

## **Highlights**

- Gossip is a form of conversation that uniquely involves three actors: the gossip, the receiver, and the target.
- In professional settings, gossipers are more likely to share positive and non-malicious gossip than negative and malicious one.
- Gossipers tend to purposely plan the content to be shared by considering the target-receiver interpersonal closeness.

# **Are we truly wicked when gossiping at work?**

## **The role of valence, interpersonal closeness and social awareness**

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## **Are we truly wicked when gossiping at work?**

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#### **Abstract**

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

***Keywords:*** *gossip, valence, interpersonal closeness, social awareness.*

## **Are we truly wicked when gossiping at work?**

### **The role of valence, interpersonal closeness and social awareness**

#### **1. Introduction**

Human beings show an increasing interest in and attraction to telling stories that do not belong to their own sphere. Data report that 60% of adult conversations are about absent persons (Wert & Salovey, 2004) and 65% of their day-to-day conversations involve talking about others (Beersma & van Kleef, 2012), a practice widely adopted both during private and professional conversations. Defined as an exchange of information about absent third parties taking place in social contexts in which all actors involved are known (Foster, 2004), gossip is a key social behavior that nearly everyone working in any organization experiences, hears, and probably contributes to (Mills, 2010). The general belief is that gossip has always a malign purpose, and is a form of mistreatment aimed to cause harm to individuals and organizations (Wu, Kwan, Wu, & Ma, 2015), thus leading people to develop a reflexive distaste for those who gossip and the gossip itself. But is this a stereotype or is it the reality? Despite the wide array of studies existing on gossip (see Wu, Birtch, Chiang, & Zhang, 2016 for recent research), what type of information co-workers share the most when gossiping and the related purpose are not well established. Indeed, extant contributions have shown mixed results: while some have demonstrated that negative news is more likely to be shared (e.g., Hornik, Satchi, Cesareo, & Pastore, 2015), others have highlighted that people prefer to pass on positive information (e.g., Berger & Milkman, 2012). Further, most research examines gossip valence as being positive vs. negative (e.g., Ellwardt, Labianca, & Wittek, 2011; Wu et al., 2016), thereby leaving room for studying further valenced nuances, such as the gossip maliciousness. In this regard, existing works on malicious gossip have proposed theoretical arguments (Wert & Salovey, 2004), applied discourse analysis

(Guendozi, 2001), developed surveys (Lyons & Hughes, 2015), implemented multiagent models (Smith, 2014) or observational techniques (Low, Frey, & Brockman, 2010). To our knowledge, scholars have therefore overlooked the usefulness of experimental research for the analysis of gossip at work considered as an organizational behavior (Thau, Pitesa, & Pillutla, 2014). Moreover, while there is a plethora of studies on gossip among friends or acquaintances (e.g., Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012; Michelson & Suchitra Mouly, 2004), gossip in the workplace remains significantly overlooked (Mills, 2010). Wu et al.'s (2016) paper reports that our current knowledge on gossip in organizations is either theoretical (e.g., Kurland & Pelled, 2000) or deduced from other fields of research (e.g., social anthropology, Kniffin & Sloan Wilson, 2010; ethics; Wu et al., 2015). In addition, existing research on gossip within organizations tends to present a too simplistic perspective, by associating gossip with a negative talk that needs to be discouraged or even banned.

In order to fill these gaps, we investigate what type of gossip is more likely to be shared among peers at work by offering a unique framework encompassing both the gossip content and the relationships existing among the actors involved in this informal communication. While the former is captured by looking at the gossip valence, being both positive vs. negative and malicious vs. non-malicious, the latter is analyzed by considering gossip as a relational process involving a gossipers, a receiver, and a gossip target (Foster, 2004; Wu et al., 2016). In particular, we study the social transmission of gossip by incorporating in our model both the target-receiver interpersonal closeness and the sender-receiver relationship by focusing on whether the receiver might or might not be able to verify the truthfulness of the gossip. By applying Kurland and Pelled's (2000) model, and based on the findings of three experimental studies, we demonstrate that positive and non-malicious gossip is more likely to be shared with others than negative and malicious gossip. Further, we show that this relationship is enhanced when the gossip object belongs to the receiver's social group at

work and when the gossip is aware that the recipient might verify the truthfulness of the news transmitted. By taking an impression management perspective, our work contributes to enriching the understanding of gossip in the workplace which remains an overlooked issue in management studies (e.g., Mills 2010). It particularly points to how gossip can be used to make a good impression on in-group members and, therefore, to fulfill employees' needs to foster group cohesion and intimacy (Dunbar, 2004).

## **2. Theoretical background**

### *2.1. Gossip: definition and functions*

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

Regarding the functions of gossip, there is no denying that it has been traditionally conceived of as a negative communication (Wu et al., 2015). As Dunbar (2004) emphasizes, “For reasons that are not entirely clear, gossip has acquired a decidedly shady reputation” (p. 100). Hence, people use it to criticize their enemies, to denigrate those whom they perceive as their adversaries, or to push insurgences and riots (Foster, 2004). However, more recent

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

studies have also called attention to the positive effects of this type of communication. Gossip is frequently used to fill in space in conversations (Berger, 2014) as well to share novel and original information with others, thereby allowing for the strengthening of the senders' status and prestige within groups (Ellwardt et al., 2011; Smith, 2014). Consistent with an evolutionary perspective (Dunbar, 2004; McAndrew, Bell, & Garcia, 2007), gossip reminds people of the rules and values that regulate a community's life, thus consolidating group unity. As a consequence, it helps limit behaviors that deviate from norms and functions as punishment for those who misbehave (e.g., free-riders and social cheats). Taken together, both negative and positive functions of gossip suggest that it may serve as a means for impression management.

## *2.2. Social transmission of gossip in the workplace*

Gossip, as an aspect of informal interpersonal communication, is intrinsic to personal as well as to organizational life. It usually arises in "unmanaged spaces" of organizations thus facilitating the communication of ideas, attitudes, and emotions regarding the organization (Michelson & Suchitra Mouly, 2004). Similarly, gossip seems to be more frequent in work contexts characterized by formal and hierarchical communication (Mills, 2010).

Acknowledging this, scholars have suggested that gossip can involve the whole organization, thus going beyond the individual or group dynamics (van Iterson & Clegg, 2008); others have argued that gossip is strictly connected with power in organizations (Kurland & Pelled, 2000) and that, when group-based rewards are provided, group-level gossip is more likely to occur (Kniffin & Sloan Wilson, 2010).

In this study, we aim to investigate the social transmission of gossip by applying Kurland and Pelled's (2000) model which distinguishes different kinds of gossip based on three dimensions, i.e., sign, credibility, and relatedness. We relate the valence of the gossip (i.e., its



sign) to the likelihood of sharing it with others, while considering the moderating effect of two intervening aspects: on one side, the interpersonal closeness of the target of the gossip and the receiver (i.e., relatedness); on the other side, the sender's awareness of the receiver's ability to check the truthfulness of the gossip (i.e., credibility).

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

### **3. Conceptual development**

Our argument is grounded on the idea that the social transmission of gossip depends upon two main factors: the gossip itself and the actors who directly or indirectly participate in it.

Regarding the former, one of the main features that needs attention is the valence of the gossip, that is the nuances that its content assumes during the communicational exchange.

Regarding the latter, we acknowledge that gossip has a dynamic nature requiring the participation of a triad of actors.

The importance of analyzing gossip valence (i.e., sign) is consistent with the acknowledgement of different types of gossip which have been conceptualized so far.

However, while most authors limit their attention to the analysis of positive and negative gossip (e.g., Grosser et al., 2012), in this paper we take a further step and include the investigation of malicious and non-malicious gossip, the empirical analysis of which is still scarce in the literature (a few exceptions can be found in Low et al., 2010; Lyons & Hughes, 2015; Smith, 2014). While positive gossip consists of communicating favorable news about others (e.g., praising the absent individual, defending a colleague), negative gossip tends to emphasize the undesirable side of others' actions and behaviors (Ellwardt, Steglich, & Wittek, 2012). Differently, the distinction between non-malicious and malicious gossip is generally associated with subtle evaluations embedded in the speaker's tone or in jokes that outsiders

cannot completely grasp and that might insinuate other explanations (Wert & Salovey, 2004). Therefore, malicious gossip is often used strategically to reduce others' reputation, to manipulate, influence, or even bully and isolate other people (Beersma & van Kleef, 2012). The literature on the social transmission of gossip has highlighted that the valence of the message is a relevant dimension in social communication. Studies of word of mouth have demonstrated that differences in the formulation of the message lead to different reactions of individuals (e.g., Alexandrov, Lilly, & Babakus, 2013; Berger & Milkman, 2012; Packard, Gershoff, & Wooten, 2016). The popular beliefs about gossip and the general confusion about rumors lead people to think that negative news is more likely to be transmitted than positive news (i.e., negativity bias, see Hornik et al., 2015). Nonetheless, researchers have also posited that positive information is more frequently diffused than negative information since the source of the message may gain social rewards (Berger & Milkman, 2012). This recalls the idea that individuals prefer to share content that is consistent with a self-presentation scope or with the need to convey their own identity.

Whereas the gossip sign (i.e., valence) captures the characteristics of the gossip content, the remaining two dimensions of Kurland and Pelled's (2000) model (i.e., credibility and relatedness) encapsulate its social side, that is the relationships existing among the actors involved in the communication process. In particular, given that credibility is an indicator of the extent to which the gossip is plausible and truthful (Kurland & Pelled, 2000), it echoes the risk of misinformation underlying the gossip (Foster, 2004). Often the actors involved in a social communication process, especially the recipient, question the veracity of the information exchanged and explicitly demand references for verifiable sources. Therefore, given the difficulty in identifying the source of the message and the related inability to evaluate its truthfulness, gossip might be subject to the so-called "suspension of belief" (Michelson & Suchitra Mouly, 2004, p. 191). Such ambiguity regarding the veracity of the

news is likely to increase interest in the news itself. In this regard, scholars have argued that message credibility predicts whether it will be transmitted to others or not (Berger, 2014). We attempt to capture gossip credibility by investigating the extent to which the sender is aware of the receiver's ability to check the truthfulness of the news. The awareness of others' needs, emotions and abilities recalls the social awareness construct (Boyatzis, 2008), which helps people read others' perspectives and concerns accurately. In developing his Social Awareness Inventory, Sheldon (1996) refers to social awareness as one's ability to form a mental representation (a contextualized cognizance) of either oneself or another person, recalling that it relates to constructs such as cognitive empathy and social sensitivity.

Lastly, our conceptual framework encompasses gossip relatedness. However, while the original model by Kurland and Pelled (2000) defines it as the extent to which gossip is about work issues, we focus rather on a social conceptualization of relatedness by examining the extent to which the target of the gossip belongs to the receiver's social group or not. Social (or interpersonal) relatedness is defined as the "desire to feel connected to others [...] to have a sense of communion or closeness with others" (Sheldon & Bettencourt, 2002, p. 27). Our model addresses social relatedness by examining the actors' interpersonal closeness. Based on prior research, interpersonal closeness describes the psychological proximity of two people and the related feelings of attachment and connection between them (Dubois, Bonezzi, & De Angelis, 2016; Gino & Galinsky, 2012). Researchers have demonstrated that interpersonal closeness affects the information transmission process (e.g., Ellwardt et al., 2011; McAndrew et al., 2007), both its reach and its impact. In particular, Hornik and colleagues (2015) argued that the tie strength between the actors (e.g., family or friends, work parties) might moderate the relationship between secondary word of mouth and information dissemination. Given that social comparison is at the basis of gossip and that comparing different social groups helps to establish a social identity (Wert & Salovey, 2004), people tend to distinguish those

individuals who belong to their own social clique (i.e., in-group members) from those who do not (i.e., out-group members).

**Figure 1:** Conceptual development.

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## **4. Hypotheses development**

### *4.1. Gossip valence and interpersonal closeness*

People frequently tend to impress others at work by sharing positive instead of negative information. Indeed, sharing positive information might self-enhance the message senders (Berger, 2014; Dubois et al., 2016), leading to an improvement in their reputation (Ellwardt et al., 2012) and a fulfillment of their ego and individual status needs (McAndrew et al., 2007; Michelson & Suchitra Mouly, 2004). By praising or defending an absent person, co-workers implicitly try to persuade others about their commitment to the group/organization and their loyalty to the community values and norms. Similarly, by spreading positive information about others, employees signal that their co-workers might be able to count on them when needed (Gambetta, 2009). Gossip senders thus tend to make a good impression on their interlocutors, hoping that they will reciprocate the behavior in the future by supporting their own ideas or defending their own actions at work with the ultimate aim to maintain group solidarity and functioning (Ellwardt et al., 2012). As Hornik et al. (2015) highlight, this kind of behavior is frequent also in word-of-mouth consumers, who tend to transmit positive information rather than negative information for self-presentation and self-enhancement purposes. Given that the distinction between positive and negative gossip might parallel the one between non-malicious and malicious gossip in that both communicate news in favor vs. against the gossip target, we expect the above-mentioned argument to be valid also for the

non-malicious gossip. Formally:

**H1a:** Positive gossip is more likely to be shared with others than negative gossip.

**H2a:** Non-malicious gossip is more likely to be shared with others than malicious gossip.

Positive and non-malicious gossip are more likely to be spread in contexts in which individuals are socially interconnected. Employees working together on the same project or on the same product and characterized by high mutual interdependences, are likely to be interested in maintaining high welfare for the group (Ellwardt et al., 2012). Indeed, people codify and encode information about in-group and out-group individuals differently, in such a way that they tend to interact more with in-group members than with out-group ones, show more spontaneous positive affective responses, think more favorably about them, and respond more cooperatively to them (Tajfel, 1974). Similarly, gossiping non-maliciously and about in-group members may help senders avoid negative associations with themselves (Berger, 2014) in an attempt to make a good impression on others. This idea recalls existing research arguing that communicating with close (vs. distant) others triggers a psychological motive to protect others (Dubois et al., 2016). Overall, this argument suggests that, depending upon whether the target belongs to their reference group or not, people display different behaviors in gossip by revising the valence of the message they share. Therefore, we expect that the likelihood that positive and non-malicious gossip are shared more will be stronger when the target of the gossip is an in-group vs. an out-group member. Formally:

**H1b:** The relationship between positive gossip and the likelihood to share it with others is enhanced when the target of the gossip belongs to the receiver's social group.

**H2b:** The relationship between non-malicious gossip and the likelihood to share it with others is enhanced when the target of the gossip belongs to the receiver's social group.

#### *4.2. Malicious and non-malicious valence and the receiver's ability to verify the gossip*

Gossip is an intimate conversation, and it happens mainly in physical contexts with a feeling of mutual trust between the sender and the receiver. Scholars have stressed that information transmission is significantly influenced by the strength of the relationship between the communicator and the recipient (Berger, 2014) in such a way that the receiver's reaction to the communication processes plays a relevant role in how social interactions unfold (see, for instance, Sweeney, Soutar, & Mazzarol, 2008). Given that much gossip "involves creative fantasy work regarding others" (Clegg & van Iterson, 2009, p. 277), the receiver is in the position to verify the truthfulness of the information. Especially when the information shared is uncertain, ambiguous, and difficult to verify, individuals may be highly motivated to search for additional cues to reduce the confusion (Jia, Ruan, & Zhang, 2017). As a matter of fact, the information asymmetry between the sender and the receiver may lead the former to cheat and the latter either to seek further information or to look for alternative information sources (Lim & Chung, 2011). Based on this, we expect that the sender's awareness of the receiver's potential reaction to the gossip might affect his/her likelihood to share it with others. Perspective taking research suggests that those who have the cognitive capacity to look at the world from other viewpoints (such as the one of their counterpart) are more likely to anticipate the behavior and reactions of others. They can mimic others' non-verbal behaviors (Galinsky, Maddux, Gilin, & White, 2008) and successfully manage interpersonal relationships in order to favor their own reputation, status and personal image. By virtue of this capacity, gossip senders can therefore adapt the valence of the message according to their perception of the receivers' concerns and attitudes. In other words, supposing that receivers are more or less likely to verify the gossip, this may influence the content that the gossip senders will share in an attempt to achieve socially desirable responses. Formally:

**H3:** The relationship between non-malicious gossip and the likelihood to share it with others

is enhanced when the receiver is able to verify its truthfulness.

A synthesis of the postulated hypotheses is shown in Figure 2.

**Figure 2:** Research model.

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## 5. Overview of the studies

This work aims to demonstrate the following: (i) when studying gossip, it is important to devote attention to the different valenced nuances characterizing the message that is shared, and (ii) the interaction between the sender-target-receiver triad may generate social dynamics likely to shape the way information travels within an organizational context.

Web experiments were run involving paid participants who declared to have a current job position (e.g., Mills, 2010) and recruited on Amazon Mechanical Turk. The advantage of using such a digital platform lies in its anonymity, experiment bias (i.e., subject crosstalk and reactance) and the related higher level of self-disclosure (Paolacci, Chandler, & Ipeirotis, 2010). Moreover, being aware of the potential influence of certain variables on the phenomenon of interest (i.e., the likelihood to share the gossip), in all studies we controlled for both respondents' age (continuous variable) and level of education (1 = Lower than high school, 2 = High school, 3 = Bachelor's degree, 4 = Master's degree, 5 = Doctoral degree, 6 = Other). For the three studies, we employed the same dependent variable by averaging the responses collected about the likelihood to share the message with closer or more distant actors, i.e., partner, friends, acquaintances. The scale was adapted from McAndrew et al. (2007) (Study 1:  $\alpha = .66$ ; Study 2:  $\alpha = .76$ ; Study 3:  $\alpha = .70$ ).

Study 1 and Study 2 investigate the likelihood of sharing positive vs. negative gossip (Study 1) and malicious vs. non-malicious gossip (Study 2) in relation to the target-receiver

interpersonal closeness. A follow-up study (Study 3) puts in relation the sender's likelihood of sharing malicious vs. non-malicious gossip with the sender's awareness of the receiver's ability to check the veracity of the gossip.

### *5.1. Study 1*

Study 1 tests whether the valence of the gossip (positive vs. negative) affects the sender's likelihood to share it with others as well as whether this relationship might change depending upon the target-receiver interpersonal closeness (in-group vs. out-group). To do this, participants were presented with a short story, representing positive vs. negative gossip (i.e., valence), in which the target of the gossip was a person who belonged (or not) to the receiver's close organizational social group (i.e., interpersonal closeness), and were asked to rate to what extent they were likely to share that gossip with others. We predicted that the sender of the gossip would be more likely to share positive valenced rather than negative valenced gossip (Hypothesis 1a) and that this relationship would be moderated by the target-receiver social bond at work especially when the target is closely tied to the receiver (i.e., in-group member; Hypothesis 1b).

#### *5.1.1. Method*

A total of one hundred and forty-four respondents ( $M_{\text{age}} = 33.8$ ; 65.3% male) were randomly assigned to a condition in  $2$  (valence: positive vs. negative)  $\times$   $2$  (target-receiver interpersonal closeness: in-group vs. out-group) between-subjects design and were distributed as follows:  $n(39)$ ; positive gossip and in-group target:  $n(36)$ ; negative gossip and out-group target:  $n(35)$ ; positive gossip and out-group target:  $n(34)$ .

The experiment was grounded on a scenario reproducing a physical and intimate conversation. The cover story asked the participants to imagine the following scene: a wallet, with a great amount of money inside, has been lost in the workplace but soon returned to the



owner—all money included (positive valence). The person who found and returned the wallet was a co-worker personally well known to the message receiver (in-group member) or someone who occasionally works for the company (out-group member). The negative valence scenario invited imagining that in the workplace a wallet, with a great amount of money inside, has been stolen. The message receiver has been told that someone saw who the thief was: in one case, it was a co-worker personally well known to the message receiver (in-group member); in the other case, it was someone who occasionally works for the company (out-group member).

Next we asked participants to rate how likely they would be to share that gossip with their partner, friends, and acquaintances (1 = “Very unlikely”; 7 = “Very likely”) and checked for the manipulation of the message valence (1 = “Negative”; 7 = “Positive”;  $M_{\text{negative}} = 3.1$ ;  $M_{\text{positive}} = 6.0$ ;  $F(142) = 15.17$ ,  $p = .000$ ). Finally, we asked for demographic information and thanked the participants for the contribution provided.

### 5.1.2. Results

A 2-way ANCOVA was performed, controlling for both age and education level. Control variables did not show any significant associations with the likelihood to share. A test of homogeneity proved differences in the variance among the four conditions (Levene’s test:  $F(3, 138) = 1.1$ ,  $p = .37$ ). The ANCOVA also showed that there is a significant main effect of gossip valence on the likelihood to share it with others: the mean of positive gossip ( $M_{\text{positive}} = 5.3$ ) is higher than the one of negative gossip ( $M_{\text{negative}} = 4.5$ ;  $F(1, 136) = 8.5$ ,  $p = .004$ ), supporting Hypothesis 1a. Regarding the main effect of the target-receiver interpersonal closeness on the likelihood to share gossip, we found it not to be statistically significant: in-group and out-group means are the same, with no statistical significance ( $M_{\text{in-group}} = 4.9$ ,  $M_{\text{out-group}} = 4.9$   $F(1, 136) = .01$ ,  $p = \text{ns}$ ). However, we found a significant two-way interaction

between the valence of the gossip and the interpersonal closeness on the likelihood to share the gossip ( $F(1, 136) = 7.7, p = .006$ ). In order to better examine such a moderating influence, we controlled for planned contrast. It proved that the valence of the gossip matters; under both conditions (in-group and out-group), respondents are more likely to share positive valenced ( $M_{\text{in-group}} = 5.6, M_{\text{out-group}} = 4.9; F(1, 136) = 4.3, p = .04$ ) rather than negative valenced gossip ( $M_{\text{in-group}} = 4.2; M_{\text{out-group}} = 4.8, F(1, 136) = 3.4, p = \text{ns}$ ). As shown in Figure 3, results revealed that people are more likely to share positive gossip regarding an in-group member; conversely, negative gossip is more likely to be transmitted when it is about an out-group member. However, data showed that the gossip valence is not significantly affected by the target-receiver interpersonal closeness when the gossip object is an out-group member. Hypothesis 1b is therefore supported.

**Figure 3:** The relationship between valence of the gossip (positive vs. negative) and target-receiver interpersonal closeness on the likelihood to share the gossip.

--- INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE ---

## 5.2. Study 2

Because gossip is often viewed as a message that contains additional cues, people may add subtle meanings to the communication instead of simply transmitting valenced messages (positive vs. negative). To address this issue, the manipulation of the message valence was modified to include malicious (vs. non-malicious) information while holding constant the moderation effect of the target-receiver interpersonal closeness (a person well known, in-group, vs. a person barely known, out-group). This study aims to test whether non-malicious gossip (vs. malicious) is more likely to be shared (Hypothesis 2a) and whether this association might be affected by the relationship existing between the target and the receiver of the gossip (Hypothesis 2b).

### 5.2.1. Method

One hundred and fifty-nine respondents ( $M_{\text{age}} = 34.1$ ; 50.3% male) took part in a 2 (valence: malicious vs. non-malicious)  $\times$  2 (target-receiver interpersonal closeness: in-group vs. out-group) between-subjects design and were randomly assigned as follows: malicious gossip and in-group target:  $n(38)$ ; non-malicious gossip and in-group target:  $n(45)$ ; malicious gossip and out-group target:  $n(37)$ ; non-malicious gossip and out-group target:  $n(39)$ .

In order to test our hypotheses, we first manipulated the target-receiver interpersonal closeness by presenting a scenario in which, during a coffee break at work, a colleague reports that a co-worker, either barely known (out-group) or well known to the receiver (in-group) has been promoted to executive manager. Second, we manipulated the valence of the gossip through the use of a vignette showing two co-workers chatting during a coffee break. While in the non-malicious gossip scenario, the co-workers comment on the promotion of their colleague as a highly deserved one (“He has been working very hard over the last year”, “He deserves the promotion!”), in the malicious scenario the news takes on the form of a scandal (“Shhhh... He used to blarney his boss all the time”, “He does not deserve the promotion!”; see Appendix). As we did in Study 1, respondents were asked to indicate how likely they would be to share that gossip with their partner, friends, and acquaintances, anchoring it with 1 = “Very unlikely”, 7 = “Very likely”. This was used as our dependent variable. We then checked for the manipulation of the valence of the gossip (1 = “Malicious”; 7 = “Non-malicious”;  $M_{\text{malicious}} = 3.1$ ,  $M_{\text{non-malicious}} = 4.2$ ;  $F(1, 157) = 1.31$ ,  $p = .000$ ), asked for demographics and thanked the participants.

### 5.2.2. Results

After controlling for age and level of education, a two-way ANCOVA proved variance's

heterogeneity among the four conditions (Levene's test:  $F(3, 153) = 2.3, p = .08$ ). First, control variables were not statistically significant. Further, the analysis revealed that there is a marginally significant effect of valenced gossip on the likelihood to share it: the mean of non-malicious gossip ( $M_{\text{non-malicious}} = 4.1$ ) was higher than the mean of malicious gossip ( $M_{\text{malicious}} = 3.7$ ;  $F(1, 155) = 3.5, p = .06$ ). Hypothesis 2a is therefore supported, despite the statistical significance not being very strong. Furthermore, there was not a significant main effect for the target-receiver interpersonal closeness (in-group vs. out-group) on the likelihood to share ( $M_{\text{in-group}} = 3.8, M_{\text{out-group}} = 4$ ;  $F(1, 153) = .34, p = \text{ns}$ ). Differently, we found a significant two-way interaction between the valence (malicious vs. non-malicious) and the interpersonal closeness on the likelihood to share the gossip ( $F(1, 151) = 6.26, p = .01$ ). Planned contrast showed that when the target of the gossip is an out-group member there is not a significant effect ( $M_{\text{malicious}} = 3.8$ ;  $M_{\text{non-malicious}} = 3.7$ ;  $F(1, 151) = .24, p = \text{ns}$ ) while, when the target is an in-group member, both valenced forms of gossip are statistically significant ( $M_{\text{malicious}} = 3.5, M_{\text{non-malicious}} = 4.5$ ;  $F(1, 151) = 9.8, p = .000$ ; see Figure 4). Overall, these findings demonstrate that the likelihood of sharing gossip with others is highest when the gossip is non-malicious and the target is an in-group member; conversely, the likelihood is lowest in the case of malicious valence and an in-group target. Being an out-group member does not make any difference in that both malicious and non-malicious gossips are shared almost equally. These results thus marginally support Hypothesis 2b.

**Figure 4:** The relationship between the valence of the gossip (malicious vs. non-malicious) and target-receiver interpersonal closeness on the likelihood to share the gossip.

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### 5.3. Study 3

The goal of Study 3 is to examine whether the relationship between the gossip valence

(malicious vs. non-malicious) and the likelihood to share it is moderated by the sender's awareness of the receiver's reaction to the gossip, that is of his/her ability to verify the truthfulness of the gossip (Hypothesis 3). This study attempts to show that the sender might plan what to share depending upon his/her understanding of whether the recipient is able or not to check the veracity of the message received.

### *5.3.1. Method*

Two hundred and fifteen participants took part in this study ( $M_{\text{age}} = 34$ ; 59.1% female).

Workers participated in a 2 (valence: malicious vs. non-malicious)  $\times$  2 (receiver's ability to verify: high vs. low) between-subjects design and were distributed as follows: non-malicious and low receiver's ability to verify:  $n(61)$ ; non-malicious and high receiver's ability to verify:  $n(45)$ ; malicious and low receiver's ability to verify:  $n(60)$ ; malicious and low high receiver's ability to verify:  $n(49)$ .

The participants were presented with the same vignette used in Study 2 in which we firstly manipulated the valence of the gossip. In the subsequent manipulation, we provided a scenario in which the sender is aware that the gossip receiver either is able to verify the truthfulness of the gossip (high ability to verify) or is not (low ability to verify). Next, respondents rated their likelihood to share the gossip with their partner, friends, and acquaintances (1 = "Very unlikely"; 7 = "Very likely"). We checked for the manipulation about whether the vignette was perceived correctly as either malicious or non-malicious (1 = "Malicious"; 7 = "Non-malicious";  $M_{\text{malicious}} = 3.1$ ,  $M_{\text{non-malicious}} = 4.3$ ;  $F(213) = .5$ ,  $p = .000$ ) and whether the receiver was in the position to verify the gossip or not (1 = "Very unlikely"; 7 = "Very Likely";  $M_{\text{non-verify}} = 3.5$ ,  $M_{\text{verify}} = 4.0$ ;  $F(213) = .03$ ,  $p = .05$ ). Finally, we asked for demographic information, and thanked respondents for their contribution to the research.

### 5.3.2. Results

In order to test Hypothesis 3, we ran a two-way ANCOVA regressing the valence of the gossip (malicious vs. non-malicious) and the receiver's ability to verify the gossip (high vs. low) as independent variables. Levene's test demonstrated variance's heterogeneity among the conditions ( $F(3, 211) = .21, p = .09$ ). Initial results showed a significant main effect of the valence of the gossip on the likelihood to share it: the mean of non-malicious gossip ( $M_{\text{non-malicious}} = 4.0$ ) was significantly higher than the mean of malicious gossip ( $M_{\text{malicious}} = 3.2$ ;  $F(1, 209) = 19.3, p = .000$ ). There was a significant main effect of the receiver's ability to verify the news on the likelihood to share: the mean of likelihood to share when the receiver is high in this ability ( $M_{\text{high-ability}} = 3.8$ ) is greater than when he/she is not able to check the truthfulness of the gossip ( $M_{\text{low-ability}} = 3.4$ ;  $F(1, 209) = 5, p = .03$ ). We also found a significant two-way interaction between valence and the receiver's ability to verify on the likelihood to share the gossip ( $F(1, 209) = 4.8, p = .03$ ). Specifically, planned contrasts demonstrated that the mean of non-malicious gossip was statistically significant ( $M_{\text{high-ability}} = 4.5$ ;  $M_{\text{low-ability}} = 3.6$ ;  $F(1, 209) = 9.7, p = .002$ ) while the mean of malicious gossip was not ( $M_{\text{high-ability}} = 3.2$ ;  $M_{\text{low-ability}} = 3.2$ ;  $F(1, 209) = .001, p = \text{ns}$ ; Figure 5). Finally, control variables were not statistically significant. Thus, Hypothesis 3 is supported.

**Figure 5:** The relationship between the valence of the gossip (malicious vs. non-malicious) and the receiver's ability to verify the gossip on the likelihood to share it.

--- INSERT FIGURE 5 HERE ---

## 6. Discussion

In this paper, we seek to understand whether certain valenced gossip is more likely to be shared at work and whether this relationship is affected by, on one side, the target-receiver interpersonal closeness and, on the other side, the sender's awareness of the receiver's ability

to verify the gossip. By running three experimental studies, we first found that positive and non-malicious gossips are more likely to be passed on to co-workers than negative and malicious gossip (Study 1). We believe this result echoes research stressing that sharing positive content leads the sender of the message to be more appreciated by his/her interlocutor (Berger, 2014). In particular, scholars suggest that people prefer to transfer a positive self-image when discussing intimately with others (McAndrew et al., 2007) and select those messages which allow them to avoid a loss of likability (Farley, Timme, & Hart, 2010). Moreover, our findings demonstrate that this relationship is strengthened when the gossip object is interpersonally close to the gossip receiver (Study 2). This result recalls the tenets of the intergroup behavior theory (Brewer, 1999) postulating that attachment and familiarity for in-group members come prior to the development of preferences for out-group individuals. Grounded on social identity and belief congruence research (Tajfel, 1974), the so-called in-group bias leads to in-group members' favoritism, expressed in liking, evaluation or resource allocation. A further explanation might derive from the effect of homophily in interpersonal communication (see Chu & Kim, 2011) in that the extent to which certain individuals share similar beliefs and attitudes is likely to shape their interactions. Finally, Study 3 demonstrates that non-malicious gossip is more likely to be shared when the gossip is aware of the receiver's ability to verify the veracity of the news. This evidence implies that the sender might carefully plan what to transmit depending upon his/her awareness of the receiver's potential future actions related to the gossip heard (Packard et al., 2016). Such an approach to the social relationships underlies the sender's aim to present himself/herself favorably with respect to social norms and standards. These individuals might be assumed to be "faking good" (Zerbe & Paulhus, 1987) to abide by the group norms, by stifling their self-serving impulses.

Overall, our results can be explained by considering gossip as a means through which people

attempt to impress others (Dunbar, 2004) by signaling their image and reputation within their group or organization. Especially in professional contexts, people may decide to convey certain content because they want to gain credit, attract others, and exert power on their mates (Farley et al., 2010).

### *6.1. Theoretical contributions*

By adopting an impression management perspective, our work firstly contributes to enriching the understanding of gossip in the workplace which remains an overlooked issue in management studies. Most prior research on gossip in organizations is grounded on qualitative analysis, by mainly examining the contextual conditions under which gossip flourishes (e.g., Rosnow, 2001). In response to this, our research offers experimental evidence to clear up a misconception of gossip in the workplace as a purely idle talk. Indeed, we demonstrate that gossip might be beneficial to both individuals and organizations and that, beyond contextual factors, senders' cognitive and psychological mechanisms can serve as motivational factors in deciding what to share. Secondly, it enriches the understanding of how differences in gossip valence affect the social transmission of information at work, thereby pointing to the literature on intraorganizational knowledge sharing (e.g., Wang & Noe, 2010) and its effect on several organizational behaviors, such as employees' creativity and innovation (Dong, Bartol, Zhang, & Li, 2016). Thus, we add to the literature on more general interpersonal communication at work. Thirdly, it sheds light on the importance of considering gossip as a complex interaction in which all components of the triad of actors involved affects what is more likely to be shared. Hence, gossip has to be conceptualized as a unique communicational setting wherein three different entities are simultaneously involved. Gossip sharing is therefore calibrated depending upon the relationships existing among this triad. In so doing, our work emphasizes that gossip is a group process, instead of



merely a sender-receiver relationship (e.g., DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007; Dunbar, 2004; Ellwardt et al., 2012; Foster, 2004). Finally, our work demonstrates that gossip can be a useful means through which co-workers attempt to influence each other by signaling a positive image of him/herself to their own social group. Hence, grounding on intergroup theory (Tajfel, 1974), gossip can be better understood by considering people's need to increase intimacy and cohesion within the community to which they belong at work, as well as their need to increase interpersonal social bonding (Alexandrov et al., 2013).

## *6.2. Implications for theory and practice*

From a theoretical point of view, this study offers new insights into the interpretation of gossip in the workplace and the effects of its transmission. Having a social purpose, gossip takes on the form of a critical pillar on which intraorganizational social networks are based. Following Housmanfar and Johnson's (2004) study, gossip becomes a cultural practice which, given its contextual, informal, and implicit nature, is among "the most challenging components of any organizational system to analyze" (p. 127). Shifting the focus to the bright side of this type of communication therefore opens up a new avenue for researchers who want to explore how people share information among each other at work. The literature on intraorganizational knowledge sharing (see Wang & Noe, 2010), for instance, might take advantage of understanding why certain valenced messages are more likely to be shared through gossip instead of through different communicational means. Similarly, it might benefit from acknowledging what the role played by trusted relationships is in allowing certain forms of communication at work.

From a managerial perspective, practitioners should look at gossip as a way through which employees can reinforce their sense of belonging to a certain group as well as to their organization (Michelson & Suchitra Mouly, 2004), by fostering group cohesion and

solidarity. Moreover, given that it is an extremely widespread form of communication, managers might want to understand whether gossip can be used to transmit information across organizational levels more rapidly than formal communication channels allow. Consistent with the importance of organizations adapting to current environmental dynamism, gossip might serve a function of measuring the effectiveness of certain policies and procedures on employees' behaviors and productivity (Mishra, 1990). Additionally, managers should be aware that gossip might affect human resource management strategies in that it often helps employees relieve tension and anxiety, especially in the case of organizational changes (Michelson, van Iterson, & Waddington, 2010). Further, as it is linked to the conceptualization of in- and out-group members, gossip might be used to affect intraorganizational competitors (e.g., marketing vs. finance group), by addressing, for instance, resource allocation among organizational units. Acknowledging that gossip valence is context-specific, organizations could also monitor the switching effect from one valence to another and contain the asymmetry of the information passed through among co-workers. Moreover, adapting valence of gossip permits to adjust organizational behaviors and reduce cultural dissonance gap.

By accepting gossip as an everyday form of communication that occurs in the workplace, managers can thus contribute to creating a professional environment in which relations among co-workers are fostered by promoting inclusiveness programs, more frequent job rotations and teamwork.

### *6.3. Directions for further research*

We acknowledge the limitation of our study in terms of experimental replicability. However, we believe it opens up interesting avenues for further research on gossip. Future work might explore whether a signal-identity process may drive what people gossip about. Further

research may also investigate whether gossip containing emotionally valenced information might have an effect on both the sender's likelihood to share it further and the receiver's reactions. Additionally, research might examine whether passing on gossip can be moderated by emotions. When, for example, the general mood of co-workers is low, people may tend to gossip more and focus on targets that are perceived as socially distant. Conversely, when the mood is high, people may engage less in gossiping and focus on targets that are socially close. Further questions that may be addressed concern whether different valenced gossip has a different impact on the organizational performance as well as whether the utility and functions of gossip change according to whether it is seen from the employees' instead of the organization's perspective (Grosser et al., 2012; Van Iterson & Clegg, 2008). Still, the role played by gossip can be investigated while looking at the organization's external relations. In this regard, scholars might be interested in studying whether envisaging the manipulative role of switching gossip valence might lead to purposefully engage in alter business relationship. Finally, studying whether certain people rather than others feel enjoyment while gossiping might be worth investigating. For instance, some works have demonstrated that women are more oriented toward gossiping than men (see Foster, 2004); however, it is still unclear whether this is associated with an equally higher enjoyment in participating in gossip.

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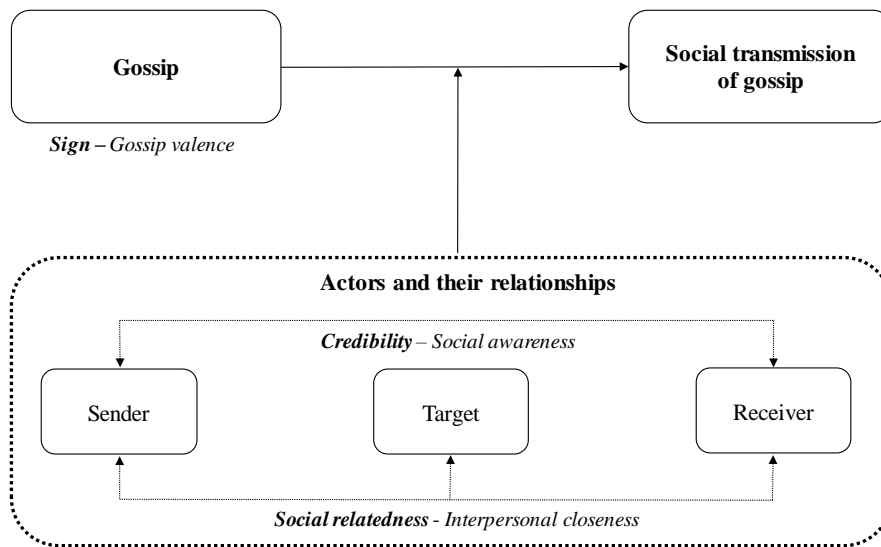
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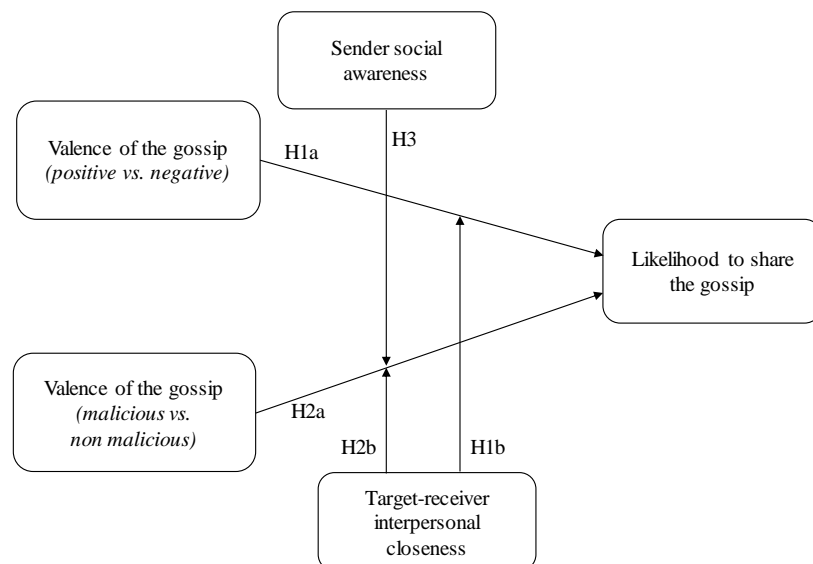
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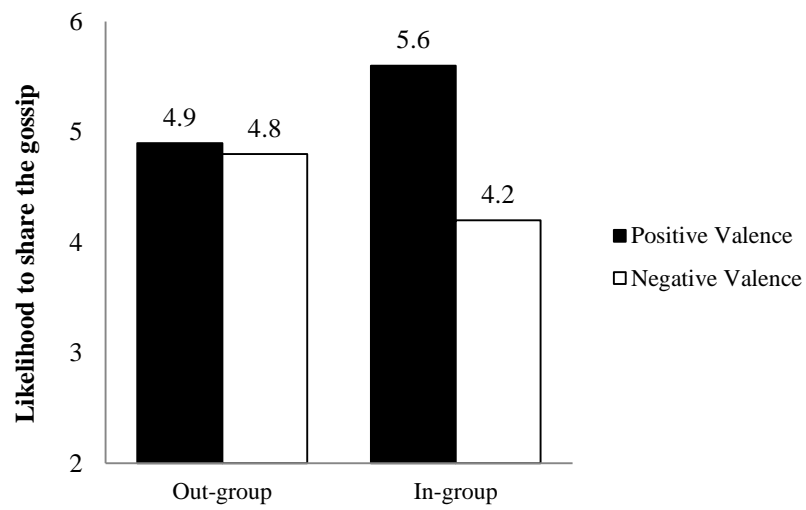
**Figure 1: Conceptual development.**



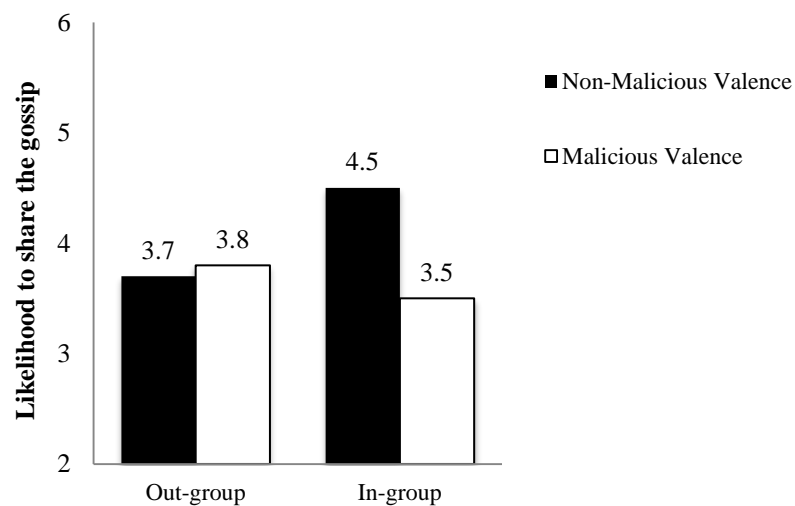
**Figure 2: Research model.**



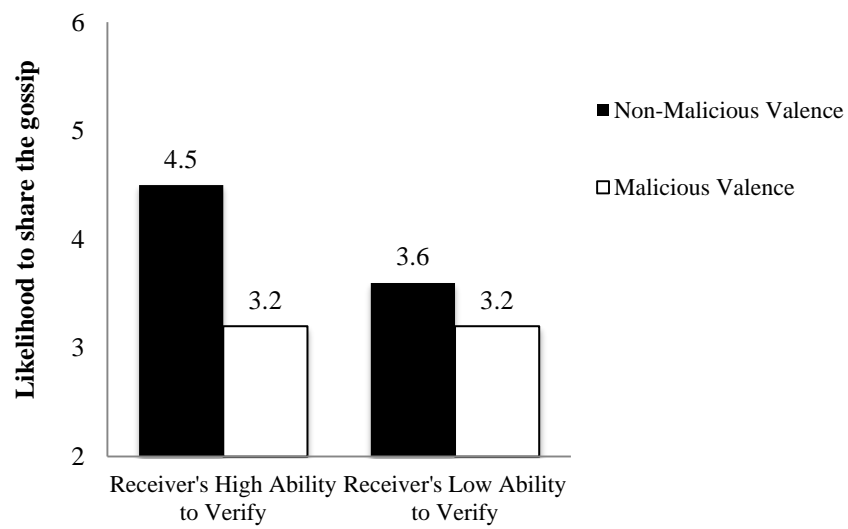
**Figure 3:** The relationship between valence of the gossip (positive vs. negative) and target-receiver interpersonal closeness on the likelihood to share the gossip.



**Figure 4:** The relationship between the valence of the gossip (malicious vs. non-malicious) and target-receiver interpersonal closeness on the likelihood to share the gossip.



**Figure 5:** The relationship between the valence of the gossip (malicious vs. non-malicious) and the receiver's ability to verify the gossip on the likelihood to share it.



## Appendix

### ***Vignette 1: Malicious gossip***



### ***Vignette 2: Non-malicious gossip***

