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Why we gossip

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Chapter 3

Tell me the gossip: The self-evaluative function of receiving gossip about others⁶

Abstract

We investigate the self-evaluative function of competence-related gossip for individuals who receive it. Using the Self-Concept Enhancing Tactician (SCENT) model, we propose that individuals use evaluative information about others (i.e., gossip) to improve, promote, and protect themselves. Results of a critical incident study and an experimental study showed that positive gossip had higher self-improvement value than negative gossip, whereas negative gossip had higher self-promotion value and raised higher self-protection concerns than positive gossip. Self-promotion mediated the relationship between gossip valence and pride, while self-protection mediated the relationship between gossip valence and fear, although the latter mediated relationship emerged for receivers with mastery goals rather than performance goals. These results suggest that gossip serves self-evaluative functions for gossip receivers and triggers self-conscious emotions.

⁶ This chapter is based on Martinescu, E., Janssen, O., & Nijstad, B. A. (2014). Tell Me the Gossip: The Self-Evaluative Function of Receiving Gossip About Others. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 40, 1668-1680. doi:10.1177/0146167214554916.

Introduction

Gossip, defined as positive or negative evaluative talk about someone who is not present (Foster, 2004), is pervasive in all domains of social life. Empirical reports suggest that people spend more than two thirds of their daily conversations engaging in some type of interpersonal evaluation (Dunbar, Duncan & Marriott, 1997; Emler, 1994). To clarify its omnipresence, researchers have predominantly focused on group-serving functions of gossip, such as communicating group norms and sanctioning norm violators (Grosser, Lopez-Kidwell, & Labianca, 2010), protecting members from being exploited by others (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2011; Feinberg, Willer, Stellar, & Keltner, 2012; Kniffin & Wilson, 2005), exercising social influence through reputational systems (Burt, 2008; Sommerfeld, Krambeck, Semmann, & Milinski, 2007), and establishing social bonds (Bosson, Johnson, Niederhoffer, & Swann, 2006; Dunbar, 2004).

Whereas previous research has significantly advanced understanding of gossip, the predominant focus on group-serving functions implies that individuals' interests and needs have largely been overlooked. This is unfortunate because most gossip occurs within a sender-receiver dyad (Ellwardt, Labianca, & Wittek, 2012): it is an individual and not a group who gossips (Nevo, Nevo & Derech-Zehavi, 1994; Paine, 1967), and it is an individual and not a group who receives and responds to gossip. We know, however, little about why individuals are interested in receiving gossip, and how they react to it. To address this gap in the literature, we examined how individuals receive gossip about others.

We suggest that receiving gossip is functional for individuals because individuals need evaluative information about others to evaluate themselves. Evaluating one's own abilities and opinions is a fundamental need that can be satisfied indirectly through interpersonal processes, such as social comparison (Festinger, 1954; Sedikides & Skowronski, 2000; Sedikides & Strube, 1997). Although mostly overlooked in the social

comparison literature, gossip may provide information about others that can be used for self-evaluation purposes (Wert & Salovey, 2004). Receiving gossip is an easier and less threatening way of obtaining social comparison information about a target person than more direct encounters (Suls, 1977; Wert & Salovey, 2004). Thus, in the current paper, we investigate whether receiving gossip is functional for individuals from a self-evaluation perspective.

Specifically, using the Self-Concept Enhancing Tactician model (SCENT, Sedikides & Strube, 1997), we propose that receiving positive and negative gossip is functional for individuals for purposes of self-improvement, self-promotion, or self-protection. We suggest that the self-evaluation value of gossip depends on its valence, with positive gossip having higher self-improvement value and negative gossip having higher self-promotion and self-protection value. Furthermore, given that self-evaluation generates self-conscious emotions (Tracy & Robins 2004), gossip is likely to trigger emotional reactions that are congruent with the self-evaluation value of gossip. We therefore also investigate how different self-conscious emotions (alertness, pride, and fear) associate with the self-improvement, self-promotion, and self-protection value of gossip.

Gossip can involve evaluative information about a target person on different dimensions, such as appearance, personality, peculiarities, or competence. For two reasons we focus on how individuals respond to competence-relevant gossip in achievement situations. Firstly, as posited by self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2002), competence is an innate psychological need that becomes salient in achievement situations. Secondly, previous research has shown that gossip is pervasive in typical achievement contexts such as the workplace, the classroom, or sports (Clegg & Van Iterson, 2009; Ellwardt et al., 2012; Kniffin & Wilson, 2005). Furthermore, when focusing on gossip in achievement situations, the role of achievement goals becomes important. Based on achievement goal theory (e.g.,

Elliot, 2005; Yeo, Loft, Xiao, & Kiewitz, 2009), we distinguish between *mastery* goals that are focused on developing competence through gaining knowledge, skills, and abilities, and *performance* goals that are focused on demonstrating competence through outperforming others (Elliot, 2005). We examine whether the self-improvement, self-promotion, and self-protection value of gossip depends on (the interaction between gossip valence and) salient achievement goals.

In sum, this study makes three contributions to the literature. First, we examine whether receiving gossip serves a self-evaluation function for individuals. Second, we propose that positive and negative gossip elicits self-conscious emotions that are congruent with the self-evaluation value of the gossip. Finally, we explore how achievement goals influence individuals in their self-evaluations and emotional reactions to gossip.

The SCENT model

According to the Self-Concept Enhancing Tactician (SCENT) model, self-evaluation is a fundamental aspect of human nature. Humans are motivated to constantly update the cognitive representations of their attributes, with the ultimate goal of maintaining a positive self-concept (Sedikides & Gregg, 2008; Sedikides & Strube, 1997). The SCENT model assumes that the self-evaluation process serves a strategic self-enhancement function: rather than needing a completely accurate or consistent self-concept, individuals need a positive and well-protected self-concept in order to cope with the world (Sedikides & Strube, 1997). Positive feelings about the self are vital for one's mental health (Taylor & Brown, 1994), and help protect against anxiety and defensive behaviors (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, Arndt, & Schimel, 2004). Individuals can tactically increase the positivity of their self-concept through self-improvement, by developing self-relevant skills and abilities. They can also increase their self-concept positivity more directly through self-promotion, by making self-flattering social comparisons and attributions, or through self-protection, by avoiding

disadvantageous social comparisons and attributions (Sedikides & Strube, 1997). These self-evaluation motives guide individuals' behaviors and reactions to stimuli in their social environment, such as gossip information.

We propose that self-improvement, self-promotion and self-protection motives underlie the value receivers place on gossip. Gossip about others' attributes and behaviors may be functional for self-improvement purposes, because it suggests ways in which the self could become better in the future. In addition, gossip provides social comparison information that reflects whether the self is doing better or worse than relevant others, and thus may have self-promotion or self-protection value. In turn, evaluating the self gives rise to self-conscious emotions, which are experienced when something important for one's well-being occurs (Tangney, 2003). Self-reflection informs people whether or not they have lived up to their actual or ideal self-representation, or to others' representations of them (Leary, 2007; Tracy & Robins 2004). As such, gossip might trigger specific self-conscious emotions that are congruent with the self-evaluation value of gossip. However, because received gossip does not contain explicit information about the self, self-conscious emotions can only be evoked by gossip through self-evaluative processes (e.g., Tracy & Robins 2004). Thus, we propose that individuals first cognitively appraise the received gossip and draw implications for the self through self-evaluative processes, which subsequently generate a congruent emotional response.

Self-improvement

One function that gossip may fulfill for receivers is self-improvement. Baumeister, Zhang, and Vohs (2004) argue that gossip has a learning function, because it provides useful lessons about how to be successful or avoid failure in specific social domains. Acquiring evaluative information about relevant others in achievement situations facilitates individuals' achievement pursuits and helps them successfully navigate the social environment (Foster,

2004). Therefore, individuals may be interested in receiving competence-related gossip in an achievement context, because it might have instrumental value for self-improvement.

From a self-improvement perspective, individuals may be more interested in receiving positive compared to negative gossip (Litman & Pezzo, 2005), and may feel instrumental attraction for targets who perform better and can serve as role-models (Yinon, Bizman, & Yagil, 1989). Upward social comparisons motivate individuals to increase their effort when performance-related information about a superior group member is available (Weber & Hertel, 2007). Thus, gossip targets with attainable achievements can inspire self-improvement, because they enable individuals to picture similar future success for themselves (Lockwood & Kunda, 2000). Accordingly, we expect that positive competence-related gossip has higher self-improvement value than negative gossip (hypothesis 1a).

Seeing self-improvement value in (positive) gossip is unlikely to lead to positive or negative emotions, because actual self-improvement may only occur in the future (also see Wayment & Taylor, 1995). However, because positive gossip has instrumental value for individuals interested in developing their competence, we expect that individuals will become more alert after receiving positive gossip. Given that individuals selectively allocate cognitive resources to information that is important for learning (Reynolds & Anderson, 1982) the self-improvement value associated with positive gossip might trigger a mental state of alertness. Therefore, we hypothesize that the self-improvement value of gossip mediates the relationship between competence-related gossip valence and alertness (hypothesis 1b).

Self-promotion

Gossip may also be functional for recipients due to its self-promotion value. Individuals can boost their self-concept positivity by making downward social comparisons, which are inherently present in negative gossip (Wert & Salovey, 2004). The need for positive self-regard motivates people to draw favorable conclusions about themselves. People

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do so whenever they can find sufficient justification for their positive self-judgments (Kunda, 1990). Gossip is a rich and easily accessible source of information that can provide this justification. As such, receiving negative gossip is likely to fuel individuals' self-promoting beliefs and feelings that they are better than relevant others (i.e., the targets of gossip), which is important especially in self-relevant domains (Brown, 2012).

Downward comparisons are an effective way to boost self-esteem and make oneself feel good (Wills, 1981). The self-promotion value increases the more the gossip target is similar to the self, because failure of rivals in one's proximity reflects most positively on the self. Evidence from evolutionary psychology shows that people are interested in receiving negative gossip about same-sex others, because such information derogates rivals and promotes the self (McAndrew, Bell, & Garcia, 2007). Thus, negative gossip helps receivers self-promote and maintain positive self-views.

Furthermore, negative gossip might be self-promoting because senders signal to receivers that they are worthy of receiving such sensitive information, or that they are better than the target (Bosson et al., 2006; Grosser et al., 2010). Therefore, negative gossip can enhance receivers' self-perceived status and reputation, because it justifies them positioning themselves above the target in the social hierarchy (Ellwardt et al., 2012; Nevo et al., 1994). We thus hypothesize that negative competence-related gossip has higher self-promotion value than positive gossip (hypothesis 2a).

As a result of self-promotion through downward comparisons, individuals experience elevated feelings of pride (Wert & Salovey, 2004). Pride conveys competence, success or status, and arises when people meet or exceed standards (Tangney, 2003), or achieve a socially valued outcome (Leary, 2007). Receivers of negative gossip might view the performance of the gossip target as a standard they have exceeded, which elicits self-promotion and the associated emotion of pride. Therefore, we expect that self-promotion

value mediates the relationship between competence-related gossip valence and pride (hypothesis 2b).

Self-protection

The self-protection motive is salient when individuals strive to defend themselves against negative self-views. Self-protection helps individuals avoid negative situations and prevent or deflect negative implications for the self (Sedikides & Gregg, 2008). Positive and negative gossip might activate two distinct types of threats for receivers. On the one hand, making upward comparisons with similar others in a self-relevant domain may threaten individuals' position in the social hierarchy. Accordingly, *positive* gossip may generate feelings of inferiority and may activate receivers' self-protection concerns (Wayment & Taylor, 1995; Wert & Salovey, 2004). On the other hand, negative gossip signals a hostile and threatening social environment where people talk negatively about similar others. Accordingly, *negative* gossip could activate self-protection concerns for receivers because receivers might fear becoming targets of negative gossip themselves, due to a reflection process (Tesser, 1988). Negative gossip can substantially damage one's reputation, because reputation reflects others' impressions rather than objective information about someone (Burt, 2008). Thus, both positive and negative gossip may arouse receivers' self-protection concerns. The principle that bad is stronger than good (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001) would predict that especially receiving negative gossip increases self-protection concerns, because self-protection is an adaptive response to a malignant social environment. Therefore, we tentatively predict that negative competence-related gossip arouses stronger self-protection concern than positive gossip (hypothesis 3a).

Self-protection concern is likely associated with fear or social anxiety, which arise when individuals doubt their ability to create or maintain a favorable impression on others (Leary, 2007). Self-protection is associated with fear, especially in light of negative events

with uncertain outcomes for the self (Frijda, Kuipers, & Ter Schure, 1989). Accordingly, individuals who receive negative gossip and become concerned with self-protection are likely to experience fearful emotional reactions, as they draw negative implications for their reputation. Fear is an adaptive and functional reaction in situations that pose threats for the individual (Öhman, 1993), because fear helps appraise the situation as threatening and prepare defensive behaviors. We thus expect that self-protection concern mediates the relationship between competence-related gossip valence and fear (hypothesis 3b).

Achievement Goals

We investigate reactions to receiving competence-related gossip in achievement contexts. Achievement goals are salient in achievement-relevant situations and regulate cognition, affect, and action towards a desired state (Yeo et al., 2009); thus achievement goals might influence how recipients respond to competence-related gossip. Achievement goal theory primarily distinguishes between mastery and performance goals (e.g., Yeo et al., 2009). Mastery goals reflect a desire to develop competence by gaining knowledge, skills, and abilities, whereas performance goals reflect a desire to demonstrate competence by outperforming others⁷ (Elliot, 2005). Although both mastery and performance goals are fueled by the fundamental need for competence (Deci & Ryan, 2002), they define competence differently. Individuals who pursue mastery goals have intrapersonal standards for competence and feel competent when they improve their performance relative to their previous performance. In contrast, individuals who pursue performance goals have interpersonal standards for competence and feel competent when they outperform others. Given their focus disparity, gossip receivers with mastery and performance goals might interpret and react differently to gossip.

⁷ Achievement goals are typically portrayed as approach forms of self-regulation and distinguished from avoidance goals (Elliot, 2005). We restrict the use of the terms “mastery goal” and “performance goal” to the approach versions of the goals.

Achievement goals and self-improvement

Because they focus on competence development, individuals with salient mastery goals might value gossip as instrumental for self-improvement. Accordingly, they might be interested in positive gossip about others' achievements, since positive gossip provides success stories they can learn from. However, individuals could self-improve through negative gossip as well, by learning from others' failures (Baumeister et al., 2004).

Individuals for whom mastery goals are salient perceive others as potential allies, who can help them by cooperating and sharing resources (Poortvliet & Giebels, 2012; Poortvliet, Janssen, Van Yperen, & Van de Vliert, 2007). Therefore, individuals with salient mastery goals might increase the value of both positive and negative gossip as a resource for self-improvement. We expect that individuals with salient mastery goals attribute higher self-improvement value to competence-related gossip than individuals with salient performance goals, regardless of gossip valence (hypothesis 4).

Achievement goals and self-promotion

Individuals with salient performance goals focus on demonstrating superior competence and might use received gossip to self-enhance relative to others, either by self-promotion or by self-protection, depending on gossip valence. Individuals with performance goals are competitive, and see others as rivals rather than allies (Poortvliet & Giebels, 2012); they are more exploitative in their interpersonal relations and strive to maximize outcomes for the self at the expense of others (e.g., Poortvliet et al., 2007). Accordingly, because they reach their goal only when they outperform others, individuals who are pursuing performance goals may be interested in obtaining *negative* gossip in order to play up their own attributes relative to those of failing others. Thus, individuals with performance goals might attribute higher self-promotion value to negative competence-related gossip than individuals with mastery goals (hypothesis 5a). Consequently, we expect the indirect effect of gossip valence

on pride through self-promotion value to be stronger for individuals with salient performance goals than for individuals with salient mastery goals (hypotheses 5b).

Achievement goals and self-protection

Achievement goal and gossip valence may interact in their effects on self-protection concern and fear. Specifically, we expect that positive competence-related gossip raises higher self-protection concern for individuals with salient performance rather than mastery goals (hypothesis 6a), because others' success may undermine attainment of one's own performance goal of demonstrating superior competence. Negative gossip, however, signals a malignant social environment which arouses self-protection concern regardless of achievement goal. Thus, we propose that individuals who have mastery goals experience higher self-protection concern when they receive negative rather than positive gossip, whereas self-protection concern among individuals who have performance goals is high irrespective of gossip valence. Accordingly, we expect the indirect effect of gossip valence on fear through self-protection concern to emerge only for individuals with mastery goals, and not for individuals with performance goals (hypothesis 6b). Figure 3.1 displays an overview of our expectations on how gossip valence and achievement goals influence individuals' self-evaluations and emotions in response to received gossip.

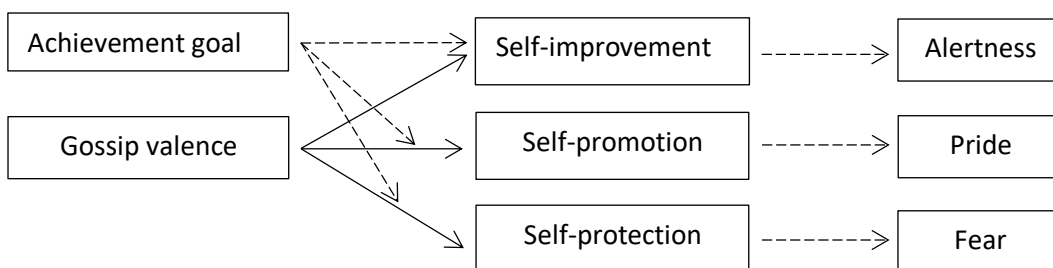


Figure 3.1. Conceptual model. Solid lines represent hypotheses tested in Studies 3.1 and 3.2; dashed lines represent hypotheses tested in Study 3.2.

Study 3.1

To test hypotheses 1a, 2a, and 3a, we conducted a critical incident study among students of a Dutch university, in which we asked participants to recall an incident of receiving either positive or negative gossip. We then examined whether the valence of the received gossip was related to self-relevant value of gossip.

Method

Design and participants. One hundred eighty-three undergraduates ($M_{\text{age}} = 20.38$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 2.30$; 69 female, 2 not specified) completed an online survey in exchange for course credit. They were randomly assigned to a positive ($N = 86$) or negative ($N = 97$) gossip condition. For a medium effect size with 2 groups at power .80 and $\alpha = .05$, about 90 participants are needed (GPOWER, Erdfelder, Faul & Buchner, 1996).

Procedure. Participants were informed that this was a study about informal group communication, and were asked to recall a situation in which they worked in a group of at least four students on a course assignment. Furthermore, participants were asked to recall and write a short description of an incident in which a group member shared with them either positive or negative evaluative information (depending on condition) about another group member's competence. Five participants (one in the positive gossip condition) were unable to remember such an incident, and were directed to the end of the survey. The remaining participants (85 in the positive and 93 in the negative gossip condition) subsequently completed measures on self-relevant value of gossip.

Measures. In our measures, we referred to the gossiper as "the group mate who gave you the information" and to the gossip target as "X". The response format for all measures was a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). To measure the self-improvement, self-promotion, and self-protection value of received gossip

information, we developed a three-dimensional scale in accordance with self-motives conceptualizations (Sedikides & Strube, 1997; Gregg, Hepper, & Sedikides, 2011).

We measured *self-improvement value* of the received gossip with four items, e.g. “The information I received made me think that I can learn a lot from X in this group assignment” ($\alpha = .88$), *self-promotion value* with eight items, e. g. “The information I received made me feel that I am doing well compared to X in the group assignment” ($\alpha = .93$), and *self-protection concern* with four items, e. g. “The information I received made me feel that I must protect my image in the group” ($\alpha = .91$).

Results

Confirmatory factor analyses. To assess whether the three self-motives underlying valuation of gossip are distinct constructs, we conducted confirmatory factor analyses. We first tested a model with the three intended constructs (self-improvement, self-promotion and self-protection). The fit statistics, $\chi^2(101) = 313, p < .001, CFI = .95, SRMR = .06, RMSEA = .10$, indicated a good model fit (cf. Hooper, Coughlan, & Mullen, 2008). To further evaluate the discriminant validity of our measures, we tested two alternative models. First, self-promotion and self-protection were grouped into one factor, whereas the self-improvement factor remained unchanged ($\Delta\chi^2(2) = 606, p < .001, CFI = .82, SRMR = .16, RMSEA = .19$). Second, all items were loaded on one factor ($\Delta\chi^2(3) = 1006, p < .001, CFI = .69, SRMR = .19, RMSEA = .25$). The fit statistics for both alternative models were worse than for the hypothesized model.

Manipulation check. Participants wrote down descriptions of the received gossip, which were categorized as containing positive or negative gossip by the first author (blind to condition). A second coder, blind to gossip condition and hypotheses, coded a subset of 75 stories (34 in the positive condition). All stories (100%) were coded as matching the condition by both coders. These results suggest that the manipulation of gossip valence was

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successful. Furthermore, to examine whether gossip stories were competence-related, the content of the gossip was coded into four categories (ability, effort, both ability and effort, or neither). Of the stories, 27.5% were coded as ability-related gossip, 48.3% as effort-related gossip, 21.9 % as both effort and ability-related gossip, and 2.2 % did not contain any competence-related gossip. A second coder categorized a subset of 75 stories, with an agreement of .93 (Cohen's Kappa). Therefore almost all gossip incidents were, as intended, competence-related. The four participants that did not explicitly refer to competence were retained in the analyses, but dropping them did not alter conclusions. The content of gossip stories did not moderate the effect of gossip valence on any of the self-motives underlying gossip valuation, as shown by a MANOVA: there was no significant effect of gossip content, $\lambda = .96$, $F(6, 332) = 0.99$, ns, and no significant interaction effect between gossip valence and gossip content, $\lambda = .98$, $F(6, 332) = 0.55$, ns.

Descriptive statistics. Table 3.1 presents means, standard deviations, and Pearson zero order correlations between variables included in Study 3.1. In line with our conceptualization, the relatively low magnitude of the inter-correlations between self-improvement, self-promotion, and self-protection value of received gossip indicate that the hypothesized constructs represent distinct self-evaluation motives in valuing gossip ($-.23 < r < .35$).

Hypotheses testing. To assess the effect of gossip valence on the self-evaluation value of received gossip, we conducted a MANOVA with gossip valence as an independent variable and the measures of self-improvement, self-promotion, and self-protection value as three dependent variables, showing a significant multivariate effect of gossip valence, $\lambda = .44$, $F(3, 174) = 73.89$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .56$. Follow-up univariate ANOVAs showed that the self-

Table 3.1. Means, standard deviations, and zero-order Pearson correlations for variables in Study 3.1.

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3
1 self-improvement value	3.60 [3.38; 3.81]	1.45	-		
2 self-promotion value	3.63 [3.42; 3.84]	1.41	-.23**	-	
3 self-protection concern	3.47 [3.26; 3.69]	1.47	-.04	.35**	-

$N = 178$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; 95% confidence intervals are given between brackets.

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improvement value of gossip was higher for positive gossip ($M = 4.55$, $SD = 1.17$), compared to negative gossip ($M = 2.72$, $SD = 1.08$), $F(1, 176) = 149.21$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .39$, supporting hypothesis 1a. The self-promotion value of gossip was higher for negative gossip ($M = 4.35$, $SD = 1.28$), compared to positive gossip ($M = 2.83$, $SD = 1.09$), $F(1, 176) = 71.69$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .28$, which supports hypothesis 2a. Finally, the self-protection concern was higher for negative gossip ($M = 3.75$, $SD = 1.47$), compared to positive gossip ($M = 3.17$, $SD = 1.41$), $F(1, 176) = 7.22$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$, supporting hypothesis 3a.

Because there is some debate about potential gender effects in gossip behavior (e.g., Michelson, Van Iterson, & Waddington, 2010; Nevo et al., 1994) we explored whether participant gender had any effects. A MANOVA with gender and gossip valence as predictors showed no multivariate interaction effect on the self-relevant value of gossip, $\lambda = .97$, $F(3, 170) = 1.38$, ns, $\eta_p^2 = .02$, suggesting that gender did not moderate the effect of gossip valence; however, a univariate effect of gender indicated that self-promotion value was higher for men ($M = 3.80$, $SD = 1.30$) than for women ($M = 3.31$, $SD = 1.50$), $F(1, 172) = 9.30$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$. No other effects were significant (all $F < 2$; all $p > .20$).

Discussion

Findings showed that receiving positive gossip had self-improvement value for individuals, whereas negative gossip had self-promotion value. Moreover, negative gossip significantly increased self-protection concerns, providing initial support for our expectations. In addition, we found that men perceive higher self-promotion value of gossip than women. To replicate these results, and to test whether the self-evaluation value of received gossip mediates the relationships between gossip valence and recipients' self-conscious emotions we conducted an experimental scenario study. In Study 3.2 we also manipulated achievement goals, to examine whether achievement goals influence responses to receiving positive vs. negative gossip.

Study 3.2

Method

Design and participants. One hundred twenty-two undergraduates at a Dutch university (53 female, 6 not specified), with mean age of 21.18 ($SD = 2.20$), participated in this laboratory study in exchange for course credit or 4 Euros. The study had a 2 (gossip valence: negative vs. positive) x 2 (achievement goal: mastery vs. performance) between-subjects factorial design⁸; participants were randomly assigned to conditions. For a medium effect size with 4 groups at power .80 and $\alpha = .05$, about 120 participants are needed (GPOWER, Erdfelder, et al., 1996).

Procedure. Upon arrival at the laboratory, participants were seated in separate cubicles, and informed that they would participate in a study about informal communication in the workplace. The experiment began with the presentation of a scenario, in which a sales agent described the job, from a first-person perspective. Participants were assigned the role of the sales agent and asked to imagine that they had written the presented text.

The achievement goal manipulation consisted of two coherent parts (cf. Sijbom, Janssen, & Van Yperen, 2014). First, the achievement climate in the sales department differed between the performance and mastery goal conditions. In the performance goal condition, the department had a strong competitive climate (“...as an employee, I feel encouraged to continuously demonstrate my competencies by outperforming my co-

⁸ The original design of the study also included a control condition for the achievement goal manipulation. In this condition, instructions emphasized to “do your best” and success was defined as “using your knowledge, skills, and abilities.” This control condition was dropped for two reasons. First, the pattern of means was inconsistent and hard to interpret: some means fell between the mastery and performance condition (e.g., for fear), and other means were similar to the mastery condition (e.g., for self-protection and self-improvement). Second, in retrospect, the definition of success in the control condition contained elements of mastery goals (i.e., using one’s skills and abilities). Full details about the findings in the control condition may be obtained from the first author.

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workers”); in the mastery goal condition, the department had a strong developmental climate (“...as an employee, I feel encouraged to continuously develop my competencies by acquiring new sales skills and knowledge”). Second, participants were assigned an achievement goal consistent with the department climate. Specifically, in the performance goal condition, participants’ goal was to perform better than other colleagues (“...my personal goal is to demonstrate my sales abilities and communication skills, and to perform better than my colleagues do”). In contrast, in the mastery goal condition, participants’ goal was to perform better than before (“...my personal goal is to improve my sales abilities and communication skills, and to perform better than I did before”). Next, to help participants internalize their assigned achievement goal, they were instructed to write a paragraph of 5-10 sentences from the perspective of the sales agent, in which they explain why pursuing their assigned goal was important.

The scenario continued with the gossip valence manipulation. Participants were asked to imagine that they were chatting with Sam, a fellow sales representative. During their chat, Sam tells gossip about a colleague, called Alex. That is, participants received gossip information from Sam that contained competence-related evaluations about the target, framed positively (Alex did very well at the performance appraisal) or negatively (Alex did very badly at the performance appraisal). Next, participants completed the manipulation checks and dependent measures, were debriefed, compensated and thanked for their participation.

Measures. For all dependent measures we used 7-point Likert response scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

Participants indicated to what extent they, as a sales agent, had a mastery goal (“At my job, my goal is to do better than I did before”), and to what extent they had a performance goal (“At my job, my goal is to do better than others”). Participants also indicated to what extent the gossip they received from their co-worker in the scenario was positive (“Sam heard

that Alex did well at the performance appraisal”) or negative (“Sam heard that Alex did poorly at the performance appraisal”).

Self-evaluation value of received gossip was assessed as in Study 3.1 (*Self-improvement value: $\alpha = .90$; Self-promotion value: $\alpha = .95$; Self-protection concern: $\alpha = .87$*).

Alertness, pride, and fear were measured using the PANAS-X scale (Watson & Clark, 1994). Specifically, after reading the sentence stem “The information I received makes me feel...,” participants indicated to what extent the received gossip information made them feel “alert”, “attentive”, “focused” (alertness, $\alpha = .76$), “proud”, “strong”, “confident”, “bold” (pride, $\alpha = .82$), and “afraid”, “scared”, “nervous” (fear, $\alpha = .92$).

Results

Manipulation checks. First, we examined the paragraph that participants wrote to internalize their goal. The text was categorized as corresponding to the mastery or the performance goal by the first author (blind to conditions). All participants referred to the goal assigned to them. However, five participants (4.1 %) also mentioned elements that correspond to the other achievement goal. A second coder, who was blind to the conditions and hypotheses, coded participants’ descriptions of their assigned goal, with an agreement of .92 (Cohen’s Kappa).

Second, T-tests indicated that participants in the mastery condition scored marginally higher than participants in the performance condition on the mastery goal check, $t(120) = 1.90, p = .059$ ($M_{\text{mastery}} = 6.33, SD = .85; M_{\text{performance}} = 5.97, SD = 1.21$), and lower on the performance goal check, $t(120) = -7.06, p < .001$ ($M_{\text{mastery}} = 4.80, SD = 1.44; M_{\text{performance}} = 6.36, SD = .93$). These results indicate that the achievement goal manipulation was overall successful.

T-tests indicated that participants in the positive gossip condition scored higher than participants in the negative condition on the positive gossip check, $t(120) = 15.50, p < .001$

($M_{\text{positive}} = 6.24$, $SD = 1.12$; $M_{\text{negative}} = 2.25$, $SD = 1.67$), and lower on the negative gossip check, $t(120) = -21.49$, $p < .001$ ($M_{\text{positive}} = 1.34$, $SD = .65$, $M_{\text{negative}} = 5.98$, $SD = 1.56$). These results indicate that the gossip valence manipulation was successful.

Outlier analysis. Before further analysis, we examined influential observations. Four participants had Cook’s distance scores higher than 0.07 on the self-relevant gossip value measures, which is well above the cut-off point of 0.032 for our sample (Bollen & Jackman, 1990), and were excluded from the analysis. The results are thus based on data from 118 participants.

Descriptive statistics. Table 3.2 presents means, standard deviations, and Pearson zero-order correlations for the variables included in Study 3.2.

Table 3.2. Means, standard deviations, and zero-order Pearson correlations for variables in Study 3.2.

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1 self-improvement value	4.12 [3.83; 4.41]	1.60	-					
2 self-promotion value	3.92 [3.66; 4.18]	1.43	-.59**	-				
3 self-protection concern	4.62 [4.38; 4.85]	1.29	-.15	.13	-			
4 alertness	5.14 [4.97; 5.32]	.95	-.09	.19*	.28**	-		
5 pride	3.63 [3.40; 3.86]	1.26	-.33**	.62**	-.05	.15	-	
6 fear	3.43 [3.17; 3.70]	1.46	.18*	-.28**	.42*	.21*	-.27**	-

$N = 118$; *. $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; 95% confidence intervals are given between brackets.

Hypotheses testing. To test our hypotheses we employed a bootstrapping procedure for assessing indirect and conditional effects (Preacher, Rucker, & Hayes, 2007). We conducted three regression analyses with gossip valence as independent variable, achievement goal as moderator, the motives underlying the self-relevant value of gossip as mediators, and emotions as dependent variables (see Figure 3.1). For each of the following models 5000 bootstrap samples were used. Results are shown in Table 3.3.

We predicted that self-improvement mediates the effect of gossip valence on alertness, and that gossip (irrespective of valence) has higher self-improvement value for individuals with salient mastery goals compared to individuals with salient performance

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goals. Self-improvement value was higher in the positive gossip condition ($M = 5.21$, $SD = 1.11$) than in the negative gossip condition ($M = 2.95$, $SD = 1.17$), $b = 1.13$, $p < .001$, confirming hypothesis 1a. Self-improvement value was higher in the mastery ($M = 4.28$, $SD = 1.60$) than in the performance goal condition ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 1.60$), although this effect was marginally significant, $b = -.17$, $p = .09$, which provides some support for Hypothesis 4. Self-improvement was unrelated to alertness, $b = .01$, ns. Consequently, the indirect effect of gossip valence on alertness through self-improvement was not significant, either in the mastery condition (*indirect effect* = .02, 95% CI [-.17; .22]) or in the performance condition (*indirect effect* = .01, 95% CI [-.16; .20]), disconfirming hypothesis 1b.

We expected self-promotion value of gossip to mediate the relation between gossip valence and pride, and achievement goal to moderate this indirect effect. In line with hypothesis 2a, self-promotion value was higher in the negative ($M = 5.12$, $SD = .88$) than in the positive gossip condition ($M = 2.80$, $SD = .80$), $b = -1.15$, $p < .001$. However, there was no main effect of achievement goal on self-promotion, $b = -.06$, ns, and no interaction effect, $b = -.03$, ns, which disconfirms hypotheses 5a and 5b. Self-promotion was related to pride, $b = .68$, $p < .001$, and self-promotion mediated the negative relationship between gossip valence and pride, supporting hypothesis 2b. This indirect effect was similar in the mastery condition (*indirect effect* = $-.77$, 95% CI [-1.04; $-.53$]), and performance condition (*indirect effect* = $-.82$, 95% CI [-1.13; $-.56$]).

Self-protection concern was hypothesized to mediate the relationship between gossip valence and fear, and achievement goal was expected to moderate this indirect effect. As predicted by hypothesis 3a, self-protection concern was higher in the negative ($M = 4.88$, $SD = 1.17$) than in the positive gossip condition ($M = 4.37$, $SD = 1.36$), $b = -.25$, $p < .05$. A main effect of achievement goal, $b = .22$, $p < .05$, showed that self-protection concern was higher in the performance ($M = 4.85$, $SD = 1.26$) than in the mastery goal condition ($M = 4.38$, $SD =$

1.29). In line with hypothesis 6a, these main effects were qualified by a significant interaction, $b = .31, p < .01$, showing that self-protection concern was high in the negative gossip condition regardless of achievement goal ($M_{\text{mastery}} = 4.97, SD = .98; M_{\text{performance}} = 4.79, SD = 1.35$), and was lower in the positive gossip condition only for participants with a mastery goal ($M = 3.82, SD = 1.32$) but not for participants with a performance goal ($M = 4.91, SD = 1.19$). Furthermore, self-protection concern was related to fear, $b = .54, p < .001$. Consequently, and consistent with hypothesis 6b, there was a negative indirect effect of gossip valence on fear through self-protection concern when participants had a mastery goal (*indirect effect* = $-.31, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.55; -.14]$), but not when they had a performance goal (*indirect effect* = $.03, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.14; .21]$). In sum, negative as compared to positive gossip raised higher self-protection concerns and fear among individuals with salient mastery goals; among individuals with salient performance goals, however, self-protection concerns were high irrespective of gossip valence.

As in Study 3.1, we also examined whether participant gender moderated the effects documented above. Two MANOVAs were performed with gender, achievement goal and gossip valence as predictors, and self-evaluative value and emotions as dependent variables, respectively. These analyses revealed no main effects of gender, no two-way interactions between gender and achievement goal, and no three-way interactions, all $F < 2.10$; all $p > .10$. However, the multivariate interaction between gender and gossip valence was marginally significant for self-evaluative value of gossip, $\lambda = .94, F(3, 112) = 2.39, p = .07, \eta_p^2 = .06$, and significant for emotions, $\lambda = .89, F(3, 112) = 4.20, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .10$. These effects were further explored in univariate ANOVAs.

The gender by gossip valence interaction was marginally significant for self-promotion value of gossip, $F(1, 114) = 3.08, p = .08, \eta_p^2 = .02$, revealing a valence effect stronger for women ($M_{\text{positive}} = 2.70; M_{\text{negative}} = 5.29, F(1, 114) = 134.08, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .54$)

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than for men ($M_{\text{positive}} = 2.89$; $M_{\text{negative}} = 4.94$, $F(1, 114) = 92.39$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .44$). This same effect was observed for the related emotion of pride, $F(1, 114) = 5.81$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$, where valence effects were stronger for women ($M_{\text{positive}} = 2.86$; $M_{\text{negative}} = 4.50$, $F(1, 114) = 29.69$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .20$) than for men ($M_{\text{positive}} = 3.29$; $M_{\text{negative}} = 3.93$, $F(1, 114) = 4.95$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$). These results are inconsistent with those of Study 3.1, in which men (regardless of valence) perceived higher self-promotion value than women.

Further, the interaction effect on self-protection was marginally significant, $F(1, 114) = 3.19$, $p = .07$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$, showing that negative gossip only increased self-protection concerns for women ($M_{\text{positive}} = 4.30$; $M_{\text{negative}} = 5.24$, $F(1, 114) = 7.70$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$) but not for men ($M_{\text{positive}} = 4.43$; $M_{\text{negative}} = 4.54$, $F(1, 114) = 0.74$, ns). Moreover, as shown by a marginally significant interaction effect, $F(1, 114) = 2.65$, $p = .10$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$, women experienced equally high fear regardless of gossip valence ($M_{\text{positive}} = 3.77$; $M_{\text{negative}} = 3.58$, $F(1, 114) = 0.25$, ns), whereas men experienced lower fear in the negative gossip condition ($M_{\text{positive}} = 3.70$; $M_{\text{negative}} = 2.66$, $F(1, 114) = 8.35$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$).

Finally, a marginally significant interaction effect, $F(1, 114) = 3.80$, $p = .053$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$, showed that negative gossip increased alertness for women ($M_{\text{positive}} = 4.91$; $M_{\text{negative}} = 5.54$, $F(1, 114) = 6.32$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$), whereas for men alertness was equally high regardless of gossip valence ($M_{\text{positive}} = 5.09$; $M_{\text{negative}} = 5.04$, $F(1, 114) = 0.35$, ns).

Discussion

Consistent with Study 3.1, we found support for our prediction that positive gossip has self-improvement value, whereas negative gossip has self-promotion value, but also raises self-protection concerns. These results clearly indicate that gossip has self-evaluative functions for receivers. Moreover, negative gossip elicited pride due to its self-promotion value, and fear due to increased self-protection concerns. However, we found no support for the mediating role of self-improvement in the relation between gossip valence and alertness.

Table 3.3. Moderated mediation analysis for Study 3.2.

	Mediator Variable Models								
	Self-improvement			Self-promotion			Self-protection		
	<i>B</i>	<i>t</i>	CI	<i>b</i>	<i>t</i>	CI	<i>b</i>	<i>t</i>	CI
Gossip valence	1.13***	10.79	.92; 1.33	-1.15***	-14.80	-1.30; -1.00	-.25*	-2.28	-.48; -.03
Achievement goal	-.17	-1.70	-.38; .02	-.06	-.84	-.22; .08	.22*	2.01	.003; .45
Gossip valence * achievement goal	-.05	-0.52	-.26; .15	-.03	-.45	-.18; .11	.31**	2.80	.09; .53
	Dependent Variable Models								
	Alertness			Pride			Fear		
Gossip valence	-.16	-1.29	-.40; .08	.24	1.55	-.06; .54	.44***	3.78	.21; .68
Self-improvement	.01	.22	-.13; .17						
Self-promotion				.68***	6.35	.47; .90			
Self-protection							.54***	5.95	.36; .72
	Conditional indirect effect								
Mastery goal	.02		-.17; .22	-.77		-1.04; -.53	-.31		-.55; -.14
Performance goal	.01		-.16; .20	-.82		-1.13; -.56	.03		-.14; .21

$N = 118$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; Gossip valence was coded -1 for negative condition and 1 for positive condition; achievement goal was coded as -1 for mastery goal and 1 for performance goal; CI = 95% confidence interval.

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We further found that mastery goals led to marginally higher self-improvement value of gossip. Achievement goals were unrelated to self-promotion value of received gossip, but were related to self-protection concerns: individuals with performance goals had higher self-protection concerns compared to individuals with mastery goals. Furthermore, for individuals with performance goals self-protection concern was high irrespective of gossip valence, presumably because negative gossip reveals threats for the self, while positive gossip interferes with their goal to outperform others. For individuals with mastery goals negative gossip increased self-protection concerns and fear compared to positive gossip, presumably because negative but not positive gossip signals self-threats for individuals with mastery goals.

Exploratory analyses showed that valence effects on self-promotion value, pride, self-protection concern, and alertness were stronger for women than for men. For men, negative gossip elicited less fear than positive gossip, whereas for women there was no valence effect. We propose an interpretation of these effects in the General Discussion.

General Discussion

Self-evaluation value of gossip

In line with the view that positive gossip provides success stories which facilitate instructive social comparisons, we showed that compared to negative gossip, positive gossip is more valuable for self-improvement. Although the cultural learning view of gossip (Baumeister et al., 2004) posits that negative gossip has higher learning value, because information about violated norms and possible consequences is more adaptive for individuals, our results indicate that individuals perceive higher self-improvement value of positive than of negative gossip. Litman and Pezzo (2005) document receivers' preference for positive gossip, but attribute it to the general bias against negative gossip, which is socially undesirable. According to our findings, an additional reason may be that people value

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receiving positive gossip because it facilitates self-improvement: competence-related positive gossip about others contains lessons about how to improve one's own competence. However, the particular content of gossip might moderate its self-improvement value. Gossip about norm compliance might be less instructive than gossip about norm violations when individuals learn specific social norms (Baumeister et al., 2004). Thus, the gossip content and other situational contingencies may operate as boundary conditions on the self-improvement value of positive and negative gossip.

The self-improvement motive prompts individuals to make persistent efforts and master challenges (Sedikides & Skowronski, 2000). Accordingly, we predicted that the self-improvement value of positive gossip would increase alertness. However, alertness was high for both positive and negative gossip (M around 5 on a 7-point scale), which suggests that alertness is a generic response to self-relevant information. Positive gossip receivers might become alert in preparation for self-improving actions, while negative gossip receivers might become alert due to the direct positive and negative implications gossip may have for themselves.

Our results further showed that negative gossip had self-promotion value, because it provides individuals with social comparison information that justifies self-promoting judgments, which result in feelings of pride. Contrary to lay perceptions, most negative gossip is not intended to hurt the target, but to please the gossipier and receiver (Ben-Ze'ev, 1994), by fostering self-promotion and positive affect for its participants (cf. Robins & Beer, 2001). We also showed that negative gossip elicited self-protection concerns, which were associated with anxiety. Social comparisons enable individuals to draw analogies between themselves and others. Negative gossip makes people concerned that their reputation may be at risk, as they may personally become targets of negative gossip in the future, which generates fear. Given that fear increases systematic information processing, functional for regaining order and

predictability (Baas, De Dreu, & Nijstad, 2012), fear represents an adaptive response to negative gossip threats. Fear urges individuals to take action to preserve their self-system integrity, and to defend themselves against potential negative outcomes (Green, Sedikides, Pinter, & Van Tongeren, 2009).

Achievement Goals

Our study revealed that compared to participants with salient performance goals, participants with mastery goals perceived marginally higher self-improvement value of the received gossip. Given that mastery goals are dominant in student populations (Elliot & Church, 1997), we could attribute the marginality of this effect to the characteristics of our student sample, where high chronic mastery goals might have generated self-improvement tendencies for participants in both goal conditions.

Contrary to our expectations, the self-promotion value of gossip was similar among individuals with salient mastery and performance goals. Negative gossip elicited relatively high self-promotion value for both participants with mastery and performance goals (M around 5 on a 7-point scale). Thus, irrespective of receivers' goal, negative gossip generated positive self-regard, suggesting that positive self-regard is a fundamental human need. Moreover, in line with achievement goal conceptualizations, participants in the performance goal condition experienced overall higher self-protection concerns compared to participants in the mastery goal condition, because they feel more easily threatened. Participants with salient performance goals experienced self-protection concerns in response to both positive and negative gossip. By defining their competence relative to others, individuals who pursue performance goals feel threatened by positive gossip because rivals' success translates to their own failure (cf. Poortvliet & Giebels, 2012). Moreover, similarly to individuals with mastery goals, individuals with performance goals feel threatened by negative gossip because it

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suggests that their social environment is hostile and they might become negative gossip targets themselves.

Gender

Our exploratory analyses in Study 3.2 (but not in Study 3.1) suggest that women are generally more sensitive to the valence of received gossip than men. As compared to men, women responded more strongly to the valence of gossip in terms of evoked self-promotion value, pride, self-protection concern, and alertness, whereas for men gossip valence generated differential responses on fear. These findings suggest that cues from their social environment facilitated downward social comparisons and also revealed potential threats for women; men were less sensitive to the threat of a malignant social environment in which they may become targets of negative gossip. The moderating effect of gender may reflect that women are more relational and interdependent than men, and therefore more sensitive to social cues (Weber & Hertel, 2007). As such, women may be more sensitive than men to information revealing a benign or malignant social environment, and may also derive their self-views to a higher extent from it. The higher impact of received gossip on women's self evaluations may partly explain why gossip is stereotypically seen as a female behavior (Michelson et al., 2010): if receiving gossip is more important for the self-evaluation of women than that of men, women perhaps are more interested in receiving (both positive and negative) gossip. Future research may examine this possibility.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

The present study contributes to self-evaluation motives research, by providing empirical evidence of the self-evaluative functions that gossip serves for receivers. Consistent with the idea that people include representations of others in the self-concept (Brown, 1998), we showed that receiving competence-related gossip is relevant for self-improvement, self-promotion and self-protection. Social comparison is an intrinsic part of self-evaluation

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(Festinger, 1954); positive and negative competence-related gossip about others sets in motion social comparison processes (Wert & Salovey, 2004), which make self-evaluation motives salient. Self-evaluation depends on available information and on the ratio between information value and its emotional cost (Sedikides & Skowronski, 2000). Gossip conveniently provides individuals with indirect social comparison information about relevant others, which allows individuals to avoid threat or embarrassment by directly encountering the target (Suls, 1977; Wert & Salovey, 2004). Thus, receivers value gossip highly due to its self-evaluative functions, which elicit adaptive self-conscious emotions. Moreover, receivers' achievement goals influence their self-evaluations and emotional reactions to competence-related gossip.

By showing that receiving gossip plays an important role in self-evaluation, the present findings help explain why gossip is universal among humans. Our research might shift the prevailing negative perception of gossip (Baumeister et al., 2004, Foster, 2004), and it might complement research that documents its social control functions. We demonstrate that besides emotional catharsis and social control, gossip provides an essential resource for self-evaluation.

Gossip is omnipresent in organizations, where it has a paradoxical reputation. On the one hand, gossip is perceived as a threat to the organization and its employees (Michelson et al., 2010). Social norms explicitly instruct people to avoid gossip, and prescribe punishments for those who gossip (Dunbar, 2004; Goodman & Ben-Ze'ev, 1994). On the other hand, due to its social control functions, managers often encourage gossip, but call it "mutual monitoring" (Kniffin & Wilson, 2010). At any rate, employees do gossip fervently about coworkers' achievements and failures. Our results suggest that negative and positive gossip are valuable and accessible sources of information, which can help employees compare with others in their organization, and evaluate their own competence or performance. An upward

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comparison may teach employees how to improve, while a downward comparison can be flattering or reveal threats for the self. Furthermore, achievement goals, often explicitly advocated by human resource policies, influence how people value competence-related gossip. Thus, our research may help managers and employees understand why people value gossip related to their achievement domain, and have certain emotional reactions to the received gossip.

Limitations and Future Research

First, we believe that gossip satisfies fundamental human needs, thus our results should be replicable within the general adult population. However, the participants of our studies were students. It remains for future research to replicate our findings using more diverse samples. Second, we used only explicit self-report measures for self-evaluation value of gossip, which we constructed in line with conceptualizations of self-evaluation motives. Future research could use other measures to assess the implicit self-evaluative functions of received gossip. Third, we manipulated gossip valence and achievement goals so that participants recalled or received either positive or negative gossip, and had either a mastery or performance goal. However, people may receive messages that contain both positive and negative gossip, and may hold a combination of achievement goals. Therefore, our results should be interpreted keeping these aspects in mind. Fourth, the present study focused on the self-relevant value of passively received gossip. However, in conversation people are rarely either gossip senders or receivers, but rather exchange roles dynamically. Future work should investigate how individuals value gossip when they seek gossip actively, and whether, in turn, they become gossip senders.

Conclusion

The present research shows that individuals are interested in receiving gossip due to its self-evaluative functions. Gossip recipients tend to use positive and negative gossip

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information in order to improve, promote, and protect the self. Furthermore, positive and negative gossip elicits self-conscious emotions that are congruent with the specific self-evaluation motives underlying gossip valuation. Finally, achievement goals influence individuals' self-evaluations and emotional reactions to the received gossip. In all, this study suggests that one reason why gossip is so prevalent in all walks of life is that receiving gossip serves important self-evaluative functions for individuals.