

The Gossip Ecosystem: Developing and Validating a Theoretical
Model of Workplace Gossip

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Abstract

Informal communication is an important form of organisational communication. Workplace gossip (informal, evaluative communication about an absent third party), is prevalent in organisational settings and is presented as a double-edged sword in multiple studies – having both positive and negative outcomes. To contribute to the growing literature, this study explores different components of workplace gossip and the interrelationships between them. Utilising a two-phase research method, including literature review and semi-structured interviews, it investigates how, when and where gossip manifests in organisational settings.

A review of extant research provides a robust understanding of different workplace communication elements which are conceptualised as a “gossip ecosystem”. The resulting model demonstrates the relationship between gossip-triggering events, gossip energy sources, gossip habitats, and gossip influences. The second phase included interviews with three employees from the service sector about their experiences of workplace gossip. The resulting data largely support the conceptual framework.

The dissertation includes strategies for managers and organisations to address workplace gossip. In practical terms, understanding the components of workplace gossip equips organisational leaders with tools to manage informal communication channels. Recommendations emphasise the importance of fostering supportive work culture and transparent communication.

Contents

Abstract	ii
Contents.....	iii
List of Tables.....	v
List of Figures.....	vi
Acknowledgements.....	vii
Attestation of Authorship.....	viii
1 Introduction	1
1.1 Importance of studying workplace gossip	1
2 Research Design	4
2.1 Theoretical Model Development.....	4
2.2 Model Validation.....	4
2.3 Subjects	5
2.4 Materials	5
2.5 Procedure	6
3 Conceptual model of gossip – The Gossip Ecosystem	8
3.1 Psychosocial Factors	9
3.1.1 Motives of gossipers	10
3.1.2 Gossip recipient selection.....	10
3.1.3 Gender differences	11
3.2 Gossip Triggering Events.....	11
3.2.1 Organisational changes	11
3.2.2 Cyclical events	12
3.2.3 Psychological contract breach	12
3.3 Gossip Habitats.....	13
3.3.1 Physical gossip habitats	13
3.3.2 Virtual gossip habitats	13
3.4 Gossip Energy Sources	14

3.4.1	Gossip intensity	14
3.4.2	Gossip sensitivity and importance	15
3.4.3	Gossip content.....	15
3.5	Environmental Influences.....	17
3.5.1	Access to information.....	17
3.5.2	Confidentiality expectations.....	18
4	Workplace Gossip Model.....	19
4.1	Influence of gossip triggers on gossip content:.....	20
4.2	Influence of psychosocial factors of gossip on gossip content:.....	21
4.3	Influence of information access on gossip content.....	22
4.4	Influence of confidentiality expectations on gossip recipients.....	23
4.5	Influence of gossip content on gossip habitats.....	23
5	Gossip model validation (semi-structured interviews).....	25
5.1	Gossip triggers relating to gossip content.....	25
5.2	Gossip motives relating to gossip content.....	27
5.3	Influence of environmental factors on gossip elements	28
5.4	Influence of gossip content on gossip habitats.....	29
6	Discussion	31
7	Conclusion.....	34
7.1	Contribution to existing literature.....	34
7.2	Practical implications	34
7.3	Future research directions	35
	References	37
	Appendices.....	41
	Appendix A – Ethics Approval	41
	Appendix B – Participant Information Sheet.....	42
	Appendix C – Consent form	44

List of Tables

Table 1: Overview of interview participants	5
Table 2: Gossip and related social activities	9
Table 3: Gossip motives and Gossip content.....	22

List of Figures

Figure 1: Gossip content	16
Figure 2: Workplace Gossip Model	20

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The ethics approval for this study was granted by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEK) on 19 March 2024 with application number 24/3.

Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgments), nor used artificial intelligence tools or generative artificial intelligence tools (unless it is clearly stated, and referenced, along with the purpose of use), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

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1 Introduction

Workplace communication is often seen as the lifeblood of an organisation, influencing everything from performance and group functioning to overall culture (Sun et al., 2023). Employees may use informal workplace communication to bridge the gap left by an organisation's formal communication (Ellwardt et al., 2012; Subramanian, 2006). Within the context of communication, workplace gossip is garnering increased attention from organisational leaders and experts. Workplace gossip is a pervasive yet relatively hidden phenomenon within organisations (Greenslade-Yeats et al., 2023; Sun et al., 2023). The content of gossip encompasses a broad spectrum, ranging from discussions about the actions and interactions of fellow employees to narratives surrounding workplace events. For example, it includes speculative discussions, making explicit and implied judgements based on observed behaviours, discussions around work performance and internal conflicts (Greenslade-Yeats et al., 2023).

Although gossip is a ubiquitous element of communication in the workplace, research on gossip has primarily focussed on gossip elements in isolation. For example, there are studies on the antecedents and consequences of workplace gossip (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012; Cheng et al., 2023; Tan et al., 2021; Yao et al., 2020) or gender differences between gossipers (Eckhaus & Ben-Hador, 2019; Farley et al., 2010). While this has provided a general understanding of workplace gossip, there has been limited research on the interplay between gossip components, especially around how one gossip element is affected by another within gossip phenomena. Exploring how gossip elements influence each other is important due to changing perceptions of organisational gossip from simply counterproductive talk to a more nuanced understanding of gossip having both positive and detrimental functions (Brady et al., 2017).

1.1 Importance of studying workplace gossip

An organisation cannot function without informal communication. Understanding workplace gossip provides insights into this informal communication and its impact within organisations. De Gouda et al. (2005) claim a thin line exists between healthy communication and other conversations often defined by participants themselves. If an employee converses with their manager about how their team member's performance is

declining due to personal and financial issues, it might not be considered gossip. However, it would likely be considered gossip if the same employee shared this information with a co-worker or an individual from another department (De Gouda et al., 2005). Hence, intention, recipient, and connection to the workplace are all salient when discussing workplace gossip.

On an individual level, gossip is important to employees as it may be used as a “pressure valve” to “let off steam”, especially in situations where nothing else can help (Dijkstra et al., 2014). It also plays a crucial role in the social fabric at workplace, functioning as a tool for social bonding. At a team and organisational level, gossip can act as a potential channel of information flow, spreading information and news more quickly than formal communication networks. However, it is important to note that gossip valence could be both positive and negative. While certain gossip can help employees stay informed about organisational changes, potential opportunities, and threats (Anggraeni & Michael, 2020), research suggests negative gossip is a detrimental phenomenon for an organisation that could hurt work relationships, eventually leading to decreased employee morale and increased turnover (De Gouda et al., 2005).

When untrue gossip, spread by gossipers with self-serving intentions, is prevalent in organisations, it can create anxiety and hyper-vigilance. This heightened state of awareness and sensitivity to potential gossip can be emotionally taxing and may result in a negative organisational climate (De Cuyper et al., 2009; Lewis et al., 2008). In addition, gossip senders also may face social consequences (Kakarika et al., 2024). Gossip that is perceived to be a strategy for self-enhancement might impact the gossip sender more than the gossip target (Gao et al., 2024). Gossip senders may experience heightened anxiety due to the unpredictable nature of gossip transmission in an organisation (Gao et al., 2024). Since gossip can spread beyond the intended audience, gossipers may fear that the content of gossip will eventually reach the target, leading to potential repercussions. Gossip senders may also experience increased feelings of guilt (Gao et al., 2024). Gossip, in general, is believed by many to be inherently harmful, and despite initiating workplace gossip, gossip senders may also share the same negative attitudes towards gossip. Recognising that their behaviour is an ethical breach, gossip senders tend to feel heightened levels of guilt (Gao et al., 2024). Additionally, a gossipper risks being negatively

evaluated by the recipient, especially if the gossip is perceived as self-serving motive (Greenslade-Yeats et al., 2023).

Gossip can be destructive at both the individual and organisational levels (Gholipour et al., 2011; van Iterson & Clegg, 2008). In addition to the effect on interpersonal relationships, gossip directly impacts organisations in terms of reduced organisational citizenship and knowledge hiding (Khan et al., 2023; Yao et al., 2020; Zhao et al., 2024). Knowledge hiding refers to deliberate efforts by an individual to conceal or withhold information from someone who has requested it (Khan et al., 2023). Yao et al. (2020) reported that individuals who experience gossip tend to adopt knowledge-hiding behaviours to protect themselves and their resources. Along with the internal organisational dynamics, negative gossip extends beyond organisational boundaries. When employees begin discussing negative information about the organisation, its culture, ways of working or the employees with outsiders, it impacts the organisation's reputation, hiring and client relationships.

Despite gossip's pervasive influence, Houmanfar and Johnson (2004) note that organisations find it challenging to analyse gossip due to its contextual and informal nature. Due to the complex nature of workplace gossip, several studies highlighted the need for a deeper understanding of workplace gossip dynamics (Ellwardt et al., 2012; Kuo et al., 2015). This study aims to develop a comprehensive understanding of workplace gossip by exploring existing literature. The research seeks to identify the components of workplace gossip, developing a model of gossip which conceptualises gossip as existing in an "ecosystem" and describes the interplay of various workplace features. Gossip itself is framed as a living organism within the ecosystem. To achieve this, the following research questions are proposed:

RQ1: What are the primary antecedents of workplace gossip?

RQ2: How do the motives of gossipers influence the initiation and circulation of gossip?

RQ3: What role do environmental factors play in shaping gossip dynamics?

RQ4: How does the content of workplace gossip influence the locations and communication channels used by gossipers?

2 Research Design

To address the above research questions effectively, a rigorous methodology comprising two phases was employed: first, using extant literature to build a theoretical framework and second, validating the resulting framework using semi-structured interviews. This two-step approach allowed for model refinement and a deeper understanding of the phenomenon.

2.1 Theoretical Model Development

The project began with a thorough literature search aimed at identifying current research focussing on workplace gossip. The literature search process involved sourcing a diverse range of scholarly papers from scholarly databases. Through a careful analysis and synthesis of the literature, key elements and themes were extracted. Workplace gossip components were identified, and a theoretical model was formulated, which laid the groundwork for validation of the model using semi-structured interviews.

2.2 Model Validation

Following the development of the theoretical model, the validation phase was initiated by conducting semi-structured interviews with employees in the service sector. These interviews were designed to gather participant's experiences, perspectives and insights into workplace gossip dynamics, thereby helping to confirm and refine the concepts proposed in the model. Due to the limited time constraints associated with the six-month dissertation period, only three participants were interviewed. The primary purpose of these interviews was to test the developed framework rather than to serve as the main focus of the study. Despite their similar age groups and gender, these participants represented different roles within different organizations, allowing a meaningful contribution to the study. Through open-ended questions, participants were encouraged to share their thoughts on antecedents and triggers of gossip, motives and gathering spots of gossipers, and factors influencing workplace gossip. Post interviews, the insights were analysed, common patterns were identified, and these were compared to the theoretical model.

2.3 Subjects

Three participants from separate organisations in India were recruited; they had different backgrounds and worked at different organisational levels. All participants were employed for at least 20 hours in service-based organisations. Workplace gossip, being a complex topic, necessitates attention to ethical research procedures. To ensure the anonymity of all our participants, identifying information of the participants is excluded. Participants will henceforth be referred to as Participant A, Participant B, and Participant C.

Table 1: Overview of interview participants

Participant	Level	Profession	Information Access	Gender	Age	Organisation	City
A	Senior	HR Professional	High	Female	34	Financial institution	Bangalore
B	Mid-Level	Recruiter	Limited	Female	28	HR Consultancy	Delhi
C	Mid-senior	Software Engineer	Low	Female	32	Technology Solutions	Bangalore

2.4 Materials

The primary materials used in the research was the theoretical model (see chapter 3) which informed the interview questions exploring different gossip components. The questions were designed to gain insights into participants' experiences and validate the theoretical model of workplace gossip dynamics. The selected semi-structured interview method allowed flexibility and gave opportunities to probe further based on participants' responses. The term "gossip" was deliberately avoided to limit social desirability effects (Ellwardt et al., 2012). Instead, questions were structured indirectly, asking participants about their experiences around casual, informal conversations at work. The following

were the initial set of indicative questions asked during the interview. Questions were slightly modified based on participant's responses.

1. How frequently do you find yourself participating in casual, informal conversations at workplace?
2. Can you describe a recent instance where you initiated, contributed or participated in any casual conversations at workplace? Did you notice any particular reason or intention behind that conversation?
3. Have you noticed any patterns in the frequency or nature of these conversations during specific periods?
4. How do you categorise the level of access to employee information you have at work? Do you feel that access to information affects your conversations with others? How so?
5. How do you describe your organisation's confidentiality expectations of you? Is this expectation explicit?
6. With whom do you usually chat at workplace? Where do you meet to converse?
7. Have there been any instances where you consciously decided not to contribute or share certain information due to confidentiality concerns?
8. Have you observed any patterns in the types of conversations that occur in different physical and virtual spaces at work?

2.5 Procedure

According to Savin-Baden (2012), semi-structured interviews are a good option when the researcher has only one opportunity to interview the participant, as it allows to effectively manage the limited time available while maintaining a focussed interaction. The semi-structured interviews were conducted online via Zoom to accommodate participants varied time zones and schedules. Initially one participant was recruited through primary recruiter's LinkedIn connections, which then expanded into snowball sampling to recruit the remaining two participants.

The interviewer adhered to the interview protocol. The questions moved from general to specific gradually introducing different components of gossip model, as appropriate. Follow-up questions were tailored based on participants' responses, allowing for richer data collection. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes, post which it was transcribed with participant's consent. Participants were also given the option to review the transcripts.

To ensure ethical integrity, all required measures were taken during the interview process. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and the importance of the insights they provide. Consent forms were obtained from all the participants. Confidentiality was a key concern, especially because of the sensitive nature of the study. Participants were ensured of their privacy, and their right to withdraw from the study at any point.

Post interviews, the data analysis process focussed on validating the theoretical model developed from the literature review. It involved a detailed examination of the interview data to assess how participants experiences supported the model. Each interview transcript was examined, identifying instances where participants' experiences either aligned with or contradicted the elements of the model.

3 Conceptual model of gossip – The Gossip Ecosystem

In this chapter, a conceptual model or framework of gossip is described in the form of a “Gossip Ecosystem”. This model is derived from a review of the current literature relating to workplace gossip.

Before exploring the details of workplace gossip dynamics, it is important to define gossip. Due to its complex nature and close connection with other social activities, workplace gossip has been defined in various ways by researchers. For example, Kakarika et al. (2024) define gossip as “the informal and evaluative talk among organisational members about another member who is not present”. While this definition captures the informal and evaluative nature of workplace gossip, the scope of this phenomenon is narrowed to organisational members only. Our study acknowledges that gossip can go beyond organisational boundaries, with employees potentially engaging in gossip with outsiders. Another definition suggests that gossip is “informal communication transmitted to another person or persons, irrespective of whether or not the communication has been established as fact” (Michelson & Mouly, 2000). While the definition is valid, the definition looks at “gossip” and “rumour” as the same phenomenon. It implies that gossip content could cover any information, including objects and events. It overlooks the aspect of discussing about a third person, which is the core component of this study.

Hence, for the purpose of this research, the following definition was used, “An employee (i.e., the sender) communicating to another individual at work (i.e., the receiver) about a workplace other (i.e., the target) who is absent or unaware of the content” (Dores Cruz et al., 2021; Sun et al., 2023). Following the definition, this study notes that a gossip network consists of the sender, the receiver, the target and each element of this network can include multiple people.

Gossip and related social activities can be differentiated in terms of intent, content and conceptualisation (Greenslade-Yeats et al., 2023; Kurland & Pelled, 2000). Gossip generally stands out due to its explicit or implicit evaluation of the gossip target (Brady et al., 2017). Table 2 provides an overview of different social activities (Brady et al., 2017; De Gouda et al., 2005; Greenslade-Yeats et al., 2023) and how these manifest in an organisational scenario, in this example – a new project.

Table 2: Gossip and related social activities

Social Activity	Formality	Targets	Tone	Content	Example
Gossip	Informal	3 rd person	Both	Evaluative	"I was just talking to the other team, it seems the new project manager is a workaholic and works for 15 hours everyday"
Rumour	Informal	Co-workers, events, object	Both	Assumed	"I just heard that the project launch is going to be in Australia"
Bitching	Informal	3 rd person	Negative	Venting	"It is frustrating to work with this new project lead. Her ways of working is not going to go well"
Reporting	Both	Co-workers, events, object	Both	Documented	"The CEO's email says that the new project comes with an increased hiring budget"
Chatting	Informal	Co-workers, events, object	Positive	Casual	"During lunch break, the manager introduced all the new teammates and discussed about our project"
Tattletaling	Both	Co-workers	Negative	Assumed	"Do you know the manager said we don't have the skills to lead the new project"

3.1 Psychosocial Factors

Understanding how gossip begins and flows is crucial as it forms the primary layer in a gossip ecosystem. In this section, different characteristics and behaviours of gossipers including their motives and how they choose their gossip recipients are conceptualised as "Psychosocial factors".

3.1.1 Motives of gossipers

Employees have various motives for gossiping (Dores Cruz et al., 2021). These motives impact the gossip content and frequency. Employees might use gossip as a key to gain power, influence information and other employees (Gholipour et al., 2011; Kurland & Pelled, 2000). Individuals with the motive to gain power use information for social engineering, which is a self-serving behaviour aimed at strategically manipulating and influencing others to achieve specific goals (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012).

Additionally, Beersma and Van Kleef (2012) found that social enjoyment is a motive for gossiping. Some employees view gossip as a means to bond with others for amusement or entertainment. Gossip senders might also have group protection motives (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012). Individuals try to protect their group members against harmful behaviour using gossip. Gossipers with group protection motives might be seen as “attractive friends” as they gather information and alert their circle about any upcoming issues (Ellwardt et al., 2012).

Another common motive behind gossip is information-gathering-validation (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012). Gossip senders start conversations or give information with an intention to seek new insights about that topic due to their desire to stay informed in organisations. Further, individuals with information-gathering-validation motive try to obtain a sense of validation and reassurance regarding their knowledge by discussing their understanding of a situation. People may also try to compare their feelings, beliefs and experiences with those of others in gossip sessions – validating or confirming their own experiences (Houmanfar & Johnson, 2004).

3.1.2 Gossip recipient selection

Gossip senders often have specific individuals and networks to serve as their gossip recipients. These gossip recipients, usually close connections at work and trusted confidants, play a crucial role in the exchange and sharing of gossip (McBride & Bergen, 2015). Ellwardt et al. (2012) note that gossip channels are found among employees with friendly and frequent connections. This is also supported by the theory of propinquity which suggests that employees who are in close proximity tend to interact more (Minchella et al., 2023). Additionally, employees with similar interests, goals, and concerns about the organisation are more likely to gossip frequently.

Gossip recipients need not be in one's workgroup. As long as the gossip motive is satisfied, in most cases social-enjoyment, it could also occur among outside groups who have no relation with the gossip target (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012). For instance, employees from different organisations might meet at social gatherings and bond over shared experiences, leading to an exchange of gossip from their respective workplaces. Individuals can also find gossip recipients among family members and friends outside the workplace. Zhang and Zheng (2024) argue that emotional support from friends and family can reduce negative emotions resulting from gossip.

3.1.3 Gender differences

A common misconception when discussing about gossipers is of women being more inclined to gossip than men. Though gossip is often conceptualised as "women's talk", Michelson and Mouly (2000) note that this perception prevails partly due to women gossiping in more "visible" locations. The stereotype might also exist since men do not want to be perceived as gossipers (Eckhaus & Ben-Hador, 2019) and hence might not admit to gossiping openly. Additionally, contrary to the stereotype, Kakarika et al. (2024) reported that women disapprove of gossip senders more than men. The gossip content discussed might also be different among men and women. Regarding gossip content, men tend to share information with more people, while women provide more detail (Gholipour et al., 2011).

3.2 Gossip Triggering Events

Gossip activity in organisations tend to peak or become more prevalent during certain periods. Gossip patterns are characterised by specific triggers and events. Analysing these patterns in gossip may add to our understanding of organisational processes (Ellwardt et al., 2012). In exploring "triggering events", this section aims to identify specific events within the workplace that stimulate gossip.

3.2.1 Organisational changes

According to Houmanfar and Johnson (2004) employees are more likely to gossip during times of environmental ambiguity or organisational change to get information. Gossip sharing further levels up when the management keeps information under wraps with no regular formal communication (Grosser et al., 2012). Environmental ambiguity can

include any change, such as restructuring or leadership transitions. Confusion about changes in roles, job security or change in policies can serve as a catalyst for gossip. In such situations, employees engage in gossip for gathering and sharing information, and mobilising support.

Additionally, formal communication (meetings, emails) with any business updates such as promotions or awards is often followed by gossip (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012; Sun et al., 2023). The gossip in these scenarios could be a mix of positive and negative gossip, including discussions about the selection process, the performance of others, potential favouritism and other factors. However, if the business update includes a positive business milestone like a new project launch or company performance, the gossip is more likely to be positive.

3.2.2 Cyclical events

Stressful situations can trigger heightened levels of anxiety and emotional strain for employees, which ultimately produces gossip (Gholipour et al., 2011). These situations can include any everyday events like deadlines and team disagreements or cyclical events like performance evaluations. Additionally, gossip periods also follow when a shared issue climate exists (Mills, 2010). These periods are characterised by the presence of common concerns or grievances within a team or a social group in organisations. For example, an employee getting fired may give rise to speculations regarding changing policies or probable conflict with the manager. The aftermath of such scenarios would result in feelings of uncertainty or perceived injustice, which can fuel gossip. In these situations of shared issues, gossip serves as a means for collective problem-solving.

3.2.3 Psychological contract breach

Any event that results in an unbalanced exchange of benefits (loyalty for relationships or work for rewards) or events of abusive supervision would eventually lead to workplace gossip (Dijkstra et al., 2014; Kuo et al., 2015). The breaking of a psychological contract is also a common trigger for workplace gossip (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012). If an employee breaches a co-worker's trust by disclosing private information, this may lead to feelings of betrayal and resentment. In response to such events, the aggrieved employees could then use gossip as a means to vent their frustration (Blithe, 2014; Koch & Denner, 2022).

3.3 Gossip Habitats

Gossip is enacted in various places in the workplace, each impacting gossip interactions. The common habitats for gossipers have been changing with the evolving work arrangements. Regardless, gossipers tend to choose a place that is accessible and private (Minchella et al., 2023). In this section, different physical and virtual spaces where gossip thrives within the workplace are conceptualised as “habitats”.

3.3.1 Physical gossip habitats

Employees tend to choose places with architectural privacy that protect them from unwanted observations (Sundstrom et al., 1980). In physical office spaces, water coolers or kitchens are a classic hotspot for gossipers (Koch & Denner, 2022), maybe because they are among the most frequently visited areas. Additionally, common areas, breakrooms, coffee spots, or even office corridors provide gossip opportunities (Fan & Dawson, 2022). These are ideal areas for employees to disconnect from work and start impromptu conversations. Employees get to break away from the managerial constraints in these places which is not always possible within cubicles and meeting rooms.

Mills (2010) notes informal gatherings provide opportunities for employees to pass on and evaluate gossip. A team outing or team lunch would serve as a good place for gossip. However, the gossip content might not include a sensitive topic. Gossipers tend to choose their gathering spots based on the content of the gossip. The chosen gossip locations also act as gossip cues for employees. A co-worker who suggests grabbing a cup of coffee might actually be signalling the intention to share gossip.

3.3.2 Virtual gossip habitats

The cues and gathering spots for gossipers have significantly changed with remote work. The channel of communication selected serves as a cue for gossip in the virtual work environment (Blithe, 2014). Since the employees in virtual workspaces cannot meet by chance in hallways and lunch rooms, the gossip conversations will be more likely to be planned and scheduled. A report by Viererbl et al. (2022) mentioned that during remote work, employees schedule virtual coffee breaks either via phone or video conference for informal conversations. A scheduled Zoom or Teams call during working hours probably involves a work-related conversation, but an after-work phone call to a co-worker can hint at gossip.

Gossip might also find its place during online meetings. Virtual workers might use time just before or after a business meeting for informal conversations (Viererbl et al., 2022). However, these conversations largely depend on the attendees of the meeting. If all participants of the meeting are familiar gossip recipients, there may be a higher likelihood of engaging in gossip.

3.4 Gossip Energy Sources

Having explored why and how gossip occurs, the next important step is to understand what feeds and maintains gossip. Gossip content includes a diverse range of topics at varying levels of detail and tone. The variations and combinations of gossip content can lead to different implications. In this section, various contents of gossip are described on the basis of intensity, sensitivity, and content.

3.4.1 Gossip intensity

Gossip intensity refers to the amount of gossip circulating within the workplace. It could be high intensity and low intensity gossip. High-intensity gossip exhibits frequent and widespread gossip exchanges, functioning as a potent source of energy. Conversely, low intensity gossip is characterised by minimal instances of gossip exchanges (Anggraeni & Michael, 2020). The reasons behind the varying levels of gossip intensity might depend on the events occurring in the organisation at a given time. The occurrence of significant organisational developments can increase the energy and longevity of gossip. For instance, as discussed in the “gossip triggering events” section, an upcoming organisational change with low formal communication might result in high-intensity gossip.

Research indicates that intensity and frequency of gossip is positively associated with individuals’ social needs, such as desire to be accepted (Anggraeni & Michael, 2020). This stands on the principle that gossip serves as a social tool helping employees navigate through relationships at workplace. Individuals tend to gossip more, to establish themselves as people with information and enhance their social standing. The intensity of gossip need not be consistent throughout the organisation. Intensity of gossip may depend on the relationship between gossipers (Ellwardt et al., 2012).

3.4.2 Gossip sensitivity and importance

Gossip conversations can revolve around a spectrum of topics ranging from everyday occurrences to critical organisational developments (Holland, 1996). The nature of gossip refers to the attributes of gossip content, such as the topics and degree of sensitivity. It can be categorised as sensitive content, which includes confidential topics (De Gouda et al., 2005), and non-sensitive content which includes casual conversations and social updates.

3.4.3 Gossip content

For gossip content, we use the categories theorised by Lee and Barnes (2021), which integrates gossip valence and work-relatedness as dimensions. Gossip valence refers to whether gossip conveys positive or negative information about its target (Greenslade-Yeats et al., 2023), and has been a subject of interest across numerous studies (Brady et al., 2017; Greenslade-Yeats et al., 2023; Kurland & Pelled, 2000). For example, conversations about a good performance by an employee may be viewed as positive gossip. The gossip targets of positive and negative gossip are different from a social network standpoint. While positive gossip, in general, does not target a particular group, high social status protects employees from being the target of negative gossip (Ellwardt et al., 2012). Kuo et al. (2015) mention that the type of gossip discussed depends on the intimacy between gossipers.

In their gossip and power model, Kurland and Pelled (2000), distinguish the content of the gossip by the extent to which it is work-related. According to these authors, gossip content can include different aspects of the target's life, including professional and social. Job-related gossip revolves around tasks, responsibilities, and performance of gossip targets. Non-job-related gossip involves discussions about the target's personal life, relationships or hobbies.

Figure 1: Gossip content

	Work-related	Non-work-related
Negative	Protection-based gossip	Derogation-based gossip
Positive	Endorsement-based gossip	Communion-based gossip

Protection-based gossip is work-related gossip with negative valence. The content of this gossip serves as a form of social learning, potentially protecting group members from possible danger. Additionally, it conveys group norms, allowing gossip recipients to learn about expected behaviours in the workplace (Lee & Barnes, 2021).

Derogation-based gossip refers to gossip which is negative and non-work-related. This type of gossip is characterised by its potential harm to the gossip target while offering no significant benefits to the gossip recipient. Unlike protection-based gossip which can provide useful information to its recipients, derogation-based gossip primarily aims to harm the target (Lee & Barnes, 2021).

Endorsement-based gossip is characterised by positive valence and work relatedness. Lee and Barnes (2021) claim this type of gossip typically involves praising and recognising gossip targets, thereby supporting their reputation. It encompasses positive discussions about co-workers skills and competencies, helping to foster workplace solidarity.

Communion-based gossip is characterised by positive valence and non-work-relatedness. The content of this gossip aims to cultivate relational bonding and serves as a means for nurturing friendships through socially enjoyable interactions (Lee & Barnes, 2021).

A significant portion of gossip is about employees with positions of power in an organisation (Ellwardt et al., 2012; Noon & Delbridge, 1993). This does not necessarily mean C-suite leaders become gossip targets. Gossip targets are usually people who are

close at hand and those who are familiar with gossipers (Clegg & van Iterson, 2009). Hence, team leaders or managers might become victims of gossip. This is more likely when there is low trust in management (Ellwardt et al., 2012).

While discussing the conditions under which gossip content is likely to spread, Gholipour et al. (2011) state that it depends both on how important and how vague the gossip news is. If the gossip content is about top management being replaced with no additional information about who is being replaced, when and why, the gossip is most likely to spread either for group protection or information-gathering and validation. Another condition for gossip flourishing relates to the probability of believing the gossip. Gossip usually spreads among employees who trust one another.

3.5 Environmental Influences

Apart from social dynamics and individual motivations, gossip events and the wider ecosystem are influenced by the organisational environment. These influences may define the frequency, the meeting places of gossipers or the content of gossip itself. This section aims to identify the factors impacting information flow in a gossip network.

3.5.1 Access to information

Access to information refers to the availability of privileged information to employees. Employees with higher access to information can influence the topics of gossip conversations and they often become trusted sources within the organisation due to their ability to provide valuable insights and updates. When a gossip sender is perceived to be credible, this significantly affects gossip acceptance (Gholipour et al., 2011).

People with information access often have a sense of importance and exclusiveness in their gossip networks, as their knowledge of privileged information becomes valuable in social interactions (Fan & Grey, 2021). They might often use this information to boost their status in their gossip network. This information need not be obtained through formal or even intentional channels. For instance, if an employee overhears their supervisor's conversations, they might know certain information that is not readily available to other team members.

3.5.2 Confidentiality expectations

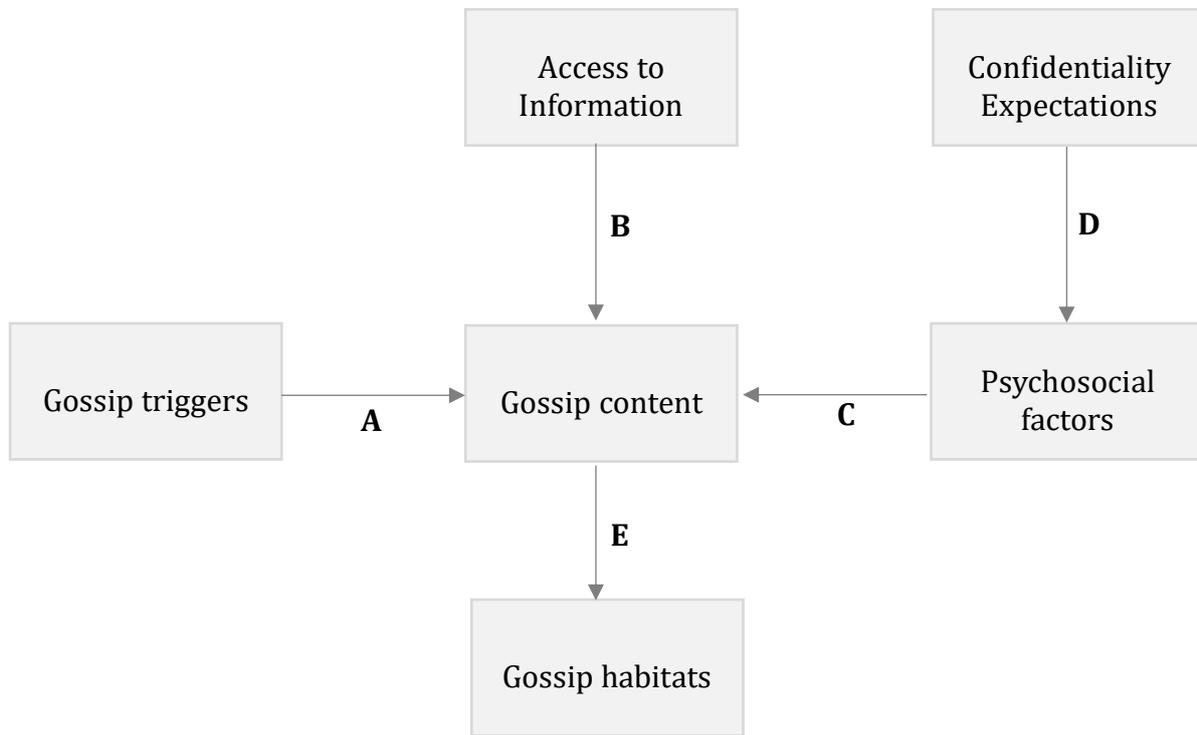
Confidentiality expectations refer to the policies and norms established by an organisation regarding the handling and passing of sensitive information (Sussman, 2008). These expectations are crucial for maintaining the security of information and privacy of other employees. Expectations of confidentiality can be explicit, especially for professionals with formal access to information (HR employees, for example), or can be implied if the employee is sourcing information through informal channels (De Gouda et al., 2005).

Confidentiality expectations do not necessarily mitigate gossip. Fan and Grey (2021) hold that confidentiality does not change the existing characteristics of gossip; rather, it shapes gossip exchange by adding an extra layer of secrecy. In spite of information security policies, there are always concerns about employee-linked information security breaches (Cuganesan et al., 2018). This might indicate that employees pass the information through their networks even if they are restricted from sharing it. The main reasons for breaching the communication policies might include the human need for social connection and bonding, according to Sussman (2008). However, these confidentiality expectations might influence how much of this information employees share and with whom.

4 Workplace Gossip Model

The elements described in the previous chapter, though distinct, are interlinked in many ways. Building upon the workplace gossip research, a theoretical model of workplace gossip dynamics is proposed. Figure Two represents gossip ecosystem in the workplace. At the centre of the model is “Gossip Content” which is shaped by three primary elements: gossip triggers, information access, and psychosocial factors. Gossip triggers are the events or situations that initiate or catalyse gossip conversations. The topics and tone of gossip are determined by the nature of these events, thereby influencing the gossip content. Information access plays a critical role in shaping gossip content. Employees with access to privileged and exclusive information are likely to contribute more details to the gossip, enriching its content. Psychosocial factors add complexity to the gossip content. The tone of gossip and types of gossip, such as protection-based, derogation-based, endorsement-based and communion-based, are driven by different motives of gossipers. Confidentiality expectations may not directly affect the gossip content but may influence how information is shared by impacting gossip recipient selection. These expectations dictate the boundaries of gossip, thereby guiding what is being shared with which gossip recipient. Lastly, gossip content influences gossip habitats. These habitats are locations where gossip occurs and thrives, whether physical or virtual. The type and nature of gossip content might determine the location suitable for conversations, thereby influencing where and how openly or discreetly employees gossip. The following subsections will explore each of these interplays in detail.

Figure 2: Workplace Gossip Model



4.1 Influence of gossip triggers on gossip content

This section explores the influence of different gossip triggers on gossip content. This relationship is illustrated in the model by arrow A. Gossip-triggering events shape the themes and topics of gossip content. Ellwardt et al. (2012) reported that low generalised trust increases gossip about managerial skills in general while low interpersonal trust triggers person-specific gossip. This may suggest that work-related gossip might be more prevalent when there are general problems with management, while non-work gossip gets triggered from personal issues and social dynamics of employees. For instance, during periods of uncertainty such as organisational changes, layoffs or leadership transitions, high energy protection-based gossip (negative work-related) would likely be prevalent. Protection-based gossip includes information that can alert the recipient about a possible danger or threat (Lee & Barnes, 2021).

Similarly, derogation-based gossip (negative, non-work related) might occur because of personal conflicts or psychological contract breaches. These triggers evoke emotional responses among employees, which are reflected in their conversations. In these

situations of conflicts and high emotions, gossip senders extend their gossip beyond the realm of work and target the individual's personal life, conduct and character.

Endorsement-based gossip (positive work-related information sharing) serves as a means to display support to others in the workplace. It also affirms the competency and reliability of co-workers in the work context (Lee & Barnes, 2021). Endorsement-based gossip could be a result of team success or innovations. Another common trigger for endorsement-based gossip is when the gossip sender benefits because of the target. For example, if the gossip sender is awarded or promoted by the manager, the beneficiary is likely to spread positive information.

Triggers for communion-based gossip (positive non-work related information sharing) can include personal achievements or life milestones of the target. In addition to personal achievements, communion-based gossip can also occur as a result of the target's display of positive traits. This may result in conversing about the target's kindness, generosity or sense of humour.

4.2 Influence of psychosocial factors of gossip on gossip content

While discussing gossip components, the previous chapter examined the motives of gossipers as part of "Psychosocial factors". This segment aims to explore how these motives influence gossip content. This relationship is illustrated in the model by arrow C.

Group protection motives drive individuals to engage in gossip conversations to safeguard the interest of one's group. Individuals with this motive tend to engage in protection-based gossip (negative work-related information sharing). For instance, if employees get information about their new manager's highly neurotic personality, they would immediately alert their team members if they intend to protect their group.

An information-gathering-validation motive produces either positive or negative work-related content. During periods of uncertainty, individuals tend to discuss negative work-related gossip with their recipients to exchange more information on that topic or to validate their experiences or beliefs. At other times, gossipers might share best practices and success stories, seeking and giving feedback, resulting in positive work-related gossip.

Self-serving motives of gossipers would fuel gossip with negative valence. These individuals gossip for their personal agendas, to enhance their reputation or to source information for their benefit. They might also spread derogation-based Gossip (negative non-work related information sharing) to undermine their co-workers. While negative non-work related gossip may not have a direct impact on the target in an immediate work context, it still damages the target’s reputation (Lee & Barnes, 2021).

Lastly, the social enjoyment motive tends to produce gossip from all categories. It could be bonding over shared experiences, celebrating achievements or sharing personal stories. Among all the categories, communion-based gossip (positive non-work related information sharing) content offers more significant potential for social bonding. Lee and Barnes (2021) argue that positive non-work-related gossip is essential to maintain work relationships. Although the gossip is evaluative, due to the positive valence, employees’ bond over this gossip without guilt (Lee & Barnes, 2021).

Table 3: Gossip motives and Gossip content

Motive	Positive WG	Negative WG	Positive NWG	Negative NWG
Group-protection		Yes		
Information gathering	Yes	Yes		
Self-serving		Yes		Yes
Social enjoyment	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

4.3 Influence of information access on gossip content

Within the context of environmental influences, the previous chapter explored access to information and confidentiality expectations. This section aims to explore the influence of information access on gossip content. This relationship is illustrated in the model by arrow B. Employees with extensive access to information often become central figures in

gossip network and attract gossip seekers (Ellwardt et al., 2012), making information access a crucial factor in shaping and influencing gossip content. Those with access to privileged information would have better content and in-depth insights, leading to high-intensity gossip compared to those who have less access (Farley, 2011; Sussman, 2008). Additionally, the level of information and the type of information accessed by individuals impact the tone and valence of gossip content. For instance, if there is a positive conversation about an employee but HR is aware that this employee was previously suspended and shares this information with the network, the valence of gossip is changed to negative. Individuals with high information access, who are seen as the “movers and shakers” of information may be included in social circles to avoid missing out on valuable information, but are generally kept at a distance as they may be deemed untrustworthy (Farley, 2011).

4.4 Influence of confidentiality expectations on gossip recipients

In the model, arrow D represents the influence of confidentiality expectations on social factors of gossip. Certain employees are required to maintain a high level of confidentiality as part of their job. Employees may not always adhere strictly to these expectations despite being obligated to maintain confidentiality (Sussman, 2008). They might still engage in gossip conversations and share information. However, these confidentiality expectations may cause them to be subtle or cryptic in their information sharing. They might also be selective in sharing information and hold back details that could be traced back to them. Employees with high confidentiality expectations might be extra vigilant in choosing their gossip recipients. In their research, Fan and Grey (2021) outline a group’s inclusion and exclusion criteria while engaging in confidential gossip. As the topic of the gossip shifts, the individuals who are involved in the gossip might also change. Based on the new topic, different recipients might be brought into the conversation (Fan & Grey, 2021).

4.5 Influence of gossip content on gossip habitats

The relationship between gossip content and gossip habitats is illustrated in the model by arrow E. In the workplace, gossipers' choices of meeting spots are not arbitrary. Gossipers choose their meeting spot based on the content. For example, if the gossip content includes confidential or sensitive information, gossipers would not be

comfortable meeting in an open spot on the work floor or near a work cubicle as that attracts attention and speculations from others (Sundstrom et al., 1980). Instead, they would choose discreet or less visible space. If the content is not particularly sensitive, gossipers might be willing to converse in less private locations like office kitchen areas.

Additionally, positive work-related gossip, such as stories about the good performance of co-workers, may foster a supportive work environment and help nurture the bond between gossipers and their target. In this case, gossipers may choose communal places or visible places like the work floor (Lee & Barnes, 2021).

Psychological privacy, as explained by Sundstrom et al. (1980) refers to an individuals' sense of control over other's access to themselves and their social groups. This might play an important role in choosing gossip meeting spots, especially when the content is perceived as sensitive. If a particular place is perceived to have less psychological privacy, then gossipers might avoid conversing there.

Choices of virtual gossip spaces like WhatsApp or platforms like Teams are also influenced by gossip content. If gossip senders perceive their content as sensitive and fear potential repercussions, they might avoid official communication tools like Zoom and Teams and instead resort to personal communication channels.

5 Gossip model validation (semi-structured interviews)

To assess the veracity of the gossip model derived from current literature, I interviewed several organisational members with personal experience of workplace gossip, as senders, receivers or targets. The aim was to test the proposed interaction of the elements in the model against perceptions of employees in the real world. Semi-structured interviews were employed to gather insights and validate the theoretical constructs (see Chapter Two for more detail on research design). Although there were only three participants in this validation phase, the content of the interviews revealed rich and detailed information.

Interviews were a valuable addition to this project for several reasons. Firstly, the interviews provided empirical data to validate the theoretical model of gossip, derived from extant literature. The participants revealed subjective experiences of real-world employees, adding depth to the research and enriching the understanding of workplace gossip. The findings contributed to the study by adding additional nuance that allowed expansion of the model. Additionally, interview data helped in bridging the gap between theory and practice. The participants' experiences, allowed practical recommendations and implications for organisations to be described. The analysis of the interviews are organised in four key themes, described below.

5.1 Gossip triggers relating to gossip content

Discussing the dynamics of gossip triggers and resulting content, participants provided insights on how specific events catalyse conversations. As discussed in the gossip triggers segment, cyclical events contribute to an increased gossip atmosphere since these periods shape employees' career trajectories. All three participants identified the periods of performance evaluations, promotions and bonuses as triggers of gossip. Employees tend to speculate and compare the benefits they receive versus what others receive. In these events, negative work-related conversations tend to arise.

“One very obvious situation is right before and after the performance appraisal. That is when people tend to speak a lot about it... it's very obvious from how people do their work if they are satisfied with the hike they have received or not” – Participant

A

“There are negative conversations as well. Like if someone is getting a promotion and if someone else doesn't feel they [the target] deserve it and they think they [the sender] deserve it much more than the other person..” - Participant C

Additionally, in service-based organisations, cross-functional collaborations are a common way of working. Following the collaborative meetings, one of the participants, Participant C, noted an increase in the intensity of workplace gossip, particularly negative work-related gossip.

“you know I work for a testing team and we have a development team.. and we have regular meetings and stuff. And if something went wrong from the dev side, we do discuss that... after our discussions [meetings] we try to discuss whose mistake it is and who to blame” - Participant C

As noted earlier, psychological contract breaches act as a triggering point for gossip conversations. If an employee perceives injustice or favouritism, they tended to engage in both work and non-work-related gossip. Supporting this hypothesised link, Participant B shared their experience.

“I take around 2 hours one way [to office] so obviously I requested my manager [to work from home]. So looking into my performance and everything they took a call and said that's fine.. But the moment it happened I can recall that everyone started gossiping about it.. saying the manager is biased towards her, he is favouring her, there is something going on between them” - Participant B

In addition to these events, it is also noted that any employee joining or leaving the team increases the frequency of gossip conversations. *Participant A* brought attention to the correlation between work pressure and the occurrence of gossip. They suggested that during periods of high work pressure, employees tend to converse less and vice-versa. This is in line with Participant B's experience of tight work schedules leading to fewer conversations.

“...when there is tremendous amount of work pressure, even though a lot of things are going wrong... people don't have the time to speak about it. That's when the communication is pretty low. The other times when the work pressure is not much and you know people are kind of free, then you see a lot of increase in the amount of communication that people have” – Participant A

“My job profile is such that I do not get that time during office hours. There is strictness as well. There are like limited coffee breaks you can take..” - Participant B

5.2 Gossip motives relating to gossip content

Gossip motives influence the intensity and nature of gossip content. The most common motive noted by participants was the self-serving motive followed by the information-gathering-validation and group protection motives.

Two participants highlighted instances where gossip in the workplace appeared to be driven by self-serving motives. One of the participants recollected an instance where their colleagues started a conversation and collected information for their own benefit.

“So there is one member in [team name] who is unhappy with the kind of work they are doing. So they keep speaking to other people from other teams asking how happy are they with their work.. This they started as a conversation but later on.. there is a leadership visit from some other country and when this person is having their one on one with the leadership, they quote examples with names of employees from every team.. saying this person is also unhappy”- Participant A

Sharing their experience, one participant explained her information-gathering motive when she recently tried to analyse and understand the criteria and performance required for getting converted into a full-time employee. In this case, the content could be both positive and negative work-related.

“We had a discussion about the contract based workers getting converted to full time working. So I heard few of my colleagues.. they recently got conversions and stuff.. so there were some conversations about that you know trying to figure out the way they contributed” - Participant C

Discussing about the information-gather motive and self-serving motive, Participant B described how both these motives could be interrelated.

“Also there are some people who like to know what is happening in each and every team. So what they do is they look for one member in every team who can give them information. And they collate all that information and use it at the right time” – Participant B

Additionally, two participants shared a new perspective of “self-protection motive”. While the self-serving motive involves seeking personal benefit or gaining a competitive advantage over others, the self-protection motive involves sharing information to defend oneself against potential threats. Sharing about their experience, two of the participants shared their self-protection motive.

“In due course of time, the day I decided to part ways with this organisation the same thing would happen to me as well so I am worried for my future” - Participant A

“My only intention was I was getting affected.. my targets were affected. I was frustrated.” - Participant B

5.3 Influence of environmental factors on gossip elements

While discussing access to information and confidentiality expectations, it became apparent in the interviews that these factors are interrelated. When an employee has formal access to information, they have explicit confidentiality expectations. However, if the employee lacks formal information access then the confidential expectations are low. Participant A (with high information access) agreed and provided more insights during the interview.

“...I joined the organisation, but the moment I started getting deeper into the work and I started having more access to confidential information, I realised that there is absolutely zero pay parity in this organisation and we discussed” - Participant A

Participant A claimed they shared information only with other employees who had similar access, suggesting a link between confidentiality expectations and choices of gossip recipients.

“The organisation that I work for they have a very strong compliance and ethics team. I am bound by the contract.. I have signed the contract and you know there are trainings at regular intervals... So if I'm found doing that [spreading sensitive information] I could be terminated. Therefore I cannot and I do not discuss such things with anybody [in the workplace] who does not have access to these information” - Participant A

Participant A also described sharing conversations with co-workers at a similar level. She also highlighted her approach to gossiping with external recipients when they face trust issues with their usual conversation partners.

“I mean even though you have friends in the organisation, you really can’t trust them 100% . You don’t know when people are going to get back at you using which information right so yes.. there are a bunch of things that I would have discussed with my work friends but I did not because I was scared. I didn't want to be in any kind of compliance meeting where you know I would be charged with discussing confidential information so yes I have spoken to people outside of this organisation.. other friends or family members that I have” – Participant A

Additionally, participant B spoke about getting information from other employees in an informal way. When asked about implied confidentiality expectations, she recollected having none.

“I get to know some information, then it is completely up to me if I want to tell that to someone or not... Obviously, no one can pull me and ask me, you were the one who spread this. They don’t have any proof.. right. They didn’t see me do it. If you don’t have any proof you cannot blame anyone.” - Participant B

Similarly, Participant C believed confidentiality would not matter since the information is getting circulated within the organisation. This again implies confidentiality expectations even if it is not rigid or explicit, causes employees to be mindful of who are their conversation partners.

“What we discuss is within office and I personally don’t discuss these things with anyone outside. And whatever we are discussing.. some day or the other it will be coming to us officially.” – Participant C

5.4 Influence of gossip content on gossip habitats

Participants provided insights into how the nature of gossip content influences their choice of communication channels and gossip habitats. All the participants focussed on the importance of privacy in choosing their meeting spots. For casual conversations, all the participants identified lunch tables as the most preferred spots. Participant C claimed they chose the work floor for conversations if the topic was common to everyone present.

“I would say most of these happen over lunch or coffee. But yeah if it is.. so I said we always rant about the development team.. that usually happens in our cubicles, like we gather around and chat about it because we know that the whole development team sits in another floor and they can’t really hear us. But then if it is anything we don’t want others [on the work floor] to know that we are discussing.. it usually happens at the lunch table.” - Participant C

Participant B spoke about having sensitive conversations outside the work premises and stressed the privacy issues.

“So to be honest, I try to avoid doing this [gossiping] in work premises. I always do it like after office hours... Because somewhere I feel you never know who is listening to you. Or may be people can just listen half a thing and they can just make anything about it... make anything in their head and come up with any stories. - Participant B

Participant A and Participant C highlighted their reluctance to use digital communication platforms for gossiping about sensitive topics. Speaking about privacy issues, one participant expressed discomfort using messaging apps that could potentially document their conversations.

“I was stupid enough to have a conversation over zoom and if the organisation wanted could have traced the conversation and the call... The moment it is an informal communication my first choice is a face to face conversation because then there are no chances of somebody recording you over a phone call. If that is not an option then the second option would be a phone call without taking anybody's name or any confidential information. I have stopped conversing over any sort of app where you have to write and send a message and that becomes a proof later on. I do not like keeping any proofs of any conversation whatsoever” - Participant A

6 Discussion

Workplace gossip is a pervasive phenomenon, often serving as informal communication and social bonding among employees. This study aimed to explore workplace gossip components – presenting a theoretical model conceptualising the “gossip ecosystem” and identifying gossip habitats, psychosocial factors influencing gossip, gossip triggers, energy sources of gossip and environmental factors influencing gossip. The workplace gossip model examines the interplay of these gossip elements. Additionally, the proposed model was validated through qualitative data from semi-structured interviews.

RQ1. What are the primary antecedents of workplace gossip?

Participants recalled a range of triggering events and circumstances that served as catalysts for gossip in organisations. Confirming aspects of “gossip triggers” (section 4.1), participants shared both the situational and interpersonal nature of these triggers. Among the most prevalent triggers discussed were cyclical organisational events like performance evaluations, promotional processes, and team meetings. Participants noted that these events resulted in speculation and social comparison, increasing the intensity of gossip. Beyond organisational events, interpersonal dynamics such as perceived favouritism by managers and changes in team composition were identified as gossip triggers. Participants recalled how these triggers influenced the content and themes of gossip discussions. While cyclical organisational events resulted in work-related gossip focussed on a target’s performance or competence, other triggers resulted in non-work-related gossip revolving around a target’s personal life or their relationship with their manager. It is also important to note that all the participants claimed to not engage much in non-job-related gossip. According to Kuo et al. (2015), this could be because non-work-related gossip may not hold the same significance for employees as work-related gossip, and therefore may not fully serve the intended purpose. It is also possible that there was an element of response or desirability bias in the interviews, with non-work conversations perhaps being perceived as less appropriate in a workplace so being under reported.

RQ2. How do the motives of gossipers influence the initiation and circulation of gossip?

Participants also revealed a variety of motives driving their engagement in workplace gossip. In line with previous studies (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012; Dores Cruz et al., 2021;

Sun et al., 2023), the most prominent motives identified during the interviews were self-serving, information-gathering-validation, and group-protection. Gossip content with a self-serving motive tends to revolve around the gossiper's personal interests. It could be both work-related and non-work-related, however, the intensity, frequency and focus of the gossip was guided by the gossiper's personal interests and agendas. The content of this gossip was mostly of negative valence.

Conversely, information-gathering motives result in gossip content that informs the recipient about a topic. While the content may be influenced by the gossip sender, it is not driven by selfish motives, but rather by a desire to disseminate salient information. The valence of the information-gathering-validation motive tended to be both positive and negative.

Participants also highlighted instances where self-protection strategies motivated their engagement in gossip, driven by the desire to safeguard their reputation or job. Interestingly, social enjoyment as a motive was not mentioned by the participants in these interviews. It is possible that participants did not admit to social enjoyment as a motive because the non-work gossip conversations they did admit to might not have been especially enjoyable. Possibly the "fun" (salacious or less appropriate) gossip with enjoyment as a motive was seen as less socially desirable and thus was not mentioned.

RQ3. What role do environmental factors play in shaping gossip dynamics?

Complementing the literature review and model creation, the interviews shed light on the role of environmental factors such as information access and confidentiality expectations on gossip. Participants highlighted the impact that information access had on the content and depth of workplace gossip. Those with more access to information had additional topics to gossip about. In contrast, participants with limited access to information disclosed that they sourced information from others who had more information access. This suggests that individuals with less access to information would be more likely to be gossip recipients than gossip senders.

Participants also described how strict confidentiality expectations influenced their selection of gossip recipients. Those with stringent confidentiality expectations restricted their gossip to trusted peers with similar information access. Employees with low confidentiality expectations in their role were able to engage in unrestricted gossip.

Participants' experiences in this study are consistent with the research by Sussman (2008). According to Sussman (2008), whether employees adhere to confidentiality depends on a set of questions challenging the agreement, such as "If I tell someone I love and trust, who will be hurt?" For example, Participant A mentioned "*[Due to trust] I have spoken to people outside of this organisation.. other friends or family members that I have*". Another question could be "People will find out anyway; why go through all this trouble?" Statements such as "*whatever we are discussing.. some day or the other it will be coming to us officially.*" by Participant C supports this. This type of sense-making and perceptual bias might result in intentional or unintentional spread of information(Sussman, 2008).

RQ4. How does the content of workplace gossip influence the locations and communication channels used by gossipers?

Kuo et al. (2015) note that gossipers tend to converse more when they do not fear being held accountable for their remarks. Consistent with this, participants emphasised the significance of privacy while discussing their choice of communication spots and gossip channels. If the nature of gossip being discussed was sensitive and personal, individuals would seek out private and secluded settings. Examples provided by participants included a corner in the lunchroom or cafeteria, meeting rooms, or spaces outside work. If the nature of gossip is less sensitive and the content of gossip is a common topic, then the conversation could occur in less discreet areas like work cubicles. Additionally, if the conversation is sensitive, all participants recounted avoiding communication platforms like Zoom or Teams due to concerns about digital surveillance and tracking capabilities of organisations.

7 Conclusion

7.1 Contribution to existing literature

This dissertation contributes to the existing literature by developing a comprehensive theoretical framework integrating multiple workplace gossip elements. By examining the interplay of the full ecosystem, including gossip habitats, psychosocial factors, triggering events, gossip energy sources and environmental influences, this dissertation provides a holistic view of workplace gossip somewhat lacking from previous research models (Dores Cruz et al., 2021; Kakarika et al., 2024; Sun et al., 2023). This study therefore adds depth to the existing literature since most of the previous research has explored these components in isolation. Secondly, previous workplace gossip research hasn't examined the influence of access to privileged information and the confidentiality expectations of employees on gossip. This dissertation expanded the understanding of gossip by considering both of these factors within the model. This perspective allows for a better understanding of how gossip is shaped in an organisation.

The dissertation also contributes rich qualitative insights into workplace gossip. These detailed accounts from interview participants not only give a deeper understanding of workplace gossip in general, but also provide evidence for the applicability of the theoretical framework. By offering insights into the nuances of gossip events, the study links various organisational factors to gossip and offers a detailed map of when and where gossip is likely to occur, and what the purpose of gossip could be, enhancing practical relevance of the research.

7.2 Practical implications

Workplace gossip has evolved with humans and will continue to be a part of life both within and beyond organisations (Grosser et al., 2012). Recognising this, the findings of the study offer several practical implications to organisations and HR professionals. Kakarika et al. (2024) mention that individuals are more interested in sharing and receiving negative than positive gossip. Our recommendations will, therefore, focus on dealing with gossip of negative valence, which could be detrimental to the organisation and employees.

Organisations can leverage an understanding of the link between gossip triggers and gossip content. By recognising the triggering events that might lead to gossip,

management can proactively address it through open and transparent communication (Ellwardt et al., 2012). During stressful events and periods of uncertainty, employees tend to use gossip as a coping mechanism (Dijkstra et al., 2014). Providing access to counselling services or support groups might help employees navigate workplace challenges (Grosser et al., 2012). Providing regular updates and information to employees can reduce uncertainty and speculation thereby reducing the probability of gossip that is fuelled by a lack of information or by misinformation (Grosser et al., 2012).

Given that information access may influence gossip, organisations should establish clear policies regarding the sharing of confidential gossip. Regular information security sessions to employees around the appropriate use of information available to them may prevent the spread of sensitive gossip (De Gouda et al., 2005). The success of these sessions would depend on how well employees understand and approve of the reasons given for these guidelines (Sussman, 2008). Additionally, creating an environment where employees feel comfortable discussing concerns openly with management, rather than through informal gossip, could foster overall positive environment in workplace (Grosser et al., 2012).

Understanding different motives and valence of gossip content could facilitate organisations in channelling gossip in a constructive direction. Organisations need to recognise the consequences of different types of gossip and take proactive steps to leverage positive impacts and minimise negative ones. Gossip that results in negative outcomes may be minimised by establishing value-based standards across the organisation (Ullah et al., 2021).

7.3 Future research directions

The framework and qualitative data provide a starting point for future research in this area. It is important to note that all the participants of the study are female employees, and all are from India. The study thus opens avenues for cross-cultural comparisons to explore how culture and gender may impact the model. Though employees across all cultures indulge in gossip, there may be ethnic, gender, and cultural differences in how and why the conversations take place (Gholipour et al., 2011; Wu et al., 2018). For instance, in South-Asian countries, employees may refrain from discussing certain personal matters due to moral and societal implications. Topics such as relationships or

divorce might be considered inappropriate to discuss openly. However, in Western countries, the boundaries of acceptable gossip can be broader. Indeed, in the current study, the Indian participants all claimed not to discuss non-work matters much. Either they actually did not (perhaps due to the cultural constraints in South Asian work environments), or they felt it appropriate to say they did not (due to the social desirability of this restraint). Testing the applicability of the model across different cultures and genders would enhance its generalisability.

Future research could focus on how technology, and social media in particular could impact workplace gossip. With extensive use of social sites such as Instagram and Tik Tok, as well as professional sites like LinkedIn, access to co-workers' personal and professional lives has increased significantly (Murtaza et al., 2023). This heightened access to others may well increase the frequency, valence, content, and depth of workplace gossip. Additionally, gossip content and a gossiper's behaviour are likely to be influenced by individual's personality traits such as extroversion, neuroticism, agreeableness (Penney et al., 2011). Future research could focus on the applicability of the model on gossipers with different personalities, backgrounds, and life experiences. Addressing these areas further could significantly improve and refine the gossip model.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Ethics Approval



Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTECH)

19 March 2024
Rachel Morrison
Faculty of Business Economics and Law

Dear Rachel

Re Ethics Application: **24/3 Navigating workplace conversations: The impact of information access and confidentiality expectations**

(Exploring the impact of information access and confidentiality expectations on organisational conversations)

Thank you for your responses to AUTECH's conditions.

Your ethics application has been approved for three years until 19 March 2027.

Standard Conditions of Approval

1. The research is to be undertaken in accordance with the [Auckland University of Technology Code of Conduct for Research](#) and as approved by AUTECH.
2. All public facing documents must have the AUTECH approval number and be of a high standard of spelling and grammar. Dates on the Information Sheet(s) and Consent Form(s) must be consistent.
3. Any amendments to the project must be approved by AUTECH prior to being implemented.
4. A progress report is due annually on the anniversary of the approval date.
5. A final report is due at the expiration of the approval period, or, upon completion of project.
6. Any serious or adverse events must be reported to AUTECH, this includes unforeseen issues that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project.
7. AUTECH grants ethical approval only. You are responsible for obtaining management permission for access from any institution or organisation at which your research is being conducted and you need to meet all ethical, legal, public health, and locality obligations or requirements for the jurisdictions in which the research is being undertaken.

The application number and title need to be referenced on all correspondence related to this project.

All forms are available online <http://www.aut.ac.nz/research/researchethics>

For any enquiries, please contact ethics@aut.ac.nz
(This is a computer-generated letter for which no signature is required)

The AUTECH Secretariat
Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee

Cc: jjq7428@autuni.ac.nz

Appendix B – Participant Information Sheet



Participant Information Sheet

Date Information Sheet Produced:

17/03/2024

Project Title

Exploring the impact of information access and confidentiality expectations on organisational conversations.

An Invitation

Hello! My name is Sreenika Vidyavathi and I am inviting you to participate in a research project that is part of my Master of Business degree at Auckland University of Technology (AUT). The research examines informal conversations at workplace.

What is the purpose of this research?

In our study, we aim to explore workplace conversation dynamics, focussing on how employees' access to information and organisation's confidentiality expectations from the employee, influences conversation behaviour. By participating in this research, you contribute valuable insights to enhance our understanding of workplace communication patterns. Undertaking this research is necessary for my Master of Business degree.

What are the benefits of this research to the wider community?

Our research aims to offer better understanding of informal conversations at workplace. This knowledge is crucial to improve organisational practices. The results of the research can also be used for fostering transparent communication and overall well-being in organisations.

How was I identified and why am I being invited to participate in this research?

We identified potential participants through different channels, including initial recruitment by advertising via LinkedIn. Additionally, you may have been informed about this study by other participants and have expressed interest by contacting the researcher. You have been invited to participate as you are currently employed in a service sector and work at least 20 hours per week.

How do I agree to participate in this research?

If you are willing to participate in the research, please reply to the invitation email. You will then complete a participant consent form that will be provided before the interview. Your participation in this research is voluntary (it is your choice) and whether or not you choose to participate will neither advantage nor disadvantage you. You are able to withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose to withdraw from the study, then you will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to you removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of your data may not be possible.

What are the inclusion and exclusion criteria for participants?

- a. Participants must be employed for at least 20 hours a week in a service sector.
- b. Participants must have good level of spoken English.
- c. Participants will have been employed in their role for at least 1 year.

What will happen in this research?

If you decide to participate in the research, I will arrange an interview with you at your convenience, either through teams or skype. The interview will last for approximately 30 minutes, during which I will be asking you a series of questions about your experiences of informal workplace conversations. The interviews will be recorded for accuracy during analysis. All the transcripts will be kept confidential, accessible only to me and my supervisor.

At the end of the interview, you may be given an option to inform potential participants about the study and invite them to contact the primary researcher if they are interested in participating. No participant details need to be shared with the researcher. If interested, participants themselves can share their details by contacting the researcher.

What are the discomforts and risks?

I expect minimal potential for discomfort or risk during the study.

How will these discomforts and risks be alleviated?

Any information you provide is strictly confidential and will be kept between you, me, and my research supervisor. All data will be anonymised and only I will know your identity. The final research report will not contain any of your identifying information. At any point during the interview, you can choose not to answer a question or to end the interview.

What are the benefits?

By participating in the research, you will gain insights on factors influencing informal conversations at workplace. I will be able to complete my dissertation for my Master's degree and inform my future career.

How will my privacy be protected?

Any information you provide will be kept confidential. The interview transcripts will be stored in two factor authenticated cloud space and will be accessed only by me and my primary supervisor. The final report will not have any identifying information of you or of anyone you might mention during your interview. Your contact details will be stored securely and will not be shared.

What are the costs of participating in this research?

Participation will require approximately 30 minutes of your time. You will not incur any financial costs by taking part in the research. The interview will be conducted at your convenience either online or in person.

What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?

You will have 2 weeks to respond to the invitation. If I don't receive any response, I will send you a reminder after 2 weeks to confirm whether you wish to participate.

Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?

If you wish to receive feedback on the results, you can tick the box on the consent form. I will email you the summary of the findings of the research on completion. If you wish to review your transcript, you can tick the box on the consent form. I will email you the transcript and you will have one week to review them.

What do I do if I have concerns about this research?

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor, Associate Professor Rachel Morrison, rachel.morrison@aut.ac.nz.

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary of AUTECH, ethics@aut.ac.nz, (+649) 921 9999 ext 6038.

Whom do I contact for further information about this research?

Please keep this Information Sheet and a copy of the Consent Form for your future reference. You are also able to contact the research team as follows:

Researcher Contact Details:

Primary Researcher – Sreenika Vidyavathi Sugumar Babu

Email ID – sreenika.sugumar.babu@aut.ac.nz or vidyavathisreenika@gmail.com

Phone - 0274316984

Project Supervisor Contact Details:

Primary Supervisor – Rachel Morrison

Email - rachel.morrison@aut.ac.nz

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 19 March 2024, AUTECH Reference number 24/3.

Appendix C – Consent form



Consent Form

Project title: *Exploring the impact of information access and confidentiality expectations on workplace informal communication.*

Project Supervisor: *Associate Professor Rachel Morrison*

Researcher: *Sreenika Vidyavathi Sugumar Babu*

- I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated 17 March 2024.
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.
- I understand that notes will be taken during the interviews and that they will also be audio-taped and transcribed.
- I understand that data I share will be kept for up to 6 years.
- I understand that taking part in this study is voluntary (my choice) and that I may withdraw from the study at any time without being disadvantaged in any way.
- I understand that if I withdraw from the study then I will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to me removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of my data may not be possible.
- I am confident I have a good enough level of spoken English to participate in this research.
- I agree to take part in this research.
- I wish to receive a summary of the research findings (please tick one): Yes No
- I wish to review transcripts from my interview (Note: if you tick this box, I will email your transcripts to you once these are complete. You will have one week to review them. If I do not hear from you after one week, I will assume you are okay with me analysing your transcripts as they are.): Yes No

Participant’s signature:

Participant’s name:

Participant’s Contact Details :

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.....

Date:

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 19 March 2024 AUTEK Reference number 24/3