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The Importance of Norm Violation and Relevance for Gossip Appreciation

Social grooming theory posits that relevance is a key feature of gossip whereas prosocial gossip theory emphasizes norm violations. To determine which theory better captures participants' perceptions of gossip compared to non-gossip, 197 participants viewed 16 videos that varied by statement type (gossip vs. target-present), relevance (relevant vs. irrelevant), and violation (violates norms vs. does not violate norms). Participants rated each speaker's intention on four social functions: usefulness, relationship building, entertaining, and influence. They also rated the speaker's attitude and perceived severity. In support of the social grooming and prosocial gossip theories, relevant statements containing norm violations were rated as better serving the social functions. However, only strengthening relationships was improved by gossiping. The speaker's attitude was also rated more positively for gossip statements. Our findings support both the social grooming and prosocial gossip theories, demonstrating that people view gossip more favourably when it is relevant and includes norm violations.

Keywords: communication, social functions, social grooming theory, norm violations, prosocial gossip

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Consider the following situation. During your lunch break, you overhear your co-worker, Jamie, telling Paul about how an absent co-worker has violated an important workplace rule. Why is Jamie telling Paul this information? Is Jamie trying to build a friendship with Paul by sharing this information? Are they trying to entertain Paul? In making these attributions, you are engaging in complex cognitive reasoning about the intentions of a speaker who is using gossip. The purpose of this study was to examine whether gossip that contains a norm violation or relevant information can influence listeners' appreciation of the social functions of gossip.

Gossip is sharing evaluative information about an absent third party (Huskey, 2021). It takes place in conversations in most social contexts, and it occurs in over 70% of our daily discourse (Emler, 1994). For gossip to occur, there needs to be a speaker (i.e., the person conveying information), a target (i.e., the person who the information is about), and a listener (i.e., the person receiving the information; Giardini & Wittek, 2019). Further, gossip contains an evaluation about someone, it is shared from the speaker to the listener, it is recognized and understood by the listener, and it is done in the absence of the target (Giardini & Wittek, 2019). Gossip may vary in valence, ranging from a negative to positive evaluation of the target, and it can vary in strength from weak to strong (Hales et al., 2025). Dores Cruz et al. (2021a) proposed an integrative definition of gossip as communication from a sender to a receiver about a target who is absent or unaware, and highlighted that gossip can vary in valence (e.g., positive, negative, neutral) and formality (e.g., informal, formal). Research shows that different forms of gossip will differ in their functions and consequences: negative gossip is often tied to norm enforcement and reputational harm, as it highlights a target's transgressions or shortcomings (Dores Cruz et al., 2021b). On the other hand, positive gossip can serve to reward prosocial behavior and enhance reputations whereas neutral gossip (i.e., updates on activities or circumstances) can convey socially relevant but non-evaluative information (Dores Cruz et al., 2021b). Further, positive gossip tends to be about in-group targets whereas negative gossip tends to be about those outside of the speaker's and listener's social circle (Estévez & Takács, 2022). In the current study, we focused on gossip's potential costs and its role in sanctioning norm violations so our method only included negative gossip. Making this distinction is essential, as the unique social functions of negative gossip, particularly its link to norm enforcement and reputational consequences, formed the basis of the theoretical accounts we tested in this study.

Gossip is ubiquitous, and psychologists theorize that it serves an adaptive purpose for humans. People living alone rely on gossip as a primary source of social support, and gossip can help a group of coworkers get through the monotony of a long workday (Torres, 2019). People find gos-

sip more interesting when it contains damaging information about non-allies or positive information about allies within their social group (McAndrew & Milenkovic, 2002) and they can enjoy being the target of gossip when the message contains positive information (Hales et al., 2025). However, the “threat of gossip,” or the awareness that you’re being observed and may be spoken about behind your back, can cause people to behave more prosocially than they otherwise would (Számadó et al., 2021). This demonstrates that people are aware of the impact gossiping may have on their reputation and they will adjust their behavior accordingly. When the threat of gossip is present, people will choose to cooperate with those who are known to uphold social rules and avoid those who may be targeted by gossipers for violating social norms (Feinberg et al., 2014). Thus, people understand how to gossip effectively to positively impact their reputation, and they utilize gossip to serve important social functions.

Gossip is culturally inescapable and for good reason; it is believed to afford the speaker four important social functions: sharing information (Beersma & van Kleef, 2012; Feinberg et al., 2012; Foster, 2004), strengthening relationships (Foster, 2004; Pápay et al., 2022), entertaining the listener (Foster, 2004; Peng et al., 2015), and socially influencing the listener (Estévez et al., 2022; Foster, 2004). While the gossip literature agrees with Foster’s (2004) claim that gossip affords the speaker social benefits, there is still a theoretical debate about why people gossip. Some researchers suggest that people gossip to socially bond, to maintain group norms, to punish norm violators, to undermine or harm the target’s reputation, and to vent emotions (Pápay et al., 2022). Beersma et al. (2019) highlight the social motives for gossiping in the workplace include bonding, entertainment, emotional venting, exchanging information, maintaining work norms, and being aggressive towards other members at work. Some researchers emphasize that gossip helps people to manage their reputation and the reputations of others (Feinberg et al., 2012; Giardini & Wittek, 2019). However, gossip is a risky speech act because it can negatively influence the gossipers’ reputation (Farley, 2011). When we gossip, we run the risk of tainting the listener’s perception of how trustworthy or likeable we are (Lian et al., 2023; Martinescu et al., 2022). People are adept at identifying when someone is sharing dishonest or inaccurate gossip which can damage the gossipers’ reputation and can put future cooperation and trust with the listener at jeopardy (Számadó et al., 2021). Similarly, people are less willing to trust those who spread negative gossip (Giardini et al., 2021). Therefore, gossip must afford the speaker important benefits that outweigh these social risks.

The research highlights the social benefits of gossiping but what motivates people to gossip? More specifically, why might people decide to talk about someone when they are absent rather than when they are present?

One useful way to frame this question is by contrasting gossip with target-present talk. For the present study, target-present talk can be defined as a speaker telling the listener information about the target while the target is present to hear what is being said about them. This contrast highlights the unique benefits that with gossip when the target is absent, the speaker may avoid immediate accountability, manage their appearance strategically, and shape reputational dynamics in ways not possible when the target is present. Further, how do people interpret the intentions of speaker who is gossiping? Regardless of the speaker's intentions, how the listener interprets the speaker's intentions when using negative gossip, either pro-social or self-motivated, is a significant determinant of how the speaker is perceived (Testori et al., 2024). In the present study, we aimed to examine these differences systematically. Two prominent gossip theories are reviewed next, followed by specific proposals that are derived from each framework.

Prosocial Gossip Theory

Baumeister et al. (2004) contended that gossip pertains to cultural information about group norms that can help listeners avoid violating such norms in the future. Group norms are behaviours that are common or approved within a social group which are then sustained by approval or disapproval by group members (Wallen & Romulo, 2017). Gossip, in this regard, reminds group members about group norms, and can serve as an effective deterrent for those who transgress (Barkow, 1992). Feinberg et al. (2012) recognize the contradiction that gossip, while negative about target, can be beneficial to the listener and the social group. Thus, when gossip teaches the listener about norm violations, even when negative in valence, it is labeled as prosocial gossip (Feinberg et al., 2012). In support of this theory, gossip allows the speaker to highlight group values (Kawakatsu et al., 2024), to signal group membership (Lee et al., 2022), to strengthen solidarity amongst group members (Beersma & van Kleef, 2012; Testori et al., 2024), and to resolve ambiguity about group norms (Noon & Delbridge, 1993). Wilson et al. (2000) found that people approve of negative gossip when it pertains to violating norms. Furthermore, people find gossip more interesting when it contains negative or damaging information about those who do not belong to their social group, compared to when it contains positive news about those who do belong to their social group (McAndrew & Milenkovic, 2002). Gossip tends to be more negative when it is about outsiders, and it encourages observers to develop more cynical views of the groups of people being gossiped about (Grayson et al., 2025).

Studies have highlighted importance of discussing norm deviations for in- and out-groups to promote cohesion within social groups (Imada

et al., 2022). When people recalled gossip they heard at work, most of it contained stories where the target violated a norm inside or outside of the workplace (Martinescu et al., 2022). Lian et al. (2023) argued that both positive and negative gossip that clarifies norms serves to improve the speaker's reputation with the listener. Thus, prosocial gossip theory argues that people gossip about norm violations to spread reputational information about those who have transgressed against norms to solidify group norms (Feinberg et al., 2012). From the prosocial gossip perspective, sharing information about cultural norms should be a feature that is unique to gossip and not to statements made when the target person of the gossip is present (hereafter referred to as target-present statements). Furthermore, if prosocial gossip theory explains why people are motivated to gossip, gossip containing norm violations should better serve gossip's social functions than gossip that does not contain norm violations.

Social Grooming Theory

Dunbar's (2004) theory of social grooming suggests that we gossip to create and strengthen social bonds. In support of this theory, research shows that sharing a mutual attitude towards a target person promotes closeness between the speaker and listener (Bosson et al., 2006). Similarly, Estévez et al. (2022) found that adolescents gossip to ensure consensus between previously established friends. Furthermore, people find gossip more useful and more interesting when it helps them enhance their social status, and when the absent target person is the same gender and is close to their age (Barkow, 1992; McAndrew & Milenkovic, 2002). People are more likely to gossip about targets who are relevant to them, such as celebrities or members who belong to their social group (Lee et al., 2022). Effective gossip contains information the listener will find useful so the speaker needs to provide content that is relevant for the listener. From the social grooming account, gossip containing information that is relevant to the listener should better serve gossip's social functions than gossip containing irrelevant information. Furthermore, if social grooming theory can explain why people gossip instead of talking about present targets, relevance should not influence participants' appreciation of gossip's social functions for target-present statements.

Politeness Theory

An additional motivation for why we gossip might come from Brown and Levinson's (1978) politeness theory regarding maintaining face. While this model is not exclusive to gossip, politeness theory suggests that gossiping helps the speaker maintain their own face while protecting the target's face by speaking about them behind their back, as opposed to speaking about them directly to their face. While gossiping allows people

to influence the reputation of others, it also allows to manage our own reputation (Giardini & Wittek, 2019). This has often been described in terms of “saving face” in research but more recent work has coined this motivation as reputational concern or the extent to which people care about how they are perceived by others (Nieper et al., 2025; Righi & Takács, 2022). Listeners tend to have positive impressions of speakers who gossip with them. There is evidence that people gossip with co-workers at work to improve their reputation by appearing more trustworthy to their listener (Tan et al., 2023). Testori et al. (2022) found that if the gossiper was perceived to be honest and gossiped for prosocial motives, listeners were more likely to respond positively even if the gossip contained negative information about the target. By sharing honest reputational information about the target that listeners will find useful, prosocial gossipers succeed in boosting their reputation and cooperation with the listener (Tan et al., 2023; Testori et al., 2022). From the perspective of reputational concern, when gossip is negative, people may gossip about absent targets instead of talking about present targets because they want the listener to view them as a polite and kind person.

The Present Study

In the present study, we tested the predictions of prosocial gossip theory (Feinberg et al., 2012) and social grooming theory (Dunbar, 2004) by comparing how participants perceived the social functions of gossip when observing gossip and target-present scenarios that varied in content pertaining to the main elements of both theories. In doing so, we aimed to answer the research question: which theory better explains participants’ perceptions of gossip’s social functions? To test this research question, we presented participants with animated videos depicting conversations between a speaker and a listener with half containing gossip where the target was absent and half containing target-present statements where the target person observed the speaker tell the listener information about the target. Social grooming theory posits that people gossip to share relevant information with listeners. To examine this theory, we manipulated whether the gossip content was relevant or irrelevant to the listener by providing character background information pertaining to their occupation. Prosocial gossip theory contends that gossip serves to share information about norm violations and to establish group norms, so we also varied the gossip according to whether it contained information that violated a norm or did not violate a norm. For the violation variable, we manipulated whether the target violated a norm or did not violate a norm of the listener’s occupation. People consider a speaker’s occupation as relevant information in determining that speaker’s communicative intentions (Katz & Pexman, 1997; Pexman et al., 2006). Therefore, video characters were presented

as having well known occupations (e.g., teacher, police officer, dentist) so participants would know the group norms for that occupation and be able to recognize when a character was violating the norm for their occupation. To test whether these features are unique to gossip as a speech act, we also varied the presence of the third-party target. For gossip statements, the target of the gossip was absent whereas for target-present statements, the target of the gossip was depicted as being present to witness the speaker telling the listener about them. Thus, participants were presented with videos that varied by statement type (i.e., gossip or target-present), relevance (i.e., relevant or irrelevant), and violation (i.e., violates norms or does not violate norms).

After each video, participants were asked to rate the speaker's intentions according to the four social functions of gossip as described by Foster (2004): 1) sharing information, 2) strengthening relationships, 3) entertaining the listener, and 4) socially influencing the listener. Further, participants were asked how mean or nice the listener would judge the speaker's attitude to be, to measure if "saving face" was important for the listener's perception of speaker attitude in support of politeness theory. Finally, participants were asked to rate how problematic they found the target's behaviour to be. This variable was included to examine if this judgment was impacted by whether the statement contained a norm violation. To maintain experimental consistency, all statements contained negative information about the target such as the target breaking their leg or stealing money. We decided to only include negative information in our study because we expected that participants would be more familiar with negative gossip, and the addition of positive gossip would significantly increase the procedure duration.

By the social grooming account, we predicted that participants would rate gossip as more useful to the listener, more entertaining to the listener, more strengthening of the speaker-listener relationship, and more influential to the listener when gossip contained relevant information compared to when gossip contained irrelevant information. In addition, if social grooming theory captures a feature unique to gossip, participants should rate target-present statements containing relevant and irrelevant information similarly on these social functions. However, if norm violation content is a key feature of gossip as argued by the prosocial gossip theory, participants should rate gossip as more useful, more entertaining, more relationship strengthening, and more influential when gossip contained norm violations compared to when gossip did not contain norm violations. Lastly, we reasoned that, if prosocial theory describes a unique feature of gossip, participants should rate target-present statements with and without norm violations similarly on gossip's social functions.

Additionally, according to politeness theory, a speaker who gossips should appear nicer than a speaker who talks about the present target because gossip protects the faces of the target and speaker. We predicted participants would rate the listener's perception of the speaker's attitude as nicer for gossip than for target-present statements. Finally, participants were asked to rate how problematic they found the target's behaviour. We predicted there would not be significant differences between conditions according to statement type and relevance, but that statements containing norm violations would be rated as more problematic compared to messages without norm violations.

Methods

Participants

An a priori power analysis conducted using G*Power 3.1 (Faul et al., 2009) indicated a minimum of 110 participants would be required to detect a small effect size with statistical power set to .80 and an alpha of .05. In total, 197 participants were included in the final analyses (mean age = 20.44 years; 146 females, 46 males, 3 non-binary, 1 transgender male, and 1 genderfluid individual). Although 208 undergraduate students were recruited from introductory psychology classes in a university in a medium sized Canadian city, 11 participants were excluded because they did not provide a rating for one or more of the dependent variables. Participants were required to be fluent in English to sign up for the study.

Materials

Videos

Each participant watched 16 videos. To manipulate statement type and trial order, four versions of the videos were created, and the order of videos was randomized in each version. We presented each version to approximately equal numbers of participants. The experimental design was derived from the theoretical accounts under investigation. The social grooming theory suggests that gossip is best serving of the speaker's social goals when their statement contains information that is relevant to the listener, so participants in the present study were presented with statements containing information that was either relevant to the listener or irrelevant to the listener. The prosocial gossip theory highlights the role of norm enforcement in fulfilling social goals, so we presented participants with statements that contained a norm violation or statements that did not contain a norm violation. Finally, gossiping is theorized to fulfil the speaker's social goals better compared to target-present statements, so we presented participants with gossip statements where the target was absent

or target-present statements where the target witnessed the speaker telling the listener about the target. To examine which feature of each theory produced higher ratings of gossip's social functions, participants were presented with vignettes depicting conditions in a fully crossed 2 (statement type: gossip vs. target-present) x 2 (relevance: relevant vs. irrelevant) x 2 (violation: violates norms vs. does not violate norms) design.

A total of 64 videos were created. This number resulted from our inclusion of eight exemplars for each of the eight experimental conditions to ensure sufficient variability in statement content and to reduce the influence of any single video. Thirty-two videos depicted a gossip interaction between two characters introduced by name. In the gossip videos, a speaker gossiped to a listener about a target or an absent third party. Eight gossip videos were created for each of the four conditions: 1) relevant and violates norms, 2) relevant and does not violate norms, 3) irrelevant and violates norms, 4) irrelevant and does not violate norms. For example, in the gossip videos, the speaker told the listener about a target that was relevant to the listener's occupation and violated norms for that same occupation, was relevant to the listener's occupation but did not violate a norm for that same occupation, was irrelevant to the listener's occupation and violated a norm for that different occupation, or was irrelevant to the listener's occupation and did not violate a norm for that different occupation, all while the target of the gossip was not present. Thirty-two more videos depicted non-gossip interactions between three characters where the target was present and heard what was being said about them. Eight target-present videos were created for each of the four conditions: 1) relevant and violates norms, 2) relevant and does not violate norms, 3) irrelevant and violates norms, 4) irrelevant and does not violate norms (See Table 1). The videos were randomized such that there were four counterbalanced versions of videos presented across participant groups. This ensured that any potential order effects in video presentation were evenly distributed.

Response Booklets

Participants were given a response booklet containing eight questions to answer in writing after each video and with wording adapted to each video:

1. Target Presence: This manipulation check question tested if participants recognized whether the target was present or absent. For example, "Did Oliver (the target) hear what was said about him? Circle your answer." Participants were provided "Yes" and "No" to choose from.

2. Usefulness: This question measured the speaker's social function to share useful information. Participants rated how useful the listener would find the speaker's statement to be on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (very useless) to 6 (very useful). For example, "How useful would Liam (the listener) find this information? Circle a number."

Table 1

Example of Video Narration by Statement Type, Relevance, and Violation

Condition		Video Narration	Prediction
Statement Type	Gossip	Oliver is not there to hear Noah say this about him.	Gossip statements where the target is absent should produce higher ratings on the social functions of gossip.
	Target Present	Oliver, who is sitting with them, hears what Noah said about him.	Target-present statements should produce lower ratings on the social functions of gossip.
Relevance	Relevant	This is Liam. Liam is a teacher. This is Noah. Noah knows that Liam is a teacher. And this is Oliver. Oliver is also a teacher.	Statements that are relevant to the listener should produce higher ratings on the social functions of gossip.
	Irrelevant	This is Liam. Liam is a teacher. This is Noah. Noah knows that Liam is a teacher. And this is Oliver. Oliver is a hotel housekeeper.	Statements that are irrelevant to the listener should produce lower ratings on the social functions of gossip.
Violation	Violates norms	Noah tells Liam that Oliver swore at one of his students.	Statements that contain norm violations should produce higher ratings on the social functions of gossip.
	Does not violate norms	Noah tells Liam that Oliver broke his leg playing soccer.	Statements that don't contain norm violations should produce lower ratings on the social functions of gossip.

3. Relationship Strengthening: Participants rated the effect the speaker's statement would have on the speaker-listener's relationship on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (weaken a lot) to 6 (strengthen a lot). For example, "Would this conversation strengthen or weaken Noah (the speaker) and Liam's (the listener) relationship? Circle a number."

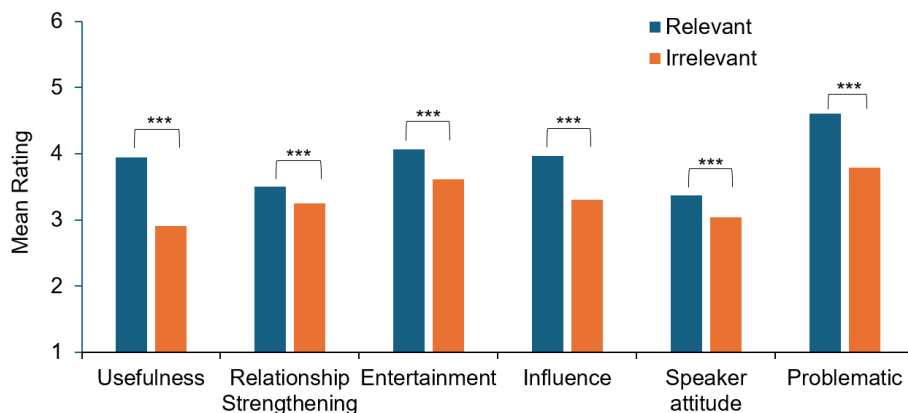
4. Entertainment: Participants rated how entertaining the listener would find the speaker's statement to be on a 6-point scale, ranging from 1 (very boring) to 6 (very entertaining). For example, "How entertaining would Liam (the listener) find this conversation? Circle a number."

5. Influence: Participants rated how likely the speaker's message was to influence the listener's behaviour in the future on a 6-point scale, ranging from 1 (very unlikely) to 6 (very likely). For example, "How likely would this conversation influence Liam's (the listener) behaviour in the future? Circle a number."

6. Speaker Attitude: This question measured participants' assessment of the listener's perception of the speaker's attitude on a 6-point scale, ranging

Figure 1

Mean Ratings for Statements Containing Information Relevant and Irrelevant to the Listener



Note. Statements that were relevant to the listener were rated significantly higher on all scales compared to statements that were irrelevant to the listener.

*** $p < .001$.

Table 2

Unstandardized Coefficients (B) and Standard Errors (SE) From Multilevel Regressions Predicting Mean Ratings

Rating scale	Usefulness	Relationship-Strengthening	Entertainment	Influence	Speaker Attitude	Problematic
	B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)
Predictor						
Relevance	1.03 (0.06)***	0.24 (0.04)***	0.46 (0.05)***	0.65(0.05)***	0.32 (0.05)***	0.80 (0.06)***
Violation	1.33 (0.06)***	0.43 (0.04)***	0.58 (0.05)***	0.81 (0.05)***	0.75 (0.05)***	2.37 (0.06)***
Statement	-0.11 (0.05)*	0.22 (0.04)***	0.09 (0.05)	-0.09 (0.05)	0.17 (0.05)***	0.03 (0.06)
Video						
Version 1	0.35 (0.08)***	0.09 (0.06)	0.04 (0.07)	0.21 (0.08)	0.17 (0.07)	0.08 (0.08)
Version 2	-0.04 (0.08)	-0.20 (0.06)**	-0.32 (0.07)***	-0.06 (0.08)	0.00 (0.07)	-0.05 (0.08)
Version 3	-0.24 (0.08)**	-0.11 (0.06)	-0.29 (0.07)**	-0.34 (0.08)	-0.23 (0.07)	-0.18 (0.08)*

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

from 1 (very mean) to 6 (very nice). For example, “How mean or nice would Liam (the listener) think Noah (the speaker) was being for telling him this information? Circle a number.”

7. Problematic: This question measured to what degree participants found the target character’s behaviour to be problematic on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all problematic) to 6 (very problematic). For example, “How problematic do you think a teacher swearing at a student is? Circle a number.”

8. Listener Occupation: This manipulation check question tested if participants correctly remembered the listener’s occupation. For example, “What was Liam’s (the listener) job? Circle one.” Participants were provided with two occupations to choose from.

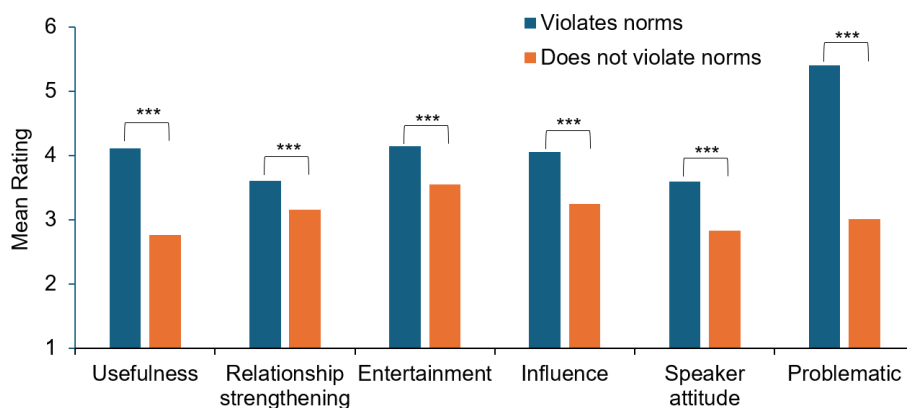
Participants were asked to provide their demographic information on the last page of the booklet. This page asked participants about their birthday, gender identity, what language they spoke at home, and what country they grew up in.

Procedure

Groups of participants sat in classrooms and they were provided a consent form and a response booklet. An experimenter provided verbal instruc-

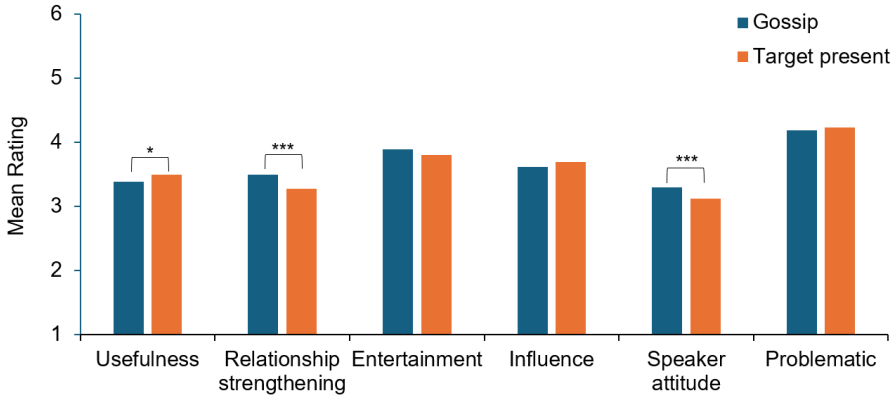
Figure 2

Mean Ratings for Statements About Norm Violations and Statements Not About Norm Violations



Note. Statements about norm violations were rated significantly higher on all scales compared to statements not about norm violations.

*** $p < .001$.

Figure 3*Mean Ratings For Gossip Statements and Target Present Statements*

Note. Target-present statements were rated as significantly more useful than gossip statements. Gossip statements were rated as significantly more relationship-strengthening than target-present statements. For speaker attitude, gossip was rated as significantly less mean than target-present statements.

* $p < .05$.

*** $p < .001$.

tions, then sixteen 30-second videos were displayed on a large screen at the front of the classroom. Participants were told that they would watch 16 short videos, and that they would be given one minute to answer questions on the corresponding page in the response booklet for each video. The experimenter played the videos on the screen and waited for all participants to finish writing prior to starting the next video. After answering the questions about each of the 16 videos, participants were asked to complete the demographic survey. The procedure took 30 minutes.

Results

All analyses included participants' ratings only when they correctly answered both the Target Present and Listener Occupation manipulation check questions for that video. Responses for these questions were at ceiling accuracy levels and resulted in the inclusion of nearly all ratings. Multilevel regressions were conducted to examine the effects the message characteristics (relevance, norm violation, and statement type) had on par-

ticipants' mean ratings while controlling for which version they received. See Table 2 for a summary of multilevel regressions on mean ratings for all scales.

Usefulness Ratings

Relevance ($B = 1.03$, $SE = 0.06$, $t(3020) = 18.73$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.92, 1.13]) and norm violation ($B = 1.33$, $SE = 0.06$, $t(3020) = 24.21$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [1.22, 1.43]) were positive predictors of usefulness ratings whereas statement type ($B = -0.11$, $SE = 0.06$, $t(3020) = 2.02$, $p = 0.04$, 95% CI [-0.22, -0.003]) negatively predicted usefulness ratings. Version 1 ($B = 0.35$, $SE = 0.08$, $t(3020) = 4.46$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.20, 0.51]) and Version 3 ($B = -0.24$, $SE = 0.08$, $t(3020) = -3.02$, $p = .003$, 95% CI [-0.39, -0.08]) were also significant predictors of usefulness ratings. Participants were more likely to rate statements that were relevant to the listener or containing norm violations as being more useful (See Figure 1). However, they were more likely to rate target-present statements as more useful than gossip statements.

Relationship Strengthening Ratings

Relevance ($B = 0.24$, $SE = 0.04$, $t(3019) = 5.76$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.16, 0.32]), norm violation ($B = 0.43$, $SE = 0.04$, $t(3019) = 10.55$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.35, 0.51]) and statement type ($B = 0.22$, $SE = 0.04$, $t(3019) = 5.38$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.14, 0.30]) were all positive predictors of relationship-strengthening ratings. Version 2 ($B = -0.20$, $SE = 0.06$, $t(3019) = -3.20$, $p = .001$, 95% CI [-0.32, -0.08]) also significantly predicted relationship-strengthening ratings. Participants were more likely to rate statements as relationship-strengthening if they were relevant, contained norm violations (See Figure 2), or said with gossip (See Figure 3).

Entertainment Ratings

Relevance ($B = 0.46$, $SE = 0.05$, $t(3022) = 9.46$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.36, 0.55]) and norm violation ($B = 0.58$, $SE = 0.05$, $t(3022) = 11.94$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.48, 0.67]) were positive predictors of entertainment ratings. Statement type did not significantly predict entertainment ratings ($B = 0.09$, $SE = 0.05$, $t(3022) = 1.76$, $p = .08$, 95% CI [-0.01, 0.18]). Version 2 ($B = -0.32$, $SE = 0.07$, $t(3022) = -4.46$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-0.46, -0.18]) and Version 3 ($B = -0.29$, $SE = 0.07$, $t(3022) = -4.16$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-0.42, -0.15]) were also significant predictors. Participants were more likely to rate statements as entertaining if they contained information that was relevant to the listener or a norm violation. Gossip and target-present statements were equally likely to be rated as entertaining.

Influence Ratings

Relevance ($B = 0.65$, $SE = 0.05$, $t(3019) = 12.05$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.55, 0.76]) and norm violation ($B = 0.81$, $SE = 0.05$, $t(3019) = 14.92$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.70, 0.92]) were positive predictors for influence ratings. Statement type was not a significant predictor of influence ratings ($B = 0.09$, $SE = 0.05$, $t(3019) = 1.61$, $p = .11$, 95% CI [0.19, 0.02]). Version 1 ($B = 0.21$, $SE = 0.08$, $t(3019) = 2.63$, $p = .009$, 95% CI [0.05, 0.36]) and Version 3 ($B = -0.34$, $SE = 0.08$, $t(3019) = -4.35$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-0.49, -0.19]) were also predictors of influence ratings. Participants were more likely to rate statements as influential when they contained information that was relevant to the listener or a norm violation.

Speaker Attitude

Relevance ($B = 0.32$, $SE = 0.05$, $t(3011) = 6.97$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.23, 0.41]), norm violation ($B = 0.75$, $SE = 0.05$, $t(3011) = 16.44$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.66, 0.84]), and statement type were positive predictors of speaker attitude ratings ($B = 0.17$, $SE = 0.05$, $t(3011) = 3.75$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.08, 0.26]). Version 1 ($B = 0.17$, $SE = 0.07$, $t(3011) = 2.64$, $p = .008$, 95% CI [0.05, 0.30]) and Version 3 ($B = -0.23$, $SE = 0.07$, $t(3011) = -4.35$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-0.36, -0.10]) were also predictors of ratings of the speaker's attitude. Participants were more likely to rate the speaker as being nice if their statement was relevant to the listener, contained a norm violation, or was gossip.

Problematic Ratings

Relevance ($B = 0.80$, $SE = 0.06$, $t(3022) = 14.37$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.69, 0.90]), and norm violation ($B = 2.37$, $SE = 0.06$, $t(3022) = 42.88$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [2.27, 2.48]) were positive predictors of problematic ratings. Statement type did not predict problematic ratings ($B = 0.03$, $SE = 0.06$, $t(3022) = 0.56$, $p = 0.57$, 95% CI [-0.14, 0.08]). Version 3 was also a predictor of ratings of problematic ratings ($B = -0.18$, $SE = 0.08$, $t(3022) = -2.21$, $p = 0.03$, 95% CI [-0.33, 0.02]). Participants were more likely to rate a statement as problematic if it was relevant to the listener or if it contained a norm violation. Gossip and target-present statements were just as likely to be rated as problematic.

Discussion

We aimed to determine whether relevance and norm violation were features unique to gossip, and not target-present statements, by examining whether participants' ratings of gossip's social functions differed depending on whether they observed a speaker sharing information about a third party person in that person's presence or absence. In support of the social

grooming account, relevance positively predicted participants' ratings of usefulness, relationship-strengthening, entertaining, and influence. Relevant statements were rated as more useful to the listener, more strengthening of the speaker-listener relationship, more entertaining to the listener, and more influential to the listener when the gossip contained relevant information compared to when the gossip contained irrelevant information.

By the prosocial gossip account, we predicted that participants would rate the speaker as better serving gossip's four social functions for gossip that contained norm violations compared to gossip that did not contain norm violations. In support of prosocial gossip theory, we found that norm violation positively predicted participants' ratings of usefulness, relationship strengthening, entertaining, and influence. Statements containing social norm violations were more likely to be rated as useful, relationship strengthening, entertaining, and influential, than statements that did not contain norm violations.

In contrast, statement type did not significantly predict most of the social functions. Only strengthening the speaker-listener relationship was perceived to be significantly higher in gossip scenarios than target-present scenarios. There were slight differences to suggest that participants found that the target being present to hear the message was more useful than gossip; however, these differences were minor compared to how predictive relevance and/or norm violations were for these functions. Our findings appear to challenge Foster's (2004) account that the functions of providing useful information, strengthening relationships, entertaining others, and influencing listeners represent key reasons why people gossip. Because non-gossip statements were also perceived to serve these functions, our results suggest that gossip's distinctiveness may lie less in its informational or entertaining qualities and more in its relational implications such as relationship-building or managing reputations. However, Foster's account emphasizes the effects on speakers and listeners, whereas our study examined how observers interpret the speaker's intentions. Thus, our findings do not suggest that gossip fails to uniquely promote these social functions, rather, they indicate that observers did not perceive a difference between gossip and target-present situations, except for strengthening the speaker-listener relationship.

While our findings align with reports that gossip promotes social bonding and maintains social norms (Pápay et al., 2022), our results also show that saying the same information directly in front of the target can also achieve these social functions. This finding is consistent with previous literature that identified the role of norm violating gossip in strengthening the speaker-listener relationship (Beersma & van Kleef, 2012; Samu & Takács, 2021). However, speakers can also satisfy these goals when a norm violation is described in front of the target who violated the norm.

In the present study, participants rated how nice or mean the listener perceived the speaker. Participants rated the speaker as nicer when they gossiped about a norm violation when the target was absent compared to when the target was present. This finding is consistent with politeness theory's (Brown & Levinson, 1978) suggestion that speakers who gossip should be perceived as nicer than speakers who talk about a present target. Our results are also consistent with reports that people perceive speakers more positively when their gossip clarifies group norms (Feinberg et al., 2012; Lian et al., 2023). In addition, Feinberg et al. (2012) described gossip as a method to solidify group norms while protecting one's own reputation by maintaining distance from the target. From this perspective, participants in the present study might have rated the speaker as nicer for gossip compared to target-present statements because the speaker distanced themselves from the target to manage their reputation with the listener. Research also suggests that gossip helps the speaker manage their reputation with the listener, target, and broader social circle (Feinberg et al., 2012; Giardini & Wittek, 2019; Nieper et al., 2025; Pápay et al., 2022; Righi & Takács, 2022). In the present study, gossip that was relevant and contained norm violations were rated as nicer than direct irrelevant statements that did not contain a non-norm violation. While we did not ask participants to explain their motivations for their ratings, they may have recognized that gossiping about norm violations serves a prosocial purpose that benefits the speaker, listener, and the social group while protecting the speaker's reputation.

Although we only included negative gossip in the present study, it is possible that positive gossip may also similarly be perceived as nice and as protecting the speaker's reputation. Számadó et al. (2021) argued that people are motivated to spread positive gossip about other people because it makes them look more prosocial. Correspondingly, some people don't mind being gossiped about when the gossip is positive, and this can improve the speaker-target relationship (Hales et al., 2025). Future research is required to determine how a listener's perception of the speaker's attitude and reputation might vary for negative versus positive gossip.

Limitations

While our study offers new insights into how gossip is evaluated from an observer's perspective, a few limitations should be noted. Our participant sample was homogenous, consisting of Canadian university students who were mostly English-speaking women in their early twenties. Because gossip is highly context dependent and attitudes toward gossip can vary across cultures and subgroups (Giardini & Wittek, 2019), the limited diversity in our sample restricts the generalizability of our findings. Another limitation concerns how we operationalized the variable of rel-

evance. In our study, relevance was manipulated by depicting the gossip target as having the same or different occupation as the listener. This gave us some experimental control, but it does not capture the range of factors that make gossip relevant to people in everyday contexts. For example, we may consider gossip relevant to a coworker even when it does not pertain to the workplace. Further, using occupations to determine relevance assumes sharing an occupation makes the information personally relevant to listener, whereas some people may identify more strongly with their job than others. Therefore, although manipulating the characters' occupations in our study was useful for our methodology, our results may not generalize to other forms of relevance.

In addition, our experimental method tasked participants to take the perspective of cartoon characters in hypothetical scenarios, and this may have not been an ideal way to measure participants' assessments of gossip's social functions. Our study focused exclusively on negative gossip, but not all gossip is negative. Future research will need to examine how theories can account for positive gossip. Finally, the videos were randomized across four versions to reduce potential order effects and confounding effects of specific scenarios presented to the participants. Each version included an equal distribution of experimental conditions so that characters and situations counterbalanced across versions. Despite this precaution, some video versions significantly predicted some social functions, suggesting some video versions contained scenarios that influenced participant ratings. However, the regression analyses remained significant when controlling for video version, indicating that significant results were not solely attributed to the video versions. Nonetheless, we acknowledge this limitation of our method.

Future Research Directions

Our results highlight the importance of measuring the speaker's attitude and considering politeness in future gossip research. Future studies seeking to uncover which elements of gossip can serve gossip's social functions could replicate the experimental design used in the present study with independent variables including social and power dynamics between the speaker, listener, and target. Furthermore, cross-cultural studies are needed to directly measure the effect different cultural norms have on gossip appreciation. We also suggest that a future study should compare positive and negative gossip to see if managing the speaker's reputation is a function unique to negative gossip.

Implications

Our results provide support for both the social grooming and prosocial gossip theories because gossip containing information about a norm

violation that is relevant to the listener can achieve the social functions of usefulness, strengthening the speaker-listener relationship, entertaining the listener, and influencing the listener's behaviour. These functions are likely not mutually exclusive such that statements that are useful and entertaining for the listener may also strengthen the speaker-listener relationship. We found little differences between gossip and target-present statements in terms of serving the three of the four social functions, with strengthening relationships being the exception. This suggests that these social functions are not unique to gossip, and that a speaker can achieve many of the same social goals when speaking about a target in front of them.

Conclusion

When people observe gossip, both norm violations and relevance are cues to the social functions of sharing information, strengthening relationships, entertaining the listener, and socially influencing the listener. However, these cues also apply to target-present statements. Only strengthening relationships and additionally, saving face, were perceived to be better achieved with gossip compared to target-present statements. Prosocial gossip theory (Feinberg et al., 2012) and social grooming theory (Dunbar, 2004) describe gossiping about norm violations that are relevant to the listener to share critical information about group norms. In support of these theories, our results suggest that, compared to when the target is present, participants perceived gossip about relevant norm violations to allow the speaker to manage their reputation by appearing nicer to the listener and by strengthening their relationship with the listener.

Authorship Details

Caelan Budhoo: research concept and design, collection and/or assembly of data, data analysis and interpretation, writing the article, critical revision of the article, final approval of the article.

Penny Pexman: research concept and design, critical revision of the article, final approval of the article.

Melanie Glenwright: research concept and design, data analysis and interpretation, writing the article, critical revision of the article, final approval of the article

Conflict of Interest Disclosure

The authors report no conflicts of interest.

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Research Ethics Statement

The approving institution is the University of Manitoba, protocol number: HE2023-0114. This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the University of Manitoba and Research Ethics Board 1. The Human Ethics Office (HEO) is constituted and operates in accordance with the current Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans- TCPS 2. Participants were verbally informed about the study's objectives, procedures, potential risks, and benefits prior to their involvement. Participants were provided a consent form that outlined the study's objectives, procedures, potential risks, and benefits prior to their involvement. Participants then provided their written consent.

Data Availability Statement

Data associated with the current study will be made available upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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