2021

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Trevor Spoelma
University of New Mexico, tspoelma@unm.edu

Andrea Hetrick
University of New Mexico, ahetrick@unm.edu

Recommended Citation

Spoelma, T. M., & Hetrick, A. L. (2021). More than idle talk: Examining the effects of positive and negative team gossip. Journal of Organizational Behavior, 42(5), 604-618. https://doi.org/10.1002/job.2522

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Trevor M. Spoelma and Andrea L. Hetrick

University of New Mexico

Author Note

Trevor M. Spoelma and Andrea L. Hetrick, Department of Management, Anderson School of Management, University of New Mexico.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Trevor M. Spoelma, Department of Management, Anderson School of Management, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM 87106. E-mail: tspoelma@unm.edu

Abstract

Gossip is a behavior that has been traditionally viewed as harmful in organizations. However, a more balanced perspective has emerged in recent years that suggests gossip can have important benefits. We propose that one way to uncover potential benefits of gossip in teams is to focus on the *valence* (positive or negative nature) of the gossip. Drawing on expectancy theory, we propose team gossip indirectly influences team performance through social loafing because it plays a key role in shaping beliefs about effort in team contexts; effects determined by team gossip valence. We hypothesize that positive team gossip decreases social loafing, whereas negative team gossip increases it. In turn, we expect that through social loafing, positive team gossip has a positive indirect effect on team performance, whereas negative team gossip has a negative indirect effect. We test these predictions in a sample of 63 self-managing teams. We find support for our predictions regarding positive team gossip but not regarding negative team gossip. Our findings point to the potential benefits of gossip and highlight why efforts to abolish gossip in organizations may impair team effort and performance.

Keywords: gossip; social loafing; groups and teams; team performance

More Than Idle Talk: Examining the Effects of Positive and Negative Team Gossip

Over the past several decades as the nature of work has become increasingly interdependent, there has been a growing interest in identifying and removing behaviors that inhibit effective collaborative performance (Mathieu, Hollenbeck, van Knippenberg, & Ilgen, 2017). In particular, one behavior that has been identified as detrimental is gossip—"informal and evaluative (i.e., positive or negative) talk from one 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" (Brady, Brown, & Liang, 2017, p.3). Gossip has historically been conceptualized as deviant behavior that harms relationships in the management literature (e.g., Robinson & Bennett, 1995). Mirroring this perspective, gossip is typically viewed pejoratively in organizations and several organizations have sought to enact anti-gossip policies (McKnight, 2009). Taken together, the longstanding sentiment on gossip in organizations is that it is harmful and is to be suppressed.

However, recent research casts a more neutral perspective, suggesting that gossip is not inherently good or bad but that certain factors determine its impact (Brady et al., 2017). Adopting this lens, we propose that by focusing on the *valence* (positive or negative nature) of the gossip, important benefits of gossip for teams can be uncovered. Recent research suggests there is value in distinguishing negative gossip—the topic of most gossip research to date—from positive forms, which have received comparatively little research attention (Brady et al., 2017). Considering differences in team gossip valence is particularly important because positive and negative gossip should have divergent motivational properties, which in turn affect team functioning and performance. Taking this into account, we consider the impacts of team gossip

on team motivation. Specifically, we examine how positive and negative team gossip affect members' social loafing behavior, and ultimately impact team performance.

To develop our conceptual model, we draw from a fundamental theory of motivation in organizations, expectancy theory (Vroom, 1964). This theory proposes that individuals will only exert effort in team contexts to the extent that they believe their efforts will lead to valued team outcomes (Karau & Williams, 1993). As a medium by which evaluations of team members' behaviors are communicated, we extend this model by theorizing that team gossip plays a key role in shaping expectancies for whether and how individual efforts will result in higher team performance. We first predict that positive team gossip reduces social loafing and negative team gossip increases social loafing. In turn, we propose that positive team gossip has a positive indirect effect on team performance via social loafing and negative team gossip has a negative indirect effect on team performance via social loafing.

By examining the effects of team gossip, this work has several theoretical and practical contributions. First, by teasing apart the effects of positive and negative team gossip and revealing the merits of positive team gossip, we add to research that has begun to change the way that gossip is viewed in organizations. While we expect that negative gossip has the corrosive effects commonly understood, we propose that it is premature to seek to eliminate gossip completely in organizations—we find that positive team gossip has distinct benefits for teams. Without this nuanced perspective, organizations could unintentionally hamstring teams by aiming to categorically abolish all types of gossip. Our examination of team positive gossip is novel and our findings help break assumptions that have prevented research on gossip in organizations from progressing (c.f., Brady et al., 2017). Second, we add to the gossip literature by drawing on expectancy theory to uncover social loafing as a specific motivational mechanism

by which team gossip influences team performance. By introducing a new substantive mediator that describes *how* team gossip influences team performance, we add a crucial piece of understanding to a growing area of the gossip literature (Whetten, 1989). Third, by offering a new perspective on how teams *themselves*—through their own communication—can reduce the likelihood that counterproductive behaviors like social loafing get institutionalized into team routines and snowball into larger problems, we add to research on reducing counterproductivity in organizations, where existing approaches are largely "leader-centric" (e.g., Mayer, Aquino, Greenbaum, & Kuenzi, 2012). Going beyond theoretical and research implications, our work also offers practical insights for better equipping self-managing teams to more effectively regulate themselves.

Literature Review

Gossip is talk that "communicates an evaluation of the behaviors and/or reputations of others" (Brady et al., 2017, p. 3). By definition, the subject of this communication is not present to hear what is said. These evaluations play an integral role in helping people understand reputations, typical behavior, and abilities of other members in one's group (Gluckman, 1963). Such evaluations inform members' perceptions of each other's broader characteristics (e.g., abilities or tendencies) consistent with research on the halo and horns effect (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977) which has found a "tendency to evaluate all components of a target person in the same way once a general evaluation, positive or negative, is formed" (Fiske & Taylor, 1991, p. 256). Together, these evaluations influence team motivation and confidence (Marks, Mathieu, & Zaccaro, 2001). Another characteristic of gossip is its positive or negative *valence*. According to Brady et al. (2017, p. 4), "positive workplace gossip is seen as talk about normative behaviors or

positive reputations (i.e., positive evaluations) while negative workplace gossip is talk about norm-violations or negative reputations (i.e., negative evaluations)."

Altogether, these features make gossip distinguishable from other types of communication found in teams. For instance, communication that only involves factual information (e.g., role identification behaviors; Pearsall, Ellis, & Bell, 2010) is not gossip because it does not entail an evaluative component (Brady et al., 2017). Constructs such as information sharing (Bunderson & Sutcliffe, 2002) and information elaboration (van Knippenberg, De Dreu, & Homan, 2004) are also distinguishable from gossip because they strictly consist of task-related information and do not require the content of the communication to be about a member of the organization who is not present to hear what is said.

Consistent with prior conceptual work on team gossip (e.g., Kniffin & Wilson, 2010), in this study we focus on gossip between two or more members of the team about another member (or members) who is not present to hear.[1] *Team gossip* refers to the extent to which team members as a whole initiate in this type of informal and evaluative talk (Kniffin & Wilson, 2005). Team gossip emerges through a bottom-up process in which, initially, a gossiper (i.e., the sender) communicates an evaluation to the party or parties receiving the gossip (i.e., the receiver[s]) about another member of the team (i.e., the target of the gossip). This gossip may be initiated for several reasons, including to validate opinions (e.g., Wert & Salovey, 2004) or simply for enjoyment (e.g., Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012), and may be positively or negatively valenced. Over time, through continual dyadic exchanges among members of the team and mechanisms of reciprocity, mimicry, norm development, and socialization, teams converge

[1] It is important to note that in this study, we use a sample of self-managing teams and therefore the content of the gossip is restricted to evaluations about other members, not a formal team leader. This is a boundary condition that we revisit in the discussion section.

around a certain level of gossip behavior (see, for example, Collins, Lawrence, Troth, & Jordan, 2013; Feldman, 1984). Consistent with seminal work (Brady et al., 2017), we measure gossip behavior from the perspective of the potential gossip sender by asking each team member how often they engaged in gossip behavior about another teammate. We operationalize team gossip as the mean value derived from averaging each member's gossip behavior value in line with the direct consensus model where sufficient member agreement needs to be attained (Chan, 1998). In this way, team gossip becomes a property of a team and emerges when there is consensus in the amount of gossip engaged in by individual members.

Research on gossip in group and team contexts is scattered throughout several disciplines, including anthropology (Gluckman, 1963), social and evolutionary psychology (Dunbar, 2004; Feinberg, Willer, & Schultz, 2014; Kniffin & Wilson, 2005), health sciences (Widmer et al., 2018) and, more recently, organizational psychology (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012; Jeuken, Beersma, ten Velden, & Dijkstra, 2015). Yet, a common thread throughout is an emphasis on the function of gossip as a communication tool. For example, in a study of gossip in nursing units, Altuntaş, Altun, and Akyil (2014) found that information sharing was the most commonly reported reason for gossiping with other nurses. In addition, research shows gossip is a tool for group members to discuss organizational politics (Blithe, 2014), group rules and norms (Baxter, Dun, & Sahistein, 2001), and the behavior of similar others (McAndrew & Milenkovic, 2002).

While this work provides important insight into the antecedents of gossip, research on the consequences of gossip in teams is currently limited. For one, research to date has almost exclusively focused on the effects of negative gossip (Beersma, Van Kleef, & Dijkstra, 2019). Yet, gossip may be positive or negative (Brady et al., 2017) and the different motivational

properties of positive and negative gossip likely produce divergent outcomes. Because these two forms of gossip can occur independently of each other—"low" levels of negative gossip do not necessarily mean "high" levels of positive gossip exist—it is useful to consider them in the same conceptual model to isolate their independent effects. As we will discuss, based on expectancy theory, we believe that by considering positive team gossip, the virtues of gossip for teams may be uncovered. Research on gossip at the team level is also limited to cross-sectional designs examining the main effect relationship between negative team gossip and team performance. This work finds that negative team gossip is negatively correlated with team performance (e.g., Loughry & Tosi, 2008). However, research to date has not examined mediators that transmit the effects of team gossip on team performance. Because of this, we do not know *why* team gossip influences team performance. By building on the limitations of prior work, we propose that negative and positive team gossip have distinguishable effects, and we use expectancy theory to develop a theoretical account of *why* the valence of team gossip influences team performance.

Theory and Hypotheses Development

Expectancy Theory

According to expectancy theory (Vroom, 1964), individuals only exert effort in team performance contexts when they believe their efforts will be instrumental in leading to valued team outcomes. This calculus is composed of three factors: expectancy, instrumentality, and the value of the outcome. Expectancy refers to perceptions of how one's effort relates to performance—the expectation that "if effort is exerted, the result will be successful performance" (Miner, 2005, p. 110). Instrumentality is the degree to which successful performance corresponds to rewards. Lastly, outcome value refers to the degree to which one values the rewards. In this way, motivation in teams depends on members' perceptions that there

are clear relationships between (a) effort and high performance and (b) high performance and valued rewards. In theorizing the downstream effects of positive and negative gossip, we focus solely on the expectancy piece of this calculus. This is because, in the current context, we expect team members to value the rewards associated with high team performance (i.e., high outcome value) and for there not to be any bias in how the rewards are distributed (i.e., high instrumentality). In other words, we expect the instrumentality and value aspects of expectancy theory to be relatively fixed and not exhibit substantial variation between group members because the context is relatively consistent among teams. Because of this, we expect motivation to boil down to whether members believe as though their future efforts will translate into successful team performance—the expectancy component of expectancy theory. This is in line with prior teams research that has drawn from expectancy theory without applying all three factors of expectancy theory (c.f., Baumann & Bonner, 2017; Bunderson & Sutcliffe, 2002; Hüffmeier et al., 2017).

Depending on team expectancy perceptions, members adjust their levels of social loafing—the focal variable that captures members' motivation and effort level in team contexts according to expectancy theorizing (Karau & Williams, 1993). Social loafing is defined as the tendency for a "reduction in motivation and effort when individuals work collectively compared with when they work individually or coactively" (Karau & Williams, 1993, p. 681). Social loafing behaviors include when members defer their responsibilities to others, put forth less effort when other members can do the work, fail to do their fair share of tasks, and leave work for others to do (George, 1992; Pearsall, Christian, & Ellis, 2010). At the team level, social loafing refers to how much members of the team as a whole engage in social loafing (Price, Harrison, & Gavin, 2006). In turn, social loafing influences team performance (Comer, 1995;

Shepperd, 1993). Taken together, following analogous individual-level models in which effort variables mediate the relationship between expectancy-instrumentality-value perceptions and performance (e.g., Arvey, 1972; Eden, 1988; Vroom, 1964), expectancy theory has been effectively applied to team settings to explain why features of a team environment produce social loafing (Karau & Williams, 1993), which in turn influences team performance (Shepperd, 1993). In general, when team members expect that their efforts will lead to high team performance, they give effort (i.e., reduce social loafing), which ultimately increases team performance.

We utilize expectancy theory to propose that positive and negative gossip are important factors that shape members' expectancies. In particular, we propose that the *valence*, or positive or negative nature, of the evaluations communicated by gossip shapes members' expectancies of whether and how their future efforts in the team will lead to high performance, which in turn impacts downstream social loafing and team performance. In essence, expectancies are perceived probabilities that teams can accomplish their tasks (Arvey, 1972). Expectancies are shaped by various cognitions (Miner, 2005) and emotional states (Collins et al., 2013; Erez & Isen, 2002). For instance, in teams, prior research posits that members' expectancies that their collective efforts will lead to high performance are influenced by not only task-related factors such as training and resource provisions, but also more general factors such as self-esteem and personality (Karau & Williams, 2001). As we will describe, we believe team gossip is a crucial, yet poorly understood, source of member motivation because it influences cognitions and emotions that underlie members' expectancies.

The Effects of Team Gossip on Social Loafing

Starting with positive team gossip, we propose positive team gossip circulates evaluations that elevate members' impressions of their fellow teammates. Teams with high levels of positive

gossip are characterized by frequent interactions where members are complimenting, conveying respect, and defending the actions of other members (Brady et al., 2017). Through these anecdotes, members learn about the successes and positive reputations of other members (Baumeister, Zhang, & Vohs, 2004). Indeed, Tasa, Taggar, and Seijts (2007) suggested that perceptions of team capabilities are not only formed by direct observation, but also through hearing about the experiences and behaviors of others. In line with expectancy theory, these favorable evaluations increase expectancies that greater effort will lead to higher team performance, altogether decreasing social loafing.

More specifically, positive team gossip will reduce social loafing by influencing two fundamental sources of expectancies: cognitions and affect. In terms of cognitions, while team expectancies for performance are shaped by many cognitions (Karau & Williams, 2001), positive team gossip in particular should influence effort-performance expectancies by making salient the team's positive reputation and high-quality member relationships. Gossip is a crucial source for learning the reputations of other team members (Brady et al., 2017). Over time, as members hear positive gossip about several other team members, they gain a sense that they are part of a team composed of members with positive general qualities. In tandem, through positive gossip, members learn about high-quality member relationships, as positive gossip is a mechanism for building solidarity and conveying support for others (Ellwardt, Labianca, & Wittek, 2012). The perception that the team is composed of members with positive attributes and high-quality relational bonds spills over to influence members' perceptions of how the team will do on organizational tasks in the future. This is because in line with expectancy research drawing from the halo effect, people use global impressions to make inferences about more specific, individual dimensions of job performance (W. H. Cooper, 1981; King, Hunter, & Schmidt, 1980; Nisbett &

Wilson, 1977). In this way, general positive impressions gained through positive team gossip influence perceptions of how well the team will perform on organizationally relevant tasks, establishing expectancies that the team's future efforts will produce higher performance.

In addition to these cognitions, positive team gossip generates positive emotional reactions (e.g., pride, optimism) that influence members' expectancies. In general, positive emotional states increase expectancies because they facilitate cognitive orientations that help people more clearly see associations between their efforts and performance (Erez & Isen, 2002). In teams where members frequently discuss the positive reputations of others through gossip, being associated with the team generates positive feelings because membership reflects positively on members' own self-evaluations (Snyder, Lassegard, & Ford, 1986). In addition, in teams that frequently articulate what they respect about other teammates' actions, there is less ambiguity about what behaviors will generate similar praise, reducing uncertainty and increasing optimism. Taken together, when high levels of performance are perceived as attainable through collective efforts, this drives extraverted behaviors and behavioral activation (Elliot & Thrash, 2002) and commitment to the team (M. R. Cooper & Wood, 1974), altogether decreasing social loafing (George, 1995).

In sum, we propose that, by serving as a medium by which favorable member reputations are spread throughout the team, positive team gossip increases members' expectancies and thereby reduces social loafing. Supporting this logic empirically, Limon and Boster (2003) found that perceived group prestige and task competence were negatively correlated with social loafing and Karau and Hart (1998) found that social loafing was lower in teams that liked each other. Additional support is found in the social loafing literature, where Mulvey and Klein (1998) found that collective efficacy was negatively related to team social loafing perceptions and

multiple studies demonstrate that positive coworker performance expectations are negatively related to social loafing (Hütter & Diehl, 2011; Kerr, 1983; Schnake, 1991). Taken together, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1: Positive team gossip reduces social loafing behavior.

On the other hand, we propose negative team gossip communicates evaluations that downgrade members' impressions of their teammates. Teams with high levels of negative gossip are characterized by frequent interactions wherein members actively question and criticize the abilities and actions of other members, whether through unflattering stories, venting, or seeking to affirm negative impressions (Brady et al., 2017). In line with expectancy theory, negative team gossip lowers members' expectancies, leading to the belief that greater effort will not produce higher team performance, thereby increasing social loafing.

These lower expectancies are a product of member cognitions and emotions stimulated by negative team gossip. In terms of cognitions, upon hearing several instances of negative gossip, members become aware that their team is composed of members with poor general reputations. In addition, actions such as criticizing and venting about the poor behavior of teammates also convey dislike for other members (Lee & Barnes, 2020), contributing to perceptions that members have low-quality relationships. In line with the halo effect (in negative contexts, also referred to as the horns effect), this general negative reputation and impressions of member low-quality bonds downgrade members' perceptions of how well the team will work together in the future on organizationally-relevant tasks (Costa, Passos, & Bakker, 2015; Lehmann-Willenbrock, Grohmann, & Kauffeld, 2011). As documented in the social loafing literature, when members anticipate interacting with others who they cannot rely on, they increase social loafing as to avoid becoming the "sucker": one who puts forth a disproportionate

amount of effort on a collective task (Jackson & Harkins, 1985; Kerr, 1983). Because team performance depends on the contributions of multiple people, individual members feel as though "the group will not achieve a desired level *even with* one's efforts—that, no matter how high the caliber of one's contributions, the group will still fail to reach its goal" (Comer, 1995, p. 653).

In addition, negative team gossip fosters negative emotional reactions (e.g., anxiety, anger) within the team that impact members' expectancies. In teams with high levels of negative gossip, members are likely to realize that they are, at times, the target of negative gossip, generating apprehension and paranoia about the content of the negative evaluations (Martinescu, Janssen, & Nijstad, 2014). Further, in teams with high levels of negative gossip, members are likely to develop animosity that others are violating norms of equity and social responsibility. Negative emotional states create cognitive orientations that narrow one's attention and effectively make associations between effort and performance more difficult to perceive (Clore & Huntsinger, 2007). Further, negative reactions make members more pessimistic about the team's potential to achieve high team performance (Schwarz & Clore, 2007). In effect, these cognitions and emotions decrease the utility of putting forth individual effort to reach team goals, causing members to increase social loafing (Bandura, 1982; Shepperd, 1993).

Altogether, we propose that because negative team gossip communicates unfavorable reputations of team members, it lowers members' expectancies for whether their effort can generate successful team performance and increases social loafing. Supporting this empirically, Peralta, Lopes, Gilson, Lourenço, and Pais (2015) found that poor team reputation was associated with negative group affective tone and lower team commitment. Further, Vaidyanathan, Khalsa, and Ecklund (2016) found that in contexts with negative gossip, members avoid collaborative interactions altogether. This coalesces with individual-level research finding

that perceptions of negative gossip are negatively related to organizational citizenship behavior (L. Z. Wu, Birtch, Chiang, & Zhang, 2018). Therefore, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 2: Negative team gossip increases social loafing behavior.

The Indirect Effects of Team Gossip through Social Loafing on Team Performance

We further expect social loafing to serve as the mechanism by which positive and negative gossip affect team performance, which is defined as the "extent to which the productive output of a team meets or exceeds the performance standards of those who review and/or receive the output" (Hackman, 1987, p. 323). As established by expectancy theory and principles of team motivation more generally, in order to achieve high levels of team performance, members must not engage in social loafing (Karau & Williams, 2001). When social loafing is high, members are restricting their team-related efforts, hampering the team's ability to garner the potential advantages of distributed knowledge and abilities. This undermines collaborative work exchanges, as members do not devote their full capacity of effort toward coordinating joint actions. In the aggregate, social loafing also causes inefficiencies in task distribution and overloads members who are "stuck" with completing the tasks. Altogether, social loafing should negatively affect team performance.

Supporting the negative link between social loafing and team performance empirically, social loafing had a negative effect on team performance in two separate lab studies—one in a sample of teams working on a command and control simulation (Pearsall, Christian, et al., 2010) and one in a sample of teams working on a puzzle-building task (Ellis, Mai, & Christian, 2013). This relationship was also found in a field study sample of business student project teams (Mulvey & Klein, 1998). Taken together, we propose that positive team gossip will indirectly lead to increased team performance because it will reduce social loafing behavior that is

detrimental to team performance (a positive indirect effect), whereas negative team gossip will indirectly lead to decreased team performance because it will increase social loafing behavior that is detrimental to team performance (a negative indirect effect). Overall, we build on our prior hypotheses to build our conceptual model (shown in Figure 1) and hypothesize:

Hypothesis 3: Positive team gossip has a positive indirect effect on team performance through social loafing.

Hypothesis 4: Negative team gossip has a negative indirect effect on team performance through social loafing.

Method

Sample and Procedure

We conducted a longitudinal field study using a sample of self-managing undergraduate business student project teams to test our hypotheses. In general, this context offers advantages ideal for testing hypotheses of general principles, such as high response rates over multiple surveys and the fact that contextual factors such as rewards, memberships, tasks, and goals are stable and consistent across teams (Berkowitz & Donnerstein, 1982; Shen et al., 2011). More specifically, this type of sample has been used in prior research to test our theory (e.g., Geister, Konradt, & Hertel, 2006; Nakanishi, 1988) and meta-analytic evidence indicates that team communication constructs in student and employee samples have similar effects (Marlow, Lacerenza, Paoletti, Burke, & Salas, 2018).

Our participants were sampled from 313 undergraduate students at a large public university in the Southwestern United States taking an introductory management course. Study participants were arranged into 63 teams as part of a semester-long course team project. This project required teams to act as consultants by interviewing an organization, identifying

problems, and then detailing solutions the organization could use to improve its practices based on organizational behavior principles (c.f., Perry-Smith & Shalley, 2014). These teams were deeply motivated to perform well on the project, as their performance contributed to 30% of their final course grade. Team sizes ranged from three to six members, with the majority of teams, 52 of 63 (82.5%), consisting of 5 members (M = 4.97; Mode = 5). Of these individuals, 41 either did not complete the surveys or did not provide consent for their data to be used for research purposes, resulting in a total of 272 participants in 63 teams that were used in analyses. Their mean age was 23.6 (SD = 7.29), 78.1% indicated that they currently worked at least part-time, 64.1% were men, and participants were mostly Hispanic/Latino (43.8%) or Caucasian (34.4%).

Study variables were collected at three points in time over the semester, using survey measures and archival sources. Keeping in mind how long it would take for members to realistically assess team phenomena, the independent variables (positive and negative team gossip) were collected in a survey at the midpoint of the semester (Time 1; after teams had been working together for about six weeks and before they had received any formal feedback about their project) and the mediating variable (social loafing) was collected in a survey four weeks later (Time 2). The dependent variable, team performance, was assessed using the team final projects submitted at the end of the semester (Time 3). This protocol received approval from the University's institutional review board.

Measures

Positive team gossip (Time 1). Positive team gossip was measured using Brady et al.'s (2017) five-item measure. We adapted the items to refer to gossip with teammates about other teammates (see Appendix 1 for the full list of items). Following Brady et al. (2017), participants were told the items referred to how frequently they had conversations with their teammates about

other teammates who were not present to hear what was said. Sample items include: "complimented a teammate's actions while talking to another teammate" and "said something nice about a teammate while talking to another teammate" (α = .93). Participants were asked how often they had engaged in these behaviors since the beginning of the semester on a scale of 1 (*never*) to 7 (*more than once a day*). As our conceptualization of team gossip relies on consensus around levels of individual behavior, we used the direct-consensus model to calculate mean values which constituted our team-level variable (Chan, 1998). To demonstrate interrater reliability and agreement among team members, we calculated two types of intraclass correlation coefficients (ICCs) and $r_{wg(j)}$. ICC(1) is an effect size estimate that represents how much the team members' ratings were because of their team membership, whereas ICC(2) provides a reliability estimate of the team's mean (Bliese, 2000). Within-team agreement is further represented by $r_{wg(j)}$, an estimate comparing the observed variance among team members in their responses to the variance expected from a theoretically relevant null distribution (LeBreton & Senter, 2008). We used the slight skew null distribution to calculate $r_{wg(j)}$ because members may want to portray a favorable image of themselves and their teammates when responding (Smith-Crowe, Burke, Cohen, & Doveh, 2014). Supporting the aggregation of positive team gossip, we found ICC(1), ICC(2), and mean $r_{wg(j)}$ values of .08, $F(62, 195) = 1.45$ $p < .05$; .31; and .95, respectively.

Negative team gossip (Time 1). Negative team gossip was measured using Brady et al.'s (2017) five-item measure, with similar adaptations to positive team gossip (see Appendix 1) and measured using the same response format. Sample items include: "asked a teammate if they have a negative impression of something that another teammate has done" and "criticized a teammate while talking to another work teammate" (α = .92). As with positive team gossip, we created a mean value of negative gossip for each team in line with the direct consensus model (Chan,

1998). We again used a slight skew null distribution when calculating $r_{wg(j)}$ because members may wish to leniently rate socially undesirable phenomenon (Smith-Crowe et al., 2014). In support of the aggregation, we found ICC(1), ICC(2), and mean $r_{wg(j)}$ values of .22, $F(62, 197) = 2.38$, $p < .001$; .58; and .98, respectively.

Social loafing (Time 2). Social loafing was assessed using George's (1992) seven-item measure of social loafing as validated by Pearsall, Christian, et al. (2010) for team contexts. Participants were asked how much they agreed that members of the team engaged in social loafing behaviors *since the last survey* on a seven-point scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree)* to 7 (*strongly agree)*. Example items include "defer responsibilities they should assume to other team members" and "do not do their share of the work" ($\alpha = .98$). We created a mean value for each team by aggregating in line with the referent-shift model (Chan, 1998). Given we were measuring a socially undesirable characteristic, we again used the slight skew null distribution. Supporting the aggregation, we found ICC(1), ICC(2), and mean $r_{wg(j)}$ values of .18, $F(62, 197) = 2.06$, $p < .001$; .52; and .98, respectively.

Team performance (Time 3). Team performance was measured using the focal output of the team project— the team's final paper, which was submitted during the last week of the course. Assessments of team final projects have been used as a measure of team performance in similar designs (see Courtright, McCormick, Mistry, & Wang, 2017; Jehn & Mannix, 2001 for examples). Procedures detailed by Troth, Jordan, Lawrence, and Tse (2012) were employed to rate the final papers. In line with their method, we used three subject matter experts—research assistants who had previously completed a course that covered the subject matter of the final papers—to provide independent assessments of each team's final paper. Each rater assessed three dimensions critical to successful team performance on the project: idea clarity, writing

clarity, and overall quality; dimensions which were ultimately averaged to create a team performance variable ($\alpha = .83$).

An initial assessor training meeting was held to cover the rating criteria and discuss expected standards. Following this, all three assessors independently rated the same randomly-chosen set of 13 papers (20.6% of the total 63 papers). Raters were asked to assess each performance dimension on a scale of 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). We then calculated the level of inter-rater agreement and consistency using Cohen's kappa (Landis & Koch, 1977). Following Troth et al. (2012), Cohen's kappa was calculated by marking ratings that were within one mark of each other as "yes" and ratings greater than one mark of each other as "no." Cohen's kappa coefficients for the subject matter experts' ratings of idea clarity, writing clarity, and overall quality were .96, .92, and .96, respectively. These kappa coefficients indicate very strong inter-rater agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977). Lastly, the means and variances of these three performance variables were compared across each rater, revealing similar mean and variance distributions. Because sufficient inter-rater agreement was established, the remaining papers were then divided among the raters to assess.

Control variables. Key to our model is that positive and negative team gossip increases or decreases social loafing; inferences enabled by controlling for initial levels of social loafing (Hanges & Wang, 2012). As a result, in addition to measuring social loafing as the mediating variable in the Time 2 survey, we also measured social loafing at Time 1 using Price, Harrison, and Gavin's (2006) four-item measure. Participants were asked the extent to which they agreed that members of the team engaged in social loafing behaviors since the beginning of the semester on a seven-point scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree)* to 7 *(strongly agree)*. Sample items include "would leave work for others to do" and "would have other things to do when asked to

help out" (α = .92). We aggregated this variable using the same composition model and null distribution as social loafing at Time 2. Supporting the aggregation of social loafing at Time 1, we found ICC(1), ICC(2), and mean $r_{wg(j)}$ values of .08, $F(62, 195) = 2.30$, $p < .001$; .31; and .91, respectively. In addition, because differences in team size could impact social loafing and thereby performance (Karau & Williams, 1993; Schippers, 2014), we controlled for the number of team members.

Results

Descriptive Statistics, Power Analysis, and Measurement Model

Table 1 provides descriptive statistics and correlations among the study variables. To assess whether we had sufficient power for path analysis, we conducted post-hoc power analyses in PS Power and Sample size version 3.1.6 (Dupont & Plummer, 1998). The results from these power analyses suggested that our sample size of 63 teams provided sufficient power to conduct path analysis. To verify the validity of our theorized model, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using Mplus 8.1 (Muthen & Muthen, 2012). The results for our measurement model provided an adequate fit to the data ($\chi^2 = 995.07$, $df = 120$, $p < .001$; CFI = .95; RMSEA = .09; SRMR = .09).

Hypothesis Testing

We tested our predictions using path analysis in Mplus 8.1 with a bootstrapping approach of 1,000 data draws. Model results are provided in Figure 2. Path analysis, as a general form of multiple regression, allows for theoretical, causal models to be tested, while still providing statistical control (Mitchell, 2001). This is also advantageous for our context because it enables us to model all pathways at once, and simultaneously account for both forms of team gossip to ensure the results of our hypotheses tests are not confounded by shared variance among the two

forms of team gossip. In addition to the hypothesized paths, we included a direct effect from positive and negative gossip to team performance, as these paths are needed for testing mediation (MacKinnon, Lockwood, Hoffman, West, & Sheets, 2002). Even if those paths are not significant, including them is needed to prevent spuriously inflating the indirect effect results (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). We also included control paths from time 1 social loafing to time 2 social loafing and from team size to team performance.

Hypothesis 1 predicted that positive team gossip reduces social loafing behavior. Supporting Hypothesis 1, positive gossip was significantly and negatively related to social loafing at Time 2 (b = -.33, s.e. = .08, $p < .001$). Hypothesis 2 predicted that negative team gossip increases social loafing behavior. Hypothesis 2 was not supported, as negative team gossip was not significantly positively related to social loafing at Time 2 (b = .14, s.e. = .11, p = .24). Although they are conceptually distinct constructs, positive and negative forms of team gossip were correlated. Therefore, we analyzed variance inflation factors (VIF; Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003). Well below traditional cutoffs, the range of VIF for positive gossip was [1.08, 1.45] with a mean of 1.26 and for negative gossip was [1.02, 1.09] with a mean of 1.06. This shows our results are likely not influenced by multicollinearity between these two forms of gossip.

Hypothesis 3 predicted that positive team gossip has a positive indirect effect on team performance through social loafing. Supporting Hypothesis 3, social loafing at Time 2 was negatively related to team performance (b = -.36, s.e. = .15, p = .01), and the positive indirect effect of positive gossip on team performance through social loafing was significant (ρ = .12, s.e. = .06, p = .03, 95% CI = [.011, .228]). Hypothesis 4 predicted that negative team gossip has a negative indirect effect on team performance through social loafing. Hypothesis 4 was not

supported, as the negative indirect effect of negative gossip on team performance through social loafing was not significant (ρ = -.07, s.e. = .07, p = .32, 95% CI = [-.213, .070]).[2]

Analysis of Alternative Explanation

While our hypothesis that team negative gossip would increase social loafing was drawn from expectancy theory, we did not find support for this prediction. However, a potential explanation for this non-significant effect is that hearing negative information about teammates led some to compensate by working harder (LePine & Van Dyne, 2001). In the spirit of transparently testing this post-hoc explanation (e.g., Hollenbeck & Wright, 2017), we tested this idea directly by creating a standard deviation value of our Time 2 social loafing measure—in teams where there is more variance in effort, we would expect social loafing standard deviation to be higher. We did not find support for this effect when replacing Time 2 social loafing standard deviation in the place of Time 2 social loafing mean. The paths of positive gossip (b = -.08, s.e. = .12, p = .53) and negative gossip (b = .20, s.e. = .21, p = .36) to the social loafing standard deviation value were nonsignificant, as was the path from the social loafing standard deviation value to team performance (b = -.15, s.e. = .11, p = .18). The indirect effects were therefore also nonsignificant for positive gossip to team performance through the social loafing standard deviation value (ρ = .01, s.e. = .03, p = .68) and for negative gossip to team performance through the social loafing standard deviation value (ρ = -.03, s.e. = .05, p = .55). In addition, the correlation between Time 1 team negative gossip and the Time 2 social loafing

[2] Interestingly, when the time 1 social loafing variable is removed from our model and the same analytic procedure is employed, the indirect effect of negative gossip to team performance through time 2 social loafing becomes significant (ρ = -.21, s.e. = .10, p = .03, 95% CI = [-.399, -.021]). The indirect effect of positive gossip to team performance through time 2 social loafing remains significant (ρ = .18, s.e. = .08, p = .02, 95% CI = [.031, .335]). This suggests that, despite a relatively low frequency of negative team gossip, negative gossip is still associated with greater social loafing behavior, which, in turn, is associated with worse team performance.

standard deviation value was not significant (r = .10, p = .39). Therefore, this would not seem to support the alternative explanation that some work harder in the face of team negative gossip.

Discussion

Historic approaches that view all gossip as deviant behavior in organizations (e.g., Robinson & Bennett, 1995) have prevented the study of gossip and how it relates to other organizational variables from flourishing (Brady et al., 2017). Extending a more recent and balanced view of gossip (Brady et al., 2017) to the team level, we propose that team gossip is not inherently beneficial or harmful, but its *valence* is a crucial factor that shapes its outcomes. With this lens, we uncover a context in which team gossip improves team functioning and performance. Using expectancy theory (Vroom, 1964), we advance theory in this domain by showing that gossip is a medium that influences team members' expectancies for team performance. We found that positive team gossip reduced social loafing and in turn had a positive indirect effect on team performance, but negative team gossip did not affect social loafing or team performance.

Theoretical and Research Implications

This study offers several theoretical contributions. First, we contribute to the gossip literature. To date, negative gossip has received most of the attention even though positive gossip appears to be more common in organizations (Brady et al., 2017). This attention has generated a narrative that gossip only has long-term destructive outcomes for teams (e.g., Beersma et al., 2019) and aligns with traditional perspectives that view all gossip as deviance. Our work shows that this approach—failing to consider positively-valenced gossip—overlooks important benefits that gossip can have for teams. Although a more nuanced view of gossip has been emerging in recent years, it has largely considered contingencies related to negative gossip in organizations.

For instance, previous research suggests that the *threat* of being the target of negative gossip generates much more pro-group behavior (e.g., Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012; J. Wu, Balliet, & Van Lange, 2016) than when those threats are *realized* and one becomes the target of negative gossip (e.g., L. Z. Wu et al., 2018; Zhou, Liu, Su, & Xu, 2019). By considering gossip valence and providing an initial investigation of the merits of team positive gossip, our work reinforces that a more complex view of gossip is needed to fully understand the outcomes of gossip in teams.

We also contribute to the gossip literature by revealing a key mediating mechanism that explains how team gossip influences team performance, a core element of theory building in this area (Whetten, 1989). Finding that team gossip influences team performance indirectly via social loafing is important because it explains why informal, evaluative talk has downstream effects on task-related team functioning—it impacts motivation by communicating evaluations crucial for shaping expectancies of how the team members will work together. This provides a key mechanism for explaining why general forms of team gossip influence performance on organizational tasks. While both positive and negative gossip have informational value in delineating between acceptable and non-acceptable team behavior, we do not find that these two forms of gossip are equally motivational. Drawing from expectancy theory, this is because only positive evaluations about the team make members confident that the team will ultimately be able to perform well, increasing members' expectancies that putting forth effort will lead to high team performance. Further, by uncovering social loafing as the mechanism by which team gossip affects team performance, we answer calls to investigate how gossip relates to deviance as an antecedent (Brady et al., 2017) and broaden the nomological net of gossip to team-level performance criterion (Beersma et al., 2019).

While we found support for our model regarding the effects of positive team gossip, negative team gossip did not increase social loafing nor indirectly influence team performance. This could be for several reasons. It is possible that there are more nuanced factors at play, and these positive and negative forces are canceling each other out. While we theorized about negative effects at the team-level, prior dyad-level research suggests sharing negative gossip about a deviant team member can strengthen bonds between the gossip sender and receiver, as it informs the gossip receiver about who to avoid in the team (Peters, Jetten, Radova, & Austin, 2017). In terms of team-level outcomes, it is plausible that negative team-level attitudes about the capabilities of the team were being canceled out by strengthened dyad-level bonds. We encourage research on the relationship between negative team gossip and team performance, as a more complex process may be occurring.

The results of this research also provide new insights for the application of expectancy theory. Although Karau and Williams (1993, p. 702) suggest that communication in groups plays a key role in shaping expectancies that enhance or reduce social loafing, expectancy theory has yet to be fully leveraged in this domain. Applications of expectancy theory in teams to date emphasize the role of objective performance feedback after formal performance episodes as sources that form member expectancies (e.g., Eby & Dobbins, 1997; Hüffmeier et al., 2017; Shepperd & Taylor, 1999). Yet for teams without a history of working together or teams with particularly long performance episodes without frequent objective performance feedback, factors that shape social loafing in line with expectancy theory are largely unknown. We extend expectancy theory by testing a different assumption—that informal and subjective evaluations of members' behavior (through gossip) also play a crucial role in shaping member expectancies for team performance. Finding that expectancy theory effectively explains why team gossip has

different effects depending on its valence (positive or negative nature) also suggests that expectancy theory can also be applied to explain how other similarly-valenced forms of team phenomena influence effort in teams. For instance, it may be fruitfully applied to explain why positive and negative group affective tone—"consistent or homogeneous affective reactions within a group" (Collins et al., 2013; George, 1990, p. 108)—influence team motivation and performance.

Finally, we contribute to the literature on counterproductive behavior in teams. Member disengagement from responsibilities in collective settings is harmful for team functioning. Because of this, understanding antecedents of this form of counterproductive behavior is important. In regard to social loafing, while research has focused on structural factors such as hybrid reward systems (Pearsall, Christian, et al., 2010) and team diversity (Rubino, Avery, Volpone, & Ford, 2014) to "build" teams where social loafing is less likely, we show that dynamic team processes also come into play. Importantly, by using a sample of teams with hybrid reward structures intact (in addition to the team project grade, team members received additional individual grades based on peer ratings during the project), we show team gossip explains meaningful variance in social loafing *beyond* the influential structural predictors of individual and group reward structures.

In terms of broader implications for this literature, by examining gossip through an expectancy theory lens, we offer a new perspective on how teams can reduce the likelihood that counterproductive behaviors get institutionalized into team routines and snowball into larger problems. To date, research has largely focused on the role of leaders in reducing team counterproductive behaviors like withholding effort (e.g., Mayer et al., 2012), with the assumption that leaders are aware of and have the capacity to monitor and punish deviant

behavior. Yet, with the prominence of self-management, it is pressing to understand how teams self-regulate their own behavior (Tannenbaum, Mathieu, Salas, & Cohen, 2012). Existing research suggests that members can reduce other members' bad behavior through control mechanisms like ostracism (e.g., Felps, Mitchell, & Byington, 2006). However, because of ostracism's net damage (e.g., Howard, Cogswell, & Smith, 2020), it is likely not a viable long-term solution for teams. Our work highlights positive team gossip as a new avenue to reduce undesirable behavior in teams and challenges the idea that social loafing remedies need to come from upper levels of management.

Practical Implications

The results of our study offer important practical implications. First, it is imperative for organizations to try to change attitudes about gossip and foster a more nuanced and open view, since "groups are a breeding ground for gossip, and organizational work groups are no exception" (Beersma et al., 2019, p. 417). A recent poll of 1,500 employees found 60% rated workplace gossip as their job's top "pet peeve" (Haupt, 2015). Supervisors tend to hold similarly pessimistic views (Grosser, Lopez-Kidwell, & Labianca, 2010). However, through these views and subsequent actions to suppress *all* workplace gossip, organizations may be unknowingly harming motivation by stifling a crucial process by which teams communicate positive evaluations. As our results show, not all gossip is equal, and positive team gossip has important benefits. Because of this, organizations do not necessarily need to spend effort or resources trying to prevent team gossip. Therefore, there is value for organizations in distinguishing positive from negative gossip and educating about the benefits of its positive forms.

Second, our results offer implications for team members seeking to encourage team-focused efforts of other members and ultimately enhance team outcomes. Popular suggestions

for thwarting social loafing focus on manager-driven incentives, recognition, and evaluations—reductions in group size are also recommended (Bennett & Naumann, 2005). Such tools, however, are not as useful to teams who cannot control their member count or composition, do not have a formal leader, lack discretion over formal group and individual reward systems, and are forced to self-manage. Engaging in positive gossip thus offers an alternative source of agency for team members, organically putting into motion an evaluative feedback system about member behavior that prevents members from withholding effort without the use of top-down traditional organizational enforcement mechanisms.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

These implications should be evaluated considering some limitations. First, it is important to acknowledge a boundary condition of our operationalization of team gossip. In this study, we examined gossip among team members that targeted another member of the team. Although fellow members are commonly targets of gossip (Ellwardt et al., 2012), gossip targets may be the leader of the team or even organizational members outside of the team. For instance, given outgroup biases (Chattopahyay & George, 2001), members are likely to exchange negative gossip about the behavior of members of another team. In this case, the gossip may serve as a social comparison tool (e.g., Wert & Salovey, 2004) and contribute to perceptions of competence, influencing attitudes such as team efficacy. It would be interesting for future research to examine the outcomes of team gossip with different targets.

In addition, in this study we operationalized team gossip using a mean value. While we believe this consensus-based approach is warranted theoretically (and empirically supported) and offers an important first step in examining team-level implications of gossip, team gossip may be fruitfully examined as a configural construct. For instance, a social network approach may offer

the ability to view the phenomenon differently. Instead of using Brady et al.'s (2017) scale, scholars may adapt the items to detail the recipient and target (c.f., Grosser et al., 2010). Using that approach, scholars may examine centralization or density in team gossip, or the frequency with which the same target is gossiped about among members of the team.

It is also important to note that a boundary condition of our study is that we examined a sample of self-managing teams. Although a substantial percentage of work teams are this form and better understanding how these types of teams effectively self-regulate is important (Tannenbaum et al., 2012), future research may consider the effects of team gossip in teams with traditional leadership structures. For instance, it would be useful to know whether and/or to what extent team gossip is a substitute for feedback from leaders. Given leaders often have formal power over rewards and punishments (Podsakoff, Bommer, Podsakoff, & MacKenzie, 2006), we expect that positive team gossip would have less of an effect on team outcomes when positive feedback from the leader is also high.

Another limitation of our work is that we used a sample of student teams. Although scholars have argued that inferences based on student and employee samples are similar (e.g., Highhouse & Gillespie, 2009)—especially in terms of team communication constructs (Marlow et al., 2018)—a fruitful avenue for future research could be extending our model in a work context with an employee sample. The external validity of our model could be tested by sampling work teams using a time-lagged design. Such an effort may also help establish whether our results regarding team negative gossip could have been because of the low base rate of gossip in our sample or is an effect that generalizes to other populations and study designs.

Our last limitation is that we did not consider moderators or additional mediating mechanisms in our model. Future research could extend our model by testing moderating factors

inherent in a diverse sample of work teams. For instance, we would expect factors that increase uncertainty about team functioning, such as task complexity, would create conditions wherein the effect of positive team gossip is strengthened. Our model could also be extended by testing alternative mediators that may transmit the effect of negative team gossip on team performance. For instance, it would be interesting for future research to consider the role of social exchange relationships (Colquitt, Baer, Long, & Halvorsen-Ganepola, 2014) or trust (De Jong, Dirks, & Gillespie, 2016). We would expect that team negative gossip would decrease both the quality of members social exchange relations and trust, in line with social exchange theory (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005), and in turn harm team performance.

Conclusion

As noted by Kniffin and Wilson (2010, p. 167-168), "as a first step, gossip needs—and deserves—to be recognized as a practice that is a natural part of social organizations that can serve socially-redeeming purposes." Rather than devoting resources to eliminating gossip altogether, organizations may be better off acknowledging its potential advantages. By revealing the benefits of positive team gossip, we hope this study helps reframe the perceived utilities of gossip, spurring new insights about the role of gossip in organizations.

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Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations for Study Variables

Variables	M	SD	Min	Max	1	2	3	4	5
1. Positive team gossip (T1)	2.39	.67	1.07	4.25					
2. Negative team gossip (T1)	1.29	.44	1.00	3.60	.42				
3. Social loafing (T2)	2.73	1.11	1.20	5.00	-.26	.37			
4. Team performance (T3)	4.03	.64	2.00	5.00	.04	.04	-.22		
5. Social loafing (T1)	2.74	1.05	1.25	6.88	.01	.59	.70	-.14	
6. Team size	4.97	.47	3.00	6.00	.06	.00	.15	.00	.19

Note. $N = 63$ teams. Values above |.25| are significant at $p < .05$ and values above |.26| are significant at $p < .01$. Min = minimum value, Max = maximum value.

Appendix 1

The following questions are about conversations in which you talked about a teammate when he/she was not present to hear what was said. The teammate could be any of your teammates.

Since the beginning of the semester, how often have you…

Positive Gossip (*label not shown to participants*)

1. complimented a teammate's actions while talking to another teammate
2. told a teammate good things about another teammate
3. defended a teammate's actions while talking to another teammate
4. said something nice about a teammate while talking to another teammate
5. told a teammate that you respect another teammate

Negative Gossip (*label not shown to participants*)

1. asked a teammate if they have a negative impression of something that another teammate has done
2. questioned a teammate's abilities while talking to another teammate
3. criticized a teammate while talking to another teammate
4. vented to a teammate about something that another teammate has done
5. told an unflattering story about a teammate while talking to another teammate

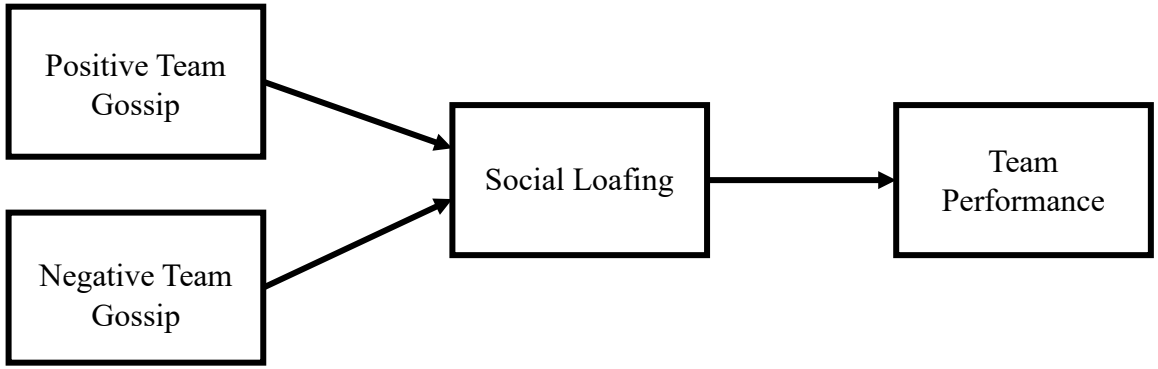

Figure 1. Conceptual model.

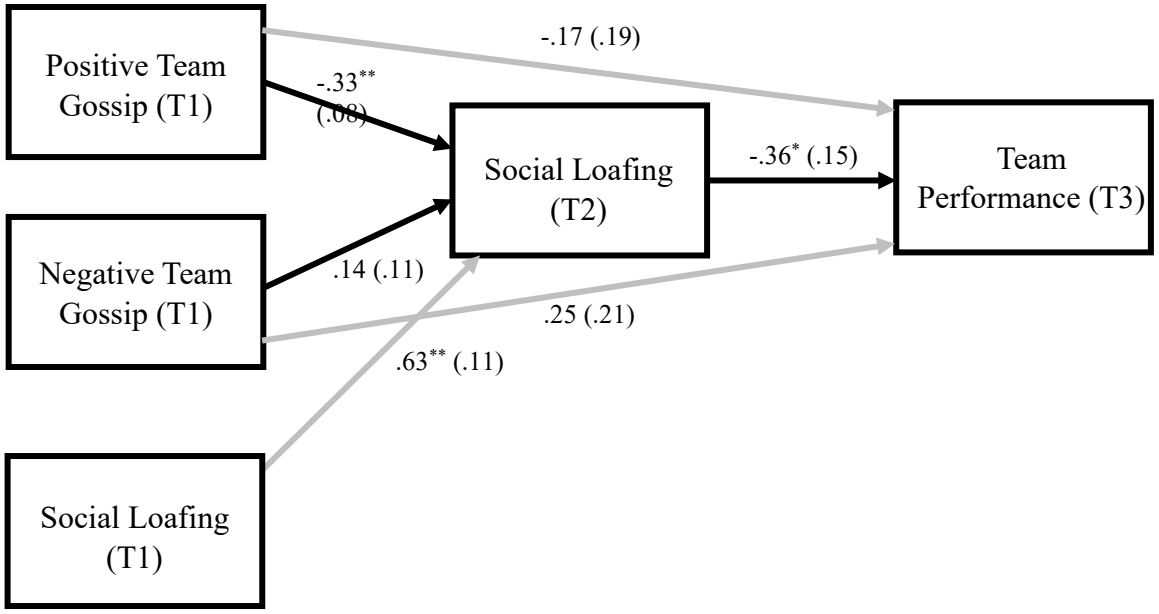

Figure 2. $N = 63$ teams. Path model standardized results. Standard errors shown in parentheses. Control variable pathways are shown in gray. For visual simplicity, the standardized effect of team size to team performance is not shown but was .07 with a standard error of .11.

* = significant at the $p < .05$ level; ** = significant at the $p < .01$ level.