GOSSIP AS INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION: SOCIAL FUNCTIONS AND CONTEXT-DEPENDENT EFFECTS

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Abstract

Gossip is a ubiquitous form of interpersonal communication, whose functions and consequences are more complex than its predominantly negative perception suggests. The purpose of this narrative review is to synthesize the literature on gossip as a mechanism of social communication, with an emphasis on its social functions, psychological consequences, and implications for interpersonal relationships and well-being. The analysed literature indicates that gossip can facilitate the transmission of reputation-related information, the monitoring of social norms, mate selection, and cooperation. At the same time, its effects are not uniformly beneficial. Gossip can contribute to social connection and, under certain conditions, to stress regulation, but it can also be associated with social exclusion, reputational damage, diminished trust, and negative consequences for psychological well-being. An important distinction exists between the anticipation of gossip—which can stimulate prosocial behaviours through concern for one's reputation—and the experience of becoming the target of negative gossip, which can damage relationships and undermine the motivation to cooperate. Overall, the literature supports a contextual perspective on gossip: its effects depend on the accuracy and valence of the information, the communicator's motivation, the relationships among participants, and the social context. Therefore, gossip should not be considered inherently beneficial or inherently harmful, but rather an ambivalent social mechanism whose consequences result from the interaction between individual, relational, and contextual factors.

Keywords: *gossip, interpersonal communication, social functions, psychological well-being, interpersonal relationships, social behaviour*.

1. INTRODUCTION

Gossip is a widespread form of interpersonal communication that plays a complex role in social life. Although it is frequently associated with negative judgments, malicious intentions, and harmful consequences, the literature shows that gossip cannot be reduced to an exclusively negative form of communication. Rather, it is a behaviour through which individuals convey evaluative information about absent people and manage their social relationships (Dores Cruz et al., 2019; Dores Cruz et al., 2021). This ubiquity raises the question of why gossip remains a stable component of human interaction, despite its often negative perceptions.

An important explanation lies in its social functions. Gossip is used to convey information about reputation and socially relevant behaviours, facilitating the evaluation of potential interaction partners, the identification of norm violations, and decision-making regarding cooperation (Nieper et al., 2022). From this perspective, gossip can function as an informal mechanism of social regulation, helping to deter undesirable behaviours and maintain cooperation within groups (Molho et al., 2020; Pan et al., 2024).

However, the effects of gossip depend on its content, accuracy, and motivation. Prosocial and accurate gossip can support the transmission of reputation-related information, while inaccurate or self-serving gossip can distort perceptions and undermine cooperation (Nieper et al., 2022; Testori et al., 2022). Furthermore, the consequences differ depending on the individual's position: the anticipation of gossip can stimulate behavioural self-regulation, while the experience of being the target of negative gossip can lead to exclusion and subsequent negative social effects (Nieper et al., 2022).

From a psychological perspective, gossip has ambivalent effects. It can be associated with both emotional arousal and social connection, as well as variations in stress depending on individual predispositions (Rudnicki et al., 2023). At the same time, exposure to negative gossip is correlated with social exclusion, decreased trust, and reduced psychological safety, particularly in

organizational contexts (Song & Guo, 2022; Dores Cruz et al., 2019).

Overall, the literature presents gossip as a context-dependent phenomenon, whose effects vary depending on the accuracy of the information, the sender's motivation, and the relationships between individuals (Dores Cruz et al., 2019; Nieper et al., 2022; Testori et al., 2022). The purpose of this narrative review is to synthesize the evidence regarding the social functions, psychological consequences, and impact of gossip on interpersonal relationships, in order to better understand the conditions under which it contributes to or affects individual and social well-being.

2. GOSSIP AS INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

2.1. Conceptualizing Gossip

Gossip can be understood as a form of interpersonal communication through which individuals convey evaluative information about another person who is not present in the interaction. This characteristic distinguishes it from direct communication and highlights its fundamentally social nature. The information conveyed through gossip can be positive, negative, or neutral and can serve different functions depending on the communicator's intention and the context of the interaction (Dores Cruz et al., 2021). Therefore, the term "gossip" should not be used as a synonym for negative or malicious information.

Such a conceptualization is important because the literature highlights the existence of distinct forms of gossip. Positive gossip can convey favourable information about a person and contribute to the formation of positive impressions, while negative gossip can convey information about behaviours considered problematic or about violations of social norms. The motivation behind the communication is also a relevant dimension. Individuals may share information to protect other group members, to obtain social information, to reduce emotional tension, or for social interaction, but also to damage another person's reputation or to improve their own social standing (Dores Cruz et al., 2019).

This diversity makes it more appropriate to understand gossip as a context-dependent communicative behaviour, the consequences of which cannot be determined solely on the basis of the label "gossip." The content of the information, its accuracy, and the communicator's motivation can significantly alter the effects on the individuals involved (Nieper et al., 2022; Testori et al., 2022).

2.2. Gossip in Everyday Social Interaction

Gossip is a common component of everyday social interactions. Research conducted in natural settings indicates that it occurs primarily in informal, face-to-face interactions. In a field study based on reports of everyday experiences, most instances of gossip occurred in face-to-face conversations and dyadic interactions, suggesting that gossip is integrated into ordinary interpersonal communication and is not a behaviour limited to exceptional social situations (Dores Cruz et al., 2021).

A particularly relevant aspect is the relatively balanced distribution of the valence of the information conveyed. The aforementioned study identified episodes of positive, negative, and neutral gossip, thereby challenging the view that gossip is, by definition, associated with defamation or criticism of an absent person (Dores Cruz et al., 2021). In this sense, gossip can be viewed as an informal channel through which individuals construct and update their representations of other people and their social environment.

At the same time, information conveyed through gossip can influence how recipients evaluate the people about whom they receive information. Research synthesized by Nieper et al. (2022) indicates that information about others' reputations can be used in social decision-making, including in the selection of cooperation partners. Consequently, even a seemingly informal conversation can have consequences for how individuals are perceived and for subsequent social relationships.

2.3. Positive and Negative Gossip

Distinguishing between positive and negative gossip is essential to understanding its consequences. Positive gossip can help reinforce

favourable impressions and convey information about prosocial behaviours. In contrast, negative gossip can convey information about rule violations, selfish behaviours, or individuals perceived as potentially unreliable for cooperation (Dores Cruz et al., 2019; Nieper et al., 2022).

However, negative valence alone is not sufficient to determine the effect of gossip. The accuracy of the information is a key factor. Accurate information about a person's behaviour can help recipients make more informed social decisions, while inaccurate information can lead to erroneous assessments of reputation and, consequently, to inappropriate social decisions (Nieper et al., 2022). Similarly, Testori et al. (2022) emphasize the importance of prosocial motivation and truthfulness in determining the effects of gossip on cooperation.

3. SOCIAL FUNCTIONS OF GOSSIP

Gossip can fulfil a number of social functions that go beyond the simple informal transmission of information about absent individuals. The literature reviewed suggests that it can contribute to the transmission of reputational information, the monitoring of social behaviour, the maintenance of norms, and the facilitation of cooperation. From this perspective, gossip can be viewed as an informal mechanism through which individuals construct representations of others and adjust their behaviour based on the information available in their social environment (Nieper et al., 2022; Pan et al., 2024). The relationship between these functions and their potential psychological and interpersonal consequences is illustrated in Fig. 1.

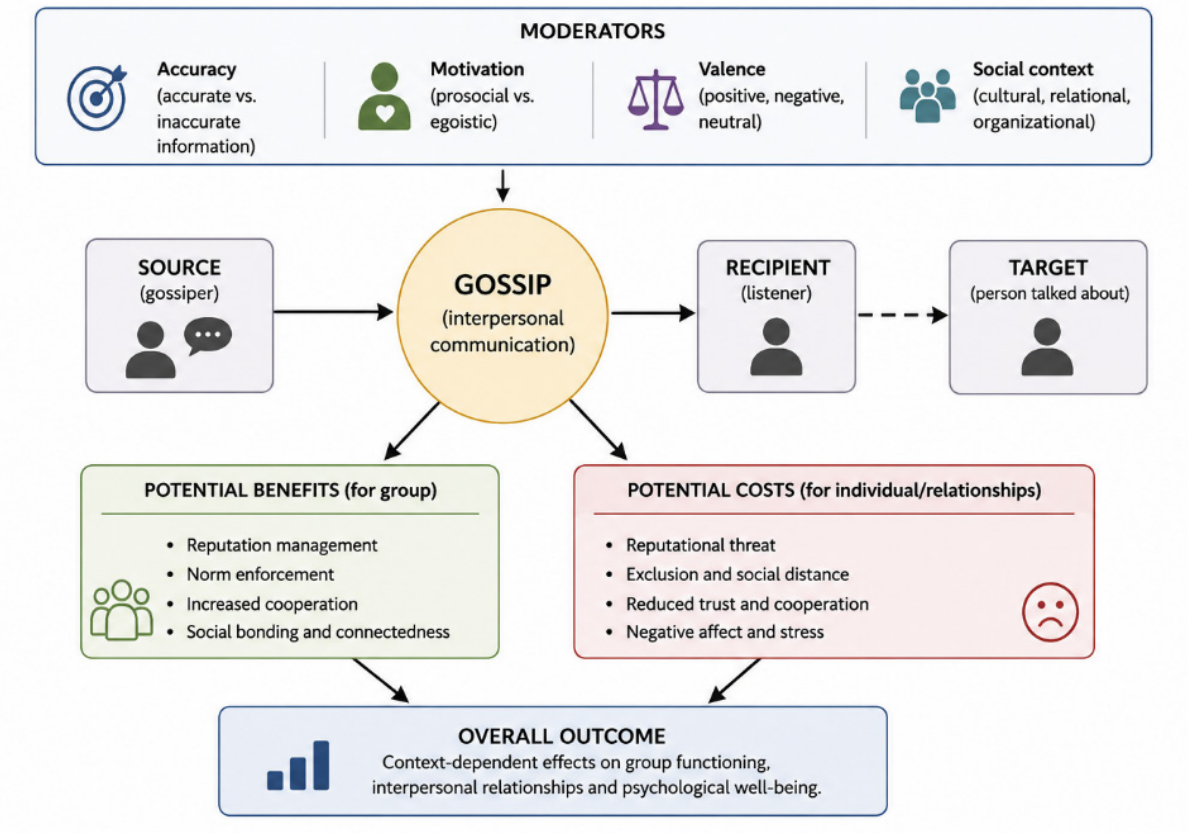


Fig.1. A contextual model of the effects of gossip

(*Note. The model illustrates how accuracy, motivation, valence, and social context may shape the effects of gossip as interpersonal communication. Depending on these factors, gossip may contribute to reputation management, norm enforcement, cooperation, and social connectedness, while also being associated with reputational threat, exclusion, reduced trust, stress, and negative affect.) (Author's own illustration, created with the assistance of AI)*

3.1. Reputation and Information Transmission

One of the most important functions attributed to gossip is the transmission of information about individuals' reputations. In social interactions, people do not always have direct access to the past behaviour of potential partners. Reputations are, therefore, often private, fragmented, and imperfectly aligned among members of a group. Gossip can help mitigate this problem by indirectly conveying information about a person's behaviour to individuals who did not directly observe the situation in question (Righi & Takács, 2022; Nieper et al., 2022; Giardini & Vilone, 2016).

Through this information, recipients can better assess whether a person is a trustworthy partner for cooperation. Thus, gossip can influence partner selection and subsequent social decisions. In this regard, the information conveyed is not only relevant to the image of the person being discussed but can also have consequences for the structure of relationships within the group (Nieper et al., 2022).

However, the effectiveness of this function depends on the quality of the information. If gossip is inaccurate or used for strategic purposes, reputations can be distorted. Therefore, the transmission of information through gossip can support cooperation only if recipients can obtain sufficiently credible information about the behaviour of others (Nieper et al., 2022; Testori et al., 2022). This observation is important because it demonstrates that the mere existence of a communication channel does not guarantee positive social outcomes.

3.2. Social Norms and Indirect Punishment

A second important function of gossip is related to the maintenance of social norms. By discussing behaviours considered selfish, inappropriate, or unacceptable, members of a group can convey information about what is considered acceptable and about the consequences of violating norms. Gossip can thus become a form of social monitoring and indirect sanctioning (Molho et al., 2020; Nieper et al., 2022).

Unlike direct confrontation, indirect communication can reduce the costs and risks associated with conflict. Research on responses to norm violations suggests that people may resort to gossip when direct confrontation is perceived as risky, particularly when the person who violated the norm holds a position of power or might react aggressively (Molho et al., 2020). In these situations, gossip allows a negative evaluation to be conveyed to other group members without directly exposing the speaker to retaliation.

This function may explain why gossip is sometimes conceptualized as a form of indirect social punishment. It can damage the reputation of the person who violated a norm and, consequently, reduce that person's opportunities to benefit from the cooperation of other group members. In this sense, gossip can help regulate behaviour even in the absence of formal sanctioning mechanisms (Nieper et al., 2022; Pan et al., 2024).

3.3. Cooperation and Social Regulation

The link between gossip and cooperation is one of the most widely discussed social functions of this behaviour. Some research suggests that the possibility of becoming the subject of gossip may prompt individuals to be more mindful of their own behaviour and to adopt more prosocial behaviours. From this perspective, reputation acts as an incentive for norm compliance and cooperation (Nieper et al., 2022).

However, recent literature indicates that the effect of gossip on cooperation is not automatic. Testori et al. (2022) show that gossip promotes cooperation especially when it is prosocially motivated and conveys accurate information about the behaviour of others. This finding calls into question the idea that any form of gossip serves a beneficial function for the group. Gossip motivated by self-interest, false information, or reputation manipulation may, on the contrary, undermine the mechanisms through which social information facilitates cooperation.

The experimental results also support the idea that gossip can play a distinct role from formal punishment. Under certain conditions, the possibility of using gossip was associated with higher levels of cooperation, and its effects persisted even after the possibility of gossiping was eliminated, suggesting that the experience

of reputational monitoring can influence subsequent behaviour (Dores Cruz et al., 2019). By comparison, material sanctions can produce immediate effects on behaviour but may also entail costs for the group.

The main social functions of gossip, along with their potential positive and negative consequences and the conditions influencing these effects, are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Social Functions and Potential Consequences of Gossip

Function / role of gossip	Potential positive effect	Potential negative effect	Key condition
Reputation information	Helps individuals evaluate potential interaction and cooperation partners	May distort reputation when information is inaccurate	Accuracy of information
Social norm monitoring	May discourage norm violations	May lead to indirect social punishment or exclusion	Social context and motivation
Cooperation	May encourage prosocial and cooperative behaviour	May reduce trust toward gossipers	Prosocial motivation and truthfulness
Social connectedness	May strengthen interpersonal bonds	May create in-group/ out-group divisions	Relationship between participants
Emotional regulation	May provide social connection or coping for some individuals	May be associated with stress or negative affect	Individual differences
Reputation threat	—	May produce exclusion, reduced self-esteem, and psychological distress	Being the target of negative gossip

4. PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF GOSSIP

Gossip can have different psychological implications depending on the individual's role in the interaction, the motivation behind the communication, and the social context in which it occurs. The reviewed literature indicates that engaging in gossip can be associated with experiences of social connection and emotional regulation, but also with physiological arousal, stress, or negative psychological consequences, particularly when the individual becomes the target of negative gossip. Therefore, the psychological effects of gossip must be analysed from a contextual perspective, avoiding the assumption that it uniformly produces either benefits or costs.

4.1. Potential Benefits: Coping and Social Connectedness

One perspective on the psychological function of gossip is based on the idea that sharing information about others can help form and maintain social connections. By sharing common information and evaluations about group members, gossip can create a sense of closeness and belonging among conversation participants (Rudnicki et al., 2023). However, psychophysiological evidence suggests that this function should be interpreted with caution. Rudnicki et al. (2023) did not identify clear evidence that gossip represents a direct equivalent of the forms of affiliation observed in other primates, but they highlighted a combination of physiological arousal and the subjective experience of social connection. With regard to stress, the reduction in cortisol associated with gossip-based interaction was more pronounced in individuals with a higher predisposition to engage in gossip, suggesting that it may function as a coping strategy for certain individuals, though it does not represent a universal mechanism for stress reduction (Rudnicki et al., 2023). Thus, gossip may serve as a coping mechanism for some individuals, but the available evidence does not support generalizing this effect to the population as a whole.

4.2. Potential Costs: Stress, Exclusion, and Negative Affect

In contrast to these potential benefits, gossip can have negative psychological consequences, particularly for people who become the target of negative evaluations. Research in organizational contexts indicates that exposure to negative gossip may be associated with a decline in well-being and an increase in psychological distress. In a study conducted among employees, negative gossip in the workplace was associated with a decrease in subjective well-being, a relationship explained, at least in part, by increased psychological distress (Cheng et al., 2023).

These effects can be understood through the social nature of gossip. When a person learns that they have become the subject of negative evaluations, this information can pose a threat to their reputation and their sense of belonging to the group. Research on negative gossip in the workplace also indicates associations with social exclusion and a decline in organizational self-esteem (Song & Guo, 2022). Consequently, the experience of being the target of gossip can affect not only how the individual is perceived by others but also how they assess their own position within the group. The literature on organizational gossip offers an integrative perspective, distinguishing between the consequences for the sender, the receiver, and the target. This research suggests that gossip should not be analysed exclusively from the perspective of the person conveying the information, as its effects can extend beyond the immediate relationship between participants and impact the social climate and group relationships (Sun et al., 2023).

Overall, the evidence suggests that the psychological implications of gossip are bidirectional and context-dependent. For some people, participating in gossip may be associated with social connection and certain forms of coping, while for those who are the subject of negative gossip, it may represent a source of reputational threat, exclusion, and psychological distress. Therefore, the role of gossip in psychological well-being cannot be assessed independently of the individual's position within the interaction and the nature of the information being communicated.

5. GOSSIP AND INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

The effects of gossip are not limited to the person who conveys or receives the information, but extend to the relationships among members of a group. Because gossip involves conveying evaluations of people who are not present, it can alter how individuals are perceived and, consequently, how others choose to interact with them. Thus, the relationship between gossip and interpersonal relationships can be analysed through processes such as reputation formation, trust, social inclusion, and cooperation (Dores Cruz et al., 2021; Nieper et al., 2022).

5.1. Trust and Social Inclusion

One of the ways in which gossip can influence interpersonal relationships is by altering a person's reputation. Research conducted in everyday contexts shows that information conveyed through gossip can change the recipient's evaluation of a person and influence the value the recipient assigns to a relationship with that person. In particular, receiving positive information about a person's honesty can increase the value placed on the relationship with that person, suggesting that gossip can contribute to the formation and maintenance of social networks (Dores Cruz et al., 2021).

This function may also be relevant to trust. Since individuals cannot always directly observe the behaviour of others, social information received through intermediaries can serve as a basis for interpersonal decisions. Righi and Takács (2022) highlight the problem of private and fragmented reputations within social groups and propose the view that communication and insights into others' reputations can help overcome the difficulties caused by incomplete information. From this perspective, gossip can facilitate the coordination of relationships even when individuals lack direct information about a potential partner's behaviour.

However, this same ability to shape reputation can have negative effects on social inclusion. When the information shared is negative, the person in question may lose social status or be excluded from certain interactions. This

mechanism is evident in organizational contexts, where exposure to negative gossip has been associated with workplace exclusion and reduced organizational self-esteem (Song & Guo, 2022). These findings suggest that gossip can affect an individual's relationship not only with the person conveying the information but also with the broader social group.

5.2. Cooperation and Relational Consequences

The relationship between gossip and cooperation is particularly relevant because cooperation requires trust and the ability to anticipate others' behaviour. Experimental research indicates that the mere possibility of becoming the target of gossip can increase cooperative behaviour. Wu et al. (2016), for example, showed that introducing the possibility of reputation transmission through gossip increased contributions to public goods, and participants exposed to this condition subsequently exhibited higher levels of trust and reciprocity, even after the possibility of gossiping was eliminated.

However, the benefits for cooperation must be distinguished from long-term relational consequences. Dores Cruz et al. (2019) highlight this ambivalence through the difference between the immediate effect of gossip on behaviour and its consequences for relationships among group members. Constructive and accurate criticism may prompt the targeted individual to make a greater effort to protect their reputation; however, the experience of being the target of gossip may subsequently reduce their willingness to cooperate with the people who spread the information.

This tension highlights the complexity of the effects of gossip: at the group level, it can help identify problematic behaviours and safeguard cooperation, while at the interpersonal level, it can damage the relationship between the target and other group members. Furthermore, the effects may vary depending on the cultural and organizational context, and the findings of Song and Guo (2022) suggest that negative gossip may be associated with mechanisms of exclusion and with a deterioration in one's perceived standing within the organization.

Therefore, the relationship between gossip and interpersonal relationships is characterized by a tension between inclusion and exclusion. Gossip can strengthen relationships when it facilitates the exchange of relevant information, trust, and coordination, but it can damage relationships when used to harm someone's reputation, manipulate information, or marginalize a person. In this regard, the relational consequences of gossip depend not only on the content of the message, but also on each participant's position within the social network and the function that communication serves within the group.

6. DISCUSSION

The literature analysed in this narrative review supports a contextual perspective on gossip as a form of interpersonal communication. Although gossip is frequently associated with negative behaviours, the available evidence indicates that it can fulfil important social functions, including conveying information about reputation, monitoring norms, and facilitating cooperation. At the same time, these same mechanisms can produce negative consequences when the information is inaccurate, the motivation for communication is predominantly individual, or the person targeted is subject to social exclusion (Nieper et al., 2022; Testori et al., 2022). Theoretical and computational models of the evolution of cooperation suggest that the spread of information about others' behaviour can contribute to the stability of cooperation in large groups, as it allows individuals to update their reputations and avoid partners who exhibit free-riding behaviour (Pan et al., 2024). Similarly, the reputational perspective proposed by Righi and Takács (2022) highlights that social information can partially compensate for the difficulty of directly observing the behaviour of all members of a group. These perspectives provide a framework for understanding the social value of gossip, without, however, implying that it automatically produces beneficial effects.

A central theme that emerges from the reviewed literature is the importance of how information is conveyed and used. The social value of gossip appears to depend on the interplay between the accuracy of the information,

the communicator's motivation, and the relational context. Testori et al. (2022) show that gossip promotes cooperation, particularly when it is prosocially motivated and conveys true information, suggesting that the informational function of gossip must be distinguished from the interpersonal intention underlying the communication. Negative information can serve a social function when it alerts group members to problematic behaviour, but it can become harmful when it is exaggerated, inaccurate, or used to damage a person's reputation (Nieper et al., 2022). Therefore, gossip cannot be evaluated solely on the basis of its positive or negative valence, but must be analysed in relation to the quality of the information, the purpose of the communication, and the relationships among the participants.

Another important implication concerns the difference between the effects of gossip on the group and the consequences for the individual targeted. At the collective level, the possibility that reputational information will circulate can encourage compliance with norms and cooperation, while at the individual level, the experience of becoming the target of negative gossip can lead to exclusion, reduced self-esteem, and strained relationships with others (Song & Guo, 2022). This distinction is also relevant to the interpretation of the findings by Dores Cruz et al. (2019), who suggest that accurate negative criticism can help regulate behaviour through concern for one's reputation, whereas the person who learns they have been the target of gossip may subsequently become less willing to cooperate with those who spread the information. Wu et al. (2016) provide a similar example of the reputational effect on cooperation, showing that the possibility of information being spread through gossip can increase contributions to public goods and have subsequent effects on trust and reciprocity. Thus, the same communication can serve a preventive function for observers and, simultaneously, a threatening one for the person targeted. This asymmetry helps explain the ambivalent nature of gossip and illustrates why its effects cannot be assessed separately from the individual's position within the group.

With regard to psychological well-being, the literature also suggests that the effects of gossip are context-dependent and influenced by individual characteristics. Rudnicki et al. (2023) identified a combination of physiological arousal and the subjective experience of social connection, and the effects on stress varied depending on an individual's predisposition to engage in gossip. In contrast, exposure to negative gossip can pose a threat to one's reputation and social belonging and may be associated with psychological distress and reduced well-being (Song & Guo, 2022; Cheng et al., 2023). Overall, these results support an interpretation of gossip as an ambivalent social mechanism, whose consequences result from the interaction between the informational function of communication, the communicator's motivation, the accuracy and valence of the message, the relationships among participants, and the social context. Therefore, the available literature does not support classifying gossip as an exclusively beneficial or harmful phenomenon, but rather points to the need for a contextual approach that distinguishes between its functions for the group, its consequences for relationships, and the individual experience of the person concerned.

7. LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The reviewed literature presents several limitations that must be taken into account when interpreting the social and psychological implications of gossip. First, the studies employ a variety of methodological approaches, ranging from observations and self-reports of everyday experiences to controlled experiments and computational models. For example, Dores Cruz et al. (2021) analysed gossip in natural contexts using the Experience Sampling Method, while other studies employed psychophysiological experiments or agent-based simulations (Rudnicki et al., 2023; Testori et al., 2022; Pan et al., 2024). This diversity enhances the literature's relevance for understanding the phenomenon but makes it difficult to directly compare results.

A second limitation stems from variations in social and cultural context. The consequences of gossip may depend on the structure of relationships, the ability to choose conversation partners, and group norms. The models by

Righi and Takács (2022) and Pan et al. (2024) highlight the importance of social network structure and the way reputational information circulates among individuals. Furthermore, findings on negative gossip in organizations suggest that processes of exclusion and social evaluation may be influenced by cultural context (Song & Guo, 2022).

Future research should, therefore, more systematically combine laboratory methods with studies conducted in natural settings and use longitudinal designs to clarify the distinction between immediate and long-term effects. Research is also needed that simultaneously examines motivation, the accuracy of information, relationships among participants, and the social context, as these variables appear to determine whether gossip fosters cooperation or produces negative consequences (Testori et al., 2022; Nieper et al., 2022). In this regard, future research should treat gossip not as a uniform behaviour, but as a communicative phenomenon whose effects depend on the interaction of multiple social and psychological factors.

8. CONCLUSIONS

Gossip is a complex and ubiquitous form of interpersonal communication, the implications of which go beyond the informal transmission of information about absent individuals. The literature analysed in this narrative review indicates that gossip can fulfil important social functions, contributing to the transmission of reputation-related information, the monitoring of norms, and the facilitation of cooperation (Dores Cruz et al., 2019; Nieper et al., 2022; Pan et al., 2024). At the same time, it can have negative psychological and relational consequences, particularly when the information is inaccurate, the motivation is predominantly self-interested, or the person in question is exposed to social exclusion (Song & Guo, 2022; Testori et al., 2022).

Overall, the evidence supports a contextual perspective on gossip. It can contribute to the functioning of groups when it facilitates the exchange of relevant information and encourages prosocial behaviours, but it can harm well-being and interpersonal relationships when used to manipulate reputations or marginalize others. Therefore, understanding gossip requires simultaneously considering the content of the information, its accuracy, the communicator's motivation, the relationships among participants, and the social context. Such a perspective allows us to move beyond the simplistic dichotomy of "beneficial gossip" versus "harmful gossip" and highlights the ambivalent nature of this social behaviour.

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