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What motivates employees to gossip?

Review of organizational gossip

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Abstract

Purpose: The literature review undertaken in this paper sheds some light into the current research carried out in the topic of organizational gossip, typically referring to a host of informal conversation about a third party at the workplace. Gossip is a topic, whose causes and motives have been explained by a variety of theories cutting across disciplines of psychology, sociology, anthropology, evolutionary biology and even in management studies. This clearly highlights the relevance of the topic undertaken.

Approach: We qualitatively separate the different motives of gossip into broad ideas. This is done so because the various disciplines that study organizational gossip are cross-cutting and either complement or oppose the views of other theories. A case-by-case analysis of every motive is undertaken here.

Findings: We find that there exists an informal structure superseding the formal organizational structure. We find that the motives for gossip are predominantly inherent in the socio-psychological need in humans for friendship, the epistemological need to gather information, expand knowledge-base and find meaning, as well as the evolutionary biological need to survive in a competitive environment with scarce resources. We also find that gossip has a beneficial element where it leads to a conducive social structure, as well as a malicious element which causes incoherence and inefficiency in the workplace.

Practical implications: This study has several practical implications for organization at the workplace. Firstly, gossip's beneficial role improves job satisfaction when it brings people closer and nurtures trust; Secondly, a gossip-prevalent workplace is also one with higher efficiency, but at the cost of increased individual stress. Thirdly, a proper balance of the two which promulgates an optimal amount of gossip might be the way to go in terms of management policy.

Originality/Value: This paper cuts across different streams of academic research on the topic and therefore presents a holistic view that enables further research to factor in aspects from multiple disciplines.

Keywords: Information transmission, psychological factors, social capital theory, evolutionary biology, power dynamics and gossip, perceptions of gossip.

1 Introduction

Gossip is a form of communication prevalent in human networks and organizations. It has both positive and negative connotations in its definition. Gossip is defined as the exchange of positive or negative personal information in an evaluative way about absent third parties in a context of congeniality (Foster E. K., 2004). In this paper, we identify five broad areas that are alluded to be possible motives for the prevalence of gossip in the work place. These are: 1. Information transmission, 2. Psychological factors pertaining to the self and its manifestations in the workplace, 3. Interpersonal and social factors, 4. Factors pertaining to establishing and influencing and challenging power and 5. Perceptions of gossip that itself is a cause of gossip in organizations or lack thereof. In the subsequent sections, we shall discuss the theories proposed in literature elaborately.

2 Information Transmission

By definition, gossip is a relational process, allowing individuals to interact and exchange resources with members of their social environment in a spontaneous, informal and unscripted manner (Emler, 1994). There is an emerging consensus regarding the motive of people engaging in gossip, in order to exchange information. If members of gossiping groups also contribute more information to the group's pool, the members also stand to learn more than they otherwise would have. Gossip is the epistemic

value that allows agents to address the lags in their own conceptions of their experience. Similarly, when group members gossip, the group does a better job of filtering and limiting inaccurate information. Gossip is perceived as a potentially powerful and efficient means of transmitting information about the rules, norms, and other guidelines for living in a culture (Baumeister, Zhang, & Vohs, 2004); (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012); (Johnson, 2016). Information validation and gathering was found to be one of the most important motives to gossip as per (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012).

2.1   Information in a power hierarchy

The paper (Martinescu, Janssen, & Nijstad, 2019) hypothesizes the role of information as a motive to gossip in a power hierarchy. In an organization, information is usually conveyed in a top-down approach. However, sometimes employees are unable to fully understand the events or development in the environment via this formal communication. In order to avoid situations of uncertainty and threat, people can informally supplement incomplete information with news obtained informally through gossip which is often more easily accessible, than the formal channels. (Baumeister, Zhang, & Vohs, 2004); (Mills, 2010); (Wert & Salovey, 2004). Information gathered through gossip can often be used in validating and comparing observations and opinions and form more accurate impressions of people around.

Information flow in a power hierarchy usually occurs between those who are fit to exchange mutually valuable information. People usually seek information from someone who is perceived as knowledgeable. In downward directions, the powerful are less likely to be interested in the information offered by the lesser powerful conversation partners are likely to ignore their perspectives and emotions. In contrast, in an attempt towards upward interaction of gossip, the gossiper may feel that the respondent will not reciprocate with the same interest or gain the same value from the interaction and therefore, may not indulge in one. Thus, upward and downward interactions for gossip are often characterized by asymmetric dependencies which lead to low willingness or low ability to exchange valuable information through gossip. In contrast, lateral relationships are characterized by mutual dependence and reciprocity and therefore, people may be both willing and able to exchange information which is mutually beneficial to both the parties.

2.2   Information towards job enhancement

Discussions regarding the performance of employees, ease of working with customers, experiences with various agents and employees, are broadly evaluative conversations about third parties, in other words, gossip. These are vital expertise offered by the senior employees to new entrants which may not be possible to gather via formal channels. This knowledge will facilitate the employee in progressing through his line of work and navigating his new position. (Johnson, 2016)

2.3   Disclosure of Risky Information

Gossip also allows the exchange of risky information in a uniquely safe way. It often allows members of a historically or systematically subordinated group to share information about persons in privileged groups or authority figures in power. Gossip restricts access to the content shared, thereby lending a degree of security to what otherwise might be dangerous talk (Johnson, 2016). Thus, in a small way, gossip as an information mechanism can help to interrupt the power of the privileged group and give voice to a minority position. (Jacobs, 2000).

3   Psychological Factors

There has been a lot of research regarding what motivates gossip at the organizational level. Past research has managed to single out four different motives that cause extensive gossip behaviour at the workplaces (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012). However, this research ignores the underlying psychological

factors which could cause an individual to engage in such activity. Here, we try to take an alternative approach towards understanding the cause of such behaviour (Chua & de la Cerna Uy, 2014).

Gossip has been an understudied phenomenon in the field of human psychology. There can be various psychological factors which can cause people to indulge in gossip at their workplace. It must be noted that in this section we will be focusing on the factors (both micro and macro) that influence individuals to engage in gossip at workplaces. Until now, there have been two contrasting arguments regarding workplace gossip - while some view it as a socially constructive behaviour, others like to label it as a workplace Deviance Behaviour (Hafen, 2004). Here we have tried to study the various psychological factors which could be the underlying causes for individuals indulging in gossip at the workplace.

3.1 Factors related to individual behaviour and one's Self-Concept

Before we move on to the organization level, let us first try to examine the factors that affect an individual's intention to gossip. For this purpose, we take the help of the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). This theory has been particularly helpful in understanding human behaviour (Fu, Richards, Hughes, & Jones, 2010). and also in various research fields such as consumer behaviour (King, Dennis, & Wright, 2008). According to the Theory of Planned Behaviour, an individual's intention to perform a specific behaviour is affected by his or her attitude towards the behaviour, his or her subjective norms related to performing the behaviour and the perceived ease or difficulty of performing that behaviour. Attitude and subjective norms have been proved to be significant predictors of intention to gossip (Luna & Chou, 2013). However, the use of this theory has certain limitations. Firstly, we do not differentiate between negative and positive gossips. Gossip is only viewed as a dependent construct and the effect of attitude, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control is examined. Another limitation is that several internal factors such as personality traits, which have been proved to explain individual behaviour (Ones, Viswesvaran, & Schmidt, 1993), have not been included.

An alternative theory suggests that the nature of gossip is a projection of the gossiper's life issues which are basically grounded on his/her self-concept and reflected in their anxieties (Chua & de la Cerna Uy, 2014). Moreover, the nature of gossip depends on the coping mechanism adopted by individuals to help them reduce their anxiety levels. This theory is based on the assumption that man is a social being, gossip is a social activity and that everyone has the propensity to gossip. It suggests that while gossip emanates from a person's anxieties and is their coping mechanism, for any gossip to thrive, social support is of utmost importance. The role of social support and gossip as a means for social exchange has been highlighted previously (Mills, 2010). Also, extensive work has been done with regards to the evolutionary perspective of gossip and how it aids in building friendship at workplaces (Ellwardt, Steglich, & Wittek, 2012). Thus, people with an innate psychological need to feel accepted by others, would try to engage in gossip, something which they wouldn't do otherwise, just to build better relationships at the workplace.

3.2 Factors related to the organization and workplace environment

Now that we have examined the various factors from an individual's perspective, let us look at the psychological macro factors that affect the individual's propensity to engage in gossip at the organizational level. Abusive supervision has been known to have negative impacts on the workplace morale and loyalty (Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007). Leaders do not always act in a responsible and ethical manner (De Cremer, 2003); (Samuelson & Messick, 1995). However, it is not always the case that employees react negatively towards their abusive supervisor (Stouten & Tripp, 2009). In order to understand this, we need to understand the concept of organizational identification and social identity theory. Organizational identification is the perceived oneness with an organization and experiencing the organization's successes and failures as one's own (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). This organizational identification is somewhat deep rooted in social identification theory. According to social identity theory, individuals are striving toward a positive self-image, which is partly based not only on their personal identity but also their social identity (Tajfel, 1978). Coming back to our original argument, when confronted with an abusive supervisor, employees who identify with their organization are more

likely to feel part of their work group and will be less likely to engage in gossip about their abusive supervisor (Decoster, Camps, Stouten, Vandevyvere, & Tripp, 2013). Thus, we see that employees who have abusive supervisors and feel detached from their organization have a higher propensity to engage in negative gossip targeted at their supervisors.

In a workplace where work-related gossip is perceived to be prevalent, employees are aware of a greater likelihood that they will become gossip targets (Tan, Yam, Zhang, & Brown, 2020). Thus, knowing that they can easily become targets of workplace gossip, these employees begin performing better, thereby increasing the overall productivity at the workplace. In contrast, low pressure to perform tends to be associated with employee complacency and reduced work performance (Nygaard & Dahlstrom, 2002). Also, it has been seen that the prevalence of negative gossip at the workplace has a positive effect on the proactive behaviour of the employees at the workplace (Wu, Kwan, Wu, & Ma). Though negative gossips at the workplace can drive the employees to perform better, they have their downsides too. When perceptions of negative workplace gossip prevalence are high, employees are less likely to form strong emotional ties or trust their co-workers, both of which are important components that enhance psychological well-being at work (Ryff, 1989); (Veit, 1983). In addition to the above negative effects, targets who perceive negative workplace gossip are bound to face a loss in their creativity (Liu, Kwan, & Zhang, 2018).

Thus, we see that work-related gossip prevalence can cause both positive (increased job performance and higher proactiveness, etc.) and negative (decreased psychological well-being, decreased creativity, etc.) effects. We can now conclude by stating that prevalence of gossip at the workplace is like a double-edged sword - one having both positive and negative effects. Instead of simply trying to eradicate gossip from the workplace, the organization must first make an attempt to analyse the type of gossip, its underlying causes, and only then proceed to formulate their response strategies.

4 Interpersonal and social approaches

In this section, we explore the several interpersonal and social approaches available in literature that attempt to explain the possible motives, causes and effects of gossip in an organization, typically the workplace. These approaches are often data-centric, where hypotheses are proposed based on pre-existing sociological, biological, psychological, models in the broader area of human behavior and its preconditions that allow for the prevalence of gossip. We mainly categorize these into different kinds of perspectives which are as follows:

1. Social capital theory.
2. Evolutionary psychology.
3. Social comparison theory.
4. Conversational theory.
5. Coalition theory.
6. Observational learning theory.

4.1 Social capital theory

The definition of social capital, from its propounder, is derived solely from its functions which depend on the multitude of social relationships that exist in the society (Coleman, 1988). The fundamental idea behind this theory is that humans are creatures in need of emotional support from other members of the society. This need could either stem from the innate fear and anxiety of the unknown or as a coping requirement from the anticipated challenges that everyday life poses.

Interpersonal attachment

In the psychology circles, this is popularized by the line from John Donne's poetry: "*No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent*" (Roberts, 1975). Therefore, interpersonal

attachment, the need for a stable relationship with peers or social exchange partners and the general sense of belongingness is the subject matter of many studies, with some confirming this hypothesis of attachment and others providing counter-evidence, which still fails to be statistically significant in rejecting the hypothesis (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Through gossip, the engagers often find closeness and also a mutually shared identity in the social construct they seemingly create (Fine & Rosnow, 1978).

Informal workplace structure

In the workplace there often exists an informal structure networked by social bond apart from the hierarchical structure dictated by the formal organization. These informal relationships are pivotal in defining the organizational culture and even the values that the organization stands for (Cantos Galindo, 2016). Thus, one can speculate that the addition of informal relationships in the workplace lead to an increase in employees' job performance. This has been proved in a field study where an employee's job performance was measured to increase where one had a higher number of positive advice-giving peers, as opposed to decrease when one's peers were hindrance-causing (Sparrowe, Liden, Wayne, & Kraimer, 2001). Further, a personality-based study based on self-monitoring theory also concluded that informal associations with fellow-employees enabled their job performance (Mehra, Kilduff, & Brass, 2001).

Friendship goals as motives

Using highly mathematical network theory and survey data, it was found that, indeed, an individual's reputation in an organization, characterized by trust as a variable, depended on the network levels of gossip and friendship (Burt & Knez, 1996). The idea that friendship is related to gossip behaviour is therefore not without pretext. In a study, it was found that people tend to share negative attributes, often in the guise of gossip, with their close friends as opposed to other acquaintances (Bosson, B., Niederhoffer, & Swann Jr, 2006).

Resources as motives

Network organization theories which treat the organization as a series of networks, where social capital is formed by trusting interpersonal relationships, involves and to a large extent, depends on these exchanges to ensure business motives are met (Borgatti & Foster, 2003). However, the fundamental reason for people to engage in gossip, from the social capital standpoint is that, people wish to access essential resources from others, (Lin, 2017) including human capital, as well as to receive intangibles such as support, constraint in the presence of close ones, etc. (Brass & Labianca, 1999).

Friendship-gossip mechanism

The mechanism in which friendships have a causational role in the prevalence of gossip is also discussed in several studies. It was stated earlier that trust amongst peers was a key determinant for gossip between two individuals, for without trust, one stands vulnerable of being exposed, especially when it comes to negative gossip. It is hypothesized that when a person indicates to another individual, a gesture of friendship, the latter often tends to reciprocate by sharing a piece of gossip. If in an organization, several such friendship gestures are made by an individual, then he/she would be a recipient of much more gossip as reciprocation and would over time engage in the same (Ellwardt, Steglich, & Wittek, 2012).

4.2   Evolutionary psychology perspective

The evolutionary psychology approach, much like evolutionary biology is firm-rooted in its foundations on Darwin's theory of natural selection. The features that enable a species to evolve, adapt and survive in the long run are also factors that affect its behaviour. In the particular behaviour of gossip in the workplace amongst humans, taken up here, much of the study of gossip is correlated and superseded by the study and evolution of language. Since we humans spend about 65% of our conversational time focussing on topics pertaining to others, this relation comes as no surprise (Dunbar R. I., 2004).

Gossip and grooming

It is also presented by Dunbar that it is gossip that holds human groups and societies together, much like the function that grooming performs in primates (Dunbar, 1997). This is put to test by a study that gives the surveyors – social agents, the opportunity to choose one of grooming or gossiping. It was found that gossip provided the same role of grooming, in addition to serving as a device that provided information within the group and catalyses cohesion within the group and offers protection from other groups (Slingerland, Mulder, vanderVaart, E., & Verbrugge, 2009).

Competition as a motive

The reason for gossip according to this approach would be in recognizing the vitality of gossip to decipher who are one's friends and foes. Since gossip need not necessarily entail information that is true to the word, and is rather a subjective recollection of an individual's experience or thoughts, there is a lesser emphasis on the validity of the information provided in such gossip. It is this fact that essentially validates the evolutionary biology approach, where natural selection would favour individuals that give out information that is likely to portray one's strengths rather than weaknesses and the competitor's weaknesses over strengths (Barkow, 1992).

Veracity in gossip

The truthfulness of an individual in gossiping, the technical term being *veracity* has also been studied extensively. It was found that the presence of ample sources, lack of opposing gossip-claims increased gossip veracity while competition between the sender of the gossip and its target significantly decreased the parameter measured (Hess & Hagen, 2006). In the same context, it was also found during gossip, people sought information that can be used to strategize and exploited one-up against their competition. The effect this had on the receiver of gossip was perceived to be one of greater closeness (McAndrew & Milenkovic, 2002).

Gossip-friendship mechanism

It is also posited that gossip could be means of revealing oneself, and the ideas and principles one stands for and wishes to be identified as within the group (Gambetta, 1994). One can therefore extend this to the idea that gossiping could be caused by the desire to advertise and associate oneself with certain qualities that might be desirable within the group. Another positive connotation to gossip from the evolutionary perspective is that the third-party information embedded through gossip serves as signals of interest in a relationship with the exchange partner and indicates unreciprocated trust. This is put to hypotheses again, in that gossip increases the friendship network and strengthens pre-existing friendships. It was found that the results concurred with the evolutionary perspective, where gossip increased the chances of relationship formation in the future amidst the gossip sender and receiver, often at the cost of the gossip target. (Ellwardt, Steglich, & Wittek, 2012). The cause of gossip therefore is the need for friendships and other positive relationships in humans.

4.3 Social comparison theory

The theory of social comparison was proposed in the seminal work by Festinger, whose idea was that humans fundamentally had the need and the drive to compare themselves with others using tests of objective reality (Festinger, 1954). We know that objective reality refers to elements that actually exist independent of the mind – the sun, a tree etc. while subjective reality totally depends on the mind and the multitude of its perceptions. Now, in the absence of such tests of objective reality, then humans rely on subjective opinions of others to gain information about their skills, strengths weaknesses etc. Clearly, under a social setting, this can be related to the need for gossip amongst people.

Gossip is therefore defined as all information transmissions that are evaluative in nature – in this regard comparison with others certainly is evaluative talk. It was postulated according to social comparison theory that ones who gossip more and seek it for self-evaluation, also tend to pass it on to other people (Suls, 1977). Therefore, from the workplace point of view we can infer that this aspect of social

comparison leads to an increasing amount of gossip that is critical and evaluative in nature. The implication could be that this leads to greater cohesion within the group and a correct and impersonal self-assessment would also lead to increased job performance.

Studies show an empirical analysis that put the social comparison theory to test by using several types of comparisons, that amongst similar peers, with people of less and more power than oneself, people that are within the group and outside the group and also with other non-human entities and with humans that are of the same emotional wavelength (Wert & Salovey, 2004). Several triggers are identified here that motivates gossip in this regard; these include the need for moral failing stories for self-correction, the suspicion that one has been treated unjustly, competition, pressure imposed by out-group factors, need for distinction in identification of oneself, the feeling of vulnerability and infirmity etc.

Conversational approach

The conversational approach studies gossip using behavioural theories rooted in psychology and anthropology and explains the motives of gossip as those arising from conversational properties inherent in humans. As opposed to other theories, the root of gossip lies not in information dissemination or competition decimation but rather in relationship building. Some of these studies argue that the content material of the gossip has no intrinsic value at all, when taken bereft of conversational properties (Guerin & Miyazaki, 2006).

4.4   Other theories and studies

Coalition theory

Coalition theory states that the mutual discontentment or animosity with the target causes and nourishes the advent of gossip between the sender and the receiver. This theory together with the constraint theory that gossip is caused by the large number of holes in a gossiper's network and the closure theory, that posits gossip is naturally induced in a closed triad with an absent third member – all statistically prove the aforementioned causes of gossip (Wittek & Wielers, 1998).

Observational learning theory

According to this theory, human being social animals, start developing the intent to gossip due to the underlying need to learn about one's surroundings and identify with one's culture. It was found that amongst young children, the tendency to gossip was observed as early as the onset of the ability to talk (Fine G. , 1977). An empirical study on this confirms the significant role of gossip in one's learning of the complexity and subtlety in the cultural life, with information about others failure and non-adherence to established norms being of high instructional value. (Baumeister, Zhang, & Vohs, 2004). The implication for workplace gossip therefore, is that it serves the purpose of understanding the organizational culture and values.

Negative attributes of gossip

While the positive and negative attributes of gossip towards interpersonal relationships were discussed above, the overall effect of gossip on the organization has been benign only up to a certain level, beyond which gossip proved to be detrimental for organizational structure as well as for the individual excessive gossiper. The presence of this effect and its consequent decrease in the group's effectiveness and in job performance in the case of a workplace was concluded in a study (Oh, Chung, & Labianca, 2004).

Table 1. The different theories, their explanation of gossip and the role of gossip as a precedent or an antecedent according to the theory is tabulated along with the key papers that contribute to these theories.

Theory	Explanation of gossip	Role	Key papers

Social capital theory	Social capital needs such as emotional support and crucial resources sought through friendships cause gossip.	Precedent	(Burt & Knez, 1996); (Fine & Rosnow, 1978); (Bosson, B., Niederhoffer, & Swann Jr, 2006); (Ellwardt, Steglich, & Wittek, 2012)
Evolutionary psychology	Presence of competition leads to gossip. Friendships also lead to gossip. The need for the latter causes the prevalence of gossip.	Antecedent	(Dunbar R. I., 2004); (Barkow, 1992); (Hess & Hagen, 2006); (McAndrew & Milenkovic, 2002)
Social comparison theory	Comparison arises from the innate need to evaluate oneself – when formal objective tests are absent, gossip is means for this.	Precedent	(Suls, 1977); (Wert & Salovey, 2004)
Conversational theory	Gossip stems from the inherent need for building social connections. Content of gossip immaterial.	Precedent	(Guerin & Miyazaki, 2006)
Coalition theory	Triadic structures such as absence of third party in closely knit triad or the mutual animosity towards the target between intimate dyads motivates gossip.	Precedent	(Wittek & Wielers, 1998)
Observational learning theory	Gossip is motivated by the need to gain cultural insights through observational learning.	Precedent	(Baumeister, Zhang, & Vohs, 2004)

5 Power dynamics and gossip

In examining the literature on the influence of power on workplace gossip and vice versa, two major perspectives were drawn from the literature. The first perspective elaborated on how the different kinds of gossip in terms of the sign, credibility and work-relatedness may exhibit different dimensions of power on the recipients of the gossip (Kurland & Pelled, 2000). The second perspective mainly elaborated on how the functionality of gossip for exchanging social resources may be contingent on the relationship between the gossiper and the receiver of gossip (the respondent) (Martinescu & Nijstad, 2019). Power has been defined as the potential ability to influence behaviour, to change the course of events, to overcome resistance, and to get people to do things that they would otherwise not do (Jeffrey & Pfeffer, 1992). It is symbolic of an asymmetric dependence of the powerless on the powerful over information, potential to obtain rewards and to avoid punishments.

5.1 Linkage between Gossip and Power

The paper (Kurland & Pelled, 2000) discusses the basic linkage between different kinds of gossip and the power it exerts on the recipients of the gossip. There are three important dimensions to explore the kinds of gossip, namely, sign, credibility and work-relatedness. Sign indicates the nature of the news - positive and negative. When the news is favourable to someone, it is defined as positive and when it is unfavourable news about others, it is defined as negative. Credibility is the extent to which the gossip is believable or the perceived accuracy of the message. Work-relatedness is the degree to which work is focused on a subject's work life, such as career progress, job performance and general behaviour in

the workplace. An individual can have four different kinds of power over another individual namely coercive power, reward power, expert power, and referent power (French & Raven, 1959).

Let us assume that the person delivering the gossip is Person A and the person receiving the gossip is Person B. The paper offers several propositions in the situation:

Table 2. Propositions of power dynamics as discussed in Kurland & Pelled, 2000.

Proposition	Type of Gossip/ Determinant	Power	Example
I	Positive	Person A has reward power over B since B perceives that he has control over valued outcomes	When A shares positive gossip about someone, B tends to believe that A may share positive gossip about her as well
II	Negative	Person A has enhanced coerced power over person B as B perceives A can administer punishments (such gossip constitutes an imminent threat to damage career/reputation)	When A narrates negative new about someone, B believes that A could do the same for her as well
III	Positive/ Negative	Expert power as it can facilitate an exchange of data and building a database (Code, 1994); (Dunbar, 1997)	Gives more information about the organisation's values and about individuals
IV	Negative/Positive	Gossip reduces A's referent power over B. Especially true for negative gossip as compared to positive gossip	People who condemn gossip from an ethical standpoint will look down on people who engage in such behaviour
V	Credibility of Gossip	Credibility influences all four types of powers	Individuals who share accurate information are more trusted than those who share far-fetched or incorrect information
VI	Work-Relatedness of Gossip	Workplace-relatedness of gossip influences all four types of powers. It diminishes any negative link between gossip and referent power.	The employee who engages in more work-related gossip has a greater ability to influence the rules in the workplace than does an employee who engages in other social topics

5.2 How power relationships shape gossip behaviour

The paper (Martinescu & Nijstad, 2019) discusses how power relationships shape gossip behaviour. The power hierarchy ranks people based on their relative authority. (Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003). It defines the concept of power of individuals as relative to their interaction partner - upward hierarchical relationships would indicate a partner with higher power, lateral as interaction partner with

the same level of power and downward hierarchical as an interaction partner with a lower level of power. The power hierarchy mainly influences the scope of social resource sharing, information and thus, it will constrain their actual engagement in gossip with that particular individual.

Four main hypotheses were tested in the paper. The first tested the frequency and detail for downward gossip relative to upward and lateral. The second hypothesis tested the role of information and how it influences the motive to gossip which was discussed in the previous section. The third hypothesis tests the motive to exert influence in upward relationships compared to that in downward or lateral. The final hypothesis will test the motive to seek support in lateral relationships and how it motivates a person to gossip.

After carrying out three different studies and doing an extensive statistical analysis the paper concluded that power relationships between people do shape their motives and gossip behaviours. In downward relationships, people tend to gossip less compared to upward or lateral. This is mainly because people with more power are likely to have more access to valuable resources, are less dependent on others and also, pay less attention to their lower interaction partners (Magee & Smith, 2013). They are also likely to feel more self-sufficient and satisfied while working alone (Lammers, Galinsky, Gordijn, & Otten, 2012) and instead, use formal power mechanisms to exercise influence and control over others, for example in (Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003); (Galinsky, Magee, Gruenfeld, Whitson, & Liljenquist, 2008) to avoid all types of informal gossip to gain information and resources.

In upward relationships, people are aware of their dependency on the high-power individuals for obtaining rewards and avoiding punishments (Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003). Thus, they often attempt to informally influence these individuals in order to gain more control over their situation, social environment and outcomes (Lammers, Stoker, Rink, & Galinsky, 2016), and be treated fairly or to avoid threats to disadvantaged situations. Gossip is thus perceived as a low cost, high benefit strategy for exerting influence as a mere message can lead to an action in the desired direction (Scherer & Cho, 2003).

Finally, it was observed that lateral gossip helps people seek information and support from others. Gossip in lateral relationships are mainly functional because one is more likely to expect reciprocity due to mutual interdependence (Gouldner, 1960). While upper relationships are mainly governed by one's asymmetrical dependence on the more powerful person and bonding with a lower person may damage one's reputation, lateral relationships strike a balance between the two giving more reliability and support.

6 Perception of gossip

An important aspect in understanding why employees gossip is how they perceive the idea of gossip. It is often assumed that gossip is harmful and that individuals should refrain from gossiping. In fact, evidence suggests that gossiping can lower morale, ruin employees' reputation, and force employees to leave (Portfield, 2008). Gossip is often seen as dysfunctional to organisations and has been associated with lower organisational citizenship behaviour (OCB) (Wu, Birtch, Chiang, & Zhang, 2018) and higher employee cynicism (Kuo, Chang, Quinton, Lu, & Lee, 2015). However, this view is contrary to how the perception of gossiping has evolved in disciplines such as psychology, anthropology and sociology where scholars have emphasised on the positive functions that gossip serves such as facilitation of information flow, friendship, and enhanced control sanctions (Foster E. K., 2004).

The paper (Tan, Yam, Zhang, & Brown, 2020) adds to the existing literature on workplace gossip by examining how perceptions of work-related gossip prevalence influence organizational members at large, beyond the actors (the gossipers and the gossip target) involved. We attempt to analyse this paper here, quite extensively because unlike the previous literature that solely focussed on the negative aspects of gossip, this paper provides a neutral perspective on the same, thereby keeping up with modern trends

of research. Drawing upon social information processing theory, (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978), the paper views gossiping as a 'mixed blessing' rather than treating it as a solely disruptive element (Brady, Brown, & Liang, 2016). It examines the costs and benefits of employees' perceived gossip prevalence. Perceived gossip prevalence is referred to the individual's impression of the prevalence of informal and evaluative talk occurring within the organization about other organizational members, which usually takes place among a few individuals out of earshot from these members (Kurland & Pelled, 2000).

Three studies were conducted in the paper by (Tan, Yam, Zhang, & Brown, 2020). Study l compared the responses of full-time employees in two conditions: high work-related gossip prevalence vs control. Participants completed survey measures of performance pressure, psychological well-being, as well as manipulation check items after reading the description of the organizations. Study 2 required full-time working employees with substantial work experience to complete the survey at two different time points (T1 and T2). At T1, employees completed measures of perceptions of work-related gossip prevalence, negative gossip prevalence, performance pressure, positive gossip prevalence, and gender. At T2, approximately 2 weeks later, employees reported their job performance. Employees answered all the questions based on their current job and how they actually feel. Study 3 required full-time leaders who were enrolled in a part-time Master of Business Administration (MBA) program. Leaders were asked to provide a list of their followers. At time 1, the followers completed measures on perceptions of work-related gossip prevalence, negative gossip prevalence, and positive gossip prevalence. At time 2, the followers completed measures on performance pressure and psychological well-being. At time 3, leaders rated followers' job performance; leaders did not complete any other measures at time 1 or 2.

Table 3. Results on perceptions of gossip as per Tan, Yam, Zhang, & Brown, 2020, a pivotal paper that highlights the modern trend in analysing gossip as a 'mixed blessing'.

	Hypothesis	Result
I	Perceptions of work-related gossip prevalence are positively related to performance pressure	Accepted (Study 1,2 & 3)
II	The relationship between perceptions of work-related gossip prevalence and job performance is mediated by performance pressure.	Accepted (Study 2 & 3)
III	Perceptions of work-related gossip prevalence are negatively related to employee well-being	Accepted (Study 1 & 3)
IV	The indirect effect of perceptions of work-related gossip prevalence on job performance via performance pressure is moderated by negative gossip prevalence, such that the indirect effect will be stronger when negative gossip prevalence is high.	Accepted (Study 3)
V	The relationship between perceptions of work-related gossip prevalence and employee well-being is moderated by negative gossip prevalence, such that the relationship is stronger when negative gossip prevalence is high.	Accepted (Study 3)

The above results carry many implications for the individual. The first result indicates that if the individual perceives a high presence of work-related gossip, then it is likely to induce a lot of performance pressure as they may become gossip targets and their performance will be much more visible to other members. This drives employees to experience higher performance pressure, a type of attitude system (Zimbardo & Leippe, 1991), that results in "a negative evaluative orientation toward performance insufficiency" (Eisenberger & Aselage, 2009). Performance pressure occurs when the individual negatively evaluates their current level of performance as being insufficient (Zimbardo & Leippe, 1991). Thus, the second result holds true. However, perceived work-related gossip prevalence

induces a negative environment for the individual, that lowers individual's psychological well-being (Repetti, 1987) since the employee constantly stays alert to monitoring and evaluation as well as an inability to form social relationships and trust their fellow workers, thus confirming the third result. The fourth result is a reinforcement of the second result and indicates that the presence of negative work-related gossip will have a higher negative effect on the employee's job performance than the positive effect due to a positive work-related gossip. Similarly, the fifth result is a reinforcement of the third result and implies that the presence of negative work-related gossip will have a higher negative effect on the employee's well-being as compared to the positive effect on the employee due to a positive work-related gossip.

Thus, we see that the perceived presence of work-related gossip has positive implications on the employee due to a performance pressure-induced environment and has negative implications on the employee's well-being. These factors are especially enhanced when there is a negative work-related gossip.

7 Managerial Implications

Now, let us try to analyse the managerial implications of prevalence of gossip at the workplace. A group of researchers (Kuo, Chang, Quinton, Lu, & Lee, 2015) tried to use Social Information Theory (Pfeffer, 1978) and Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1988) to try to develop an understanding of the relationship between gossip and employee behaviour at the workplace. The authors have identified two constructs of gossip – job-related gossip and non-job-related gossip. The authors observe that these two constructs have different effects on employee behavior. The authors observe that job-related gossip is more strongly connected to employee cynicism whereas non-job-related gossip is less likely to promote such cynicism among employees. Thus, the HR managers must be wary of the prevalence of gossip at the workplace as it can lead to cynical behavior and cause perceived psychological contract violation amongst the employees (Kuo, Chang, Quinton, Lu, & Lee, 2015).

There can be multiple drivers for workplace gossip and high job-stress levels can be one of them. Also, people may want to indulge in gossip as a means to extract revenge (Şantaş, 2018).
The authors identified that revenge is a significant driver of gossip at the workplace. Does the feeling of organizational revenge and prevalence of gossip have any effect on the levels of job stress? It was observed that organizational revenge and gossip have significant but not strong effect on job stress (Şantaş, 2018). Thus, factors which lead to gossip, such as organizational revenge and stress must be identified, a healthy communication channel must be established and the HR managers must ensure that a feeling of equality prevails among their employees.

There has been a lot of literature on the negative implications of gossip. However, workplace gossip as an organizational phenomenon can have both positive and negative effects at the same time, depending on whether one is viewing gossip from the employee's perspective or the organization's perspective (Ferrari, 2015). Gossip is an effective means of information exchange (Foster E. K., 2004). Gossip has also been shown to elevate the social status of the gossipers as people believe that the person is in possession of special knowledge and information (Baumeister R. F., 2004). Thus, gossip is a useful tool for social influence. Gossip has a few practical applications too. Gossip can help in reducing agency costs. Gossip is an efficient tool to collect information and this can have benefits in the workplace. The participants in an organization obviously want benefits but they also want organizational justice (OJ). Gossip fosters interpersonal intimacy, and in turn improves relational and informational justice (Ferrari, 2015). Thus, although workplace gossip has many undesirable effects on the employee's well-being, it's importance as a managerial tool cannot be overlooked. Managers must therefore, not aim at completely eliminating the gossip culture from their organizations but instead must try to come up with regulative measures so as to control the ill-effects it has on employees.

8 Limitations and Future Research

The current research paper focused majorly on psychological, sociological and evolutionary biological aspects of gossip literature. The trend in gossip literature is over analysing the nature and effects of gossip based on its perception, thereby adding an element of respondent's feedback in the analysis. We also observed that in recent studies the analysis of gossip was treated along with other forms of informal communication such as grapevine, rumours etc. It is also seen that the current direction of study on gossip is increasingly complex and mathematical, and involves computational network theory models applied on social networks.

9 Conclusions

We have studied the different motives of gossip in a workplace environment. We observed the role of gossip as information transmission mechanism in power hierarchy towards job enhancement and towards the disclosure of risky information in a workplace. From a psychological standpoint, we observe that one's self-concept and their attitude towards their work were major factors which determine their behavior in the workplace. Gossip has both benign and malicious effects – and therefore an optimal level of gossip might be good for the organization. In the social capital theory, we find that gossip leads to strengthening of existing friendships, while the evolutionary theory highlights the role of gossip in maintaining competition within the organization. Further, the social comparison analysis of gossip implies that gossip also serves the role of subjective evaluation when objective assessments are unavailable, which is mostly the case in the real world. In the context of power dynamics, we observed links between gossip and power. Gossip is symbolic of an asymmetric dependence of the powerless on the powerful. In the workplace, we observed a higher upward or lateral interaction as compared to a downward interaction. Perceived workplace gossip prevalence is likely to have a positive impact on the employees' job performance and a negative impact on the employees' well-being.

10 References

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