 percent were male, with an average age of 38.10 years. Based on supervisors' responses, 46 percent of the participants were male, and their average age was 48.20 years.

### *Measures*

We used the translation/back-translation procedure to translate English language measures into the Chinese language (Brislin, 1986) using competent bilingual individuals. Back-translation was conducted, and one Chinese full professor compared the original and back-translated versions. No translation problems were found.

*Perceived subordinates' negative workplace gossip.* Perceived negative workplace gossip by subordinates was measured using three items developed by Chandra and Robinson (2009). Supervisor responses were obtained on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree). These items were: "Subordinates communicated damaging information about me in the workplace," "Subordinates spread unfavorable gossip about me in the workplace" and "Subordinates made negative allegations about me in the workplace." The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for this scale was 0.71.

*Supervisor negative emotions.* Supervisor negative emotions were measured using the ten items of a job-related affective well-being scale (Van Katwyk *et al.*, 2000). Supervisors were asked to rate ten specific negative emotions on a five-point Likert scale, indicating the degree to which supervisors experienced these ten specific emotions because of their subordinates. A sample item of a negative emotion includes "indicate the amount that your subordinates have made you feel hostile." The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for the measurement of this scale was 0.76.

*Supervisor emotional regulation.* A four-item scale was used to measure supervisor emotional regulation (Wong and Law, 2002). Using a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree) supervisors indicated the extent to which they agreed with statements such as, "I have good control of my own emotions." The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for this scale was 0.79.

*Abusive supervision.* To assess supervisor abusive behavior toward subordinates, the employees were asked to respond to five items developed by Mitchell and Ambrose (2007), based on the research work of Tepper (2000). A sample item is "My supervisor puts me down in front of others." Abusive supervision was assessed with a scale ranging from 1 = never and 5 = always. The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for this scale was 0.78.

*Control variables.* We controlled for age and gender since they can influence supervisor abusive behavior in the workplace (Mackey *et al.*, 2017). Furthermore, we also controlled for organizational- and supervisor-level factors, given that, for example, organizational injustice and role overload may be associated with abusive supervision (Aryee *et al.*, 2007; Eissa and Lester, 2017).

## Results

The first step in our analysis was to assess the construct validity of the variables through confirmatory factor analysis using AMOS 21. To measure the model's accuracy of fit, we followed the model fit indices: comparative fit index (CFI), CMIN/df, the root-mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) and the Tucker–Lewis index (TLI) (Byrne, 2013). According to Hair *et al.* (2010) and Markus (2012), a good model fit should present values of CFI and TLI above 0.90 and an RMSEA score below 0.08. The results of the first model (applied to all items of our four factors) showed relatively poor fit statistics (CMIN/df = 2.63, CFI = 0.88, TLI = 0.89, RMSEA = 0.10). The second model was tested after removing three low-factor loading items (i.e. guilt, nervousness and scared) from the ten-item negative emotions scale. After this change, the model fit statistics improved significantly, reaching acceptable levels (CMIN/df = 1.45, CFI = 0.96, TLI = 0.95, RMSEA = 0.04). Table I reports the descriptive statistics, correlations and Cronbach's  $\alpha$ 's for all variables. The internal consistency  $\alpha$ 's of all study variables were above 0.70.

### *Analytical approach*

We tested the full hypothesized model by following the recommendations of Preacher *et al.* (2007). To test the hypotheses, we used the Process macro for SPSS, as suggested by Hayes (2013). *H1–H3* were tested via a simple mediation model, while *H4* was tested using moderated mediation.

### *Tests of mediation*

Table II presents the findings for *H1–H3*. The results show that perceived subordinates' negative workplace gossip was positively associated with supervisor negative emotions ( $B = 0.34$ ,  $SE = 0.03$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), and supervisor negative emotions were positively associated with abusive supervision ( $B = 0.18$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Thus, *H1* and *H2* were supported. Our results also showed that subordinate negative workplace gossip had an indirect effect on abusive supervision through supervisor negative emotions ( $B = 0.06$ ,  $SE = 0.03$ ,  $CI = 0.01, 0.13$ ). We applied the Sobel test with a bootstrapped 95% confidence interval, which demonstrated the significant indirect effect of perceived subordinates' negative workplace gossip on abusive supervision (Sobel  $z = 2.43$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and showed that the bootstrapped CI did not include zero (0.01, 0.13). Therefore, *H3* was supported.

### *Tests of moderated mediation*

Tables III and IV present the results for *H4*. Table III shows that the interaction of perception of subordinates' negative gossip with supervisor emotional regulation was significant in predicting supervisor negative emotions ( $B = -0.25$ ,  $SE = 0.03$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), supporting *H4a*. Since *H4a* suggests that at high levels of supervisor emotional regulation, the association between perceived subordinates' negative workplace gossip and supervisor negative emotions would be weaker, we examined the relationship at high and low values of supervisor emotional regulation (1 SD below the mean, and 1 SD above the mean). Table IV shows that the relationship between perceived subordinates' negative workplace gossip and supervisor negative emotions was weaker when supervisor emotional regulation was high ( $B = 0.16$ ,  $SE = 0.03$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), and the same relationship was stronger when supervisor emotional regulation was low ( $B = 0.58$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Figure 2 illustrates these trends. Thus, *H4a* was fully supported. On the other hand, *H4b* was not supported given that the interaction of supervisor negative emotions with supervisor emotional regulation did not predict abusive supervision ( $B = 0.03$ ,  $SE = 0.08$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ).

Finally, emotional regulation was examined to investigate the conditional indirect effects of perception of subordinates' negative gossip on abusive supervision via the supervisor's

**Table I.**  
Descriptive statistics,  
reliability estimates  
and study variable  
inter-correlations

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Supervisor gender	1.54	0.49										
2. Supervisor age	3.61	0.66	-0.043									
3. Supervisor education	2.37	0.76	-0.026	-0.104*								
4. Supervisor tenure	2.49	0.73	-0.041	-0.384*	0.351**							
5. Organizational injustice	3.56	0.58	-0.108*	0.075	0.010	-0.091						
6. Role overload	3.93	0.54	-0.091	0.184*	0.078	-0.184*	0.284**					
7. Negative workplace gossip (S)	2.84	0.53	0.007	0.047	-0.095	0.014	0.056	-0.037	0.71			
8. Negative emotions (S)	2.91	0.37	-0.028	0.101*	-0.206**	-0.228**	0.110**	0.116*	0.500**	0.76		
9. Emotional regulations (S)	2.30	0.83	0.001	0.216**	0.307**	0.427**	0.153**	0.167**	0.369**	-0.570**	0.79	
10. Abusive supervision	2.90	0.40	0.047	0.029	-0.199	-0.191**	0.134**	0.054	0.108*	0.233**	-0.265**	0.78

**Notes:** *n* = 326. Coefficient ( $\alpha$ ) reliabilities are shown in the diagonal. 1 = male; 2 = female. Negative workplace gossip (S) = Subordinates negative workplace gossip; Negative emotions (S) = Supervisor's negative emotions; Emotional regulation (S) = Supervisor's emotional regulation. \**p* < 0.05, \*\**p* < 0.01 levels (two-tailed)

**Table II.**

Regression results for simple mediation

	Mediator variable model: supervisor negative emotion				Dependent variable mode: abusive supervision			
	<i>B</i>	SE	<i>t</i>	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>B</i>	SE	<i>t</i>	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>
Constant	1.32	0.20	6.43**	0.32	0.56	0.26	2.09*	0.10
Organizational injustice	0.02	0.03	0.74		0.07	0.04	2.03*	
Role overload	0.07	0.04	1.86		0.01	0.04	0.10	
Perceived subordinates' negative workplace gossip	0.34	0.03	10.65**					
Supervisor negative emotions					0.18	0.06	2.62**	
Indirect effect of subordinates' negative workplace gossip on abusive supervision	Effect	SE	LL 95% CI	UL 95% CI				
	0.06	0.03	0.01	0.13				
Normal theory test for indirect effect	Effect	SE	<i>Z</i>					
	0.06	0.03	2.43					

**Notes:** *n* = 326. LL, lower limit; CI, confidence interval; UL, upper limit. Unstandardized regression coefficients are reported. Bootstrap sample size = 5,000. \**p* < 0.05; \*\**p* < 0.01

**Table III.**

Emotional regulations moderation: regression results for overall model

Outcome variable	Mediator variable model: supervisor negative emotions				Dependent variable mode: abusive supervision			
	<i>B</i>	SE	<i>t</i>	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>B</i>	SE	<i>t</i>	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>
Constant	0.06	0.16	0.39	0.37	0.09	0.24	3.73**	0.11
Organizational injustice	0.01	0.03	0.21		0.07	0.04	1.87	
Role overload	0.02	0.03	0.42		-0.01	0.04	-0.17	
Subordinates' negative workplace gossip	0.37	0.03	11.63**					
Supervisor negative emotions					0.13	0.07	2.02*	
Supervisor emotional regulation	-0.19	0.02	-8.80**		-0.07	0.04	-1.84	
Subordinates' negative workplace gossip × emotional regulations								
Supervisor negative emotions × Emotional regulations	-0.25	0.03	-9.29**		0.03	0.08	0.43	

**Notes:** *n* = 326. Unstandardized regression coefficients are reported. Bootstrap sample size = 5,000. \**p* < 0.05; \*\**p* < 0.01 level (two-tailed)

**Table IV.**

Conditional direct and indirect moderating effect of supervisor ER

Emotional regulations	Boot effect	Boot LL 95% CI	Boot UL 95% CI
<i>Perceived subordinates' negative workplace gossip</i> → <i>Negative emotions</i>			
Low	0.58	0.48	0.67
High	0.16	0.10	0.22
<i>Indirect effect: perceived subordinates' negative workplace gossip</i> → <i>Negative emotions</i> → <i>Abusive supervision</i>			
Low	0.09	0.02	0.22
High	0.01	-0.01	0.07

**Notes:** *n* = 326. LL, lower limit; CI, confidence interval; UL, upper limit

negative emotions. Table IV shows that the conditional indirect effect of perceived subordinates' negative gossip on abusive supervision was insignificant (*B* = 0.01, CI = -0.01, 0.07) when supervisor emotional regulation was high, and the same relationship was significant (*B* = 0.09, CI = 0.02, 0.22) when supervisor emotional regulation was low.

Moreover, to examine the difference between the two coefficients, we calculated the index of moderated mediation (Hayes, 2015), and results revealed a significant coefficient (coefficient = -0.07; CI = -0.11, -0.03). The negative coefficient suggests that negative gossip led to increased abusive supervision through increased negative emotions, but only among those supervisors with low emotional regulation. Thus, *H4c* was supported.

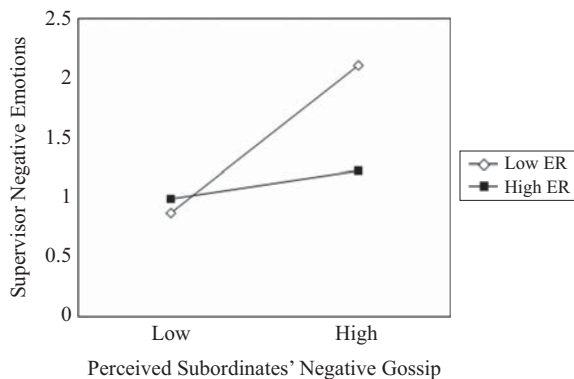
**Discussion**

Based upon AET (Weiss and Cropanzano, 1996), this study proposed and tested a subordinate-level antecedent, negative gossip, to determine its effect on supervisor abusive behavior. As predicted, the findings showed that perception of negative workplace gossip by subordinates provoked supervisor negative emotions, which, in turn, triggered supervisor abusive behavior toward subordinates. We also investigated supervisor emotional regulation as a moderator of the first and second stages of our model. The findings revealed that supervisor emotional regulation weakened the relationship between perceived subordinates' negative workplace gossip and supervisor negative emotions but did not mitigate the relationship between supervisor negative emotions and abusive supervision.

It is possible that because supervisor emotional regulation moderated the relationship between subordinates negative gossip and negative emotions, the probability of moderation at the second stage was minimized. That is, once supervisors use their emotional regulation to lower emotional reaction to negative gossip, there is no longer a need to regulate their behavioral reaction to negative emotions since they are already lessened. This explanation is supported by person-situation interaction perspective suggesting that individuals' patterns of emotional and behavioral responses primarily depend on their perceptions of the situation they are confronting (Lim and Tai, 2014; Mischel and Shoda, 1995). As such, once intense emotions are manifested, their effect on behavioral reactions is difficult to suppress. Our notion is also supported by research showing that affective dispositional factors (e.g. trait hostility) mitigate the association between negative workplace events and negative emotions but do not moderate the linkage between negative emotions and behavioral responses (Lim *et al.*, 2018). Finally, our findings showed that supervisor emotional regulation conditionally moderated the indirect effect of perceived subordinates' negative gossip on abusive supervision through supervisor negative emotions. As predicted, the mediated linkage was weaker when supervisor emotional regulation was high.

*Theoretical contributions*

The findings of this study contribute to the literature in several ways. First, this study draws increased attention to the role of workplace gossip in the context of the



**Figure 2.** Interaction of perceived subordinates' negative workplace gossip and supervisor emotional regulations on supervisor's negative emotions

subordinate–supervisor perspective. Research on workplace gossip previously focused on investigating the aims and motives of employees who engage in gossip in the workplace. More recently, progress has been made toward understanding the positive behavioral outcomes (e.g. proactive behavior, OCB) of negative workplace gossip (Wu *et al.*, 2016, 2018). Despite some progress, there remains a lack of a theoretical framework for examining the effect of perceptions of negative gossip by employees on supervisor’s anti-social workplace behaviors. Accordingly, this study advances literature on workplace gossip by investigating the supervisors’ negative behavioral outcome resulting from negative gossip by subordinates.

Second, few studies have examined the predictors of abusive supervision. Previous research has determined that the employees’ direct victimization (via workplace deviance) is positively related to abusive supervision (Lian *et al.*, 2014; Mawritz *et al.*, 2017; Simon *et al.*, 2015). This study contributes to the literature by exploring whether subordinates’ negative gossip influences supervisor willingness to engage in abusive behavior as well. Lending support to our framework, this study further demonstrated the significance of supervisor negative emotions as a mediator of the relationship between perceived subordinates’ negative gossip and abusive supervision relationship; scholars assert that supervisor frustration can be triggered on the basis of their experiences in the workplace, which, in turn, elicits supervisor behaviors that were perceived as abusive (Eissa and Lester, 2017). Consistent with the previous evidence, our findings revealed that when supervisors perceive that their subordinates engage in negative evaluative talk in their absence, then supervisors negative emotions are generated. Thus, not only do our findings advance current research about perceived subordinates’ negative gossip as a distal antecedent, but also we improve understanding of the underlying mechanism of supervisor negative emotions as proximal antecedent of supervisor abusive behavior.

Third, this study also advances the literature by investigating the role of emotional regulation as a supervisor-level moderator (Martinko *et al.*, 2013). Our findings support the idea that supervisor emotional regulation can intervene at different points of the mediated path between perceived subordinates’ negative gossip and abusive supervision. Supervisor’s negative emotions elicited from perceptions of subordinates’ negative gossip were influenced by the emotional regulation of supervisors. Moreover, the indirect impact of perceived subordinates’ negative gossip on abusive supervision via supervisor negative emotion was weaker at high levels of supervisor emotional regulation.

### *Managerial implications*

In practical terms, abusive supervision is recognized as a destructive workplace behavior that is costly to organizations (Mackey *et al.*, 2017; Martinko *et al.*, 2013). Thus, it is important for organizational management and practitioners to understand the reasons why supervisors exhibit abusive behavior toward subordinates. This study shows that abusive supervision is not only caused by organizational factors such as perceived organizational injustice and psychological contract breaches (Aryee *et al.*, 2007; Hoobler and Brass, 2006), but also by the behavior of subordinates themselves in the form of negative gossip. Thus, in order to eliminate abusive supervision, the policy and decision makers must protect supervisors from being targeted by negative gossip from subordinates, as well as carefully observing supervisor negative affective responses that may lead to supervisor abuses at work.

In addition, this study serves as a wake-up call for top management about the potentially harmful effects of negative gossip at work. It is essential for higher management to understand that negative workplace gossip by employees not only causes a reduction in positive work-related behaviors (Wu *et al.*, 2016, 2018), but also has deleterious effects (i.e. abusive supervision). Thus, workplace gossip joins other types of workplace behaviors (e.g. bullying and incivility) that should be subject to training and

regulation through codes of conduct and discipline systems designed to demonstrate that negative gossip will not be tolerated in the workplace. Furthermore, organizational management should promote social norms that minimize negative gossip behavior among employees (Michelson *et al.*, 2010). Significantly, this study also suggests that subordinates should be made aware that targeting supervisors via negative gossip can backfire on them in the form of future abusive supervision.

The finding that supervisor emotional regulation moderates the effect of negative gossip on the negative emotions that lead to abusive supervision suggests that one way to reduce the occurrence of abusive supervision is to select and promote individuals to supervisory positions who have high levels of emotional regulation. Such individuals can regulate their negative emotions by changing their perceptions about negative workplace events (e.g. negative gossip) and thus avoid displaying abusive behavior toward their employees. Alternatively, emotional regulation training helps individuals to reappraise events as a challenge rather than a stressful situation (Bai *et al.*, 2016; Slaski and Cartwright, 2002), and further assists them in managing negative emotions (Nelis *et al.*, 2009) and alleviating aggression at work (Cherniss and Adler, 2000). With the benefits mentioned above, we suggest that organizations conduct supervisory training programs to provide assistance to supervisors for successfully dealing with subordinates' negative gossip and, further, help them manage the triggered emotional as well as behavioral reactions.

#### *Limitations and future research directions*

Like all studies, the current one is not without limitations. First, the data were collected using a cross-sectional research design, which limits the interference of causality among the hypothesized relationships in our model. Future research work should apply alternative research designs such as a daily diary or longitudinal data collection (Shadish *et al.*, 2002), in order to support the validity of our study.

Second, although we used AET to explain the relationships among the variables in our model, we do not deny that other alternative theories and mechanisms may offer alternative explanations for our proposed relationships. For example, conservative resource theory suggests that workplace targeting depletes one's personal resources (e.g. self-esteem) and that victims engage in negative organizational behavior to protect further resource loss (Hobfoll, 1989). Likewise, the stressor-emotions (Spector and Fox, 2002, 2005) and transactional stress models (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984) similarly posit that perceived stressful situations are likely to deplete personal resources, resulting in negative emotional and behavioral outcomes. Thus, future scholars may advance and support the current study by utilizing other established theories, in an effort to discover other plausible mechanisms to improve our understanding of the relationships among the variables in the current study.

Third, Mawritz, Dust and Resick (2014) and Mawritz, Folger and Latham (2014) suggested that "employees working in the same workgroup are likely to be influenced by similar leadership behaviors, suggesting that leadership behaviors operate at the group level" (p. 368). This suggests that the use of subordinate-supervisor dyadic data is also a potential limitation. Although research has commonly used the dyadic approach, i.e., subordinate-supervisor (Eissa and Lester, 2017), future research should examine the influence of abusive supervision on a group level in order to generalize the current findings. Moreover, whether a supervisor engages in abusive behavior to show retaliation specifically to the gossipier, the gossip recipient, or displaced aggression toward the entire group, should be addressed in future research.

Fourth, our theoretical model minimized the risk of reverse causality by examining the effect of perception of subordinates' negative gossip on abusive supervision via supervisor negative emotions and we collected data from two different sources (i.e. supervisors reported negative gossip and subordinates reported abusive supervision). Despite those

measures, we acknowledge that theoretically it is plausible that subordinates' negative gossip may take place when supervisors abuse and devalue the employees. Thus, future research would obtain benefit by investigating abusive supervision to negative gossip relationship by introducing appropriate mediators and research design. Finally, we explored the role of supervisor emotional regulation as a potential boundary condition. Future research should examine the mitigating effect of alternative moderators (e.g. organization-related contextual factors) on the hypothesized relationships in the current study. For instance, organizational support is considered a resource for people, one that may help in dealing with stressful events (Kossek *et al.*, 2011; Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002).

## Conclusion

This study revealed that supervisors can be abusive because they are being targeted by subordinates through negative gossip. Because abusive supervision is a costly workplace behavior, it is important to investigate what provokes supervisors to engage in such abusive behavior in the workplace. This study advances the emerging research by examining workplace gossip as a distal antecedent and negative emotions as proximal antecedents of abusive supervision. Furthermore, the conditional effect of supervisor emotional regulation helps us understand variations in the relationships of workplace negative gossip → negative emotion → abusive behavior. We hope, the current study encourages scholars to investigate other potential ways of theorizing and empirically testing workplace gossip and abusive supervision.

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