WHISPERS AT WORK: A COMPREHENSIVE OVERVIEW OF WORKPLACE GOSSIP AND ITS IMPACTS

J. M.O. GABRIEL, PhD
Department of Business Administration

LINDA OTONYE GABRIEL, PhD
Department of Marketing, Faculty of Administration and Management,
Rivers State University, Port Harcourt

LOLO ADIAS, PhD
Bayelsa State Polytechnic, Aleibiri
Bayelsa State, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

Workplace gossip, an often overlooked yet pervasive social phenomenon, has profound implications for organizational dynamics and employee well-being. This article conceptualizes workplace gossip, explores its dimensions, and examines both its implications and potential gains within organizational settings. The paper also elevated the discussion on workplace gossip to include its digital perspective by drawing on existing literature. As a way of deepening the intellectual contents of the paper, six baseline social theories were reviewed, including Social Exchange Theory (SET), Social Identity Theory (SIT), Social Comparison Theory (SCT), Social Learning Theory (SLT), Social Network Theory (SNT), and Impression Management Theory (IMT). The paper concluded that workplace gossip is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon with both negative and positive implications for organizations; and recommended among others that organisations should establish clear communication channels, promote a positive workplace culture, and train employees on the effects of workplace gossip.

Keywords: Whispers at work, workplace, Gossip, digital gossip

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The nature of a workplace is defined by the environment, culture, relationships, and interactions that occur among employees and management. It represents a structured space where individuals perform tasks, collaborate, and communicate to achieve both personal and common organizational goals. The key aspects of workplace dynamics are shaped by interpersonal interactions, the division of labor, and the time commitment of employees. More so, the workplace remains a social environment where people engage in friendship and work - occasioned interactions that may dwell on diver's issues as considered necessary by the actors. Some of these interactions are formal, while a lot more are informal. It is within the informal discussions that rumors thrive, resulting in whispers and gossips.

Workplace gossip, defined as the informal and evaluative talk about others in the workplace, has been a topic of increasing interest among organizational scholars. While traditionally

viewed as a harmful and disruptive behavior, recent studies have begun to recognize the multifaceted nature of gossip, suggesting that it can also have positive impacts (Brady et al., 2017). Gossip has been previously studied from different perspectives including: Gossip as Social Information (Michelson & Mouly, 2004), Positive vs. Negative Gossip (Ellwardt, Labianca, & Wittek, 2012), Workplace Gossip and Power Dynamics (Kurland & Pelled, 2000), Psychological Impacts of Gossip (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2011), Cultural Contexts of Workplace Gossip (Farley, Timme, & Hart, 2010), and Gossip as a Form of Organizational Control (Kniffin & Wilson, 2005). However understanding the complex nature of workplace gossip is crucial for managers and HR professionals, as it can influence employee morale, productivity, and organizational culture.

It is also observed that previous studies on workplace gossip focused more on the traditional face to face aspect, but recent developments in technology and natural occurrences have shifted the definition of the workplace from any physical location to a more liberal meaning that implies anywhere one stays to deliver on the duties associated with their job roles, be it in the office, home, airplane, bus, or even gardens. This has given rise to the concept of remote work or teleworking; which has now introduced the concept of digital workplace gossip. On the strength of the above analysis, this paper shall deepen the discussions on workplace gossip; go beyond the face to face gossip and delve into the field of digital workplace gossip. The objectives of the paper are:

1. Review literature on the concept and theories of workplace gossip
2. Identify and discuss the dimensions of workplace gossip, especially focusing more on digital gossip
3. Discuss the implications of workplace gossip
4. Consider strategies for managing workplace gossip

2.0 LITERATURE

2.1 Conceptualization of Workplace Gossip

Workplace gossips can be conceptualized as communications that occur within organizations, often outside formal channels; which involves the discussion of absent member(s) who are unlikely aware they are being discussed. It is characterized by its evaluative nature, where information is exchanged about individuals' behaviors, job performance, or personal lives (Michelson & Mouly, 2004). Gossip can be spontaneous or deliberate, and it may serve various purposes, including entertainment, information dissemination, and social bonding (Foster, 2004).

In their view, Lehmann-Willenbrock and Stein (2023) described workplace gossip as informal, evaluative communication between two or more members of an organisation about an absent third party. In furtherance too, Ellwardt, Labianca, and Wittek (2012) expressly defined gossip as the act of discussing individuals in their absence, which can be either positive or negative. Similarly, Farley et al. (2010) describes gossip as a dynamic social process that can serve both prosocial and harmful functions.

Going by these views, it is plane that workplace gossip is a social tradition or practice, involving more than one person, focusing on absent member(s), about their personal or work

related affairs. These discussion however may be positive or negative, but most often about what the actors are not bold enough to say in the presence of the victim. In the organizational realm, some scholars have tagged gossip as harmful and associated it to several counterproductive behavior paradigms. For example, gossip is considered an active form of mistreatment (Li et al., 2019), a type of deviance (Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007), and a form of social undermining behavior (Duffy et al., 2002).

Michelson and Mouly (2000) suggest that workplace gossip is a form of "organisational socialization", helping employees navigate the unwritten rules and norms of the organisation. Therefore, while gossip is often perceived as frivolous and harmful, it can serve a functional role in shaping the social fabric of an organisation.

2.2 Dimensions of Workplace Gossip

The dimensions of workplace gossip can be broadly categorized into content, intent, and medium:

Content: The content of gossip may range from work-related issues (e.g., performance, promotions) to personal matters (e.g., relationships, lifestyle). The veracity of the information shared also varies, with some gossip being based on facts, while other times it may be speculative or entirely false (Foster, 2004). According to Kniffin and Wilson (2005), workplace gossip often serves as a form of social information exchange that can influence organisational behaviour, affecting trust, cooperation, and social bonding. The content also plays a role in the formation of social hierarchies, where sharing insider knowledge can elevate status among peers. Those who bear top profile secretes and information are considered upwardly connected and somewhat powerful in the political structure of the organisation.

Intent: The intent behind gossip is a critical dimension that influences its impact. Gossip can be malicious, aimed at undermining someone's reputation, or benign, serving as a means of social interaction or even helping others by sharing useful information (Kurland & Pelled, 2000, Grosser et al. 2012). The positive form of prosocial gossip is used to warn others about untrustworthy individuals, thereby protecting the group (Feinberg, Willer, & Schultz, 2014). The intent behind gossip is critical because it determines whether the gossip strengthens or weakens team cohesion. For instance, when gossip is perceived as malicious, it can erode trust and foster a toxic work atmosphere, which is also capable of distorting team cohesion and harmony.

Medium: Gossip can spread through various mediums, including the traditional-face-to-face conversations, telephone calls, or digital- emails, or social media platforms. The medium through which gossip is shared can affect its reach and potential consequences within the organization (Michelson & Mouly, 2004). In today's work system where a lot of organisations operate remote work system, gossips thrive digitally, although it comes with some level of restrain because what is written down is open to verification. So people are a little more careful gossiping digitally.

2.3 Digital Workplace: A New Frontier

The rise of digital communication tools has transformed the nature of workplace gossip. As organizations increasingly adopt remote and hybrid work models, gossip—traditionally spread through face-to-face interactions—has found new channels online. Digital gossip refers to the spread of informal or unofficial information via electronic means such as emails, instant messaging apps (e.g., Slack, Microsoft Teams, WhatsApp), social media, and even anonymous forums. This shift raises questions about how gossip functions in virtual environments and its impact on organizational dynamics.

2.4 The Nature of Digital Gossip

Digital gossip retains many characteristics of traditional workplace gossip, including its potential to informally communicate organizational norms, build social bonds, or create divisions. However, it operates with new dynamics, including:

Permanence and Traceability: Unlike verbal gossip, digital gossip often leaves a written or recorded trace. This permanence increases the risk of exposure and accountability (Turner & Reinsch, 2007). Gossip shared via email or messaging platforms can easily be forwarded or saved, making it harder to contain once disseminated. For this reason actors are much more cautious unlike the traditional gossip where the window for denial or retraction is always open.

Anonymity and Distance: in their views, digital tools allow for anonymous or semi-anonymous interactions, which may embolden individuals to spread gossip without the fear of immediate repercussion (Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart, & Madden, 2015). This anonymity also allows for a sense of distance, which can reduce empathy and lead to the spread of more negative or harmful gossip; and no one is actually available to take responsibility.

Speed and Reach: Digital platforms facilitate the rapid spread of information across large networks. Unlike in-person gossip, which may be limited to small groups, digital gossip can reach an entire organization in a matter of minutes, amplifying its impact (Wu, 2020). The speed and ease of sharing information online contribute to the formation of gossip loops that are hard or impossible to control or mitigate.

3.0 IMPACT ON THE ORGANIZATION

3.1 Negative impacts

Trust and Team Dynamics: The immediacy and permanence of digital gossip can have profound effects on team dynamics. Research suggests that gossip plays a role in building trust and cohesion within teams, because it often has to do with the sharing of information which are not readily available in the public domain (Ellwardt, Labianca, & Wittek, 2012). It is not controvertible that people who share common secrets tend to bond more than those outside the group. However, in digital environments, the risk of betrayal (e.g., sharing gossip outside a trusted group) can undermine trust, creating suspicion and fear of surveillance among employees. It may also contribute to the creation of a toxic work environment, where individuals feel anxious or fearful about being the subject of gossip (Robbins & Judge, 2019). Moreover, malicious gossip can damage reputations and relationships, leading to conflicts and reduced collaboration (Kuo et al., 2015).

Cyberbullying and Negative Gossip: Digital platforms may also facilitate more toxic forms of gossip, including cyberbullying- the use of digital platforms, such as social media, messaging apps, or websites to harass, threaten, or demean individuals. The anonymity and distance provided by digital communication can make it easier for individuals to engage in hurtful or malicious gossip without facing immediate social consequences (Farley, Coyne, Axtell, & Sprigg, 2016). This can contribute to a hostile work environment, leading to decreased job satisfaction, employee morale and overall workplace toxicity.

Organizational Change and Resistance: Digital gossip plays a significant role during periods of organizational change. In the absence of clear communication from leadership, rumors and speculation may spread rapidly through digital channels. This can create anxiety, resistance, or even sabotage efforts to implement change (DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007). Digital gossip can amplify uncertainties and influence employee perceptions, often shaping how they interpret official announcements.

3.2 Positive Impacts

Social bonding tool: Gossip can also have positive outcomes. It can serve as a social bonding tool, helping employees feel connected and integrated within the workplace (Foster, 2004). Additionally, gossip can function as an informal information network, allowing employees to stay informed about organizational changes, policies, and other relevant issues (Noon & Delbridge, 1993).

Cultural Transmission: Gossip can help transmit organizational culture by reinforcing norms and values through the informal sharing of stories and experiences (Foster, 2004).

Social Control: Gossip can act as a form of social control, where the threat of being gossiped about may deter deviant behavior and encourage adherence to organizational norms (Michelson & Mouly, 2004). in this respect, the avoidance of being a subject of gossip can make some employees increase their impression management behaviors in portraying only positive sides of themselves at work, which in essence breeds conscientiousness at work.

Early Warning System: Gossip can serve as an early warning system, alerting management to potential issues or conflicts that may not be visible through formal channels (Noon & Delbridge, 1993).

3.3 Baseline Social Theories for Understanding Workplace Gossip

To comprehensively analyze workplace gossip, it is essential to ground the discussion in well-established social theories. These theories provide a framework for understanding the meaning, dimensions, and implications of gossip within organizational settings. The following sections explore key social theories relevant to the study of workplace gossip.

3.4 Social Exchange Theory (SET)

Social Exchange Theory (SET), rooted in the work of Homans (1958) and further developed by Blau (1964), posits that social behavior is the result of an exchange process where individuals seek to maximize benefits and minimize costs in their interactions. In the context

of workplace gossip, SET can help explain why individuals engage in gossip as part of the social exchange process. Gossip can be viewed as a currency in social interactions, where sharing information can lead to increased social capital, such as building alliances or gaining status within a group (Coleman, 1990).

SET also highlights the reciprocal nature of gossip. When employees share gossip, they may expect something in return, such as information, loyalty, or protection within their social network. Understanding gossip through SET provides insight into its role in building and maintaining social relationships within the workplace.

3.5 Social Identity Theory (SIT)

Social Identity Theory (SIT), developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979), focuses on the role of group membership in shaping individual identity and behavior. According to SIT, individuals derive part of their self-concept from their membership in social groups, leading to in-group favoritism and out-group discrimination. Workplace gossip can be understood through this lens as a mechanism for reinforcing group identity and differentiating in-groups from out-groups.

Gossip often functions to create and maintain boundaries between different social groups within an organization (Hogg & Terry, 2000). For example, employees may engage in gossip to solidify in-group cohesion by sharing information that reinforces shared values or norms, while simultaneously marginalizing those who are perceived as outsiders. SIT can thus explain how gossip contributes to the formation of social cliques and the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in the workplace.

3.6 Social Comparison Theory (SCT)

Festinger's (1954) Social Comparison Theory (SCT) suggests that individuals have an innate drive to evaluate themselves by comparing their abilities and opinions with those of others. Workplace gossip can be a manifestation of this need for social comparison, as employees often use gossip to assess where they stand relative to their peers.

Gossip allows employees to gather information about others' performance, behavior, and status, which can influence their own self-perception and satisfaction (Suls & Wheeler, 2000). Through gossip, employees may compare their situations with those of their colleagues, leading to feelings of superiority, envy, or even anxiety, depending on the outcome of the comparison. SCT provides a framework for understanding the psychological motives behind gossip and its impact on individual well-being and organizational dynamics.

3.7 Social Learning Theory (SLT)

Social Learning Theory (SLT), introduced by Bandura (1977), posits that people learn behaviors, attitudes, and norms by observing others within a social context. In the workplace, gossip can be a powerful tool for social learning, as it conveys information about acceptable and unacceptable behaviors, organizational norms, and potential consequences for certain actions.

Employees often learn about the unwritten rules of the workplace through gossip, which can serve as an informal means of socialization (Bergmann, 1993). For instance, hearing gossip about a colleague's behavior and the resulting outcomes can influence an employee's future actions and decision-making processes. SLT helps to explain how gossip can function as a mechanism for reinforcing organizational culture and controlling behavior.

3.8 Social Network Theory (SNT)

Social Network Theory (SNT) examines the patterns of relationships and interactions within a social network (Granovetter, 1973). In the context of workplace gossip, SNT is valuable for understanding how gossip spreads through different networks within an organization and how individuals' positions within these networks influence their access to and dissemination of gossip.

Gossip tends to flow more freely within dense networks, where individuals have strong, interconnected relationships (Burt, 2004). However, it can also travel across networks through "weak ties," or more distant connections, which can lead to the widespread distribution of information (Granovetter, 1973). SNT provides insights into the structural dimensions of gossip and its implications for information flow, power dynamics, and influence within the workplace.

3.9 Impression Management Theory (IMT)

Impression Management Theory, as outlined by Goffman (1959), suggests that individuals attempt to control the impressions others form of them by managing their behavior and interactions. In the workplace, gossip can be a tool for impression management, where individuals use it to shape how others perceive them or their colleagues.

Employees may engage in gossip to enhance their own image or to discredit others, thereby influencing the social perceptions and reputations within the organization (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). By understanding gossip through the lens of Impression Management Theory, one can explore how individuals navigate their social environment to maintain a favorable image and the strategic role gossip plays in these efforts.

3.10 Managing Workplace Gossip

Although gossip is not very easy to tame in the workplace, but it can be managed so as to minimize its negative consequences and maximize the positive ones. Organizations can manage workplace gossip by promoting open communication, fostering a positive organizational culture, and providing employees with accurate information. Training programs that address the potential harms of gossip, as well as its positive uses, can help employees understand how to engage in gossip constructively (Robbins & Judge, 2019). Additionally, creating a culture of trust and transparency can reduce the need for gossip, as employees are more likely to seek and share information through official channels.

3.11 Challenges of Managing Digital Gossip

Managing digital gossip poses new challenges for organizations, as traditional approaches to curbing workplace gossip (e.g., in-person supervision) are not as effective in a digital context. Some of these challenges include:

Surveillance and Privacy: Organizations may feel compelled to monitor digital communication platforms to prevent harmful gossip. However, excessive surveillance can infringe on employee privacy and autonomy, leading to dissatisfaction and perceptions of a lack of trust (Ball, 2010). Balancing the need to control gossip with respect for privacy is a delicate task for managers because of the litigation potentials associated with the later.

Escalation and Virality: The viral nature of digital content means that once gossip is shared, it can be difficult to contain. Unlike verbal gossip, which can be denied or mitigated, digital gossip is often documented, making it more challenging to control the narrative once it is widely spread (Wu, 2020). This requires organizations to be proactive in their internal communication strategies to reduce the likelihood of gossip escalating into widespread rumors.

4.0 CONCLUSION

Workplace gossip is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon with both negative and positive implications for organizations. While it can contribute to a toxic work environment, it also has the potential to foster social bonds, disseminate important information, and reinforce organizational culture. By understanding the dimensions of gossip and its potential gains, organizations can develop strategies to manage gossip effectively, minimizing its harmful effects while leveraging its benefits. Digital gossip introduces new dynamics into workplace communication, significantly impacting trust, team cohesion, and organizational culture. While it shares similarities with traditional gossip, its speed, anonymity, and permanence create unique challenges for organizations. Managing digital gossip requires a nuanced approach that balances the need for oversight with respect for employee privacy. As remote and hybrid work models continue to grow, understanding the implications of digital gossip will become increasingly important for leaders and managers.

5.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the analysis of workplace gossip and its multifaceted impacts, several recommendations can be made for both organizations and individuals seeking to mitigate negative consequences while fostering a healthy work environment. These recommendations not only aim to address the immediate effects of gossip but also encourage further exploration of this complex phenomenon.

1. Establish Clear Communication Channels

Organizations should prioritize the development of clear, transparent communication strategies. This includes regular updates from management, open-door policies for employee concerns, and anonymous feedback mechanisms. By fostering an environment of trust and openness, employees may feel less inclined to engage in gossip as they have reliable sources for information.

2. Promote a Positive Workplace Culture

Creating a culture that values respect, collaboration, and inclusivity can diminish the prevalence of gossip. Team-building activities, diversity training, and recognition programs for positive behavior can help cultivate a supportive environment where employees feel valued and heard.

3. Train Employees on the Effects of Gossip

Workshops and training sessions can be effective in educating employees about the potential harms of gossip. By raising awareness about its impact on morale, productivity, and relationships, organizations can encourage individuals to engage in more constructive forms of communication.

4. Develop Policies to Address Gossip

Organizations should consider implementing clear policies regarding gossip and its consequences. While it may be difficult to eliminate gossip entirely, having guidelines in place can help manage its spread and establish accountability for harmful behaviors.

5. Encourage Feedback and Open Dialogue

Encouraging feedback mechanisms allows employees to voice concerns before they escalate into gossip. Regular check-ins, surveys, and team discussions can help identify issues early on and promote a culture of open dialogue.

6. Further Research on Workplace Gossip

Given the complexities of workplace gossip, further research is necessary to deepen our understanding of its dynamics and consequences. Areas for future study could include:

The Role of Social Media in Workplace Gossip: Investigating how digital communication affects gossip dynamics and employee relationships.

Cross-Cultural Perspectives: Exploring how workplace gossip varies across different cultures and its implications for multinational organizations.

The Impact of Leadership on Gossip: Analyzing how leadership styles influence gossip prevalence and employee behavior.

Longitudinal Studies on Gossip's Effects: Conducting long-term studies to assess the lasting impacts of gossip on workplace morale, retention rates, and overall organizational culture.

By implementing these recommendations and encouraging further exploration into the realm of workplace gossip, organizations can better manage its implications and foster a healthier, more productive work environment.

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