



## Management Focus

## Can subordinates benefit from Manager's gossip?

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## ABSTRACT

Every story has two sides, so does gossip. Unlike prior studies that condemn gossip, our research analyzes whether managers' gossip benefits subordinates. Gossip is informal conversation about other people who are absent at the scene, and gossip may be positive or negative. Positive gossip contains positiveness and appreciation, whereas negative gossip encloses negativeness and depreciation. We propose that managers' positive gossip acts as commitment facilitator, implying a sense of recognition to subordinates. We also propose that subordinates appreciate such recognition by showing commitment toward managers. Research data are gathered from anonymous questionnaires that are distributed to 117 managers and 201 subordinates from five industries in Taiwan. Bootstrapping and structural equation modeling techniques are used to analyze the data. Managers' positive gossip is found to be correlated with subordinates' commitment toward managers, which also mediates subordinates' perception of well-being, team empowerment, and job embeddedness. Yet, manager's negative gossip is not correlated with any research variables. Our research is the first of its kind to explain why managers' gossip has potential to be a commitment facilitator, and has brought news insights into gossip literature. Implications of the research findings also help reduce the bias associated with workplace gossip.

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## 1. Introduction

In layman's terms, gossip is an informal conversation about other people who are absent at the scene. In the workplace, gossiping is not only ubiquitous but also provides a channel of information exchange. On the one hand, empirical studies have shown that 14% of workplace coffee break chat is gossip and about 66% of general conversation between employees is related to social topics concerning talk about other people (Cole & Dalton, 2009). People may spend a great amount of their time in talking about social topics and up to two-thirds of all conversations refer to third parties (Dunbar, 2004). Employees are also found to produce, hear, or participate in evaluative comments about someone who is not present in the conversation (Kuo, Chang, Quinton, Lu, & Lee, 2015). On the other hand, scholars have discovered that managers often hold instrumental positions in a company's social networks that enable them to get hold of exclusive information; interestingly, these instrumental positions also enable managers to hold legitimate rewarding and punishing power, thus managers' gossiping

behavior holds more credibility and weight than those of same level coworkers (Erdogan, Bauer, & Walter, 2015; Kurland & Pelled, 2000).

Gossip's influence at work has been investigated from evolutionary needs (Kniffin & Wilson, 2010), social-organizational dynamics (Noon & Delbridge, 1993), and other perspectives (for a review, see Grosser, Lopez-Kidwell, Labianca, & Ellwardt, 2012). Over the last decade, scholars have made valuable contribution to the understanding of gossip formation (Kurland & Pelled, 2000), gossip's antecedents and its moderating/mediating effect on behavior (Grosser et al., 2012; Kniffin & Wilson, 2010), and gossip's influence on the organization (Farley, Timme, & Hart, 2010; Wu, Birtch, Chiang, & Zhang, 2016). Despite considerable progress, scholarly work on workplace gossip remains limited, particularly the gossip-related interaction between managers and subordinates. Prior studies have focused on how gossip affects group dynamics and organizational performance (Noon & Delbridge, 1993; Kniffin & Wilson, 2010); and more recently, scholars are keen to examine the nature of gossip valence (*c.f.* positive/negative gossip; Grosser et al., 2012) and the impact of gossip on employees (Wu et al., 2016).

But, to our knowledge, scholars seem not interested in analyzing whether managers are gossipers and how subordinates respond to managers' gossip (with the exception of gossiping workplace in:

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Ellwardt, 2011 & Ellwardt, Wittek, & Wielers, 2012). We know little about how subordinates respond to managers' gossip or whether subordinates' interpretation of managers' gossip affects consequent attitude and experience at work. Further research of workplace gossip is crucial and required for two reasons. On the one hand, gossip is a prevalent type of informal communication that is likely to play a central role in employees' work life. On the other hand, if unnoticed and unmanaged, gossip can damage teamwork (Kniffin & Wilson, 2010), breach employee's psychological contract, and causes employee cynicism (Kuo et al., 2015); and ultimately, both managers and subordinates may suffer from a gossip-rampant workplace. Indeed, a more specific understanding of gossip-related interaction between managers and subordinates is needed if organizations wish to better support their employees at work. Following the same logic, the current research is conducted.

The current research aims to make a contribution in three specific ways: *first*, inspired by the commitment theory (Meyer & Allen, 1991), we propose a new perspective that managers' positive gossip matters; *second*, unlike prior studies that analyze general gossip (e.g., Farley et al., 2010; Wu et al., 2016), we discuss the valence of managers' gossip (positive vs. negative) and examine its implication to subordinates; and, *third*, we connect managers' gossip with subordinates' perception of well-being, team empowerment, and job embeddedness, so we can closely observe the relationships of all research variables. To our knowledge, our research is the first of its kind to examine the gossip-related interaction between managers and subordinates. Research findings help to refine gossip literature and offer practical insights into gossip intervention practices.

## 2. Literature review and research hypotheses

### 2.1. Workplace gossip and its valence

Gossiping is a common social phenomenon as it is part of human nature. Gossip is often mistaken as rumor because both are results of societal interaction that most people would like to avoid or fall victim to. Although gossip and rumor seem overlapped, they vary in distance and validity. Rumors are often about persons and events (i.e., larger distance between rumor speaker and target persons/events), whereas gossip is strictly about other individuals who are personally known by both gossipers and listener (Rosnow, 2001). Gossip may be based on a known fact, but rumor usually suffers from poor validity (DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007). Following the comparison between gossip and rumor, a clearer definition of workplace gossip is needed and important to the current research. As such, we define *workplace gossip* as an idle talk between colleagues as it occurs when one colleague engages in informal and evaluative communication with another colleague(s) about the absent colleague(s). Similar definitions of workplace gossip are found in cognate studies (e.g., Grosser et al., 2012; Wu et al., 2016).

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

discovery (Rosnow, 2001); and, iv) *Gossip triad*: The formation of gossip depends on the interaction across gossipers, listener, and target. Michelson, Irterson, and Waddington (2010) describe the interaction as gossip triad, which also affects the outcome of gossiping behavior.

Workplace gossip has been found to serve multiple functions. These are: for instance, *getting information, gaining influence, releasing pent-up emotions, providing intellectual stimulation, fostering interpersonal intimacy, and maintaining group values and norms* (Grosser et al., 2012). Empirical studies suggest that over 90% of the employees in the United States and Western Europe engages in at least some gossip activity on the job, and that male colleagues engage in gossip with just as many people as female colleagues do (Ellwardt, 2011; Ellwardt et al., 2012). Gossip helps to deliver a more accurate, experiential truth than objective explanations, and individuals may adjust their behavior along with the received information through gossip (Levin & Arluke, 1987). Gossip is crucial to the societal development as the constant flow of information within the society helps society members to evaluate pieces of information from different angles, and then interpret it according to their own knowledge base (McAndrew, Bell, & Garcia, 2007). To sum up, workplace gossip seems important at work as it not only facilitates the information exchange between employees, but also helps individuals to understand the events and ethos in their workplace.

Scholars have analyzed workplace gossip from diverse perspectives, including: *job relevance* (Kuo et al., 2015), *behavioral consequence* (Wu et al., 2016), and *gossip nature* (Grosser et al., 2012). Prior studies are important and have offered valuable insights to explain the consequence of gossiping behavior; yet, they seem not very interested in studying gossip valence – an important but neglected area of gossip studies. Therefore, the current research is keen to analyze gossip valence, with the following reasons: i) Workplace gossip can be positive (e.g., gossiping a colleague's diplomacy in handling customer complaints, which improves overall customer satisfaction) or negative (e.g., gossiping a colleague's incapability in handling complaints, which aggravates the severity of complaints); ii) Both positive- and negative-gossiping episodes involve interpersonal interactions and comprise at least three parties (gossiper, listener, and target). Gossiping can be viewed as a relational-behavioral process, and gossip valence affects this process; for instance, negative gossip tends to occur when a closer gossiper-listener relationship exists (Grosser et al., 2012); iii). Gossip may be positive and negative concurrently; very often, it depends on whether one is viewing gossip from the employee's perspective or organization's perspective (DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007); and iv). Considerable research attention has been paid to the consequence of gossiping behavior (excluding gossip valence), so the understanding of gossip valence remains limited (Rosnow, 2001).

In summary, the majority of prior gossip research has focused on the side of employees and paid limited attention to the role of manager-subordinate interaction in gossiping behavior. Although gossip valence seems an important factor, prior studies tend to put more weight on malignant gossip and less attention on benign gossip (Wu et al., 2016). Previous research findings are informative but the implication of positive-/negative-gossip on employees is still unclear (DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007). Overall, we know little about whether managers are gossipers, or whether managers produce positive- or negative-gossip. To respond to the knowledge gaps stated above, the current study aims to examine whether managers are gossipers and how subordinates respond to managers' gossip. Toward this end, we now turn our attention to discuss about the gossip-related interaction between managers and subordinates.

2.2. Managers' gossip and subordinates' commitment toward managers

Do managers gossip? How do subordinates respond to managers' gossip? To answer these two questions, the current research proposes an overarching framework (see Fig. 1 for details) to connect managers' gossip and subordinates' response through the concept of commitment. The rationale is described as follows:

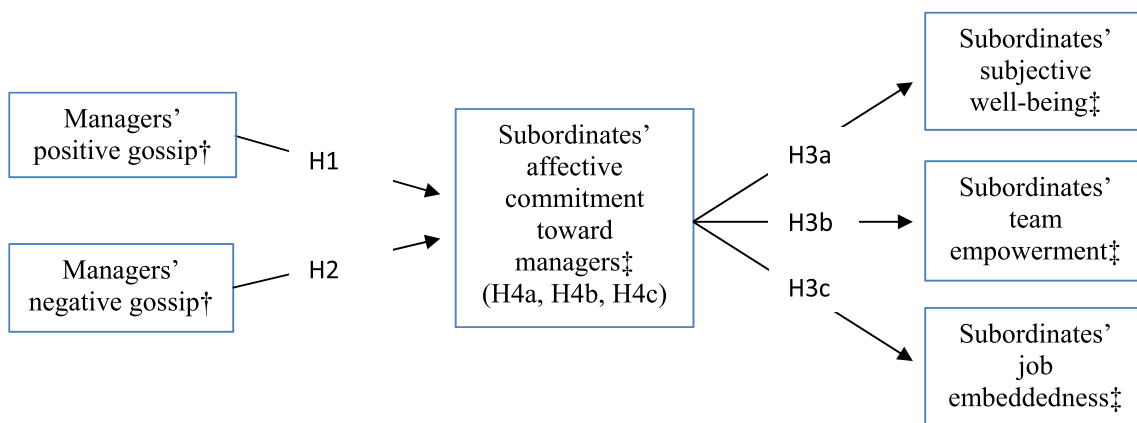
To begin with, both managers and employees may gossip as the ubiquity of gossip makes it an activity that every member experiences in the organization (Kniffin & Wilson, 2010). Gossip facilitates teamwork by increasing the levels of reciprocity, trust, and reputation between teammates (Sommerfeld, Krambeck, & Milinski, 2008). Managers' gossip may be positive as it helps fostering interpersonal intimacy (see gossip's multiple functions in: Grosser et al., 2012). Managers' gossip may be negative as it stimulates employee cynicism (see job-related gossip's effect in: Kuo et al., 2015), and causes embarrassment and discomfort to the gossip victims (Foster, 2004). Negative gossip is usually stealthy (Dunbar, 2004) and ruins victims' reputation and credibility at work (Cole & Dalton, 2009).

Next, unlike negative gossip that encloses a sense of negativity and depreciation, positive gossip contains positiveness and appreciation, implying a sense of recognition (Kuo et al., 2015). Based on the gossip triad proposition (Michelson et al., 2010), we propose that managers' gossip is associated with subordinates' commitment toward managers, in which positive gossip increases commitment and negative gossip decreases commitment. Our viewpoint is: when a manager (gossiper) makes positive comments about a subordinate (target) in front of colleagues (listeners), this provides positive evidence to the listeners of the managers' value and respect for the target. Manager's positive comments tell colleagues that managers explicitly recognize and, at least verbally, reward the subordinate's good behavior and/or performance. This is linked to enhanced commitment toward the manager because human beings are a social species and their behaviors often operate on the principle of reciprocity (Veličković et al., 2014). When subordinates become aware that they are valued and respected by managers, because of the reciprocal principle, subordinates may thank the manager's recognition by offering support and good interaction in return, such as demonstrating commitment toward managers. On the contrary, managers' negative gossip may reduce subordinates' commitment. As negative gossip damages the

target's reputation (Cole & Dalton, 2009) and causes troubles to the target (Foster, 2004), we thus believe that subordinates (target) would not receive any commendation or reward from managers' negative gossip, and that there is no motive for subordinates to demonstrate commitment toward managers. Very likely, due to the influence of negative gossip, the levels of commitment may drop quickly.

To justify our proposal above, the commitment theory (Meyer & Allen, 1991) is now adopted in the following discussion. The theory regards commitment as a psychological state, comprising: affective-, continuance-, and normative-dimensions, which affect how employees feel and evaluate the organization that they work for. Across three dimensions, affective commitment has drawn great academic attention along with the following reasons: i) Unlike normative commitment that describes the general feeling of obligation, affective commitment refers to employee's emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in the organization. Affective commitment explains why employees want to remain in the relationship with their organizations (Clugston, Howell, & Dorfman, 2000); ii) Unlike continuance commitment that depicts the fear of loss, affective commitment is operated on reciprocity; simply put, when people enjoy work, they are likely to feel good and satisfied with their job. In turn, this increased job satisfaction helps to add a sense of organizational commitment (Veličković et al., 2014); iii) Mercurio (2015) has found affective commitment to be the most important essence of commitment in the workplace; and iv) Commitment is more than a psychological attachment, as it is an affective bond reflecting one's dedication to the career and organization (Klein, Molloy, & Brinsfield, 2012). Affective bond acts like a psychosomatic mechanism, affecting how individuals evaluate and respond to managers, colleagues, and organization (Mercurio, 2015). In view of what has preceded, the current research decides to focus on affective dimension, as it seems to be the most important dimension of workplace commitment and fits to the research context.

To conclude, earlier literature review has implied an important relationship between managers' gossip and subordinates' commitment. When hearing managers' positive gossip, subordinates may feel recognized and appreciated by managers, thus showing more commitment toward managers; in contrast, when hearing managers' negative gossip, subordinates may feel unrecognized and depreciated by managers, hence showing less commitment toward managers. As such, we propose:



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

Fig. 1. Research conceptual framework. Note: Variables with † sign were responded by the managers, whereas variables with ‡ were responded by the subordinates.

**H1.** Managers' positive gossip is positively correlated with subordinates' commitment toward managers.

**H2.** Managers' negative gossip is negatively correlated with subordinates' commitment toward managers.

For the sake of clarity, a research conceptual framework (Fig. 1) is developed to illustrate all research variables and hypotheses.

### 2.3. Subordinates' commitment and experiences in the workplace

Recently, scholars have examined the impact of gossip at the organizational level, e.g., gossip affects organizational performance (Wu et al., 2016) and gossip causes cynicism in the organization (Kuo et al., 2015). Although these findings have advanced the knowledge of gossip, we still know little about the influence of managers' gossip. To close this knowledge gap, the current research is keen to analyze how managers' gossip affects subordinates through examining three pertinent variables. For the sake of clarity, we describe these three variables as outcome variables in the current research. These are: *subjective well-being* (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985; Dodge, Daly, Huyton, & Sanders, 2012), *team empowerment* (Kirkman & Rosen, 2000; Spreitzer, 1995), and *job embeddedness* (Crossley, Bennett, Jex, & Burnfield, 2007; Mitchell, Holtom, Lee, Sablinsky, & Erez, 2001). (These three variables are found to affect employees' experience in extant studies and thus have important implication to the current research. These variables will be discussed in due course). The current research proposes that when subordinates feel recognized through managers' positive gossip and show commitment toward managers, they may perceive more *subjective well-being*, *team empowerment*, and *job embeddedness*. By connecting subordinates' commitment to these three variables, we are keen to advance these literatures. We now turn our attention to analyzing how these three variables are related to subordinates' commitment toward managers. Details follow:

*Subjective well-being* is defined as a pleasant state (Diener et al., 1985), including cognitive (job satisfaction) and affective component (positive and negative affect). It is like a state of balance regulated by positive and negative life events, and both personal values and development opportunity affect the well-being (Dodge et al., 2012). Following this logic, subordinates' well-being shall be associated with their workplace, such as interpersonal relationships and the managers they work for. For instance, when subordinates feel recognized through managers' positive gossip and show commitment toward managers, we propose that subordinates' subjective well-being becomes more positive. The rationale is: when showing commitment toward managers, subordinates are more likely to appreciate their managers and organization, leading to a more positive experience at work.

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

Job embeddedness comprises multiple forces that influence employee retention; to be exact, organizational commitment is the

core of job embeddedness, indicating an employee's intent to stay in the organization (Mitchell et al., 2001). Both *on-the-job* and *off-the-job* forces act to bind people to their jobs, predicting the likelihood of voluntary turnover (Crossley et al., 2007). Following this logic, we propose that, when subordinates feel recognized through managers' positive gossip and show commitment towards managers, they may feel more enmeshed in their jobs. The reason is: when showing commitment toward managers, subordinates show organizational commitment too (as managers are vital organizational figures). When subordinates show commitment toward managers and organizations, their intent to leave the organization becomes lower and, for the same reason, they are more likely to stay in the organization.

Based on the above reasoning, we propose that, when showing commitment toward managers, subordinates are more likely to have a positive experience at work, perceive their team's competency and stay in the organization. As such, we propose:

**H3.** Subordinates' commitment toward managers is positively correlated with their perception of subjective well-being (H3a), team empowerment (H3b), and job embeddedness (H3c).

Managers' positive gossip and outcome variables: The mediating role of subordinates' commitment towards managers.

In an earlier discussion, we proposed that managers' positive gossip is related to subordinates' commitment toward managers (see details in: *Hypothesis 1*), and that such commitment is related to three specific research variables (see details in: *Hypothesis 3*). To the best of our knowledge, our research is the first of its kind to investigate how managers' positive gossip makes subordinates feel better through the proposed mediating effect of subordinates' commitment toward managers. We now turn our attention to explaining the rationale underlying the proposed mediating effect.

Meyer and Allen (1991) have conceptualized commitment as a prominent type of psychological attachment, which manifests a process of an individual's self-concept, evaluation, and recognition toward targets. To apply the conceptualization of commitment to the current research context, i.e., the workplace for managers and subordinates, three principles are adopted to enrich the discussion. These are: i) The concept of commitment involves three components: *cognitive* (e.g., subordinates take instructions from managers), *evaluative* (e.g., managers have leading qualities), and *affective* (e.g., subordinates respect managers). These components denote subordinates' perception of psychological emotional attachment toward managers (Meyer & Allen, 1991); for instance, an employee who is strongly committed to organizational goals would be keen to remain a part of the organization; ii) The concept of commitment toward managers is both relational and comparative (Mowday, Porter, & Steers, 1982); relational-wise, it defines how one individual (such as subordinate) is relative to another individual (such as manager); and comparative-wise, it explains how a subordinate (lower rank of position) is compared to the manager (higher rank of position); and finally, iii) Mercurio (2015) states that an affective component is an enduring, demonstrably indispensable, and central characteristic of organizational commitment.

Next, we argue that managers' positive gossip is related to subjective well-being, team empowerment, and job embeddedness, with the following reasons: i) Managers' positive gossip offers a sense of positiveness and recognition to subordinates (*cf.* positive gossip: Kuo et al., 2015), and such cognition helps to improve individual well-being (Diener et al., 1985); ii) Managers' positive comments contain useful know-how, which acts as good advice to subordinations (*cf.* informational support; Wills, 1985). Subordinates with sufficient information and support from managers feel empowered at work (Kirkman & Rosen, 1999, 2000); and iii)

Managers' positive comments often involve membership recognition and organizational commitment (Wills, 1985). Scholars have indicated that organizational membership and commitment toward organization are found to predict job embeddedness (Mitchell et al., 2001).

Based on the above reasoning, we propose that subordinates' commitment toward managers is correlated with outcome variables, i.e., subjective well-being, team empowerment, and job embeddedness. The rationale is: subordinates with higher levels of commitment tend to feel intertwined with their personal role in the organization (Ellemers, De Gilder, & Haslam, 2004) and have a higher sense of shared fate with the organization and those belonging to it (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Namely, subordinates' commitment may motivate themselves to devote more effort to the job, creating a positive impact on personal well-being. Serendipitously, extant studies have brought valuable insights to our proposal. For instance, employees' organizational commitment is found to be correlated with their well-being (Dodge et al., 2012), team empowerment (Kirkman & Rosen, 2000; Somech, 2005), and job embeddedness (Crossley et al., 2007; Mitchell et al., 2001).

In view of what has preceded, we propose that managers' positive gossip has a positive relationship with subordinates' commitment toward managers, and that subordinates' commitment toward managers has a positive relationship with three outcome variables. As such, we propose:

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

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Sample and procedure

The current research was approved by the institutional research ethics committee. Five industries in Taiwan were chosen in line with the grant criterion. These were: *manufacturing, information technology, finance, retailers, and general services*. Publicly traded companies (PTCs) from five industries were selected, as PTCs' personnel system and policies were regulated by local councils (Zhao, Xia, He, Sheard, & Wan, 2016) and PTCs offered researchers a good opportunity to observe the interaction between managers and subordinates (Xu, Xu, & Robinson, 2015).

To ensure the quality of data collection, researchers contacted HR staff from each company, along with the explanation of research aim, data collection method, and confidentiality policies. HR staff then helped researchers to post the research invitation on their internal bulletins, which allowed prospective participants (both managers and subordinates) to inform researchers of their participation through emails. As prospective participants contacted researchers directly, HR staff could not know who joined the questionnaire surveys. Vouchers were used as incentives to stimulate the participation rates.

Once we (researchers) received "agreement of participation" from participants, we emailed them with questionnaires and covering letters, in which we explicitly explained the research aim, confidentiality policy, voluntary nature of participation, and freedom of withdrawal at any stage of data collection. For the sake of confidentiality, all questionnaires were precoded prior to distribution, so researchers could identify the matching manager–subordinate dyads at the later stage of data analysis. To further ensure the anonymity of responses, participants returned completed questionnaires to researchers through emails.

During the process of participant recruitment, two strategies

were implemented to improve the ecological validity of data collection. First, we only recruited: i) *managers* who worked with their subordinates for at least six months, and ii) *subordinates* who worked with their managers for at least six months. The length of 6 months provided managers and subordinates an ample opportunity of interaction, as the current research was keen to analyze the interaction between two parties. Second, we drafted two types of covering letters. For subordinates, the covering letter described research purpose as understanding managers, i.e., subordinates to comment on managers' behavior. For managers, however, the covering letter described research purpose as understanding subordinates, i.e., managers to comment on subordinates' behavior.

The unit of data analysis was dyad, as dyadic analysis helped researchers to examine the interaction between managers and subordinates; coincidentally, dyadic analyses were adopted in extant studies (e.g., Kuo, Wu, & Lin, 2018; Liu et al., 2013). To tackle the influence of common method variance (CMV) in data collection, we adopted a time-lagged strategy (two-staged). Managers first responded to the questions of gossip engagement; approximately one month later, subordinates responded to the remaining questions (see Fig. 1 for details). Both managers and subordinates responded to demographic questions. Questionnaires were precoded before distribution, and HR staff-assisted researchers in matching manager–subordinate dyads.

Overall, 322 pairs of questionnaires were distributed to all prospective participants through emails; then, 201 pairs of participants emailed *completed questionnaires* to researchers (*response ratio*: 62.42%). To be specific, the 201 pairs of participants comprised 117 managers and 201 subordinates (see Table 1 for details). The demographic profile of 117 managers was outlined below: average age (43.39 years old), average tenure (14.21 years), education levels (67.52% undergraduate and 22.22% graduate), and gender ratio (63.25% male). The demographical profile of 201 subordinates was outlined below: average age (34.93 years old), average tenure (7.36 years), education levels (79.10% undergraduate), and gender ratio (49.25% male).

#### 3.2. Measures

All measures were standardized scales and developed in English originally. For the research purpose, we created Chinese versions of all measures using the renowned *translation-back translation procedure* (Brislin, 1970). Three bilingual scholars of management were invited to examine the clarity of scale items, and revisions were made accordingly. In total, five standardized scales were used in the questionnaire surveys. Managers responded to: *workplace gossip*, whereas subordinates responded to: *commitment toward managers, subjective well-being, team empowerment, and job-embeddedness*. All measures adopted the same response scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). All questionnaire respondents were asked to answer the questions in relation to their workplace and personal experiences. Details follow:

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

**Commitment toward managers.** We adopted a scale to measure the perception of commitment toward managers (Clugston et al.,

**Table 1**  
Research samples.

(Industry)	One manager to one subordinate	One manager to two subordinates	No of pairs
Manufacturing	9	3	15
Information technology	10	35	80
Finance	8	14	36
Retailer	10	9	28
General service	20	11	42
Total			201

2000; five items,  $\alpha = 0.77$ ). Sample items included: *I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career with my managers, I really feel as if this Managers' problems are my own, and I feel emotionally attached to my line managers.* Higher scores meant more commitment toward managers.

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

**Team empowerment.** We adopted a scale to measure the perception of team empowerment (Kirkman, Rosen, Tesluk, & Gibson, 2004; twelve items,  $\alpha = 0.90$ ). Sample items included: *The team I work for is very important to me, I am confident that my team can do the job well, and Our team is an important asset to the organization.* Higher scores meant more team empowerment.

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

### 3.3. Control variables

At the early stage of data analysis, we attempted to control demographic characters of managers and subordinates. These were: gender, age, job tenure, and educational levels. Results showed that the association between demographic characters and corresponding variables was weak (this phenomenon is common in general

**Table 2**  
Summary of descriptive statistics.

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

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

social science research; see further discussion in: Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2012). We then adopted SEM to examine the potential influence of demographic characters on the conceptual model (Fig. 1), by incorporating demographic characters into the model (we described this process as the controlled model). In terms of model fitness, the controlled model ( $\chi^2 (161) = 273.58$ ,  $p < .001$ , CFI = 0.94, IFI = 0.94, TLI = 0.92, RMSEA = 0.06) is very similar to the research conceptual model ( $\chi^2 (130) = 218.45$ ,  $p < .001$ , CFI = 0.95, IFI = 0.95, TLI = 0.94, RMSEA = 0.06), indicating that the conceptual model is still confirmed with the controlled variables. Specifically, as compared to the conceptual model, the controlled model did not affect the direction and significance of all pathways (coefficient) of research variables. The SEM findings were consistent with Podsakoff et al.'s viewpoint and affirmed that these control variables were generally nonsignificant and did not affect research variables. For the sake of brevity and clarity, the control variables were thus omitted from the analyses reported below.

## 4. Findings and analysis

We calculated the descriptive statistics of all research variables and presented the results in Table 2. Congruent with our expectation, managers' gossiping behavior was found to be correlated with different research variables. For instance, managers' positive gossip was positively correlated with subordinates' commitment toward managers ( $r = .21$ ,  $p < .01$ ), subjective well-being ( $r = 0.15$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and team empowerment ( $r = 0.14$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Managers' negative gossip was not correlated with any variables, including: commitment toward managers ( $r = .09$ , *ns.*), subjective well-being ( $r = -0.03$ , *ns.*), job embeddedness ( $r = 0.11$ , *ns.*), and team empowerment ( $r = 0.07$ , *ns.*). Subordinates' commitment toward managers was positively correlated with subjective well-being ( $r = 0.39$ ,  $p < .001$ ), team empowerment ( $r = 0.47$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and job embeddedness ( $r = 0.58$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Managers' positive gossip was positively correlated with managers' negative gossip ( $r = .39$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

To examine the phenomenon of nonindependence in raw data, a series of ANOVAs were carried out and the results showed no difference in managers' positive gossip ( $F (116, 84) = 1.26$ , *ns.*), managers' negative gossip ( $F (116, 84) = 1.21$ , *ns.*), subordinates' commitment toward managers ( $F (116, 84) = 1.05$ , *ns.*), subjective

well-being ( $F(116, 84) = 1.33, ns.$ ), team empowerment ( $F(116, 84) = 1.14, ns.$ ), and job embeddedness ( $F(116, 84) = 1.01, ns.$ ). These statistical figures jointly affirmed no violation of independence within the data (Liu, Kwan, Wu, & Wu, 2010), explaining that the data were appropriate for more advanced inferential statistical analysis, such as structural equation modeling (SEM).

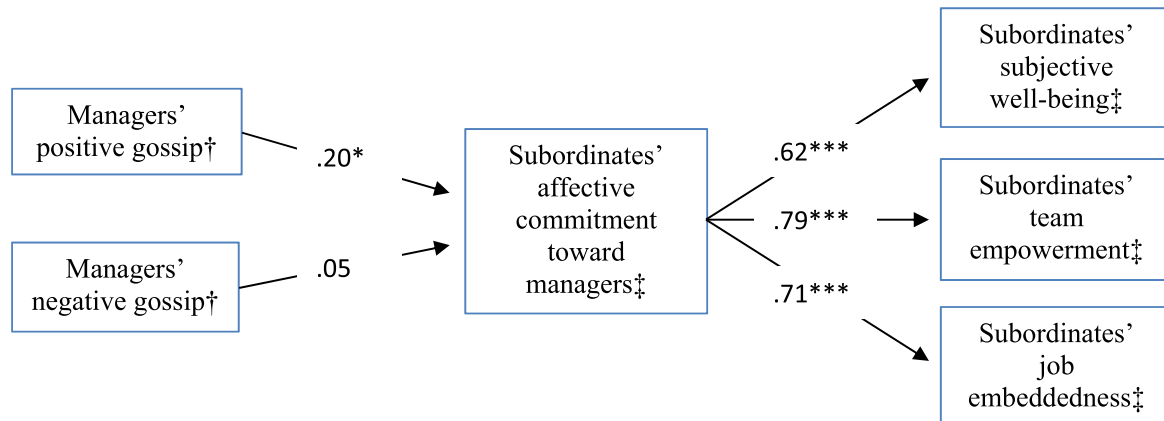
4.1. Analysis of the conceptual framework model

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

represented the best fit to the data ( $\chi^2(130) = 218.45, p < .001$ , CFI = 0.95, IFI = 0.95, TLI = 0.94, RMSEA = 0.06).

To reinspect the model fitness, a feedback model was proposed and analyzed (Podsakoff et al., 2012). That is, a reverse causal model was computed, in which subjective well-being, job embeddedness, and team empowerment were regarded as mediators, whereas subordinates' commitment toward managers was regarded as an outcome variable. In terms of model fitness, the hypothetical model outperformed the feedback model ( $\chi^2(126) = 334.30, p < .001$ , CFI = 0.88, IFI = 0.88, TLI = 0.86, RMSEA = 0.09), indicating that the hypothetical model was sound and appropriate for further analysis.

With respect to reliability, the composite reliability (CR) of all research variables ranged from 0.67 to 0.88. All reliability coefficients were higher than 0.65, indicating that the CR of all variables was acceptable for inferential statistical analysis (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). With respect to validity, the average variance extracted (AVE) of all research variables ranged from 0.42 to 0.71. Almost all AVEs of research variables were higher than 0.50, indicating that the convergent validity of all variables was satisfactory (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The AVE of "subordinates' commitment towards managers" was 0.42, which was slightly lower than the



Note: Variables with † sign were responded by the managers, whereas variables with ‡ were responded by the subordinates. Standardized parameter estimates ( $\chi^2(130) = 218.45, p < .001$ , CFI = .95, IFI = .95, TLI = .94, and RMSEA = .06).

Fig. 2. Path analysis diagram. Note: Variables with † sign were responded by the managers, whereas variables with ‡ were responded by the subordinates. Standardized parameter estimates ( $\chi^2(130) = 218.45, p < .001$ , CFI = 0.95, IFI = 0.95, TLI = 0.94, and RMSEA = 0.06).

Table 3 Comparison of hypothetical model and alternative models.

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

Note: †. Hypothetical model (conceptual framework) comprises six research variables as shown in Fig. 1.  
 Model 1: Managers' positive gossip and negative gossip are merged as one factor.  
 Model 2: Subordinates' subjective well-being, team empowerment, and job embeddedness are merged as one factor.  
 Model 3: Managers' positive gossip, managers' negative gossip, and subordinates' affective commitment toward the managers are merged as one factor.  
 Model 4: Managers' positive gossip, managers' negative gossip, subordinates' affective commitment toward the managers, and subjective well-being are merged as one factor.  
 Model 5: Managers' positive gossip, managers' negative gossip, subordinates' affective commitment toward the managers, and subjective well-being, and team empowerment are merged as one factor.  
 Model 6: All variables are merged as one factor.

conventional threshold (0.50); therefore, we still accepted it for further analysis.

With respect to the potential influence of CMV, two examination methods were implemented. First, we adopted *Harman's single factor method* (HSFM) and merged all research variables into one factor for CMV analysis. Results showed poor fit, i.e., one single factor of merging all variables was inappropriate for data analysis ( $\chi^2(135) = 1163.32, p < .001, RMSEA = 0.19, CFI = 0.46, IFI = 0.46, TLI = 0.39$ ). Second, because of the sensitivity limitation of HSFM (see further discussion in: Podsakoff et al., 2012), we also adopted an *Unmeasured latent construct method* (ULCM) to examine the potential influence of CMV. ULCM indicated no change in any of the correlative path coefficients or significance levels, and the *Chi-square* difference test was not significant ( $\Delta\chi^2(1) = 0.27, p > .05$ ). To sum up, the chance of CMV-related bias in the following data analysis was very slim.

#### 4.2. Data analysis

We applied SEM to examine the fitness of the conceptual framework (i.e., research hypothetical model) and to examine the relationships among six research variables. The results revealed that the model fitness was satisfactory ( $\chi^2(130) = 264.32, p < .001, CFI = 0.93, IFI = 0.93, TLI = 0.92, RMSEA = 0.07$ ), and that the relationships among variables were congruent with our expectation. Specifically, managers' positive gossip was found to predict subordinates' commitment toward managers ( $\beta = .20, p < .05$ ), and managers' negative gossip did not predict subordinates' commitment toward managers ( $\beta = .05, ns.$ ). These statistical figures jointly indicated that managers' positive gossip was positively correlated with subordinates' commitment toward managers, and that managers' negative gossip was not correlated with subordinates' commitment toward managers. Based on these findings, the first hypothesis should be supported and the second hypothesis should be declined.

Next, subordinates' commitment toward managers was found to predict subjective well-being ( $\beta = .62, p < .001$ ), team empowerment ( $\beta = 0.79, p < .001$ ), and job embeddedness ( $\beta = 0.71, p < .001$ ). These statistical figures jointly indicated that higher levels of commitment were correlated with more perception of subjective well-being, team empowerment, and job embeddedness, and that lower levels of commitment were correlated with less perception of subjective well-being, team empowerment, and job embeddedness. Based on these findings, the third hypothesis should be supported.

To examine the mediating effect of subordinates' commitment toward managers, we created an alternative model, in which managers' positive gossip was connected to the outcome variables through three lines. We connected managers' positive gossip to subordinates' subjective well-being through Line 1 ( $\beta = 0.12, p = .24$ ), team empowerment through Line 2 ( $\beta = 0.03, p = .38$ ), and job embeddedness through Line 3 ( $\beta = 0.01, p = .78$ ). All three lines were found to be insignificant, implying that managers' positive gossip had no significant effect on all three outcome variables.

We then compared the fitness difference between research conceptual model (Fig. 1) and alternative model. The fitness of alternative model was satisfactory ( $\chi^2(124) = 258.44, p < .001, CFI = 0.93, IFI = 0.93, TLI = 0.91, RMSEA = 0.07$ ) and similar to the fitness of the conceptual model ( $\chi^2(130) = 264.32, p < .001, CFI = 0.93, IFI = 0.93, TLI = 0.92, RMSEA = 0.07$ ). Because of the fitness proximity, we conducted a bootstrapping analysis to scrutinize the mediating effect (see Table 4 for details).

The results of bootstrapping analysis revealed that managers' positive gossip did not have a direct effect on subordinates' subjective well-being (direct effect = .11, n.s.), job embeddedness

(direct effect =  $-0.14, n.s.$ ), or team empowerment (direct effect =  $-0.08, n.s.$ ). Yet, managers' positive gossip was found to have a significant indirect effect on subordinates' subjective well-being, through a mediator – subordinates' commitment toward managers (indirect effect = .17,  $p < .05$ ). A similar indirect effect was found on job embeddedness (indirect effect = 0.21,  $p < .01$ ) and team empowerment (indirect effect = 0.22,  $p < .01$ ).

To sum up, managers' positive gossip was positively correlated with subordinates' commitment toward managers, which was positively correlated with three outcome variables. Subordinates' commitment toward managers was also found to mediate the relationship between managers' positive gossip and subordinates' perception of subjective well-being, job embeddedness, and team empowerment. Based on these findings, the fourth hypothesis should be supported.

## 5. Discussion

Inspired by the commitment theory (Meyer & Allen, 1991), the current research has proposed a novel perspective of workplace gossip and supported it with statistical figures. Research findings are valuable and meaningful in two ways: *first*, managers' positive gossip was found to be associated with subordinates' commitment toward managers and *second*, subordinates' commitment toward managers was found to mediate the perception of subjective well-being, team empowerment, and job embeddedness. Because of the limitation of cross-sectional research design, the causality of research variables could not be justified; yet, research findings have implied an important relationship between managers' gossip and subordinates' experiences. Research findings have also provided new insights into the workplace gossip literatures, and shifted attention to the role of managers' gossip, an important but neglected area in gossip-related studies.

### 5.1. Contribution to the literature

Following the calls to explore gossip's influence at work (e.g., Kuo et al., 2015; Ellwardt et al., 2012), we developed a new model of workplace gossip (Fig. 1), analyzing how managers' gossip is related to subordinates' attitudes and behaviors. Our model differs from previous studies that have primarily adopted an organizational perspective, wherein gossips are analyzed by organizational identity (Farley et al., 2010) or group dynamic approaches (Kniffin & Wilson, 2010). While identity and group dynamics are undoubtedly linked to gossiping behavior, our research findings illustrate that managers' gossip also matters; specifically, we have found that managers' gossip is related to several research variables, which has contributed to gossip literature in several ways.

Unlike previous gossiping studies that focus on organizations (Kuo et al., 2015) and group performance (Kniffin & Wilson, 2010), our research findings have revealed a unique factor to workplace gossip – rank. From the perspective of rank, managers often hold higher ranks of position, and subordinates hold lower ranks of position; that is, the rank difference between two parties is salient. The rank difference can be further analyzed through the social exchange theory (Homans, 1958), which explains that the relationship between two parties depends on the cost and reward embedded within the interaction. When the costs exceed rewards, the interaction between two parties becomes problematic and the relationship terminates soon; in contrast, when the rewards exceed costs, the interaction becomes healthy and the relationship lasts longer (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Following this logic, the rank difference between managers and subordinates is crucial; to subordinates, managers hold higher ranks so their words are influential at work. To maintain a good relationship with managers,



**Table 4**  
Bootstrapping: indirect effects of mediation analysis (Monte Carlo).

Path	$P_{MX}$	$P_{YM}$	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	Total Effect	Confidence interval of indirect effect	
			$(P_{YX})$	$(P_{MY}P_{XM})$	$(P_{YX} + [P_{YM}P_{MX}])$	Lower bound	Upper bound
MPG → SC	.27**	.63***	.11	.17*	.28**	0.05	0.30
→ subjective well-being							
MPG → SC	.27**	.78***	-.14	.21**	.07	0.06	0.37
→ job embeddedness							
MPG → SC	.27**	.84**	-.08	.22**	.14	0.06	0.39
→ team empowerment							

Note: MPG = Managers' positive gossip; SC = Subordinates' commitment toward managers (Bootstrapping = 10,000; \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; and \*\*\* $p < .001$ ).

subordinates may pay close attention to managers' comments and views (including gossip). Coincidentally, earlier data analysis has affirmed a positive correlation between managers' positive gossip and subordinates' commitment toward managers. Our view is: managers' positive gossip contains a sense of positiveness and recognition, sending rewarding signals to subordinates; in return, subordinates interpret such a signal positively, sending rewarding signals to managers (such as showing commitment toward managers). To sum up, our research findings have implied that rank is an important factor to the formation of workplace gossip, and that the gossip-commitment relationship is probably not causal but correlational in nature.

Next, managers' gossip was found to be correlated with subordinates' commitment toward managers; however, the correlation only applied to positive gossip, not negative gossip. This phenomenon is fascinating so it deserves further discussion. Based on the commitment theory (Meyer & Allen, 1991) and the concept of reciprocity (Veličković et al., 2014), one can easily understand the correlation between managers' positive gossip and subordinates' commitment toward managers (see discussion in Literature Review). Yet, why managers' negative gossip was not negatively correlated with subordinates' commitment toward managers? To respond to this question, we have proposed three assumptions. These are: i) *Risk avoidance*: When subordinates feel unpleasant about managers' negative gossip, they may not necessarily engage in retaliation-related behavior, such as criticizing managers' decision or showing no commitment toward managers and organizations. The assumption can be further explained through the risk avoidance proposition, which explains that people may refrain from any behavior if it leads to risk or uncertainty (Gneezy, List, & Wu, 2006). In the workplace context, for instance, if subordinates were unable to predict how managers tackle the retaliation-related behavior, they would not initiate such behavior; ii) *Responsibility of managers*: Managers are expected to support and manage subordinates in different ways, such as conducting performance assessment, supervising projects, criticizing performance, or overseeing/running management-related tasks (Cheng, 1995). Following this logic, subordinates may feel reasonable when managers comment on performance and make criticisms. As long as subordinates understand managers' responsibility, they are more likely to accept criticism and regard negative gossip as the consequence of management. For the same reason, when hearing managers' negative gossip, subordinates may not necessarily interpret it in a negative manner; perhaps, subordinates may continue to interact with their managers normally, and their commitment toward managers remains about the same; and iii) *Level of subtlety*: Negative gossip is usually sensitive and stealthy (Dunbar, 2004). Its influence on employees may be too subtle to be diagnosed through a cross-sectional research design. Perhaps, the relationship between managers' negative gossip and subordinates' commitment toward managers is not straightforward, so our quantitative research

approach could not measure it properly. Duly, the aforementioned three assumptions are hypothetical in nature and deserve further examination.

Congruent with our research hypothesis, subordinates' commitment toward managers was found to be correlated with three outcome variables. These were: *subjective well-being*, *team empowerment*, and *job embeddedness*. This particular finding has advanced literature in several ways:

First, we have provided statistical evidence to explain when subordinates feel recognized through managers' positive gossip and show commitment toward managers, subordinates' subjective well-being would be positive too. Following earlier well-being studies (Diener et al., 1985; Dodge et al., 2012), our research has explicitly explained the mechanism underlying the commitment and well-being relationship, i.e., when showing commitment towards managers, subordinates are likely to recognize and appreciate their managers, leading to a positive experience in the workplace.

Second, employees tend to have more job commitment when they feel enmeshed in the jobs and workplace (*the concept of job embeddedness*; Crossley et al., 2007). Serendipitously, the current research has found a positive correlation between subordinates' commitment toward managers and their perception of job embeddedness. Although prior research and the current research are different in nature, they have jointly conveyed a message that job embeddedness may reflect a form of organizational commitment. Our proposition is: the scope of job embeddedness could be wider than emotional link and attachment to the workplace (as explained by: Crossley et al., 2007; Mitchell et al., 2001). Perhaps, job embeddedness also encloses a component of organizational commitment, reflecting how individuals evaluate and respond to colleagues, managers, and the organization they work for.

Third, earlier studies indicate that team empowerment occurs when team members contribute to the decision-making process (Somech, 2005) and proactively participate in teamwork and mundane tasks (Kirkman & Rosen, 2000). To continue this line of research, the current research advances the literature by clarifying the commitment-empowerment relationship; specifically, subordinates' commitment toward managers was found to be positively correlated with their perception of team empowerment. Our proposition is: team empowerment and team commitment may be partially overlapped; for instance, empowered employees tend to feel that their managers are competent and vital organizational figures (Kirkman et al., 2004). Following this logic, when subordinates feel managers are important assets, subordinates are likely to show commitment toward managers, which in turn increases subordinates' feeling of team empowerment.

In addition, managers' positive gossip was found to be correlated with their negative gossip. This finding has added a new line to the literature that managers may engage in both positive- and negative-gossip. Prior studies discovered the valence of gossip

(Grosser et al., 2012) and discussed its impact (DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007). Following this line of research, the current research has extended the knowledge of gossip valence by adding a new factor, i.e., subordinates' commitment toward managers. On the one hand, we have provided statistical evidence to explain that only managers' positive gossip has potential to affect subordinates' commitment towards managers, and that only managers' positive gossip is related to subordinates' perception of subjective well-being, team empowerment, and job embeddedness. On the other hand, although subordinates' commitment towards managers was found to have a mediating effect on three outcome variables, its mediating effect actually varied. The strongest mediating effect was found on team empowerment, followed by job embeddedness and subjective well-being, respectively. Simply put, the mediating effect is not universal, subject to the nature of outcome variables.

In summary, the current research has affirmed the importance of managers' gossip and analyzed the influence of different gossip valences (*positive vs negative*), providing statistical evidence to counter prior research arguments (c.f. DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007; Grosser et al., 2012). Our argument is: not all gossip is bad; at least, managers' positive gossip has merits. Inspired by the social exchange theory (Homans, 1958), the current research has highlighted the role of rank and discussed its potential implication to workplace gossip. To our knowledge, our research is the first of its kind to link managers' gossip with employees' ranks of positions. In addition, identifying the mediating role of subordinates' commitment toward managers has helped to advance the theoretical understanding of workplace gossip. Such knowledge also helps to search for continuous improvement of employee performance and potentially reduce the bias associated with workplace gossip.

### 5.2. Practical implications

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

Informal communication (such as gossip) plays a crucial role in human society and facilitates group dynamics as social glue; specifically, it fosters group cohesion and helps to police deviant behavior (Dunbar, 2004). Gossip is a common type of informal communication (DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007), so we surmise that gossip will continue to be part of human life and occur frequently in the workplace. Based on previous studies and the current research findings, we feel it is necessary to recognize this specific type of employee behavior – *workplace gossip*. We would like to recommend team leaders and managers to appreciate the importance of gossip and learn from workplace gossip. Our research has implied that managers who gossip positively about subordinates can be a

good thing, such as fostering a culture of team commitment and empowerment. Through the effect of positive gossip, managers can also raise subordinates' spirits and make them feel better.

### 5.3. Research limitations

As the data were gathered from employees in Taiwan, the findings reported here may be sample-specific and in need of replication. Because of the limited resource, only three outcome variables were investigated so the implications of research findings on other types of employee attitudes and behaviors are still unknown. In different settings, other factors such as identity and manager-subordinate relationship, might become relevant. For example, receiving positive gossip about coworkers is found to increase commitment as it nurtures identity in groups, i.e., positive gossip is prosocial behavior that strengthens group identity (Dunbar, 2004).

The concept of subordinates' well-being was measured in the general form, rather than work-specific context. Although we asked subordinates to answer the questions using their experiences at work, future studies are encouraged to adopt more job-related or workplace-related questions to improve the ecological validity of well-being measurement.

The current research did not measure how social desirability affected managers' gossiping behavior, or how managers reported their gossip engagement. Because of the influence of social desirability, for instance, managers may underestimate or underreport the true amount of negative gossip, which then causes bias in data analysis. Future studies may consider both prevention and detection methods (Nederhof, 1985) to alleviate the impact of social desirability on data collection.

During the data collection, we did not investigate with whom managers gossiped, and the victims (targets) of gossip were not measured either. The gossipers-victims-audience relationship would be clarified if the aforementioned data were available. Similarly, we did not investigate whether managers selectively gossiped to a particular subordinate who was more committed to themselves, or whether managers' gossip made subordinates more committed. Future studies may focus on the quality of manager-subordinate relationship and analyze whether such relationship is relevant to the influence of workplace gossip.

Interestingly, Edwardt et al. (2012) indicate that group dynamics (e.g., interaction and membership) is correlated with the occurrence of gossip, implying that organizational/group size may be crucial to the influence of gossip. Gossip is a social phenomenon and related to social and cultural factors in the scene (Noon & Delbridge, 1993). Our research does not have the capacity to examine these factors, but future studies may continue this line of research by studying whether gossip functions differently in collectivist-versus individualist societies, in larger versus smaller groups, or the formation of gossip is related to the cultural characteristics. Finally, one may criticize that our small sample size lacks statistical power to detect small effects, so whether positive gossip really matters in reality is still unknown. Future studies may take these factors into consideration and examine their relevance to workplace gossip.

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### Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emj.2020.09.009>.

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