

Interplay of Gossip, Self-Esteem and Personal Insecurity: An Exploratory Research

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to examine the relationship among variables of gossip, self-esteem and personal insecurity among young adults aged 20- 30 years, in a social setting. A quantitative research design was employed. Pearson's correlation analysis was conducted to determine the relationships among the variables, and one-way ANOVA analysis to examine variation in gossip and self-esteem across dimensions of personal insecurity. The results indicated a significant positive correlation between gossip and personal insecurity. However, no significant relationship was found between gossip and self-esteem and between self-esteem and personal insecurity. The one-way ANOVA analysis indicated that self-esteem did not show significant variation across the domains of insecurity, but gossip showed significant variation across the Study and Prospective domains. These findings suggest that gossip is more closely associated to personal insecurity than with self-esteem.

Keywords: *Gossip, Self-Esteem, Personal Insecurity, Social Behaviour, Young Adults*

GOSSIP

Gossip is defined as an informal communication about another individual absent from the group, for the purpose of social bonding and information exchange (Foster, 2004). It is the informal interpersonal communication regarding others which assists people to understand and adjust to their social environment (Rosnow & Fine, 1976). In the modern era, social psychology defines gossip as a communicative tool and social skill that facilitates formation of social bond and helps individuals navigate social relationships and situations (The Oxford Handbook of Gossip and Reputation, 2020). Gossip behaviour has been found to serve a number of purposes mainly that of forming social relationships, information sharing and for navigating one's social environment. Individuals may gossip for six reasons in particular information collecting, information confirming, social laughter, social warning, targeting individuals and for developing new or strengthening old social bonds (Hartung, Krohn, & Pirschat, 2019). Scientific study belief major motivators for gossip are social laughter, emotional expression regarding individual or putting down other (Testori, Hemelrijk & Beersma, 2022).

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Evolutionary psychologists believe gossip evolved as a source for “verbal grooming” rather than just physical grooming helping to form alliances and improve social cohesion (Robert Dunbar, 2004). Gossip might also occur for selfish purposes like improve reputation or social status, influence perception about others, or gain advantage over others (McAndrew, Bell, & Garcia, 2007). Some individuals may seek gossip themselves due to intrinsic interest to be informed about others life events and achievements reflecting their social curiosity (Hartung & Renner, 2013).

Gossip can take different forms depending on the context and content. It has been classified particularly into two valence positive gossip and negative gossip (Martinescu, Janssen & Nijstad, 2014). Positive gossip involves hearing praise, encouragement and achievements, while negative gossip refers to hearing unflattering and critical information about another individual (Liu, Xu & Yuling, 2024). Negative gossip spreads at faster rates and targeted at particular individual while positive gossip travels to a broader population (Ellwardt, Labianca & Wittek, 2012). Negative gossip tends to affect social and psychological well-being and as well as interpersonal relationships (Subhekti & Nadi, 2024)

Despite being primarily, a social tool gossip also serves as a psychological tool, influencing well-being, emotions, perception, decision-making, judgment and is part of the social learning process (Nicholas Emler, 2013). Both positive and negative gossip, influences visual perception and cognition, affecting how individuals assess and evaluate social information (Anderson, Siegel, Moreau, & Barrett, 2011). Gossip evokes emotional reactions, shaping one’s behaviour and responses to social situation (Martinescu, Janssen, & Nijstad, 2019). Furthermore, gossip tends to shape beliefs about others and ensuring adherence to social norms (Feinberg, Willer, & Schultz, 2014). It also plays an important role in reputation formation and behavioural evaluation, helping individuals analyse other’s nature, social intentions, cooperativeness and decision making, (Cruz et al, 2021)

SELF-ESTEEM

In psychology, self-esteem is considered as an enduring characteristic, including beliefs about oneself (Psychology Lexicon). It is defined as the overall view about oneself, one’s emotions and thoughts whether positive or negative (Rosenberg, 1965). Self-esteem is subjective evaluation of one’s own abilities, skills and characteristics (Kuster & Orth, 2023). It is considered to be the outcome of one’s goals and accomplishments (William James, 1890).

Humanistic psychologists believe self-esteem to be the core component of self-concept and self-worth (Rogers, 1961). It is considered to be a basic human need, occupying the fourth stage in Maslow’s need hierarchy. Self-esteem leads to feelings of confidence, pride, fulfilment, and strength and is necessary for personal growth and self-actualization in individuals (Maslow, 1954). The sociometer theory however, states self-esteem to be predictor of individual’s perceived levels of social inclusion or exclusion, like a “internal monitoring system”. High self-esteem points to social acceptance, while low self-esteem commonly means social rejection (Leary & Baumeister, 2000).

Self-esteem is a global trait, the individual’s perception of self may change but sense of self-worth persists (Harter, 1999). It is a developmental trait that evolves with individuals’ life experiences, successes and failures (Orth & Robins, 2014). Thus, it is characterized as both stable and unstable. Stable self-esteem indicates emotional maturity, consistent self-worth,

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and confidence while unstable self-esteem points to fragile self-worth, vulnerability, dependence and emotional reactivity (Kernis, 1993).

Self-esteem depends on a number of factors and is shaped experiences throughout life. Some factors shaping self-esteem can be achievements, trauma, criticism, cultural norms and societal expectations (Heine & Lehman, 1997). Self-esteem operates at two levels “explicit (conscious)” and “implicit (unconscious)”. Explicit is based on perceptual evaluation of self, while implicit self-esteem functions automatically, without conscious awareness. Incongruence between the two affects emotional responses and behaviour (Bosson, Swann, & Pennebaker, 2000).

Self-esteem is a multifaceted concept, including self-worth, self-competence, self-respect, social identity, and self-efficacy. Self-worth is the fundamental component of self-esteem defined as the amount of value an individual assigns to themselves. High self-worth indicates acceptance of self and confidence while low self-worth stems from feelings of insecurity and inferiority (Rosenberg, 1965). The faith in one’s own skills, talents, and capabilities is referred to as self-competence which proves to be helpful in various life domains including social, academic, and professional life (Marsh & Craven, 1997). Self-respect is about treating oneself with dignity as one would treat others, which is equally important for high self-esteem (Coopersmith, 1967). Social identity or social self refers to individuals’ perception about themselves in social context including reputation, social acceptance, inclusion and importance (Leary & Baumeister, 2000). Self-efficacy refers to the trust in oneself to accomplish tasks and achieve goals. High self-efficacy promotes high self-esteem by boosting confidence, resilience and optimism (Bandura, 1997).

The ABC model however, describes three components of self -esteem namely, affective, behavioural, and cognitive. Affective component comprises emotions and feelings toward oneself like pride, respect, hate or shame (Brown, 1998). The behavioural component refers to actions and conducts that may affect self-esteem like persistence, aggression, withdrawal, resilience or avoidance (Baumeister, 1999). The cognitive component includes thoughts, beliefs, and perception about the self (Beck, 1976).

Self-esteem plays an important role in the mental well-being of individuals. High self-esteem is an indicator of overall well-being, personal growth, and life satisfaction (Han & Yoon, 2024). It also indicates healthy self-concept, resilience, and social adaptability (Chocano, Junoy, & Molero, 2025). People with high self-esteem experience lower anxiety, social awkwardness, mental distress and depression (Vaananen et al, 2014). Individuals with high self-esteem also demonstrate better emotional stability, less overthinking, and fewer negative emotions. However, individuals with low self-esteem are at greater risk of mental breakdowns, mental disorders and are more sensitive and emotionally vulnerable (Steiger, Allemann, Robins, & Fend, 2014).

PERSONAL INSECURITY

Personal insecurities are defined as feelings of inadequacy, dissatisfaction, uncertainty, and self-doubt about one’s skills and capacities (Smith & Crowley, 2015). It involves the constant questioning of one’s value and worth (Leary, 2007). Insecurity is a state of emotional vulnerability marked by fear of negative evaluation, criticism, perceived rejection (Kernis, 2003). These feelings are usually self-evaluated, subjective and based on individuals’ perception, beliefs, and past experiences (Horney, 1950).

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Personal insecurities can be identified by some psychological characteristics. The most common features are persistent self-doubt in one's abilities and fear of negative evaluation, peer rejection, judgment, and criticism (Baumeister, 1999). Insecurity arises from social comparisons, in which individuals evaluate their circumstances and abilities in respect of others (Festinger, 1954). Insecurity also tends to raise self-awareness making individuals highly conscious of their actions and behaviour (Leary & Kowalski, 1995). Insecurities promote unrealistically high standards, fear of failure and habits of perfectionism (Flett, Hewitt & Martin, 1995).

Insecurities can develop at any stage of life and are influenced by factors like family environment, peer support, cultural norms, gender norms, societal expectations, trauma and life events (Heine et al., 1999). They are fuelled because of overthinking, social comparison, negativity bias, and magnification of small issues (Beck, 1976). Individuals with personality traits of neuroticism, introversion, and sensitivity are vulnerable to feelings of insecurity (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Insecurities can be related to one's appearance, performance, family, peers, social skills, cognitive abilities, existence, academics or career.

Insecurities might not feel significant, but they impact one's social behaviour and psychological well-being (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Individuals with high insecurity traits often avoid or withdraw from social situations to hide their feelings and deal with fear of criticism or exclusion (Leary & Kowalski, 1995). They may seek external validation or approval, increasing dependence and people-pleasing behaviour (Horney, 1950). Insecurities lead to feelings of jealousy, envy, competitiveness, and dissatisfaction with oneself (Festinger, 1954). Individuals may also experience difficulties in interpersonal relationships due to lack of trust, constant comparison, emotional vulnerability, or clinginess (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 2000).

Psychological effects of insecurities include- increased anxiety, stress, worry and overthinking (Rapee & Heimberg, 1997). It reduces life satisfaction, leads to poor mood, self-doubt and affects overall well-being (Gross & John, 2003). It leads to a cycle of negative thinking, feelings of hopelessness, self-criticism and ultimately depression (Orth, Robins, & Roberts, 2008). Insecurities also affect one's decision-making capabilities due to confusion, unnecessary re-evaluation of choices and fear of making wrong decision (Rassin, 2007).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Gossip Behaviour and Self-Esteem

Gossip behaviour has been widely examined in relation to self-esteem, particularly focusing on different valence of gossip and its influence on self-evaluative functions. The research by Cole Scrivener in 2013 aimed to study effect gossip behaviour on self-esteem of gossiper for a short period of time. About 140 participants were asked to engage in positive and negative gossip. Findings suggested that negative gossips about self or others lead to decline in self-esteem and contribute to feeling of insecurity. The research also suggested gossip behaviour was associated to social comparison, self-evaluation and feelings of guilt.

Similarly, research by Martinescu, Janssen & Nijstad in 2014 focused on how gossip about others induced processes of self-evaluation, self-protection, self-promotion, and self-improvement. The study considered gossip as a psychological tool instead of a social tool evaluating reasons for why individual paid attention on gossip. The study used two research methods critical-incident technique where participants recollected real-life gossip

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information and a target-individual method where participants were introduced to positive or negative gossip about others. The results indicated that positive gossip was linked to tendencies of self-improvement while negative led to increase in self-protection and self-promotion behaviours. Thus, this indicates that positive or negative gossip both can lead to self-esteem processes in receiver.

Further, Esther S. Min studied connection between different valence of gossips: positive, negative or neutral and individuals' self-esteem. The study reported that negative gossip was more common than positive gossip in social settings, while neutral was most common overall. The data obtained from 170 participants suggested that negative gossip was linked to low self-esteem, meaning individual indulging in negative gossip of any form showed lower levels of self-esteem. Positive and neutral gossip were negatively linked to self-esteem, thus having no significant influence on individuals' self-esteem.

Moreover, a study conducted by Allard in 2023, examined the effect of different valence of gossip: positive or negative on individuals' self-esteem and emotional state, also considering factor of source of gossip: friends or acquaintance. The research used a quantitative research method involving an online survey filled by 602 randomly selected participants. The study concluded that negative gossip leads to decrease in self-esteem and feelings of shame or embarrassment, whereas positive gossip was linked to feelings of pride but did not significantly increase self-esteem at any level. Gossip originating from friends resulted in a stronger emotional impact rather than that done by acquaintances, highlighting the role of interpersonal closeness in guiding impact of self-esteem.

Hales, Yucel and Rudert studied openness of individuals to be the target of gossip shifting focus on gossip as a self-evaluative psychological tool. The research used two different methodological approaches to evaluate individuals' readiness to be subject of gossip. Results indicated that the openness dependent on factors like on age, gender and individual differences while men and individuals with narcissist personality traits were open to gossip, older individual were opposed to the idea. Preference to be subject of positive gossip was higher than that of negative gossip. Overall, it suggested gossip as a tool for self-evaluation, a core component of self-esteem.

A study conducted by Uy, Navals & Valmores in 2013 proposed possible relationship between tendency to gossip, self-concept and anxiety levels, considering gossip as a psychological tool instead of a pure social tool. The quantitative method used by researchers proposed a possible link between the three. Self-concept was found to be inversely related to anxiety levels and gossiping tendencies suggesting that individuals with strong self-concept face lower anxiety and do not prefer to actively engage in gossip. The researchers also predicted that self-esteem and gossip behaviour may show same pattern as self-concept, where high self-esteem might be indicator of low gossiping tendency.

Quantitative research was conducted by Xiaolei Song & Siliang Guo in 2022 at organizational level. The researchers used convenience sampling method and standardized self-report measures to study effect of negative workplace gossip on organizational self-esteem in different work environments considering factors of age, education and hierarchical position. The research concluded that negative workplace gossip acted as an environmental stressor inversely affecting employees' self-esteem particularly in unfair or biased work environments.

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These findings indicate that gossip behaviour plays a significant role in influencing self-esteem through process of social comparison, emotional responses, and self-evaluation.

Gossip Behaviour and Personal Insecurities

Gossip behaviour has also been examined in relation to personal insecurities. In 2018, Researchers Wu, Birth, Chiang, and Zhang conducted a study based on the self-consistency model, hypothesizing that gossip acts as a social threat leading to change in one's self – concept and behaviour. The empirical study conducted in workplace environment proved that gossip acted as a psychological threat, inducing feelings of insecurity and behavioural adjustments. Individuals with traits of negative affectivity and sensitivity were prone to feeling of insecurities.

Similarly, the study by Zong, Xu, Zhang & Qu in 2021 focused on the impact of negative workplace gossip on individual's psychological states and perceived harm on their social image and reputation. The empirical study confirmed that negative gossip led to social evaluation linking to feelings of insecurity. To deal with this, individuals showed behavioural modifications like strategic interactions, distancing from peers with high gossiping tendency and self-monitoring.

Further, a survey-based study conducted in 2022 by Wang, Niu, Sun, Yu, Wang, Xue & Hu focused on evaluating the effect of positive gossip on job satisfaction. The findings concluded that positive gossip was linked with job satisfaction, while reducing the job insecurity. Thus, positive gossip improved employees' well-being and satisfaction.

In addition, Wert & Salovey in 2004 explored reasons for why people engage in gossip exploring emotional reactions and feeling insecurity or inferiority associated with the behaviour. They considered gossip as both social and psychological tool. The study suggested that negative gossip occurred as a coping mechanism to deal with emotions of jealousy, envy or feelings of insecurity and inferiority.

These finding suggest that gossip, especially negative gossip, contributes to the development and maintaining feelings of personal insecurities.

Self-Esteem and Personal Insecurities

A study conducted by Huang, Berenbaum and McKee in 2022 examined the relation between self-insecurity and negative repetitive thinking on both interpersonal and intrapersonal levels. Results indicated that self-insecurity leads to negative overthinking at both levels. Additionally, self-esteem was found to be inversely related to self- insecurity, meaning that individuals with low self-esteem showed higher levels of personal insecurities. Similarly, a study by Nezlek & Plesko in 2001, used daily diary method to examine variability in mood, self-esteem and self- concept clarity. High variation in self-esteem and low self- concept were indicators of self-doubt and insecurities. The study thus highlights that unstable view of self is a key contributing factor to personal insecurities.

Further, the research by Lo Presti, Callea, Mauno & Urbini was dedicated towards understanding insecurity, self -esteem and well-being of individuals related to their professional setting. The study found that both qualitative or quantitative forms of job insecurity were negatively linked to mental well- being, while self-esteem acted as a moderator indicating that people with high self-esteem experienced lower impact of job insecurity on their well-being.

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In addition, Zhang, Chen, Jia, Li & Wang conducted a study to explore the relationship between inferiority feelings, social anxiety and fear or negative evaluation. The study concluded that feelings of insecurity were significantly linked to social anxiety and fear of negative evaluation, meaning that individuals with strong feelings of insecurity experienced higher social anxiety and the fear of evaluation. Further, the researchers suggested that individuals with high insecurity feelings had low self-esteem which further contributed to the social anxiety & fear of negative evaluation.

CONCLUSION

Gossip has now become an important type of communication in daily life, serving multiple purposes. It supports interpersonal relationships by strengthening bonds, promoting belongingness and facilitating emotional expression. It also acts as a medium for information sharing, reputation formation, social norms maintenance and a source of entertainment. However, beyond its role as a social tool, gossip also acts as a psychological tool.

Self-esteem is the subjective evaluation of one's worth. It includes an individual's perception of self, evaluation of abilities and skills and overall sense of value. It is considered one of the basic human psychological needs and plays a significant role in emotional stability and social adjustment. As gossip also communicates people's perception about others, both positive and negative gossip might directly affect an individual's self-esteem.

Similarly, personal insecurities are feelings of inadequacy, arising from comparison, self-doubt, or fear of negative evaluation. These feelings are usually related to one's appearance, abilities, performance, and social acceptance. Insecurities impact one's psychological well-being by increasing overthinking, low self-confidence and heightened sensitivity to criticism. Individuals with high insecurities generally experience low self-esteem.

Previous research has studied the short-term effects of gossip on self-esteem, and in general effect of gossip on self-esteem mostly in workplace settings. Studies about gossip and insecurity have also mostly focused on employee's well-being and job insecurity. The objective of this study is to focus on the relation among the three variables in a general social setting. It aims to examine the correlation among self-esteem, personal insecurities and tendency to gossip.

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Conflict of Interest

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