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Title: How does receiving gossip from coworkers influence employees' task performance and interpersonal deviance? The moderating roles of regulatory focus and the mediating role of vicarious learning

Short title: *How does workplace gossip benefits receivers*

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Abstract:

Based on social learning theory and regulatory focus theory, we propose that receiving positive and negative gossip from coworkers increases individuals' vicarious learning, which subsequently improves their adaptive behaviours in the workplace, namely increasing task performance and decreasing interpersonal deviance. Furthermore, we propose that gossip receivers' regulatory foci determine the extent to which receivers engage in vicarious learning and change their behaviours. Results from two studies testing a moderated mediation model (Study 1: $N = 214$; Study 2: $N = 189$) showed that negative and positive gossip were indirectly related to increased receivers' task performance and decreased interpersonal deviance through vicarious learning. The indirect effect of negative gossip was stronger for receivers with a high prevention focus, and the indirect effect of positive gossip was stronger for receivers with a high promotion focus. This research documents the beneficial role of receiving gossip from coworkers and advances our understanding of its consequences in the workplace.

Keywords:

workplace gossip, regulatory focus, vicarious learning, task performance, interpersonal deviance

Data availability statement:

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Conflict of Interest:

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

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Abstract: Based on social learning theory and regulatory focus theory, we propose that receiving positive and negative gossip from coworkers increases individuals' vicarious learning, which subsequently improves their adaptive behaviours in the workplace, namely increasing task performance and decreasing interpersonal deviance. Furthermore, we propose that gossip receivers' regulatory foci determine the extent to which receivers engage in vicarious learning and change their behaviours. Results from two studies testing a moderated mediation model (Study 1: $N = 214$; Study 2: $N = 189$) showed that negative and positive gossip were indirectly related to increased receivers' task performance and decreased interpersonal deviance through vicarious learning. The indirect effect of negative gossip was stronger for receivers with a high prevention focus, and the indirect effect of positive gossip was stronger for receivers with a high promotion focus. This research documents the beneficial role of receiving gossip from coworkers and advances our understanding of its consequences in the workplace.

Keywords: workplace gossip, regulatory focus, vicarious learning, task performance, interpersonal deviance

Gossip, defined as communication between a sender and receiver about an absent person (i.e., the gossip target; Dores Cruz, Nieper, Testori, Martinescu, & Beersma, 2021), is a ubiquitous social phenomenon. Workplace gossip represents communication from a member of an organization to one or more members of the same organization about another member of the organization who is not present to hear what is said, and its content may vary from positive to negative (Brady, Brown, & Liang, 2017). Although gossip is often viewed as trivial or antisocial, scholars have outlined the benefits of receiving gossip in organizations (Foster, 2004; Michelson, van Iterson, & Waddington, 2010). People who receive gossip, either by engaging in gossip conversations or by overhearing these, can benefit from gossip in multiple ways.

First, gossip contains information about others' past behaviours, skills or abilities, and this can help receivers understand who they should trust and partner with (Dunbar, 2004). Specifically, negative gossip may warn receivers against being exploited or harmed by uncooperative or selfish individuals and positive gossip may help receivers choose to work with others known for being hardworking, capable, or cooperative (Feinberg, Willer, Stellar, & Keltner, 2012; Nowak & Sigmund, 2005; Sommerfeld, Krambeck, Semmann, & Milinski, 2007; Sommerfeld, Krambeck, & Milinski, 2008; Wu, Balliet, & van Lange, 2015).

Second, previous research suggests that gossip plays a crucial role in receivers' learning, because they can use the information acquired through gossip to draw lessons about how to behave appropriately in their social environment (Baumeister, Zhang, & Vohs, 2004; Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012; Brady et al., 2017; Martinescu, Janssen, & Nijstad, 2014; Wert & Salovey, 2004). Both positive and negative gossip are valuable sources of information for

receivers because gossip helps communicate, contextualize, and interpret abstract organizational norms. This is important in helping people understand how norms may apply to themselves and how to improve their own functioning in the organization. For example, Bai and colleagues (2019) showed that receiving negative gossip from supervisors contributes to employees' job performance because negative gossip fosters reflection. Peters and colleagues (2017) also showed that gossip about deviance helps individuals improve their understanding of social norms.

However, previous research provides only limited insights into the learning mechanisms and boundary conditions that shape the way in which employees learn from negative and positive gossip about others, and how this affects their behaviours in the workplace. Specifically, previous studies did not systematically investigate the role of positive gossip nor the role of receiving gossip from coworkers. This is unfortunate because employees are likely to hear both negative and positive gossip in the workplace (e.g., Brady et al., 2017; Martinescu et al., 2014). Furthermore, people are more likely to receive gossip from their coworkers than from their supervisors (Martinescu, Janssen, & Nijstad, 2019), because in hierarchical relationships, powerful individuals pay limited attention to less powerful people (Magee & Smith, 2013), and tend to distance themselves from subordinates to avoid status loss (Galinsky, Magee, Gruenfeld, Whitson, & Liljenquist, 2008; Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003; Magee & Galinsky, 2008). As such, gossip between coworkers in horizontal relationships is likely to be more frequent and elaborate than gossip from supervisors (Martinescu et al., 2019). Therefore, in the current paper we focus on the

effects of negative and positive gossip from one's coworkers on receivers' learning process and subsequent behaviour.

Based on social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) and the cultural learning perspective of gossip (Baumeister et al., 2004), we examine the role of vicarious learning in shaping gossip receivers' behaviours in the workplace. Vicarious learning occurs by being exposed to and extracting meaning from other's specific actions and their consequences (Gioia & Manz, 1985). According to theory, observing positive consequences increase the likelihood that individuals will adopt an action, while observing negative consequences will reduce that likelihood (Manz & Sims, 1981). The information gained from gossip about others' successes and failures supplements one's direct observation of others. Learning prompted by gossip may result in multiple behavioural changes, but previous research has focused primarily on task performance and has ignored deviant behaviours, which may also improve as a result of learning. Given that organizations rely on employees to perform well and treat each other well to function optimally, employee task performance and interpersonal deviance are important outcomes not only for the employees themselves, but also for the well-being of other members and ultimately the performance of the organization (Whiting, Podsakoff, & Pierce, 2008; Eissa, Lester, & Gupta, 2019). Thus, we focus on how learning from gossip may affect both: task performance and interpersonal deviance. Specifically, task performance reflects work-related outcomes that bear a direct relation to the organization's technical core (Motowidlo & Van Scotter, 1994), while interpersonal deviance captures interpersonally-related outcomes, violates workplace norms for mutual respect and has destructive effects (Michalak, Kiffin-Petersen, & Ashkanasy, 2019). Gossip often conveys

information about (un-)satisfactory performance and contains useful lessons that help people learn adequate behaviour in their social context, and how to conform to norms and meet acceptable standards of behaviour (Baxter, Dun, & Sahlstein, 2001). In this regard, we propose that the vicarious learning mechanisms set in motion by positive and negative gossip from coworkers may affect receivers' task performance and interpersonal deviance.

Moreover, boundary conditions determining who is likely to learn from different types of gossip have not been examined in previous studies. This is also unfortunate, because not all employees may learn equally well from the same type of gossip; individual predispositions may shape the effect of gossip on receivers' behaviours. Bai and colleagues (2019) therefore called for research to investigate factors that may shape the relationship between gossip and receivers' behaviours. To answer this call, we draw from regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1996, 1997) to identify individual characteristics (in particular, prevention and promotion focus) as factors that influence receivers' learning from gossip. Specifically, due to their characteristic sensitivity to positive and negative information, we propose that prevention-and promotion-focused receivers are likely to respond more strongly to negative and positive gossip from coworkers, respectively, through vicarious learning, which, we propose, will benefit their performance and help reduce interpersonal deviance, as shown in Figure 1.

Our investigation contributes to the literature in several ways. First, the literature on workplace gossip that mainly focuses on targets has suggested that workplace gossip is harmful and costly (Kuo, Wu, & Lin, 2018; Liu, Kwan, & Zhang, 2018; Wu, Birtch, Chiang, & Zhang, 2018; Wu, Kwan, Wu, & Ma, 2018). The current research underscores the

significance of gossip from coworkers for receivers' vicarious learning, which helps explain how gossip can benefit receivers and subsequently their organization, by increasing performance and reducing deviance. This also challenges the lay view that emphasizes the destructive power of gossip. Second, we show that the extent to which negative and positive gossip from coworkers triggers vicarious learning is contingent on receivers' regulatory focus. Thus, by integrating social learning and regulatory focus theory, our research extends current knowledge of when gossip is most likely to stimulate receivers' desirable reactions.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Theoretical framework and hypotheses development

Receiving gossip from coworkers and vicarious learning

We rely on social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) to explain how gossip from coworkers is likely to prompt vicarious learning and foster changes in the behaviours of receivers. We propose that both receiving negative and positive gossip promote receivers' vicarious learning, which occurs when an observer learns indirectly from other's behaviours and outcomes rather than directly from the consequences of their own behaviours (Gioia & Manz, 1985). Workplace gossip contains information about the successes and failures of targets and how these came about, as well as how other organization members perceive targets and behave towards them. Thus, information conveyed by positive or negative gossip from coworkers can prompt receivers to learn from targets themselves and from others in the organization, who comment on the target's attributes or behaviours.

Previous research has shown that gossip not only helps individuals learn implicitly about how acceptable certain behaviours are, which contributes to the establishment or

maintenance of social norms (Jolly & Chang, 2021), but also helps individuals gather and compare information about social targets, and learn which group members are skilled, capable, and trustworthy, and willing to cooperate, and which ones are not (Beersma & van Kleef, 2012; Fine & Rosnow, 1978). In this way, utilizing the experiences of others provides individuals with an effective way of learning how they could improve their own outcomes.

Negative gossip conveys information about targets' norm-violating behaviours or below-standard performance, while positive gossip conveys information about targets' desirable behaviours and satisfactory performance (Brady et al., 2017). According to the cultural learning view (Baumeister et al., 2004), receiving gossip can be effective for learning both when it is negative and positive, because both types of information can contain valuable lessons. Receivers can learn from negative gossip to avoid similar undesirable outcomes as the target, and can learn from positive gossip how to achieve similar levels of success as the target. Receiving gossip can help people identify gaps in their own knowledge, skills or abilities and may help direct their attention towards models in their social environment they could learn from (Wolfson, Tannenbaum, Mathieu, & Maynard, 2018). Specifically, through a process of upward or downward social comparison with targets (Wert & Salovey, 2004), positive and negative gossip can help receivers self-evaluate and grasp how they can achieve positive outcomes or avoid negative outcomes (Martinescu et al., 2014). For example, hearing that a colleague was denied a tenured contract after losing an important client, could prompt gossip receivers to learn more about how the colleague handled the client in order to avoid a similar fate; however, hearing that a colleague managed to reduce the completion

time for a project and was praised for it could lead the gossip receiver to ask this person for advice about one's own work or seek to work on joint projects with them.

Because negative and positive gossip provide concrete examples of links between behaviours of targets and their outcomes, they are powerful means of disseminating rules, norms and other guiding principles that apply in one's social environment (Baumeister et al., 2004; Foster, 2004). Implicitly or explicitly, gossip communicates a code of conduct and moral norms (Sabini & Silver, 1982), which facilitate understanding of organizational norms, appropriate behaviours, how to achieve satisfactory job performance, and the consequences of (not) behaving normatively. As such, negative and positive gossip from coworkers may guide observation and direct receivers' attention to people they could learn from (Gioia & Manz, 1985). Therefore, both negative and positive gossip from coworkers may enable receivers to understand (in)appropriate organizational behaviour and its consequences through vicarious learning.

Hypothesis 1a: Negative gossip is positively related to receivers' vicarious learning.

Hypothesis 1b: Positive gossip is positively related to receivers' vicarious learning.

Vicarious learning, task performance, and interpersonal deviance

According to social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), vicarious learning guides future actions, helps to avoid "reinventing the wheel", allows employees to drive out inefficiencies, and improve work quality by emulating positive behaviours and avoiding negative behaviours seen in others (Argote, Gruenfeld, & Naquin, 2001; Kim & Miner, 2007).

Vicarious learning is an essential process in acquiring, developing, and altering behaviour in organizations (Gioia & Manz, 1985). By observing other organizational members' actions

and the consequences of those actions, individuals may easily grasp the causal relationship between such actions and their consequences.

Vicarious learning provides a way for gossip receivers to reassess their behaviours and identify areas for improvement. Therefore, we propose that vicarious learning triggered by receiving gossip from coworkers helps people understand how to change their behaviours in beneficial ways. The information provided by positive and negative gossip may guide receivers to adjust their behaviours and achieve better work results in the future (i.e., task performance), and may also guide them to decrease their destructive behaviours (i.e., interpersonal deviance). By directing their attention to others in their social environment who achieve positive or negative outcomes, gossip may help receivers understand how to implement beneficial changes in their own behaviour. Based on observations guided by gossip, people may understand how to perform better, and understand the possible consequences of workplace deviance (e.g., formal sanctions, social exclusion, Baumeister et al., 2004), leading them to increase their task performance and decrease deviant behaviours. Hence, vicarious learning based on positive and negative gossip from coworkers may help receivers perform their work appropriately, complete assigned core tasks, and achieve better job performance. Furthermore, as a result of vicarious learning, gossip receivers may engage less in activities that may harm or undermine others in the organization.

Hypothesis 2: Gossip receivers' vicarious learning is (a) positively related to task performance and (b) negatively related to interpersonal deviance.

The mediating effect of vicarious learning

We theorize that positive and negative gossip from coworkers elicit vicarious learning among receivers, who are likely to seek role models in their social environment in order to achieve similar positive or avoid similar negative outcomes as the gossip targets they heard about. In turn, this learning process is likely to result in higher task performance and lower interpersonal deviance. Thus, we hypothesize that vicarious learning mediates the relationship between negative and positive gossip from coworkers and gossip receivers' adaptive behaviours, in the form of higher performance and lower deviance.

Hypothesis 3: Vicarious learning mediates the relationship between negative gossip and gossip receivers' (a) task performance and (b) interpersonal deviance.

Hypothesis 4: Vicarious learning mediates the relationship between positive gossip and gossip receivers' (a) task performance and (b) interpersonal deviance.

The role of regulatory focus in learning from gossip

Manz and Sims (1981) recognized that certain individual characteristics could play an essential role in the process of vicarious learning. The regulatory focus dimensions (Higgins, 1996, 1997) could function as such characteristics. Regulatory focus theory identifies two self-regulatory systems: prevention focus and promotion focus, which guide individuals' strategic responses to potential opportunities and threats that may arise. Because people tend to pay more attention to information that matches their primary regulatory focus - prevention or promotion - and show greater motivation and performance when they are encouraged to pursue strategies that fit their regulatory focus (Higgins, 2000), we propose that gossip receivers' regulatory focus determines to what extent positive and negative gossip facilitate vicarious learning.

Prevention focus. Specifically, prevention-focused gossip receivers are more likely to focus on social cues associated with thwarted goals or adverse outcomes (e.g., mistreatment, loss of resources), as they are driven by a focus on avoiding failure or loss (Brebels, De Cremer, & Sedikides, 2008; van Dijk & Kluger, 2004). As such, individuals with a high prevention focus are likely to be persuaded by messages of caution to avoid loss (Appelt & Higgins, 2010). They are cautious and monitor others' behaviours in social situations for information about which behaviours are improper, inadvisable, and unacceptable (Förster & Higgins, 2005). They can use this social information to learn how to avoid errors and mistakes and thus adjust their behaviours to accomplish goals of safety and security, which are likely to be salient for them (Lieberman, Molden, Idson, & Higgins, 2001). Because of these attributes, we propose that gossip receivers with a high prevention focus are particularly sensitive to information conveyed by negative gossip from coworkers and are especially likely to learn from it to protect themselves against adverse outcomes. They will carefully attend to negative gossip, which contains information about undesirable behaviours and their consequences. Receiving negative gossip is likely to stimulate prevention-focused individuals to engage in vicarious learning, because it enables them to better understand and internalize the lessons from others' failures, helping them avoid a similar experience.

Hypothesis 5: Gossip receivers' prevention focus will moderate the positive relationship between negative gossip and vicarious learning, such that the relationship will be stronger when prevention focus is high rather than low.

Furthermore, we formulate the following moderated mediation hypothesis:

Hypothesis 6: Prevention focus will moderate the indirect effect of negative gossip on gossip receivers' (a) task performance and (b) interpersonal deviance via vicarious learning, such that the mediated relationship will be stronger when prevention focus is high (rather than low).

Promotion focus. Whereas prevention focus leads to emphasizing the fulfilment of duties by avoiding failures, promotion focus leads to emphasizing opportunities for advancement and accomplishment through the pursuit of ideals (Crowe & Higgins, 1997; Lanaj, Chang, & Johnson, 2012). Thus, employees with a high promotion focus may be easily convinced by messages that express opportunities for reaping rewards (Appelt & Higgins, 2010). Indeed, Lockwood and Kunda (2000) suggested that information about targets who have achieved success (which is also attainable for themselves) can motivate people for self-improvement by allowing them to imagine their future success. Furthermore, positive gossip has instrumental value for those who seek to develop their competencies (Martinescu et al., 2014), and this is likely to be the case especially for promotion-focused employees, because they are particularly inclined to pursue growth and advancement in the organization. Thus, individuals with a high promotion-focus are likely to be particularly sensitive to positive gossip and to perceive its value for self-improvement. They may carefully attend to positive gossip received from coworkers to gather information about targets who are successful, valuable to the organization, and recognized by others, so that they can learn vicariously based on this information and achieve similar positive outcomes.

Hypothesis 7: Gossip receivers' promotion focus will moderate the positive relationship between positive gossip and vicarious learning, such that the relationship will be stronger when promotion focus is high rather than low.

Furthermore, we formulate the following moderated mediation hypothesis:

Hypothesis 8: Promotion focus will moderate the indirect effect of positive gossip on gossip receivers' (a) task performance and (b) interpersonal deviance (via vicarious learning), such that the mediated relationship will be stronger when promotion focus is high (rather than low).

Drawing on insights from regulatory focus theory, we expect prevention and promotion focus receivers to respond more strongly to negative and positive gossip, respectively. However, it is plausible that gossip receivers' prevention focus also influences their reactions to positive gossip, and promotion focus may influence reactions to negative gossip. As these effects cannot be inferred directly from regulatory focus theory, we tested them in an exploratory manner and presented the results in online supplementary analyses.

Study overview

We used a two-study replication design to test our hypotheses. In Study 1, we collected supervisor-employee data at two times from different companies. In Study 2, we used data collected over three time periods from supervisors and employees within one company. We used different research designs across two studies to answer the calls for more replication studies in psychology / organizational behaviour research and ensure the validity and generalizability of our results (e.g., Wright & Sweeney, 2016).

Study 1: Method

Sample and procedure

The participants were full-time employees and their immediate supervisors from different industries in China (i.e., IT, construction, and finance). All participants participated voluntarily and anonymously. All the employees and supervisors were informed that the objective of the survey was to explore questions related to human resource management practices, and that all responses would be kept confidential. For each participant, we provided a sealed envelope with a code number that was used for matching the supervisor questionnaires with the employee questionnaires. All subordinates and supervisors who completed the survey received a \$3 gift to thank them for their participation.

The survey was conducted at two points in time, three weeks apart. In the first survey, 383 employees were invited to complete measures of gossip, regulatory focus, and the control variables. We collected 315 responses (82.2% response rate). For the second survey, we asked these 315 employees to complete questions about vicarious learning. We received responses from 241 employees (76.5% response rate). We then invited the supervisors of those 241 employees to rate their subordinate's task performance and interpersonal deviance. Of those supervisors, 214 returned a completed questionnaire (88.8% response rate). The final sample therefore consisted of 214 unique supervisor-subordinate dyads (each dyad comprised one supervisor and one direct subordinate). Of the 214 employee respondents, 75 were female (35.0%). The employees had an average age of 33.14 years ($SD = 6.00$) and had worked for their organization for 5.0 years on average ($SD = 4.62$).

Measures

To ensure equivalence in meaning of the items that we measured, we followed procedures (Brislin, 1980) to back-translate the measures initially written in English into Chinese. Participants responded to the items using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree except for the items measuring coworker gossip, for which the anchors were (1 = never to 5 = always).

Gossip from coworkers. Received gossip from coworkers was assessed using the 10-item scale developed by Brady et al. (2017). Employees were asked to rate how often they heard coworkers talk about each of the items listed. A sample item for negative workplace gossip was ‘At work, my coworkers question an absent coworker’s abilities while talking to another work colleague.’ A sample item for positive workplace gossip was ‘At work, my coworkers compliment an absent coworker’s actions while talking to another work colleague.’ The Cronbach’s alpha was .92 for negative gossip, and .94 for positive gossip.

Regulatory focus. We used the 18-item scale of Neubert, Kacmar, Carlson, Chonko, and Roberts (2008) to measure regulatory focus. A sample item for prevention focus was ‘I am very careful to avoid exposing myself to potential losses at work.’ A sample item for promotion focus was ‘I spend a great deal of time envisioning how to fulfill my aspirations.’ The Cronbach’s alpha for prevention focus was .88, and .93 for promotion focus.

Vicarious learning. Vicarious learning was assessed using Wolfson and colleagues’ (2018) 3-item measure (e.g., ‘Intentionally observing someone do his or her job’). The Cronbach’s alpha for this measure was .88.

Task performance. Supervisors reported subordinates’ performance on three items developed by Peterson, Luthans, Avolio, Walumbwa, and Zhang (2011). A sample item was

‘This employee meets his or her performance expectations.’ The Cronbach’s alpha for this measure was .88.

Interpersonal deviance. We used six-item scale of Aquino, Lewis, and Bradfield (1999) to measure interpersonal deviance ($\alpha = .92$). Supervisors indicated their subordinate’s engagement in certain behaviours (e.g., ‘This employee refused to talk to a coworker’). The Cronbach’s alpha for this measure was .92.

Control variables. We controlled for the effect of working in a specific organization and employees’ gender, age, and organizational tenure, in line with research showing that these variables can influence employees’ self- and other-directed actions (Malamut & Offermann, 2001; Kim, Moon, & Shin, 2019, Ng & Feldman, 2011, Wu et al., 2018 a). Gender was coded as ‘0’ for female and ‘1’ for male, and age and organizational tenure were self-reported in years. The organization was coded as “1” for company A, “2” for company B, and “3” for company C.

Results

Descriptive statistics, correlations, and CFAs

The means, standard deviations, and correlations among the key variables are shown in Table 1. We performed a series of confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) using Mplus 8.0 to assess the distinctiveness of the key variables in our proposed model. As shown in Table 2, the 7-factor model was a good fit to the data ($\chi^2(719) = 1106.80$, CFI = .93, TLI = .92, RMSEA = .05, and SRMR = .05) and fits significantly better than other alternative models. These results provide support for the distinctive factor structure of our study’s constructs.

Insert Tables 1 & 2 about here

Hypotheses testing

Since we collected data from different companies, we ran an analysis of variance to test whether there were systematic differences in ratings of task performance and interpersonal deviance between the organizations (Field & Hole, 2003). The results showed that there were no systematic differences between ratings of task performance ($F(2, 211) = .25, p = .78$) and interpersonal deviance ($F(2, 211) = .18, p = .84$), therefore we proceeded to conduct path analyses with Mplus 8.0 to test the hypothesized model.

The results of mediation and moderation analyses are presented in Table 3. In line with Hypotheses 1 and 2, both negative ($b = .11, SE = .05, p < .05$) and positive ($b = .43, SE = .05, p < .001$) gossip were positively associated with vicarious learning, and vicarious learning was positively associated with task performance ($b = .43, SE = .08, p < .001$) and negatively with interpersonal deviance ($b = -.21, SE = .07, p < .01$).

Hypotheses 3 and 4 predicted that vicarious learning would mediate the relationship between negative and positive gossip and receivers' task performance and interpersonal deviance. Hypothesis 3 was not supported because the indirect effects of negative gossip on task performance ($b = .05, SE = .03, p > .05$) and interpersonal deviance ($b = -.02, SE = .01, p > .05$) were not significant. In line with Hypothesis 4, positive gossip was found to have an indirect effect on task performance ($b = .18, SE = .05, p < .001$) and interpersonal deviance ($b = -.09, SE = .03, p < .01$) via vicarious learning.

Hypotheses 5 and 7 predicted that regulatory focus would moderate the relationship between gossip from coworkers and receivers' vicarious learning. The results showed that prevention focus moderated the association between negative gossip and vicarious learning (b

= .12, $SE = .05$, $p < .05$) and promotion focus moderated the association between positive gossip and vicarious learning ($b = .20$, $SE = .04$, $p < .001$). As indicated in Figure 2, there was an association between negative gossip and vicarious learning for receivers with a high prevention focus ($b = .16$, $p < .01$) but no association for those with a low prevention focus ($b = .05$, $p > .05$). Furthermore, the slope of the association between positive gossip and vicarious learning was stronger for receivers with a high promotion focus ($b = .55$, $p < .001$) but weaker for those with a low promotion focus ($b = .31$, $p < .001$). Thus, Hypotheses 5 and 7 were supported.

 Insert Figures 2 about here

Hypotheses 6 and 8 posited that the indirect effect of coworker gossip on receivers' task performance and interpersonal deviance via vicarious learning is moderated by receivers' regulatory focus. As shown in Table 4, the conditional indirect effect of negative gossip on task performance was statistically significant when prevention focus was high ($b = .07$, $SE = .03$, 95% CI [.02, .14]) but not when prevention focus was low ($b = .02$, $SE = .03$, 95% CI [-.02, .08]); the conditional indirect effect of negative gossip on interpersonal deviance was statistically significant when prevention focus was high ($b = -.03$, $SE = .02$, 95% CI [-.08, -.01]), but not when prevention focus was low ($b = -.01$, $SE = .01$, 95% CI [-.05, .01]).

Similarly, the conditional indirect effect of positive gossip on task performance was stronger for receivers with high ($b = .24$, $SE = .06$, 95% CI [.14, .36]) rather than low promotion focus ($b = .13$, $SE = .04$, 95% CI [.07, .21]). The conditional indirect effect was stronger for receivers with high ($b = -.12$, $SE = .04$, 95% CI [-.20, -.04]) rather than low promotion focus ($b = -.07$, $SE = .03$, 95% CI [-.12, -.02]). The difference between the

conditional indirect effects at high and low levels of promotion focus was significant (for task performance, Δ indirect effect = .10, SE = .03, 95% CI [.06, .18]; for interpersonal deviance, Δ indirect effect = -.05, SE = .02, 95% CI [-.10, -.02]). Therefore, Hypotheses 6 and 8 were supported.

Insert Tables 3 & 4 about here

Study 1: Discussion

The results from Study 1 largely supported the hypothesized model: we found support for the moderated mediation hypotheses, although hypothesis 3 was not supported. We attempted to extend and validate the findings of Study 1 in Study 2 by increasing the time periods between data collection points, as it is important to verify whether the results obtained differ when there is more time between the measures. Further, we used the 10-item job-related gossip scale of Kuo, Chang, Quinton, Lu, and Lee (2015) in Study 2 to check if our results are robust when using other gossip measures. We also controlled for supervisor feedback to examine if gossip stimulates vicarious learning over and above the influence of supervisor feedback because relevant formal feedback about behaviours or abilities helps individuals improve their behaviours (Kluger & Denisi, 1996).

Study 2: Method

Sample and Procedure

We collected data from employees and their direct supervisors of a manufacturing company located in China. All participation was voluntary and confidentiality was ensured. We used the same survey matching method as in Study 1. Senior management of the organization supported our data collection by encouraging employees to participate in our

study. We collected data over three time periods separated by 3 weeks. At Time 1, subordinates provided information on coworker gossip, demographics, and supervisor feedback. At Time 2, subordinates rated their regulatory focus and vicarious learning. At Time 3, supervisors rated their perceptions of subordinates' task performance and interpersonal deviance. We distributed surveys to 325 subordinates at Time 1; 263 provided complete surveys (i.e., 80.9% valid data), 216 subordinates complete responses at Time 2 (i.e., 82.1% valid data), and 189 supervisors complete responses at Time 3 (i.e., 87.5% valid data). The final sample consists of 189 unique supervisor–subordinate dyads.

Among the 189 participating subordinates, 70% were male, and their average age was 33.44 years ($SD = 6.19$), and average organizational tenure was 5.19 years ($SD = 4.67$).

Measures

We used the same measures for prevention focus ($\alpha = .90$), promotion focus ($\alpha = .93$), vicarious learning ($\alpha = .91$), task performance ($\alpha = .90$), and interpersonal deviance ($\alpha = .91$) as in Study 1. A 10-item scale developed by Kuo et al. (2015) was used to measure coworker gossip. Employees were asked to rate how often they heard coworkers talking about each of the items listed. The response options ranged from 1 (never) to 5 (always). 'My coworkers talk about an absent coworker's carelessness and poor work engagement' is a sample item for negative workplace gossip ($\alpha = .92$), and 'My coworkers talk about an absent coworker's credibility in job role and experience' is a sample item for positive workplace gossip ($\alpha = .93$).

Control variables As in Study 1, we controlled for employees' gender, age, and organizational tenure. Supervisor feedback was assessed using George and Zhou's (2001)

7-item scale (negative feedback, $\alpha = .85$; positive feedback, $\alpha = .84$). A sample item for negative feedback is 'My supervisor often gives me negative feedback,' and a sample item for positive feedback is 'My supervisor often tells me that I do a good job.'

Results

Descriptive statistics, correlations, and CFAs

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations for variables in Study 2. The CFA results (see Table 2) indicated good model fit of the nine-factor model (in which all variables in the study are modeled as separate factors) to the data ($\chi^2(998) = 1376.64$, CFI = .94, TLI = .93, RMSEA = .05, and SRMR = .05). The nine-factor model fits significantly better than the alternative models we tested (see Table 2).

Hypothesis testing

Summaries of hypotheses tests are presented in Tables 3 and 4. In line with Hypotheses 1 and 2, both negative ($b = .14$, $SE = .05$, $p < .01$) and positive gossip ($b = .60$, $SE = .06$, $p < .001$) were positively associated with vicarious learning, and vicarious learning was positively associated with task performance ($b = .31$, $SE = .09$, $p < .001$) and negatively with interpersonal deviance ($b = -.28$, $SE = .07$, $p < .001$).

In line with Hypotheses 3 and 4, negative gossip had an indirect effect on task performance ($b = .04$, $SE = .02$, $p < .05$) and interpersonal deviance ($b = -.04$, $SE = .02$, $p < .05$) via vicarious learning; positive gossip had an indirect effect on task performance ($b = .19$, $SE = .06$, $p < .01$) and interpersonal deviance ($b = -.17$, $SE = .05$, $p < .001$) via vicarious learning.

Supporting Hypotheses 5 and 7, the interaction between negative gossip and prevention focus was significantly associated with vicarious learning ($b = .20$, $SE = .05$, $p < .001$), and the interaction between positive gossip and promotion focus was significantly associated with vicarious learning ($b = .30$, $SE = .05$, $p < .001$). As indicated in Figure 3, the slope for negative gossip was stronger for high prevention focus ($b = .26$, $p < .001$) than for low prevention focus ($b = .03$, $p > .05$); the slope for positive gossip was stronger for high promotion focus ($b = .80$, $p < .001$) than for low promotion focus ($b = .41$, $p < .001$).

Moreover, as shown in Table 4, the conditional indirect effect of negative gossip on task performance was statistically significant when prevention focus was high ($b = .08$, $SE = .03$, 95% CI [.031, .15]) rather than low ($b = .01$, $SE = .02$, 95% CI [-.03, .05]); the conditional indirect effect of negative gossip on interpersonal deviance was significant when prevention focus was high ($b = -.07$, $SE = .03$, 95% CI [-.13, -.03]), but not when prevention focus was low ($b = -.01$, $SE = .02$, 95% CI [-.05, .03]).

Furthermore, positive gossip had a significant conditional indirect effect on task performance at high ($b = .24$, $SE = .08$, 95% CI [.11, .41]) and low ($b = .13$, $SE = .04$, 95% CI [.05, .22]) promotion focus; positive gossip had a significant conditional indirect effect on interpersonal deviance at high ($b = -.22$, $SE = .06$, 95% CI [-.34, -.11]) and low ($b = -.12$, $SE = .03$, 95% CI [-.18, -.05]) promotion focus. Importantly, the difference between the conditional indirect effects at high and low levels of promotion focus was significant (for task performance, Δ indirect effect = .12, $SE = .04$, 95% CI [.05, .22]; for interpersonal deviance, Δ indirect effect = -.11, $SE = .03$, 95% CI [-.18, -.05]). Therefore, Hypotheses 6 and 8 were supported.

General discussion

Previous research has demonstrated that gossip receivers can learn from workplace gossip (Bai et al., 2019; Martinescu et al., 2014; Jolly & Chang, 2021). This study aimed to understand the relationship between gossip from coworkers and two important work outcomes of gossip receivers: task performance and interpersonal deviance. Drawing upon social learning theory (Bandura, 1997) and regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1996, 1997), our work identifies factors that stimulate gossip receivers to learn and engage in adaptive behaviours. The results from two studies provided robust evidence that gossip was indirectly associated with receivers' high task performance and low interpersonal deviance through vicarious learning, and this was conditional upon their regulatory foci. Identifying vicarious learning as a mediator helps explain gossip's positive functions in the workplace and offers a nuanced understanding of how gossip receivers benefit from positive and negative gossip. Furthermore, our studies shed novel light regarding the role of regulatory foci as factors that can explain why relationships between gossip and positive organizational outcomes are more pronounced for some receivers than for others. Results demonstrated that individuals with a high prevention focus are especially likely to learn from negative gossip, whereas individuals with a high promotion focus are likely to learn from positive gossip and apply these lessons in performing better and behaving less deviantly.

Theoretical implications

This study makes several important theoretical contributions. First, research on how receivers respond to workplace gossip is still at a nascent stage (Bai et al., 2019) and our work enriches the gossip literature by explaining when and how gossip from coworkers has a

positive effect on receivers. Much of the literature on workplace gossip has suggested that workplace gossip is harmful and costly, especially for targets (Kuo et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2018; Wu et al., 2018 a; Wu et al., 2018 b). The current research underscores the significance of receiving gossip from coworkers for vicarious learning, which helps explain how gossip can benefit receivers and subsequently their organization, by increasing performance and reducing deviance. This challenges the view of gossip as a destructive behaviour in organizations, and enhances our understanding of the mechanisms and conditions under which gossip may be beneficial for individuals' work outcomes.

Second, we advance current knowledge about workplace gossip by exploring the benefits of both negative and positive gossip for receivers. Prior research has primarily focused on negative gossip and ignored the functions of positive gossip (see Zhou, Fan, Cheng, & Fan, 2021; Bai et al., 2019). Our research addresses this gap in the literature by examining both negative and positive workplace gossip, which is necessary for understanding more comprehensively the role of gossip for learning and its effects on employee outcomes (Brady et al., 2017). Moreover, unlike Bai and colleagues's (2019) research, which focused on supervisor gossip, we focus on a more pervasive, and accessible form of gossip – coworker gossip (Martinescu et al., 2019). Thus, we expand the workplace gossip literature by documenting the positive functions of receiving gossip from coworkers.

Third, prior research has suggested that workplace gossip is an effective way to communicate organizational norms and thus constrain organizational members' destructive behaviours (Dunbar, 2004; Brady et al., 2017). However, prior research has not provided substantial empirical support for this claim, especially in an organizational context. By

demonstrating the inhibitory effect of gossip from coworkers on receivers' deviant behaviours, our research challenges the traditional view of workplace gossip that categorized workplace gossip as a form of deviance (e.g., Robinson & Bennett, 1995), and supports the position that typical workplace gossip is a normative behaviour itself (Brady et al., 2017). As such, we responded to Brady et al.'s (2017) call for investigating how workplace gossip relates to deviance and makes an essential empirical contribution in understanding the consequences of workplace gossip.

Fourth, our work contributes to the literature on social learning and workplace gossip by examining the role of vicarious learning. Although Baumeister et al. (2004) argued that workplace gossip functions as a learning mechanism by providing useful information on succeeding or avoiding failure, few studies have yet focused on this learning process (Bai et al., 2019; Jolly & Chang, 2021). Moreover, Brady et al. (2017) called for research to explore *how* workplace gossip relates to employee work outcomes and processes. Our findings are important, as they indicate that vicarious learning provides a compelling explanation for how gossip from coworkers influences different work outcomes.

Fifth, this study is the first to investigate how individual differences (i.e., regulatory foci) influence the effect of gossip from coworkers on vicarious learning, therefore meaningfully extending the social learning and gossip literature. Although the literature on receivers' reactions to workplace gossip is dominated by the learning perspective (Bai et al., 2019; Baumeister et al., 2004; Martinescu et al., 2014; Jolly & Chang, 2021) and possible self-improvement and self-protection responses to workplace gossip about others are considered, these reactions are often posited as the result of social comparisons (Martinescu et al., 2014).

Thus, our work addresses an implicit assumption in the literature (see Baumeister et al., 2014), that all gossip receivers learn vicariously from workplace gossip, and demonstrates that receivers' regulatory focus exerts a strong influence on their reactions. Moreover, our integration of the learning perspective with regulatory focus, therefore, addresses the calls of Bai et al. (2019) to develop gossip receivers' perspectives further and provide a comprehensive explanation for the effect of workplace gossip on receivers.

Practical implications

Our findings have practical implications for managers by explaining why and when gossip receivers might benefit from gossiping with coworkers. Our research showed that vicarious learning, triggered by gossip, is efficacious for boosting receivers' task performance and inhibiting interpersonal deviance. Based on these findings, and in line with earlier work by Brady et al. (2019), we recommend that managers should not view gossip as deviant or malicious, but rather as a functional behaviour that supports learning and contributes to desirable behaviours. Managers should recognize gossip as a potentially effective channel for disseminating information valuable for learning, that receivers use according to their learning needs, as shaped by their regulatory focus. Because employees with different regulatory foci may find positive or negative gossip more valuable for learning, managers should be aware that individual differences affect how employees respond to and use gossip at work.

Although our findings indicate that exchanging gossip helps employees learn how to behave in desirable ways, ample research has identified adverse effects of workplace gossip for targets, such as higher cynicism and lower prosocial behaviour (see Kuo et al., 2015; Kuo

et al., 2018; Wu et al., 2018 a). Therefore, we do not encourage managers to motivate employees to engage in workplace gossip. Instead, managers should be neutral to workplace gossip and try to eliminate the instances of malicious gossip that is shared with a clear purpose to harm others (research findings indicate that these instances are relatively rare, though, see for example Beersma & van Kleef, 2012).

Furthermore, based on our findings, when employees are overly interested in hearing gossip, managers could infer that employees' learning needs are not met, and they rely on gossip in order to understand how to perform well and avoid deviant behaviours. Therefore, we advise managers to assess whether employees could benefit from other formal and informal learning opportunities (Wolfson et al, 2018). For example, managers could help create a psychologically safe environment, in which employees feel encouraged to openly share their successes and failures, so that others can learn from these rather than gossip. Such interventions can enhance vicarious learning and may support desirable behaviours, as well as reduce the need to seek information through gossip. More openly sharing experiences and useful information could also help build positive social exchange relationships between employees who help each other (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005), and would have the advantage of reducing adverse effects of gossip for targets.

Finally, in order to support employee functioning, managers should provide clear and transparent information about organizational structure, procedures, planned changes in the organization, the roles of different employees and the status of work progress in shared projects. Access to information and wider dissemination is likely to reduce uncertainty

among employees and enable them to learn more directly than through gossip about what is expected of them and how to best fulfill their duties.

Limitations and future research directions

Our study has several limitations that merit discussion and that inform future research. First, we only investigated the positive consequences of gossip from the receivers' perspective; nevertheless, it would be valuable to simultaneously investigate the benefits and costs of gossip for gossip receivers. Specifically, positive gossip could also trigger a sense of inferiority in receivers (Wert & Salovey, 2004), undermining their sense of self-efficacy. In addition to providing the receivers with information about organizational norms and job performance, negative workplace gossip might also generate anxiety among receivers about becoming a target of negative gossip themselves (Wert & Salovey, 2004, Martinescu et al., 2014). Future research should also expand the range of deviant behaviours investigated. For example, organizational deviance is described as employee behaviour that threatens the well-being of an organization. Examining whether workplace gossip decreases receivers' organizational deviance in a similar way as it decreases their interpersonal deviance would provide a more comprehensive explanation of the learning effects of workplace gossip.

Second, we did not compare the effect of gossip with other types of communication. Gossip is a unique type of communication because targets are absent from the conversation. As such, gossip is likely to transmit some information that might not be shared in the target's presence. Therefore, it would be interesting for future research to explore whether the impact of gossip on receivers' vicarious learning differs from other types of communication, such as

direct observation of targets, interactions with them, or browsing through social media, which can also offer specific types of information.

Third, although regulatory focus is theoretically relevant to our model, other contextual factors may also be relevant. It would be valuable for future research to consider the role of organizational climate, which reflects the perceptions of conditions and can be deliberately shaped by organizational practices, routines, and rewards (Ostroff, Kinicki, & Muhammad, 2013). For example, organizations with highly competitive climates may sensitize gossip receivers to lessons to be learned from positive gossip which may help them understand how to gain a competitive advantage. In contrast, cooperative climates could motivate individuals to protect shared values and sensitize them to norm violations (Brewer & Chen, 2007), thus making gossip receivers more likely to respond to negative gossip, which may teach them how to best behave to meet cooperative expectations of the group.

Fourth, in the current study we did not assess gossip veracity and did not examine what happens when what people learn from gossip is false or inaccurate. Studies that examined veracity perceptions of gossip demonstrated that gossip receivers overwhelmingly believe gossip (e.g., Dores Cruz et al., in press; Fonseca & Peters, 2018). However, this might relate to another research finding that shows that people usually corroborate gossip from multiple sources and their own observations to assess gossip veracity (Sommerfeld et al., 2008), and might focus less on gossip that is clearly false. Nevertheless, it would be interesting to examine to what extent actual and perceived veracity of gossip influences the relationship between gossip and vicarious learning in future studies.

Fifth, our empirical findings suggest that norms communicated through gossip were in line with organizational goals and values (i.e., criticism of undesirable behaviours and praise of desirable behaviours). However, in certain situations individuals may perceive a mismatch between the organizational norms and alternate standards for behaviours (Packer, 2008). For example, the norms could prescribe performing under high work pressure or accepting unfair wages, and alternative behaviours adopted by employees might be to waste productive time or sabotage relationships with clients, or the quality of products. In these situations, employees may use gossip to influence other colleagues in learning and adhering to these alternative norms, for example by using gossip to praise negative and criticize positive behaviours. This situation may occur when organizations are perceived to have practices incompatible with employee rights and well-being. Future research could explore how vicarious learning is affected when the norms and behaviours conveyed by gossip depart from those endorsed by the supervisor or organization. It is interesting to study whether in this case, gossip will lead employees to follow the alternative norms rather than those endorsed by the organization.

Finally, our study was conducted in a single societal context (China). Although previous research showed that workplace gossip has cross-cultural generalizability effects on various organizational outcomes (Brady et al., 2017), it will be valuable for future research to enhance the generalizability of our findings and assess how cultural factors influence receivers' responses to gossip from coworkers.

Conclusion

This article provides insights into how and when individuals respond to receiving gossip from coworkers by engaging in adaptive behaviours. Our findings demonstrate that receivers' regulatory foci influence the relationship between gossip and task performance and interpersonal deviance (through vicarious learning). As such, our work adds a critical component to growing streams of research in describing workplace gossip as a beneficial process for its receivers.

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Table 1*Descriptive statistics and correlations (Studies 1 and 2)*

Variable	Mean (SD) Study 1	Mean (SD) Study 2	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Negative gossip	2.76 (.66)	2.83 (.78)		-.21**	.13	.01	.08	.10	.07	.01	-.09	-.09	-.08	.04
2. Positive gossip	2.41 (.82)	2.48 (.92)	-.08		-.09	-.35**	.34**	.23**	-.09	-.02	.07	-.03	.07	.07
3. Prevention focus	2.55 (.48)	2.51 (.58)	.10	.06		-.30**	.19**	.01	.03	.11	-.09	-.06	-.10	.01
4. Promotion focus	3.65 (.61)	3.72 (.65)	-.01	-.31**	-.29**		.08	.15*	-.01	-.07	.01	.05	.09	.06
5. Vicarious learning	2.60 (.80)	2.63 (.96)	.14*	.33**	.14*	.09		.46**	-.29**	.03	-.05	-.04	.09	-.01
6. Task performance	2.41 (.84)	2.69 (.87)	.04	.30**	-.01	-.14*	.45**		-.12	-.11	-.01	.01	.05	.04
7. Interpersonal deviance	2.28 (.77)	2.41 (.76)	.12	.01	.10	-.09	-.14*	.04		.02	.10	.06	.10	-.02
8. Gender	0.65 (.48)	0.70 (.46)	.02	-.01	.11	-.14*	.03	-.08	.06		-.01	-.02	-.08	-.02
9. Age	33.14 (6.00)	33.44 (6.19)	-.08	.08	-.02	.04	-.04	-.04	.15*	-.02		.78**	.05	.08
10. Tenure	5.00 (4.62)	5.19 (4.67)	-.04	.01	-.01	.08	.01	-.08	.13	-.01	.67**		.01	.06
11. Positive feedback		2.32 (.68)												.13
12. Negative feedback		1.96 (.56)												
13. Company	1.80 (.66)		.04	.09	-.07	.03	.03	.02	.02	-.14*	.10	.09		

Note. Study 1: $N = 214$ (correlations below the diagonal), Study 2: $N = 189$ (correlations above the diagonal). In Study 1, company is coded “1” = company A, “2” = company B, and “3” = company C. In both studies, gender is coded “1” = male, “0” = female.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$ (two-tailed).

Table 2*Results of confirmatory factor analysis (Studies 1 and 2)*

Model	χ^2	df	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR
Study 1						
Seven-factor model	1106.80	719	.93	.92	.05	.04
Five-factor model ^a	1903.08	730	.79	.77	.09	.10
Four-factor model ^b	4039.79	734	.40	.36	.15	.15
Two-factor model ^c	4776.94	739	.26	.22	.16	.17
One-factor model ^d	4846.77	740	.25	.21	.17	.19
Study 2						
Nine-factor model	1376.64	998	.94	.93	.05	.05
Seven-factor model ^a	2506.30	1013	.74	.73	.09	.12
Six-factor model ^b	2948.13	1019	.67	.65	.10	.12
Three-factor model ^c	4373.66	1031	.43	.40	.13	.16
Two-factor model ^c	5499.64	1033	.23	.20	.15	.20
One-factor model ^d	6166.33	1034	.12	.08	.16	.21

Note. ^a This model combines variables measured at Time 2 to form a Time 2 factor.

^b This model combines variables measured at Time 1 to form a Time 1 factor.

^c This model combines variables reported by employees to form an employee-rating factor and combines variables reported by supervisors to form a supervisor-rating factor.

^d This model combines all of the measurement items into one factor.

^e This model combines variables measured at Time 1 to form a Time 1 factor, combines variables measured at Time 2 to form a Time 2 factor, and combines variables measured at Time 3 to form a Time 3 factor.

Table 3*Results of mediation and moderation analyses (Studies 1 and 2)*

Variables	Study 1			Study 2		
	Vicarious learning	Task performance	Interpersonal deviance	Vicarious learning	Task performance	Interpersonal deviance
Age	-.05 (.02)*	.04 (.02)	.02 (.02)	-.04 (.02)	-.01 (.02)	.03 (.02)
Gender	.06 (.10)	-.15 (.11)	-.12 (.11)	.05 (.11)	-.20 (.12)	.03 (.12)
Organizational tenure	.06 (.03)*	-.06 (.02)*	.01 (.03)	.06 (.03)	.02 (.03)	-.02 (.03)
Company	-.03 (.07)	-.03 (.08)	-.01 (.08)	-	-	-
Negative feedback	-	-	-	-.14 (.09)	-.10 (.09)	-.08 (.10)
Positive feedback	-	-	-	.01 (.08)	-.01 (.08)	.05 (.08)
Negative gossip (NG)	.11 (.05)*	.01 (.07)	.12 (.05)*	.14 (.05)**	.11 (.07)	.09 (.06)
Prevention focus (PVF)	.18 (.06)**	-.04 (.06)	.10 (.06)	.25 (.06)***	.01 (.07)	.10 (.06)
NG×PVF	.12 (.05)*	-	-	.20 (.05)***	-	-
Positive gossip (PG)	.43 (.05)***	.14 (.08)	.07 (.06)	.60 (.06)***	.20 (.09)*	.06 (.07)
Promotion focus (PMF)	.13 (.06)*	.03 (.07)	-.04 (.06)	.15 (.06)*	.13 (.08)	.06 (.08)
PG×PMF	.20 (.04)***	-	-	.30 (.05)***	-	-
Vicarious learning	-	.43 (.08)***	-.21 (.07)**	-	.31 (.09)***	-.28 (.07)***
R^2	.36	.10	.26	.48	.12	.28

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 4*Moderated mediation results (Studies 1 and 2)*

Independent variable		Task performance			Interpersonal deviance		
		Prevention focus					
		High	Low	Difference	High	Low	Difference
Negative Gossip	Study 1	.07* (.03)	.02 (.03)	.05* (.02)	-.03* (.02)	-.01 (.01)	-.02* (.01)
		[.02, .14]	[-.02, .08]	[.01, .09]	[-.08, -.01]	[-.05, .01]	[-.06, -.01]
	Study 2	.08** (.03)	.01 (.02)	.07** (.03)	-.07** (.03)	-.01 (.02)	-.07** (.02)
		[.03, .15]	[-.03, .05]	[.03, .14]	[-.13, -.03]	[-.05, .03]	[-.12, -.03]
		Promotion focus					
		High	Low	Difference	High	Low	Difference
Positive gossip	Study 1	.24*** (.06)	.13*** (.04)	.10** (.03)	-.12** (.04)	-.07** (.03)	-.05** (.02)
		[.14, .36]	[.07, .21]	[.06, .18]	[-.20, -.04]	[-.12, -.02]	[-.10, -.02]
	Study 2	.24** (.08)	.13** (.04)	.12** (.04)	-.22*** (.06)	-.11*** (.03)	-.11** (.03)
		[.11, .41]	[.05, .22]	[.05, .22]	[-.34, -.11]	[-.19, -.06]	[-.18, -.05]

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Figure 1*Theoretical model*

Figure 2

Interaction between negative workplace gossip and regulatory focus in predicting vicarious learning (Study 1)

Figure 3

Interaction between positive workplace gossip and regulatory focus in predicting vicarious learning (Study 2)

Supplementary analyses

In addition to testing the hypothesized effects, we also conducted exploratory analyses testing the moderating effects of prevention focus on how receivers respond to positive gossip and promotion focus on how receivers respond to negative gossip. Using Mplus 8.0, we conduct these tests with the datasets of Study 1 and Study 2. The interaction between negative gossip and promotion focus was negatively related to vicarious learning (Study 1, $b = -.13$, $SE = .04$, $p < .01$; Study 2, $b = -.19$, $SE = .05$, $p < .001$), while the interaction between positive gossip and prevention focus was not significantly related to vicarious learning (Study 1, $b = -.05$, $SE = .04$, $p > .05$; Study 2, $b = -.09$, $SE = .04$, $p > .05$). Furthermore, as shown in Table 5, the conditional indirect effect of negative gossip on task performance (Study 1, $b = .07$, $SE = .03$, 95% CI [.03, .14]; Study 2, $b = .09$, $SE = .03$, 95% CI [.04, .17]) and interpersonal deviance (Study 1, $b = -.04$, $SE = .02$, 95% CI [-.10, -.01]; Study 2, $b = -.09$, $SE = .03$, 95% CI [-.15, -.04]) were significant for receivers with a lower promotion focus. The conditional indirect effect of positive gossip on task performance (Study 1, Δ indirect effect = $-.02$, $SE = .02$, 95% CI [-.06, .01]; Study 2, Δ indirect effect = $-.04$, $SE = .02$, 95% CI [-.08, .01]) and interpersonal deviance (Study 1, Δ indirect effect = $.01$, $SE = .01$, 95% CI [-.01, .04]; Study 2, Δ indirect effect = $.03$, $SE = .02$, 95% CI [-.01, .07]) were not significant. Overall, the supplementary analyses are in line with our inferences about the role of regulatory focus in learning from gossip from one's coworkers.

Table 5*Moderated mediation results (Supplementary Analyses)*

Outcomes	Independent Variables	Study 1			Study 2		
		Prevention Focus					
		High	Low	Difference	High	Low	Difference
Task Performance	Positive Workplace	.16 (.04)	.18 (.05)	-.02 (.02)	.19 (.06)	.22 (.06)	-.04 (.02)
		[.09, .25]	[.10, .28]	[-.06, .01]	[.09, .31]	[.11, .35]	[-.08, .01]
Interpersonal Deviance	Gossip	-.10 (.03)	-.11 (.04)	.01 (.01)	-.17 (.05)	-.21 (.05)	.03 (.02)
		[-.17, -.04]	[-.19, -.05]	[-.01, .04]	[-.27, -.10]	[-.31, -.12]	[-.01, .07]
Promotion Focus							
		High	Low	Difference	High	Low	Difference
Task Performance	Negative Workplace	.01 (.02)	.07 (.03)	-.06 (.03)	.01 (.02)	.09 (.03)	-.08 (.03)
		[-.03, .07]	[.03, .14]	[-.13, -.02]	[-.03, .05]	[.04, .17]	[-.17, -.03]
Interpersonal Deviance	Gossip	.01 (.01)	-.04 (.02)	.04 (.02)	-.01 (.02)	-.09 (.03)	.08 (.03)
		[-.04, .02]	[-.10, -.01]	[.01, .09]	[-.05, .03]	[-.15, -.04]	[.04, .15]

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.