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# Workplace gossip erodes proactive work behavior: anxiety and neuroticism as underlying mechanisms

Chengyin Gao<sup>1,2</sup>, Sadia Shaheen<sup>3\*</sup> and Muhammad Waseem Bari<sup>3</sup>

## Abstract

**Purpose** Services organizations highly value proactive employees. Managers are interested in promoting frontline employees' proactive behavior because proactivity is crucial for organizational success. The mechanism of negative workplace gossip on workplace prosocial behavior is unclear. This research investigates the factors hindering this valuable behavior, specifically focusing on negative workplace gossip and employee anxiety, through the lens of the conservation of resources theory.

**Design/methodology/approach** Data were collected from a sample of 352 female frontline employees across diverse service organizations using a two-wave design. Statistical analyses were conducted using appropriate software (e.g., SPSS, AMOS) to test the hypothesized relationships.

**Findings** The study's findings reveal that negative workplace gossip reduces employees' proactive work behavior, and anxiety mediates the relationship between NWGS and proactive work behavior. Further, Neuroticism strengthens the relationship between NWGS and anxiety. These results offer a novel perspective on the detrimental consequences of gossip in services sector.

**Practical implications** **Originality/value** While research on negative gossip exists, this study specifically examines its impact on frontline service employees, a crucial but under-studied group in service organizations.

**Keywords** Negative workplace gossip, Employee anxiety, Proactive work behavior, Neuroticism, Conservation of resource theory

## Introduction

Today's business environment is constantly evolving, requiring employees to take initiative and drive positive changes in their work. By being proactive, employees can better manage their growing workload and seize new opportunities as they arise [1, 2]. Proactive work behavior means taking initiative and challenging the current situation in an anticipatory manner rather than a passive manner [3–5]. Essentially, it's a self-centered behavior that employees exhibit without the instructions of the supervisor in order to change the status quo [4]. Proactive work behavior enhances individual as well

\*Correspondence:

Sadia Shaheen

Sadia\_shaheen5@yahoo.com

<sup>1</sup>School of Accounting, Hainan Vocational University of Science and Technology, Haikou, China

<sup>2</sup>Lincoln University College, Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia

<sup>3</sup>Lyallpur Business School, Government College University Faisalabad, Jinnah Block, New Campus Jhang Road, Faisalabad, Pakistan



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as organizational performance [6]. Thus, it is essential to investigate the predictors of proactive work behavior in order to enhance organizational performance (such as growth, image, and profitability as well as employee outcomes such as satisfaction, engagement, and career growth) [6, 7]. However, available research has depicted that negative workplace events reduce proactive work behavior [8, 9].

Multiple antecedents of PWB have been examined in the current literature such as individual factors (e.g. high negativity effect, personality types (McCormick et al., 2019; Parker et al., 2019), and organizational factors (e.g., role stressors (He et al., 2022), time pressure (Sonnen- tag & Sychala, 2012) organizational climate (Caniëls & Baaten, 2019), abusive supervision (Ouyang et al., 2015)), and contextual factors includes leadership styles, job design, and autonomy (Nurjaman et al., 2019; Permata & Mangundjaya, 2021).

Despite the fact that gossip is a widespread issue in workplaces, the negative side of gossip, particularly among frontline service employees, remains under- investigated. In services sectors employee proactive work behavior helps in improving customers' views about the quality of the services, satisfying customers' needs, and increasing organizational performance [2, 9]. Employees' proactive work behavior is not only necessary for production organizations but is equally important for service organizations. A supportive working environment boosts employee energy and they come up with the motivation to perform their duties in an efficient manner [7]. But workplace stressors such as negative workplace gossip reduce employees' energies and enhance negative emotions at the workplace such as emotional exhaustion and anxiety [10].

Gossip is considered as ever-present in the workplace because 90% of the dialogues consisted of gossip [11]. Gossips defined as colloquial and judgmental conversation about someone who is not present [5]. Gossip damages the mutual relationship between all the colleagues who are involved in spreading gossip (Liu et al. 2020). Additionally, it can also harm employee attachment to the organization [12]. Several studies have highlighted its adverse consequences in the workplace. For instance, workplace gossip can have a negative impact on knowledge sharing [13], employee satisfaction [14], commitment to the organization [15] and employee creativity [13, 16]. However, little is known in the service sector context, particularly where frontline employees continuously have to serve and maintain harmonious relationships with customers or clients. For instance, in the nursing profession, nurses have to serve patients in a timely manner when they need assistance, treatment, and other help. The same is true for other frontline employees such as female frontline workers working in salons,

and serving as bus hostesses referred as pink color jobs). In such types of professions, frontline employees have to maintain a high level of interaction and collaboration with the customers as well as coworkers. Due to this reason, we particularly focus on the services sector to investigate the impact of workplace gossip on the proactive behavior of frontline employees. Gossip can be categorized as positive workplace gossips and negative workplace gossip [16]. We are particularly focusing on the negative workplace gossip that is receiving considerable attention from academic researchers and practitioners. Negative gossip often spreads faster and has a stronger influence on others than positive rumors [17]. Despite its prevalence, the impact of negative workplace gossip (NGW) on frontline employees' proactive work behavior within the service sector remains under investigation. NWG can have an adverse impact on employee's emotions, perceptions, and behavior [18]. When employees find themselves as a victim of NGW it can cause them to go through distress and psychological unrest [19]. Consequently, NWG hinders the ability of employees to focus on core responsibilities due to psychological unrest and stress.

Employee personality traits, like neuroticism, might influence how negative workplace gossip (NWG) indirectly affects proactive work behavior through anxiety. Studies have shown a positive connection between exposure to negative workplace gossip (NWG) and destructive behaviors among employees high in neuroticism [20]. Employees with high neurotic personalities react more toward negative events in contrast to those employees who score low in neuroticism [21]. Researchers agree that neuroticism aggravates the connection between NWG and negative emotional outcomes such as frustration and envy [21]. Neuroticism also results in depressive symptoms in employees. In a similar vein, the connection between unpleasant events and negative outcomes is stronger for employees who are high in neuroticism [20]. Therefore, we propose, that neuroticism stronger the impact of NWG on anxiety, which results in decreasing their proactive work behavior.

To explain how NWG and proactive work behavior are linked, we rely on the conservation of resource theory [22]. Negative workplace gossip can be viewed as a resource threat [23]. It can damage one's reputation, social standing, and psychological well-being, thereby depleting personal resources [24]. When exposed to negative gossip, individuals may experience increased anxiety. This emotional response can further deplete personal resources, making it difficult to engage in proactive work behaviors. Thus, we tried to contribute to the current literature in several ways. First, this research aims to expand the current understanding of negative workplace gossip (NWG) by examining its impact on

employee proactiveness. We propose that NWG not only fosters negative employee behaviors like deviance but also has the potential to deplete positive behaviors like proactive work behaviors. Second, while prior research has explored the link between negative workplace gossip (NWG) and employee proactiveness through emotional responses, this study sheds light on employee anxiety as a potential, yet unexplored, mediating factor in this relationship. Third, this research delves specifically into how neuroticism might amplify the effect of negative workplace gossip on employee anxiety. This clarifies how negative workplace gossip (NWG) is particularly problematic for employees who are more sensitive to stressors due to their personality traits characterized by higher levels of neuroticism. We prioritize in-depth exploration of how these factors (neuroticism and anxiety) influence the behavioral consequences of negative gossip, rather than simply examining a wider range of potential effects.

The manuscript follows an academic structure. It begins with a literature review, followed by a methods section. The results of the study are then presented, followed by a discussion of their implications section. The paper concludes with limitations and suggestions for future research.

## Theory and hypothesis

### Impact of workplace negative gossip and proactive work behavior

The aim of this study is to explore negative workplace gossip from the perspective of the gossipers. This viewpoint is closely linked to workplace victimization [25], where the target perceives themselves as a victim. Negative workplace gossip influences workplace attitudes and behaviors in various ways. Employees can often sense when they are the subject of gossip due to noticeable changes in the environment and the suspicious behavior of others [26]. For example, colleagues may stop talking when the target approaches or avoid making eye contact [27]. Conversely, some individuals may inform the target about the negative evaluations made by others [8]. Negative workplace gossip often involves hostile assessments of the target and is considered an informal conversation that can damage the target's image and reputation (Fay & Urbach, 2023).

The most common topics which can be discussed about the victim contain affairs, divorce, job titles, etc. [8]. These types the topics are commonly discussed about the frontline females who regularly interact with the customers. The nature of negative workplace gossip depends upon the situation and nature of the relationship with the victim. Research suggests that negative workplace gossip (NWG) can have detrimental effects on employees. It can erode their confidence, weaken their motivation to work, decrease their overall engagement, and hinder

their proactiveness [7]. Employees tend to involve in proactive work behavior when they found support from the work environment [28]. Workplace events and situational factors are essential components of employees' proactive work behavior [7]. On the contrary workplace stressor and unpleasant situations hinder employees' proactive work behavior [29]. NWG acts as a stressor and influences employees' positive work behavior. Thus, to cope with such stressors the victim needs to utilize his essential psychological resources. According to the COR theory, the depletion of employee psychological resources leads to lower performance and difficulties in handling workplace situations [30, 31]. Therefore, employees safeguard their resources by not utilizing them at the workplace. Proactive work behavior is not a mandatory behavior of employees and it is out of the punishment and rewards parameters. Thus, employees who deplete their resources due to workplace stressors (such as NWG) are less likely involved in proactive work behavior.

We therefore hypothesized.

**H1** NWG is negatively linked with employee proactive work behavior.

### The mediating role of anxiety in the relationship between workplace negative gossip and proactive work behavior

Research indicates that workplace stressors, such as negative workplace gossip (NWGS), can drain employees' psychological and social resources, increasing the likelihood of undesirable workplace behaviors. These behaviors may include deviant actions (e.g., sabotage, theft), withdrawal behaviors (e.g., absenteeism, reduced communication), and diminished work engagement [17, 32]. Numerous researchers have found that stressful situations lead to tension, frustration, and exhaustion, which impair employees' ability to perform their tasks proactively [33]. NWGS, as a workplace stressor, causes the victim to feel depressed and experience negative emotions. According to Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, negative evaluations by others, such as negative gossip, can result in frustration, stress, and anxiety, weakening employees' competence to perform their daily tasks proactively (Hobfoll, 2011a; Malik, 2023). This study suggests that NWGS may deplete employees' emotional resources, leading to feelings of frustration and anxiety [34]. These negative emotions can, in turn, hinder job performance by reducing concentration and increasing the likelihood of errors.

Particularly, when the victim is unable to respond back to the gossiper he became a victim of anxiety. Under high stress, employees may struggle to manage their energy and resources, potentially leading to performance decline. Proactive work behavior is defined as anticipatory, self-started, persistent, and future-oriented

behavior that beats the mandatory requirements of one's job [35]. Due to the frequent nature of problems faced by frontline employees, a proactive approach is crucial. By anticipating and addressing potential issues, they can prevent them from recurring in the future. The researcher described proactive behavior at the organizational level, team level, and individual level [36]. But the focus of this study is individual frontline employees' proactive work behavior. Employees need a great amount of energy and support from the work environment in order to exhibit proactive work behavior [37]. Effective proactive work behavior requires a future-focused mindset. By analyzing the current situation and anticipating potential needs, employees can plan and take action to ensure successful task completion [38]. Therefore, employees who exhibit proactive work behavior need energy, support, and a compassionate work environment. Thus, a proactive employee needs extra physical as well as psychological resources at the workplace so that he can perform in a proactive manner [39]. In a situation where employees suffer from any type of stress such as the workplace gossip employees suffer from anxiety which depletes their valuable resources [32]. Thus, the employees who became victims of gossip remained less interested in exhibiting proactive work behavior. But they tried to restore their resources by avoiding any exceptional work such as proactive work behavior. Proactivity occurs only in a situation when an employee is fully motivated, enthusiastic, and energetic [40]. Therefore, employees who are suffering from stressful situations protect their resources by not engaging in proactive work behavior.

**H2** Anxiety mediates the relationship between NWG and Proactive work behavior.

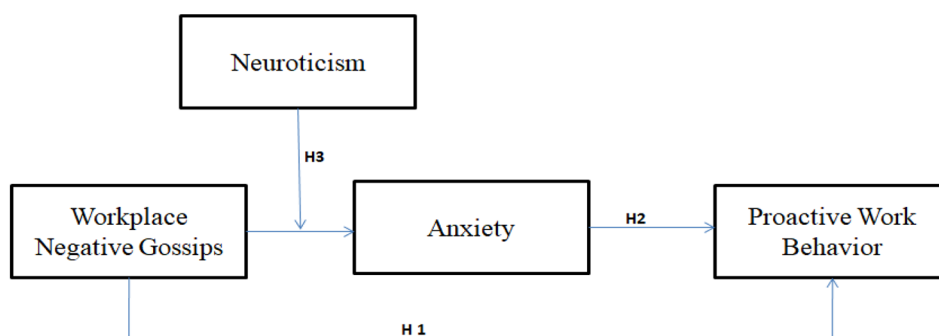
#### The moderating role of neuroticism in the connection between workplace negative gossip and anxiety and proactive work behavior

Neuroticism is characterized as a negative personality trait in employees, leading to emotions such as frustration, mood swings, envy, and jealousy, which hinder

their ability to cope with stressful situations like negative workplace gossip (NWGS) (Roelofs et al., 2024; Zellers et al., 2002). Studies indicate that neurotic employees are more reactive to stress compared to those with lower levels of neuroticism (Wang et al., 2015). Employees with high neuroticism exhibit less emotional stability, making them more susceptible to stressful events such as NWGS (Bowling et al., 2005; Tian et al., 2019). These employees, prone to experiencing negative emotions and anxiety, often show lower levels of positive organizational behaviors during stressful situations. This tendency is due to their focus on conserving resources as a coping mechanism, prioritizing the protection of existing resources over proactive work behaviors or exceeding expectations. Research shows a positive correlation between negative workplace events and neuroticism, with highly neurotic employees being more vulnerable to stress and less capable of performing tasks proactively. Drawing on the conservation of resource theory, employees who score high in neuroticism react to stressful situations more aggressively and exhibit negative emotions such as anxiety in a contrast to employees who score low in neuroticism. The employees who are emotionally stable have plentiful psychological resources thus they react less toward negative situations such as NWGS, and they perform their tasks in an above-average manner.

**H3** Neuroticism moderates the relationship between NWG and proactive work behavior such that the relationship will be stronger in the presence of high neuroticism in contrast to low neuroticism.

**H4** Neuroticism moderates the mediated relationship between NWG and proactive work behavior such that the relationship will be weakened in the presence of high neuroticism in contrast to low neuroticism. Figure 1 explains the study framework and hypotheses relationships.



**Fig. 1** Research framework

## Methodology

We choose a quantitative design and a time lag data collection method. A quantitative study design is best suited for data collection from a larger population and enriches the generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, a time lag data collection method is best suitable to study the temporal effects of variables (e.g., negative workplace gossip, proactive work behavior, and anxiety), it also benefits to investigate the causal relationships and helps to minimize the common method bias.

Due to the informal nature of pink-collar employees in Pakistan and the difficulties associated with the approachability of the respondents we preferred to choose the convenience sampling technique. The duty schedule of these workers usually may not be fixed, such as nurses' childcare workers and bus hostesses. Additionally, we do not have a complete list of the population, therefore, we used non-probability sampling techniques. Convenience sampling techniques benefit us to collect the data from those employees who are available at the time of the data collection, as well as it also supports to coordinate with the participants.

We recruited participants in various ways. First, we targeted those service organizations where the majority of pink-collar workers are serving such as salons, bus hostesses, nurses, and childcare organizations. Then we contacted the managers/owners of those organizations through emails and personal contacts. We also used the available references such as references of the students, friends, and family members. First of all, the objective of this study was elaborated to the managers and owners of the organizations. Then after getting permission from the management of the services organizations, the participants were approached and contacted through emails, WhatsApp, and by physically distributing the questionnaire. Before data collection written informed consent was taken from all the participants and it was assured to them that there is no right and wrong answer of the given questions. We only want to record your valuable opinion regarding this study. It was also assured to them that they are fully free to quit this study at any point of time without bearing any penalty.

We collected data from female employees working at various service organizations such as beauty salons, bus hostesses, nurses, and child care centers also known as pink collar workers. We selected the above-mentioned organization believing that most of the female in Pakistan works in these organizations. All the protocols of the research were applied before data collection. Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of Lyallpur Business School during their 6th meeting of board of studies. The board is affiliated with Government College University in Faisalabad. A written informed consent was taken from the participant before data

collection. It was elaborated to all of them there is no right and wrong answer and they are totally free to leave the study whenever they want.

Data were collected by personal visits and with the reference of friends, students, and colleagues. Additionally, to alleviate the issue of common method bias data were collected in two times lags. In lag 1, data were collected on independent variable (negative workplace gossip), moderator (neuroticism), and mediator anxiety. After four weeks' interval data were collected on the dependent variable (proactive work behavior). The objective of this study is to particularly focus on the pink-collar workers in a developing country. The experiences of females regarding negative work place gossips may differ significantly as compared to male workers due to the collectivist and masculine nature of culture. Female workers particularly those doing lower-level jobs are more sensitive to negative workplace gossips as contrast to males. However, a robust study can be done by doing a comparison between male and female experiences regarding negative workplace gossip, anxiety, neuroticism, and proactive work behavior. therefore, we have highlighted this point in the future research directions.

### Measures

All the variables were measured on five-point Likert scale ranging from 1=strongly disagree and 5=strongly agree.

### Workplace negative gossips

We adapted a three-item scale to measure Workplace negative gossips from Chandra and Robinson (2010). The sample items include "At work others (e.g., coworkers/supervisor) made false allegations about me ( $\alpha=0.87$ ).

### Anxiety

6-items anxiety scale was adapted from [41]. The sample items include "tense", "uneasy", and "worried" ( $\alpha=0.94$ ).

### Neuroticism

Neuroticism 8 items scale was adapted from [42]. The sample items of the scale include "Do you tend to say what is in your mind?" "Do you sometimes feel lonely?" ( $\alpha=0.95$ ).

### Proactive work behavior

Proactive work behavior 3 items scale was adapted form [43] further validated by [44]. The sample items include "Initiated better ways of doing your core tasks" "Come up with ideas to improve the way in which your core tasks are done". ( $\alpha=0.92$ )



**Table 1** Confirmatory factor analysis of the hypothesized model

Model	$\chi^2$	df	$\Delta\chi^2$	$\Delta df$	RMSEA	CFI	SRMR
	362.67	154	-	-	0.06	0.97	0.039

**Table 2** Correlation analysis

Variables	Mean	SD	CR	$\alpha$	AVE	1	2	3	4
Education	2.97	1.34							
Experience	2.96	0.95							
Gender	2.0	0.000							
Age	1.84	0.600							
NWG	3.56	1.195	0.876	0.87	0.703	0.865			
NEU	3.86	1.18	0.952	0.95	0.713	0.730**	0.838		
ANX	3.56	1.19	0.947	0.94	0.749	0.769**	0.789**	0.895	
PWB	2.41	1.199	0.924	0.92	0.801	-0.752**	-0.737**	-0.780**	0.844

\* $p < .10$ , \*\* $p < .05$ , NWG=Negative workplace gossips, NEU=Neuroticism, ANX=Anxiety, PWB=proactive work behavior

**Table 3** Results of the mediation analyses (without covariates)

	Coefficient	SE	Bootstrap 95% CI
<i>IV to mediator (A path)</i>			
Negative workplace gossips → Anxiety	0.772***	0.034	
<i>Mediator to DV (B path)</i>			
Anxiety → Proactive work behavior	-0.494***	0.0485	
<i>Total effect of IV on DV (C path)</i>			
Total effect of IV on DV (C path)	-0.754***	0.035	
<i>Direct effect of IV on DV (C path)</i>			
Direct effect of IV on DV (C path)	-0.372**	0.048	
<i>Indirect effect of IV on DV through proposed mediator</i>			
NWG → Anxiety → Proactive work behavior	-0.382***	0.0062	[-0.513; -0.268]

\* $p < .10$ , \*\* $p < .05$ , \*\*\* $p < .01$

## Results

Data has been analyzed by using AMOS.21 and SPSS. First, we conduct the confirmatory factor analysis by using AMOS 21. Then we checked the hypothesized model by using PROCESS macro by Hayes. We used PROCESS model 4 for mediation and model-7 for moderated mediation analysis.

### Measurement model

We used confirmatory factor analysis to test the measurement model. There were four latent variables in the measurement model such as negative workplace gossip, anxiety, proactive work behavior, and neuroticism. According to the results of the measurement model, all the fit indices are within the acceptable range such as ( $\chi^2=362.376$ ,  $df=154$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $CFI=0.97$ ,  $TLI=0.96$ ,  $IFI=0.97$  and  $RMSEA=0.06$ ) all the yielded results depict a good fit. (Please see Table 1)

Table 2 represents the mean, standard deviation, CR,  $\alpha$ , AVE, and the square root of AVE. We test the convergent and discriminant validity of the proposed model. The statistical results of AVE prove the convergent validity of the model because all the values are greater than the cutoff point which is 0.5 (see Table 2). The discriminant validity of the model is also established according to the statistical evidence because the square root of AVE is greater

than their correlations (see Table 2, the square root of AVE is shown in diagonal). Thus both convergent and discriminant validity is proved. Additionally, the CR and  $\alpha$  values of negative workplace gossip, neuroticism, anxiety, and proactive work behavior are meeting the threshold criteria which is 0.6 (see Table 2).

We also presented a correlation analysis of the proposed model. The correlation analysis shows negative workplace gossip is positively related to neuroticism ( $r=.73$ ,  $P < .01$ ), employee anxiety ( $r=.769$ ,  $P < .01$ ), and negatively related to proactive work behavior ( $r = -.752$ ,  $P < .01$ ). Neuroticism is positively related to employee anxiety ( $r = 0.789$ ,  $P < .01$ ) and negatively related to proactive work behavior ( $r = -0.737$ ,  $P < .01$ ). Employee anxiety is negatively related to employee proactive work behavior ( $r = -0.780$ ,  $P < .01$ ) (see Table 2).

### Hypothesis analysis

We test the proposed model by using the PROCESS macro by Hayes. We applied model 7 to test the moderated mediation and previously a number of researchers used this model to test the same type of model such as [45–47]. Therefore, we strongly believe that model 7 is perfectly suitable to test the hypothesized relationships of our proposed model. For clarity first, we present the result of the mediation analysis in Table 3. According to

the proposed model negative workplace gossip is negatively related to employee proactive work behavior. The obtained results support this expectation ( $\beta = -0.139, p < .05$ ) therefore, hypothesis 1 is accepted. Hypothesis 2 states, employee anxiety mediates the relationship between negative workplace gossip and proactive work behavior which has been proved with the help of statistical data as depicted by the 95% Bootstrapped confidence interval which has no zero [-0.513; -0.268]. The direction of the UL and LL support that there is a mediation effect of employee anxiety in the connection between negative workplace gossip and employee proactive work behavior.

According to hypothesis 3, neuroticism moderates the relationship between workplace negative gossip and anxiety proved by the statistical results ( $\beta = -0.057, p < .05$ ). According to the expectation, the connection between proactive work behavior and anxiety is stronger when a person is high in neuroticism (see Table 4).

### Discussion

In the current study, we test the impact of negative workplace gossips on proactive work behavior through employee anxiety. Additionally, the moderating role of neuroticism in the relationship between negative workplace gossips and anxiety is also tested. Data were collected from only female workers, working in different service sectors such as nursing, hotels, working as bus hostesses, and working in salons.

Females who are high in neuroticism deplete their psychological, emotional, and physical resources in stressful situations (e.g., NWG) more frequently in contrast to those who are low in neuroticism. High neurotic employees need more energy to manage negative

workplace gossip when they experience negative gossip from coworkers and society. Consequently, the drain of energy in managing negative gossip, they remained less involved in proactive work behavior. For instance, preparing themselves for challenging goals, thinking of new ideas for improvement, and being vigorous and responsive at the workplace. The results of the study are verified by [6, 8, 20] as well as COR theory [48].

Our findings provide strong support for all hypothesized relationships. Notably, negative workplace gossip was found to significantly elevate employee anxiety in a collectivist cultural context. This heightened anxiety, in turn, appears to be associated with decreased proactive work behavior.

This study contributes valuable insights into the dynamics of negative workplace gossip within collectivist societies. Furthermore, by focusing on female employees, the research highlights a potential vulnerability specific to this demographic. In collectivist cultures, women may be disproportionately targeted by negative gossip, particularly when their work roles are traditionally considered less prestigious compared to their male counterparts.

The findings of the moderated mediation analysis shed light on the underlying mechanisms that contribute to lower levels of attentiveness, energy, and passion among female employees in these service sector jobs. This study contributes to the literature on the service sector in Pakistan by providing a deeper understanding of the root causes associated with reduced proactive behavior among blue-collar female workers.

Although this study particularly deals with negative workplace gossip, however, any type of personal mistreatment enhances employee anxiety and consequently

**Table 4** Ordinary least squares regression coefficients from Moderated Mediation Model

Predictors	Outcome			
	M: Anxiety	Y: Proactive work behavior		
Constant	-0.375	5.507		
X: Negative workplace gossips	0.621***	-0.372***		
M: Anxiety		-0.494***		
Neuroticism	0.666***			
Negative workplace gossips × Neuroticism	-0.057**			
R <sup>2</sup>	0.707	0.665		
F	280.33***	346.68***		
Moderator	Index of Moderated Mediation			
Neuroticism	0.0179	95% Confidence Interval based on 5000 bootstrap resamples -0.0017 – 0.0503		
Conditional Indirect Effects of IWE = Mean ± 1SD				
Neuroticism	<i>Bootstrap Indirect Effect</i>	<i>Bootstrap SE</i>	<i>Boot LLCI</i>	<i>Boot ULCI</i>
2.50	0.477	0.050	0.378	0.576
4.25	0.376	0.045	0.286	0.466
5.00	0.333	0.055	0.224	0.442

Note. N=352

PROCESS Model 7, Bootstrap sample size=5,000, LL=lower limit, UL=upper limit, CI=confidence interval

\* $p < .10$ , \*\* $p < .05$ , \*\*\* $p < .01$  (two-tailed)

reduces proactive work behavior. Based on recent research different types of personal mistreatment such as bullying, abusive supervision, ostracism, and undermining have resource depletion effects and reduce proactive work behavior [20].

### Theoretical implications

This study has numerous contributions. First, this study enhances our knowledge regarding negative workplace gossips by investigating proactive work behavior in services sector. Existing research on job performance [49] and organizational citizenship behavior [50] provides us a theoretical support to understand the effect of negative workplace gossips on proactive work behavior of employees. Existing studies on negative workplace gossips has not focused on the blue-collar worker's job outcomes (e.g., proactive work behavior). Leaving promising research gap in the current literature.

Second, this paper breaks new ground in the study of workplace gossip by exploring its impact on employee proactivity through the lens of anxiety. This nuanced approach deepens our understanding of how negative rumors can hinder employee's proactive work behavior. While prior research has centered on how workplace gossip shapes employee psychology, emotions (Spoelma & Hetrick, 2021; Guo et al., 2022; Sun et al., 2023), and attitudes (Brady et al., 2017; Chen, 2018; Zhou et al., 2021), this study takes a different angle, exploring how these internal shifts ultimately influence employee behavior. Taking the research on negative gossip one step further, we explored how they make people less willing to be proactive at work.

Third, while understanding individual emotional responses to gossip is valuable, a crucial next step is exploring how it shapes workplace behavior, particularly for women in collectivist societies. This study pioneers this investigation, specifically delving into how female workers navigate the implications of negative gossip in such cultural contexts.

Forth, building on previous research by Nhu et al. (2021) who called for more studies on what influences employees proactive work behavior, this study examines how negative gossip at work can discourage employees in the service sector from going the extra mile. To get a complete understanding of how people behave at work, we need to consider all the factors that influence them, and that definitely includes negative work place gossips.

### Practical implications

This study offers several practical implications for managers as well as for organizations in services sectors. In the services sector, employees' proactive behavior is very essential to serving customers in an adequate and timely manner. In services sector employees need to

be attentive, energetic and prepared to deal every type of customer. But negative workplace gossips can drain their energies which push them towards anxiety particularly for high neurotic employees. Therefore, they invest their energies to manage negative gossips and anxiety which reduces their attentiveness and proactivity at the workplace.

This study contributes to the understanding of fostering service employee proactivity by proposing several interventions for managers in the service sector. Firstly, implementing recognition programs, such as appreciation ceremonies, could acknowledge the value of blue-collar employees and contribute to a more positive work environment. Secondly, offering targeted counseling sessions could help blue-collar employees understand the significance of their role and how their contributions impact the organization's success. More importantly, proactive measures are necessary to address negative workplace gossip. Managers can implement educational programs to equip employees with the skills to identify and effectively deal with such behaviors. Negative workplace gossip represents a critical and detrimental phenomenon that can significantly hinder employee performance [51]. These training initiatives should raise awareness about the importance of eradicating such detrimental behaviors. Training programs can range from formal, off-site workshops to informal, on-the-job training sessions.

Thirdly, our result stated that negative work place gossips influence more to high neurotic employees, thus it is necessary to find out the employees who are high in neuroticism and managers should find out the ways to mitigate the effect of negative workplace gossips for neurotic employees. Managers need to do personality tests before hiring a blue-collar employee and should avoid those employees who are high in neuroticism. The managers should also arrange training sessions for high neurotic employee and train them how they can deal with uneven situations. Hence, organizations should pay more attention to those employees who are high in neuroticism. The organization should create a culture of social support and friendly environment. So, employees can restore their energies by sharing their problems with each other.

### Limitations and future research directions

This study is not without limitations. First, a potential limitation of this study is its focus solely on the influence of negative workplace gossip on proactive work behavior. Future research could explore the potentially contrasting role of positive workplace gossip in promoting employee proactivity. Examining the impact of both positive and negative gossip on employee behavior would provide a more comprehensive understanding of this dynamic.

Second, this study's generalizability may be limited due to the inclusion of only female service sector workers.



Future research should aim to compare the reactions of male and female employees to negative workplace gossip to explore potential gender differences in this response. Third, we collect data from collectivist society the study can be replicate on individualistic cultures for better generalizability. Furthermore, this study employed a single moderator variable. However, it is important to acknowledge that other personality traits or dispositions, such as extraversion, trait emotional exhaustion, and attribution style, could also potentially moderate the relationship between negative workplace gossip and employee proactive work behavior.

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#### Author contributions

Conceptualization: C.G, S S; formal analysis: MWB writing—originaldraft: SS software: C.G, SS writing—review and editing: MWB. All authors haveread and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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#### Data availability

The datasets used and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

#### Declarations

##### Ethics approval and consent to participate

This study was performed in line with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of Lyallpur Business School during their 6th meeting of board of studies. The board is affiliated with Government College University in Faisalabad. All methods were carried out in accordance with relevant guidelines and regulations. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

##### Consent for publication

Not applicable.

##### Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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