



A Study of Attitude towards Gossip, Loneliness and Stress in Covid-19 times

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Abstract

The present study examined the attitude towards the social and moral value of gossip during period of Covid-19 in India. The research mainly attempts to study the relationship between attitude towards gossip (Social Value and Moral Value) with perceived stress and loneliness. The sample included a total of 203 individuals (Women= 148, Men = 55). The research found that attitude towards social value of gossip was more popular than the moral value of gossip for both genders. The results showed, correlation of social value (SV) and moral value (MV) with perceived stress significantly positive, whereas with loneliness significantly negative. Multiple regression found that perceived stress and loneliness played a significant role in predicting attitude towards MV of gossip but not in case of SV of gossip. Research opens doors for further exploration with psychological perspective.

Keywords: Attitude, Gossip, Perceived Stress, Loneliness, Regression, Covid-19

Introduction

Gossip is one of the biggest paradoxes in human life. In spite of being considered malicious, it still is a part of everyone's life. Gossip makes 19 percent of our daily conversations. It can be said that gossip explains our true nature, that is, we are social beings. Evolutionary psychologist Robin Dunbar (1996) first pioneered the idea of gossip being a means of bonding. The ancient man found gossip indispensable for his survival and to establish social bonds and till today. One must admit it remains an integral part of our conversations even after being looked down upon.

All people indulge in gossip but surprisingly only women are thought to be participating in it although no significant gender differences have been observed. A frequently used definition of gossip is "evaluative talk exchanged informally about an absent third party (Dunbar, 2004; Foster, 2003). Ben Ze'ev and Goodman (1994) also found divergent views on the nature of gossip. A mixed attitude ranged from gossip being small talk about some and negative to gossip being a fun activity along with being a source of information. The pandemic of Covid-19 witnessed a decline in gossip (Vincenty, 2021). People being restricted in movement and social relationships caused this so-called gossip shortage. But gossip still found its way through and became common on social media platforms. The way people gossiped took a form of enormous screenshotting circulating over Twitter. In 2020, Twitter usage increased by 23% (Carlton, 2020). One of the most interesting facts surrounding gossip is that despite its negative connotations, it is widely prevalent. Be it any sphere of life; school, college, or job, none is free from this social act (Guendouzi, 2020; Peng et al., 2015). The current study explores the attitude towards gossip during the covid-19 pandemic and its relation to stress and loneliness.

Nature of Gossip

Attempts to draw comparisons between the pros and cons of gossip make its nature and impact more and more ambiguous. Research has highlighted that it has both the dark and the positive sides (Dores Cruz et al., 2019; Grosser et al., 2010). Some argue that gossip fosters group cohesion and group solidarity by checking transgressions along with promoting prosocial behavior and generosity (Gluckman 1956; Hannnerz, 1967; Sommerfeld et al., 2007; Wu et al., 2016). Feinberg et al. (2012) in their study found that when individuals heard about another person's anti-social behavior or an injustice, gossiping actively about it, it soothed them turning their heart rate down implying that gossiping has a positive physiological effect.

Gossiping is often seen as a pleasurable activity and has been related to increased levels of oxytocin and cortisol (Brondino et al., 2017). One big purpose that gossip serves is entertainment (Hartung & Renner, 2013). Research has also shown that gossiping amongst old-aged people is a way to overcome loneliness (Rosnow, 2001; Torres 2019).

Additionally, gossip comes with its share of the negatives. Negative gossip has also been linked to the ambiguous sense of self. Decrease in the group's effectiveness and productivity are major cons of the workplace (Oh et al., 2004; Kuo et al., 2015). While it fosters better connections between the two participating gossipers, on the other hand hampers bonding with the gossip target along with decreasing likability (Farley 2011; Shaw et al., 2011).

According to Farley et al. (2011) anxiety, stress, low self-esteem, confidence for the gossip targets is some negative of gossip. An inverse relationship between perception about gossip and employee well-being has also been reported (Tan et al., 2020). Negative gossip is also related to intimidating and hostile environments (Martinescu et al., 2014). Negative gossip amongst school students has

also been correlated to loneliness and suicide ideation (Wnag et al., 2020). Based on the mixed review on the nature of gossip, following null hypotheses have been proposed.

Measurement of Gossip

Whether one decides to take gossip as positive or negative depends on the context, content, and intention (Hannarz,1967). A common practice is to discuss gossip in terms of the attitude people have towards it, for instance Tendency to Gossip Questionnaire (TGQ) by Nevo et al. (1994) assesses individual differences in attitudes and feelings related to gossiping. Another widely used scale used to study attitudes related to gossip is the Attitude towards Gossip (ATG) scale.

The scale has two dimensions: attitude towards Social Value (SV) and Moral Value (MV) of gossip. The SV subscale inquiries about gossip's "social capital," which is to say its usefulness for forming social relationships and as a source of keeping up one's interest. The MV scale is concerned with views on the appropriateness of transmitting gossip to others and on the reliability of gossip as a source of information.

Hypotheses

1. There is no significant relation between attitude towards SV and MV of gossip and perceived stress.
2. There is no significant relationship between attitude towards SV and MV of gossip and loneliness.
3. Perceived stress and loneliness do not significantly predict attitude towards MV of gossip.
4. Perceived stress and loneliness do not significantly predict attitude towards SV of gossip.

METHOD

Sample

A sample of a total of 203 (Women= 148, Men = 55) was taken for the study. Men and women of the age of 18-40 years were included.

Tools

- **Attitude Towards Gossip Scale (ATG)** by Litman and Pezzo (2005): ATG scale has two subscales that measure attitude towards gossip's social value (SV) of gossip, that measures its social utility and moral value (MV) of gossip that measures ethical justifications for using by Russell (1996) gossip. The scale has good validity (Litman & Pezzo, 2005).
- **Perceived Stress Scale 4 (PSS 4)** by Cohen et al. (1993): PSS 4 also has satisfactory reliability and validity for a four-item scale (Karam et al., 2012).
- **UCLA 3 Loneliness Scale:** UCLA 3 Item Loneliness Scale is a short version of the R-UCLA Loneliness Scale with good reliability and concurrent validity (Hughes et al., 2004).

Results**Table 1***Descriptive statistics for SV, MV, Stress and Loneliness*

Variable	Mean	S.D.
Attitude towards Social Value	16.33	4.09
Attitude towards Moral Value	15.19	3.48
Perceived Stress	7.61	2.89
Loneliness	5.29	1.66

Table 2*Correlation for Attitude towards SV and MV of gossip, Stress and Loneliness*

Variables	(SV)	(MV)	Perceived Stress	Loneliness
Attitude towards Social value (SV)	1.00	0.141	0.086	-0.037
Attitude towards moral value (MV)		1.00	.134	-0.073
Perceived Stress			1.00	0.343*
Loneliness				1.00

Table 3*Multiple linear regression for Attitude towards SV of gossip*

Predictors	B	SE	t	p
PERCEIVED STRESS	0.159	0.106	1.50	0.135
LONELINESS	-0.186	0.185	-1.01	0.315

R squared = 0.012

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table 4*Multiple linear regression for Attitude towards MV of gossip*

Predictors	Beta	SE	t	p
PERCEIVED STRESS	0.187**	0.090	2.09	0.038
LONELINESS	-0.266*	0.156	-1.70	0.090

R squared = 0.027

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Discussion of Results

Two constructs of Attitude Towards Gossip scale, Moral Value (MV) and Social Value (SV) were studied through means for both the gender groups, men (N=55) and women (N=148). Means obtained for SV =17.49 and MV =15.89 for men and SV= 15.88 and MV=14.92 for women. Table

(1) shows that the sample scored higher on SV than MV and on perceived stress than loneliness. For evaluation of the first hypothesis, Pearson r was calculated between attitude towards (social value and moral value of gossip) and perceived stress. The correlation was found to be positive between SV and perceived stress ($r=0.086$) and for MV and perceived stress ($r=0.112$). Therefore, we can say that both the variables are positively correlated but insignificant, as shown in Table (2).

Similarly, for the second hypothesis, the correlation was calculated for SV and MV with loneliness, which came out to be negative though insignificant ($r=-0.037$) ($r= -0.073$) respectively as shown in Table (2). Therefore, the first two hypotheses are supported. There was a positive correlation between perceived stress and loneliness, ($r=0.343$, $p<0.01$).

For investigating the third hypothesis, multiple regression is calculated where perceived stress and loneliness were independent variables and attitude towards SV was the dependent variable. This resulted in a model, $F(2, 200) = 1.26$; $R^2 = .0125$. The individual predictors were examined further and indicated that perceived stress ($t = 1.50$) and loneliness ($t = -1.186$) were non-significant predictors. The constant was found to be significant at 0.01 level. For investigating the fourth hypothesis, multiple regression is calculated for MV and resulted in the model, $F(2, 200) = 2.74$, $R^2 = .0267$. The individual predictors were examined further and indicated that perceived stress ($t = 2.09$, $p<0.05$) and loneliness ($t = -1.70$, $p<0.01$) were significant predictors as shown in Table 4. Constant was found to be significant for both SV and MV at 0.01 level.

The present study shows that attitude towards SV of gossip was more popular than the MV of gossip for both genders. A positive correlation was found between SV and MV with perceived stress.

Many studies are consistent with this finding where gossip is accepted as a way of socializing and gathering information (Feinberg et al., 2012; Ellwardt et al., 2012; Peng et al., 2015). Stress has been found in organizations where gossip is rampant (Tan et al., 2020). People looking for gossip to relieve stress may also explain this positive relationship (Hartung & Renner, 2013; Feinberg et al., 2012; Brondino et al., 2017). A negative correlation between MV of gossip and loneliness may be studied in terms of people who look down upon gossip as evil and do not believe in transmitting negative gossip specially when dealing with loneliness and suffering in personal lives (Peters & Kashima, 2013). Negative correlation of SV with loneliness explains the social function that gossip serves (Rosnow, 2001; Peng et al., 2015; Torres, 2019). In times of stress, people may indulge in gossip to be a part of the group or seek companionship.

The study also showed perceived stress and loneliness to be significant predictors of attitude towards MV gossip. Moral value (MV) of gossip refers to the extent one finds it appropriate to spread gossip to others (Litman et al., 2009). Kakar (2013) states similar findings where gossip is found to help relieve organizational stress. A positive physiological effect of gossiping in the form of decreased heart rate was also reported by Feinberg et al. (2012). Association between loneliness and gossiping can be studied in lieu of the social bonding theory that professes social interactions help overcome pangs of loneliness. Gossiping often provides a vent to people's grief and gives an insight into other's life, thereby promoting empathy and cooperation (Dunbar, 2004). It won't be

wrong to accept the current study's findings that argue that a negative attitude towards gossiping is related to loneliness.

Conclusion

At present there is vast literature on gossip but it lacks psychological perspective. Constants in multiple regression came out to be significant indicating towards others factors that can be studied to better predict attitudes towards gossiping. The study opens up scope for future exploration. Different types of personality dimensions can be studied in light of attitudes towards gossiping. Qualitative methods like interviews or sociometry are sure to increase the authenticity and validity.

Conflict of Interest

Author has no conflict of interest.

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