The main purpose of this study is to determine whether there is a difference in the cross-cultural perceptions of office gossip through the replication of the study conducted by De Gouveia, van Vuuren and Crafford (2005). This study will be conducted on male employees at middle to senior management job levels, from differing cultural backgrounds and within the non-academic departments of a tertiary institution. A contribution will be made to existing literature as no known research has been conducted in South Africa or elsewhere to explore this cross-cultural understanding. This study might also equip employers in controlling malicious office gossip by ensuring that there is a common understanding among differing cultures of what constitutes malevolent gossip before implementing adequate gossip-control measures. Additionally, this study might also emphasise the importance of eradicating this cultural barrier to enhance trust and consideration among employees of differing cultures.

1. **SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW**

A semi-structured interview is also known as a qualitative research interview. The researcher has predetermined questions and topics to be addressed, but they may differ across interviews, as well as in their sequencing. A semi-structured interview enables the researcher to leave out or add questions as necessitated, based on the quality of information gathered. This data collection technique will enable the researcher to probe throughout the process and to resolve any uncertainties as they arise (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2007:312). Limitations of an interview might be that the cultural differences between the researcher and the participant might influence the responses given and the conclusions made.

**1.1 During the individual semi-structured interviews, participants will be asked to**:

* Perform a card-sorting exercise (see 1.3) in which they will read and briefly study 11 case studies;
* Order the case studies in a sequence from ‘least’ like gossip to ‘most’ like gossip;
* Explain the criteria they used to determine their sequence;
* Rate each case on a scale in terms of the extent to which it could be perceived to be gossip (the four-point scale consisted of: ’not gossip’, ‘slight gossip’, ‘quite a bit of gossip’ and ‘very much gossip’);
* Answer questions pertaining to each individual case; and
* Provide a definition of gossip in the workplace.

**1.2 Questions pertaining to the authenticity and nature of the information typically gossiped about will be included, for example:**

* What kind of information does gossip deal with?
* Is gossip always true, always false or both?
* Is Hollywood/tabloid information gossip?

**1.3 Participants are also asked to describe the types of people that gossip. Questions include:**

* Demographically describe the type of people that gossip.
* What type of tactics do people use to gossip?
* What type of information do people gossip about?
* Why do people gossip?
* The final questions asked of the participants were:
* How does gossip in the workplace affect the organisation?
* How would you go about preventing and dealing with gossip
* in an organisation?

**2. CARD-SORTING**

Card-sorting is a qualitative type of exercise in which participants have to sort given case-studies from, for example, most to least important, and then have to explain the criteria they used to sort the case-studies. It is a non-invasive way of establishing the manner in which a person perceives a specific phenomenon and the manner in which the person organises these perceptions (De Gouveia, van Vuuren & Crafford: 2005:59). A limitation of this data collection technique is that English might not be the first language of all the participants, which might cause a barrier for them to fully understand each case study. In light of the fact that differences in cultural perceptions are the object of the study, this cultural barrier might be detrimental in collecting accurate information.

**Case studies as presented to the participants during the card-sorting exercise**

**A** Marie a 32-year-old, single, heterosexual woman, is a top insurance broker who has been working her way up the corporate ladder. It’s taken many years and hard work to get to her current position. The other day, on the way to the photocopy room, she overheard some colleagues talk about her sex life over coffee and doughnuts. As the discussion about her sexual preference continued, someone remarked: ‘I know she is a dyke for sure’.

**B** In the weekly meeting between John and his boss, the boss let it slip that the company was in trouble and that retrenchment was inevitable. All positions would be in jeopardy. John’s boss asked him to keep this confidential until top management decided to bring it to light. During lunch in the canteen, John couldn’t help but tell his colleagues what he had heard.

**C** While sipping on their coffee, Jessica remarks to Brett that the boss is very late for work as it is already 10:00 am and there is no sign of him anywhere. Brett tells Jessica that their boss probably wouldn’t be at work due to the loss of his mother the previous evening. One week later while Brett is at his table doing some work, the boss calls him into his office and says, ‘Brett, I would appreciate it if in future, you keep quiet about my personal life instead of sharing it with the entire office’.

**D** Jake, a 57-year-old factory worker, walks into the building on Monday morning with a big smile on his face. When you ask him why he is smiling, he tells you that his oldest daughter got engaged over the weekend. During the day, someone remarks that Jake looks really happy. You tell them that it’s because of his daughter’s engagement.

**E** Sam overheard Lyn (a colleague) mention to her husband over the phone that their daughter, Mary, was not accepted into university. During the tea break someone mentions their child’s academic achievement. Someone else says: ‘I know Lyn’s daughter was also waiting to see if she got into university … I wonder if she made it?’ Having heard the conversation earlier between Lyn and her husband, Sam speaks up and says ’no, unfortunately, Mary did not get in’.

**F** There are two managers at the store where you work. You are good friends with one of the managers Joan. You heard from a reliable source that the other manager and some employees are not registering certain items on the cash register in order to pocket the money. You know that if head office finds, out both managers will be dismissed regardless of who is responsible. Over lunch you mention the situation to Joan.

**G** Matthew’s secretary is going through a messy divorce. As a result, her work performance has decreased. Although she has told him about her divorce, she asked that he not mention it to anyone. Matthew is in a meeting with his manager, Mary a few days later. She remarks that it has come to her attention that Matthew’s secretary is ‘slacking’ in her performance, not getting to work on time, taking too many days off and failing to meet deadlines. Matthew mentions the fact that he is worried about her and that her lack of performance is due to a pending divorce.

**H** The boss and the new manager are having an affair. Paul knows this for a fact because he saw them kissing. While everyone is having tea and talking about Days of our Lives, Paul mentions the company’s very own scandal.

**I** Jan had been working in a position for some time, and put in extra effort because of a promotion she was keen to get as executive manager. To her surprise, a colleague’s daughter who has just finished matric got the position. Jan is disappointed and angry. When everyone is convened around the coffee machine during lunch, she mentions her disappointment. She heard some time ago that her boss and colleague were romantically involved, and she mentions to the group that that may be the reason for her colleague’s daughter getting the position.

**J** It’s apparent that money and stock have gone missing from the cosmetic store where Sarah works. Some make-up went missing on Saturday. Sarah and her team were working over the weekend. When she walked into the storeroom, she saw Jack packing containers. She tells the supervisor that he may be responsible for the missing stock.

**K** Alex, an administration officer, is photocopying documents. A document catches his eye while sorting through some forms. The document stipulates that due to a loss incurred by the company, the employee pension funds will be decreased by 35%. When Alex returns to his desk, he shares the information with the other administration officers.

You are invited to participate in a study. My colleagues and I hope to learn more about your preferences surrounding gossip in the workplace. By participating in this research, you will be helping us determine attitudes toward gossip. You are one of approximately 10 subjects chosen to participate in this study.

You are under no obligation to participate in this study. If you choose to participate in this study, it will require you participate in an interview and to fill out a questionnaire related to scenarios related to gossip. Your participation will take approximately 60 minutes. You will face no foreseeable risks or discomforts. All information that you provide will be held in the strictest confidence by the study’s researchers. All evidence connecting your identity with your responses will be destroyed once the study has been completed.

If you have questions about your rights as a study participant, or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact me at sk10@txstate.edu or Becky Northcut, CIP, Compliance Specialist and IRB Coordinator for Texas State University, BNorthcut@txstate.edu, JCK 489, x 8491.

By signing this form, you are consenting to participate in the study and have the information used for the purpose described above. A photocopy of this consent form will be provided to you, if requested. Thank you for your cooperation and your assistance with this study.

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(Signature)

Sincerely,

Susan Kirby

Principal Investigator at Texas State University