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Gossip and gender differences: a content analysis approach

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ABSTRACT

In this study, **we attempt to evaluate gender-based differences in gossiping habits, subjects and sentiments**. In order to do so, a mixed methods research approach comprising qualitative and quantitative analyses was employed. **Questionnaires were filled out by 2230 participants**, and an open question format was used, with participants imagining a scenario in which they are invited to describe to a friend, a person they had just met. Our findings suggest that, quantitatively speaking, women and men engage in the same amount of gossiping activity. Nevertheless, gender-based differences are apparent in the subject of gossip. **Women gossip more about social relationships and physical appearance than men**. It was also found that women's gossip is more positive than men's. Qualitative analysis of the data provides a more complex picture. For example, while women gossip more about physical appearance than men, their descriptions tend to be couched in positive terms, although they are deployed to emphasize other salient negative traits. This research therefore contributes to the refutation of gender-based stereotypes about gossiping.

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Introduction

Gossip can be defined as an informal and unscheduled form of human communication (Elmer, 1994). Generally, gossip pertains to an absent third party, and can often be salacious and stimulating (Berkos, 2003). According to Massar, Buunk and Rempt (2012), **approximately two-thirds of adult casual conversations are devoted to matters of social importance, and can thus be considered gossip**.

Gossip plays many positive roles in communication. It is a means of information sharing and knowledge extension (Bergmann, 1993), gaining influence, releasing pent-up emotions, fostering interpersonal intimacy (Grosser, Lopez-Kidwell, & Labianca, 2012) and evaluating others (Robinson, 2016). Gossip can also be used for self-improvement, self-promotion and self-protection (Martinescu, Janssen, & Nijstad, 2014). Nevertheless, gossip has negative connotations linked to **malice, jealousy** (Einat & Chen, 2012) and **falsehood** (Melwani, 2012). Gossip is also associated with **negative, judgemental, trivial assumptions** (Michelson, van Ijtersen, & Waddington, 2010) and **slander** (Bergmann, 1993). Many religious codes condemn gossip as wicked (Morgan & Martin, 2006; Van Eck, 2012). In some countries, such as Iran, gossiping is forbidden by law (Mohajer, 2013).

Usually, people do not think of themselves as gossipers (Hartung & Renner, 2013) and do not want to be perceived as such. Dececchi, Timperon and Dececchi (1998) noted that nearly 15% of female cadets at the Royal Military College of Canada identified gossip and rumours as the most negative feature of college life. Turner, Mazur, Wendel and Winslow (2003) found that even if the content of the

gossip is positive, the gossipers are perceived negatively. According to Robinson (2016), not only do stereotypes of gossipers exist, gossip reinforces those same stereotypes (for example, negative stereotypes of women).

The aim of this study is to evaluate and challenge gender-based stereotypes about gossip. Our hypotheses concern the differences between male and female gossiping habits in terms of degree, content and sentiment. In order to do so, we used a mixed research methods approach. While quantitative research, especially survey studies, provides a broad but limited picture, qualitative research narrows the focus, producing a more profound and insightful description that integrates subjective experiences (Trafimow, 2014). Methodologically, mixed methods research thus more comprehensive, and the combination of techniques leads to greater precision in findings (Vila, Rovira, Costa, & Santoma, 2012). Our use of dual research methods generates a diverse heterogeneity of perspectives on gossip (Allwood, 2012) ultimately validated by outcomes.

Gossip and women

Rysman (1977) asserted that gossip and women are linked in a negative relationship. Moreover, he claimed that in the twentieth century gossip was perceived as essentially any interaction between women. Nowak (2005) invoked the case of 1950s Poland, in which women who wanted to spread the socialist message in conversations with other women were tagged derogatorily as 'gossipers'.

Michelson, van Iterson and Waddington (2010) agree that gossip is perceived as 'women's talk', and that both men and women approve this perception. For example, women in prison in Israel thought gossip to be a feminine phenomenon (Einat & Chen, 2012). Moreover, in this study most female prisoners were convinced that they were, in reality, not gossiping. In fact, a great deal of research on gossip includes only female subjects (for example, Farley, Timme, & Hart, 2010; Massar et al., 2012; Waddington & Fletcher, 2005) perhaps due to the persistent perception of gossip as almost exclusively a female behaviour. For instance, Campbell (1987) claimed that female gang members construct their identities through gossip and verbal mudslinging.

As noted, the social perception of women as gossipers carries negative connotations. Farley, Timme and Hart (2010) examined this phenomenon in the workplace, and found that high gossipers were perceived as more impelled to exert control over others. However, they apparently registered less need than low gossipers for others to control them. High gossipers were also perceived as less emotionally warm than low gossipers; most of the high gossipers were women. The social conception that women gossip more than men is backed up by a body of research. From a socio-historical perspective, Horodowich (2005) pointed out that in sixteenth century-Venice gossip was a weapon of the weak, especially the underclasses and women. As a result, women were marked as gossipers. McAndrew (2014) claimed that women talk more about others and men talk more about themselves. Leaper, Carson, Baker, Holliday and Myers (1995) also suggest that women may be more inclined than men to gossip, and Levin and Arluke (1985) found that women spend more time overall gossiping than men. On the other hand, Grosser, Lopez-Kidwell, Labianca and Ellwardt (2012) claim that gossiping frequency is equal for men and women, but the content of the gossip can be quite different. Berkos (2003) also suggests that in organizations men and women gossip to the same degree, but on different subjects. Charlotte, Nelissen and Fisher (2007) reached the same conclusion regarding the lack of differences between males and females gossiping about potential opposite sex mates. Therefore, we can hypothesize that:

H1. Women and men gossip quantitatively to the same degree.

What do women (and men) gossip about?

Our quantitative claim is based on a vast literature (Berkos, 2003; Grosser et al., 2012; Nevo, Nevo, & Derech-Zehavi, 1994) arguing that gender differences in gossiping behaviours are, in fact, qualitative: men and women gossip about different subjects and use different gossiping manners.

Agadjanian (2002) points out that gender **plays an important role in informal communication**. Further, Levin and Arluke (1985) claimed that **women are more likely** than men to gossip about close **friends and relatives**. McDonald, Putallaz, Grimes, Kupersmidt and Coie (2007) found that the frequency and quality of gossip among **girls** is connected to **their friendship volume**. Conversely, Watson (2012) **found that gossip is more connected to male friendship than its female counterpart**. Nevo, Nevo, and Derech-Zehavi (1994) found gender differences in topics of gossip. They concluded that **women tend to gossip more than men about physical appearance** (for instance, in the domain of fashion), but **found no gender differences** in terms of gossiping about **achievements and other subjects**. Watson (2012) confirmed the finding that women gossip more than men about physical appearance. Vaillancourt (2013) added that women (especially young women) gossip mostly about **appearance and sexuality**. Charlotte, Nelissen and Fisher (2007) found that gossip about **women** tends to focus on attractiveness whereas gossip about **men** focuses **more on economic situation and social status**. Grote (2005), who studied the gossip habits of aboriginal girls, also found that topics mostly revolved around **physical appearance and relationships, but that this gossip was mostly about boys**. Conversely, McAndrew (2014) found that **women gossip especially about other women**. Regardless of the identity of the person that gossip is about, most of the gossip researchers agree that women gossip more about **physical appearance and attractiveness**.

And what do **men gossip about**? Walker (1994) found that men focus on **shared activities**, while **women prioritize shared feelings**. Mohajer (2013) asserted that Iranian men gossip about **power and solidarity**. Horodowich (2005) also noted that men gossip about **power and achievements**. Acheson (1988) found that lobster fisherpersons in Maine, use gossip as a **tool for 'punishing' fishermen who are perceived as being too successful** (a **success** earned in the wrong way). Buss (1990) has made a similar argument with female deprecation strategies. He argued that males will deprecate one another, directly or indirectly about power and status and females about physical appearance, which reflects the male–female differences in mate selection **strategies and jealousy**.

Cameron (1998) conducted anthropological research on men's discussion patterns, and noted that their talk revolved, to a considerable degree, around **the skills and sports records of other men**. However, she doubted if talking about the achievements of others can be categorized as gossip which reveals some of persistent assumptions about gender arising in previous research. Relying on these findings, we **suggest that women may be more likely to gossip about social relationships and physical appearance, while men gossip about achievements that represent power**.

Therefore, our next hypotheses are as follows:

H2a. Women gossip more than men about social relationships and physical appearance;

H2b. Men gossip more than women about achievements.

Moreover, as we concluded that the content of gossiping differs according to gender, the gender of the gossiper can be predicted by the content of the gossip. We hypothesize that:

H2c. The tendency to gossip regarding physical appearance and social relationships and the tendency to gossip about achievements predict the gender of gossiper.

Do women gossip less positively than men?

As mentioned, Cameron (1998) was sceptical that talk consisting of positive information relating to a third party be called 'gossip'. The debate about whether gossip contains a mix of positive and negative information or is made up of exclusively negative information is an old one. Campbell (1987) maintained that gossip contained mostly negative content; the vilification of actions and character of others. Robinson (2016) pointed out that not all information pertaining to a third party can be regarded as gossip: **it should be 'juicy' and stimulating, but that it can be positive**. Martinescu, Janssen and Nijstad (2014) also affirmed that gossip **relates to both negative and positive emotions and information**. Kurland and Pelled (2000) drew a **distinction between positive and negative workplace gossip**.

Levin and Arluke (1985) pointed out that if gossip is regarded as only derogatory talk about others, then no significant gender differences in gossiping exist. Massar, Buunk and Rempt (2012), however, offered an evolutionary rationale for female gossiping as an alternative to physical violence. They claim that women gossip in order to reputationally damage their opponent and to strengthen themselves. Thus, women gossip more about attractive women in order to inflict damage on their social standing, resulting in the content of their gossip being overwhelmingly negative.

McAndrew (2014) suggested that gossip can contain both positive and negative information, although positive information tends not to be as interesting, even if it can promote and help friends and loved ones. He also concluded that most women's gossip is negative, since negativity has greater social use. Females therefore tend to wield gossip as tools of aggression more often than men, as the old Chinese proverb states: 'gossip is the sword of a woman'. Campbell (1987) is another supporter of the view that the content of women's gossip is less positive than men's. Bosson, Johnson, Niederhoffer and Swann (2006) claim that the less positive the gossip, the more it functions as a 'social glue' and produces intimate social bonds. If this is correct then, since women tend to create more intimate social bonds (Clarke, 2011), the content of their gossip will be more negative (Farley et al., 2010). Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H3. Women's gossip tends to be less positive than that of men.

Methodology

We relied on a dual methodology using qualitative and quantitative research tools.

The quantitative method consisted of responses to the questionnaire on a tendency to gossip (TGQ) developed by Nevo, Nevo and Derech-Zehavi (1993). This questionnaire demonstrated solid internal reliability (Cronbach's α of .87), as well as strong construct and convergent validity. A sample question would be, 'Do you talk with friends about other people's personal appearance?' Items were ranked on a Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 = 'Never' to 5 = 'Always', narrowed from the 1–7 scale. For final analysis, 2230 completed questionnaires were collected out of 2475 that were distributed online using Google Docs by 15 third year undergraduate students to their friends, family, and other students. Answers were anonymous. Respondents were informed that the responses would be used only for research. The questionnaire included the researchers' contact information which enabled any respondent to receive the research results. The students that handed out the questionnaire received debriefing after collecting the data. The study and data collection were approved by the institutional committee for non-clinical research in human subjects. The data collection was voluntary and anonymous, the subjects were aware of the research objectives and could stop their participation at any time.

Our qualitative interpretation is based on gossip descriptions: Respondents from the same sample were asked the following question: 'Imagine a person you have met, with characteristics you like or don't like. How would you describe this person to a friend?' This open question was answered by 1858 respondents.

Text analysis was performed on the 1858 descriptions using a classic qualitative method (Vidich & Lyman, 2000). Gossip has been descriptively reported in ethnographic accounts (Agadjanian, 2002; Kniffin & Wilson, 2005) because of its verbal properties that are often misleading or ambiguous (Braithwaite, Abetz, & Moore, 2014). Gossip can also reflect marginalized and multi-voiced positions (Pilcher & Cortazzi, 2016). As noted, insights from qualitative research can reflect subjective interpretations, perceptions, opinions and assumptions of social reality (Ben-Hador, 2016). Textual artefacts are therefore useful for reflecting social reality (Myers, 2013).

In order to diagnose the tendency to positively or negatively gossip, the open question was also analysed quantitatively. For such a large text sample, we employed TEXTIMUS, software designed for text mining and analysis, with three major modules. The first module ('COUNT') sums up the number of appearances of every word using n-gram. N-gram refers to a contiguous sequence of n words from a given sequence of text (Marafino et al., 2014). It is based on the greater probability of certain items

occurring more often than others – not only words, but also pairs, triplets, quadruplets, etc. (Nadkarni, Ohno-Machado, & Chapman, 2011). N-grams is thus a popular technique in statistical natural language processing (Polpini, Sibunruang, Paungpronpitag, Chamchong, & Chotthanom, 2008). The second utility ('ASSESS') processes an Excel sheet with a column of texts and a header row of chosen words, and then counts the number of appearances for each of the header words in each of the texts. The third utility ('COMPARE') takes as input two texts and the required n-gram size, generating two Excel files with the unique words used in both texts and a third Excel file with the words used in both texts. In the first stage, we employed COUNT in order to explore recurring words or phrases. Then COMPARE was used in order to examine similarities in texts and to search for further insights. In the empirical section of the paper, ASSESS was employed.

We made use of the 'Bag-of-Words' (BOW) technique, known as the most common method for text analysis based on natural language processing (Razavi, Matwin, De Koninck, & Amini, 2014) and prevalent in document classification (Wang, McCallum, & Wei, 2007). This technique is based on the concept that documents are represented as a collection of words, regardless of grammar and word order (Verberne, Boves, Oostdijk, & Coppen, 2010).

We found that the most frequent word employed was 'good' including negative references when adding a negative word ('not good'). We then went over all respondents' texts in order to filter the texts in which respondents answered relevantly to what they were asked, we found that most of these texts includes the word good, probably since this word is related to having a stand on a subject or person. The texts include both positive and negative stands, therefore trying to focus on the most relevant and exact, these texts were selected. By employing ASSESS, we then counted for each respondent the number of appearances of the word.

Quantitative results

Exploratory factor analysis

Gossip tendencies are affected by culture (Lee & Workman, 2014), and since the original survey may have been handed out in a different culture environment than ours, it was important to at least re-validate the construct's dimensions. The factorability of the TGQ items was examined. In the factor analysis process, cross-loading items should not be permitted (Guo, 2012) and must be deleted (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 2010). After cross-loading items were removed, two constructs remained with four and five items, respectively, which is above the minimum of three items that is required for a solid construct (Costello & Osborne, 2005), and follow a common selection of no more than five items per construct (Maffini & Wong, 2015). Several well-recognized criteria for the factorability of a correlation were used. First, all items correlated at least .3 with at least one other item, suggesting reasonable factorability. Second, the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was .88, above the recommended value of .6, while Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ($\chi^2(36) = 2737.53, p < .001$). The diagonals of the anti-image correlation matrix were all over .5, supporting the inclusion of each item in the factor analysis. Finally, the loadings were all above .3 (Table 1), further confirming that each item shared

Table 1. Factor loadings based on a principal components analysis with verimax rotation for 9 items (N = 781).

| | GOS1 | GOS2 |
|--|------|------|
| Talk to friends about other people's clothes | .81 | |
| I tend to gossip | .75 | |
| Talk with friends about other people's love affairs. | .74 | .34 |
| Discuss personal appearance of other social events | .68 | |
| Know what is going on, who is dating, etc' | .64 | |
| Talk with friends about other people's success at work | | .80 |
| Talk with friends about other people's grades and Achievements | | .77 |
| Talk with friends about educational level of celebrities | | .75 |
| Talk with friends about other people's salaries | | .68 |

Note: Factor loadings < .3 are suppressed.

some common variance with other items. Given these overall indicators, factor analysis was deemed to be suitable with all nine remaining items. A principal-components factor analysis of the nine items using varimax rotations was conducted. Eigen values showed that each variable loads highly onto two factors, explaining 61% of the variance. These include social relationships and physical appearance (*GOS1*) and achievements (*GOS2*).

The factor loading matrix for this final solution is presented in Table 1.

Cronbach's alpha examined internal consistency for the scales, showing adequate alphas of .82 and .80 for the two factors *GOS1* and *GOS2*, respectively. Composite scores were created for the construct, based on the mean of the items which had their primary loadings on the factor. Higher scores indicate greater tendency to gossip.

Statistical analysis

Data were analysed using logistic regression and independent *t*-test.

Of the 781 respondents, 59.3 per cent were female and 40.7 per cent were males. Table 2 lists the demographic profile of the respondents.

H1, positing no gender difference in quantity of gossip, was supported. In terms of content, quantity can be defined by the number of words or by the total number of characters in the text. Therefore, two *t*-tests were performed, comparing gender over number of words and characters in the texts. Both *t*-tests failed to show statistically significant difference between women and men ($p > .05$).

H2a, predicting that women gossip more than men about social relationships and physical appearance, was supported. A *t*-test was performed to compare genders (Table 3). The results indicated a statistically significant difference between them ($t = 5.82$; $df = 716.59$; $p < .001$), confirming that women ($M = 2.65$) gossip more than men on these subjects ($M = 2.28$).

H2b, stating that men gossip more than women about achievement, was not supported. A *t*-test was performed to compare genders. Results, however, did not indicate a statistically significant difference ($p > .05$) between men ($M = 2.43$) and women ($M = 2.38$) for tendency to gossip about achievements.

H2c, which posited that tendency to gossip regarding physical appearance or relationships in parallel with tendency to gossip about achievements predict gossipper gender, was supported. A logistic

Table 2. Demographic characteristics.

| Demographic profile | <i>N</i> | % |
|---------------------|----------|------|
| Gender | | |
| Male | 318 | 40.7 |
| Female | 463 | 59.3 |
| Age | | |
| 15–17 | 21 | 2.7 |
| 18–24 | 291 | 37.5 |
| 25–29 | 244 | 31.4 |
| 30–39 | 111 | 14.3 |
| 40–49 | 52 | 7.3 |
| 50+ | 53 | 6.8 |
| Marital status | | |
| Single | 422 | 54 |
| Married | 327 | 41.9 |
| Divorced | 24 | 3.1 |
| Widower | 8 | 1 |
| Education | | |
| School | 200 | 25.6 |
| High-school | 216 | 27.7 |
| BA | 297 | 38 |
| MA or higher | 68 | 8.7 |
| Employment | | |
| Employee | 605 | 77.5 |
| Independent | 70 | 9 |
| Pensioner | 11 | 1.4 |
| Unemployed | 95 | 12.2 |

Table 3. Gender differences in gossip regarding social relationship and physical appearance.

| Periods | N | Mean | STD | t |
|---------|-----|------|-----|---------|
| Female | 463 | 2.65 | .92 | 5.82*** |
| Male | 318 | 2.28 | .85 | |

*** $p < .001$.

regression was performed, where *GOS1* and *GOS2* are the independent variables and *Gender* is the dependent variable (Table 4). Results indicate a statistically significant model ($\chi^2 = 62.88, p < .001$). The resulting equation is characterized by a coefficient of determination ($R^2_{\text{Nagelkerke}}$) of .10. Both independent variables were significant.

H3, stating that women gossip more regarding less positive orientations and opinions, was not supported. A *t*-test was performed to compare the two periods (Table 5). The results indicated a statistically significant difference between genders ($t = 1.97; df = 698.11; p < .05$), confirming that women's gossip ($M = .33$) is encoded with more positivity than that of men ($M = .25$).

Qualitative results

The qualitative method focused on the content of women's and men's descriptions, and the differences between them. Our analysis suggests three main themes (Glover, Galliher, & Crowell, 2015): (1) resistance to gossip, (2) positive descriptions, and (3) physical appearance.

- (1) The first theme concerns the objection of male respondents to gossip; far more noticeable among men than women (60% of objectors were male). The objection was expressed more strongly by men, using clear statements of resistance to gossip as compared to women. For example, objecting women answered using statements such as: *It is okay to be different. If someone is a bit shy he complements me since I am sociable and extroverted (Woman, 24 years old)*. This participant did not refuse to gossip, but redefined bad qualities as not unambiguously bad by self-referencing her own personality. The objection of men, however, was far more forceful and direct. For instance, one male participant stated: *I do not gossip, I believe in good karma... I'm not the kind of guy who trashes others (Man, 29 years old)*. The use of harsh words such as 'trashes' expresses strong opposition to the request to gossip. Others expressed their view in a moralistic manner: *It is immoral to gossip; you shouldn't ask me to do so. We all have good and bad qualities; we should learn from the good and stay away from the bad (Man, 56 years old)*. This admonition was directed at the researchers for making a morally deficient request and was couched in a form of moral instruction. The male objection to be perceived as gossipers probably reflects a social tendency of reluctance to engage in gossip. This is perhaps due to the widespread perception of gossip as 'women's talk'; with women, therefore, less opposed to such a request and acting on it in a subtler way.
- (2) The second theme focuses on the positivity or negativity of described traits, supporting the quantitative findings and analysis that suggest women indeed use more positive descriptors. For instance, a female reported: *I will describe only good qualities (Woman, 51 years old)*. Others effectively used only positive descriptors in their reports: *He is funny and witty, he likes to cook special dishes, and he has an amazing ability to pay attention to details (Woman, 26 years old)*. Men, however, were less prone to exclusively use positive descriptors, and were more modest with them when they did so.

Table 4. Logistic regression results.

| | Coefficients (B) | Statistical error (SE) | p | Exp(B) |
|-------------|------------------|------------------------|---|--------|
| <i>GOS1</i> | -.87 | .12 | 0 | .42 |
| <i>GOS2</i> | .60 | .11 | 0 | 1.81 |

Table 5. Gender differences in positive stands.

| Periods | N | Mean | STD | t |
|---------|-----|------|-----|-------|
| Female | 463 | .33 | .57 | 1.97* |
| Male | 318 | .25 | .55 | |

* $p < .05$.

- (3) The third theme concerned physical appearance. To our surprise, very few physical appearance descriptions were recorded. The respondents mostly described traits and rarely included reference to external appearance or clothing. Most physical appearance descriptions were reported by women and were usually integrated into general descriptive accounts. For instance: *A smart guy, dressed impressively; sometimes he sounds as if he is saying exactly what you want to hear from him. (Woman, 42 years old)*. In this example, the physical trait (dressed impressively) is positive, although actually implying dissatisfaction with a personality characteristic of the described individual. This same attitude is also emphasized in this report: *He is a good looking and nice guy; it is fun to spend time with him, but, on the other hand, he is lazy and will not move a finger to help someone else. (Woman, 33 years old)*. Here, the positive trait of physical appearance ('good looking') is contrastively mentioned in reference to more negative character deficiencies. Interestingly, when women mention physical appearance, they tended to describe male physical traits. Only in very few descriptions written by men, were women physically referenced. However, men did not deploy the contrastive strategy of opposing an attractive physical description with a negative characteristic.

Discussion

This research aimed to identify gender differences in gossiping behaviours. We employed a mixed methods research methodology, which includes the combined strengths of both qualitative and quantitative techniques (Creswell, 2014, p. 2). Our quantitative hypotheses relied on literature that mostly related to stereotypes about women and gossip. Most of our hypotheses were confirmed: (H1) lack of quantitative change in gossip by gender, (H2a) women gossip more than men about social relationships and physical appearance, and (H2c) tendency to gossip regarding physical appearance and social relationships and tendency to gossip about achievements predict gossip gender. However, the hypothesis that men gossip more than women about power and achievements (H2b) was not confirmed. The final hypothesis that women tend to gossip less positively than men was also not validated; in fact, women were found to gossip more using a positive orientation than men. This finding is interesting, because it contradicts common stereotypes. However, it can also be explained by Social Desirability theory (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960). Studies found that women have higher social desirability response bias than men (for example Bernardi, 2006) and this bias has been observed in gossip too (Agneswaran & Javeri, 2015). Therefore, it is possible that the content of women's gossip is not more positive due to their positive attitudes, but because they have a higher tendency to satisfy the social environment. The qualitative themes mostly supported the quantitative hypotheses, although highlighting different aspects of the overall research picture. Three themes were traced: (1) people basically do not want to be perceived as gossipers, and resistance to gossip is higher and more extreme in men; (2) women declare their intent to report exclusively positive gossip, and do so using positive traits at a much higher rate than men; and (3) description of physical appearance in a gossiping context represents a complex phenomenon. In fact, it was overall rather difficult to locate descriptions of physical appearance. Women tended to engage in this activity more than men, but these were almost exclusively employed in reference to men. Most instances were positive (good looking, dresses nicely, etc.), however, they were deployed to contrast with more negative and representative features of the men described. When men described the

physical appearance of women, the traits utilized were positive and non-contrastive. These interesting findings contribute to a broader and deeper perspective on women's gossip.

This paper calls in to question stereotypes on gossiping and women. Gossip, as with other aspects of social life (McDowell, 2017), can be perceived as feminine or masculine. A popular stereotype, however, associates gossip and women.

Many stereotypes are linked to women. (Szymanowicz & Furnham, 2011) Krane (1997) pointed out that negative stereotypes can create hostility and suspicion against women. Benard and Schlaffer (1981) agree that stereotypes about women can be discriminatory because they falsely appeal to rationality. Stereotypes also exist regarding men, and they might be incorrect and damaging, but the perception of women as a 'minority' intensifies the harm stereotypes cause women (Carli, Alawa, Lee, Zhao, & Kim, 2016). Therefore, findings that women do not gossip more than men and that their gossip content is mostly positive are helpful for undermining invidious common stereotypes. As noted, women and men gossip about different subjects. Women gossip more about relationships and physical appearance. We could not confirm that men gossip more about power and achievements and as with Nevo et al. (1994), who were also unable to confirm their hypothesis that men focused their gossip on achievements, we found that the topic of gossip predicts the gender of gossip. But these quantitative findings about women's gossip are not complete without the qualitative analysis. As opposed to the literature, we did not find that women attribute physical appearance traits to other women. Even though women were more generous with positive traits, when physical appearance was mentioned (especially in the context of describing men) it was generally a hint that some more significant negative descriptor was soon to be deployed. Tannen and Kakava (1992) analysed Greek and American disagreeing expressions among men and women and argued that the Greek man disagrees directly; the Greek woman briefly agrees before going on to disagree; the American woman disagrees indirectly. It is possible that our finding is a form of expressing indirect dissatisfaction about the described person

Research limitations – By confirming gender differences in gossip we may intensify other stereotypes, and this may possibly be construed as a research limitation. Moreover, there are differences in gossiping among members of the same gender that emanate from personality, environment or age (Massar et al., 2012), suggesting that many more factors influence gossip.

More importantly, the attempt to refute stereotypes sometimes leads to their affirmation. Gossip has been considered a negative trait and in the literature review we demonstrated that the perception of gossip as evil is rooted in the patriarchal past and often stems from religions. Moreover, many studies confirm the importance of gossip for positive uses such as transferring information and clarifying ambiguity (DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007), expressing feelings (Waddington & Fletcher, 2005), providing pleasure and entertainment, reinforcing social ties (Michelson & Mouly, 2000), and emotional support (Chua & de la Cerna Uy, 2014). Feminists often oppose presenting women as gossipers (Ponterotto, 2016), but in doing so, they may strengthen the stereotype. In fact, gossip has an adaptive nature for women: it is a way to compete with other women in a non-physically dangerous manner. As such, it is not accompanied by any negative stereotypes or attributions. It is also a 'voice' (Hooks, 2000), for both women and men.

Future research – Research on differences in gossiping among members of the same gender at different ages, and other social categories is evidently interesting. Moreover, as was mentioned, Gossip has many cultural connections (Lee & Workman, 2014). For example, Tannen and Kakava (1992) study disagreement expressions among men and women in different cultures. This indicates to us the importance of conducting research about gossip and the gender differences, among people from different nationalities and religious. For example, is it possible that as gossip is perceived as more despicable or forbidden, it is also considered to be more feminine?

Ultimately, this research shows that women and men have different ways of expressing themselves informally using gossip and specifies these differences. Subjective judgments (gossip as good or bad, positive or negative) may arise from socially determined perceptions embedded through stereotypes and unintentional cultural processes, and, therefore, are perhaps not terribly relevant to present contexts. Our research indicates that feminine gossip is not 'evil', and the results support that this stereotype does not reflect reality.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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