



Are we truly wicked when gossiping at work? The role of valence, interpersonal closeness and social awareness[☆]



Vito Tassiello^{a,*}, Sara Lombardi^b, Michele Costabile^c

^a Liverpool Business School, John Moores University, Redmonds Building, Brownlow Hill, L3 5UG Liverpool, UK

^b University of Florence, Department of Economics and Management, Via delle Pandette 9, 50127 Florence, Italy

^c LUISS “Guido Carli”, Department of Business and Management, Viale Romania 32, 00197 Rome, Italy

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Gossip
Valence
Interpersonal closeness
Social awareness

ABSTRACT

This paper questions the belief that gossip is always damaging and that people are more interested in negative than in positive information about others. Starting from this, we seek to understand whether a certain valenced gossip (positive vs. negative and malicious vs. non-malicious) is more likely to be spread in the workplace. We test this relationship through three experimental studies by considering the moderating effect of the social linkages among the actors involved in the gossip. We found that positive and non-malicious gossip are more likely to be shared with co-workers especially when the gossip object belongs to the receiver's social group and when the gossiper reckons that the receiver may verify the news heard. We interpret these results with the lens of impression management, in that people transmit certain gossip to their co-workers with the aim of gaining social status and reputation within their organization, fostering their social bonds.

1. Introduction

Human beings show an increasing interest in and attraction to telling stories that do not belong to their own sphere. Data report that 60% of adult conversations are about absent persons (Wert & Salovey, 2004) and 65% of their day-to-day conversations involve talking about others (Beersma and Van Kleef, 2012), a practice widely adopted both during private and professional conversations. Defined as an exchange of information about absent third parties taking place in social contexts in which all actors involved are known (Foster, 2004), gossip is a key social behavior that nearly everyone working in any organization experiences, hears, and probably contributes to (Mills, 2010). The general belief is that gossip has always a malign purpose, and is a form of mistreatment aimed to cause harm to individuals and organizations (Wu, Kwan, Wu, & Ma, 2015), thus leading people to develop a reflexive distaste for those who gossip and the gossip itself. But is this a stereotype or is it the reality? Despite the wide array of studies existing on gossip (see Wu, Birtch, Chiang, & Zhang, 2016 for recent research), what type of information co-workers share the most when gossiping and the related purpose are not well established. Indeed, extant contributions have shown mixed results: while some have demonstrated that negative news is more likely to be shared (e.g., Hornik, Satchi, Cesareo, & Pastore, 2015), others have highlighted that people prefer to

pass on positive information (e.g., Berger & Milkman, 2012). Further, most research examines gossip valence as being positive vs. negative (e.g., Ellwardt, Labianca, & Wittek, 2011; Wu et al., 2016), thereby leaving room for studying further valenced nuances, such as the gossip maliciousness. In this regard, existing works on malicious gossip have proposed theoretical arguments (Wert & Salovey, 2004), applied discourse analysis (Guendouzi, 2001), developed surveys (Lyons & Hughes, 2015), implemented multiagent models (Smith, 2014) or observational techniques (Low, Frey, & Brockman, 2010). To our knowledge, scholars have therefore overlooked the usefulness of experimental research for the analysis of gossip at work considered as an organizational behavior (Thau, Pitesa, & Pillutla, 2014). Moreover, while there is a plethora of studies on gossip among friends or acquaintances (e.g., Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012; Michelson & Suchitra Mouly, 2004), gossip in the workplace remains significantly overlooked (Mills, 2010). Wu et al.'s (2016) paper reports that our current knowledge on gossip in organizations is either theoretical (e.g., Kurland & Pelled, 2000) or deduced from other fields of research (e.g., social anthropology, Kniffin & Sloan Wilson, 2010; ethics; Wu et al., 2015). In addition, existing research on gossip within organizations tends to present a too simplistic perspective, by associating gossip with a negative talk that needs to be discouraged or even banned.

In order to fill these gaps, we investigate what type of gossip is more

[☆] This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: v.tassiello@ljamu.ac.uk (V. Tassiello), sara.lombardi@unifi.it (S. Lombardi), mcostabile@luiss.it (M. Costabile).

likely to be shared among peers at work by offering a unique framework encompassing both the gossip content and the relationships existing among the actors involved in this informal communication. While the former is captured by looking at the gossip valence, being both positive vs. negative and malicious vs. non-malicious, the latter is analyzed by considering gossip as a relational process involving a gossiper, a receiver, and a gossip target (Foster, 2004; Wu et al., 2016). In particular, we study the social transmission of gossip by incorporating in our model both the target-receiver interpersonal closeness and the sender-receiver relationship by focusing on whether the receiver might or might not be able to verify the truthfulness of the gossip. By applying Kurland and Pelled's (2000) model, and based on the findings of three experimental studies, we demonstrate that positive and non-malicious gossip is more likely to be shared with others than negative and malicious gossip. Further, we show that this relationship is enhanced when the gossip object belongs to the receiver's social group at work and when the gossiper is aware that the recipient might verify the truthfulness of the news transmitted. By taking an impression management perspective, our work contributes to enriching the understanding of gossip in the workplace which remains an overlooked issue in management studies (e.g., Mills, 2010). It particularly points to how gossip can be used to make a good impression on in-group members and, therefore, to fulfill employees' needs to foster group cohesion and intimacy (Dunbar, 2004).

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Gossip: definition and functions

Gossip refers to “unverified news about the personal affairs of others, which is shared informally between individuals” (Litman & Pezzo, 2005, p. 963). Scholars have further defined it as an exchange of information about absent third parties taking place in social contexts in which all actors involved in the exchange are known (Foster, 2004). To illustrate, gossip is a private transmission between an actor A (sender) with another actor B (receiver) about a third actor C (target) who is not present during the conversation.¹ In light of this, gossip differs from rumors and urban legends which consider the transmission of either facts or events concerning individuals who are personally unknown (Grosser, Lopez-Kidwell, Labianca, & Ellwardt, 2012; Rosnow, 2001).

Regarding the functions of gossip, there is no denying that it has been traditionally conceived of as a negative communication (Wu et al., 2015). As Dunbar (2004) emphasizes, “For reasons that are not entirely clear, gossip has acquired a decidedly shady reputation” (p. 100). Hence, people use it to criticize their enemies, to denigrate those whom they perceive as their adversaries, or to push insurgences and riots (Foster, 2004). However, more recent studies have also called attention to the positive effects of this type of communication. Gossip is frequently used to fill in space in conversations (Berger, 2014) as well to share novel and original information with others, thereby allowing for the strengthening of the senders' status and prestige within groups (Ellwardt et al., 2011; Smith, 2014). Consistent with an evolutionary perspective (Dunbar, 2004; McAndrew, Bell, & Garcia, 2007), gossip reminds people of the rules and values that regulate a community's life, thus consolidating group unity. As a consequence, it helps limit behaviors that deviate from norms and functions as punishment for those who misbehave (e.g., free-riders and social cheats).

Taken together, both negative and positive functions of gossip suggest that it may serve as a means for impression management.

¹ As Foster (2004) points out, there are some exceptions to this definition. Sometimes gossip can occur face-to-face with the target, especially when it involves interaction among children. However, these seem to be very rare circumstances that are usually labeled as “public disclosure” or “ridicule”.

2.2. Social transmission of gossip in the workplace

Gossip, as an aspect of informal interpersonal communication, is intrinsic to personal as well as to organizational life. It usually arises in “unmanaged spaces” of organizations thus facilitating the communication of ideas, attitudes, and emotions regarding the organization (Michelson & Suchitra Mouly, 2004). Similarly, gossip seems to be more frequent in work contexts characterized by formal and hierarchical communication (Mills, 2010). Acknowledging this, scholars have suggested that gossip can involve the whole organization, thus going beyond the individual or group dynamics (van Iterson & Clegg, 2008); others have argued that gossip is strictly connected with power in organizations (Kurland & Pelled, 2000) and that, when group-based rewards are provided, group-level gossip is more likely to occur (Kniffin & Sloan Wilson, 2010).

In this study, we aim to investigate the social transmission of gossip by applying Kurland and Pelled's (2000) model which distinguishes different kinds of gossip based on three dimensions, i.e., sign, credibility, and relatedness. We relate the valence of the gossip (i.e., its sign) to the likelihood of sharing it with others, while considering the moderating effect of two intervening aspects: on one side, the interpersonal closeness of the target of the gossip and the receiver (i.e., relatedness); on the other side, the sender's awareness of the receiver's ability to check the truthfulness of the gossip (i.e., credibility).

In the following section, we present the conceptual development underlying our research model, as illustrated in Fig. 1.

3. Conceptual development

Our argument is grounded on the idea that the social transmission of gossip depends upon two main factors: the gossip itself and the actors who directly or indirectly participate in it. Regarding the former, one of the main features that needs attention is the valence of the gossip, that is the nuances that its content assumes during the communicational exchange. Regarding the latter, we acknowledge that gossip has a dynamic nature requiring the participation of a triad of actors.

The importance of analyzing gossip valence (i.e., sign) is consistent with the acknowledgement of different types of gossip which have been conceptualized so far. However, while most authors limit their attention to the analysis of positive and negative gossip (e.g., Grosser et al., 2012), in this paper we take a further step and include the investigation of malicious and non-malicious gossip, the empirical analysis of which is still scarce in the literature (a few exceptions can be found in Low et al., 2010; Lyons & Hughes, 2015; Smith, 2014). While positive gossip consists of communicating favorable news about others (e.g., praising the absent individual, defending a colleague), negative gossip tends to emphasize the undesirable side of others' actions and behaviors (Ellwardt, Steglich, & Wittek, 2012). Differently, the distinction between non-malicious and malicious gossip is generally associated with subtle evaluations embedded in the speaker's tone or in jokes that outsiders cannot completely grasp and that might insinuate other explanations (Wert & Salovey, 2004). Therefore, malicious gossip is often used strategically to reduce others' reputation, to manipulate, influence, or even bully and isolate other people (Beersma and Van Kleef, 2012).

The literature on the social transmission of gossip has highlighted that the valence of the message is a relevant dimension in social communication. Studies of word of mouth have demonstrated that differences in the formulation of the message lead to different reactions of individuals (e.g., Alexandrov, Lilly, & Babakus, 2013; Berger & Milkman, 2012; Packard, Gershoff, & Wooten, 2016). The popular beliefs about gossip and the general confusion about rumors lead people to think that negative news is more likely to be transmitted than positive news (i.e., negativity bias, see Hornik et al., 2015). Nonetheless, researchers have also posited that positive information is more frequently diffused than negative information since the source of the message may gain social rewards (Berger & Milkman, 2012). This

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