Roles of Self-Construal in Workplace Dynamics

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Abstract: *People with independent self-construal value individuality and self-realization [8]. The author expected these individuals to show an increased tendency to report ethical issues at work and a lower extent of mental impact from workplace gossip. In the studies, 22 current McGill University students were surveyed, and the results revealed a weak positive correlation between independent self-construal level and ethical-issue reporting behaviours, as well as a stronger negative correlation between independent self-construal level and the psychological impact of workplace gossip. The findings suggest that independent self-construal plays a less significant role in workplace dynamics than anticipated among current university students and provide managerial implications.*

Keywords: *Self-Construal, Ethical Issue Reporting, Workplace Gossip, Affective Commitment, Psychological Impact*

1. Introduction

In an organization, gossip is not only a part of social life but also a significant form of informal communication [17; 18]. The topics of office gossip may include a colleague's promotion or praise for their skills, morals, or character. However, workplace gossip can be negative, such as conversations about a colleague's bad reputation in the workplace or their personal affairs outside of work, particularly family scandals. The content of negative workplace rumours is unfavourable to the target and may cause greater mental anguish and suffering for the target employees [3; 29]. In fact, negative workplace gossip constitutes a form of "cold violence" against other employees [17].

Moreover, one of the greatest challenges facing any organization is the improper management of its employees' unethical conduct and workplace violence [7; 19]. Typically, employees who engage in unethical behaviour are met with resistance [2] and generate tension and hostility in their workplace interactions. In fact, the unethical conduct of employees in the workplace jeopardizes not only the organization's reputation but also its human relations and overall performance [14; 32].

Individual perceptions, processes, and responses to a situation can be influenced by varying levels of self-construal [11; 12]. Self-construal is a personality trait that influences how people comprehend, define, and construct themselves [21]. Specifically, self-construal is divided into independent self-construal and interdependent self-construal according to individuals' views of themselves as independent individuals separated from others or as part of a social network. A higher level of (independent) self-construal corresponds to a higher degree to which the individual views himself as independent from the group [20].

In terms of personality traits, Generation Z has its own set of workplace expectations, preferences, and perceptions [16]. They were born between 1995-2010 and are the first generation to experience globalization and culturally diverse times early in their lives, together with having connections to others from different cultures, backgrounds, and circumstances via social media [22]. Overall, they embrace diversity and are concerned with equality [27].

Therefore, this study will examine workplace dynamics based on employees' reactions to unethical workplace phenomena and their reactions to negative workplace gossip. Specifically, participants in the survey will be current university students who will soon enter the job market.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

2.1. The role of self-construal in issue reporting

To begin, studies have found that more independent participants place a higher value on a communicative manner that is direct and explicit [15]. To test if the straightforward communication of individuals of high independent self-construal is associated with a higher incidence of issues reported, Park *et al*. (2013) collected survey data on sexual harassment from three South Korean universities in 2006 [26]. Results indicated that people who have an independent self-construal are more likely to express their feelings directly to offenders as well as report the offender to the university counselling center.

The role of self-construal in issue reporting is further supported by the fact that reporting outcomes are not caused by participants' gende*r* differences in correspondence with different self-construal types [26]. In fact, no difference between women and men in independent self-construal scores has been seen among survey participants.

Given the positive correlation between self-construal level and the reporting of sexual harassment by college students [26], Study 1 hypothesizes that current college students with high self-construal are also more likely to report unethical behaviour in the workplace. Due to the lack of evidence for gender-related self-construal [6, 26], this paper will not compare gender roles. This first hypothesis is also supported by a study indicating that individuals with low self-construal place a greater emphasis on interactive constraints, where concerns for avoiding negative evaluation stem from concerns about others' psychological opposition and dislike [15]. This suggests that a low level of self-construal may lead to an avoidance of ethical-issue reporting to avoid others' disapproval.

2.2. The moderating role of self-construal

Affective commitment can enhance employees' work contributions in the workplace [24]. Because employees who have a strong affective or emotional attachment to the organization will develop a psychological bond with it and be willing to make greater contributions. In other words, in order to achieve organizational goals, such employees will strive to demonstrate organizational citizenship behaviour (OCB), in which employees focus on their work, including performing tasks, and make extra efforts to assist others [31]. Nonetheless, negative workplace gossip can reduce an employee's affective commitment and, consequently, their level of job effort in OCB [4].

Self-construal level, on the other hand, can mitigate the impact of workplace gossip on an individual's existing affective commitment, thereby offsetting the impact of workplace gossip on work effort [4]. Guo *et al*. (2022) have demonstrated that independent self-construal, which is characterized by a tendency to focus more on one's own goals [9, 8], not only moderates the impact of workplace gossip on affective commitment [Figure 1]; it can also increase the mediating effect of affective commitment in maintaining organizational citizenship behaviour in the presence of negative workplace gossip [Figure 2], which together contributes to a higher work commitment [24].
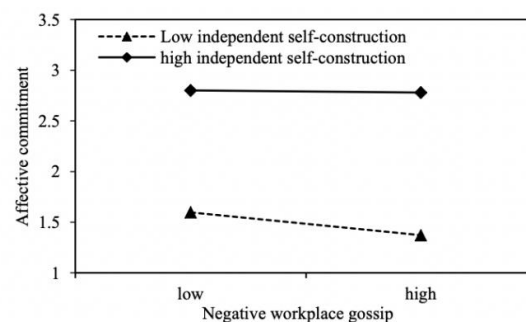

Figure 1: Individuals with higher independent self-construal maintain higher levels of affective commitment in the presence of negative workplace gossip [4].
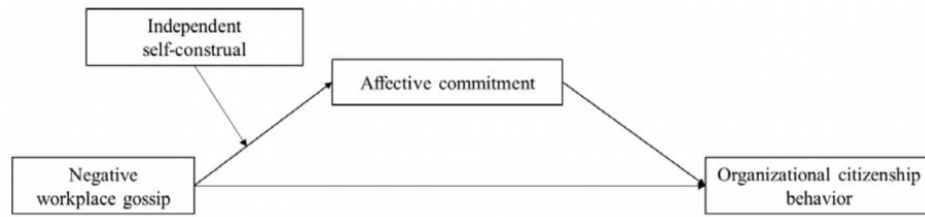
Figure 2: Negative workplace gossip impacts both affective commitment and organizational citizenship behaviour + Affective commitment leads to organizational citizenship behaviour + Independent self-construal helps with the maintenance of affective commitment = Independent self-construal counters the impact of workplace gossip and maintains a level of commitment to work, given existing affective commitment [4]

Given that negative workplace gossip can reduce affective commitment and OCB [4], and that a higher self-construal level can help alleviate the effect of negative workplace gossip to maintain affective commitment and OCB, which entails concentration on one's work [31], the study therefore hypothesises that, assuming an employee has adequate pre-existing affective commitment, independent self-construal can mitigate the mental impact that reduces an employee's concentration at work when workplace gossip is present.

2.3. Hypothesis

H1: Current college students with high self-construal are more likely to report unethical behaviour in the workplace.

H2: Independent self-construal mitigates the level of emotional impact from negative workplace gossip that lowers employees' concentration at work, given their extant affective commitment.

3. Method and participants

To test the hypotheses and identify correlations, a non-probability method was used, addressing students at McGill. A survey was shared on social media platforms, and the participants were 22 McGill students from the classes of 2022 and 2023, primarily BCom majors. First, the levels of the participants' independent and interdependent self-construal were evaluated using Gudykunst's self-construal scale [8]. To ensure the completion of the Google Form by the volunteers, only six items from the scale were used to make an independent self-construal index for comparative purposes. Agreements to questions revealing independent self-construal corresponded to the number 1 on the three-point scale of -1 to 1, and vice versa. The level of self-construal correlated with the outcomes of survey questions specific to each of the two studies.

4. Study One

4.1. Procedure and design

For a correlation to be statistically significant, the null hypothesis stating that the independent variable, self-construal level, has no effect on the propensity of participants to report unethical behaviour in the workplace must be rejected in favour of the alternative hypothesis. Individuals were asked to indicate whether they would report: 1. the dissemination of unethical comments; 2. the witnessing of bribery; and 3. workplace harassment (including: sexual harassment, disability harassment, racial harassment, sexual orientation and gender identity harassment, and/or ageism) in their workplace [25]. Multiple choice responses of "Yes", "Unsure", and "No", corresponding to the numbers 1, 0, and -1 were used to calculate the overall scores for problem reporting propensity.

4.2. Results and discussion

In the covariant graph, a negligible relationship between self-construal level and problem reporting tendency is shown by the coefficient describing independent self-construal of 0.0495283 [Figure 3]. The weak correlation is shown by the coefficient of determination of 0.0159. The lack of significant difference from the change in the independent variable of self-construal level matches the same total

proportion of high scores for activeness in problem reporting (scores of 2-3) present both in individuals with lower self-construal (indices of -1 & -2) and individuals with higher self-construal (indices of 2 & 3) [Figures 4 & 5].
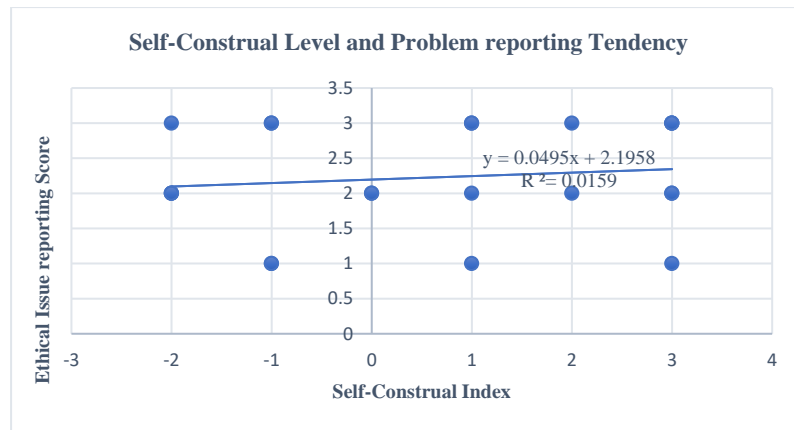

Figure 3: Bivariate scatter plot showing correlation between self-construal level and level of participants' propensity to report unethical behaviour.
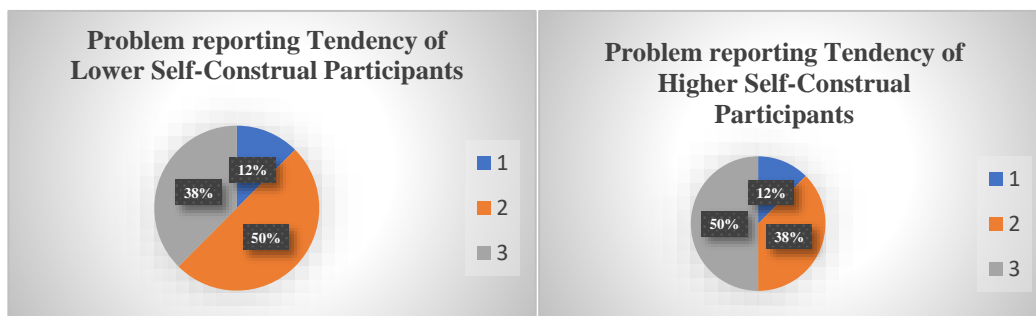

Figure 4 & 5: The outcomes for ethical-issue reporting in participants with similar levels of self-construal. A score of 3 denotes the highest tendency towards problem reporting.

The high ethical-issue reporting tendency of people with lower levels of self-construal demonstrates that, while participants with high interdependent self-construal place a higher value on relationships and harmony with others [33], this does not preclude them from publicly reporting incidents for fear of disrupting harmony or relationships within their group. Therefore, assuming the harmony-valuing personal characteristics associated with dependent self-construal are accurate, then the reason they report situations which would damage relationships with a portion of their group, as revealed by this study, may be that they believe true harmony cannot be achieved by ignoring workplace issues but rather by reporting and resolving them.

The higher-than-expected reporting behaviour of people with interdependent self-construal also clarifies the conditions of "cooperation" from the general belief that people with interdependent self-construal are expected to "hold the group's beliefs and opinions and cooperate with others" [33]. Despite the fact that participants who demonstrated a high level of cooperation with the group had a lower independent self-construal index, their conditions of cooperation did not predispose them to hold unethical opinions or engage in unethical group behaviour. According to this finding, on a larger scale, when an entire group engages in unethical behaviour, these interdependent individuals may leave the group and report the behaviour to the wider society, thereby combating unethical organizational behaviour, which is consistent with the equity-concerning trait of Generation Z [22]. The minimal effect of self-construal on the reporting of ethical issues in the workplace, as indicated by the findings of Study 1, also calls for additional research in this area.

Independent self-construal, on the other hand, only shows a slightly higher ethical issue reporting tendency, even though high self-construal is likely to deliver clear messages in any situation [15]. In comparison to individuals with lower self-construal (-1 to -2), participants with higher self-construal (2-3) had the same proportion of scores of 2- 3 in issue reporting but a higher proportion of corresponding scores of 3. A further characteristic of independent self-construal, wherein private aspects of a person's life are prioritized over more external, relational ones, resulting in a perception of the self as distinct from others [21], may prevent independent self-construal participants from reporting ethical issues. If such

individuals are more concerned with their individual rights and less concerned with group harmony and the impact of unethical workplace behaviour on other individuals, this will reduce the extent of their activity in reporting an ethical issue that happens around them but not directly affecting them. The self-oriented feature may explain the fact that people with an independent self-construal are more likely to express incidents of sexual harassment offenders reflected in studies from Korean colleges, where the reporter was the subject whose rights were violated, is proven at a greater statistical significance level [26].

Overall, the results fail to reject the null hypothesis ($p > 0.05$) that independent self-construal does not influence participants' direct reporting of ethical issues in the workplace [Table 1]. This opposes the initial hypothesis predicting a positive correlation between independent self-construal and ethical issue reporting propensity in the workplace.

Table 1: Sampling outputs from regression analysis.

Coefficients	Standard Error	P-value	Lower 95%	Upper 95%
0.0495283	0.0870168	0.57557056	-0.1319856	0.23104216

5. Study Two

5.1. Procedure and design

The study tests whether the null hypothesis can be rejected on the basis of the alternative hypothesis that independent self-construal mitigates the level of their emotional impact from negative workplace gossip that lowers their concentration at work, given their affective commitment. Since affective commitment involves emotional attachment to the organization, in which employees will strive to achieve organizational goals [24]. Volunteers are presented with a scenario in which they have an emotional attachment to a company, are focused on their work, and are exposed to background gossip. The participants are then asked to evaluate the emotional impact of negative workplace gossip based on how distracted they would be at work. The extent of the mental impact ranges from a scale of 1–5.

5.2. Results and discussion

A bivariate scatter plot of the disturbance level according to the level of independent self-construal is plotted [Figure 6]. The coefficient of -0.2040094 associated with independent construal showed its medium negative correlation with mental impact level.
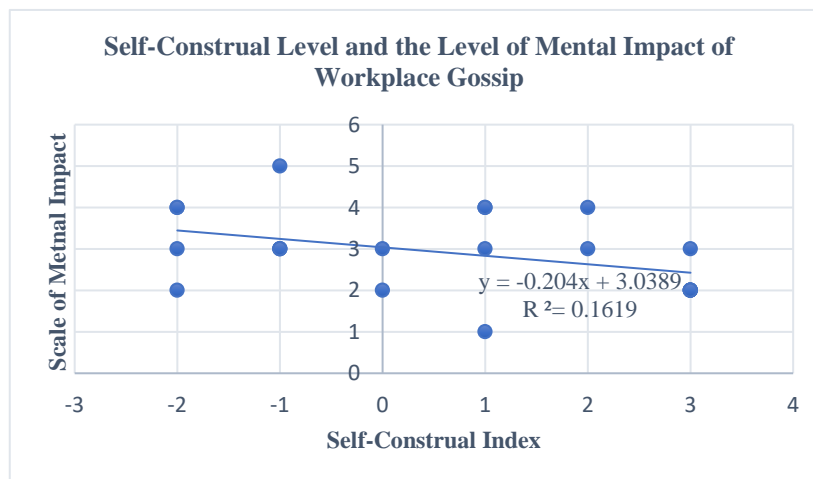

Figure 6: Bivariate graph showing the correlation between self-construal level and the level of mental impact participants obtained from negative workplace gossip.

The negative correlation between self-construal level and the level of mental impact received is linked to the characteristics of independent self-construal. Since individuals with independent self-construal tend to pay more attention to themselves and ignore others' evaluations [21], negative workplace gossip has a less significant impact on their attitudes and behaviours. Thus, if the effect of self-construal is significant enough, employees with higher construal may be better at maintaining their focus at work.

In contrast, those with a dependent self-construal demonstrate a greater emotional attachment to workplace gossip and are consequently more emotionally distressed. The reason may be that the low self-construal is preoccupied with fitting in and belonging with others such that the self and others are not distinct from situations [21; 30]. Therefore, people with interdependent self-construal tend to define themselves in relation to other group members and consider how their own thoughts, feelings, and actions are perceived by others [8]. From this perspective, the negative interpersonal connections resulting from workplace rumours may have irritated them more.

Nevertheless, despite a stronger correlation indicated than in Study 1, the effect of independent self-construal levels on reducing the mental impact that hinders their ability to concentrate on work is not significant enough (p-value>0.05) [Table 2]. This suggests that employees with lower construal may be equally adept at maintaining their concentration at work, and employees with higher construal may be equitably irritated by workplace rumors.

Table 2: Sampling outputs from regression analysis.

Coefficients	Standard Error	P-value	Lower 95%	Upper 95%
-0.2040094	0.10379201	0.06338911	-0.4205158	0.0124969

5.3. Additional implications

The effect of self-construal level on the mental impact of negative workplace gossip and the reporting of unethical behaviour can both contribute to workplace dynamics.

The emotional impact caused by workplace gossip can also lead to moral disengagement in individuals [5; 18; 36; 37]. Specifically, moral disengagement is induced when individuals respond to negative workplace gossip with the logic of "an eye for an eye"[1; 36]. Individuals who are morally disengaged may engage in a wide range of unethical workplace behaviour [13]. Examples of unethical work behaviour resulting from moral disengagement include the belief that it is acceptable to spread rumours as a defence mechanism against gossip and the belief that one cannot be held accountable for doing questionable things when following orders [9].

Due to the revenge-based nature of moral disengagement, the effect of independent self-construal on reducing the psychological impact of workplace gossip can help prevent moral disengagement [1; 35] [Figure 7]. In other words, when individuals with independent self-construal are less mentally affected by negative workplace gossip, they are less likely to engage in moral disengagement, thereby preventing unethical behaviour resulting from moral disengagement [9].
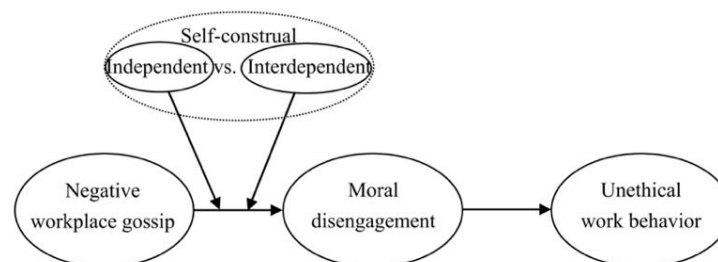

Figure 7: Independent self-construal counters the impact of negative workplace gossip on moral disengagement to prevent unethical work behaviour [9].

6. Conclusion

In the studies, the correlation between levels of self-construal and the mental impact of workplace gossip was not statistically significant among the participants. Therefore, this research suggests that it is not particularly valid to predict mental resistance to gossip or the likelihood of moral disengagement actions in response to negative workplace gossip based on the level of independent self-construal in the hiring process of newly graduated Canadian students. Companies may seek employees who will report unethical issues, including those resulting from moral disengagement. However, given the weak correlation between self-construal level and ethical issue reporting behaviour, this paper further suggests that there is no need to assess levels of self-construal to predict the likelihood that a newly graduated student will report an unethical problem.

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