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Personal Information Sharing: Essays on Antecedents and Consequences of Gossip

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"Gossip is what no one claims to like, but everybody enjoys."

Joseph Conrad

Understanding when and why people gossip, i.e., exchange personal information about others, is the topic of this PhD dissertation. Gossip is an extremely common behavior in which nearly everyone engages. Despite the general unfavorable connotation, gossip has long been considered by academic researchers as a fundamental human behavior. Some scholars consider it at the core of human social relationships and society (Dunbar 2004). In this dissertation, with the support of my PhD advisors, I develop a re-conceptualization of gossip and investigate both the antecedents and the consequences of this phenomenon.

In the first essay, I focus on the antecedents of gossip and investigate why do people gossip more about some subjects than others. I do this by focusing on the relationships between the members of the gossip-triad: the sender (A), the absent subject (B) and the receiver (C). I propose that gossip can be explained by the sender's relationship with the subject of the content (who the information is about). The desire to share information is a combination of two opposing concerns that vary based on the type of relationship with the absent subject: the perceived guilt associated with sharing something presumably private versus the perceived excitement of sharing juicy and secret content. Building on Emerson's (1962) Power-Dependence theory, I distinguish between different types of (A-B) relationships that vary across two dimensions: mutual influence and balance. Mutual influence is the overall degree of reciprocal influence in a relationship, while balance is how the influence between the two parties is distributed. Across five studies, I show that personal information about famous people (as opposed to other people) is most commonly share because consumers experience lower guilt and higher excitement. In addition, the propensity to

share gossip about celebrities remains higher even varying the relationships with the audience (A-C and B-C).

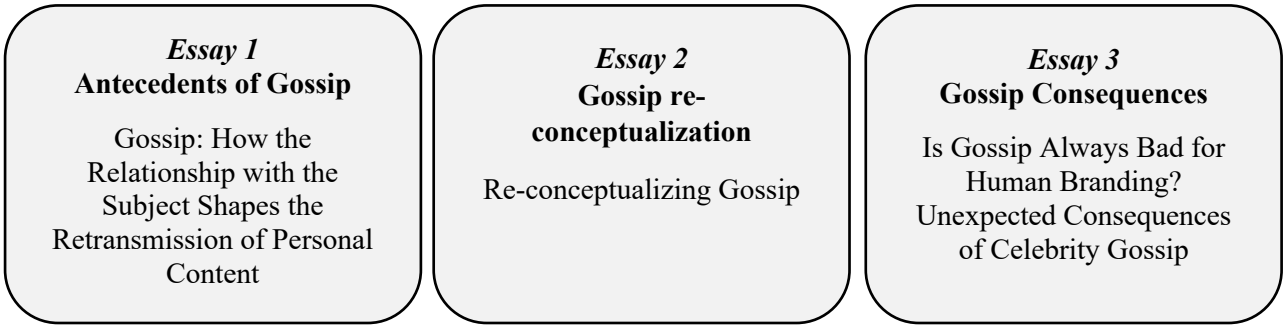
The second essay focuses on re-conceptualizing gossip. Consumers and researchers have a general idea what gossip is, but across the gossiping literature, there is lack of a clear definition and conceptualization of the behavior. The mismatch between practical relevance and research has been caused by a lack of conceptual clarity on what gossip is and is not. Following MacInnis' (2011) guidance on conceptual development, we perform a *systematic* and a *conceptual* review of existing literature and research on gossip. In the *systematic* review, we analyze all the empirical and theoretical evidence in the gossip domain to describe what is known and more importantly what remains still unexplained about gossip. We provide a set of recommendations centering on definition clarity, contexts and methods that we suggest as ways for researchers to evaluate more critically what gossip is and provide more meaningful investigation of this behavior.

In the *conceptual* review, we describe, map, and define the gossip entity by identifying the fundamental gossip characteristics. We provide a new comprehensive definition of gossip rooted in the extant literature and based on the *gossip-triad*. Gossip happens when a *sender* (A) *communicates*, often in an evaluative way (positive or negative), *personal* information about an *absent third party* (B) to a *receiver* (C). Indeed, gossip emerges as a relational phenomenon that is manifested via the *gossip-triad* (sender A, absent subject B, and receiver C). We also propose a grounded theory research design, developed with the goal to validate our re-conceptualization and further investigate the role and perspectives of the members of the *gossip-triad*. Overall, we provide guidance to future researchers on which are the elements to consider when identifying and studying gossip.

The third essay of my dissertation focuses on celebrities. In this paper, I take a complete marketing perspective and investigates the gossip industry, which constitutes a big market that remains largely unexplored by marketing research. To do this, I focus on the key subjects in this large business which are, in fact, celebrities. I start from the premise that gossip is foundational in

the relationships that famous individuals build with their fans, as it is one of the primary sources of information that consumers use to build their image of a celebrity and relate to the human brand. By being in control of personal information, celebrities can strategically self-disclose information themselves, or let others diffuse personal content about them without intervening (i.e., via gossip). Across a set of four studies, I compare information delivered via gossip vs. delivered via self-disclosure and find that negative information that comes directly from the celebrity is more likely to be shared by consumers compared to information received from a third-party (i.e., gossip). Despite this, and somewhat unexpectedly, negative information delivered via gossip (vs. self-disclosed) increases consumer's liking and appreciation of the celebrity, especially as an endorser. In this paper we aim at offering useful insights for human brands and their managers on how to deal with personal information sharing and gossip.

The figure below graphically represents the outline of the dissertation.



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Gossip:

How the Relationship with the Subject Shapes the Retransmission of Personal Content

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ABSTRACT

Why do people gossip more about certain people than others? In this research, we look at when and why content of a personal nature is more or less likely to be shared. We do so by focusing on the relationships between members of the gossip-triad: the sender (A), the absent subject (B) and the receiver (C). We propose that gossip (retransmitting personal content about an absent third party), can be explained by the sender's relationship with the subject of the content (B), whom the information is about. We distinguish between different *types* of relationships that vary across two dimensions: mutual influence and balance. Mutual influence is the overall degree of reciprocal influence in a relationship, while balance is how the influence between the two parties is distributed. We show the propensity to share information is driven by a combination of two opposing concerns that vary based on relationship type: the perceived guilt associated with sharing something presumably private and the perceived excitement of sharing personal content. Across five studies, we show personal information about famous people (as opposed to non-famous people) has the highest propensity to be shared. We find the prevalence of gossip about famous people is driven by consumers experiencing lower guilt and higher excitement. Further, we show the prevalence of gossip about famous people is consistent across different types of audiences.

Keywords:

Gossip, Information retransmission, Interpersonal relationships, Celebrities, Personal content

People love to talk about the personal details of other peoples' lives. As much as 65 percent of people's conversations is "social chatter," intended either to convey the type of person someone is or provide information about a wider network of social acquaintances (Dunbar, Marriott and Duncan 1997). After talking about one's self, talking about absent third parties is the most common topic of conversation (Emler 1990). Moreover, Robbins and Karan (2019) find people dedicate an average of 52 minutes of their daily conversations to gossiping (i.e., sharing information about an absent third party). Further, a considerable amount of the content shared in people's lives is not self-generated, but instead simply passed on. Consider that, on Twitter, retweets (sharing a message originally posted by another user) grew from less than 5 percent to 25-30 percent of all tweets between 2010 and 2014 (McGregor 2014).

Gossip constitutes one of the most frequent conversational topics, ostensibly because individuals need information about those around them to be part of a complex social environment (Foster 2004). Additionally, much of what appears in both the social and mainstream media concerns the personal lives of others, and a large portion of this personal content deals with celebrities. To illustrate this point, we asked to a sample of 100 mTurk workers (M_{age}= 34.52, 60% female) to report the extent to which the gossip they are exposed to concerns any of 10 different types of people (e.g., friends, acquaintances, family members and famous people). Unequivocally, celebrities and politicians are the subjects that respondents reported gossiping about most. Is it really the case that consumers gossip more about celebrities than other individuals, and, if so, why?

Combining people's fascination with celebrities' lives with their proclivity for talking about others, the focus of this research is on what leads consumers to share gossip. We define gossip as the transmission of personal information about absent third parties, often in an evaluative way (positive or negative). We operationalize gossiping throughout this work as the Propensity to Share personal information (PTS). Note also that our focus is on interpersonal relationships involving members of what we refer to as the gossip-triad, the sender (A), the absent subject (B) and the receiver (C). We investigate what makes the sender A prone to share personal content about subject

B to receiver C. First, we consider the relationship between the sender and the subject of the gossip (A-B). We then examine the relationship between the sender and the receiver (A-C), while simultaneously varying the relationship between the receiver and the subject (B-C).

In examining the interpersonal relationships, we begin by applying Emerson's (1962) Power-Dependence theory to distinguish between different types of relationships between the sender and absent subject (A-B). Power-Dependence theory suggests that relationships vary across two dimensions: mutual influence and balance. Mutual influence describes the overall degree of reciprocal influence in a relationship, while balance describes how that influence is distributed between the two parties. We propose that the type of relationship determines the emotional response (guilt and/or excitement) one expects to experience when sharing personal information about someone else. In anticipating our results, we find the pervasiveness of celebrity gossip is due, at least in part, to the fact that gossiping about celebrities is expected to induce little guilt and more excitement, relatively speaking, than gossiping about other people.

Next, we focus on the third actor in the gossip triad, which is the receiver (C). We thus investigate the role of the receiver or audience (C) by examining the extent to which our results depend on (A-C) and (B-C) relationships. We investigate how gossip intentions vary by audience type (strong relationships vs. weak relationships) and audience size (small vs. large). We find personal information is shared more when the subject (B) is a celebrity than when other individuals, regardless of audience type; in other words, we observe no effect of varying audience type or audience size.

The ultimate goal of this research is to broaden our understanding of information sharing by exploring retransmission behavior with respect to personal information about other people. This research makes a theoretical contribution by detailing how the nature of the relationship between individuals affects whether one of those individuals will share personal information about the other. Further, it shows the relevance of gossip, and particularly celebrity gossip, as a tool to establish and

maintain interpersonal relationships between individuals. This research also makes a substantive contribution by helping explain why celebrity gossip is so pervasive in society.

In the sections that follow, we begin by reviewing the relevant literature on gossip. Next, we discuss Emerson's (1962) Power-Dependence theory and develop a typology of relationships involving the subject of the gossip before turning to the role of the receiver. We outline our main predictions related to the perceived excitement and anticipated guilt associated with gossip. A series of five experiments document people's proclivity to gossip more about celebrities than other people, despite different audiences. We conclude by synthesizing the findings and highlighting their contribution to theory.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

We begin the literature review by focusing first on the general concept of gossip. We summarize the most important findings in the literature while highlighting how the relational dimension of gossip, expressed in the gossip-triad (sender A, subject B and receiver C), has too frequently been overlooked. We revise existing research on the members of the gossip triad and clarify the contribution of this research to the gossip domain.

A Definition of Gossip

Despite the negative connotations typically associated with gossip, academic scholars have long considered gossiping a fundamental human behavior (Stirling 1956, Ben-Ze'ev 1994). Across several studies, scholars have estimated that anywhere between 65% (Dunbar, Duncan, and Marriott 1997) and 80% (Emler 1994) of people's daily conversations involves gossip. Consider that, in a 2-week diary study, Goldsmith and Baxter (1996) find gossip is the most frequently enacted speech event. More recently, with the advent of social media, the relevance and prevalence of gossip has been exacerbated by the considerable amount of personal information that individuals disclose on these platforms. According to one national survey in the U.S., 91% of adults believe people have

"lost control" over how their personal information is gathered and used by others (Pew Research Center 2014).

Despite an abundance of research on gossip, there appears to be a lack of consensus on what gossip (or gossiping) means exactly. Scholars studying gossip have defined gossip in different ways, perhaps expressed best by Foster (2004) who writes: "we all 'know' what gossip is, but defining, identifying, and measuring it is a complex enterprise for practical investigation" (p. 80). In 1991, Eder and Enke refer to gossip as any informal talk that is about someone who is not present. Bergmann (1993) provides a narrower definition of gossip, describing it as the passing of information about the personal affairs of others. In contrast, Dunbar (2004) defines gossip broadly as any conversation about both social and personal topics. Wert and Salovey (2004) include an appraisal component when defining gossip as "evaluative talk about absent others" (p. 122). Finally, in what is the most comprehensive recent work on gossip, Foster (2004) defines gossip as follows: "in a context of congeniality, gossip is the exchange of personal information (positive or negative) in an evaluative way (positive or negative) about absent third parties" (p. 83).

Across different definitions, some recurring elements stand out.[1] First, gossip is typically conceived of as an *act*. Colloquially, "gossip" refers to both the content being shared and the *act* of personal information retransmission. Throughout this research, however, we focus on gossip as an action, specifically, the exchange of personal information.

Like Bergman (1993) and Foster (2004), we consider the content of information exchanged when gossiping as *personal*. By *personal*, the content should be considered self-relevant, disclosing and intimate by at least one of the parties involved in gossip triad. The presence of personal content is important in distinguishing gossip from other types of information exchange that fall under the umbrella of Word of Mouth (WOM), which refers broadly to the passing of information from person to person. WOM researchers have distinguished between information retransmission (similar

[1] In a related project, we conduct a review of the gossip literature with the aim of providing a clearer and more comprehensive conceptualization. The distinct elements identified here are a summary of the outcome of that work. Further details are available from the authors.

to gossip) and information generation (De Angelis, Bonezzi and Peluso 2012), but have generally overlooked the role of individuals and personal content in favor of brands and products. Personal information is particularly important with respect to gossip because the content is considered valuable and is an authentic representation of the subject's inner thoughts, feelings and internal states. Moreover, people who share personal content with others by gossiping typically consider that content precious, because it is private information not readily obtainable from external sources.

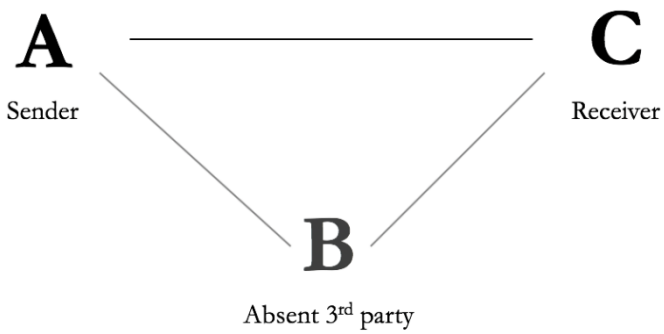
One of the most important aspects of gossip, shared by most definitions, is that the subject of the information exchange is not part of the conversation (i.e., is *absent*). The *absence* of the subject of the gossip constitutes a fundamental element; it highlights the fact that the subject likely does not want others discussing their personal life. It is this aspect that drives the negative stigma, and likely the fascination, associated with gossiping. In an age of social media and online communication, we consider *absent* to mean the information is neither directed to, nor intended to be seen by, the subject. The presumption is that when individuals discuss the intimate details of someone else's life, they are sharing information that is intrinsically valuable, while engaging in a behavior that posits a moral question. The absence of the third party can increase the excitement associated with even the most trivial content, because the sharer and the receiver are free to express any thoughts about the content without the subject being aware and directly affected.

Lastly, gossip often has an *evaluative* component (Wert and Salovey 2004, Foster 2004), which implies that the content of the exchange can be *both positive and negative*. Positive content involves favorable news about others, for example, "Anna is getting married," while negative content involves unfavorable news about others such as, "Anna is getting divorced." While Kurland and Pelled (2000) investigated implications of positive and negative gossip in the context of the workplace, others have argued that gossip is often *neutral* in valence, meaning that the content of the information exchanged is personal, but without a specific significance. In fact, Robbins and Karan (2019) find that the majority of gossip tends to be neutral, and, when it is evaluative, negative gossip is more common than positive gossip.

Putting these elements together, for the purpose of this research, we define gossip as the *exchange* of *personal information*, about *absent third parties* often in an *evaluative way* (positive or negative). One fundamental concept we should elaborate on upfront is that gossip requires the presence of three main actors, a sender (A) who shares personal information about an absent subject (B), the target of the conversation, with a receiver (C). The three actors together constitute a social triad (Peters and Kashima 2007). The concept of a social triad was introduced by Simmel (1950) at the end of the nineteenth century. It refers to a group of three people and constitutes one of the simplest human groups that can be studied. The interactions among the members of the triad vary depending on the individuals involved and on the relationships between these individuals.

Figure 1 below provides a graphical representation of the gossip-triad. Subject B, the absent third party, constitutes the main subject of gossip exactly because this person is not present in the A-C exchange of information. Investigating what types of relationships characterize the linkages in the gossip-triad is extremely important because interesting questions emerge. What is the difference between two friends who discuss the intimate details of another close friend (A, B, and C are all friends and share the same relationship structure) and two acquaintances who share the latest celebrity gossip (A and C have a different relationship structure compared to B)? What kinds of emotional responses are driven by different interpersonal relationships? The goal of this research is to explore exactly how different relationships among the individuals involved in a gossip-triad shape their behavior as it pertains to gossiping.

Figure 1 – The Gossip Triad



Gossip motives and characteristics

Previous research on gossip has tended to focus on the overall motivations behind gossiping concentrating mostly on sender (A)'s motivation to engage in this behavior. Beersma and Van Kleef (2012) identified four social motives underlying gossip, including: influencing others negatively, providing information, giving enjoyment, and establishing and maintaining group standards (e.g. Ben-Ze'ev 1994, Foster 2004, Dunbar 2004). Other research has pointed out different motives for gossiping, including helping reinforce norms shared in groups, providing a tool for indirect social comparisons, increasing intimacy and the strength of social bonds, clarifying group membership, and improving perceptions of the power and status of the gossiper (Ben-Ze'ev 1994, Dunbar 2004, Foster 2004, Nevo, Nevo and Derech-Zehavi 1993, Rosnow 1977). Additionally, Baumaister, Zhang and Vohs (2004) propose a cultural learning function of gossip, such that it helps individuals learn about how to behave effectively within the complex structures of human social and cultural life. Work by Feinberg, Willer, Stellar and Keltner (2012) shows individuals engage in "prosocial gossip" when they intend to punish an antisocial act with the goal of protecting others.

Shifting to the subject of gossip, person (B), prior research has shown people tend to be more interested in information about same-sex others and, in general, are more interested in positive information about friends than negative information about enemies (McAndrew, Bell and Garcia 2007). This pattern manifests itself when sharing information as well; people tend to prefer to spread positive information about allies and negative information about rivals. We should point out that research that takes the perspective of the receiver (C) is scarce, one exception is the work by Wu et al. (2018) who investigate employees' emotional reactions to hearing workplace gossip.

To summarize, research on gossip has focused primarily on motivations to engage in this behavior with a general focus on the sender (A), with less attention given to other individuals involved (B and C). Further, gossip is a social behavior that people use within specific relationships to build and maintain interpersonal linkages. It is then surprisingly that little research investigates

gossip through the lens of interpersonal relationships (e.g. McAndrew 2007). More specifically, an aspect that has been generally overlooked in the gossip literature is the role of the relationships between members of the gossip-triad. A notable exception is work by Martinescu, Janssen and Nijstad (2019) that examines gossip dynamics in a workplace context and focuses on hierarchical power relationships between the sender and the receiver.

In the current research, we contribute to filling the gap in the literature with respect to gossip and interpersonal relationships first by investigating the relationship between the sender (A) and the subject of the gossip (B), before exploring the role of receiver (C). Second, we look at the relationship between the sender and the receiver (A-C), while varying the receiver's relationship with the subject (B-C). Ultimately, we demonstrate that gossip – retransmitting personal information about an absent third party, often in an evaluative way – depends on the relationship between the sender and the subject of the content. We provide evidence that there are certain types of relationships (e.g., the one that consumers have with celebrities) that make gossiping more common. In the next section, we develop our typology of interpersonal relationships.

Interpersonal Relationships in the Gossip Triad

The main objective of this research is to investigate the importance of interpersonal relationships within the gossip-triad. We begin by developing a typology of relationships between the sender (A) and the subject of the shared content (B). We then focus on the receiver (C), discussing the role of low and high dependence relationships and small versus large audiences.

Relationship Between the Sender and the Subject (A-B): Power Dependence Theory

A priori, we believe the relationship a person has with the subject of gossip affects the likelihood of transmission of personal content. Thus, we look at interpersonal relationships through the lens of Power-Dependence theory, originally developed by Emerson (1962). Power-Dependency theory was framed with reference to Social Exchange theory (Thibault and Kelley

1959, Emerson 1976) viewing interpersonal exchange (in this context, the exchange of personal information about others) as a social behavior that may result in different social and economic outcomes. Social Exchange theory emphasizes that these exchanges have the potential to generate, under specific circumstances, high-quality relationships (Cropanzano and Mitchell 2005). The role of gossip in social exchange has already emerged in the conceptualization provided by Rosnow (1997), which defines gossip as "an instrumental transaction in which A and C trade small talk about B for something in return" (p. 158). Following Heath et al. (2001), Social Exchange theory can explain different functions of gossip including enjoinment, companionship, and influence.

Emerson's (1962) Power Dependence theory offers us a suitable framework for identifying different relationships among the individuals involved in the context of gossip as the theory was specifically developed to investigate relationships between individuals. Also, importantly, Emerson's theory conceives "power" as a property of the social relation, not as an attribute of the subject. More specifically, the concept of power as used by Emerson refers to relational influence. Hence power, in Emerson's (1962) view, does not have a hierarchical interpretation. As noted by Lawler and Yoon (1996), the power-dependence approach to relationships adopts a nonzero-sum conception of structural power which allows the total or average power in a relation to vary depending on the reciprocal influence of the parties involved. For this reason, we follow Emerson's conceptualization by focusing on relationships that are characterized by a non-hierarchical nature, meaning that there is no external entity which determines if one has the power to determine what someone else will do. Instead, we focus on power as interpersonal influence (i.e., dependence), which is the ability to affect what others will do (e.g., the willingness to conform to the expectations of others, see Bearden, Netemeyer and Teel 1989).

Power-Dependence theory has been applied to describe and investigate various types of dyadic and small group relationships in different non-hierarchical contexts, including boy scout patrol groups, close and distant supplier-dealer dyads or negotiations between peer students involving gift-giving (Emerson 1964, Dwyer and Gassenheimer 1992, Lawler and Yoon 1996).

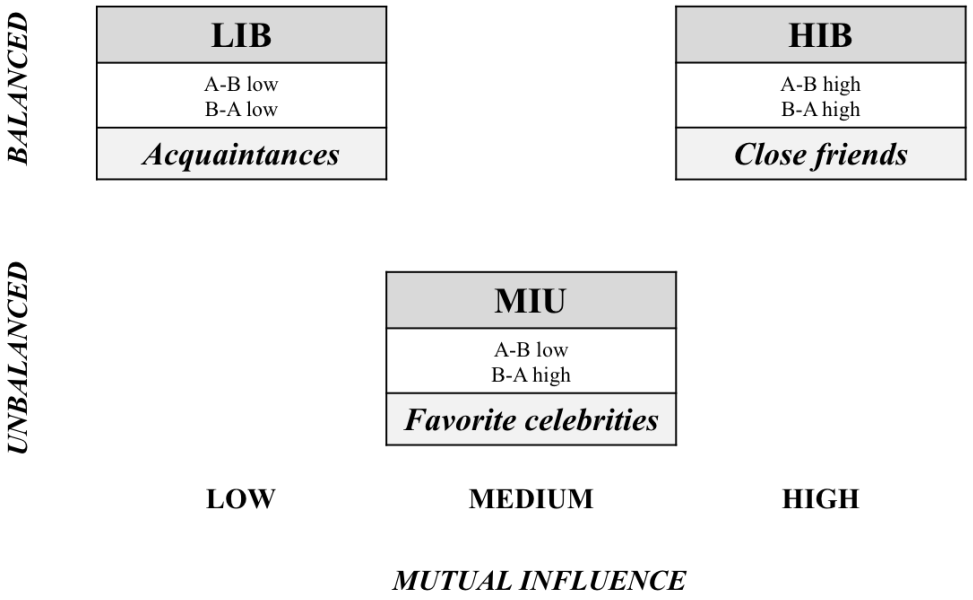
We are going to use this theory because it allows us to describe and classify the types of relationship that can exist between a sharer and an absent third party (A-B relationship) in the context of gossiping. According to Emerson (1962, p. 32) "social relations commonly entail ties of mutual dependence between the parties." Therefore, relationships vary across two dimensions: *mutual dependence* and *balance*. *Mutual dependence* is represented by the sum of reciprocal mutual influences (A's influence on B plus B's influence on A). A relationship can be characterized by a high (low) reciprocal influence when both parties strongly (weakly) influence on each other. There is balance in a relationship if both parties influence each other in the same way. *Balance* is therefore represented by differences in influence between the two parties. A relationship is balanced when both parts strongly influence on each other, or conversely, neither party has influence on the other. It is unbalanced when one party influences the other much more than vice versa. Note that Emerson's concept of mutual influence is in alignment with Granovetter's (1973) explanation of tie strength, described as "the combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie" (p. 1361). In addition, Emerson's concept of balance is in line with the notion of "relational symmetry" described by Kelley et al. (1983). According to these authors, "the interconnections from A to B may be similar to those from B to A (symmetry) or different (asymmetry), these differences in their strength and frequency relate to differences in degree of dependence, amount of influence, and so on" (p. 35).

Using Emerson's concepts of mutual influence and balance, we distinguish between three archetypes of A-B relationships. When both parties influence each other a lot, the relationship is characterized by a high level of mutual influence; in addition, the overall level of reciprocal impact is balanced, as both parties strongly influence each other in a very similar way. One example is the relationship that individuals usually build with close friends. When both parties influence each other very little, the relationship is characterized by a low level of mutual influence. Again, the overall level of reciprocal impact is balanced, as both parties weakly influence each other in the same way. One example is the relationship that individuals usually build with acquaintances. For

simplicity and brevity, we label High Influence and Balanced relationships as *HIB* and Low Influence and Balanced relationships as *LIB*.

Of course, the levels of reciprocal influences can vary a lot, but the third type of relationships that we are interested in is the one in which one party has more influence over the other party. In this case, there is one party whose influence is much stronger than the other's influence. Therefore, the overall level of reciprocal influence, which is the sum of the two, is medium. The relationship is now unbalanced, as the parties do not influence each other in the same way. This is the typical relationship that consumers build with celebrities. We label this type of relationship *MIU* for being Medium in Influence and Unbalanced. Figure 2 below provides a graphical representation of our typology.

Figure 2 – Typology of Interpersonal Relationships



The MIU relationship is one in which a consumer has an imbalanced relationship and they are the weaker party. This relationship is characterized by a medium level of reciprocal influence as the overall investment of the two parties is high on one side but low on the other. We consider this relationship particularly interesting as it exemplifies the category of relationships between ordinary

people and a famous person or celebrity. There are potentially other examples of MIU relationships (e.g., spiritual leader, boss), however, in this research we focus on celebrities for two main reasons. First, they represent a clear exemplar of an MIU type of relationship because the imbalance in reciprocal influence is straightforward. The case of a boss usually implies a hierarchical relationship where one party has the power to make the other do something but might have either a very weak or a very strong relational influence. Second, celebrities, as human brands, represent an important type of actor in our society (Furedi 2010), and understanding the consequences of their relationships with their fan base is very important. According to Moulard, Garrity and Rice (2015, p. 173) there is a "need to better understand what factors influence consumer perceptions of the celebrity brand and how to manage these perceptions."

We believe that investigating information retransmission in the case of relationships with celebrities is particularly compelling because of the nature of the interactions between the two parties. We recognize that, in out theorizing, we consider only the situation in which the influence of B over A is high and the one of A over B is low; but the opposite might be also true. This kind of unbalanced relationship, where the sender has more power over the absent subject is out of the scope of our investigation. Nevertheless, we cover an example of this kind of unbalanced relationship in the empirical section.

One of our goals with this research is to provide an explanation as to why it is so common for consumers to seek out and share personal information about celebrities' lives. We predict that different relationship types have different effects on the propensity to share information (i.e. gossiping) about the subject. More specifically, we expect relationships characterized as MIU (the prototype being an ordinary person with a celebrity of interest) to be the type of relationship for which the propensity to share personal information is the highest.

According to our theorizing, personal content about famous people is perceived as very exciting and sharing generates less guilt. The presence of these two emotions is associated with the type of relationship that the sender has with the individual being gossiped about, which is ultimately

driven by reciprocal influence and balance. Differences in influence and balance in the relational network generate differential effects with respect to how "morally right" and "thrilling" gossip is perceived to be. In fact, the stronger the power of the sender to influence the subject, the bigger the consequences of an action will be. At the same time, the more the absent third party is important to the subject, the more interesting sharing information about the subject will be. Drawing from literature on information sharing (Berger 2014) and emotions (Tangney, Stuewig and Mashek 2007), we now discuss these two conflicting mechanisms in more depth.

The Role of Guilt and Excitement

Our principal prediction is that the type of relationship a sharer has with the subject whose personal information is being shared helps determine whether or not that person will share the content (i.e., engage in gossiping). Our intuition is built on the idea that the propensity to share personal content about someone else depends on the opposing forces of (1) how guilty ones feels sharing, and (2) how exciting sharing the content is perceived to be, as these emotions depend on the relational network.

Guilt and Excitement

Guilt arises when someone behaves in a way that causes a violation of the moral order for which people take responsibility (Duhachek, Agrawal and Han 2012). Guilt has been defined as a negative self-conscious, "moral" emotion that hinders socially undesirable behaviors (Tangney et al. 2007) by focusing individuals on what they "should do" in a given context (Sheikh and Janoff-Bulman 2010) and increasing their willpower (Hoch and Loewenstein 1991). We posit that whenever individuals consider sharing personal information about someone else who is absent in the conversation, they evaluate the morality of the action and assess how guilty they would feel by doing it.

We predict that guilt increases as the level of mutual influence the consumer perceives in a relationship is greater, such that sharing intimate information about one's best friend is considerably more guilt-inducing than sharing the same information about a celebrity. In particular, the more the sender has the power to influence the subject, the higher the expected guilt associated with sharing something private. This happens because the stronger the relationship, the higher the cost of breaking the relational boundary and consequently the more guilt-inducing is gossiping. Guilt implies a fear of being punished for an action, and this fear depends on how much power an individual has to harm the other party. Therefore, when sender A has more influence over the absent subject B, these are the relationships for which the guilt of gossip will be highest. Conversely, when the influence of A over B is low, the thought of gossiping will induce less guilt.

Excitement is a subjective experience of energy mobilization leading to arousal (Mehrabian and Russell 1974). This energy activation has been shown to affect action related behaviors such as helping others (Gaertner and Dovidio 1977) or responding faster in negotiations (Brooks and Schweitzer 2011). Berger (2011) shows physiological arousal can explain information transmission because of the motivation elicited by this excitatory state, while Berger and Milkman (2012) demonstrate that content evoking high-arousal emotions – both positive and negative – is more viral overall. We expect personal content, by its nature, to be emotionally arousing. In terms of relationships, news about a close friend or a favorite celebrity that consumers perceive as highly influential individuals, *ceteris paribus*, should be more exciting. Notably, when the relationship is unbalanced and the other party has more power, sharing personal information about the more powerful party might be especially exciting. In particular, we expect that the more influence the subject B has over the sharer A, the more exciting is gossiping about subject B.

Summing up, we expect relationships characterized by medium mutual influence and an imbalance (MIU - celebrities) to be the category for which the propensity to share personal information (i.e., gossiping) is the highest. This is because the content is generally perceived as

more exciting and sharing is characterized by less guilt. This is the kind of relationship most people have with celebrities.

Relationship with the Receiver (A-C): Audience size and Audience type

So far, we have focused on the relationship between the sender and the subject (A-B) of personal information. We introduced a typology of interpersonal relationships and hypothesized that people share more gossip about MIU relationships (e.g., celebrities) because of high excitement and low guilt. But what is the role of the audience? In other words, how does the relationship between the sender and the receiver (A-C) shape the propensity to share content (gossiping)? In the second part of this paper we shift our attention to the receiver and explore people's propensity to engage in celebrity gossip based on the nature and size of the audience. By definition, gossip involves the presence of three distinct actors, and, in order to better understand the phenomenon under investigation, we must take into account the role of the audience (C). Indeed, the audience plays a critical function in shaping gossip and a failure to consider C will result in overlooking all of the roles in the gossip-triad.

We know from the gossip literature that people have different social motives to gossip, which may include interpersonal influence and friendship creation (Stirling 1956). When we look at the relationship between the sender A and the audience C, we consider the fact that gossip can improve the speaker's status, as the sender is seen as the "gatekeeper" of important information (Guerin and Miyazaki 2006). Second, gossip can increase and strength the intimacy of social bonds (Dunbar 2004, Bosson, Johnson, Niederhoffer and Swann 2006), because of shared emotions between individuals (Heath et al. 2001).

We believe that gossiping expresses its strongest power as a relational tool when it is about MIU subjects (e.g., celebrities) compared to other subjects because it offers to A and C an easy and common theme for discussion. Famous individuals offer an excellent topic to initiate a conversation because they constitute what is known as "common ground." According to Clark and Brennan

(1991), “common ground” denotes the collection of shared information, or mutual knowledge, beliefs, and assumptions that are necessary for two people to interact. When initiating a conversation, speakers make assumptions about what the listener may know about the topic (Hilliard and Cook 2016), and celebrities, because of their popularity, are likely to be known by a large number of individuals. We therefore hypothesize that consumers will be more prone to share information about celebrities when confronted with an audience composed of unfamiliar people.

But this may not only be a “common ground” driven by popularity story. We expect celebrities to be the topic of conversation even when the audience is composed of friends, who are equally aware of celebrities and other members of the social group. We think that this occurs because sharing gossip helps in strengthening already established bonds. Therefore, a priori, we expect people to share personal information about celebrities more when speaking with friends, again because a lack of anticipated guilt and a non-existent fear of being punished for engaging in immoral behavior. By exploring the role of the audience C, we provide an additional explanation for the prevalence of celebrity gossip in the marketplace. We believe that people use this topic as a tool to initiate conversations with unfamiliar audiences and strengthen already established relationships with friends. Figure 3 below synthesizes our complete conceptual framework. Table 1 below summarizes all our predictions.

Figure 3. Conceptual Framework

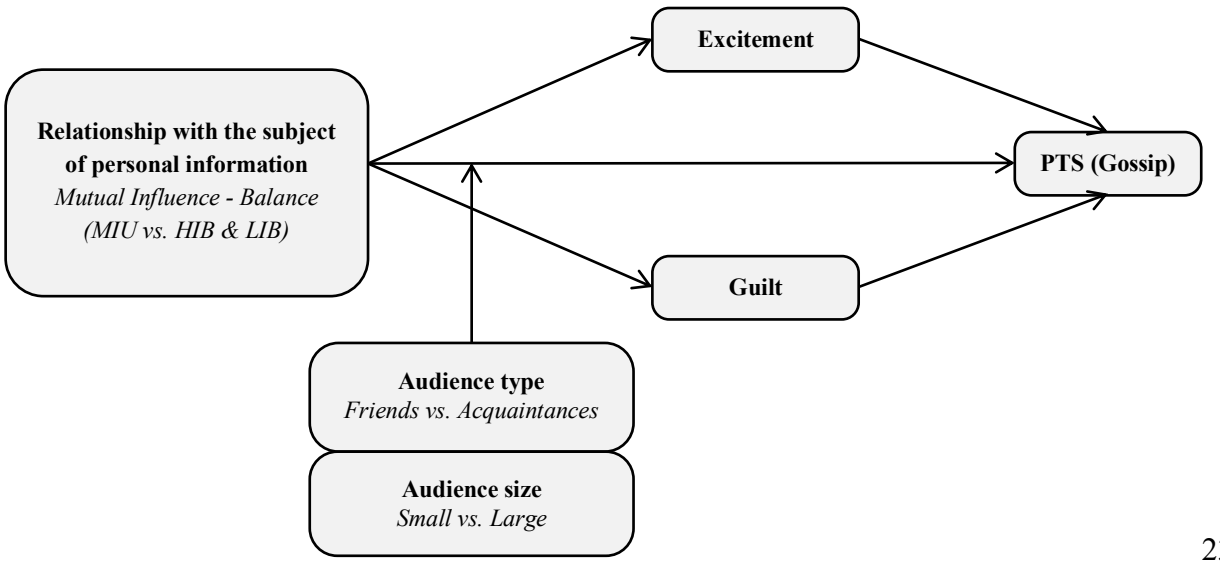


Table 1: Summary of Predictions

Relationship with the subject	Variable	Value	Gossip *Propensity to Share*
HIB *(e.g., close friend)*	Anticipated guilt	High	Low
	Perceived excitement	High	
LIB *(e.g., acquaintance)*	Anticipated guilt	Low	Low
	Perceived excitement	Low	
MIU *(e.g., favorite celebrity)*	Anticipated guilt	Low	High
	Perceived excitement	High	
Relationship with the subject	**Audience type**	**Size**	**Gossip** ***Propensity to Share***
MIU *(e.g., favorite celebrity)*	Acquaintances	Large	High
	Acquaintance	Small	High
HIB *(e.g., close friend)*	Acquaintances	Large	Low
	Acquaintance	Small	Low
Relationship with the subject	**Audience type**	**Size**	**Gossip** ***Propensity to Share***
MIU *(e.g., favorite celebrity)*	Friends	Large	High
	Friend	Small	High
HIB *(e.g., close friend)*	Friends	Large	Low
	Friend	Small	Low

EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

We test our predictions across five studies. Studies 1 to 3 focus on the relationship between the sender and the absent third party (A-B), studies 4 and 5 focus on the relationship between the sender and the audience (A-C) and explore different relationships between the audience and the absent subject (B-C). In study 1, we provide empirical support for our independent variable, the type of relationship one can have with the subject of personal information. Across two phases, we validate our typology, which is based on mutual influence and balance. In study 2, we provide initial evidence for the presence of a significant difference in gossip – or propensity to share personal information of an absent third party (PTS) – based on the relationship with the subject of the content. Study 3 replicates the main results of study 2, while documenting the role of the two mediating variables, guilt and excitement.

In studies 4 and 5, we shift our attention to the relationship with the receiver and vary audience type (high vs. low mutual influence) and audience size (small vs. large). Study 4 provides evidence of a significant difference in propensity to share (PTS) personal information about celebrities compared to close friends when the audience constitutes a small versus large group of acquaintances (people who are not known well). Study 5 replicates the design of study 4, but includes close friends (people who are known well) as the audience. Across studies 4 and 5, we provide support for a "common ground" role of gossip, thus ruling out a simple "popularity" explanation.

STUDY 1

In study 1, we test whether individuals do indeed perceive different degrees of mutual influence and balance with respect to the archetypal relationships that we identified in our conceptualization. The study is split into two phases. In phase A, we show how different relationship descriptions serve as plausible representations of different relationship types. Additionally, we explore how participants actually define the individuals with whom they have relationships. Using the results from phase A, we move into phase B to test specific relationship labels (e.g. a close friend, a work acquaintance) on a different sample to further validate our typology.

Phase A

Design and Procedure

The sample in phase A consisted of 100 mTurk workers (M_{age} = 35.63, 50% female). The study design is within-subjects, such that each participant identified, described and rated four different relationships based on idiosyncratic perceptions of mutual influence and balance. In this phase, we employ four relationship descriptors intended to manipulate different levels of mutual influence and balance. For example, the descriptor for the HIB relationship is: "Please think about a

person whom you have known *for long time* and should be the recipient of a *large amount* of your attention. Your relationship with this person should also *involve* intense emotions *on both parts*. Accordingly, there should be a relative *balance* in how *this person's behavior* affects *your* life and how *your behavior* affects *this person's* life" (all four descriptors are included in the Appendix).

For completeness, we also included another type of relationship, one that is medium and unbalanced but in the opposite direction, such that the respondents had more influence than the other party. We label this MIU2. After reading each description (the order was randomized), participants were asked to write down the name of a person who meets this description and to indicate what type of relationship they have with the person. They were asked to further write about their relationship with that person.

Next, we asked them to focus on the person they identified and reply to two one-way influence measures built from Emerson's (1962) Power-Dependence theory on a scale that goes from 1 (minimum value) to 7 (maximum value). The measures included "To what extent do you think that you have the power to influence this person?" from 1-7 and "To what extent do you think that this person has the power to influence you?", also from 1-7. From these two measures, we calculated the level of mutual influence (the sum), and balance (the difference). For mutual influence, higher numbers reflect a higher degree of reciprocal influence (the score range goes from 2 to 14). With respect to balance, the measure has value zero in the case of a perfectly balanced relationship, positive values in the case of an unbalanced relationship with more power on the respondent side, and negative values with more power on the selected person side (the score range goes from -6 to +6).

Results

We analyzed the data using a Mixed-effects REML regression using Stata. Table 2 reports the means and the results of pairwise comparisons among the four different relationship descriptors,

adjusted with Tukey HSD correction for multiple comparisons (we report the full analysis in the Appendix).

Table 2. Means and results of pairwise comparisons across conditions

Condition	Mutual Influence mean	Balance mean
HIB	11.22 (.28)[a]	-0.08 (.26)[a]
LIB	5.77 (.28)[b]	0.07 (.26)[a]
MIU1	9.90 (.28)[c]	-0.86 (.26)[b]
MIU2	8.02 (.28)[d]	1.62 (.26)[c]

Note: Standard Errors appear in parenthesis
Different superscripts (letters a, b, and c) denote averages that differ significantly at $p < .01$ (Tukey adjustment).

We observe that HIB relationships have the highest level of mutual influence followed by MIU1 and MIU2. The lowest level emerges for LIB. All means are significantly different from each other. We observe the presence of three levels of mutual influence: high, close to 14; medium, close to 8; and low, close to 2. The two balanced relationships (HIB and LIB) do not differ between each other and are both significantly more balanced (value close to 0) compared to the unbalanced ones (MIU1 and MIU2), which are unbalanced in different directions. Phase A provides initial evidence that people think about different relationships in ways that align with our descriptions and these relationships can be mapped across different levels of mutual influence and balance. Recall that, for each relationship, participants indicated a name and described the type of relationship they had with the person they selected. We used the open-ended responses collected in this phase in moving forward with validating the type of relationship as our independent variable.

Phase B

Design and Procedure

Drawing from Phase A, in the second phase we tested relationship labels (e.g., a close friend of yours) without providing the relationship descriptors employed in Phase A. In other words, here, participants were asked to think about specific people and assess their relationships in terms of

mutual influence and balance. We developed a list of 20 different labels (the full list is included in the Appendix), that included "your favorite celebrity." We conducted this study on a sample of 513 mTurk workers (M_{age} = 35.96, 46% female). The study is based on a within-subjects design such that each participant was asked to write down the name of 10 different individuals drawn from the list of relationship labels. They next replied to the question: "How would you describe your relationship with this person?" Finally, they completed the same measures from phase A, which we use to calculate the level of mutual influence and balance for each relationship.

Results and Discussion

Again, we analyzed the data using a Mixed-effects REML regression. We report all the means and the standard deviations for mutual influence and balance across the 20 relationships in the Appendix. Importantly, we conduct pairwise comparisons of the means across the different relationships and are able to identify three major categories of relationships, High Influence-Balanced (HIB, e.g., close friends and romantic partners), Low Influence-Balanced (LIB, e.g., former partners and acquaintances), and Medium Influence-Unbalanced whereby respondents felt that the other side had more power over them (MIU, e.g., spiritual leader and favorite politician/celebrity). Combining the results of the phases A and B, we settled on the following three relationships descriptions that were paired with an exemplar individual.

> HIB – High Mutual Influence Balance (e.g. close friends, romantic partners)
> "This is a person whom you have known for *long time* and should be the recipient of a *large amount* of your attention. Your relationship with this person should also involve *intense* emotions *on both parts*. Accordingly, there should be a relative *balance* in how *this person's behavior* affects *your* life and how *your* behavior affects *this person's* life."

> LIB – Low Mutual Influence Balance (e.g., acquaintances, ex-partners)

"This is a person whom you have known for *a while* and should be the recipient of *very little* of your attention. Your relationship with this person should (nowadays) involve *no emotions on both parts*. Accordingly, there should be a relative *balance* in how *this person's* behavior affects *your* life and how *your* behavior affects *this person's* life."

MIU1 – Medium Mutual Influence Unbalanced (e.g., celebrities, favorite famous persons)
"This is a person whom you have known for *long time* and should be the recipient of a *large amount* of your attention. Your relationship with this person should also involve *intense* emotions *on your part*. Accordingly, there should be a relative *imbalance* such that this person's behavior affects *your* life more than how *your* behavior affects *this person's* life."

We used these descriptions as manipulations in the subsequent studies.

STUDY 2

Study 2 focuses on the relationship between the sender A and the absent third party B. In this study, we investigate the effect of the type of the relationship identified in study 1 on propensity to share personal information (PTS), which is our operationalization of gossiping. We manipulate the subject of the content using the descriptions generated in study 1 and provide participants with personal information about that individual. We then measure their intention to retransmit the information to a broad audience online.

Procedure

Respondents include 362 mTurk workers (M_{age} = 37.50, 52% female). This study employed a between-subjects design in which each participant read one relationship description and identified a corresponding person from their own life. Participants were asked to either think about a close friend (HIB), a casual acquaintance (LIB), a favorite celebrity (MIU_{celeb}) or a politician (MIU_{polit}),

and we specified this person should be married. After reading the description and having identified one person, participants read the following hypothetical scenario:

> "Imagine that you have heard from a reliable source that *your close friend/this favorite celebrity/this acquaintance/this politician* just filed for divorce, the reason ("legal grounds") being that their spouse had an extramarital affair. In short, they caught their spouse cheating. You were shocked to hear the news and suspect others would be too."

We then measured PTS asking participants "Do you share this information online knowing that it would reach a broad audience?" The two possible responses were "Yes I do" or "No I don't." By using this binary measure, we compelled participants to make an explicit choice, which we consider realistic when it comes to gossiping.

Results and Discussion

We analyzed the propensity to share personal information across the four conditions using Probit regression. Overall, relationship type had a significant effect on the probability of sharing χ^2 (3) = 10.98, p = 0.012. Table 3 reports the margins of predicted probabilities across conditions. Table 4 reports the comparison of the marginal probabilities across conditions.

Table 3. Predicted Probabilities

Condition	PTS
HIB	.13 (.04)[a*]
LIB	.11 (.03)[a]
MIU_{celeb}	.26 (.05)[b]
MIU_{polit}	.24 (.05)[b*]

Note: Standard Errors appear in parenthesis
Different superscripts (letters a and b) denote average probabilities that differ significantly at p < .05, * denotes significant difference at p < .10).

Table 4. Comparison of Predicted Probabilities across conditions

Comparison	Contrast[1]	p-value
MIU_{celeb} vs. MIU_{polit}	.02 (.07)	0.726
HIB vs. MIU_{celeb}	-.13 (.06)	0.026
LIB vs. MIU_{celeb}	-.16 (.06)	0.005
HIB vs. MIU_{polit}	.11 (.06)	0.067
LIB vs. MIU_{polit}	.14 (.06)	0.017
LIB vs. HIB	-.03 (.05)	0.539

Note: Standard Errors appear in parenthesis
1 = Contrasts of adjusted predictions

When participants imagined receiving gossip about their favorite celebrity or a politician (both MIU relationships), they reported a significantly higher intention to retransmit the personal content online (i.e. gossip). These results are in line with our predictions such that information about someone whose relationship is characterized by medium influence and low balance – where the other subject has more power – is more likely to be shared, as compared to other relationships.

We conducted two robustness checks, by running another two studies in which we varied the way we assessed our dependent variable. In one case, we measured retransmission intention using a continuous probability measure (from 0 to 100) assessed using a slider, while in the other case, we used a 7-point scale ranging from 1 = Not at all to 7 = Extremely. In both cases, we replicate the results (details available from the authors). In the next study, we investigate the underlying mechanism by looking at the role of perceived excitement and anticipated guilt.

STUDY 3

Study 3 expands on study 2 by looking at differences in PTS in an offline context. Again, we vary the type of relationship according to mutual influence and balance and measure participant's intention to retransmit content about a third person. We also measure the perceived excitement of the information together with the anticipated guilt associated with sharing in order to investigate process. In this study, we include four relationships, the three identified initially, along with the unbalanced relationship with power on the other side (MIU2).

Procedure

Respondents were 403 mTurk workers (M_{age} = 36.70, 48% female). The study followed a between-subjects design such that each participant saw one of the four relationship descriptions and identified a corresponding person in their lives. In this study, the archetypes (in relation to the respondent) we used included close friend (HIB), ex-partner (LIB), favorite famous person (MIU1) and someone who works for the respondent (MIU2). After reading the description validated in study 1 and writing the name of someone in their own life, participants were provided with the following hypothetical scenario.

> "Imagine now that you are having a cup of coffee together with a person who also knows *person name*. You have just found out that *person name* has a new romantic relationship that you were unaware of. You are shocked about this news and suspect others would be too. You consider sharing this new information with this person..."

Note that in this case we explicitly told the participants that the receiver (C) also knows the absent subject (B). As in the last study, participants indicated their willingness to share the content on a binary PTS measure: "Yes" or "No." Participants then read the following statement "Imagine now that you decided to share the information..."

Excitement. We then asked them to tell us how knowing about this person's new romantic relationship makes them feel in terms of excitement on a 7-point scale (1 = very relaxed, 7 = very excited, and 4 = neither relaxed nor excited) adapted from Noseworthy et al. (2014). We further asked them to rate their level of emotional activation based on sharing the story on a 7-point slider scale (very passive/very active); rate their level of activation sharing the story on different 7-point slider scale (very mellow/very fired up), and rate their level of energy sharing the story on the 7-point scale slider (very low energy level/very high energy level). These measures, adapted from

Yin, Bond and Zhang (2017) and Berger (2014), were combined to create an index of excitement (Cronbach's alpha .89)

Guilt. To measure guilt, participants rated their level of agreement with the following sentence "I would feel guilty about having shared the information." Participants responded on the same agreement 7-point scale. Participants then read the following statement "Imagine that the person finds out that you shared this personal information." Then they rated their level of agreement with the following sentence "I would you then regret sharing the personal information." Participants responded on the same agreement 7-point scale (Pairwise correlation of the two items 0.90).

Finally, participants were asked to write the name of the selected person and reply to the same two one-way power questions assessing the balance and mutual influence used in prior studies.

Results and Discussion

Six participants failed to insert the correct name of the person before assessing the two one-way power measures and were omitted from the analysis[2]. Table 5 reports the results of the ANOVA for mutual influence, balance, excitement and guilt across the four conditions together with the results of the pairwise comparisons of means across conditions (with Tukey adjustment).

Table 5. Means and pairwise comparisons across conditions

Cond	Mutual Inf mean	Balance mean	Excitement mean	Guilt mean
$HIB_{\_close\ friend}$	8.80 (.27)^{a}	-0.20 (.17)^{a}	4.71 (.12)^{a}	4.76 (.18)^{a}
$LIB_{\_ex\text{-}partner}$	4.98 (.27)^{b}	0.17 (.17)^{a}	3.99 (.12)^{b}	3.91 (.18)^{b}
$MIU1_{\_favorite\ celebrity}$	6.47 (.27)^{c}	-2.37 (.17)^{b}	4.77 (.12)^{ac}	4.09 (.18)^{b}
$MIU2_{\_worker}$	7.67 (.27)^{d}	0.80 (.17)^{c}	4.30 (.12)^{c*}	5.19 (.18)^{a}

Note: Standard Errors appear in parenthesis. Different superscripts (letters a, b, c and d) denote averages that differ significantly at $p < .05$, * denotes difference significant at $p = 0.063$ (Tukey adjustment).

[2] Inclusion of these participants in the analysis does not change the results.

In Table 6, we report the margins of the predicted probabilities in PTS across the four conditions. In Table 7, we report the comparison of predicted probabilities in PTS across the four conditions.

Table 6. Predicted Probabilities

Condition	PTS
$HIB_{\_close\ friend}$	0.46 (.05)[a]
$LIB_{\_ex\text{-}partner}$	0.43 (.05)[a]
$MIU1_{\_favorite\ celebrity}$	0.70 (.05)[b]
$MIU2_{\_worker}$	0.39 (.05)[a]

Note: Standard Errors appear in parenthesis
Different superscripts (letters a and b) denote average probabilities that differ significantly at $p < .05$.

Table 7. Comparison of Predicted Probabilities across conditions

Comparison	Contrast[1]	p-value
HIB vs. MIU1	-.25 (.068)	0.003
LIB vs. MIU1	-.27 (.068)	0.001
MIU2 vs. MIU1	-.31 (.068)	0.000
LIB vs. HIB	-.02 (.070)	0.754
MIU2 vs. HIB	-.07 (.070)	0.325
MIU2 vs. LIB	-.05 (.070)	0.539

Note: Standard Errors appear in parenthesis
1 = Contrasts of adjusted predictions

The manipulation worked as expected, HIB reports the highest level of mutual influence, both MDB1and MDB2 are closer to the midpoint (8), although they are still different from each other, and LIB shows the lowest level in mutual influence. Considering balance, we find the two balanced relationships (HIB and LIB) are significantly more balanced compared to the unbalanced ones (MIU1 and MIU2), where MIU2 is unbalanced, but the latter is more so than the former (the value is closer to 0). Moreover, the values of two unbalanced relationships go in opposite directions, where negative values mean that the other party has more power.

Looking at PTS, we observe a significantly greater propensity to share for the favorite famous person (MIU1) compared to all the other relationships. Therefore, relationships characterized by medium mutual influence, and which are unbalanced with more power towards the

other person's side, are those for which the propensity to share personal information (i.e., gossip) is the highest.

Personal information from close friends (HIB) and favorite celebrities (MIU1) is equally exciting at higher levels. Most importantly, the perceived excitement is significantly lower in the case of both the ex-partner (LIB) and for the worker (MIU2) compared to the favorite famous person (MIU1). Relatedly, participants reported they would feel significantly guiltier for close friends (HIB) compared to celebrities (MIU1) and ex-partners (LIB). Participants would feel very guilty if sharing personal information from someone that works for them (MIU2), as the value this condition is significantly higher compared to MIU1 and LIB.

Mediation Analysis

We conducted a mediation analysis investigating the simultaneous role of excitement and guilt intervening in the relationship between the type of relationship and PTS. Given our dependent variable is a binary choice, we conducted a binary mediation analysis using Stata.

The two mediating variables excitement and guilt are uncorrelated (0.09 n.s.); this allow us to introduce them as parallel mediators in our model without worrying that the magnitude of their covariance may bias the results. We decompose the effect of the relationship with the subject of personal information on the propensity to share the content. Table 8 below reports the results of the mediation analysis.

Table 8. Results of the mediation analysis

Comparison	Mediator	Indirect effect coefficient	Bias-Corrected CI		Total indirect effect*	Direct effect*	Total effect*
MIU1 vs. HIB	Excitement	.0071	-.036	.050	.0804*	.1752*	.2556*
	Guilt	.0733*	.013	.134			
MIU1 vs. LIB	Excitement	.0887*	.041	.137	.0694*	.2135*	.2826*
	Guilt	-.0193	-.079	.040			
MIU1 vs. MIU2	Excitement	.0543*	.010	.098	.1756*	.1545*	.3301*
	Guilt	.1213*	.059	.183			

Note: * significant at p <0.05

The mediators are excitement and guilt, are expected to work for most of the categories in the opposite direction. Since the independent variable is multinomial, the results involve different levels (relationships) compared to the baseline category, which in this case is the favorite famous person (MIU1).

The results provide support for our predictions. When participants imagine receiving gossip about their favorite famous person (MIU1), they report a significantly higher intention to share the content. Contrasting the worker with the famous person (MIU2 vs. MIU1), we find that, including excitement and guilt, there is a significant indirect effect of .176 (Bias-Corrected CI .011, .099 and .064, .187 respectively). These results are in line with expectations, such that information from relationships characterized by medium dependency and low balance, where the other party has more power, is the most likely to be shared. Excitement and guilt play a significant role in driving this effect. In particular, participants expected to feel more guilt the higher the mutual influence in the relation, driven by the reciprocal influence in the relationship. In addition, they consider the information more exciting when the mutual influence is higher, driven by the fact that the other party has more influence in the relationship. The combination of these two assessments, high excitement and low guilt, makes the relationship characterized by medium mutual influence where the other party has more power the type of relationship for which information retransmission is most likely.

So far, we have provided evidence that people gossip more about celebrities because of the type of relationship that they have with the subject. Sharing celebrity gossip is so prevalent, in part, because of high excitement and low anticipated guilt. In study 2, we measured PTS to a broad online audience assumed to be interested in the content. In study 3, we measured PTS to a narrow audience (one person) that knows the absent third party and was assumed to be interested in the content, as was the case in study 2. In the next studies, we are going to challenge these assumptions and look at the role of the relationships with the recipient/audience in gossip.

STUDY 4

In study 4, we look at another relational role of gossip, expressed in the link between the sender (A) and the audience (C). We compare personal information about celebrities (MIU) with personal information about close friends (HIB). We include only personal information about close friends and not information about acquaintances for the sake of brevity. Note that in previous studies, we observe no significant differences across the two balanced relationships in terms of PTS. The main hypothesis tested in this study is that people use celebrity gossip as a way to build relationships with unfamiliar recipients, such as when they need to initiate a conversation with someone they do not know well. We believe gossip is an important relational tool, and this becomes particularly salient in the case of sharing celebrity gossip with people one does not know well.

In this study, we vary the type of relationship with the subject (B) and the size of the audience (C) (small vs. large), which consists of acquaintances, people that the sharer (A) does not known well. We expect celebrities to have a higher PTS compared to close friends, replicating our previous findings. In addition, by varying the size of the audience (C), we manipulate the ease of finding common ground, and this might work in two different ways. On one side, it might be easier to find common ground among a group of people compared to only one person, because it is more probable that at least one the audience members would be interested in the content. On the other side, we recognize that finding a common ground shared by all audience members is more difficult with a large rather than a small audience.

Design and Procedure

We conducted this study on a sample of 402 respondents from Prolific Academic (M_{age} = 34.87, 71% female). The study followed 2 subjects (MIU vs. HIB) x 2 audience sizes (small_1 vs. large_5) between-subject design. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions. Using the description validated in study 1, participants were instructed to think about either a close

friend or their favorite famous person and provide their name. After this, we provided them with the following hypothetical scenario.

> "Imagine that you are at a cocktail party. You are standing near *a person that you don't know well (vs. a group of five people that you don't know well)*. You look at your phone and discover that _____ is in a new romantic relationship. You are considering telling *this person (vs. these persons)* what you've learned. _____ is not at the party, so do you share this personal information?"

We measured our dependent variable using a binary choice measure: Yes vs. No. After this, we asked participants to respond to eight items of the "Extraversion" measure included in the Big Five trait taxonomy (John and Srivastava 1999). The Cronbach's alpha of this measure was .88. We included this measure because of the nature of the scenario, to account for eventual individual differences in extraversion. The study concluded with demographic questions, and, a final question asking respondents the purpose of the study.

Results

None of the participants correctly guessed the main purpose of the study, we therefore kept all the responses in the analysis. We analyzed the propensity to share personal information (PTS) across the four conditions using a Probit regression. Table 9 below displays the marginal probabilities. Table 10 reports the results of the comparison across all the conditions.

Apparent from these results is participants were more likely to share personal information about celebrities compared to the close friend, and this difference was greater when they had a larger audience.

Table 9. Predicted Probabilities

Subject	Acquaintances audience size	PTS
MIU (celebrity)	Small	0.20 (0.04)[a]
MIU (celebrity)	Large	0.33 (0.05)[b]
HIB (close_friend)	Small	0.04 (0.04)[c]
HIB (close_friend)	Large	0.08 (0.08)[c]

Note: Standard Errors appear in parenthesis
Different superscripts (letters a, b and c) denote averages that differ significantly at $p < .05$.

Table 10. Comparison of Predicted Probabilities across conditions

Comparison	Contrast[1]	p-value
MIU_{small} vs. MIU_{large}	-.41(.19)	0.036
HIB_{large} vs. MIU_{large}	-.97 (.23)	0.000
HIB_{small} vs. MIU_{large}	-1.31 (.26)	0.000
HIB_{large} vs. MIU_{small}	-.12 (.05)	0.013
HIB_{small} vs. MIU_{small}	-.16 (.04)	0.003
HIB_{small} vs. HIB_{large}	-.04 (.03)	0.233

Note: Standard Errors appear in parenthesis
1 = Contrasts of adjusted predictions

This result is in line with a common ground explanation and tells us that individuals might rely this strategy more when the audience is large. The results hold if we control for individual levels of extraversion (results reveal that extraverted individuals tend to share more in general). Neither relationship type nor audience size interacted with the extraversion variable.

To sum up, participants report being significantly more likely to share personal information about celebrities compared to close friends when the audience is composed by persons that are unknown. This finding is in line with the results of studies 2 and 3. In addition, participants shared significantly more personal content about celebrities when they imagine having a large vs. a small audience. These findings support the common ground explanation, meaning that celebrity gossip serves as a tool to engage in conversations with individuals who are not well known.

One possible limitation of this study, is that people shared gossip about celebrities only because they expect the audience to know them, in this sense celebrity gossip might be driven by popularity, meaning the primary reason people share celebrity gossip is because as subjects celebrities are famous and thus known by a lot of people. In study 5 we expand our previous findings to rule out this popularity explanation by looking at an audience composed entirely by

friends, who would be expected to know both other friends (members of the social group) and celebrities.

STUDY 5

In study 5, the design is similar to the one used in study 4. We again look at the relationship between the sender (A) and the audience (C) and test the differences in propensity to share personal information about celebrities (MIU) compared to information about close friends (HIB), but here the audience is composed of all friends. The intuition underlying this study is that people use celebrity gossip as a way to maintain and foster existing interpersonal relationships. In addition, in this study we want to rule out the simple "popularity" explanation. If celebrity gossip is shared more because people expect the audience to know about the celebrity, we should see no difference between celebrities and friends in terms of PTS, as in this case, the audience knows both.

In this study, we again manipulate subject and audience size, and we again expect higher PTS for celebrities compared to close friends. By varying audience size and comparing a conversation with just one friend to a conversation with five friends, we also manipulate the perceived risk of sharing. In general, it is easier to share gossip about celebrities compared to friends; on top of this, sharing gossip about a friend with five people compared to one person should be much riskier. This is because the expected punishment (breaking the friendship bond) for sharing something presumably private about a friend would be higher with a larger audience. Still, we expect celebrity gossip to be shared the most even when the audience (C) knows both subjects (B) – the celebrity or the close friend.

Design and Procedure

We conducted this study on a sample of 401 respondents on Prolific Academic (M_{age} = 37.31, 69% female). The study again followed a 2 subject (MIU vs. HIB) x 2 audience sizes (small_1 vs. large_5) between-subjects design. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the

four conditions. The procedure of this study is the same of Study 4, participants indicated a person, read a scenario, and replied to our binary PTS measure. After, they completed to the "Extraversion" measure (Cronbach's alpha = .89) and responded to the demographic questions. We changed the scenario in the following way.

> Imagine that you are at a cocktail party. You are standing near *a friend that you know well (vs. a group of five friends that you know well)*. You look at your phone and discover that _____ is in a new romantic relationship. You are considering telling *this person (vs. these persons)* what you've learned. _____ is not at the party, so do you share this personal information?

Results

None of the participants correctly deduced the main purpose of the study. We analyzed the propensity to share personal information (PTS) using a Probit regression. Table 11 displays the marginal probabilities.

Table 11. Predicted Probabilities

Subject	Friends audience size	PTS
MIU (celebrity)	Small	0.56 (0.05)[a]
MIU (celebrity)	Large	0.47 (0.05)[a]
HIB (close_friend)	Small	0.33 (0.05)[b]
HIB (close_friend)	Large	0.23 (0.04)[b]

Note: Standard Errors appear in parenthesis
Different superscripts (letters a, b and c) denote averages that differ significantly at $p < .05$.

When the audience is composed by friends (who know the subject) people share significantly more celebrity gossip compared to personal information about friends. Table 12 reports the results of the comparison across all the conditions.

Table 12. Comparison of Predicted Probabilities across conditions

Comparison	Contrast[1]	p-value
MIU_{small} vs. MIU_{large}	.22 (.18)	0.227
HIB_{large} vs. MIU_{large}	-.68 (.19)	0.000
HIB_{small} vs. MIU_{large}	-.35 (.18)	0.050
HIB_{large} vs. MIU_{small}	-.89 (.19)	0.000
HIB_{small} vs. MIU_{small}	-.57 (.18)	0.002
HIB_{small} vs. HIB_{large}	-.32 (.19)	0.087

Note: Standard Errors appear in parenthesis
1 = Contrasts of adjusted predictions

This implies celebrity gossip is common not because of popularity of the subject (i.e. the fact everyone is presumed to know the celebrity). In addition, audience size appears not to matter. There is no difference in PTS based on the size of the audience, both when we compare celebrities and friends. We find no evidence for the presence of a significant difference in sharing personal information about a friend with one vs. five persons, although the results directionally support our intuition, the mean probabilities are not statistically different from each other.

To sum up, participants were more likely to share personal information about celebrities compared to close friends when the audience is composed of people presumed to know both subjects (i.e., no difference in familiarity with the subject of the gossip). These findings are in line with the results of studies 2, 3 and 4. In this study, participants were not significantly more likely to share personal content about celebrities when they imagined having a large vs. a small audience. These results suggest celebrity gossip still serves as a conversational topic to maintain relationships with friends regardless of group size. The fact that celebrity gossip is shared more may be exactly because of lack of guilt, meaning absence of fear of being punished.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

This research helps explain why and how content of a personal and disclosing nature is shared. Building on Emerson's (1962) Power-Dependence theory, we distinguish between three types of relationship with respect to the subject of the personal information being shared. These

three types of relationships vary along two dimensions: mutual influence and balance. We theorize and provide evidence that what drives the desire to share information is: (1) how exciting the information is perceived to be, and (2) how guilty, or morally proper, it feels to share the content. Both the anticipated guilt of sharing something personal and the perceived excitement of the content depend on the relationship that the owner has with the subject of the personal information (relationship type).

In particular, sharing personal information about subjects who are characterized by a high degree of mutual influence makes individual feel guiltier, as they are more afraid of breaking the relationship boundary. At the same time, sharing personal information about subjects who are characterized by a relationship with a higher degree of mutual influence – specifically, those subjects who have more power than the sharer – increases the overall perceived excitement associated with sharing the content. These two mechanisms work in opposing ways. Our goal was to demonstrate that only by combining these two dimensions is it possible to explain why some personal information is more or less likely to be shared, and this applies both online and offline. In addition, the prevalence of gossip about MIU relationships compared to balanced relationships is manifest regardless of audience type. Importantly, we illustrate why it is the case that celebrity gossip is so widely shared by consumers.

Limitations and Future Directions

Future research can address several limitations of this work. In this paper, we offer one explanation for why celebrity gossip is so commonly shared among consumers based on excitement and guilt, but we acknowledge that there might be other drivers of this effect. Although we rule out the alternative explanation based on popularity, there can be other explanations that still need to be tested by future research. For example, our conceptualization of anticipated guilt relates to the fear of breaking the relational boundary with the absent third party and we do not examine the guilt derived by engaging in what can be perceived as an immoral behavior per se. Relatedly, another

alternative interpretation of the reduced feeling of guilt might be driven by a bystander effect, meaning that people share more celebrity gossip because they believe everyone else engages in the same behavior. In relation to perceived excitement, future research can test the role of information as a way to restore balance in the relationship. In this sense, celebrity gossip may serve as a tool that consumers have to feel that they are influencing or exerting power towards a subject (the celebrity) who is usually not affected by their behavior.

Another limitation of our work is that we focus solely on positive relationships, meaning relationships where power and mutual influence are conceived in a favorable way. Future research could explore the role of negative relationships like the ones with rivals, or enemies and explore other relationships like the ones with *frenemies*. These and other relationships may trigger different emotional reactions both positive and negative. In particular, gossip in these contexts may trigger other negative emotions beyond guild like envy or jealousy. We hope that the current work encourages researchers to explore gossip from a multitude of perspectives.

In addition, future research could delve deeper in understanding if and why celebrity gossip helps in creating and maintaining interpersonal relationships. The insights of study 4 and 5 support this intuition, but future studies can provide further empirical validation of this hypothesis and test the underlying mechanism.

In conclusion, in this research we provide an important contribution to the gossip literature by shedding light on the role of the sharer's relationship with the subject whose personal content is shared. In addition, our findings contribute to the literature on WOM retransmission by investigating personal information, a type of content frequently shared by consumers with scant coverage in the WOM literature. Finally, we contribute to the consumer behavior literature by providing an explanation for why certain types of information like celebrity gossip is so frequently shared by individuals.

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APPENDIX

Study 1 phase A - Relationship descriptors used in the study

HIB – *High Mutual Influence Balance*

Please think about a person whom you have known for *long time* and should be the recipient of a *large amount* of your attention. Your relationship with this person should also involve *intense emotions on both parts*. Accordingly, there should be a relative *balance* in how this person's behavior affects your life and how your behavior affects this person's life.

LIB – *Low Mutual Influence Balance*

Please think about a person whom you have known for *a while* and should be the recipient of *very little* of your attention. Your relationship with this person should *nowadays* involve *no emotions on both parts*. Accordingly, there should be a relative *balance* in how this person's behavior affects your life and how your behavior affects this person's life.

MIU1 – *Medium Mutual Influence Unbalanced with more power towards the other*

Please think about a person whom you have known for *long time* and should be the recipient of a *large amount* of your attention. Your relationship with this person should also involve *intense emotions on your part*. Accordingly, there should be a relative *imbalance* such that this person's behavior affects your life more than how your behavior affects this person's life.

MIU2 – *Medium Mutual Influence Unbalanced with more power towards your side*

Please think about a person whom you have known for *some* time and should be the recipient of *some* of your attention. Your relationship with this person should *not involve emotions on your part.* Accordingly, there should be a relative *imbalance* such that your behavior affects this person's life more than how this person's behavior affects your life.

Study 1 phase A - Results of the Mixed-effects REML regression

Table 1. MIXED Regression results

Variables	Model 1		Model 2	
	Mutual Influence		Balance	
	β	p-value	β	p-value
Subject				
LIB	-5.45	0.000	.15	0.525
	(0.376)		(0.236)	
MIU1	-1.32	0.000	-0.78	0.001
	(0.376)		(0.236)	
MIU2	-3.2	0.000	1.70	0.000
	(0.376)		(0.236)	
Constant	11.22	0.000	-0.08	0.631
	(0.283)		(0.167)	
N	400		400	

Standard errors appear in parentheses

Study 1 phase B - List of 20 labels with means and standard deviations

	Label	N*	Mutual Influence		Balance	
			Mean	St Dev	Mean	St Dev
1	A close friend of yours	250	9.58	2.57	-0.12	1.20
2	An old friend of yours	257	7.35	3.50	0.00	1.04
3	One of your parents	250	9.35	3.28	-0.66	1.66
4	An ex you broke up with	219	4.42	3.09	-0.23	1.69
5	An ex that broke up with you	218	4.63	3.15	0.43	1.54
6	Your romantic partner	224	11.61	2.57	0.00	1.06
7	A work acquaintance of yours	218	7.18	3.02	0.18	1.38
8	One of your relatives	239	7.83	3.63	-0.13	1.58
9	One of your siblings	223	7.98	3.47	0.04	1.44
10	Your spouse	186	11.39	2.85	-0.05	0.90
11	Your work boss	230	8.26	2.80	-1.50	1.93
12	Your son/daughter	145	10.82	2.55	0.97	1.74
13	A general acquaintance of yours	249	5.71	2.91	0.08	1.07
14	A neighbor of yours	217	5.36	3.01	0.08	1.03
15	Someone that works for you	163	7.92	2.66	1.61	2.00
16	Your pastor or spiritual leader	125	7.20	2.91	-1.74	2.04
17	Your favorite celebrity	236	4.85	2.58	-1.73	2.02
18	A random celebrity	241	3.33	2.07	-0.68	1.46
19	Your favorite politician	192	6.45	2.63	-2.41	2.02
20	A random politician	218	4.31	2.75	-0.97	1.80

* For each option we included “I cannot think about…” because some participants might be unable to think about some subjects (e.g. no children).

Re-conceptualizing Gossip

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ABSTRACT

Despite being a valuable and frequent behavior in which nearly everyone engages, gossip remains an understudied topic in the social sciences. As a result, there is a mismatch between academic research and practical relevance due to a lack of conceptual clarity about what exactly constitutes gossip. Indeed, everyone seems to know what is meant by gossip, but the literature is missing a clear definition and conceptualization. In this research we conduct a systematic review of the literature on gossip focusing on its conceptualization. We first focus on *summarizing* the gossip research, analyzing both the theoretical and empirical evidence in the gossip domain to assess the current state of knowledge and what still remains under-studied. Second, we turn to *delineating* gossip with the goal of describing, mapping, and providing a comprehensive definition of gossip. We classify prior work in terms of what we identify as fundamental characteristics and provide a preliminary re-conceptualization. To summarize, gossip occurs when a sender (entity A) communicates, often in an evaluative way (positive or negative), personal information about an absent third party (entity B) to a receiver (entity C). Thus, gossip emerges as a relational phenomenon manifested by a triad (sender A, absent subject B, and receiver C). In order to understand and study gossip, researchers should account for the individuals involved and the relationships among them. We provide a set of recommendations centered on definitional clarity, context and methods that provide several avenues forward for researchers. These recommendations are intended to provide more meaningful investigations of gossip behavior.

Keywords:

Gossip, Conceptual Review, Systematic Review, Re-conceptualization, Interpersonal relationships

Despite its negative connotation, gossip has long been considered as a fundamental human behavior (Stirling 1956, Ben-Ze'ev 1994). Practically speaking, gossip is also big business; the celebrity gossip industry has an estimated value of $3 billion (Rutenberg 2011), and the relevance of celebrity gossip websites continues to grow. Consequently, it is a topic of interest in many fields of study. Gossip related behaviors have been investigated across a broad range of disciplines such as marketing, psychology, management, sociology and anthropology. Moreover, scholars have investigated gossip in a variety of contexts including interpersonal interactions (McAndrew, Bell and Garcia 2007, Feinberg, Willer, Stellar and Keltner 2012), organizations and the workplace (Kurland and Pelled 2000, Farley, Timme and Hart 2010), social networking (Okazaki, Rubio and Campo 2014), and adolescent development (Eder and Enke 1991).

While constituting a frequent behavior in which nearly everyone engages, the existing research on gossip has remained quite fragmented across different disciplines, and the current state of knowledge about gossip is diffuse in a non-integrative manner varying by situation and context. Somewhat surprisingly, the marketing and consumer behavior literatures have largely overlooked the gossip phenomenon. The mismatch between the substantial practical significance of gossip and the scant overall attention from researchers has resulted in a general lack of a comprehensive understanding concerning what characterizes gossip, and its fundamental antecedents and consequences.

Our goal in this research is to provide both a review of the literature along with an analysis of the concept's development and use in past work. The purpose of the first effort - the *systematic* review - is that of *summarizing* the literature on gossip, that is, taking existing evidence into account and drawing conclusions about what is known (MacInnis 2011). In doing so, we analyze the research (both empirical and theoretical) on gossip across different streams of literature and in different contexts. Our ultimate goal is to provide a complete picture of what is already known.

The purpose of the second effort - the *conceptual* analysis - is that of identifying, describing, and mapping things that should be considered when studying a concept such as gossip. We do so by

collecting and analyzing different definitions of gossip. This effort reveals that there is substantial fuzziness in how gossip is defined across and within different fields. The lack of clarity has created inconsistency in the literature and hampered the ability of researchers to build constructively on each other's findings.

By combining the review efforts described above, we aim to offer a precise, inclusive definition of the concept, identifying its fundamental distinguishing elements, or its intension set (Sartori 1970). In addition, we provide a classification of previous work that has investigated the relevant dimensions of gossip and identify areas for future research. Thus, this work is an attempt to advance the theoretical domain of the gossip literature and spur a new stream of empirical research. We believe that a deeper understanding of gossip as human behavior is useful for both academic research and for practice.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CONCEPTUALIZATION

Despite the important role of gossip in our society, previous research focusing on this behavior has failed to advance a consistent understanding of the phenomenon. We believe that one of the main reasons for this is a lack of a shared conceptualization – a shared understanding of what gossip is and is not.

Why is it so important to develop a clear conceptualization of gossip? Conceptualization implies "seeing" or "understanding" something abstract in one's mind (MacInnis 2011). Concepts assume meaning for the scientific community, as they represent cognitive symbols that specify the attributes, features and characteristics of a phenomenon in the real or phenomenological world (Podsakoff, MacKenzie and Podsakoff 2016). Constructs have action significance because construct labels help academics and practitioners categorize situations and decide what to do (MacInnis 2011). To propose or hypothesize on ideas, events or phenomena, researchers must identify the key constructs of interest (Tähtinen and Havila 2019).

The starting point for our investigation is MacInnis' (2011) typology of conceptual contributions in marketing. We rely on her framework to motivate and guide our research. She suggests that conceptualization can pertain to various entities, which includes *ideas explication*. Explicating concepts involves understanding, explaining, or deriving new ideas and relationships. Explication can be done by *summarization* (i.e., see the knowledge on the entity in its entirety) and *delineation* (i.e., gain better understanding of an entity by mapping it out). We focus on both *summarization* and *delineation* to guide our re-conceptualization.

With the goal of *summarizing*, our first effort is to conduct a systematic analysis of all the previous investigations of gossip with an emphasis on empirical research. The goal in this first phase is to understand the current state of knowledge on gossip and identify areas for future research development. We do this, by collecting articles focused on gossip from peer-reviewed journals in a broad range of disciplines. Our *summarization* reveals that, as scholars, we have only a very partial understanding of what gossip is, as several aspects (e.g., the individuals involved in the gossip exchange) and contexts (e.g., the celebrity gossip industry) remain understudied. In addition, our efforts reveal the presence of substantial confusion with respect to what gossip actually is. For example, prior research has considered gossip both as talking about someone not present (Robbis and Karan 2019) and as untrustworthy information (Baum, Rabovsky, Rose and Rahman 2018). Is gossip an act of information exchange or a type of information? This and other inconsistencies in conceptualizing gossip across the existing gossip literature motivate our re-conceptualization effort.

Tähtinen and Havila (2019) identify the lack of consistent conceptual language as conceptual confusion. In their words, "Conceptual confusion means that studies focusing on the same phenomenon use a variety of labels and terms to refer to the phenomenon or the experiences of it, without explicit definitions or descriptions. In addition, some different concepts are defined similarly, and some same definitions relate to more than one concept" (p. 534). According to these authors, conceptual confusion is a consequence of conceptual ambiguity.

Following Sartori (2009), Tähtinen and Havila identify two sources of ambiguity; homonymy and synonymy. "Homonymy is the use of one concept to convey different meanings … Synonymy refers to the use of several concepts to refer to the same phenomenon, without any other descriptions" (Tähtinen and Havila 2019, p. 537). In conducting our systematic review of the gossip literature, we clearly identify how gossip suffers from homonymy. To provide an example, gossip has been defined both as "an instrumental transaction in which A and B trade small talk about C for something in return" (Roswnow 1977, p. 158) and as "information of a highly personal nature that could be influential in the judgments that others would make about the character, reputation, or status of the individual in question" (McAndrew and Milenkovic 2002, p. 1075). The problem of homonymy is also related to Sartori's (1970) idea of conceptual stretching, which occurs when researchers extend the number of cases to which a conceptual definition applies without changing the set of attributes used to define the concept. The result is often a conceptual mismatch between the attributes used to define the concept and the cases that the concept actually covers (Podsakoff et al. 2016).

Therefore, we also engage in the goal of *delineating*, and focus our second effort in re-conceptualizing gossip. We will focus on *concept delineation* by detailing, charting and describing gossip as an entity (MacInnis 2011). Conceptualizing implies providing a clear definition. According to Sartori (2009, p. 98) "when the ideas/events/phenomena are named, they are seen through the given label, without which they cannot be talked about;" therefore, providing explicit definitions of the key terms should be the first focus of research (Peter 1981). In this paper, we try to map and integrate the different existing definitions of gossip with the goal of providing a new, distinct comprehensive definition of the term. Just as constructs are the building blocks of strong theory, clear and accurate terms are the foundations of strong definitions (Suddaby 2010).

According to Goertz (2006), "to develop a concept is more than providing a definition: it is deciding what is important about an entity. (p. 27)." We propose that, for gossip, a relational definition based on a specific set of interactions within a social triad is most appropriate. Podsakoff

et al. (2016) highlight the fact that is it difficult to develop good conceptual definitions, and the reason for this rests in the challenge of selecting the attributes or characteristics that define a concept. Our plan is to identify the dimensions of gossip as a construct. According to Tähtinen and Havila (2019), different definitions and variations of a concept may reflect the multifaceted nature of a phenomenon; nevertheless, conceptual variety is beneficial to academics and fosters theory development only if it is properly discussed, and no confusion remains at the conceptual level.

Importantly, constructs, as abstract, hypothetical concepts need to be defined in a sufficiently precise manner in order to be measured or operationalized (MacInnis 2011). One of the major undesirable consequences of conceptual ambiguity is the difficulty in developing robust and credible operationalizations for the construct under investigation, with measurement instruments that often lack empirical validity (Bagozzi 1984). MacKenzie (2003) describes the consequences of poor construct validity as: (1) difficulty in developing measures that faithfully represent its domain; (2) failure in correctly specifying how a construct relates to its measures; and (3) a fatal undermining of the credibility of a study's hypotheses. Our conceptual review suggests that the concept of "gossip" has caused all of these problems. Hence, a related goal of this paper is to reduce conceptual confusion with respect to gossip in order to spur more rigorous and relevant empirical research in this domain.

In order to *summarize* and *delineate* gossip, we combine different methods of re-conceptualization provided by the methodological literature on conceptual contributions. In particular, we first use Podsakoff et al.'s (2016) sequential framework for developing good conceptual definitions to guide our conceptual review of gossip. We follow their guidance to identify the set of necessary and sufficient attributes of gossip, and to differentiate it from other, related concepts. In addition, following their recommendations, we take one additional step to refine our re-conceptualization by engaging in a grounded-theory effort for validating the definition.

We then rely on Tähtinen and Havila's (2019) Conceptual Analysis Method (CAM) to discover and elucidate the elements of conceptual confusion in the area of gossip research. Finally,

we employ some steps of the Welch, Rumyantseva and Hewerdine's (2016) methodology to engage in conceptual re-construction. A recent example of a re-conceptualization effort in the consumer literature based on a systematic analysis can be found in the work of Williams and Poehlman (2017), which focuses on the construct of "consciousness."

The remainder of the manuscript is organized as follows. We start with gossip *summarization* by conducting a systematic review of gossip empirical and theoretical investigations, identifying what we currently know and what still remains uncovered by existing research on gossip. Next, we focus on gossip *delineation* and conduct a review of conceptualizations of gossip in the literature. We identify, categorize and map existing definitions across a variety of fields. Based on this part of our review, we identify a set of fundamental elements (necessary and sufficient conditions) that define gossip. This allows us to provide a new definition of the phenomenon rooted in existing literature. In addition, critically, we emphasize the importance of identifying the people involved in the gossip-triad (the sender A, the absent subject B and the receiver C) together with the relationships between these individuals. Across the stages of our review, we identify areas for further theoretical and empirical improvement. Lastly, we describe a grounded theory research design that we have begun with the goal of further validating (and possibly extending) our re-conceptualization.

SUMMARIZATION: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF GOSSIP

Our first effort includes a systematic review of the gossip literature in order to provide a summary of what is known about this behavior. The goal of this summarization is to take stock of, recap, and reduce what is known about gossip to a set of key take-aways.

Existing research on gossip

In order obtain a broad picture of the existing research on gossip, both empirical and theoretical, we collected all the academic articles in the EBSCO database that had the word

"gossip*" in the title. We selected only articles in English that appear in peer reviewed journals. In addition, we conducted the same research using the PsycARTICLES database. By focusing on these two databases, we sought to cover a broad range of disciplines including business, management, marketing, economics, anthropology, sociology and psychology. This first search provided an initial set of 163 articles. We examined all these articles and removed the ones that fall outside the domain of investigation (e.g., automation science, computing and information system). We inspected the remaining papers and collected additional articles that we considered relevant (i.e., were cited by one of the articles in our initial set but were not collected during the initial search). In the end, we examined 73 articles in peer-reviewed journals in depth as well as two books that discuss (or mention) gossip or gossiping. After further removing the articles that are not relevant (e.g., those with the word gossip in the title, but not truly investigating the topic, e.g., De Angelis et al. 2012) we obtained a final set of 55 articles. In table 1 we include a list of all 55 articles separating the empirical ones from the purely theoretical ones. We order the articles by Web-of-Science citations per-year. We include the field of the journal in which the article was published, the research methodology and, when possible, the context of investigation.

Table 1. Summary of Gossip Investigations

Author(s)	WoS cit / year	Field	Empirical Methodology	Specific context
Feinberg, Willer and Schultz (2014)	16.83	Psychology	Quantitative	Other*
Feinberg, Willer, Stellar and Keltner (2012)	11.88	Psychology	Quantitative	Workplace
Baumeister, Zhang and Vohs (2004)	11.31	Psychology	Theoretical and quantitative	Broad
Martin, Borah and Palmatier (2017)	9.67	Marketing	Quantitative	Other
Bosson, Johnson, Niederhoffer and Swann (2006)	6.86	Psychology	Quantitative	Relationships
Dunbar, Marriott and Duncan (1997)	5.04	Psychology	Quantitative	Broad
Beersma and Van Kleef (2012)	4.88	Psychology	Quantitative	Broad
Wu, Birtch, Chiang and Zhang (2018)	4.50	Management	Quantitative	Workplace

Kniffin and Sloan Wilson (2010)	4.20	Management	Case studies	Workplace
McAndrew, Bell and Garcia (2007)	4.08	Psychology	Quantitative	Broad
Brady, Brown and Liang (2017)	4.00	Psychology	Qualitative and Quantitative	Workplace
Eder and Enke (1991)	3.66	Sociology	Qualitative	Broad
Decoster, Camps, Stouten, Vandevyvere and Tripp (2013)	3.43	Management	Quantitative	Workplace
Kuo, Chang, Quinton, Lu and Lee (2015)	3.00	Management	Quantitative	Workplace
Tian, Song, Kwan and Li (2019)	3.00	Management	Quantitative	Workplace
Peters and Kashima (2015)	2.80	Psychology	Quantitative	Broad
Wu, Kwan, Wu and Ma (2018)	2.50	Management	Quantitative	Workplace
McAndrew and Milenkovic (2002)	2.44	Psychology	Quantitative	Entertainment
Ellwardt, Wittek and Wielers (2012)	2.38	Management	Quantitative	Workplace
Litmand and Pezzo (2005)	2.36	Psychology	Quantitative	
Mills (2010)	2.30	Management	Qualitative	Workplace
Erdogan, Bauer and Walter (2015)	2.20	Psychology	Quantitative	Workplace
Smith (2014)	1.83	Psychology	Quantitative	Other
Peters, Jetten and Radova (2017)	1.67	Psychology	Quantitative	Workplace
Farley, Timme and Hart (2010)	1.50	Psychology	Quantitative	Workplace
Tassiello, Lombardi and Costabile (2018)	1.50	Management	Quantitative	Workplace
Waddington (2005)	1.40	Psychology	Qualitative and quantitative	Other
Hopper and Aubrey (2013)	1.00	Communication	Quantitative	Entertainment
Kim, Moon and Shin (2019)	1.00	Management	Quantitative	Workplace
Okazaki, Rubio and Campo (2013)	1.00	Psychology	Quantitative	Entertainment
Okazaki, Rubio and Campo (2014)	1.00	Marketing	Quantitative	Entertainment
Levin and Arluke (1985)	0.91	Gender studies	Quantitative	Broad
Harrington, Lee and Bielby (1995)	0.84	Sociology	Qualitative	Entertainment
Gilmore (1978)	0.82	Anthropology	Ethnographic	Broad
Watson (2017)	0.78	Psychology	Quantitative	Other

Cole and Scrivener (2013)	0.71	Psychology	Quantitative	Broad
Ferreira (2014)	0.50	Anthropology	Qualitative	Broad
Fernandes, Kapoor and Karandikar (2017)	0.33	Psychology	Quantitative	Relationships
Baum, Rabovsky, Rose and Rahman (2018)	0.00	Psychology	Quantitative	
De Backer and Fisher (2012)	0.00	Psychology	Quantitative	Entertainment
Lee and Workman (2014)	0.00	Marketing	Quantitative	Entertainment
Robbins and Karan (2019)	0.00	Psychology	Quantitative	Broad
Martinescu, Janssen and Nijstad (2019)	0.00	Management	Quantitative	Workplace
Author(s)	**Cit / year**	**Field**	**Methodology**	**Specific context**
Dunbar (1993)	29.30	Psychology	Theoretical	
Dunbar (2004)	16.75	Psychology	Theoretical	Other
Foster (2004)	9.94	Psychology	Theoretical	
Wert and Salovey (2004)	6.88	Psychology	Theoretical	
Kurland and Pelled (2000)	5.80	Management	Theoretical	Workplace
DiFonzo and Bordia (2007)	4.15	Philosophy	Theoretical	Relationships
Guerin and Miyazaki (2010)	1.86	Psychology	Theoretical	
Rosnow (1977)	0.60	Communication	Theoretical	
Chua and de la Cerna (2014)	0.00	Management	Theoretical	
Michelson and Mouly (2000)	0.00	Management	Theoretical	Workplace
Ben-Ze'ev (1994)	Book	Philosophy	Theoretical	

*Other includes: the self, students' conversations, a public goods game, evolutionary perspective, business, healthcare

Overall, we observe psychology is the field in which gossip has been investigated the most, followed by management. All the other fields included (e.g., marketing, sociology, and anthropology) include nor more than three articles. The prevalence of gossip research in psychology and management is also reflected by the contexts considered across the different papers, which is typically the workplace. In fact, a large number of articles explores gossiping at work and gossip

about coworkers. We also see a considerable number of articles that investigate gossip broadly, meaning they record random conversations among individuals or let participants be free to imagine/recall gossip instances. Worth mentioning is that a decent number of articles look at gossip in the context of entertainment.

A domain that appears to be understudied is the gossip industry. A few exceptions include the work of McAndrew and Milenkovic (2002) and De Backer and Fisher (2012). This is surprising especially considering that gossip in the form of content is something that is heavily consumed. People purchase gossip magazines, visit websites that discuss personal news about celebrities and even purchase expensive tours in Hollywood with the goal of getting the latest news and scoops about their favorite famous people and share information about celebrities with others. Despite this, there is currently very limited knowledge on the drivers and the consequences of celebrity gossip.

Surprisingly, only Martin et al. (2017) investigate gossip as it pertains to be a business. The authors use gossip theories in the context of firms' usage of consumer data and demonstrate that companies' access to personal information generates feelings of violation undermining trust. These negative effects can be reduced by increasing transparency and allowing users to have control over management of their data. Excluding this paper, there is no empirical investigation of the gossip industry and/or gossip in a business context that we could identify. This is particularly surprising if we consider the marketing literature because, as stated above, celebrity gossip is a product that is heavily consumed by people and is important for managing human brands (i.e., celebrities). To the best of our knowledge, there is no empirical research that considers gossip as a market output or that has studied the effects of gossip on a market. The lack of research linking gossip with consumption and managerial insights highlights one promising area for future research. Overall, we believe that the marketing and consumer behavior literature have considerable room for an increased understanding of gossip, especially in the context of celebrities.

In terms of the methodologies employed, a large number of articles apply mostly quantitative empirical methodologies, while only a few are qualitative. In addition, a modest

number of articles are theoretical only (e.g., literature reviews). Surprisingly, one of the most influential articles dealing with gossip (by citations) is one by Dunbar (1993), which provides neither a definition of gossip nor an empirical investigation of the phenomenon. Nevertheless, this seminal article advances the proposition that humans' evolution into large social groups depended on the development of an efficient method for time-sharing that is based on language and communication. In fact, according to the author, the time that humans dedicate to gossiping allows individuals to learn about the behavioral characteristics of other group members, helping in forming social bonds (Dunbar 1993).

For those articles that include empirical findings, we encountered heterogeneous levels of rigor. We observed a large portion of the studies conducted to date include small samples that should be replicated using more stringent methodological standards. Therefore, it is our contention that there is a need for more rigorous investigations of gossip that align to contemporary best-practices and include novel empirical tests of gossip-related hypotheses.

In sum, we find the existing literature on gossip tends to be concentrated in psychology and management. Although several authors in different fields have highlighted the importance of this behavior, the research in other disciplines (e.g., marketing) remains limited. Also, previous research centers on a few topics and contexts, mostly related to gossip in organizations and the workplace. Albeit, several investigations have kept the context broad, yet this has its own shortfalls as it impedes the derivation of context related conclusions.

A focus on gossip motives

Across the existing research on gossip, a fair amount of work focuses on the overall motivations behind gossip, concentrating mostly on the sender's motivation to engage in this behavior. Beersma and Van Kleef (2012) identified four social motives underlying gossip including: (1) influencing others negatively; (2) providing information; (3) giving enjoyment, and (4) establishing and maintaining group standards (e.g. Ben-Ze'ev 1994, Foster 2004, Dunbar 2004).

Other research has pointed out relatively different motives for gossiping, including helping to reinforce norms shared in groups, providing a tool for indirect social comparisons, increasing intimacy and the strength of social bonds, clarifying group membership, and improving perceptions of the power and status of the gossiper (Ben-Ze'ev 1994, Dunbar 2004, Foster 2004, Nevo, Nevo and Derech-Zehavi 1993, Rosnow 1977). Baumaister, Zhang and Vohs (2004) proposed a cultural learning function of gossip, such that it helps individuals in learning about how to behave effectively within the complex structures of human social and cultural life. Feinberg et al. (2012) showed that individuals engage in "prosocial gossip" when they have to punish an antisocial act with the goal of protecting others. Overall, despite its negative connotation, talking about other's personal facts appears to serve multiple personal and social goals.

A focus on gossip content

When considering the content of gossip, prior research has shown people tend to be more interested in information about same-sex others and, in general, are more interested in positive information about friends than negative information about enemies (McAndrew et al. 2007). This pattern manifests also when spreading information – people tend to prefer to spread positive information about allies and negative information about rivals.

Levin and Arluke (1985) sampled 194 instances of conversational gossip and find that the content can be both wholly positive (27%) and wholly negative (27%). The remaining 46% was a mix of positive and negative content. Similarly, Dunbar (1993) sampled human conversations and found that people discuss mainly about relationships, personal experiences and social activities. Bergmann (1993, p. 15) identified the most common gossip topics to be "personal qualities and idiosyncrasies, behavioral surprises and inconsistencies, character flaws, discrepancies between actual behavior and moral claims, bad manners, socially unaccepted modes of behavior, shortcomings, improprieties, omissions, presumptions, blamable mistakes, misfortunes, and failures." Clearly, most of the topics identified by Bergmann are negative. Indeed, Eder and Enke

(1991) find gossip behavior among adolescents primarily promoting the expression of negative judgments.

Considering the entertainment value of gossip online, Okazaki et al.'s (2014) investigation into social network websites, reveals that, when the entertainment value of the information is higher, the propensity to gossip online is higher. Also, the higher the propensity to gossip in social networks, the stronger is the identification with the website and ultimately overall social network engagement (Okazaki et al. 2014). Robbins and Karan (2019) found that the majority of gossip tends to be neutrally valenced. When the content is evaluative, negative gossip is more common than positive. Moreover, the authors find weak evidence that females gossip in an evaluative way slightly more than males. Apart from this difference, there is no clear evidence that women gossip more than men (Robbins and Karan 2019).

Current gossip knowledge

To sum up, existing research is this domain has primarily looked at gossip with a psychological/managerial perspective and has investigated the behavior most frequently in a workplace context. From the existing work, what we know is that gossip is frequent and important. Much of the research has focused on the goals and characteristics of the gossiper (i.e., the sender) and we know that gossiping serves a broad set of motivations. What is missing from the literature, however, is a broader investigation of gossip outcomes.

In terms of content, we see mixed findings related to valence and an intuition that the most frequent topics deal with the personal sphere. What remains currently understudied, is the characteristics of the other individuals involved in the act (the audience or the target) and the relationships among all of those participating in gossip. The scarcity of gossip research in the interpersonal relationships' domain calls for a deeper investigation. Lastly, other contexts, like the celebrity gossip industry, remain somehow unexplored by gossip research. This is surprising considering the relevance of this market from a managerial perspective. In general, there needs to

be a deeper understanding of the contexts and conditions that make gossip more or less frequent. In table 2 below we summarize the current status of knowledge about gossip and we highlight some areas that remain unexamined by the literature.

Table 2. The current state of gossip knowledge

	Coverage of gossip across disciplines	**Investigations of gossip in contexts**	**Aspects of gossip investigated**	**Gossip content**
What we know	Psychology (52%) Management & OB (26%)	Workplace (40%) Broad (24%)	*Motivations / Drivers* Influencing others Provide information Giving enjoyment Establishing group standards Reinforce norms Indirect social comparisons Building social bonds Clarifying group membership Improving power and status Cultural learning Punish an antisocial act	Role of valence Importance of personal topics
What we need to know	Marketing (6%)	Entertainment & gossip industry (16%) Relationships (7%)	*Gossip outcomes*	Role of information truthfulness

Note: The percentages depend on the frequencies in table 1.

What also emerges from this *summarization* of the literature, is that, across different fields and investigations, scholars have been approaching the topic of gossip very differently, by attributing a multitude of characteristics to this behavior. This is not bad per se, as different variations and manifestations of gossip may reflect the presence of a multifaceted phenomenon. Nevertheless, as Tähtinen and Havila (2019) point out, variety in a concept meaning is beneficial to scholars only if it is properly approached and discussed. MacInnis (2011) emphasizes that scholar cannot achieve their research goals unless they properly conceptualize their construct of interest. This is fundamental because construct labels guide academics and practitioners in categorizing

situations and deciding how to act. Ultimately, the better researchers can understand what gossip is, the more effectively they can deal with it (MacInnis 2011). In the next section of the paper, we deal with the multiplicity of gossip meanings with the goal of providing a re-conceptualization of the construct.

DELINEATION: A CONCEPTUAL REVIEW OF GOSSIP

While conducting the first stage of our research, one of the biggest challenges we faced was encountering a broad set of conceptualizations of the construct of gossip. Therefore, in this second stage, we focus on *delineating* gossip with the goal of identifying, describing, and mapping what should be considered when studying a concept such as gossip (MacInnis 2011).

Gossip definitions across the literature

Across the existing gossip-related investigations in the literature, there appears to be a lack of general agreement on what exactly gossip (or gossiping) means. Scholars interested in gossip as a topic of research have defined gossip in numerous and varied ways. This is articulated explicitly by Gilmore (1987), who states that "gossip as a general category is not one thing or the other, but a diverse range of behaviors all of which have something in common" (p. 89). Further, Foster (2004) highlights, "we all 'know' what gossip is, but defining, identifying, and measuring it is a complex enterprise for practical investigation" (p. 80).

In order to conduct this conceptual review, we went back to the set of 55 articles that we collected. Our goal in this phase is to understand how gossip has been conceptualized in previous research. Therefore, we extracted from this set of articles all of the unique definitions or operationalizations of gossip that we encountered (i.e., separating out articles that provided a new definition of gossip). In table 3 we include a list of all the 30 definitions we uncovered ordered by publication year.

Table 3. Gossip definitions

	Author & Year	Gossip definition
1	Rosnow (1977)	Instrumental transaction in which A and B trade small talk about C for something in return (p. 158).
2	Levin and Arluke (1985)	Conversation about any third person, whether present or absent from the group (p. 282)
3	Eder and Enke (1991)	Evaluative talk about a person who is not present (p. 949)
4	Bergmann (1993)	Exchange of news about the personal affairs of others (p. 45)
5	Ben-Ze'ev (1994)	Talk or write idly about other people, mostly about their personal or intimate affairs (p. 13)
6	De Sousa (1994)	Malicious and harmful talk about the private lives of others (p. 26)
7	Harrington and Bielby (1995)	Informal communication about real or fictional people or events that are not currently present or ongoing (p. 626)
8	Dunbar, Marriott and Duncan (1997)	The informal exchange of information about contemporary social events, including the behavior and character of either the speaker or of third parties not present (p. 233)
9	Kurland and Pelled (2000)	Workplace Gossip (WG) is an informal and evaluative talk in an organization, usually among no more than a few individuals, about another member of that organization who is not present (p. 429)
10	Michelson and Mouly (2000)	Informal communication transmitted to another person or persons, irrespective of whether or not the communication has been established as fact (p. 341)
11	McAndrew and Milenkovic (2002)	Gossip as content: information of a highly personal nature that could be influential in the judgments that others would make about the character, reputation, or status of the individual in question (p. 1075)
12	Dunbar (2004)	Social topics defined broadly as “gossip” (p. 100)
13	Foster (2004)	In a context of congeniality, gossip is the exchange of personal information (positive or negative) in an evaluative way (positive or negative) about absent third parties (p. 83)
14	Wert and Salovey (2004)	Informal, evaluative talk about a member of the discussants’ social environment who is not present (p. 123)
15	Litman and Pezzo 2005	Gossip refers to unverified news about the personal affairs of others, which is shared informally between individuals (p. 963)
16	Guerin and Miyazaki (2010)	Small talk about a mutual friend or acquaintance that has curious, scandalous, novel, humorous, and unexpected elements (p. 26)
17	DiFonzo and Bordia (2007)	Evaluative social talk about individuals . . . that arises in the context of social network formation, change, and maintenance (p. 25)

18	McAndrew, Bell and Garcia (2007)	Gossip as content: information of a highly personal nature that could be influential in the judgments that others would make about the character, reputation, or status of the individual in question. (p. 1567)
19	Farley, Timme and Hart (2010)	Communicating negative information about others (p. 363)
20	Mills (2010)	Informal talk of a personal nature about an absent third party (p. 5)
21	De Backer and Fisher (2012)	Informal discussion of the traits and behaviors of other individuals (third parties) … we include talk about present third parties who are not the targeted audience (p. 406)
22	Feinberg, Willer, Stellar, Keltner (2012)	Communicating negatively about an absent third party in an evaluative manner. Prosocial Gossip (PG) is the sharing of negative evaluative information about a target in a way that protects others from antisocial or exploitative behavior (p. 1015)
23	Feinberg, Willer and Schultz (2014)	Talk to others about a third party (p. 659)
24	Erdogan, Bauer and Walter (2015)	Passing on negative information about others (p. 196)
25	Kuo, Chang, Quinton, Lu and Lee (2015)	Gossip is often seen as informal, casual or unconstrained conversation or reports about other people, typically involving details that are not confirmed as being true (Foster 2004, Kurland and Pelled, 2000). Gossip shall be re-conceptualized into job-related gossip (JRG) and non-job-related gossip (NJG). (p. 2290)
26	Peters and Kashima (2015)	A communication act that involves a social triad composed of a gossiper, a social target (whose behaviors and attributes form the topic of discussion), and an audience. We do not limit gossip to a particular content nor to specific relationships (p. 784)
27	Brady, Brown and Liang (2017)	WG - Informal and evaluative (i.e., positive or negative) talk from one member of an organization to one or more members of the same organization about another member of the organization who is not present to hear what is said (p. 9)
28	Fernandes, Kapoor and Karandikar (2017)	Evaluative talk about absent others (p. 218)
29	Baum, Rabovsky, Rose and Abdel Rahman (2018)	Gossip verbally labeled as untrustworthy information
30	Robbins and Karan (2019)	Discussion of someone who is not present in the conversation (p. 4)

A review at the definitions in the table reveals that statements vary with respect to the dimensions of gossip including depth, content type, context and individuals highlighted. Looking carefully at all these definitions, we see several tensions emerging. First, according to some scholars, gossip is conceived of as an act, an exchange of information (e.g., Bergmann 1993, Foster 2004). However, other researchers conceptualize gossip as information content (e.g., McAndrew et

al. 2002). According to the majority of authors, gossip deals with information about an absent other (e.g., Foster 2004, Wert and Salovey 2004, Farley et al 2010), while according to other authors including Dunbar et al. (1997) and Emler (1994), gossip can be conducted by the sender about him or herself. Additionally, some authors consider gossip as the exchange of social and public content (e.g., Dunbar et al. 1997, Emler 1994, Dunbar 2004), while others consider gossip the exchange of personal, private and intimate content (e.g., Bergmann 1993, Rosnow and Fine 1976, Foster 2004, Mills 2010). Some scholars consider gossiping informal, describing it as idle or small talk (e.g., Guerin and Miyazaki 2006, Rosnow 1977, Michelson and Mouly 2000), while others stress the fact that it has an evaluative and judgmental component (e.g., Eder and Enke 1991, Feinberg et al. 2012, Fernandes et al. 2017). Some authors consider gossip as exclusively negative (e.g., Farley et al. 2010), while others specify that it can be both positive and negative (e.g., Foster 2004, Levin and Arluke 1985). For some scholars, gossip focuses exclusively on members of the same social group (e.g., Kurland and Pelled 2000, Wert and Salovey 2004), while for others gossip can also focus on people who are not known (e.g., McAndrew and Milenkovic 2002, Levin and Arluke 1985).

After collecting and inspecting these definitions, we progress to delineation following the suggestions of Podsakoff et al. (2016). In other words, we organize the potential gossip attributes by underlying themes to try to identify a set of necessary and sufficient attributes. Examining all of the characteristics of gossip previously identified in the literature, we identify some recurring elements. Table 4 below aims at summarizing the meanings and boundaries of the concept. In this table, we include only elements that are shared by at least two definitions in Table 3 (see the Appendix for a more detailed table including all elements). In addition, we attempt to identify the fundamental dimensions of gossip. These elements should comprise the necessary and sufficient conditions to define gossip. The fundamental gossip elements identified in this preliminary effort appear in the table as underlined. According to Podsakoff and colleagues (2016), concepts described by necessary and sufficient attributes are defined in terms of a logical combination of features; an entity qualifies for membership if, and only if, all attributes are present. Therefore, it is exactly the

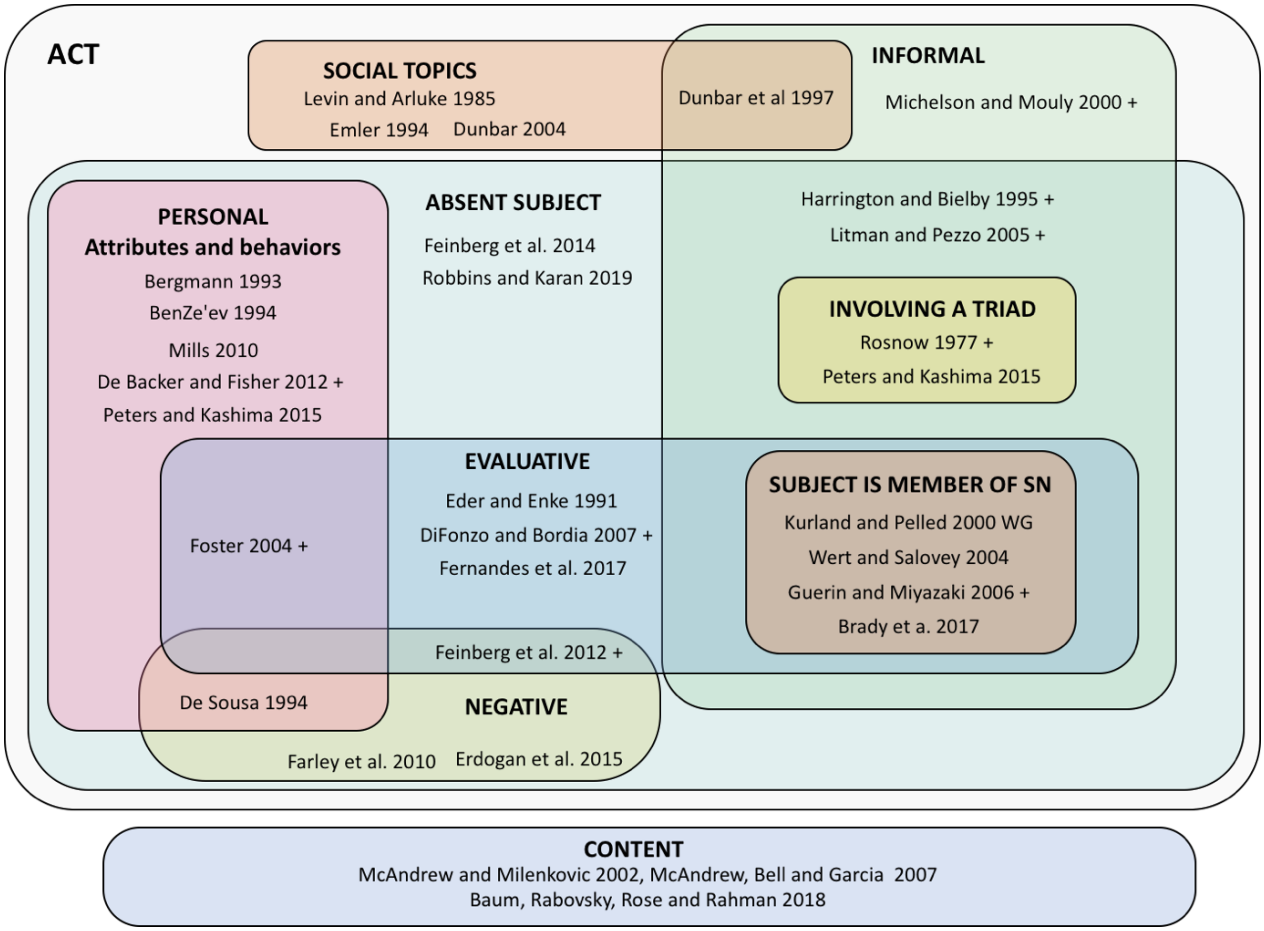
combination of these attributes that allows one to distinguish the concept of gossip from other, related concepts.

Table 4. Meanings of the gossip concept across definitions

Definition	Gossip as content	Gossip as an act	Involves a social triad	Absent third party / Others	Content: Personal behavior and attributes	Evaluative	Informal	Negative	Content: Social topics	Subject is member of the Social Network
Rosnow 1977		1	1	1			1			
Levin and Arluke 1985		1		1					1	
Eder and Enke 1991		1		1		1				
Bergmann 1993		1		1	1					
BenZe'ev 1994		1		1	1		1			
De Sousa 1994		1		1	1			1		
Emler 1994		1		1					1	
Harrington and Bielby 1995		1		1			1			
Dunbar et al. 1997		1		1			1		1	
Kurland and Pelled 2000 - WG		1		1		1	1			1
Michelson and Mouly 2000		1					1			
McAndrew et al. 2002 and 2007	1				1	1				
Foster 2004		1		1	1	1				
Wert and Salovey 2004		1		1		1	1			1
Dunbar 2004									1	
Litman and Pezzo 2005		1		1			1			
Guerin and Miyazaki 2006		1		1			1			1
DiFonzo and Bordia 2007		1		1		1				
Mills 2010		1		1	1		1			
Farley et al. 2010		1		1				1		
Feinberg et al. 2012		1		1		1		1		
Feinberg et al. 2012 - PG		1		1		1		1		
De Backer and Fisher 2012		1		1	1		1			
Feinberg et al. 2014		1		1						
Erdogan et al. 2015		1		1				1		
Peters and Kashima 2015		1	1	1	1					
Fernandes et al. 2017		1		1		1				
Martin et al. 2017		1		1		1				
Baum et al. 2018	1									
Robbins and Karan 2019		1		1						

Figure 1 provides a graphical mapping of the definitions according to the elements reported in table 4. We build this figure using a Venn diagram logic, grouping definitions that share the same attributes, definitions that have two or more common elements are positioned in the intersections.

Figure 1 – Mapping gossip definitions



In constructing the picture, we began with the characteristic that is shared by most definitions (gossip as an act) and inserted boxes grouping definitions according to frequency. Note that the presence of a "+" in the figure indicates that the definition included an additional element which is unique to that definition and not shared by any other definition in our set (a complete table with the additional elements is available in the appendix).

Considering all of these different conceptualizations of gossip, and the resulting tensions that emerge, the outcome is a clear case of conceptual unclarity, making it difficult for a researcher

investigating gossip to understand what this behavior really is. In order to address this confusion, as highlighted before, we use Posdakoff et al.'s (2016) framework to begin to identify the characteristics of gossip that are unique to this behavior only (necessary and sufficient conditions to define gossip). In the next section, we highlight the elements we consider most important.

FUNDAMENTAL GOSSIP ELEMENTS

Across all extant definitions of gossip, we recognized some recurring elements that we use as key components for our initial efforts regarding re-conceptualization. In what follows, we define the *intension set* of necessary and sufficient conditions of the gossip construct. These necessary and sufficient conditions require further empirical validation, which we implement in a follow up study. Nevertheless, this initial effort can help researchers to clearly identify, conceptualize and study gossip.

Gossip as an act

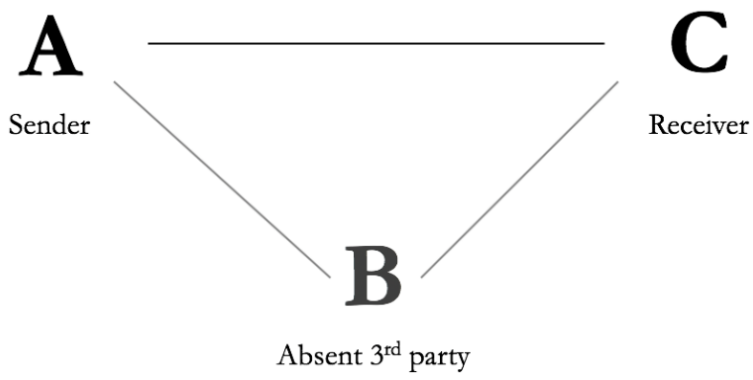
First, gossip should be conceived as an *act*. In everyday conversations "gossip" can refer to both the content being shared and the *act* of personal information retransmission. We, together with most of the previous literature, consider gossip as an action: the exchange of information. This implies there is someone generating information, someone receiving that information, or there can be a mutual multi-partite transfer of information (a conversation). Seeing gossip as an act is important because it identifies the concept as a behavior, something that happens in the real world between individuals. By being an act of information retransmission, gossip can be both unidirectional (one individual talking and the other listening), or bidirectional (both individuals communicating), and it occurs whichever perspective is taken, as long as there is an exchange between parties. Of course, gossip can also happen between a sender and an audience that consists of more than one individual, and the same holds for the absent subject (can be more than one individual). For the sake of simplicity, in this paper we refer to the sender, subject and receiver as

unique (i.e., single) individuals, but the reasoning holds also in the case of multiple parties in each role. It is important to specify that gossip involves an act in order to solve the ambiguity created by the definitions that equate gossip with the content of the message and not the act of transferring such a content.

Gossip is relational

One fundamental point is that gossip, as an act, requires the inclusion of three parties: (1) sender A who shares personal information about an (2) absent party B with a (3) receiver or audience C. These parties comprise a social-triad that has been labeled a *gossip-triad.* The importance of the triad is anticipated in Rosnow's (1977) definition. Peters and Kashima (2015) also introduce a social triad in their definition. Even though these authors have mentioned the presence of a triadic dimension, the *gossip-triad* has not been formalized in previous literature as a fundamental element of gossip. It is fundamental and necessary to emphasize this relational dimension of gossip because, as a behavior, it exists in the real world only if these three parties are involved. Figure 2 provides a graphical representation of the gossip-triad.

Figure 2. The gossip triad



Party B is the absent third-party and is the target or subject of gossip. Gossip, indeed, emerges fundamentally as a relational behavior, as it could not happen without the three main actors

"participating" in the gossip-triad. Of course, the absent subject does not have to take an active role; his "participation" in is merely driven by being the target of the conversation. This relational element of gossip has been largely undervalued by existing definitions. Indeed, gossip happens only when these three parties are party to the personal information exchange. Moreover, the relationships across members of the gossip-triad represent a critical variable in understanding the phenomenon. For example, it is exactly the absence of the third party that characterizes information sharing as gossip because that party is not present and individuals plausibly work under the assumption of "secrecy," meaning they are not supposed to have a conversation and party B would not want this to occur. We will dedicate specific attention to the gossip-triad by focusing on the subjects involved and the relationships among them in a later section.

The absent third party

One of the most important aspects of gossip, suggested by a sizable number of prior definitions, is that the subject of the information exchange is not part of the conversation. This means one party, the one whom is being talked about, is *absent*. We believe that the *absence* of the main subject of the news exchanged constitutes a fundamental element of gossiping behavior. The *absence* of the third party emphasizes the fact that the subject does not explicitly condone others discussing personal information about them, and this is the element that primarily drives the negative stigma attached to gossiping. In the age of social media and online communication, by absent we mean: the information is neither directed to nor is intended to be seen by the absent party. For example, when we read celebrity gossip on Twitter, the intention of the transmitter (e.g., TMZ) is to share the message to an audience that is composed of individuals other than the celebrity. Importantly, we believe that the absent third party does not have to be part of the social environment of the sender and the receiver. We know that people can gossip about strangers (Baumeister et al. 2004), and that many people discuss the personal life of celebrities (McAndrew and Milenkovic 2002), even if these subjects are clearly not part of their social environment.

In addition, we know that when people learn that they are the target of cynical evaluation by others, they react negatively (Martin, Borah and Palmatier 2017), experiencing feelings of violation and betrayal (Richman and Leary 2009). The absence of the third party allows the sender and the receiver to discuss that person without intending to hurt a subject who is not present. Moreover, when one individual transmits something about an absent other to the receiver, the audience is often learning something new. This means the absent subject did not communicate this information directly to the audience, implying that the audience was not supposed to have the information. By violating this notion of expected privacy, the two parties involved in the communication are exchanging something that was presumed to be kept undisclosed, as the absent third party may not want such information to be shared.

Personal and evaluative content

Information about absent others is often not easy to obtain, and this is particularly true the more the information is personal, private and self-disclosing. Following Bergmann (1993) and Foster (2004), in order to be considered gossip, the content of the information exchange has to be *personal*. By *personal*, we mean content that is considered self-relevant, disclosing and intimate by at least one of the parties involved in gossiping. Personal content can include discussing the characteristics, traits and behaviors of others or talking about facts that are considered of personal relevance (e.g., romantic relationships). We think that it is important to specify that the content of gossip is personal information to distinguish it from the mere dissemination of news. The fact that someone – either the sender, the receiver or the absent subject – considers this information as *personal* implies that the information is valuable and important (Min 2016). In addition, given we do not believe that gossip happens only in informal situations, we recognize that there are conditions (or contexts) that make the transmission of personal information about others easier. For example, individuals might be more prone to gossip with a group of close others during a party and less inclined to gossip during a work-meeting with their bosses.

In sum, *personal information* is particularly important when defining gossiping because the content is considered valuable, as it is a supposed representation of the subject's inner thoughts, feelings and internal states. Moreover, people share personal content with and about others because they consider it precious.

According to some definitions, gossip has an *evaluative* component (Wert and Salovey 2004, Foster 2004), which implies that the content exchanged can be *both positive and negative* and the meaning attached to information sharing (gossip) can have a valence too. Does gossip have to be always evaluative? Not according to recent research that sampled real conversations among individuals and found a good portion of the information exchanged while gossiping tends to be neutrally-valenced (i.e., Levin and Arluke 1985, Robbins and Karan 2019). Nevertheless, gossip is considered by conventional wisdom as evaluative, in particular reflecting a negative connotation. Despite the negative attribution, gossip is considered a positive behavior too. The entertainment and fun dimensions of gossip have been defended by BenZe'ev (1994), who argues that, in general, a common intuition shared by most people is that gossiping involves an enjoyable activity. The evaluative component of gossip represents one element that is problematic as it is currently not clear if it can be considered as a fundamental element to qualify the concept or not. In addition, the evaluative nature of the passed-on information can be discreet and is often only recognized by the tone of the speaker's voice, or by subtle remarks that only group members can understand (Wert and Salovey 2004). At the same time, we recognize that gossip, dealing with information that is about someone absent, needs to be evaluative in the sense of being speculative (e.g., trying to assess the truth).

One interesting possibility is that the evaluative component makes gossip more enjoyable compared to the case in which is neutral, and this may be an additional element rather than a fundamental one. Recent research by He, Melumad and Pham (2019) shows that consumers derive an inherent pleasure from engaging in evaluative judgments, expressing their likes and dislikes even when they do not have to make a choice.

Surely, the value and evaluative nature of gossip may be largely subjective. Indeed, we think that the *personal* and *evaluative* components of gossip can go hand-in-hand, as these characteristics distinguish gossiping from the simple dissemination of facts. In line with Foster (2004), we think that gossip has a meta-communicative evaluative component (largely driven by the presence of personal content) that can be both implicit and explicit. These components make gossiping considerably different from simple information retransmission.

Lastly, when individuals discuss the intimate details of someone else's life while not in their presence, they are sharing information that is intrinsically valuable and engaging in a behavior that is morally questionable. This characteristic is a distinct aspect of gossip, which makes it an exciting but often guilt-inducing activity. The absence of the third party can increase the "juiciness" of even the most trivial content, because the sharer and the receiver are free to express any thoughts about an idea without the subject being aware. In addition, the sender and receiver are free to discuss and question all of the actions, attributes, and characteristics that they find interesting, without facing the chance of embarrassing or threatening the absent subject. This is particularly true the more negative and evaluative the conversation; gossip offers the opportunity for people to express moral judgment on the behaviors and traits of the absent third party without facing immediate reply or retribution from the subject. In this sense, the "cultural learning" function of gossip highlighted by Baumeister et al. (2004) reaches its highest expression. According to these authors, people use gossip to learn how to live in their cultural society by communicating rules in narrative form. This happens, for example, by describing how someone behaved violating social norms.

To sum up, gossip deals with *personal* information, meaning that the content is perceived to be self-relevant and disclosing. Secondly, gossip is valuable and can be *evaluative*, meaning that the parties involved see value in the information exchange and derive value from engaging in the act of gossiping that is probably higher the more evaluative the conversation is (i.e., the more there is speculation). Lastly, gossip often deals with a private dimension, meaning the information generally is not intended to be disseminated broadly.

Putting these elements together, we can advance a comprehensive definition of gossip:

Gossip happens when a sender "A" *communicates*, often in an *evaluative way* (positive or negative), *personal* information about *absent third party* "B" to receiver(s) "C".

By identifying the fundamental elements of gossip and by offering a preliminary comprehensive definition rooted in a review of the extant literature, we provide guidance to future researchers on which elements to consider when identifying and studying gossip.

What gossip is not

Identifying the fundamental gossip elements also helps in clarifying what gossip is not. First of all, gossip is not content, it is not an idea or a thought. Gossip is present in the world when there is an information exchange. Second, gossip is more than information retransmission per-se, it deals with personal and often evaluative content. This means that communicating a non-personal fact about another individual is not gossip. For example, parents discussing the grades of their children, while not in their presence, would not qualify as gossip. A boss that communicates to his employees that a co-worker is busy in another meeting is not gossiping. As discussed earlier, the boundaries of what is personal and what is not are often subjective. Indeed, the members involved in the gossip triad are those who define what is personal and what is not. Researchers that do not specify that the content of gossip is personal information risk focusing on behaviors that do not fall under this umbrella (e.g., Feinberg et al. 2014, Robbins and Karan 2009).

What is also not gossip is self-disclosure. Self-disclosure involves the act of revealing personal information about oneself to another (Collins and Miller 1994). In the case of self-disclosure, there is no absent third party, as the source of the discussion is the sender him or herself. Therefore, when individuals discuss their own personal lives with others, they are not gossiping. This goes against the proposed definitions of Levin and Arluke (1985), Emler (1994), Dunbar et al.

(1997), Michelson and Mouly (2000) and Dunbar (2004). Making this distinction is important in order to avoid conceptual confusion as gossip and self-disclosure are two very different constructs.

It is also important to distinguish gossip from the related concept of *rumor,* as there has been confusion regarding the distinction between these two constructs. Some researchers have argued that gossip and rumor are effectively synonymous (Michelson and Mouly 2000). Rosnow (2001, p. 204) defines rumor as "an unconfirmed statement or report that is in widespread circulation". DiFonzo and Bordia (2007, p. 13) define rumor as "unverified and instrumentally relevant information statements in circulation that arise in contexts of ambiguity, danger or potential threat, and that function to help people make sense and manage risk." However, rumors may or may not concern individuals while gossip is always about the private affairs of individuals (Foster and Rosnow 2006). In fact, rumors usually relate to events or organizations. In addition, people are more likely to question the veracity of a rumor than of gossip as rumors are often linked to uncertainty about events (Farley et al. 2010). In fact, by definition, rumors lack legitimacy and/or real proof. Furthermore, rumors are not meant to be kept secret, but are instead intended for widespread circulation which is in contrast with the personal and private nature of gossip (DiFonzo and Bordia 2007). Lastly, an important distinction is that the word rumor is used to describe informational content, and individuals engage in rumor spreading or sharing. While gossip is an action, which involves the spread of personal information about individuals.

Finally, gossip is not Word-of-Mouth (WOM). WOM has been defines as "informal communications directed at other consumers about the ownership, usage, or characteristics of particular goods and services or their sellers" (Westbrook 1987, p. 261). According to Berger (2014), WOM includes discussions about products and brands; this discussion happens between a sender and an audience and it often refers to the direct experiences and opinions of the sender. The fact that the content deals with consumption experiences and the subject is not absent clearly qualifies WOM as non-gossip. Some scholars have studied information provided by others, defining it as WOM retransmission. For example, De Angelis et al. (2012, p. 552) use the term "WOM

transmission" to describe a situation in which consumers pass on information about experiences with products and services they have heard occurred to someone else. Even if, in this case, the subject of the content is not the sender, this cannot qualify as gossip, as the content of the information does not deal with personal information.

Now that, we have proposed a working definition of gossip and clarified what gossip is (and is not), we focus our attention on the relational dimension of gossip and investigate, in depth, the role of the gossip-triad and the interpersonal relationships across parties.

THE GOSSIP TRIAD

One of the fundamental elements that define gossip, anticipated but not elaborated on or formalized in previous literature, is that it involves the presence of a social triad referred to as the *gossip-triad*. We posit that a crucial component of gossip is indeed relational, as gossip serves as a way to create, build and maintain interpersonal relationships. The lack of research on gossip in the interpersonal relationships' domain calls for a deeper investigation. In this section, we dedicate specific attention to the relational dimension of gossip and investigate the role of the members of the gossip-triad.

Gossip and interpersonal relationships

Gossip exists as a system of interpersonal relationships between the sender A, the absent subject B and the receiver(s) C. In order to understand gossip, one must focus on the relationships involved in the exchange. However, little research investigates gossip through the lenses of interpersonal relationships (e.g. McAndrew 2007, Martinescu et al. 2019). In particular, an aspect that has been generally overlooked by gossip literature is the role of relationships among the members of the gossip-triad.

Gossip usually occurs among people who know each other. Some exceptions to this can be found. One salient example is at the hairdresser, where there is usually a proliferation of gossip

magazines and keen discussions about the latest celebrity news, Or, equally, in waiting rooms. Apart from these occasions, which constitute their own interesting contexts of investigation, gossip generally has been examined as something that happens in small groups (Smith et al. 1999, Eder and Enke 1991) composed by individuals who are part of the same crowd (Steele et al. 1999), or who are familiar to each other (Wert and Salovey 2004), or know and trust each other well (De Backer and Fisher 2012). For example, McAndrew (2007) analyzed the interest expressed by college students in knowing and sharing with allies and non-allies different scenarios about friends, relative, professors, acquaintances, strangers, romantic partners and same-sex rivals both male and female. College students reported being more inclined to share, with allies rather than non-allies, positive news about peers, and negative news about rivals. Again, in the relational domain, Feinberg (2012) investigates *prosocial gossip*, which happens when people share negative information about a third party in order to protect vulnerable people from antisocial behaviors. *Prosocial gossip* is especially prevalent among prosocial individuals with a strong need to help and cooperate with others (Feinberg 2012).

In the workplace setting, characterized by relationships based on hierarchy, Kurland and Pelled (2000) develop a set of propositions about the power of gossip. The authors propose that gossip is used to increases the sharer's coercive, reward, expert, and referent power over the recipient. Moreover, negative gossiping heightens the sharer's coercive power over the recipients, while positive gossiping enhances the gossiper's reward power over the recipients.

Recently, Martinescu et al. (2019) investigated how hierarchical power relationships shape individuals' gossip motives and behavior. The authors examined interactions between individuals in in downward, upward and lateral relationships and find gossip is less likely and content less elaborate in downward compared to upward and lateral interactions. In addition, the authors find people gossip laterally to seek information and social support, and upwards to exert influence (Martinescu et al. 2019).

Considering that gossip happens between some individuals and is about someone else, investigating who these "someone elses" are, and which types of relationships characterize the linkages, is extremely important. As we can see, there is variety in the types of interpersonal relationships included in gossip research. These include, for example, relationships between peers (i.e., friends) and hierarchical relationships (i.e., worker-boss). What is the difference between two friends who discuss the intimate details of another close friends and two colleagues who talk about their boss? Or two acquaintances who share the latest celebrity gossip? What kind of emotional and behavioral responses are driven by different interpersonal relationships? One of the goals of our conceptual effort is to highlight that different relationships among the individuals involved in gossiping (sender A, subject B and audience C) shape the behavior in a fundamental way, while most of previous research has looked at only a portion of the gossip-triad. Ultimately, in order to fully understand gossip, it is fundamental to clarify who each of these parties are.

The gossip-triad across the empirical literature

In order to investigate the representativeness of each party in the triad across the gossip literature, we again turn to the 55 papers collected and identify those 39 articles that either theoretically or empirically discuss one of the members of the triad. Table 5 provides a summary of this investigation (papers ordered alphabetically by author).

Looking at existing research, we see a large portion of the published articles on gossip focus on the sender A, and, specifically, 85% of the articles discuss the motivation, or study the behavior of the sharer. Moreover, a considerable portion of articles (31%) focus exclusively on the sender, without mentioning other parties in the triad. The absent third-party B is considered – for example by varying whether the subject of the gossip is the boss or a co-worker – around 45% of the times together with either the sender or the receiver.

Table 5. Gossip investigations across the gossip-triad

Author & Year	Sender A	Subject B	Receiver C
Baum, Rabovsky, Rose and Rahman (2018)		1	
Baumeister, Zhang and Vohs (2004)	1		1
Beersma and Van Kleef (2012)	1		1
Ben-Ze'ev (1994)	1		1
Bosson, Johnson, Niederhoffer and Swann (2006)	1	1	
Chua and de la Cerna (2014)	1		
Cole and Scrivener (2013)	1	1	
De Backer and Fisher (2012)		1	
Decoster, Camps, Stouten, Vandevyvere and Tripp (2013)	1	1	
Ellwardt, Wittek and Wielers (2012)	1	1	
Erdogan, Bauer and Walter (2015)	1		
Farley, Timme and Hart (2010)	1		
Feinberg, Willer and Schultz (2014)	1		
Feinberg, Willer, Stellar and Keltner (2012)	1	1	1
Fernandes, Kapoora and Karandikar (2017)	1	1	
Foster (2004)	1	1	1
Harrington, Lee and Bielby (1995)	1		
Hopper and Aubrey (2013)		1	1
Kim, Moon and Shin (2019)	1	1	
Kuo, Chang, Quinton, Lu and Lee (2015)	1		
Kurland and Pelled (2000)	1		1
Lee and Workman (2014)	1		
Levin and Arluke (1985)	1	1	
Martin, Borah and Palmatier (2017)	1	1	
Martinescu, Janssen and Nijstad (2019)	1		1
McAndrew and Milenkovic (2002)	1	1	
McAndrew, Bell and Garcia (2007)	1	1	
Okazaki, Rubio and Campo (2013)	1		
Okazaki, Rubio and Campo (2014)	1		
Peters and Kashima (2015)	1	1	1
Peters, Jetten and Radova (2017)	1		
Robbins and Karan (2019)	1	1	
Tassiello, Lombardi and Costabile (2018)	1		1
Tian, Song, Kwan and Li (2019)			1
Waddington (2005)	1		1
Watson (2017)	1		
Wert and Salovey (2004)	1		
Wu, Birtch, Chiang and Zhang (2018)		1	
Wu, Kwan, Wu and Ma (2018)			1

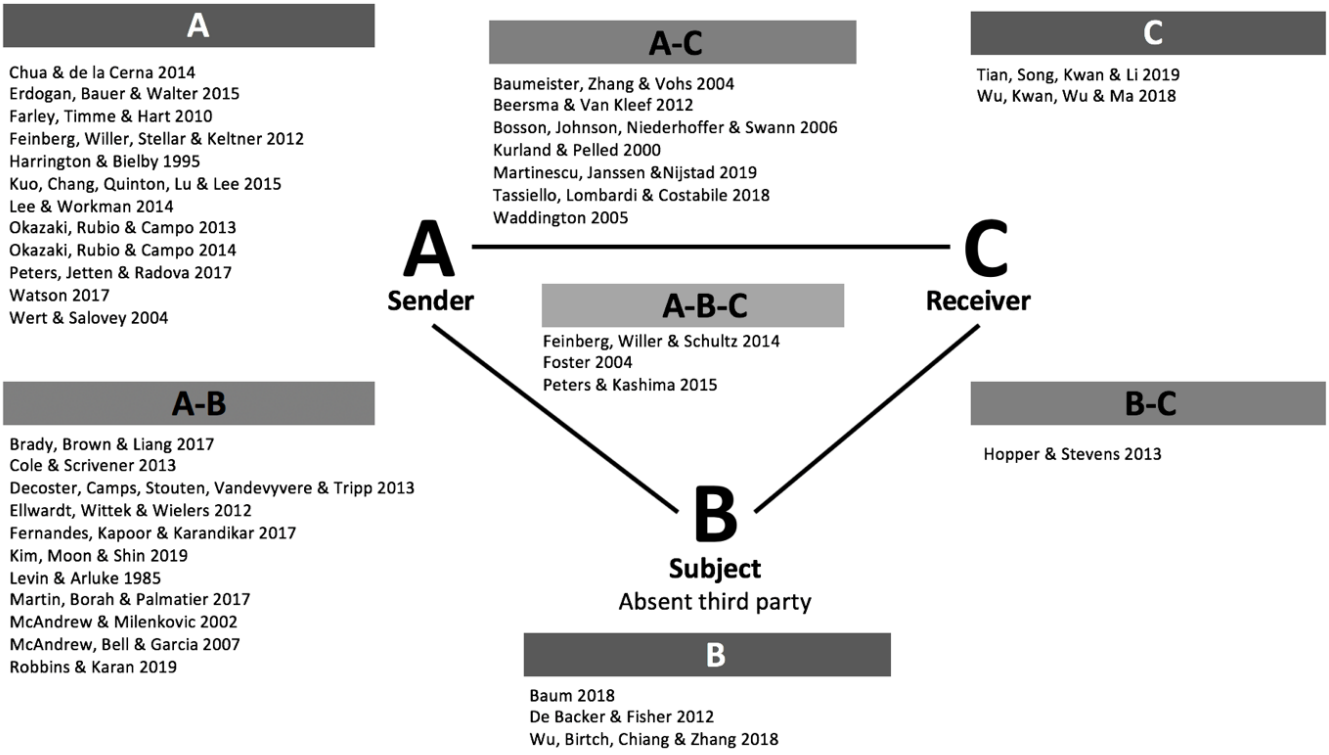
We could identify only three articles that focus exclusively on the subject B (8%), for example, by asking participants to imagine being the target of gossip by someone else. Lastly, less than 35% of the articles consider the role of the receiver C, for example, by distinguishing between a receiver who is in one's in-group vs. out-group. Similarly, with respect to the absent party, we could identify only two articles that focus explicitly on the receiver C (5%). For example, Wu et al. (2018) ask participants to imagine receiving a piece of gossip.

When we look at previous research that explored members of the triad together, we find very few articles (8%, or three articles) consider and discuss the role of all the members of the triad together. This is surprising, as gossip exists because there is interplay among the three members of the gossip triad. More than 28% of the articles examine the (A-B) relationship (e.g., McAndrew et al. 2007), although most of these articles are in the workplace domain and look at A's motivation to gossip while varying B. Less than 18% of the articles examine the (A-C) relationship. For example, Bosson et al. (2013) look at the how sharing negative gossip fosters the relationship between the sender and the receiver. Lastly, only one article focuses explicitly on the (B-C) relationship. This is work by Hopper and Stevens (2011) that looks at the reaction of the audience to information about pregnant celebrities. Figure 3 below describes the empirical investigations of gossip mapped in the gossip-triad. What is clearly visible is that the largest portion of work is focused on the sender A, or looks at the sender's relationship with the other two members involved (A-B and A-C).

There is currently very little research focused on the absent subject B and the receiver C. Also, the only paper that focuses on the (B-C) relationship is the one by Hopper and Stevens (2013) which focuses on a very narrow context, the impact of celebrity gossip magazine coverage of pregnant celebrities on pregnant women's self-objectification. What is also evident, is the fact that there are too few investigations of gossip that discuss the role of all the three members of the gossip-triad together (A-B-C). The theoretical paper by Foster (2004) discusses previous gossip research; instead, Peters and Kashima (2015) investigate how gossipers (A) that share diagnostic information about the morality of subject (B) may help receivers (C) to identify subjects that are

trustworthy or not. Feinberg et al. (2014), investigate the spread of reputational information through gossip in the context of triadic cooperation (A-B-C).

Figure 3. Gossip investigations in the gossip-triad



Overall, this picture offers clear visual evidence of where there is a dearth of research about gossip and interpersonal relationships. In addition, given the importance of relations in gossip, when studying gossip, it is wise to take into consideration the roles of all the members of the triad. Researchers interested in studying this behavior, should take into consideration who A, B and C are, and what kind of relationships exist between and among these parties.

NEXT STEPS: RE-GROUNDING GOSSIP

After *summarizing* existing gossip research and *delineating* the gossip concept, we have provided a preliminary definition for the construct. Following Podsakoff et al.'s (2016) recommendations for creating better concept definitions, we are now in the last stage of planning to

refine and validate our working definition by undertaking a grounded-theory approach. We plan to use this approach because re-grounding is particularly useful in the case of conceptual confusion (Welch et al. 2016). Our goal is to derive the most accurate, clear and comprehensive definition of gossip possible. To do this, we asked a large sample of individuals to describe what gossip means to them and to explain their perceptions of gossip. A secondary goal of this effort will be to investigate further the roles of the member of the gossip-triad.

Methodological approach: Nationally Representative Survey

To validate our definition and increase our understanding of the gossip behavior, we developed an open-ended survey using a grounded-theory approach. We collaborated with a survey platform to administer the survey to a nationally representative sample of 1,011 US individuals. The goal of this survey is to understand people's perception and assessment of gossip as a behavior and as a concept. In addition, we randomly asked participants to take the perspective of being either the sender, the receiver or the target of gossip and provide their opinion related to the distinct roles of the members of the gossip-triad.

The survey is structured in three stages. At the beginning, all participants were asked to think about the last time in which they engaged in gossiping. They were asked to describe, as carefully as possible, the circumstance and to provide details about whatever they view as important, including the individuals involved, the context, and the topic. The goal at this stage was to collect a large number of gossip instances and map them according to the fundamental gossip elements that we have identified. In addition, we were able to obtain information about which are the topics, the kind of valence and the typical circumstances. In the second stage of the survey, participants were asked to provide their own definition of gossip. This allows us to understand how the general consumer conceives of gossip and verify the alignment of popular understanding with our re-conceptualization. The third stage involved a random assignment of participants into one of three conditions (between-subjects) that varied depending on the type of actor in the gossip-triad.

We provided participants with a graphical representation of gossip (full pictures in the Appendix). Each individual was asked to think about the last time in which s/he had been the sender, the receiver or the target of gossip, and to describe the situation and provide further details. In particular, they read one of the following descriptions:

Sender - Think now about the last time in which you have been the sender of gossip, meaning that you were sharing personal information about an absent target to someone else (you are subject A in the picture). Please provide a summary of the gossip situation and describe which were your goals, motivations, intentions, feelings and expectations regarding your behavior. Feel free to add all the details you think are helpful to qualify/understand the situation.

Receiver - Think now about the last time in which you have been the receiver of gossip, meaning that you were receiving personal information about an absent target from someone/something else (you are subject B in the picture). Please provide a summary of the gossip situation and describe which were your thoughts, reactions, feelings and opinions about the situation in general, the sender and the target. Feel free to add all the details you think are helpful to qualify/understand the situation.

Absent target - Think now about the last time in which you have been the target of gossip, meaning that you were the absent subject of someone else's conversation (you are the absent target C in the picture). Please provide a summary of the gossip situation and describe which were your thoughts, reactions, feelings and opinions about situation in general, the sender and the receiver. Feel free to add all the details you think are helpful to qualify/understand the situation.

By asking participants to focus on one of the three members of the gossip-triad, we aim at gathering further understanding of the perspectives, emotions and opinions of each of the parties involved.

We conducted a preliminary coding of participant's responses to the first and the second question according to the fundamental gossip elements identified in the conceptual review. This first coding attempt allows us to assess if these characteristics constitute the gossip *intention set.* In

addition, we hoped to identify some potential other important elements of gossip that we, together with previous literature, have been overlooking thus far.

Regarding the third stage of the survey (questions about the members of the triad), we plan to examine participants' responses with the goal to identify patterns of emotions, motivations and intentions across the different roles. By doing this, we aim at deepening our understanding of the different roles of the members of the gossip-triad.

Preliminary results on the gossip definition

The first step of our empirical analysis involved a first round of coding of all 1,011 entries provided by our nationally representative sample. We began by reading all the descriptions and definitions of gossip of participants taking note of every case where there is a mention of one of the fundamental gossip elements. We excluded all entries that did not include interpretable information (125, 12%). We focus on the frequencies (percentages) of the fundamental elements across all other responses. Table 6 below summarizes the preliminary results.

Table 6. Gossip characteristics in the Nationally Representative Sample

Characteristic	An act	Involves a social triad	Absent third party / Others	Personal behavior	Evaluative
Frequency (%)	84%	67%	63%	37%	27%

Overall, we can see that a large percentage of participants described gossip as an act (84%). In addition, a considerable portion of respondents mentioned the presence of three distinct actors (67%) and specified that the subject of the information shared is absent (63%). These results confirm that individuals typically describe and think about gossip as a behavior, which includes at least three members, one of which is absent. We therefore confirm that people, in general, thinking of gossip in line with three of the fundamental characteristics already identified by previous

literature. In addition, a good portion of participants mentioned that the content of the information is personal or is a behavior of a person, with a general negative connotation (37%), and that the act involves an evaluative component which is largely driven by a speculative nature (27%). As we can see, the latter two characteristics are less well-represented, nevertheless, the results confirm their importance to the concept of gossiping.

Apart from confirming the fundamental gossip characteristics, our preliminary coding revealed the presence of some elements that have been overlooked by current literature. In particular, 20% of respondents described gossip as sharing information which is untruthful. Words used to describe this characteristic include n*ot entirely true*, *partial*, *twisted*, *not verified*, *out of context*, *exaggerated*, and *secondhand information*. This finding suggest that might be an additional fundamental dimension of gossip which justifies many of its characteristics. Indeed, the evaluative and speculative components are nurtured by the presence of informational unclarity (or even asymmetry). Across the gossip literature, information truthfulness has been regarded as a secondary element; this was probably driven by a belief that whether the information shared with gossip is true or not does not change the nature of the behavior. But our respondents suggest that truth, or dealing with uncertainty and untruth, is an important characteristic of gossip.

Going back to the literature, we found evidence of this characteristic in the definitions offered by Michelson and Mouly (2000) and Litman and Pezzo (2005). Overall, these preliminary findings confirm the value of our empirical approach by generating new insights and opening further questions. Additional analysis of this dataset will allow us to better understand and conceptualize the gossip behavior, and further open new possible research areas in this domain.

Future steps

Besides the fundamental gossip characteristics, we also coded the contexts that were most frequently mentioned by respondents. These mostly include family, friends, and the workplace, in addition, respondents mentioned neighbors and famous people. These will be the subject of future

exploration of the data with an attempt to develop a typology of gossip contexts. For example, we may distinguish between hierarchical and non-hierarchical gossip and close circle vs. distant others gossip. Another aspect that is emerging from the preliminary investigation of the quotes is that, as highlighted by previous literature, many respondents described gossip as a goal directed action. Across the different motivations to engage in the behavior, we could find some unexpected motivations related to coping and emotion regulation. Further analysis of the data is needed in order to clarify and explain this dimension.

On top of this, we will code all participant's responses in the second section of the survey (triad members) to further understand, besides the motivations and characteristics of the sender, which are the main reactions, emotional responses and outcomes for the receiver and the absent subject. Ultimately, this will allow us to increase our understanding of gossip outcomes too.

PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS

Motivated by the need to provide a comprehensive conceptualization of gossip, in this research we provide the first *systematic* and *conceptual* review of the construct of gossip and the gossiping literature. Following MacInnis' (2011) framework for conceptual contribution, we focused on gossip *summarization* and describe the state of current knowledge in the gossip domain. We further focused on a *delineation* of the literature on gossip and collected and analyzed a large number of definitions of gossip. Our review highlights substantial fuzziness in how gossip is currently conceptualized across and within different fields. We also encountered a considerable lack of definitional clarity on what gossip is. This ambiguity has undermined the consistency of the gossip literature limiting academics' ability to build constructively on each other's findings.

The outcome of our second step – the conceptual review of the literature - is a working definition rooted in extant literature and based on a relational perspective; gossip happens when a sender A communicates, often in an evaluative way (positive or negative), personal information about an absent third party B to receiver(s) C. While we followed Podsakoff et al.'s (2016)

framework for developing better concept definitions, this output is still preliminary, as it requires a refinement of our conceptualization. This refinement is the goal of our re-grounding effort.

The future of gossip research

In terms of recommendations for future research directions, gossip researchers can deepen the understanding of this behavior by focusing on the fundamental gossip elements. Being an act of information exchange, gossip could be enacted both in a vocal/oral or written way. In addition, it can be synchronous or asynchronous. Future researchers can therefore focus on the medium and the modalities of the communication. Considering the fundamental relevance of the members of the gossip triad, future research can focus on these subjects and the relationships among them. This implies understanding who A, B and C are and what types of relationships characterize the linkages across the members of the gossip-triad. For example, A as a sender/source can be institutional (e.g., a celebrity gossip magazine) or personal (e.g., a friend); B, as absent subject, can be a person of high status (e.g., a famous politician) or low status (e.g., a non-famous subject); C, as the audience, can be small (e.g., narrowcasting) or large (e.g., broadcasting). Also, both B and C can be in-group or out-group members from A's perspective, and this can be applied looking at each member's point of view.

Additionally, the relationship between A and B, A and C or B and C, can be strong (e.g., a romantic partner) or weak (e.g., acquaintance), it can be symmetric (e.g., friendship) or asymmetric (e.g., work boss). In addition, future research might advance categorizations of gossip in hierarchical vs. non-hierarchical contexts. All these subjects and relationships represent potential areas of future investigations. Future research can also explore different types of personal content and investigate further the relational dimension of gossip. Lastly, another interesting area of investigation is represented by the contexts in which gossip occurs, as these can be light or friendly, but also institutional or malicious.

Lastly, considering most of the extant research is focused on the sender, further studies could focus their investigations on the outcomes, values and motivations of all the three members involved. Indeed, this is what we aim to cover with the data collected from the nationally representative sample. A secondary goal of our research, besides conceptualizing gossip, will be to provide a clear framework of gossip antecedents (motivations, goals) and consequences (outcomes, emotional reactions) within the gossip triad.

In summary, conceptualizing constructs of importance is fundamental to the vitality of academic fields. Concepts in the social sciences need to be continuously questioned, revised and tested through a critical analysis of the current literature, a discussion within the scholarly community of reference, and an examination of existing empirical instances (Podsakoff et al. 2016). This research effort provides a first attempt to re-conceptualize gossip. Across our re-conceptualization, gossip emerges as a fundamental relational phenomenon. In order to understand and study gossip, researchers should focus on the individuals involved and the relationships among them.

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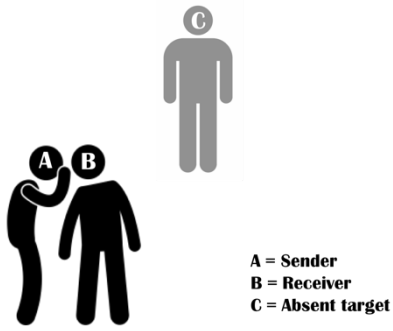
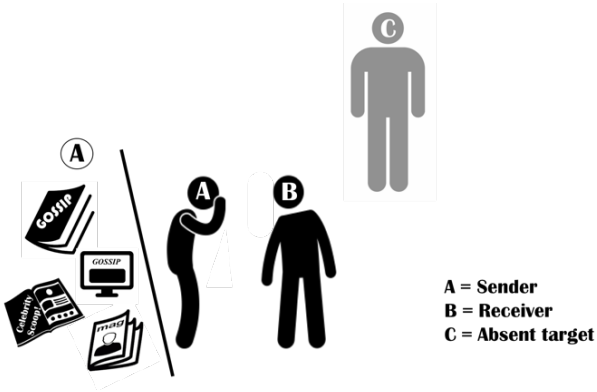
APPENDIX

The meanings and boundaries of the gossip concept across definitions											
Definition	**Gossip as content**	**Gossip as an act**	**Involves a social triad**	**Absent third party / Others**	**Content - Personal behavior and attributes**	**Evaluative**	**Informal**	**Negative**	**Content: Social topics**	**B member is of the social env.**	**Additional element**
Rosnow 1977		1	1	1			1				Is an instrumental transaction
Levin and Arluke 1985		1		1					1		
Eder and Enke 1991		1		1		1					
Bergmann 1993		1		1	1						
BenZe'ev 1994		1		1	1		1				
De Sousa 1994		1		1	1			1			
Emler 1994		1		1					1		
Harrington and Bielby 1995		1		1			1				Includes real or fictional people
Dunbar et al. 1997		1		1			1		1		
Kurland and Pelled 2000 - Workplace Gossip		1		1		1	1			1	
Michelson and Mouly 2000		1					1				Irrespective of fact / truthful
McAndrew 2002 and 2007	1				1	1					
Foster 2004		1		1	1	1					Needs a congenial context
Wert and Salovey 2004		1		1		1	1			1	
Dunbar 2004									1		
Litman and Pezzo 2005		1		1			1				Unverified news
Guerin and Miyazaki 2006		1		1			1			1	Novel, curious, scandalous, funny, and surprising elements
DiFonzo and Bordia 2007		1		1		1					Arises in a social network context
Mills 2010		1		1	1		1				
Farley et al. 2010		1		1				1			
Feinberg et al. 2012		1		1		1		1			
Feinberg et al. 2012 - Prosocial Gossip		1		1		1		1			Is done to protect others
De Backer and Fisher 2012		1		1	1		1				
Feinberg et al. 2014		1		1							
Erdogan et al. 2015		1		1				1			
Peters and Kashima 2015		1	1	1	1						
Fernandes et al. 2017		1		1		1					
Martin et al. 2017		1		1		1					
Baum et al. 2018	1										Contains untrustworthy information
Robbins and Karan 2019		1		1							

Figures used in the Nationally Representative Survey



For sender A and absent target C



For receiver B

Is Gossip Always Bad for Human Branding?

Unexpected Consequences of Celebrity Gossip

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the market for gossip by focusing on celebrities, key actors in this large business. Despite being a big market, the celebrity gossip has remained largely unexplored by marketing research. We start from the premise that gossip is foundational in the relationships that famous individuals build with their fans, as it is one of the primary sources of information that consumers use to build their image of a celebrity and relate to the human brand. By focusing on personal content of celebrities – information that is considered self-relevant, disclosing and intimate – we look at the impact of gossip (vs. self-disclosure) on consumer's evaluation of the message and the celebrity, especially as an endorser. By being in control of personal information, celebrities can strategically self-disclose information themselves, or bear the risk that others diffuse such personal content about them (i.e., via gossip). Across a set of four studies, we compare information delivered via gossip vs. delivered via self-disclosure and find that negative information that comes directly from celebrities is more likely to be shared by consumers compared to information received from a third-party (i.e., gossip). In addition, self-disclosed information is evaluated as more valuable and interesting. Despite this, and somewhat unexpectedly, negative information delivered via gossip (vs. self-disclosed) increases consumer's liking and appreciation of the celebrity, especially as an endorser. We aim at offering useful managerial insights to human brands and their managers on how to deal with personal information sharing and gossip.

Keywords

Gossip, Celebrities, Celebrity Gossip, Human Brand, Self-Disclosure

People love discussing the personal lives of celebrities. Despite its negative connotations, in daily parlance, gossiping is a behavior in which nearly everyone engages. About an hour of a consumer's daily conversations are dedicated to gossip (Robbins and Karan 2019), and gossip is the second most common topic of conversation between individuals after personal self-disclosure (Emler 1990). Within the phenomenon, celebrity gossip is a significant part of social interaction and is all over both the mainstream and social media. Zhao et al. (2011) have shown that news about celebrities online (Twitter) exceeds even what we see in the mainstream media. Websites such as TMZ.com attract more than 30 million online visitors every month and magazines including *People* and *US Weekly* reach an audience of more than 130 million consumers (Statista 2019). Gossip is big business too. Reports estimate the combined revenue for the celebrity gossip industry at more than $3 billion (Rutenberg 2011). In 2013, *People* alone generated $1.1 billion in advertising revenue, making it the American magazine with the greatest revenue based on advertising (Perez 2014). Consumers buy gossip magazines, visit gossip websites, watch gossip dedicated TV channels, and even purchase expensive tours in Hollywood with the goal of gathering the latest news and scoops about their favorite celebrities.

Overall, the gossip market constitutes a large phenomenon that remains mostly unexplored by marketing research. Key actors in this large business are celebrities, we know being one of the dominant subjects of gossiping (see Essay 1). Our goal in this essay is to focus both on the direct (human branding) and indirect (celebrity endorsement) consequences of the most widespread form of gossip, celebrity gossip. The fascination with the details of celebrities' lives is evident when one considers who has the most Twitter followers, which includes celebrities ranging from Katy Perry to LeBron James. Celebrities, as human brands, are constantly managing their image (Thomson 2006). All the details, scandals, personal revelations and scoops about famous people increase people's interest in their life and consequently nurture the celebrity gossip industry. Gossip is therefore foundational in the relationships that celebrities build with their fans, as it constitutes one of the primary sources of information that consumers use to build their image of a celebrity and

relate to the human brand. But what is the value of gossip for celebrities? In this research we try to assess the impact of gossip on celebrities as human-brands and consequently as product and brand endorsers.

It is critical to stress that gossip is fundamental in creating the relationship between a celebrity and the audience as there is no actual interpersonal interaction between the two. By knowing the details of celebrities' personal lives, fans develop a higher sense of connection to their idols. Indeed, relationships between celebrities and consumers have been labeled *parasocial* (Horton and Wohl 1956). A *parasocial* relationship consists in an illusionary experience where consumers interact with famous persons as if they are present and engaged in a reciprocal relationship when actually this is not the case.

Based on the ubiquity of gossip and the nature of *parasocial* relationships, anything a celebrity does and every word s/he says constitutes information that can shape their human brand conception and value. In this sense, celebrities can, to a certain degree, "make use" of gossip to shape their perception and value. However, this is not always possible, as there is information about them that they would like people to know (generally positive), as well as information that they would like to keep secret (generally negative). In short, they may not have full control on which of their private information may flow into the gossip channel.

Information that helps create and maintain the celebrity brand can be both business-related (e.g., the release of a new album for a singer) but most of the time non-business related, or personal (e.g., an upcoming marriage). Personal content, by-and-large, is the main topic of gossip. In addition, celebrities can deliver personal information to consumers via self-disclosure (delivering it themselves) or via gossip (a third party). Self-disclosure can be defined as any personal information, about a person, which that person communicates to another person (Derlega, Metts, Petronio and Margulus 1993). By using a preliminary definition (see Essay 1), gossip instead happens when a sender (A) gives personal information about an absent subject (B) to an audience (C). In short, in the case of self-disclosure, the sender and the subject are the same person (A = B),

while when it comes to gossip, the sender and the subject are different parties (A ≠ B). For example, self-disclosure happens when a celebrity gives a live interview or posts directly on her social network information about her personal life. When consumers receive personal content about the celebrity indirectly, for example, by reading a website, they are receiving it as gossip. In sum, we talk about gossip when there is personal information (i.e., intimate, self-relevant, disclosing content) which is delivered by a source that is not the celebrity. We talk about self-disclosure, when the personal content is delivered directly by the celebrity. In the case of gossip, the fact that the message arrives from a source that is different from the celebrity suggests the subject may not want the information to be disclosed, which in turn can contribute to the perceived juiciness and secrecy of the message. But at the same time, it may raise some doubts about the complete veracity of the information received through the gossip channel.

From an empirical standpoint, we focus on personal content – information that is considered self-relevant, disclosing and intimate – and look at the impact of gossip (vs. self-disclosure) on consumer's evaluation of the message and the celebrity. One important assumption that we make, which is consistent with the real-world case, is that celebrities have a certain degree of agency over which type of content is delivered to the gossip industry. In other words, many times (but not always), celebrities can decide which personal information will circulate among consumers, and how. By being in control of personal information, they can strategically self-disclose information themselves, or let others diffuse personal content about them without intervening.

Across a set of four studies, we compare information delivered via gossip vs. self-disclosed and find that negative information that comes directly from the celebrity is more likely to be evaluated positively and shared by consumers compared to information received from a third-party (i.e., gossip). In addition, self-disclosed information is evaluated as more valuable, credible and interesting. Despite this, and somewhat unexpectedly, we find that negative information delivered via gossip (vs. self-disclosed) increases consumer's liking and appreciation of the celebrity, especially as an endorser. Based on our data, it seems celebrities might let negative information

about them spread via gossip even if it might not be true (or exactly because these may be considered as non-completely true). In fact, it seems consumers appreciate a celebrity more when she is the subject of a negative gossip rather than when s/he engage in self-disclosing such a piece of negative information about the personal sphere. This unexpected evidence may spur interesting research avenues to understand the real power of celebrity gossip and its nuanced effects on consumer behavior.

We start by revising relevant works in the gossip and celebrity domain and drawing from literature on celebrity gossip (McAndrew and Milenkovic 2002, Harrington and Bielby 1995), information sharing (Berger 2014), emotions (Tangney, Stuewig and Mashek 2007) and human branding (Thomson 2006), we develop a set of predictions that we then test in the empirical section. Lastly, we focus on possible explanatory variables for our unexpected finding and discuss the role of potential boundary conditions. Overall, we offer useful insights on how to deal with gossip for human brands and their managers.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Celebrity Gossip

Broadly defined, gossip is the "exchange of news about the personal affairs of others" (Bergmann 1993, p. 45). Gossiping has always been considered a negative and inappropriate behavior despite the enjoinment that it brings (BenZe'ev 1994). Celebrities constitute a conversational topic that is frequently used; according to Fine (1977) they are part of the community's social world. Previous research on celebrity gossip highlights that famous people trigger the same gossip mechanisms that are activated with the affairs of other social relationships, due to the increase in familiarity with them (Gamson 1994, McAndrew 2002). Celebrities are known by most people, and humorous or scandalous stories about them can engage even those with no or little interest in their lives (Guerin and Miyazaki 2006). Meyers (2009) emphasizes the role of

tabloid and entertainment magazines dedicated to celebrities as they bring them close to the audience by making celebrities' lives not so far removed from the one of the audiences.

A few important terms should be clarified upfront. By *subject* of the content, we are referring to the target of the gossip, or whom the gossip is about (i.e., the celebrity in this case). By *source* of the gossip, we mean where the information comes from; who is the source? In the current essay, we distinguish between two broad types of sources, the celebrity and a third parties; among third parties, we further consider both institutional (gossip magazines) and non-institutional (friend) sources. We will compare both institutional and non-institutional gossip sources with self-disclosure.

We recognize that "gossip" can refer to both the content being shared and the act of personal information sharing, and we use it in both ways. The subject of gossip is by definition an absent third-party; by "absent" we mean the information is neither directed at nor intended to be seen by the subject.

Previous research on gossip has stressed the role of personal content as "information of a highly personal nature that could be influential in the judgments that others would make about the character, reputation, or status of the individual in question" (McAndrew et al. 2007, p. 1567). In terms of content, some scholars have stressed the prominence of negative information in celebrity gossip, as people seem to be more interested in unflattering stories about scandals, misfortunes and bad behaviors of famous people (e.g., McAndrew et al. 2002). Others have emphasized that, in discussing the personal lives of famous people, assessing the truthfulness of the information (as generally inaccessible) is not very relevant (Harrington and Bielby 1995). Indeed, engaging in celebrity gossip appears directed toward the pleasure of the activity rather than reaching a final outcome (Gamson 1994).

The extant gossip literature describes this behavior as fun and enjoyable, but also morally undesirable (Beersma and Van Kleef 2012, Ben-Ze'ev 1994). We therefore expect participants to experience conflicting emotions when gossiping. In particular we expect them to be excited by the

idea of sharing "secret" content as well as feeling uncomfortable (or even guilty) for partaking in an unmoral behavior. When people receive intimate and personal information about celebrities, they may experience physiological arousal and be motivated to share the content with others (Berger 2011, Berger and Milkmann 2012). At the same time, sharing personal information about others is considered as an unmoral behavior (Peters and Kashima 2015), therefore consumers may experience negative "moral" emotions like guilt (Tangney, Stuewig and Mashek 2007) and avoid retransmitting.

We expect fans to show different levels of propensity to share personal information whether the news about a celebrity comes directly from the subject or is transmitted by a different source. In particular, we expect that receiving the message directly from the celebrity (i.e., self-disclosure) makes retransmission more acceptable compared to the case in which the content comes from someone else (i.e., gossip). We therefore predict that by sharing the information themselves, celebrities increase consumer's propensity to share the content.

Celebrities as Human Brands: The Role of Parasocial Relationship

Celebrities are considered as branded individuals, who achieve recognition as famous persona through the attribution of status by the media and other influential entities (Thomson 2006, Rojek 2001). More recently, scholars like Fournier and Eckhardt (2019) have introduced the concept of *person-brand* to refer to "an entity that is at once a person and a commercialized brand offering, wherein both the person and the brand are referenced using the same brand naming convention" (p. 603). According to Fournier and Eckhardt (2019), the person-brand concept is broader than Thomson's (2006) definition of human-brands. In this research, we use interchangeably the terms celebrity, human brand and branded individuals applying the conceptualization proposed by Thomson (2006) which is "any well-known persona who is the subject of marketing communications efforts" (p. 104). According to Moulard, Garrity and Rice

(2015, p. 173) there is a "need to better understand what factors influence consumer perceptions of the celebrity brand and how to manage these perceptions."

When it comes to celebrities, consumer build a particular type of relationships that has been described as *parasocial*. 'Parasocial interaction' was initially defined as the seeming face-to-face relationship that develops between a viewer and a mediated personality (Horton and Wohl, 1956). *Parasocial* relationships are different from social relationships, because they are asymmetric in terms of influence and commitment involved in the relationship. *Parasocial* relationships tend to be one-sided, with one person extending emotional energy, interest and time, and the other party, typically a celebrity, normally unaware of the other's existence. The concept of *parasocial relationship* is in line with Schickel's (1985) discussion about the celebrity image. He says that people's fascination with celebrities is rooted in an illusion of intimacy, which is constructed between the star and the audience within celebrity gossip media (Schickel 1985). Moreover, in a parasocial relationship, the celebrity has the ability to influence the other party (the consumer) much more than vice versa; this is expressed in how much celebrities can influence the behavior and the beliefs of the consumers who follow them. But celebrities must handle this power carefully; according to Thomson (2006), celebrities must manage their impressions to consumers because appearing too commercial might signal that they have "sold out," threatening their public image.

Gossip helps in creating a celebrity's public image as people use the information they receive about their idols to form impressions and nurture their relationship. Personal news about own idols are extremely important for consumers as people rely substantially on this information to create an image of the celebrity that goes beyond the public domain and is perceived as more "real". This is similar to what Fournier and Eckhardt (2019) discuss when emphasizing the interrelations between the brand and the persona. Consumer's construction of the celebrity image is constantly balancing between the branded dimension and the human dimension. As Meyers (2009) points out, fans do recognize that a celebrity seen on a screen or a stage is a highly constructed figure. In building the relationship with this famous entity, consumers see the "real" person through the media

coverage, and this is particularly true when the topic deals with personal information and the private life (Meyers 2009). The celebrity representation delivered by the media as gossip, has an impact on the relationship between the audience and the star, but also shapes consumers' response to celebrities' actions and statements. Our goal in this research is exactly to investigate how the delivery of personal and self-disclosing content impacts consumer's assessment of a human brand.

Celebrities usually share positive news about themselves with their fans, while the content of gossip tends to consist of negative information. So how can celebrities manage gossip (especially the dissemination of negative information) successfully (or less harmfully)? We try to answer this question by investigating the consequences of information retransmission in terms of how one individual thinks about the message and the subject. By focusing on the consequences for the subject, we investigate both on the direct (human branding) and indirect (celebrity endorsement) effect of celebrity gossip.

Celebrity Endorsement

Assessing consumer's evaluation of celebrities after receiving personal information is important because of the critical role that celebrities play as product endorsers. When a celebrity affirms to prefer a brand over another or declares to be a loyal customer of a product, consumers make inferences that are based on a mix of public and private information. We predict that personal information will be particularly relevant in the context of endorsement as private and disclosing content makes the celebrity to be seen more "humanlike" and credible as a consumer. We think that self-disclosure will be particularly helpful for a celebrity compared to gossip because by delivering content themselves celebrities can shape their branding image in a more direct way.

McCracken (1989) defined celebrity endorsers as "any individual who enjoys public recognition and who uses this recognition on behalf of a consumer good by appearing with it in an advertisement" (p. 310). Organizations use celebrity endorsers to enhance the brand image, raise

brand awareness, draw attention to the marketing communication (Erdogan 1999, Kaikati 1987) and increase sales (e.g., Agarwal and Kamakura 1995, Derdenger, Li, and Srinivasan 2018).

It is paramount for organizations to select the right endorser. When news about celebrities' personal lives are diffused, the subject of the news receives substantial attention, and this has an impact on the overall power of the human brand. The impact of personal information about celebrities goes beyond the human brand image and spills over the products and brands that the celebrity talks about. In particular, the effect of gossip could be particularly threatening for the celebrity when there is negative information circulating. We firstly look at negative content specifically and test different effects on consumer's evaluation of the message and the subject (celebrity) conditional on the source of the content; later one, we also introduce positive content. We expect self-disclosure to be particularly beneficial to celebrities compared to gossip.

Self-disclosure also plays an important role in developing parasocial relationships (Chung and Cho 2017). Previous research on interpersonal communication identified self-disclosure as a key antecedent of attitude and relationship formation, as people tend to like others who disclose personal information to them (Collins and Miller 1994). More specifically, we expect negative news shared directly by the subject (i.e., self-disclosure) to reduce the negative response from consumers to the message itself compared to the case in which the same news arrives as gossip. According to previous literature on parasocial interactions, perceived self-disclosure can reduce uncertainty and increase perceived intimacy with the celebrity and liking (Perse and Rubin 1989). We expect this to be true also in the case of negative information. When something bad happens, a celebrity that decides to self-disclose information with the audience is taking the chance to connect with the fan base in a sincere way. In addition, self-disclosed content, compared to gossip, is perceived as more trustworthy and valuable as it arrives directly from the subject (Guerin and Miyazaki 2006). Overall, we expect negative gossip to negatively impact the overall perception of the celebrity as a human brand. In addition, we expect that self-disclosure, compared to gossip, reduces the impact of negative information on the likability of a celebrity as an endorser.

We compare self-disclosure with two types of gossip as, in the case of celebrities, we can identify two possible gossip sources, institutional sources like websites and magazines and non-institutional sources like other people (e.g., a friend). These sources represent two different ways in which consumers can receive the personal information. We include a distinction between these types of sources because when celebrities communicate with their fans, they are delivering the content in a way that can be both interpreted by consumers as institutional and non-institutional. Distinguishing between institutional and non-institutional sources matters because the former aim at profiting in the gossip market, while the latter do not have explicit economic reasons for sharing. Therefore, consumers might process information differently when they receive it from an institutional gossip media, because of the explicit economic objective (vs. a non-economic objective). By showing how consumers react differently to celebrity gossip based on the source, we contribute to the literature on human brand management and product endorsement strategies.

Summing up, we predict a positive effect of self-disclosure on propensity to retweet because the celebrity has authorized the diffusion of the content, reducing feelings of guilt. We also predict that consumers will judge unfavorable messages about the celebrity shared via self-disclosure more positively compared to messages received via gossip, because of increased trust and value of the information. Ultimately, in line with the literature on parasocial relationships, we expect self-disclosure (vs. gossip) to increase consumer's appreciation for a celebrity, also as an endorser, because of perceived intimacy and liking. Figure 1 below summarizes the conceptual model tested in our experiments. Table 1 reports all the predictions across the first three studies. In the table, we included a (+) and a (-) to indicate the overall expected direction of the effect in the presence of negative content. For example, we expect self-disclosure to reduce the effect of negative information on attitude towards the celebrity. Therefore, compared to gossip, we expect a less negative effect (+).

Figure 1. Conceptual model tested

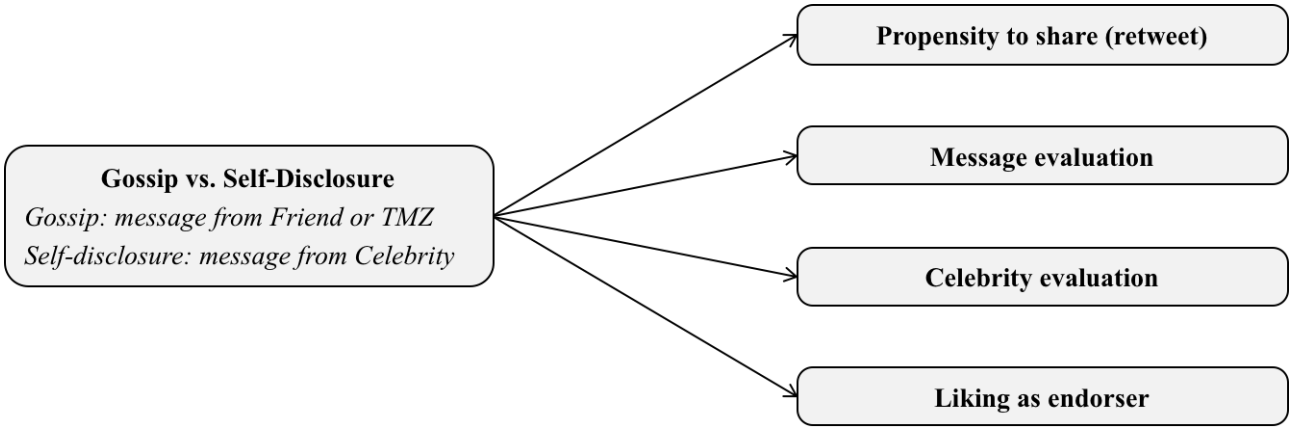


Table 1. Summary of predictions across studies

	Condition	Propensity to Share	Attitude towards the negative message	Liking of source (as endorser)
Study 1	**Gossip-TMZ**	Low		
	Gossip-Friend	Low		
	Self-Disclosure	High		
Study 2	**Gossip-Friend**		Negative (-)	Negative (-)
	Self-Disclosure		Less negative (+)	Less negative (+)
Study 3	**Gossip-TMZ**		Negative (-)	Negative (-)
	Gossip-Friend		Negative (-)	Negative (-)
	Self-Disclosure		Less negative (+)	Less negative (+)

EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

We test our predictions in four studies. In study 1, we look at consumers' propensity to share personal information when the content of the message arrives via gossip vs. self-disclosure. Study 2 uses a real-world example to test consumer's evaluation of a message and the celebrity subject. In study 3, we again manipulate the source of the message (gossip vs. self-disclosure) to investigate consumers' attitudes towards the content of the information as well as liking of the selected celebrities as endorsers. Finally, in study 4, we add as an additional explanatory variable content valence, comparing positive and negative information. Across the four studies we find some

evidence that self-disclosed information is more likely to be shared and is evaluated as more credible and interesting. Despite this and contrary to our predictions, information delivered via gossip seems to increase consumer's liking and appreciation of the celebrity, also as endorser.

Considering negative information is threatening to the celebrity image, in all our studies we consider content that goes from neutral to negative; however, in the last study, we include also positive content. We use real celebrities pre-tested to be equally known and liked by respondents.

STUDY 1

Study 1 tests for consumer's propensity to share personal content depending on the source of the information. We manipulate whether the negative information comes directly from the celebrity (self-disclosure) or is delivered by a third-party (gossip) and we used a scenario set on Twitter. We look at differences in Propensity to Retweet PTR and measure participant's perceived excitement and guilt in sharing.

Procedure for Study 1

Respondents were 300 mTurk workers (M_{age} = 35.68, 54% female). The design was between subjects such that each participant saw a scenario about a celebrity that was pre-tested to have a decent level of awareness and likability across a similar sample population. The celebrity used was Taylor Swift (TS) which is the highest paid celebrity nowadays (Forbes 2019). The scenario context was Twitter. Therefore, we pre-screened participants for Twitter use. We also asked participants two questions intended to assess their knowledge and interest in TS. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three scenarios. In one case, the personal information came directly from TS's Twitter account (Self-Disclosure) while in the other two cases the information came from a different source, a friend or the account of gossip magazine TMZ (Gossip-Friend and Gossip-TMZ).

Participants were instructed to imagine they were on Twitter and saw a tweet about the fact that Taylor Swift and her boyfriend Joe Alwyn had split up. A made-up tweet was included to increase the salience of the scenario. After reading the tweet, participants indicated their propensity to retweet (PTR) the message; the question that we used was "If you were a big fan of Taylor Swift, how likely would you be to retweet this information?". After this, we asked participants to imagine that they decided to retweet the message and include two measures of perceived excitement and guilt of sharing.

Gossip manipulation check. To assess whether participants consider information about TS that comes directly from her account as less "gossipy" compared to the information that comes from a third party, we asked participants to indicate to what extent they view the information as purely gossip on a 7-point scale (1 Not at all – 7 Very much).

Guilt. After reporting their PTR, participants were asked to imagine that they decided to retweet the message. We then asked them to imagine how they would react if TS found out that they shared her personal information using two separate measures: "I would feel guilty about having shared the information" and "I would you then regret sharing the personal information." Participants reported their level of agreement on a 7-point scale. The Pairwise correlation of the two items is 0.93. Thus, we collapsed the two in one overall guilt measure.

Excitement. After imagining that they had shared the content, we also asked participants to rate their level of emotional activation (very passive/very active); their level of excitement (very mellow/very fired up), and their level of energy having shared the story (very low energy level/very high energy level), all on 7-point scales (excitement measures adapted from Yin et al. 2017 and Berger 2014). After computing the Cronbach's alpha for these three items (.95), we collapsed them into one overall measure of excitement.

Participants completed the attention checks and the demographical questions at the end of the study.

Results and Discussion

Six participants were not aware that Taylor Swift is mainly a singer and 132 participants reported having no interest in TS's life. We removed these participants and our analysis was conducted on the remaining 162 respondents (M_{age} = 34.69, 51% female). Importantly, the number of subjects who did not qualify did not vary significantly across conditions. Also, remaining participants are similar across the three conditions with respect to age but differ significantly with respect to gender (Self-disclosure condition N = 53, M_{age} = 35.3, 62% female, Gossip-Friend condition N = 55, M_{age} = 34.25, 56% female, Gossip-TMZ condition N = 54, M_{age} = 34.52, 35% female), therefore, in the following analyses we control for gender[1]. Table 2 reports the means resulting from the ANOVAs for level of gossip, perceived guilt and excitement across the three conditions together with the results of the pairwise comparisons of means.

Table 2. Means and pairwise comparisons across conditions

Cond	Gossip mean	Guilt Mean	Excitement Mean
Self-Disclosure	4.44 (.20)[a]	3.07 (.29)[a]	4.19 (.22)
Gossip-Friend	5.87 (.20)[b]	4.33 (.29)[b]	3.72 (.22)
Gossip-TMZ	5.59 (.20)[b]	4.17 (.29)[b]	3.75 (.22)

Note: Standard Errors appear in parenthesis.
Different superscripts (letters a, b, c and d) denote averages that differ significantly at p < .01. (Tukey adjustment).

Our manipulation worked as expected. We find participants were less likely to view the message as gossip in the Self-Disclosure condition compared to the other two conditions (Gossip-TMZ and Gossip-Friend) and the differences were significant (F (2, 159) = 14.59, p < 0.01).
We analyzed retweeting intentions across the three conditions using a Probit regression. Overall, our manipulation had a significant effect on the probability to retweet χ^2 (3) = 10.10, p = 0.018. In table 3, we report the marginal predicted probabilities in PTR across the three conditions; in table 4, we report the comparison of predicted probabilities in PTR across the three conditions.

[1] Results are the same if we do not control for gender.

Table 3. Predicted Probabilities

Condition	PTR marginal probability
Self-Disclosure	.49 (.06)[a]
Gossip-Friend	.27 (.07)[b]
Gossip-TMZ	.48 (.06)[a]

Note: Standard Errors appear in parenthesis
Different superscripts (letters a and b) denote average probabilities that differ significantly at $p < .05$.

Table 4. Comparison of Predicted Probabilities across conditions

Comparison	Contrast[1]	p-value
Self-Disclosure vs. Gossip-Friend	.61 (.25)	0.016
Gossip-Friend vs. Gossip-TMZ	-.58 (.26)	0.026
Gossip-TMZ vs. Self-Disclosure	-.03 (.25)	0.902

Note: Standard Errors appear in parenthesis
1 = Contrasts of adjusted predictions

Results from an analysis of the contrasts of adjusted predictions reveals that retweeting intentions are significantly higher when the message is Self-Disclosed compared to the Gossip-Friend condition (*p-value* < .05). Content that comes directly from the celebrity is retransmitted considerably more compared to the same content when it is shared from a friend, but the values of the self-disclosure and the TMZ conditions are not significantly different. Going back to table 2, we can see that participants felt considerably less guilty sharing the information when it came directly from Taylor Swift compared to the two other conditions ($M_{Self\text{-}Disclosure} = 3.07$, $M_{Gossip\text{-}Friend} = 4.33$, $M_{Gossip\text{-}TMZ} = 4.17$, *p-values* < .05); confirming that gossiping triggers negative emotions. Instead, there are no differences in perceived excitement ($M_{Self\text{-}Disclosure} = 4.19$, $M_{Gossip\text{-}Friend} = 3.72$, $M_{Gossip\text{-}TMZ} = 3.75$, *p-values* > .05) in line with the idea that sharing celebrity news is considered as a fun activity. Results show that if celebrities want to increase the diffusion of personal content, they are better off sharing it directly from their own accounts. Nevertheless, gossip magazines like TMZ seem to be particularly powerful in getting information shared even if consumers experience guilt when passing it along.

To sum up, content delivered directly from celebrities via self-disclosure generates less of a sense of guilt in terms of retransmission compared to content already 'gossiped' about (by friends

or TMZ). This ultimately results in greater sharing for content received directly from the celebrity. This may be explained by the fact that once a celebrity chooses to inform people through social media, the sense of guilt diminishes as that content has already voluntarily been put into the public domain. Overall, if celebrities want to increase the diffusion of their personal content, they are better off at sharing it directly from their own accounts. Nevertheless, messages coming from TMZ had also a high PTR, which is not significantly different than the self-disclosure condition. This result may suggest the difficulty to replicate this circumstance in a hypothetical scenario, the potential idiosyncrasy of the example used, or even the possible presence of a confound. Probably, the fact that both self-disclosure and TMZ can be considered "powerful" sources for a celebrity makes message coming from them as more likely to be retransmitted. Another caveat is that, in this study, we only looked at information that was somewhat neutral in its valence (neither particularly positive nor negative). In the next studies, we will try to address some of these limitations and delve deeper into understanding the consequences of gossip looking at different dependent variables (message and source evaluation) while focusing on content that is clearly negative.

STUDY 2

In study 2, we use a real-life example from Jeff Bezos (Amazon's founder) to test whether consumers react differently to negative news diffused via self-disclosure or gossip.

Procedure for Study 2

In February 2019, Bezos publicly announced that the National Enquirer magazine owned revealing personal photos of him while cheating on his wife. Soon after his confession, we conducted this study on a sample of 124 mTurk participants (M_{age} = 38.26, 64% female) pre-screened to have an interest in Bezos' life events. Participants were randomly assigned to two conditions. They were asked to imagine receiving a message about Bezos' negative behavior either from him (Self-Disclosure) or from a third party (Gossip). We then measured participant's overall

evaluation of the message using four items adapted from Winterich, Gangwar and Grewal (2018) measured on 9-point scales. In particular, we asked participants to assess the content with respect to unfavorable – favorable, uninteresting – interesting, not credible – credible, worthless – valuable (Cronbach's alpha .79). We also include the evaluation of the famous person, using four other 9-point scale items adapted from Winterich et al. (2018). In particular, we asked them to assess whether Jeff Bezos is not credible – credible, insincere – sincere, untrustworthy – trustworthy, unfavorable – favorable, unlikable – very likable (Cronbach's alpha .94).

Results and Discussion

We analyzed the results conducting two ANOVAs. Results of the first ANOVA reveal no significant differences in message evaluation across conditions ($M_{Self\text{-}Disclosure}$ = 4.74 vs. M_{Gossip} = 4.63, F (1,122) = 0.10, p = 0.75), likely due to the fact that participants were already aware of the fact and had already formed an opinion. Still, contrary to our predictions, we observe a significant difference in the evaluation of the celebrity ($M_{Self\text{-}Disclosure}$ = 4.28 vs. M_{Gossip} = 5.11, F (1,122) = 4.88, p = 0.03). Participants reported a significantly more positive attitude towards Jeff Bezos when they read about the gossiped message compared to the self-disclosed one. This finding, although idiosyncratic to the case, is interesting, because it provides unexpected evidence that gossip (even when negative) can have a positive impact on the celebrity image. To summarize, after reading about the cheating scandal, participants liked Jeff Bezos more when the information was delivered as gossip versus from Bezos himself. In order to investigate further this result and accumulate more evidence on this unexpected evidence, in the next study, we test our predictions using different celebrities and different negative messages. In addition, we include a measure of message evaluation and the evaluation of the celebrity as a human brand via endorsement.

STUDY 3

Study 3 builds on the findings of study 2. In order to validate previous results, we include four different celebrities and use four different negative messages. We pre-tested the celebrities to be equally known and liked by participants, and pre-tested the negative messages to verify that they are perceived as negative, compare to positive, and equally negative among them.

Procedure for Study 3

The purpose of this study is to focus on negative content and explore how consumers respond to personal information about celebrities, contingent on whether the content is shared by the celebrity via self-disclosure (and is less like true gossip, as shown in study 1) or shared by someone else (is prototypically what we think of as gossip).

Two dependent variables were included, one intended to assess consumers' evaluation of the message, and one in which respondents evaluated the celebrity's potential as a brand endorser in light of the content. The study followed a mixed design, in which we manipulate the source of the message (Self-Disclosure vs. Gossip-Friend vs. Gosip-TMZ) between participants and ask them to evaluate four different celebrities and four different messages rotated within participants. We selected the following celebrities: Taylor Swift, Britney Spears, Justin Timberlake and Justin Bieber (two female and two males) that were all pre-tested to be known and liked by participants on mTurk (107 participants, M_{age} = 37.08, 37.38% female). In terms of negative content, we developed four scenarios that included news like a new romantic relationship or getting involved in an accident (e.g., "was recently involved in a car accident and charged with driving under the influence"), celebrities and scenarios were rotated. We further included an attention check asking participants from whom they received the message and we measured participant's familiarity with the celebrities.

We conducted this study on a sample of 300 respondents on Prolific Academic (M_{age} = 33.64, 52% female). Participants were randomly assigned to one of the three conditions and saw three different scenarios with different celebrities and messages rotated. We asked them to imagine

that they were on a social media and saw a message about the celebrity coming directly from his/her account, from a friend or from the gossip website TMZ. The content of the message was always negative, for example "Imagine that you are on a social media and you see a post from a close friend (vs. Celebrity) that tells you Celebrity (vs. s/he) is in a new relationship with someone who has had repeated run-ins with the law and has served time in prison. You have just seen the post and were unaware of this beforehand! Given that this information has come indirectly from your close friend (vs. directly from the celebrity himself/herself), you find the information reliable."

After reading the scenarios, participants were asked to indicate their attitude towards the message and how much they like the celebrities as a brand endorser.

Attitude towards the message. Participants evaluated the message on 9-point semantic differential scales anchored at unfavorable – favorable, uninteresting – interesting, not credible – credible, worthless – valuable (measures adapted from Winterich, Gangwar and Grewal 2018). We computed the Cronbach's alpha including all the items of message-evaluation (.70) and collapsed them in one unique measure.

Celebrity as an endorser. Participants responded to the following question "Would you like to see *celebrity name* as a product endorser for your favorite brands?" on a 7-point scale (not at all – very much).

At the end of the survey, we included a manipulation check with regard to whether participants remembered the source of the message (direct or gossip), we asked for participants overall familiarity with the celebrity and collected demographic data.

Results and Discussion

Out the 300 respondents, we obtained 1200 observations. Out of these 1200 observations, we have 37 cases in which participant failed the manipulation check (correctly identifying the source of the message). The number of failed checks does not vary across conditions, celebrities

and scenarios. We removed these 37 observations from the analysis resulting with a final dataset of 1163 observations.

Considering that the two dependent variables are weakly correlated (correlation coefficient = 0.17), we analyzed the data running two separated mixed regression analyses (which replicate the results of the within-subject ANOVA). The table 5 below reports the results of the mixed regressions with attitude towards the message (Model 1) and endorser (Model 2) as dependent variable.

Table 5. MIXED Regression results

Variables	**Model 1**		**Model 2**	
	Message attitude		**Endorser**	
	β	***p-value***	**β**	***p-value***
Condition				
Gossip-Friend	-1.12	0.000	.35	0.054
	(0.195)		(0.180)	
Gossip-TMZ	-1.07	0.000	.17	0.332
	(0.194)		(0.179)	
Message				
Car	.26	0.001	-.10	0.330
	(0.081)		(0.102)	
Scam	.25	0.002	-.20	0.054
	(0.081)		(0.102)	
Drugs	.40	0.000	-.09	0.383
	(0.081)		(0.102)	
Celebrity				
Taylor Swift	.19	0.244	.18	0.075
	(0.081)		(0.102)	
Justin Timberlake	.12	0.152	.49	0.000
	(0.081)		(0.101)	
Justin Bieber	-.06	0.487	-.67	0.000
	(0.081)		(0.101)	
Constant	4.61	0.000	2.65	0.000
	(0.155)		(0.155)	
N	1163		1163	

Standard errors appear in parentheses

We estimated a model including condition (Self-Disclosure vs. Gossip-Friend vs. Gossip-TMZ) as main independent variable, where self-disclosure constitutes the baseline, we also

included celebrity and gossip scenario as fixed factors (observations are nested at the respondent level).

Looking at the first model, we can see that there is a main effect of condition, such that gossiped negative messages coming from either a friend or TMZ are evaluated significantly worse than self-disclosed messages in line with our predictions. The effect is significant when we control for different celebrities and different scenarios. Looking at the second model, we can see that, again contrary to predictions, there is overall no effect of source on the endorser evaluation. The only marginal result is that compared to direct, gossip from a friend marginally increase the evaluation of the celebrity as an endorser. Across the two models, we can see that there are significant differences across different celebrities and messages but those do not impact our main effect.

Overall, the results show that gossip reduces attitude to the message while it does not affect celebrity endorsement. However, in a post-hoc investigation, we noted that the distribution of the variable endorsement is very left-skewed: mean is 2.5 in a scale from 1 to 7, with 37% of subjects who gave a score of 1 and a further 20% who gave a score of 2. We therefore decided to further inspect the relationship by dichotomizing this variable using a median-split: 0, for those who assigned a preference as endorser below the median level, and 1 for those who assigned a preference above the median. We then re-estimated the equations for the dichotomized variable endorser using a mixed Logit model. The table 6 below reports the results of the mixed Logit regressions with endorser as dependent variable. We estimated a model including condition (Self-Disclosure vs. Gossip-Friend vs. Gossip-TMZ) as main independent variable, where self-disclosure constitutes the baseline, we also included celebrity and gossip scenario as controls, again observations are nested at the respondent level.

In this case, with the transformed criterion variable, results reveal that when the message is a gossip that comes from a friend, there is a significant increase in attitude towards the celebrity as an endorser. This is marginally true also in the case of gossip from TMZ. Overall, this is another

evidence that gossiping a negative message of a celebrity increases the chance such a celebrity is preferred as endorser. Again, this result is unexpected and contradicts our prediction.

Table 6. MIXED Logit Regression results

Variables	Model 1	
	Endorser	
	β	p-value
Condition		
Gossip-Friend	1.08	0.003
	(0.360)	
Gossip-TMZ	0.67	0.058
	(0.354)	
Message		
Car	-.41	0.068
	(0.225)	
Scam	-.55	0.015
	(0.225)	
Drugs	-.24	0.278
	(0.224)	
Celebrity		
Taylor Swift	.12	0.593
	(0.217)	
Justin Timberlake	.81	0.000
	(0.222)	
Justin Bieber	-1.42	0.000
	(0.234)	
Constant	-.33	0.294
	(0.317)	
N	1163	

Standard errors appear in parentheses

So far, we only looked at neutral and negative content, but what does it happen when we look at positive information? In the next study, we further extend our investigation by considering also the role of content valence. We will compare positive and negative content; our objective is to understand if we replicate our results with both content types.

STUDY 4

The goal of this study is to explore how consumers respond to positive and negative personal information about celebrities depending on whether the content is shared directly by the

celebrity (Self-Disclosure) or shared by someone else (Gossip). Therefore, in this study we introduce valence as an additional explanatory variable. Our goal is to verify if we confirm the unpredicted results obtained in previous studies also with positive content. Figure 2 below describes the model tested in this study, table 7 describes our predictions.

Figure 2. Conceptual model tested in study 4

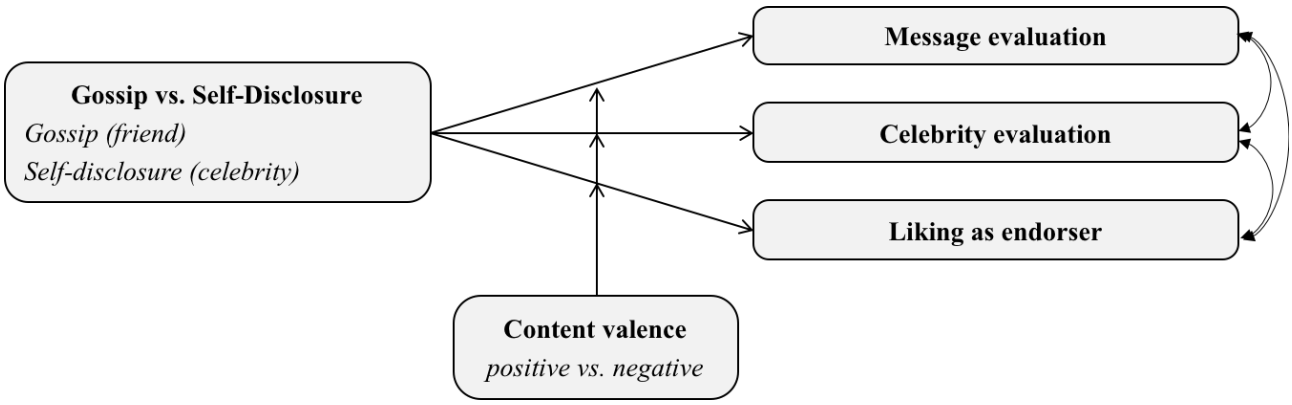


Table 7. Study 4 predictions

	Condition	Valence	Attitude towards the message	Liking of source (also as endorser)
Study 4	**Gossip**	Positive	Positive	More positive
	Gossip	Negative	Negative	Less negative
	Self-Disclosure	Positive	Positive	Positive
	Self-Disclosure	Negative	Negative	Negative

Procedure for Study 4

The study followed a 2 (gossip vs. direct) x 2 (positive vs. negative) content, between subject design. We include only one female celebrity, Britney Spears (BS), that was pre-tested to have medium-high levels of knowledge and likability. We used two scenarios about a new relationship that were evaluated in a pre-test significantly different in terms of valence (positive vs. negative) but equally credible.

We conducted this study on a sample of 400 respondents on mTurk (M_{age} = 35, 53% female). At the beginning of the survey, we included a screening check question about BS to control for participants interest in her life, participants were allowed to proceed in the study only if they reported high interest in her life (4 or above in scale from 1 to 7). After passing the pre-screening section, participants were randomly allocated to one of the four conditions. Participants were instructed to imagine they were on Twitter and read either positive or negative information about a new romantic relationship of BS that was either disclosed directly by the celebrity on her personal Twitter account or came from the Twitter account of a hypothetical friend named Alex. A made-up tweet was included to increase the realness of the scenario.

After reading the content participants responded to the dependent variables intended to assess consumers' evaluation of the message (Cronbach's alpha = .86) and consumers' attitude towards BS (Cronbach's alpha = .94) that we used in previous studies, and to a single item measure "Would you like to see Britney Spears as a product endorser for your favorite brands?" on a 7-point scale (Not at all – Very much). Lastly, we included an attention check question to verify that participants recorded the source of the message.

Results and Discussion

21 participants did not reply correctly to the attention check question that asked whether the message was a gossip or not and we removed them from the analysis, our final sample is of 379 participants (M_{age} = 35, 53.30% females). We checked the correlation among our three dependent variables and found that the three are significantly positively correlated. Considering that the DVs under investigation are not independent, we analyzed the data using a Seemingly-Unrelated Regression, a multivariate analysis of variance that provides more efficient estimates when multiple DVs under investigation are not independent. We firstly estimated the model including information type (Self-Disclosure vs. Gossip) and gossip valence (positive vs. negative) as main predictor of attitude towards the message, attitude towards the source and endorser (model 1). We secondly

estimated the model including the interaction between the two independent variables (model 2). In both cases, the Breusch-Pagan test of independence supports the choice (chi2(3) = 287.368, p = 0.000 and chi2(3) = 290.86, p = 0.000). Table 8 below reports the results of the two regressions on the three correlated DVs.

Table 8. Seemingly-Unrelated Regression results

Variables	Model 1		Model 2	
	Message attitude		Message attitude	
	β	p-value	β	p-value
Self-Disclosure	0.03	0.876	-0.16	0.547
	(0.191)		(0.270)	
Negative	-0.99	0.000	-1.18	0.000
	(0.191)		(0.267)	
Self-Disclosure x Negative			0.39	0.313
			(0.382)	
Constant	5.75		5.84	0.000
	(0.164)	0.000	(0.190)	
	Source attitude		Source attitude	
	β	p-value	β	p-value
Self-Disclosure	-0.14	0.417	0.01	0.968
	(0.175)		(0.247)	
Negative	-0.67	0.000	-0.52	0.034
	(0.175)		(0.245)	
Self-Disclosure x Negative			-0.30	0.384
			(0.349)	
Constant	6.61	0.000	6.53	0.000
	(0.150)		(0.173)	
	Endorser		Endorser	
	β	p-value	β	p-value
Self-Disclosure	-0.43	0.007	-0.10	0.653
	(0.162)		(0.228)	
Negative	-0.39	0.015	-0.07	0.796
	(0.162)		(0.226)	
Self-Disclosure x Negative			-0.67	0.039
			(0.323)	
Constant	4.78	0.000	4.62	0.000
	(0.139)		(0.159)	
N	379		379	

Standard errors in parentheses

We can see from regression model 1 that there is no main effect of gossip (vs. self-disclosure) on attitude towards the message and attitude towards the source, such that self-disclosed

messages and gossiped ones are evaluated equally. Instead, in line with previous findings, there is a significant positive effect of gossip on liking of the celebrity as an endorser. Gossip messages significantly increase the liking of BS as a product endorser. Also, as expected, there is a main effect of valence, such that negative (vs. positive) news results in significant reductions for all our three dependent variables.

Looking at model 2, where we include the source x valence variable, we can see that the positive effect of gossip on liking of the celebrity as an endorser is indeed qualified by a significant negative interaction. Meaning that only when the information is negative and diffused via gossip, participants significantly increased their liking of BS as an endorser. We further analyzed these results by looking at the contrasts of marginal linear predictions. Table 9 below reports the marginal means for the variable endorser across the four conditions.

Table 9. Marginal means

Condition	Liking as endorser
Gossip - positive	4.62 (.159)[a]
Gossip - negative	4.55 (.160)[a]
Self-disclosure - positive	4.52 (.162)[a]
Self-disclosure - negative	3.75 (.162)[b]

Note: Standard Errors appear in parenthesis
Different superscripts (letters a and b) denote average probabilities that differ significantly at $p < .05$.

Gossip increases liking of the celebrity especially in the case of negative content ($M_{self\text{-}disclosure\text{-}negative} = 3.75$ vs. $M_{gossip\text{-}negative} = 4.55$, $p = 0.001$). When the information is positive, we see no difference in consumers' appreciation of BS as a product endorser. Hence it seems that the previous unexpected evidence only emerges for negatively valenced messages.

Summing up, this set of partially counterintuitive findings offers us the possibility to pursue a new interesting research question. Why does negative gossip (vs. self-disclosure) help rather than hurt the celebrity brand? In the next section, we delve deeper in the celebrities and gossip literatures in order to identify different possible explanations that we can further test.

GOSSIP AND THE CELEBRITY PERSONA

Our goal in this research is to provide a first empirical investigation of the consequences of gossip for celebrities (i.e., human brands). We have currently conducted four studies that have been informative and helpful in delineating the effect of gossip compared to self-disclosure on message and source evaluation. In particular, studies 2, 3 and 4 revealed the presence of a significant positive effect of gossip (vs. self-disclosure) on the attitude towards a celebrity and the appreciation for the celebrity as an endorser. This is an important finding because it shows, for the first time, that celebrities can derive value from the negative personal news that circulate about them without having to intervene. Along this line, we plan to conduct further studies to conceptually and empirically replicate these results. Integrating different literature streams, we have identified three possible explanations for why gossip compared to self-disclosure positively affects celebrity; (1) Gossip is less reliable than self-disclosure, (2) Gossip is a signal of celebrity popularity, (3) Gossip humanizes the human brand. We will explore each of these explanations below.

Gossip reliability

Previous literature on gossip has emphasized the fact consumers can easily identify gossip as untrustworthy information (Baum et al. 2018). Guerin and Miyazaki (2006) stress the fact that the content of gossip must be credible, but the truthfulness of this information is usually very difficult to verify. Kurland and Pelled (2000) also discuss the fundamental role of gossip credibility, defined as "the extent to which the gossip is believable – that is, it is seemingly accurate and truthful" (p. 430). All these scholars investigated gossip in contexts that are distant from the entertainment industry (e.g., the workplace); when it comes to public media, the issue of information reliability becomes even more salient.

Harrington and Bielby (1995) discuss the characteristics of gossip when it goes from being an intimate activity conducted among known people (e.g., a group of friends) to be a public activity (e.g., the media). They say that when gossip "goes public", people cannot draw anymore from

personal knowledge about the source of the information (as they would do in the case of a close other) and this makes the truth almost inaccessible (Harrington and Bielby 1995). Bergmann (1993) too considers mass media rumors as stories with low degrees of reliability. This is why gossip magazines or websites often have to provide "proof" for what they are saying as, in this context, the issues of trust are amplified.

If traditionally gossip has been seen as information that is difficult to verify, then mass media (or celebrity) gossip should be seen by consumers as even more unreliable. This is why negative information that comes as gossip can be considerably less harmful for a celebrity compared to when it is disclosed by the subject. Consumers are used to read negative gossip about celebrities and are constantly questioning the reliability of the information they receive; therefore, additional pieces of gossip do not have much of an impact. Instead, a celebrity that self-discloses something negative is adding truthfulness to the story, significantly affecting consumers' judgment.

We find some support for this explanation if we look back at the results of study 3. Participants rated the content the message significantly lower in the gossip condition; the items used to assess the message include dimensions of truthfulness and credibility. Interpreting the findings, we can say that liking of the celebrity as an endorser is higher in the case of gossip exactly because the message is seen as less credible and trustworthy.

Gossip as a popularity signal

A second possible explanation for why gossip helps human brands rests in the inferences that people make about celebrities' importance. Consumers may think that media outlets that talk about a celebrity do this because the content is interesting and important to the public. This will increase the perception that a celebrity is relevant and worthy. A celebrity that self-discloses personal content (especially negative) is signaling to the public that she wants more attention (i.e., is not famous enough for media to talk about her).

According to McAndrew et al. (2002), celebrity gossip media trigger the same mechanisms activated with the affairs of in-group members, such that the predisposition to gossip is facilitated by an interest in people who are socially important. The more people (and the media) discuss about someone, the more that subject is relevant to the audience. DeBacker and Fisher (2012) highlight the fact that gossip is more interesting when the audience is well aware of who the subject is. Therefore, a widely known celebrity would trigger the interest of a wide public, less well-known celebrities will be less interesting to part of the audience (DeBacker and Fisher 2012). If we approach this same reasoning looking at consumer's assessment of celebrities' popularity, a celebrity that is discussed in a gossip media outlet it perceived to be more famous, important and interesting. McAndrew et al.'s (2002) investigation of celebrity tabloid content, reveals that unflattering stories about violations of norms or bad habits are, in fact, the most in demand.

Summing up, gossip, compared to self-disclosure, increases the perception that a celebrity is important and valuable. Consumer's align with the intuition that gossip magazines publish content that is interesting to the audience. For a celebrity, appearing on a gossip media, even if the content is negative, is always positive. On the opposite, by self-disclosing personal information, celebrities are communicating to the audience that they need more attention and therefore are not famous enough.

Gossip as humanizing

A third possible explanation for why gossip makes consumers like a celebrity more, is related to the humanization of the branded persona. Consumers are aware that the celebrity image is artificially constructed (Meyers 2009), so they look for hints about the "real person" behind the star representation. Gossip about celebrities offers a more authentic viewpoint into the ordinary life of a human brand, making the private and intimate publicly available. This is particularly important in the case of negative content, as it is easier for consumers to imagine that the celebrity did not want

the information to circulate. Therefore, negative gossip makes the branded persona to be seen as more human, weak, but also authentic.

This explanation is driven by recent work from Fournier and Eckhardt (2019) which investigates *persons* that are also *brands*. The authors identify *(im)balance* between person and brand defined as "a situation in which the influence of the person or the brand is out of proportion in relation to the other" (p. 609). (Im)balance is important to our context, because negative gossip makes the influence of the person over the brand explicit. Cases of misconduct or negative behaviors reveal the authentic person behind the managed person-brand (Fournier and Eckhardt 2019). As the authors highlight, in a person-brand dynamic, consumers appreciate an inside look even when it does not paint a stable or favorable picture. Turner (2004) states that celebrity gossip is fundamental because it puts celebrities into processes of social and personal identity formation. According to Meyers (2009), gossip in the media has the power to authenticate celebrities through coverage of life outside of performances.

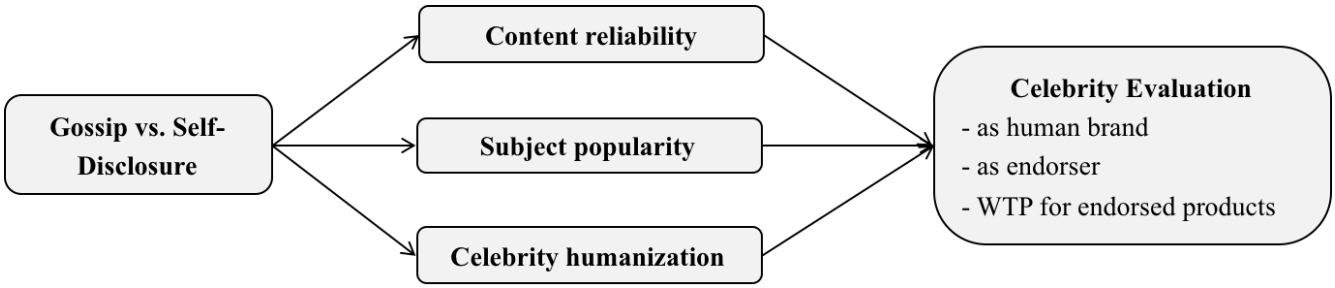
Following this reasoning, negative gossip is good for celebrities because it makes the branded persona more of a person and less of a brand. Negative personal news that circulate via gossip (even if they may not be true) make a celebrity appear to the public as more authentic and less artificial. Self-disclosure, instead, can be seen as another attempt of the celebrity to manage the human-brand. In this sense, self-disclosure emphasizes the brand in the human-brand entity. This might be particularly important in the case of product and brand endorsers, as consumers follow celebrities' advices when the recommendation comes from a believable subject.

A framework for future developments

Of course, the three possible explanations described above may not be the only ones and are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Therefore, a future step along this research line is that of empirically testing each of them to develop a deeper understanding of the consequences of celebrity

gossip. In figure 3 below, we have portrayed a potential conceptual framework for future development.

Figure 3. Conceptual framework advancing possible mechanism(s)



Future research steps will allow us to strengthen our findings and enrich the understanding of this interesting and understudied phenomenon. In addition, future investigations can broaden the set of downstream consequences considered. Beyond liking of the celebrity as an endorser, other dependent variables that can be considered are (1) consumers' purchase intention associated with celebrity sponsored products or (2) willingness to watch/read celebrities' content.

POTENTIAL BOUNDARY CONDITIONS

Beyond the understanding of the reasons behind the positive effect of gossip on celebrities, we are planning to extend current findings by looking at boundary conditions for the effect. Again, using different literature streams, we were able to identify three potential variables that can mitigate or enhance the effect.

A first boundary condition can be played by celebrity type. In particular, we plan to compare A-list with B-list celebrities. A-list celebrities are the most famous ones while B or even C-list celebrities are those who are lower in status and aim at becoming more famous. Based on the results of the studies and the current theorization (e.g., DeBacker and Fisher 2012, Meyers 2009), we could

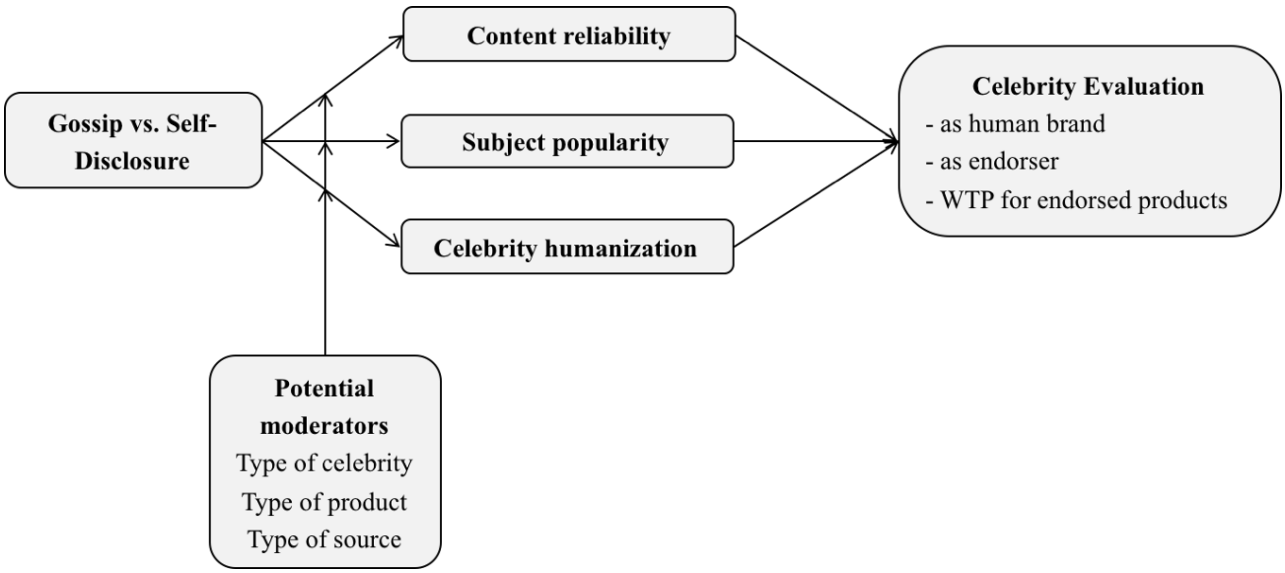
predict that gossip will be particularly helpful for B-list celebrities compared to A-list celebrities because having a third party talking about their personal information makes the personal life of a celebrity to be perceived as more important to the public. Overall, this study will allow us to test the idea that gossip increases the celebrity image because the subject is considered more valuable by the public.

A second moderation study could include different product types. In particular, we can directly test the role of the celebrity as an endorser using a hypothetical commercial setting where there is an actual product endorsed. A possible study can test the effect of gossip (vs. self-disclosure) on vice or virtue products endorsed by a celebrity. Considering that the content of negative gossip tends to be focused on vices (scandals, moral violations etc.) we might expect endorsement to be more effective for vice (vs. virtue) products.

A third moderating variable can be identified in the source type. In fact, both in the case of gossip and self-disclosure, we can identify cases in which the source is institutional/commercial or non-institutional/commercial. For example, self-disclosure can arrive via social media or via an interview on a media outlet. At the same time, gossip can arrive from a website or being transmitted by another person.

Of course, all the boundary conditions listed above may depend on the mechanism(s). Still, we think it is important to highlight how rich and multifaceted the effect can be. To sum up, figure 3 describes the full conceptual model derived after discussing both potential mediating and moderating variables (for simplicity we positioned the moderating arrow in the first path). Future studies will allow us to derive a more complete understanding of the phenomenon. We consider this framework a guidance for future research.

Figure 3. Conceptual framework for future developments



PRELIMINARY CONCLUSION

In this research, we provide interesting, so far preliminary, evidence of some market consequences of gossip for human branding, including the value of a celebrity as an endorser. In particular, we show that gossip is not always negative in how it impacts the subject of the gossip. We find that human brands can influence consumers' attitude towards themselves and their role as product endorser by letting gossip circulate freely. When celebrities want news to circulate, they are likely better off sharing that news directly (self-disclosure), but, at the same time, celebrities and their managers should consider that gossip has a positive impact on their likability, as individuals and as brand endorsers.

Our findings, although preliminary, contribute to the human branding literature by identifying a new driver of celebrity value, and they should spur further research on the topic. In addition, we provide a substantive contribution by investigating the celebrity gossip domain, a large and relevant industry which has been understudied by academic research. Finally, we provide practical insights and implications for human brand management by showing that gossip, even when negative, can improve consumers' attitudes towards celebrities and consequently the latter's value as endorsers.

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