COMBATING TOXIC WORKPLACE ENVIRONMENT THROUGH SPECIFIC HR PRACTICES: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF WORKPLACE RELATIONS IN THE HOSPITALS OF PAKISTAN

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Employees, their workplace gossips and workplace friendships are considered important in any organization structure. Infact, there is a universal understanding that almost in all the organizations particularly hospitals have such arrangements in which working class manifest the workplace gossips and the workplace friendships as the root cause of toxic work environment that leads to influence the employee productivity. Moreover, this research paper is an attempt to determine the moderation of specific HR Practices on the toxic work relation and employee productivity. In this paper, the data have been collected from 323 employees of different public and private hospitals of Pakistan. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) is used to ensure the validity (convergent and divergent) of factors. While, AMOS 22 is used to determine the assumed the relationships of selected variables as well as moderation effect. The findings of the study indicate that the employee's workplace relations and gossips are critical constituents of working environment. Toxic work environment mediates workplace gossips, workplace friendships and employee productivity. Specific human resource practices are proved as remedial path for toxic workplace environment to uplift the level of employee's productivity.

1. INTRODUCTION

Every employee at workplace carries out and endures their exclusive relationship patterns where the employees interact with one another throughout their workplace timings and even beyond that time. These relations may be either evaluated as negative or toxic by the coworkers or the supervisors (Ellwardt, et al., 2019). As employees spend a lot of time in workplace gossips and workplace friendships, that may affect their work-related attitudes and behaviors that ultimately undermining their productivity ((Ellwardt, et al., 2017; Podolny & Baron, 2017). Moreover, it has been observed that when the employees have trust worthy friendships they may try to take undue advantage over other coworkers. Employees in friendships tend to engage in the selfish conducts by becoming the obstacle in the co - workers support and help. This aspect of workplace friendships is associated with the toxic work environment.

At times, the employees at the workplace spend most of their time in workplace gossips in organizations. Usually, employees gossip for the sake of personal benefit devoid of organizational benefit. Though, the gossip phenomenon is apparently a of routine social life of employees and is not necessarily understood in the work context (Esfahani & Shahbazi, 2016). Few studies have suggested that friendships in the workplace may reduce the organizational performance because employees having friendships form groups to fulfill their selfish tasks and try to induce the organizational environment in their own favor (Berkos, 2013). In the last few decades, the scholars have given importance to the workplace relations in the form of workplace gossips and workplace friendships (Berman, et al., 2018). So, there is a need to understand the workplace relationship as other coworkers may experience the toxic environment resulting in undermining productivity due to workplace friendships and workplace gossips. Furthermore, regarding HR perspective there is a dire need to conduct proper research on the impact of workplace gossip which illustrates the background of gossip in the workplace because this approach enables leaders and managers to understand, monitor and manage relationships through workplace gossip and employee attitude, and may minimize the negative effect on employees.

To address the major apprehension mentioned above, the concern of current study is to consider what happens when an employee maintains these relations with the ones who are denigrated by the other coworkers and how it affects the employee's productivity. From the extensive review of literature, it has been found that there is dire need to delve in-depth to shed light

on the antecedent and consequences of toxic workplace environment and most specifically its remedial path. Therefore, the current study is intended to achieve following objectives;

- The main objectives of the study are to ascertain the workplace relations influencing the workplace productivity in the hospitals of Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan.

Furthermore, this study aims:

- ✓ To determine whether the work relations (Work gossips and work friendships) influence the toxic work environment in the hospitals of Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan
- ✓ To identify if the toxic work environment impacts the employee productivity in the hospitals of Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan
- ✓ To establish that the toxic work environment mediates workplace relations and employee productivity in the hospitals of Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan
- ✓ To find out the moderating role of Specific Human resource practices in a toxic work environment and employee productivity in the hospitals of Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan

The study could contribute to better consideration of employees' informal relations and Human Resource policies that may help HR executives prevent the havoc due to toxic environment, as well as the extent to which the Human Resource executives need to influence the work relations to avoid the possibilities of toxic environment. Lastly, the current study could support the executives or employers in devising strategies to reduce the deviant behaviors and enhance work performance.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Workplace Friendship

Employees spend most of their time at their workplace which enhances the mutual understanding, networking and, most of the times, this workplace friendship (WF) results into positive as well as negative outcomes simultaneously for the organization (Kulik, et al., 2018). Workplace friendship is more result oriented because of its service-based nature in hospitals as compared to rest of organizations (Berman et al., 2018). It has more worthy and significant insinuation in hospital set up due to low turnover rate, long working hours, diversity and emotional labor (Sias, 2017).

Podolny & Baron (2017) described friendship as an intentional, personified link or relationship which provides support and closeness. However, the characterization of workplace friendship varies from other kinds of friendship as it depicts the friendship which takes place in a workplace (Gordon & Hartman, 2019). According to Abbajay (2014), workplace friendships are the mutual deliberate associations which are based on trust, commitment, standards, and mutual liking and interests.

2.2. Workplace Gossip

Gossip is a medium of informal and casual and exchange of information in which information transmitted in this gossip is not authentic or complete. Partial and fake information conveyed through gossips leads towards the employee criticism (ECN) (Georganta, et al., 2019). The definition of Gossip according to (Ferrari, 2015) is the phenomenon of hearing, producing and participating in evaluative and judgmental remarks about others. Workplace gossip is normally considered as the useless talk about another employee in his/her absence. Researchers amusingly have mixed perspective regarding the origin and impact of workplace gossip. Luna et al. (2013) proposed that gossip is a vibrant process and its effects are dependent on the interaction of listener/respondent, target and gossiper known as the gossip triad.

2.3. Toxic Workplace Environment

Many scholars have tried to interpret the circumstances working environment setting in which people work (Daniel, 2019). Resultantly work environment is the collective effect of environment in which people work, including the human, organizational and technical environment and the mutual relationship between the employee and the employer (Estes & Wang, 2018). It is an active and dynamic factor which keeps on changing with the working experience in the organizational environment. Therefore, many authors categorize the work environment either into conducive or the toxic environment (Lutgen, et al., 2014). Conducive or favorable environment leads towards pleasurable experiences of the employees and provides them with an opportunity to groom the personality profile (Nandra et al., 2018; Ringer, 2019). On the other hand, the painful and harsh experiences in the toxic workplace environment affect employee's attitude. Many organizations restrict the productivity maximization of the employees with the attainment of the skills (Tierney & Tepper, 2017). Organizational prosperity is directly related with the workplace environment created for the employees. Daniel (2019) briefs that the major part of the productivity problems is connected with the workplace environment which comprises almost 80%. The negative attitude of the workers is mainly due to poor payment system, deficiency of fringe benefits, and improper leadership style, unfavorable job location, and inappropriate organizational variation among the employees (Furnham & Siegel, 2018).

2.4. Workplace Gossips, Friendship and Employee Productivity

On the basis of the practical values of workplace friendships and gossips, previously conducted empirical research in the field of sociology, psychology and management depicts that these type of workplace behaviours leads towards employees' intentions, behaviors and attitudes such as OCB, job performance, job satisfaction absenteeism and turnover intension which are work related (Gallos, 2018).

Nursing job is considered as one of the most challenging job that needs peaceful, and calm working environment free from stress. (Härtel, Cooper, & Ashkanasy, 2016). Moreover, the job of nursing is related to patient life threats, physical and
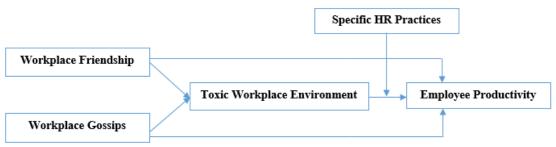
emotional exhaustion and conflicts that requires best working environment to make patients comfortable. (Hom et al., 2019; Omari & Paull, 2017). If nurses working in stressful and restless environment, it can make patients life more miserable and vulnerable. They needed friendship circle, social interactions that can divert their mindset form working patterns to personal life gossips (Thau, et al., 2014; Aghbolagh & Ardabili, 2016). Gossips can have both positive (in the form of friendly and jolly working environment in which they can express their feelings and emotions regarding patient, colleagues, family etc.) and negative effects (unmanaged gossips in the form of anger, annoyance, anxiety etc. that can damage their working relationships and standing reputations) both for the employees that will ultimately lead towards organizational performance (Bowling & Beehr, 2016; Walumbwa, et al., 2017).

2.5. Specific HR Practices

Human resource practices can be assessed by the set of indicators such as recruitment, selection, compensation, appraisals, and career management etc.(Gallos, 2018). Further, this can be amplified with the help of implementation and execution of human resource department or its executives, which requires interactions between management or employees with Human Resource executives (Cleveland, et al., 2015). According to Simmons (2018), importance of human resources is determined by the HRM practices which enable the practice of firm-specific strategy headed for the betterment of the employees and organization. Hirschhorn (2016) stated that it is anticipated that more managers and leaders will try to align the strategies and policies related to human resource that leads and encourages a more community centered organizational endeavors. The process of changing organizational practices and dysfunctional human resources such as micromanagement, politically motivated performance appraisal and employee monitoring to people who are more concerned with an organizational culture which is based on democratic management, trust, shared power and egalitarian consultation influences the behavior of employees at work.

On the basis of comprehensive review of literature, following model is proposed;

2.6. Conceptual Framework

2.7. Hypotheses

For this concern, following hypothesis would be tested during this study;

H1: There is positive significant effect of Workplace Friendship on Toxic Workplace Environment.
H2: There is positive significant effect of Workplace Gossips on Toxic Workplace Environment.
H3: There is negative significant effect of Toxic Workplace Environment on Employee Productivity.
H4: There is negative significant effect of Workplace Friendship on Employee Productivity.
H5: There is negative significant effect of Workplace Gossip on Employee Productivity.
H6: Toxic Workplace Environment mediates the relationship between Workplace Friendship and Employee Productivity.
H7: Toxic Workplace Environment mediates the relationship between Workplace Gossips and Employee Productivity.
H8: Specific HR Practices moderates the relationship between Toxic Workplace Environment and Employee Productivity.

3. METHODOLOGY

In order to devise a strategy for the identification of assumed (direct and indirect) relationships among selected variables, the survey responses are focused recommended by Yesavage et al., (2013). This study is based on a sample of doctors, nurses and administrative staff from six different public and private hospital of Lahore. Three public and three private hospitals were focused for data collection. The sample for the study consisted of 323 employees randomly selected from hospitals in Lahore, Pakistan having response rate of 68%. The researcher gathered the data personally and by emails using the simple random sampling for an assurance that data will be collected and inferred truly. The sample particularly obtained from the administrative staff the managerial staff but still for seeking the true and comprehensive understanding the data was collected from the middle level and operational level jobholders as well. Robson & McCartan (2016) recommended to follow the positivism paradigm to test the assumed relationships extracted from the data collected through self-administered survey. The survey questionnaires were distributed to 500 permanent staff members, but received back 340 questionnaires with the 68-response rate. Out of these 17 questionnaires were discarded in the initial screening of the data and 323 were used for final analysis. Furthermore, as per the recommended of Hayes (2013), AMOS 22 was used to analysis purpose and SPSS for data descriptions. The sample consisted of 239 males (74%) and 82 females (25%). The ages of the participants ranged from under

30 years were 158 respondents, from 30 to 39 years were 67 respondents, 75 respondents under the age group 40 to 49 years and 23 respondents under the age group 50 to 59 years. Moreover, out of 323 employees, 38.4% employees were from public sector hospitals and 199 employees from the private sector comprising 61.6%. The data were collected from 209 married employees and 112 unmarried employees and 1 employee with separation. The salary range of the respondents were 104 employees under 50,000, 115 employees under 50000 to 90000, 99 employees in above 90,000 salary range.

3.1. Measurements

For data collection purpose, structure questionnaire is found as more suitable form. The whole adapted instrument was based on 5-points likert scale. The overall constructs were adapted from different articles. As the constructs of a) workplace gossips were taken from Workplace Gossips Characteristics Measure developed by methods for (Campion et al. 1993), b) workplace friendships were adapted from Workplace Friendship Scale (Nielsen et al., 2000), c) toxic work environment was taken from (Chamberlain and Hodson, 2010), d) Human Resource practices were taken, from (Huselid, 1995), and finally constructs of employee performance were from (Huselid,1995).

4. EMPIRICAL FINDINGS/ANALYSIS

4.1. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (*Measurement Model*)

To check the validity of an individual construct, and fitness of overall measurement model, Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) used as most suitable approach in current study. For this, AMOS 22 used for the analysis having five factors CFA.

Table 4.1.1 Results of Convergent Validity of all Constructs				
Variables	**Measurement Items**	**Standard Loadings**	**AVE**	**CCR**
Workplace Friendship	WF1	0.871	0.626	0.702
	WF2	0.907		
Workplace Gossips	WG1	0.723	0.712	0.815
	WG2	0.811		
Toxic Workplace Environment	TWE1	0.673	0.521	0.765
	TWE2	0.826		
Employee Productivity	EP1	0.890	0.619	0.823
	EP2	0.745		
Specific HR Practices	SHRP	0.673	0.597	0.676

Table 4.1.1 reveals the results of convergent validity of all constructs as; a) all values of factor loadings > 0.60 (standard), b) average variance extracted (AVE) of all constructs > 0.50 (minimum recommended value) and c) composite construct reliability > 0.70 (threshold) which depicts that our all five factors CFA meets the standard convergent validity level.

Table 4.1.2 Model Fitness						
	GFI	**AGFI**	**NFI**	**TLI**	**CFI**	**RMSEA**
Direct Effect	.921	.932	.810	.877	.865	.027
Indirect Affect	.841	.917	.835	.925	.897	.035

Table 4.1.2 illustrates the overall model fitness having five factors CFA highlighted the moderate fit indices for direct and indirect effect of selected variables as a) GFI values (for direct is .921 & indirect is .841), b) AGFI values (for direct is .932 & indirect is .917), c) NFI values (for direct is .810 & indirect is .835), d) TLI values (for direct is .877 & indirect is .925), e) CFI values (for direct is .865 & indirect is .897), and lastly f) PMSEA values (for direct is .027 & indirect is .035).

Table 4.1.3 Discriminant Reliability and Correlation								
	AVE	**MSV**	**ASV**	**WF_all**	**WG_all**	**TWE_all**	**EP_all**	**SHRP_all**
Workplace Friendship **_all**	0.508	0.321	0.262	**0.771**				
Workplace Gossips **_all**	0.721	0.453	0.287	0.309	**0.842**			
Toxic Workplace Environment **_all**	0.593	0.373	0.312	0.624	0.582	**0.739**		
Employee Productivity **_all**	0.713	0.431	0.298	0.327	0.491	0.713	**0.828**	
Specific HR Practices **_all**	0.524	0.329	0.283	0.492	0.467	0.589	0.631	**0.814**

Note: Diagonal value: Square root of AVE and Non-diagonal value: correlation

Table 4.1.3 illustrates the results of discriminant validity supported our measurement model as given below; AVE of all constructs > MSV & ASV) and square root of AVE of each construct is also > than its correlation.

4.2. Descriptive Statistics

Table 4.2: Results of Descriptive Statistics					
Name of Variables	**N**	**Min.**	**Max.**	**Mean**	**Std. D.**

Table 4.2 results of statistics in the

Workplace Friendship	323	1	5	3.22	1.021
Workplace Gossips	323	1	5	3.30	1.126
Toxic Workplace Environment	323	1	5	3.40	.932
Employee Productivity	323	1	5	3.41	.893
Specific HR Practices	323	1	5	3.56	1.236

exhibits the descriptive form of

minimum, maximum, means, and standard deviations of the data. The data collected against the 5-point likert scale varies between the range of 1-5 (for minimum and maximum), range of 3.22-3.56 (for mean) and range of 0.893-1.236 (for standard deviation).

4.3. Regression Analysis

Structural Equation Modelling Technique (SEM) is used to check the direct and indirect effects of selected variables (workplace friendship and gossips as independent variable, toxic workplace environment as mediating variable, employee productivity as dependent variable and specific HR Practices as moderating variable).

Table 4.3.1: Results of Direct Effect

Hypothesis tested	Independent variables	Dependent Variables				Remarks
		Toxic Workplace Environment		Employee Productivity		
		β coefficients	P-value	β coefficients	P-value	
H1 (WF & TWE)	Workplace Friendship	.834	**0.021**	-.723	**0.000**	(+) ve Significant
H4 (WF & EP)						(-) ve Significant
H2 (WG & TWE)	Workplace Gossips	.315	**0.010**	-.257	**0.040**	(+) ve Significant
H5 (WG & EP)						(-) ve Significant
H3 (TWE & EP)	Toxic Workplace Environment			-.542	**0.002**	(-) ve Significant

Note: Significant at 0.05 level (two-tailed)

Table 4.3.1 displays the results of direct effect of workplace friendship, gossips on toxic workplace environment and employee productivity as well as effect of toxic workplace environment on employee productivity. The regression **(β)** coefficients of selected variables are mentioned as; for HI is .834, for H2 is .315, for H3 is -.542, for H4 is -.723 and finally for H5 is -.257 that all are statistically significant at 0.05 level and most specifically supported our first five hypothesis.

Table 4.3.2: Results of Indirect Effect

Hypothesis tested	Independent variables	Dependent Variable (Job Productivity)		Remarks
		β coefficients	P-value	
H6	WF ⟶ TWE ⟶ EP	.431	**0.000**	Statistically Significant Mediation
H7	WG ⟶ TWE ⟶ EP	.354	**0.020**	Statistically Significant Mediation

Note: Significant at 0.05 level (two-tailed)

Bootstrapping technique is employed to test the indirect effects of toxic workplace environment between workplace friendship and employee productivity (H6) and between workplace gossips and employee productivity (H7). The indirect effects are mentioned in Table 4.3.2 as which **β coefficients** of H6 is .431 & for H7 is .354 that were statistically significant at 0.05 level. Hence, these results proved the statistically significant mediation of Toxic workplace environment between work relations (friendship & gossips) and employee productivity level.

Table 4.3.3: Moderation Effect

Hypothesis tested	Independent variables	Dependent Variable (Job Productivity)		
		β coefficient	P-value	
H8	SHRP ↓ TWE ⟶ EP	-.391	**0.023**	Statistically Significant Moderation

Note: Significant at 0.05 level (two-tailed)

The above Table 4.3.3 indicates that the specific HRP significantly moderate between the toxic workplace environment and employee's productivity having β coefficient is - .391 at 0.05 statistically significant level.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose behind the study was to determine the association among the employees through work relations in the form of workplace gossips and workplace friendships with the mediation of toxic work environment on employee's productivity. Workplace gossips at times recognize the positive behavior influences. These positive gossips may be reflected in a coworker in the form of enhancing one 's confidence or could stimulate or encourage an employee to perform well to sustain and improve one's career. The positive workplace gossip may be considered as an opportunity for few employees to link them to those individuals which may arise and develop them in their careers. Contrarily, this rarely happens in reality workplace politics, rumors and sharing the newest may suppress and glare the office environment for few coworkers (Bennett and Sawatzky, 2016).

Workplace friendships may have an intense effect on subordinate productivity. These friendships at work may guide and support a coworker to perform better. Perversely, these friendships may make the work environment more soothing and enjoyable by enhancing and promoting the creativity and productivity of the coworkers (Chamberlain & Hodson, 2019; Giorgi, 2017). The workplace friendships if go awry may become a hindrance in productivity and the disclosure of information to inappropriate individuals concerning the workplace (Tuckey, et al., 2019). The environment becomes toxic and humiliating if that personal interaction and information goes beyond that circle of friendship that affects the subordinate's productivity level (Tuckey et al., 2019). The sane concept is proven in current study that workplace friendship significantly positive effect on toxic workplace environment that will ultimately lead towards low productivity/performance of employees (β =.834, P-value=.021 for WF & TWE; β = -.723, P-value=.000 for WF & E.P). Whereas Toxic workplace environment shows a partial mediation between workplace friendship & employee productivity (β =.431, P-value=.000).

Furthermore, Gossip is a common practice at the workplace, but its impact on employees is relatively vague. Gossip is typically the detail about other people, which is not confirmed in a casual, routine conversation but it creates troubles for colleagues and work circles in the form of low or poor performance (Gobind and Ukpere, 2013). The above-mentioned thoughts supported the results of current study that workplace gossips create toxic workplace environment, resultantly employee's performance becomes poor day by day (β =.315, P-value=.010 for WG & TWE; β = -.257, P-value=.040 for WG & E.P). While, Toxic workplace environment also shows a partial mediation between workplace gossips & employee productivity (β =.354, P-value=.020).

Moreover, the hospitals are not resistant to the troubles related to the toxic work environment and poor productivity (Bennett & Sawatzky, 2017). Such factors lead an organization towards the hostile outcomes in the form of stress, absenteeism, and turnover intentions whereas as the results of present study highlight that the specific Human Resource practices moderate the negative and significantly toxic work environment and subordinate productivity (Amjad, et al., 2015).

On the whole, this study was undertaken to identify the moderating role of specific Human Resource Practices in case of toxic work environment and subordinated productivity that was proven through β=-.391, P-value=.023. Improvement in designations were interrelated to the human resource practices in the private sector hospitals. The desire to become more empowered, gain more respect and become honorable among the other jobholders affects the employees. The jobholder's assertiveness towards their work may stimulate the workplace relations in a manner to avoid toxic work environment that were the highly valued aspects in Pakistan. Human resource practices such as recruitment and selection, career management and rewards turn to play important role in the improvement of one's status, particularly in the private sector contexts as human resource departments are striving and are in proper working in the private hospitals than the public sector hospitals (Vega & Comer, 2005).

Hence, it is an important requirement that the administration and policy makers of the hospitals should develop policies and take necessary measures for the provision of suitable Human Resource support for the staff to reduce the noxiousness of the environment and enhancing the employee's productivity. So, the executives should focus on devising such human resource policies that the employees at workplace get strongly engaged with the vision and mission through workplace relations.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS & FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

On the basis of the findings of the current study, following recommendations need to be considered. The hospitals are the sensitive areas where mood swings of the employee are really important to maintain a suitable and analgesic work environment. In case, the employees are calm and comfortable in their workplace relations they will be able to perform well and deal with the patients in a better way. The work relations with positive influence should be focused as the Human Resource department may play an important influence on employees. As, it may reduce the intentions to quit and maximize the performance on the part of the employees. The human resource implications would be undertaken to enhance the employee potentials through continuous trainings and backups.

Future studies should focus on the qualitative research and gain insight to the personal experiences of HR professionals and toxic environment targets relative to the phenomenon. A future study should explore the performance interventions to address workplace relations and employee productivity. Further, the studies should measure the substance and quality of the performance improvement to establish the evidence-based practices.

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