

# Supervisor negative gossip and target's helping behavior: the role of emotional exhaustion and Islamic work ethics

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This study aims to investigate the effect of supervisor negative gossip on targeted employees' helping behavior by examining the mediating mechanism of emotional exhaustion and the moderating role of Islamic work ethics.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Survey data were collected in three waves from 279 MBA students working in various organizations across Pakistan. SPSS 22.0 and AMOS 21.0 were used for reliability, validity and mediation-moderation analyses.

**Findings** – The results show that supervisor negative gossip reduces employees' helping behavior, with emotional exhaustion mediating this relationship. Islamic work ethics further moderates the negative effects of supervisor negative gossip.

**Originality/value** – This study extends the literature by examining how supervisor negative gossip impacts employees' helping behavior through COR theory and highlights the moderating role of Islamic work ethics, providing enriching insights into its organizational influence.

**Keywords** Supervisor negative gossip, Emotional exhaustion, Helping behavior, Islamic work ethics, COR theory

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Business research highlights the importance of employees engaging in behaviors that assist others, even when these actions fall outside their official job responsibilities (De Clercq *et al.*, 2020, 2023; He *et al.*, 2021). Helping behavior refers to voluntary actions that foster interpersonal harmony and help coworkers address or prevent work-related problems (Van Dyne and LePine, 1998). Such behavior is valuable for enhancing organizational effectiveness, particularly in terms of productivity and satisfaction, as it promotes harmony

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and cooperation (Chung and Yang, 2017; Grant and Mayer, 2009). Prior studies have explored various factors that influence helping behavior, both positively and negatively, including financial motives high levels of task conflict (Ng and Van Dyne, 2005) and workplace incivility (De Clercq *et al.*, 2019).

Building on the understanding of factors that influence helping behavior, research has also highlighted supervisory behaviors that can undermine such actions. Negative supervisory behaviors, such as abusive supervision (Asim *et al.*, 2023), and negative feedback (Belschak and Den Hartog, 2009) have been shown to discourage employees' willingness to assist others. Beyond formal supervisory roles, certain informal behaviors, although not mandated by job positions, can also profoundly impact employees. Despite their prevalence and influence, these behaviors remain underexplored in the literature. One notable example is supervisor negative gossip, which involves supervisors making informal, unfavorable evaluative remarks about subordinates in their absence (Bai *et al.*, 2020; Brady *et al.*, 2017; Zong *et al.*, 2023).

Supervisor negative gossip has significant implications due to its inherently ambiguous nature. Unlike direct negative feedback, which explicitly highlights poor performance, gossip subtly suggests inadequacies that may not reflect the employee's actual abilities. Instead, such remarks often stem from personal motives or interpersonal dynamics, leading to harmful consequences such as diminished trust, morale and workplace cohesion (Beersma and Van Kleef, 2012; Greenslade-Yeats *et al.*, 2023). This ambiguity further exacerbates the situation, making it more challenging for targeted employees to interpret the gossip, which in turn heightens psychological and emotional strain. Consequently, supervisor negative gossip not only undermines clarity in workplace communication but also depletes employees' cognitive and emotional resources, amplifying its detrimental impact on workplace dynamics.

Previous studies have shown that supervisor negative gossip is associated with reductions in positive affect, job self-efficacy, thriving (Zhu *et al.*, 2022), feedback-seeking behavior (Zhu *et al.*, 2023) and proactive behavior (Chen *et al.*, 2020). Although significant strides have been made in examining the impact of supervisor negative gossip on various workplace behaviors, critical aspects remain unexplored, particularly in the context of helping behavior, which is vital for organizational harmony and employee collaboration (De Clercq *et al.*, 2023). Specifically, several research questions have yet to be fully investigated in the existing literature, and this study seeks to address these gaps.

- RQ1. What is the association between a supervisor's negative gossip and targeted employees' helping behavior?
- RQ2. Does emotional exhaustion mediate the relationship between a supervisor's negative gossip and employees' helping behavior?
- RQ3. Do Islamic work ethics moderate the relationship between supervisor negative gossip and helping behavior?

We aim to extend the existing negative workplace gossip literature on the target perspective by examining both the resource-depletion and resource-acquisition processes within the framework of conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989). COR theory suggests that individuals actively seek to maintain, protect and build resources to ensure their well-being in stressful situations (Hobfoll, 1989). This theoretical framework helps explain how supervisor negative gossip can deplete the emotional and cognitive resources of employees, leading to emotional exhaustion (Han *et al.*, 2023), which in turn diminishes their willingness to engage in helping behavior (Hobfoll, 1989). Supervisor negative gossip acts as a significant stressor that challenges employees' ability to retain their resources, resulting in a drain on their emotional resources. Additionally, COR theory highlights the potential for resource acquisition as a mitigating factor (Qian *et al.*, 2024). In this study, Islamic work ethics (IWE) are posited to function as a valuable personal resource that helps buffer the detrimental effects of supervisor negative gossip on employees helping behavior. By promoting values

such as resilience and cooperation, IWE supports employees in replenishing the resources lost due to negative gossip, helping them maintain their pro-social behavior in the workplace (Islam *et al.*, 2020).

The inclusion of IWE is theoretically grounded in the COR theory, which emphasizes resource replenishment as a fundamental process in managing workplace stressors. Specifically, COR theory suggests that individuals are motivated not only to protect their existing resources but also to seek and replenish resources that can help mitigate stress and support adaptive functioning (Hobfoll, 1989). IWE encompasses values such as diligence, cooperation and resilience in adversity, and can act as a crucial personal resource that employees draw upon in the face of supervisor negative gossip (Ali and Al-Owaidan, 2008). We posit that, by reinforcing a mindset that values persistence and support for others, IWE enables targeted employees to acquire and sustain psychological resources that buffer against supervisor negative gossip. This protective role of IWE aligns with the resource replenishing tenant of COR theory, as these values promote resilience and resourcefulness, thus facilitating employees to manage the psychological strain of negative supervisor gossip more effectively. Consequently, IWE serves not merely as an ethical backdrop but as an active resource that can diminish the resource-draining effects of supervisor negative gossip, allowing employees to maintain their capacity to engage in pro-social behaviors, such as helping. Furthermore, given the socio-cultural context of Pakistan as a Muslim-majority country, the inclusion of IWE is especially pertinent to this study.

This study contributes to the literature in three important ways. First, we consider supervisor negative gossip as a trigger to the process that affects employee helping behavior. It is believed that perceived supervisor negative gossip acts as a workplace stressor which creates a resource loss situation (Hobfoll, 1989) and will negatively affect employee's helping behavior. By doing so we contribute to the literature on both the antecedents of helping behavior and outcomes of supervisor negative gossip. Second, we examine how and why supervisor negative gossip reduces employees' helping behavior by shedding light on an important mediating mechanism based on the conservation of resource (COR) theory. We cast employee emotional exhaustion as a key emotional state that translates negative gossip from supervisor into helping behavior. This suggests that, in response to negative supervisor gossip targeted employees felt emotionally exhausted and less likely to be involved in helping behavior to conserve their resources. Therefore, this study not only advances the research about the effects of negative supervisor gossip on employee's helping behavior but enhances our understanding of the underlying mechanism through which such an effect might occur.

Third, the inclusion of IWE as a moderating condition in our study contributes to the literature by explaining the role of IWE in mitigating the adverse effects of supervisor negative gossip. By doing this, our study deepens the understanding of the effects of supervisor negative gossip by answering why these effects are not the same for every individual and contributing to the literature on negative gossip and IWE. Lastly, this study contributes to the COR literature by highlighting a novel relationship between supervisor negative gossip and helping behavior with distinct mechanisms and boundary conditions. It explains resource depletion through emotional exhaustion and its impact on employees' helping behavior. Furthermore, it deepens the COR literature by introducing the moderating role of IWEs through the resource acquisition process and thereby providing a comprehensive application of the COR theory by utilizing both resource depletion and resource acquisition processes.

## Conceptual background and hypotheses

### *Conservation of resource theory*

COR theory argues that individuals strive to obtain, retain, protect and accumulate resources (Hobfoll, 1989). Individuals are motivated to preserve their existing and acquire new resources to achieve their goals (Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018) and when these resources are lost, individuals experience resource depletion (Hobfoll, 1989). Negative workplace gossip consumes

employee's reputational resources thereby leading them to a resource-loss situation (Liu *et al.*, 2020). Based on the COR theory previous studies have considered negative workplace gossip as a stressor and documented its harmful effects in the form of psychological distress (Cheng *et al.*, 2023), self-esteem threat (Ye *et al.*, 2022), ego depletion (Cheng *et al.*, 2022; Zhang *et al.*, 2024) and emotional exhaustion (Liu *et al.*, 2020; Wu *et al.*, 2018). Consequently significantly decreasing targeted employees' performance (Xing *et al.*, 2021), proactive behavior (Gao *et al.*, 2024; Wu *et al.*, 2018) and creativity (Liu *et al.*, 2020). The COR theory suggests that individuals who experience resource loss are likely to conserve their remaining resources by spending less energy in the workplace (Hobfoll, 1989).

Negative gossip from a supervisor damages the targeted employee's reputation, leading to resource loss and emotional exhaustion, which diminishes their capacity to assist colleagues. In addition to resource depletion, COR theory emphasizes the importance of resource acquisition, highlighting that individuals actively manage their resources through both internal and external sources. Building on this concept, this study incorporates Islamic work ethics (IWE) as an internal resource that helps employees cope with the resource depletion caused by stressful situations, such as supervisor negative gossip. A strong inclination toward IWE can act as a compensation for the resource loss induced by the supervisor's negative gossip. Aligned with these theoretical principles presented in the COR theory, we predict that individuals with a high tendency to embrace IWE are capable of buffering the resource depletion triggered by supervisor negative gossip. As a result, these individuals are less likely to withdraw their efforts from assisting others in the presence of supervisor negative gossip.

#### *Supervisor negative gossip and helping behavior*

Helping behavior refers to voluntary behavior that is conducted to aid co-workers in solving work barriers, which contributes to the organization's effectiveness (De Clercq *et al.*, 2020; Van Dyne and LePine, 1998). This behavior is cooperative, affiliative and directed toward other organizational members (De Clercq *et al.*, 2023). For example, doing a personal favor to another employee, and offering to assist a co-worker in finishing an assignment. Such behaviors go beyond what is necessary for one's current role requirements. Previous studies highlight the significant role of situational factors in shaping helping behavior, emphasizing how contextual elements can either foster or hinder employees' engagement in discretionary actions. For example, cooperation within groups, supportive work environment (Deckop *et al.*, 2003), servant leadership (Zou *et al.*, 2015), authentic leadership (Hirst *et al.*, 2016) and transformational leadership (Zhu and Akhtar, 2014) are associated positively with helping behavior. However, the perception of mistreatment, incivility (De Clercq *et al.*, 2019) and negative supervisor behaviors (Xia *et al.*, 2019) are associated negatively with helping behaviors.

Similarly, supervisor negative gossip refers to supervisors' negative and informal communication about an absent subordinate with other members of the organization (Bai *et al.*, 2020; Brady *et al.*, 2017; Kuo *et al.*, 2018). It is a common type of supervisor behavior and is considered a form of organizational mistreatment that causes reputational damage (Zhu *et al.*, 2023), and distress among employees (Jalil *et al.*, 2022) and hence creates an adverse situation for its targets. Negative workplace gossip has profound effects on its targets' cognition, emotions and behavior. Targets of workplace gossip often experience increased stress and distraction, leading to negative emotional responses such as anxiety, frustration or lowered self-esteem (Ahmad *et al.*, 2019; Cheng *et al.*, 2023; Ye *et al.*, 2022). These cognitive and emotional strains can, in turn, influence their behavior, potentially reducing engagement, performance, productivity and creativity (Liu *et al.*, 2020; Tan *et al.*, 2021). Supervisor negative gossip exhibits negative evaluation of the subordinate in their absence which makes employees feel embarrassed and creates a stressful situation for its target (Lian *et al.*, 2023) to perform extra-role behaviors (Martinescu *et al.*, 2021).

The COR theory provides a robust framework for explaining how individuals respond to actual or threatened resource loss in stressful situations, that is supervisor negative gossip (Hobfoll, 1989). The resource conservation tenet of the COR theory argues that "resource loss is

disproportionately more salient than resource gain” (Hobfoll, 1989, p. 62). Individuals who suffer from a resource loss are likely to protect their remaining resources by spending less energy on their regular job tasks (Ito and Brotheridge, 2003). The possibility or actual loss of resources creates stress, driving employees to take steps to prevent further depletion of their resources (Hobfoll, 1989). Supervisor negative gossip ingests employees’ emotional, time, energy and other resources and creates a resource loss situation and the drive to avoid additional resource loss may lead employees to refrain from engaging in discretionary behaviors, such as offering assistance to their colleagues within the organization. Consequently, prior research indicates that employees may adopt defensive strategies to safeguard their limited resources, which could make them hesitant to invest remaining resources in extra-role behaviors when faced with a situation of resource loss (Jang *et al.*, 2020). Because helping behavior is a discretionary behavior and outside the domain of one’s job requirements, therefore individuals who face resource loss situations in response to a supervisor’s negative gossip are less likely to be involved in such discretionary behavior. Hence, we hypothesize.

*H1.* Supervisor negative gossip is negatively related to helping behavior.

#### *The mediating role of emotional exhaustion*

Emotional exhaustion is referred to as “feelings of being emotionally overextended and depleted of emotional resources” (Maslach, 1993, p. 10). It is characterized by a sensation of having an empty emotional “tank” and a depletion of energy (Babakus *et al.*, 1999). In this context, emotional exhaustion closely mirrors traditional stress reactions, including work-related fatigue, job-induced depression, anxiety and psychosomatic symptoms (Demerouti *et al.*, 2001). This occurs when the demands of interpersonal interactions exceed employees’ capacity to handle or cope with them (Maslach and Leiter, 2016). Work stressors, such as negative gossip from supervisors, are often seen as precursors to emotional exhaustion because they necessitate substantial social readjustment and adaptation, depleting emotional resources (Zhu *et al.*, 2023).

Negative gossip from a supervisor can be considered an interpersonal stressor. Exposure to negative gossip from a supervisor suggests that the employee has a poor reputation and is in an unfavorable situation within the organization (Zhu *et al.*, 2023). Supervisor negative gossip adversely impacts an individual’s valued resource. Such as emotional energy, time and other resources, and forcing them to allocate additional resources to manage these negative effects, which can further heighten emotional exhaustion. As gossip intrudes on privacy and damages one’s reputation, employees are compelled to invest significant emotional resources to deal with it representing a significant depletion of resources. Consequently, this can lead to emotional exhaustion (Cropanzano *et al.*, 2003).

When individuals experience emotional exhaustion, they tend to minimize additional resource expenditures and focus on managing essential work demands. This implies that employees are more likely to refrain from engaging in extra-role behaviors, such as helping others, compared to fulfilling mandatory workplace responsibilities like task performance (Chang *et al.*, 2007; Birkeland and Buch, 2015) reported that emotional exhaustion is associated with less extra-role employee behavior. As helping behavior is a discretionary behavior and not part of one’s job requirements, therefore employees who suffer emotional exhaustion due to a supervisor’s negative gossip are left with fewer resources to exhibit helping behavior in their organization. The preceding discussion proposes that supervisor negative gossip creates a resource-loss situation, which facilitates emotional exhaustion and in turn, reduces helping behavior.

Our arguments are based on COR theory, which posits that when employees are deprived of personal resources, they tend to conserve what they have by reducing their energy expenditure in daily activities (Hobfoll, 1989). COR theory offers a theoretical framework for understanding whether and under what conditions interpersonal mistreatment leads to emotional exhaustion. According to COR theory, individuals are driven to preserve their existing personal resources

and acquire new ones to achieve their goals (Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018). However, when these resources are threatened or lost, individuals experience physiological arousal and emotional exhaustion. Research supports that interpersonal stressors are perceived as threats to personal resources, leading to increased cortisol levels and psychological distress (Almeida, 2005). Employees who are burned out are likely to carefully choose how they behave to preserve their remaining resources. They also devise effective strategies for resource investment to protect what they have left (Hobfoll, 1989). The resource depletion perspective suggests that emotional exhaustion mediates the relationship between work stressors and positive work outcomes (Troughakos *et al.*, 2015). This theoretical framework underpins our study's exploration of how supervisor negative gossip contributes to targeted employees' emotional exhaustion and its subsequent effect on their helping behavior. Thus, we hypothesize.

H2. Emotional exhaustion will mediate the relationship between supervisor negative gossip and helping behavior.

#### *The moderating role of Islamic work ethics*

Supervisor negative gossip poses a significant threat to targeted employees by depleting their emotional and cognitive resources, leading to adverse outcomes such as reduced helping behavior. According to COR theory, individuals strive to protect, conserve and replenish their resources to adapt to stressful situations (Hobfoll, 1989). The resource depletion caused by supervisor negative gossip results in resource loss, leaving employees with limited resources to engage in pro-social behaviors like helping others. However, COR theory also highlights the importance of resource acquisition, suggesting that individuals actively seek new resources to counterbalance losses and maintain their resource reserves to function effectively (Hobfoll, 1989; Song *et al.*, 2024). Building on this premise, IWE emerges as a critical internal resource that can buffer the resource-depleting effects of supervisor negative gossip. IWE, rooted in Islamic teachings, emphasizes values such as diligence, resilience and cooperative behavior (Ali and Al-Owaidan, 2008). Employees high in IWE are likely to perceive work-related goals and objectives as moral obligations, motivating them to persist and contribute positively even under challenging circumstances (Islam *et al.*, 2020; Khalid *et al.*, 2018). Moreover, the Quran and teachings of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) stress the significance of contributing to societal welfare and emphasize that virtuous behavior, such as helping others, is a moral and spiritual duty (Ali, 2005; Yousef, 2000).

From a COR perspective, IWE acts as a resource-replenishing mechanism that equips employees with the psychological resilience needed to manage resource depletion caused by negative workplace interactions, such as supervisor negative gossip. By reinforcing values of perseverance and support for others, IWE enables employees to reinterpret negative experiences like supervisor gossip in a way that mitigates their harmful effects (Ahmed *et al.*, 2020). Previous research supports the notion that ethical and collectivistic values, such as IWE, can serve as personal resources, enhancing positive outcomes like citizenship behavior and collaboration (Astakhova, 2015; Murtaza *et al.*, 2016). Furthermore, the socio-cultural context of Pakistan, as a Muslim-majority country, amplifies the relevance of IWE. In this setting, Islamic principles provide a shared moral framework that encourages employees to uphold ethical behaviors even in the face of adversity. Employees adhering to IWE are likely to draw strength from their spiritual and ethical values, enabling them to overcome resource loss and maintain pro-social behaviors such as helping others, even when subjected to supervisor negative gossip. Therefore, we propose that IWE help employees buffer against the resource-depleting effects of supervisor negative gossip by acting as a personal resource. This moderating role ensures that employees high in IWE are better equipped to sustain their helping behaviors, even under stressful conditions such as supervisor negative gossip. Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

H3. The relationship between supervisor negative gossip and helping behavior is moderated by IWE, such that this negative relationship is weaker at higher levels of IWE and vice versa.

IWE is conceptualized as a resource-enhancing factor that motivates employees to engage in prosocial behaviors, such as helping others, despite experiencing negative workplace gossip. From the perspective of Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, individuals with strong IWE are more likely to perceive helping behavior as an opportunity to invest in and preserve their psychological resources, thereby mitigating the negative effects of supervisor negative gossip on helping behavior. However, the moderating role of IWE was not hypothesized in the relationship between SNG and emotional exhaustion because IWE primarily emphasizes values related to perseverance, responsibility and social harmony, which align more closely with behavioral outcomes rather than emotional states (Ali and Al-Owaidan, 2008). While IWE may influence how individuals respond behaviorally to workplace stressors, it may not necessarily prevent the depletion of emotional resources caused by persistent exposure to negative gossip. Therefore, the focus on the SNG–HB relationship aligns with the motivational aspects of IWE, whereas the direct impact of SNG on emotional exhaustion remains unaffected by these ethical values.

## Methodology

### *Sample and procedures*

The current study sample comprised 279 employees working in the manufacturing and services sectors who were enrolled in the master of business administration (MBA) program in large universities in Pakistan. Highhouse (2009) suggested that the generalizability could be increased with a mixed sample of diverse organizations and groups. A minimum of one year of experience with the supervisor was considered essential to qualify as a subject for our study. We used the English version of measurement scales as the medium of higher education was in English, and all the members were qualified. The present study investigated targets' internal emotional and behavioral responses to supervisor negative gossip. Given the inherent difficulty in observing these internal states, collecting data from multiple sources might not have been suitable. As recommended by Podsakoff *et al.* (2023), a key procedural remedy to address common method bias (CMB) in such cases was the temporal separation of measurements. The one-month time lag was deliberated between questionnaire distributions. A distinctive numerical identifier was allocated to the response of each member to match (T1) time 1, (T2) time 2 and (T3) time 3 surveys, and to ensure respondent anonymity, the unique identifier was not included with any personal information. Demographics and independent variables (supervisor negative gossip) were filled in at T1. At T2, we collected information related to moderation (IWE) and mediation (emotional exhaustion). Lastly, the items of helping behavior was measured at T3. We got back 285 questionnaires at T3 out of 436 questionnaires distributed at T1 with a response rate of 63.9%. There were six incomplete questionnaires identified and excluded. We used the final sample ( $N = 279$ ) to carry on the analysis. Furthermore, additional measures such as ensuring respondent anonymity and incorporating reverse-coded items were employed to reduce social desirability and acquiescence effects, further enhancing the rigor of the study.

The demographics of the respondents included age, gender, experience and education. We measured age on a 3-point scale 1 = less than 25 (34.4%), 2 = 25–30 (45.9%) and 3 = greater than 30 (19.7%). Gender was measured as 1 = male (57%) and 2 = female (43%). Job experience and education were measured on a 3-point scale: 1 = less than 2 years (34.8%), 2 = 2–5 years (45.9%) and 3 = greater than 5 years (19.4%) and education is measured as: 1 = high school (26.9%), 2 = bachelor (38.7%), 3 = master (34.4%).

## Measures

We adapted all the constructs from past studies. Measurement items of supervisor negative gossip and IWE were ranked on a 5-point Likert scale (ranging from 5 = strongly agree to 1 = strongly disagree), and helping behavior and emotional exhaustion were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 5 (very often) to 1 (never).

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*Supervisor negative gossip*  
Supervisor negative gossip was measured with a three-point modified scale (Chandra and Robinson, 2010). A sample item was “My supervisor spread damaging information about me in the workplace.”

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*Helping behavior*  
The targeted employee’s helping behavior was measured with a four-item modified scale (Farh et al., 1997). A sample item was “I am willing to help colleagues solve work-related problems.”

*Emotional exhaustion*  
Emotional exhaustion of targeted employees was measured with a three-item modified scale (Maslach, 1986). A sample item was “I feel emotionally drained from my work.”

*Islamic work ethics*  
Islamic work ethics was measured with a Seventeen-item scale (Ali, 1992). Sample items were “Dedication to work is a virtue” and “Good work benefits both one’s self and others.”

*Control variables*  
We controlled for age, gender, job experience and education based on previous research on helping behavior (De Clercq et al., 2023).

*Analytical approach*  
We employed AMOS 22.0 and SPSS 22.0 for data analysis. The discriminant validity and reliability of the constructs were measured by calculating average variance extracted (AVE), Cronbach’s alpha and Factor loadings. The model fitness indices were calculated by confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), such as incremental fit index (IFI), root means square error of approximation (RMSEA), comparative fit index (CFI) and Tucker–Lewis index (TLI). Mediation and moderation effects were measured using PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2013). For hypotheses testing, bootstrap analysis was conducted by using path analytic procedures to assess the indirect effects (Preacher et al., 2007). Moreover, we checked for multicollinearity, outliers, wrong coding and missing values before the main analysis, and our dataset did not have such issues.

## Results

### *Reliability and validity*

Cronbach’s alpha was calculated to measure the reliability of each construct and found reliabilities of each scale well above the recommended value of 0.70 (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Measurement analysis summary

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Variables	Factor loadings	Cronbach $\alpha$	Composite reliability	AVE
SNG	0.836–0.888	0.899	0.900	0.750
Emotional exhaustion	0.801–0.848	0.867	0.868	0.686
IWE	0.710–0.902	0.968	0.968	0.639
Helping behaviors	0.749–0.836	0.872	0.847	0.634

**Note(s):** SNG = Supervisor negative gossip, IWE = Islamic work ethics, AVE = Average variance extracted  
**Source(s):** Authors’ own creation

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Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was calculated to measure our constructs' convergent and discriminant validity. The values of CFA showed a good fit ( $\chi^2 = 603.422$ , degrees of freedom (df) = 313, Tucker–Lewis index (TLI) = 0.964, comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.968, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.058, standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) = 0.039). All factor loading ranged from 0.710 to 0.902, which were above the criterion value of 0.70, thereby offering evidence of convergent validity, also, the values of average variance extracted (AVE) are greater than 0.50 (see Table 1). The values of inter-correlation were less than the square root of the AVE (see Table 2), hence providing evidence for discriminant validity.

#### *Assessment of common method bias*

To address the common method bias we followed the guidelines proposed and repeatedly used by researchers (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003, 2023). We employed several tests to check the issue of CMB in our data. First, we conducted the Harman's single factor. The first factor described a 38.05% variance of the total variance, which was less than 50%. Thus, there is no concern about common method bias in our dataset. Second, we looked at the inter-correlations among the studied variables to assess the issue of CMB. The standard value of inter-correlation should not exceed 0.90. Table 2 showed that the results of inter-correlations ranged from  $-0.484$  to  $0.394$  which fell within the acceptable range. Thus, we concluded with confidence that CMB was not a significant concern in our study. Third, a common latent factor analysis was performed (MacKenzie and Podsakoff, 2012). Standard regression weights were calculated first through confirmatory factor analysis. Then a common latent factor was included and run the confirmatory factor analysis again. After that the regression weights were compared in both analyses and none of the dominant factor emerged, which shows CMB was not a major concern in the study.

#### *Hypotheses testing*

We employed the PROCESS macro to examine the hypotheses (Hayes, 2013). Our results showed that SNG was negatively linked to employees' helping behavior ( $\beta = -0.349$ ,  $SE = 0.038$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), and provided support for H1. Supervisor negative gossip had a positive effect on emotional exhaustion ( $\beta = 0.210$ ,  $SE = 0.042$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Moreover, the findings in Table 3 showed that supervisor negative gossip had a significant indirect relationship with employee's helping behavior through emotional exhaustion (estimate effect =  $-0.050$ ,  $SE = 0.019$ , 95% of CI [ $-0.096$ ,  $-0.020$ ]) indicating that H2 was supported. The results of the moderating effect of IWE on the association between supervisor negative gossip and employees' helping behavior were presented in Table 3. The interaction term between supervisor negative gossip and IWE had a significant positive relationship with employees' helping behavior ( $\beta = 0.086$ ,  $SE = 0.043$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), supporting H3. Moreover, this interaction effect was plotted in Figure 1 to facilitate interpretation. A simple slope test was also performed (Aiken and West, 1991). As illustrated in Figure 1, the negative association between supervisor negative gossip and helping behavior became weak ( $\beta = -0.185$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ; 95% CI [ $-0.3312$ ,  $-0.0381$ ]) at high levels of IWE and strong ( $\beta = -0.354$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ; 95% CI [ $-0.4617$ ,  $-0.2456$ ]) at low level of IWE, thus providing further support for H3.

#### **Discussion**

Drawing on the COR theory, we developed a framework proposing that emotional exhaustion mediates the relationship between supervisor negative gossip and the targeted employee's helping behavior. Additionally, we suggest that IWE moderates the resource-depleting effects of supervisor negative gossip. Empirical findings from a time-lagged study confirm our hypothesized model. The results indicate that supervisor negative gossip creates a resource loss situation for targeted employees, triggering emotional exhaustion, which subsequently

**Table 2.** Means, standard deviations and correlations results

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Gender	1.43	0.49	1							
2. Age	1.92	0.86	-0.167**	1						
3. Education	2.08	0.78	-0.177**	0.104	1					
4. Job experience	2.77	0.85	-0.017	0.015	-0.022	1				
5. SNG	2.61	1.22	-0.057	-0.022	0.108	0.137*	(0.866)			
6. EE	2.85	0.89	-0.027	0.020	0.071	-0.055	0.287**	(0.828)		
7. IWE	3.63	0.98	0.100	0.000	-0.024	0.073	-0.402**	-0.380**	(0.799)	
8. HB	3.36	0.88	0.049	-0.014	-0.047	-0.067	-0.484**	-0.361**	0.394**	(0.796)

**Note(s):**  $p < 0.05$ ,  $p < 0.01$ . Correlations marked with \* are significant at  $p < 0.05$ , and those marked with \*\* are significant at  $p < 0.01$ . SNG = Supervisor negative gossip, EE = Emotional Exhaustion, HB = Helping Behavior, IWE = Islamic work ethics. The italics values are the square root of AVE

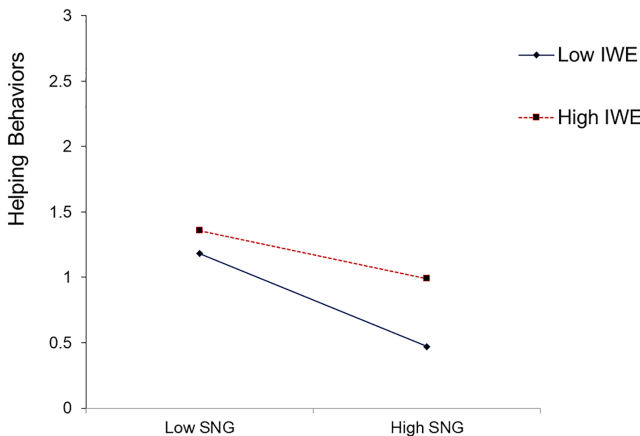
**Source(s):** Authors' own creation

**Table 3.** Mediation and moderation effect

Mediation effect				
Outcome: helping behaviors	$\beta$	SE	T	$R^2$
Constant	4.273**	0.109	39.048	0.234
SNG	-0.349**	0.038	-9.197	
Outcome: emotional exhaustion	$\beta$	SE	T	$R^2$
Constant	2.306**	0.121	18.990	0.083
SNG	0.210**	0.042	4.991	
Outcome: helping behaviors	$\beta$	SE	T	$R^2$
Constant	4.824**	0.160	30.079	0.288
Emotional exhaustion	-0.239**	0.052	-4.568	
SNG	-0.299**	0.038	-7.808	
Indirect effect	Effect	SE	LLCI (95%)	ULCI (95%)
	-0.050	0.019	-0.096	-0.020
	Effect	SE	Z	
	-0.050**	0.015	-3.334	
<i>Moderation effect</i>				
Outcome: helping behaviors	$\beta$	SE	T	$R^2$
Constant	3.402**	0.051	67.125	0.297
SNG	-0.269**	0.050	-5.372	
IWE	0.174**	0.061	2.836	
SNG x IWE	0.086*	0.043	2.009	

**Note(s):** SNG = Supervisor negative gossip \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \* $p < 0.05$ , LLCI = lower limit confident interval, ULCI = upper limit confident interval, IWE = Islamic work ethics, Bootstrap sample = 5,000

**Source(s):** Authors' own creation



**Figure 1.** Moderating effect of IWE. Source: Authors' own creation

leads to reduced helping behavior toward other organizational members. Furthermore, we found that individuals with high IWE values are buffered against the resource depletion caused by supervisor negative gossip. These individuals tend to help other organizational members by replenishing their resources from personal reserves derived from their adherence to IWE.

The findings of this study align well with the theoretical principles of the COR theory and prior empirical research. For instance, previous studies have demonstrated that workplace stressors negatively impact employees' helping behavior (De Clercq *et al.*, 2019). Additionally, the literature reveals that negative gossip contributes to emotional exhaustion, which subsequently reduces targets' creativity (Liu *et al.*, 2020), and proactivity (Wu *et al.*, 2018), while increasing counterproductive work behaviors (Murtaza *et al.*, 2023). These findings support the mediating role of emotional exhaustion identified in our study. Furthermore, our results indicate that employees with high IWE values are more likely to engage in helping behaviors compared to those with low IWE, in the presence of supervisor negative gossip. This confirms the buffering role of IWE in mitigating the negative stress outcomes within organizational settings. Similar findings have been reported in prior research, where employees with high IWE values were shown to be more resilient in adverse situations, such as abusive supervision (Ahmed *et al.*, 2020; Islam *et al.*, 2020; Khalid *et al.*, 2018), perceived organizational politics (Rawwas *et al.*, 2018), procedural and distributive justice perception (Khan *et al.*, 2015). Hence, this provides support to the findings of this study.

#### *Post hoc analysis*

While not hypothesized, we conducted a post hoc analysis to address additional questions that arose after we had tested our main hypotheses. We tested whether IWE moderates the relationship between supervisor negative gossip and emotional exhaustion. It was found that IWE significantly reduced the negative effect of supervisor negative gossip on emotional exhaustion ( $\beta = -0.1280$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ; 95% *CI* (-0.2113, -0.0447). Future studies may hypothesize the nature of this relationship.

#### **Theoretical implications**

Our study contributes significantly to theoretical advancements. We employed conservation of resources as a theoretical basis, which offers empirical provision to fill an important gap of how the relationship between supervisor negative gossip and helping behavior is mediated through emotional exhaustion and how individual values, such as IWEs moderate the relationship between supervisor negative gossip and helping behavior. Based on the COR theory, our findings reveal that supervisor negative gossip is negatively related to helping behaviors. It suggests that supervisors' negative behaviors hinder employees from performing desired organizational behaviors. It is because that individual's resource reserve is limited, and the sense of damaged reputation due to supervisor negative gossip will reduce the individual's valued organizational resources such as reputation and will cause employees to abstain from helping behaviors. Emotional exhaustion has been suggested as a mediating mechanism that leads to certain undesirable outcomes (Wu *et al.*, 2018).

Supervisor negative gossip adversely affects an individual's valued resources, and this negative effect directs people to devote extra resources to cope with such negative effects. As a result, and based on empirical and theoretical background (COR), our results endorse the fact that individuals are inclined to respond in a more careful investment of resources in these negative situations by reducing their helping behavior because it is easy for them to withdraw from discretionary acts as a form of coping strategy in response to the toxic organizational environment. Moreover, researchers have long called for studying additional boundary conditions of negative gossip (Liu *et al.*, 2020). Adding to this stream of research, the current study concludes that an individual's values, such as IWE, moderated the association between supervisor negative gossip and helping behavior. Similarly (Wu *et al.*, 2018), found that individual values might moderate the destructive consequences of negative gossip, and the same is confirmed in our findings that high IWE values weaken the derogatory effects of supervisor negative gossip and vice versa.

### Practical implication

The findings of this study provide valuable practical implications for individuals, managers and organizations. Our results demonstrate that supervisor negative gossip instigates a resource depletion process, leading to emotional exhaustion in its target. This emotional exhaustion, in turn, results in a reduction in helping behaviors toward other organizational members as individuals attempt to conserve remaining resources (Hobfoll, 1989). Prior research highlights the fact that helping behaviors contribute to individual well-being by fulfilling fundamental psychological needs for both the helper and the receiver (Weinstein and Ryan, 2010). Therefore, it is crucial for supervisors to refrain from engaging in negative gossip and to recognize its detrimental impact on employees and the broader organizational environment. Moreover, organizations should address both supervisors involved in negative gossip and employees who become its targets. Supervisor negative gossip not only affects the targeted individuals but also harms the organization as a whole by reducing helping behaviors among affected employees. This decline creates a cycle of negativity, further deteriorating organizational dynamics. To mitigate these adverse effects, organizations should implement targeted coaching and awareness programs for supervisors to educate them about the far-reaching detrimental consequences of engaging in negative gossip. Concurrently, employees should be made aware of the importance of helping behaviors in fostering a positive and supportive work environment.

Furthermore, our findings confirm the moderating role of Islamic Work Ethics (IWE) in alleviating the harmful effects of supervisor negative gossip. Employees with high levels of IWE are more likely to continue engaging in helping behaviors despite the presence of supervisor negative gossip, compared to employees with lower levels of IWE. These results suggest that organizations should focus on cultivating and promoting IWE through targeted awareness and training programs. Gossip is a ubiquitous social activity and cannot be eliminated. However, its detrimental effects can be mitigated by fostering IWE among employees, thereby encouraging pro-social behaviors even in challenging work environments. Specifically, organizations can benefit from targeted training sessions that educate employees and supervisors about the principles of IWE, highlighting their relevance in promoting resilience, pro-social behaviors and ethical conduct in the workplace. Moreover, organizations can benefit by prioritizing the recruitment of individuals with high IWE, at the screening stage applicants with minimal alignment to IWE can be eliminated from the pool. Furthermore, shortlisted candidates can be asked to complete a questionnaire designed to measure IWE, incorporating both scenario-based questions and items developed by Ali (1992). Thus, organizations can establish a foundation for a more ethical and collaborative workplace environment. Notably, IWE incorporates all dimensions of the protestant work ethic (PWE), such as diligence and responsibility, while also addressing additional aspects that extend its universal applicability. Furthermore, IWE emphasizes intention alongside outcomes as a measure of morality (Ali and Al-Owaihian, 2008). Additionally, IWE includes universally shared values such as hard work, honesty, justice and social responsibility (Ali, 1992), providing a more holistic and generalizable ethical framework that makes it applicable and beneficial across diverse organizational and cultural settings.

### Limitations and future research directions

This study has some limitations that should be addressed in future research. First, the current study employed only negative gossip from supervisors and ignored other types of gossip, such as positive supervisor gossip and negative gossip from co-workers. Future studies could investigate employees' reactions to perceived negative gossip from co-workers and how such gossip influences emotional and behavioral responses and enhance our understanding of this phenomenon. Another limitation is related to the generalizability of this study, as we have collected data from Pakistan, it cannot be generalized to other Western countries. Therefore, future researchers are encouraged to design a cross-cultural study design to address this issue. Third, due to the cross-sectional nature of our study, we cannot rule out reverse causality. Future researchers are advised to employ experimental and longitudinal designs to address this shortcoming.

Moreover, this study addressed only the moderating role of IWEs and did not include other types of work ethics such as protestant work ethics (PWE). Incorporating the role of PWE as a contextual condition in future studies could produce exciting results. In addition, this study focused only on the moderating role of IWE between supervisor negative gossip and helping behavior. However, IWE could moderate the effect of emotional exhaustion on helping behavior; therefore, we encourage future researchers to study the moderating effects of IWE in more detail. Furthermore, this study is focused on investigating the impact of emotional exhaustion on employee's helping behavior. However, the literature shows that helping others may create emotional exhaustion (Jang *et al.*, 2020). Therefore we suggest that future scholars investigate the relationship between helping behavior and emotional exhaustion through longitudinal data.

### Conclusion

Employees' helping behavior is undeniably crucial to an organization's effectiveness. Our research contributes to the existing literature by elucidating the detrimental effects of supervisor negative gossip on targets' helping behavior through the mediating mechanism of emotional exhaustion. Importantly, our study introduces the moderating role of Islamic work ethics, demonstrating how strong adherence to these values can mitigate the resource-depleting effects of supervisor negative gossip. By exploring these underlying processes, we provide a nuanced understanding of the factors that inhibit helping behavior in the workplace. This research lays the groundwork for future inquiries into the dynamics of supervisor negative gossip and helping behavior, emphasizing the potential of IWEs to serve as a protective buffer. Consequently, our study not only advances theoretical insights but also offers practical implications for fostering a supportive and resilient organizational environment.

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