

**Outside Looking In: Interpreting Gossip Appreciation in Adults Using an Observer
Perspective**

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Abstract

My primary goal was to test two main theories of gossip: the social grooming theory and the cultural learning theory. Participants (N = 197) watched 30-second videos depicting four conditions where a gossip statement or a target present statement contained negative content that was: 1) relevant and violated a norm, 2) relevant and did not violate a norm, 3) irrelevant and violated a norm, or 4) irrelevant and did not violate a norm. Participants rated the speaker's intent on the following dimensions: 1) sharing information, 2) strengthening relationships, 3) entertaining the listener, and 4) socially influencing the listener. They additionally rated the speaker's attitude. Participants' ratings indicated that statements that were relevant to the listener and contained a norm violation were better serving of gossip's four functions than irrelevant statements without norm violations. However, this was generally the case for both gossip and target present statements with some caveats. Strengthening relationships ratings were increased in gossip conditions, albeit with a small effect size. However, when statements included a norm violation, gossiping increased entertaining and speaker attitude ratings. My findings indicate that both social grooming theory and cultural learning theory capture the main social function features of gossip, with the cultural learning theory having the largest impact. Further, these features are impacted by gossip and target present scenarios by either strengthening or dampening the effects depending on the social function being measured.

Keywords: communication, social functions, social grooming theory, cultural learning theory, norm violations

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Chapter I: Introduction

The purpose of my study was to examine why we gossip. More specifically, I aimed to answer the question: what social functions motivate people to talk about someone behind their back? How we perceive the act of gossiping can influence the development of our interpersonal relationships with our peers and can impact how quickly we learn to adapt to new social norms in novel contexts. Consider the following situation. During your lunch break, you overhear your co-workers Jamie telling Paul personal information about Avery, another co-worker who happens to be absent from the room. How would you interpret the reason for Jamie telling Paul this information about Avery? Is Jamie trying to build a friendship with Paul by bringing them this information? Are they trying to entertain Paul? Are they trying to influence Paul's behaviour? How does Jamie telling Paul this information impact how you feel about them? In making these attributions, you are engaging in complex cognitive reasoning about the intentions of a speaker who is using gossip.

Gossip is defined as the sharing of evaluative information about an absent third party (Huskey, 2021). Gossip occurs in conversations in most social contexts, occurring in over 70% of adults' daily discourse (Elmer, 1992). From children on the playground, adolescents at high school, colleagues at work, or between family members at the dinner table, gossip is ubiquitous, and psychologists theorize that it serves as adaptive purpose for humans (Pinker, 2002). As social creatures, forming and strengthening social bonds and learning from one another is, and always has been, imperative to our survival. Humans are constantly communicating, even when we may not be aware of it. Gossip is a universal experience that virtually every one of us has been, or will, be involved in throughout our lifetime.

Gossip is culturally inescapable and for good reason. Gossip is believed to afford the speaker four important social functions: sharing information, strengthening relationships, entertaining the listener, and socially influencing the listener (Foster, 2004; Stirling, 1956). However, two common misconceptions of gossip are that gossip is inherently malicious towards whomever you are gossiping about, and that gossip occurs in an informal setting or in a sneaky manner (Foster, 2004; Wert & Salovey, 2004). Rather, the gossip literature has come to a consensus of two criteria for an interaction to be considered gossip. The first criterion describes “the gossip triad.” The gossip triad suggests there must be a speaker who initiates the message, a listener to hear it, and a target whom the message is about (Dores Cruz et al., 2021). The second criterion proposes that the target must be absent from hearing the message about them, either because they are not being physically present or they are unable to understand that they are being spoken about (i.e., as in the case if the speaker and listener are speaking a different language; Dores Cruz et al., 2021). The content of the message can be negative, positive, or neutral in its intent towards the target and can occur at any level of formality (Dores Cruz et al., 2021). Put simply, gossip is the sharing of evaluative information about an absent third party (Huskey, 2021). Whether being the speaker, listener, or the target of gossip, we are likely to fulfil all these roles throughout our lives. Being the target of gossip or misunderstanding the speaker’s intended message can carry serious consequences including social exclusion, loneliness, low self-esteem, depression, and anxiety (Archer & Conye, 2005).

Cultural Learning Theory

Gossip is a quick and easy method of sending and receiving information. Baumeister et al. (2004) contend gossip that pertains to cultural information about group norms can help listeners avoid violating such norms in the future. These group norms, also referred to as social

norms in the literature, can be defined as “behaviours that are common or approved within a social group” which is then sustained by approval or disapproval by group members (Elster, 1989; 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). In support of this theory, research has documented that gossip allows the speaker to highlight group values, to signal group memberships, to resolve ambiguity about group norms, and to socialize newcomers to a group (Gottman & Mettetal, 1986; Liang, 1993; Noon & Delbridge, 1993; Paine, 1976). Wilson et al. (2000) found that people can approve of negative gossip when it involves 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). Thus, the cultural learning theory argues that people gossip to share information about cultural norms with peers within our social circle.

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, Bosson et al. (2006) found that sharing a mutual attitude towards a target person promoted closeness between the speaker and listener. Furthermore, adults find gossip more useful and more interesting when it helps them enhance their social status, and when the absent third party is the same gender and is close in age as themselves (Barkow, 1992; McAndrew & Milenkovic, 2002). Thus, the social grooming theory posits that, when people tailor their gossip to contain information that is relevant to the listener, this helps the speaker strengthen social bonds with the listener.

Research Methods for Studying Gossip

A variety of methods have been utilized to research gossip in adults. Levin and Arluke (1985) trained observers to eavesdrop on student conversations in high traffic university settings. Another study had experimenters spend two months working fulltime at a factory job so they could engage in gossiping with coworkers (Roy, 1959). Similarly, interviews provide valuable qualitative data for adults' understanding of gossip. Interviews with older adults who live alone revealed gossip to be one of their main sources of social support (Torres, 2019). This kind of observational and qualitative data highlighted patterns in gossip behaviour in adults. For quantitative data, researchers utilized alternative methods.

Recognizing the difficulty of gathering empirical data on a typically private behaviour, Nevo et al. (1993a) developed the Tendency to Gossip Questionnaire (TGQ). Using the TGQ, researchers quantified gossip appreciation rather than needing to observe individual conversations (Nevo et al., 1993b). Another common and effective tool previous authors have utilized to quantify perceptions of gossip are Likert scales. Authors have used Likert scales to provide self-rated attitudes around gossip or to review gossip scenarios in the media (Bosson et al., 2016; McAndrew & Milenkovic, 2002). Wilson et al. (2000) presented hypothetical gossip vignettes to adults and found that participants were engaged with the gossip scenarios and the vignettes allowed experimental elements to be systematically controlled. These previous studies demonstrate despite that gossip is generally considered a private speech act; these methods can provide researchers meaningful empirical data within a lab setting.

These studies provide support that adults tend to have a full understanding of gossip and its purpose. Adults find gossip more interesting and useful when the gossip is more likely to increase their social status (Barkow, 1992). Adults are most interested in gossip when the target is close to the same age and gender as them (McAndrew & Milenkovic, 2002). Adults also find

gossip more interesting when it contains damaging information about non-allies and/or positive information about allies or peers within their social group (McAndrew & Milenkovic, 2002). Adults living alone rely on gossip as a primary source of social support and is used to help get a group of coworkers through the monotony of a long workday (Roy, 1959; Torres, 2019). Thus, the literature suggests that adults have a deep understanding of how to gossip effectively, understand gossip's multi-purposefulness, and can utilize gossip accordingly.

Politeness Theory

An additional motivation for why we gossip comes from Brown and Levinson's (1978) politeness theory regarding "maintaining face." The primary unique trait of gossip is speaking about a target when they aren't present. Politeness theory suggests that, when gossiping, speakers are saving face for the target by speaking about them behind their back, opposed to speaking about them to their face. From this perspective, speakers may gossip to be perceived as nicer by the listener rather than if they were to say the same message about the target when the target is present. Additionally, Farley (2011) found gossip containing negative valence, meaning to talk "bad" about the target, was seen to decrease the speaker's likeability from participants observing gossiping scenarios.

My Study

Although there is general agreement in the literature about what gossip is and what functions it serves within the dyadic relationship, there still exists a theoretical debate about why people gossip (Dores Cruz, 2021; Foster, 2004; Stirling, 1956). The primary aim of my study was to evaluate the accuracy of Dunbar's (2004) social grooming theory and Baumeister et al.'s (2004) cultural learning theory by comparing how adults perceived the purpose of gossip when using the main elements of both theories. Specifically, when this evaluation came from an

observer outside of the gossip triad. To determine what best described participants' interpretation of the speaker's use of gossip, I used their ratings on the four social functions of gossip for videos that varied by statement type (gossip, target present), relevance (relevant, irrelevant), and norm violation (violates norms, does not violate norms). To test these theories, I presented participants videos of hypothetical gossip statements and target present statements. After each video, participants were asked to rate the speaker's intentions according to the four social functions of gossip: 1) sharing information, 2) strengthening relationships, 3) entertaining the listener, and 4) socially influencing the listener (Foster, 2004; Stirling, 1956). Further, participants were asked how mean or nice the listener would judge the speaker's attitude to be, to measure if "saving face" was another function unique to gossiping. Finally, participants were asked to rate how problematic they found the target's behaviour to be. This variable was included to examine if other influences, in this case how problematic the target's behaviour was, impacted the how participants rated the four social functions and the speaker's attitude. To maintain consistency, my study used statements containing negative valence such as the target breaking their leg or stealing money.

Design

To compare participants' ratings on each scale between conditions, a 2 (statement type: gossip, control) x 2 (relevance: relevance, irrelevant) x 2 (violation: violates norms, does not violate norms) repeated measures design was used. The results were used to determine the condition on the each of the four functions of gossip individually.

To compare Dunbar's and Baumeister's theories, the videos depicted four conditions that either affirmed or refuted both the social grooming theory and cultural learning theory. Adults consider the speaker's occupation 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), such that participants would know the behavioral norms for that occupation and be able to recognize when a character was violating the norm for that occupation. To manipulate the relevance variable, I presented the listener as having the same or different occupation as the target. To manipulate the violation variable, I manipulated whether the target violated a norm or did not violate a norm of the listener's occupation. Therefore, the situations either contained information that: 1) was relevant to the listener's occupation and violated a norm for that occupation (such as a speaker telling a teacher about another teacher who swore at a student), 2) was relevant to the listener's occupation and did not violate a norm for that occupation (such as a speaker telling a teacher about another teacher who broke their leg), 3) was irrelevant to the listener's occupation and violated a norm for a group to which the listener did not belong (such as a speaker telling a teacher about a police officer who broke the law), or 4) was irrelevant to the listener's occupation and did not violate norms for a group to which the listener did not belong (such as a speaker telling a teacher about a police officer who broke his leg). These conditions were repeated in the control condition by including the target of the speaker's statement to be present to hear the speaker-listener conversation.

For Hypothesis 1, by the social grooming account, I hypothesized participants would rate the speaker's 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 in the two relevant conditions compared to the two irrelevant conditions. By the cultural learning account, I hypothesized participants would rate the speaker's gossip as more useful to the listener, more strengthening of the speaker-listener relationship, more entertaining to the listener, and more

influential to the listener in the two violate norms conditions compared to the two conditions contained statements without a norm violation. Based on the literature, I predicted the relevant and violates norms condition, which satisfy requirements for both the social grooming theory and cultural learning theory, would have the highest mean ratings on all functions of gossip among participants.

Hypothesis 2 of my study argued that gossiping would strengthen the effect the four social functions would have on the listener. To test this hypothesis, I compared all gossip conditions to target present conditions. I predicted participants would rate the four social functions higher in the gossip condition when the target of the statement was absent compared to the target present condition when the target was present to hear the statement. Additionally, according to politeness theory from Brown and Levinson (1978), gossiping may serve as a function to appear nicer to the speaker as a way to “save face” from saying mean things in front of the target. I predicted the participants would rate the listener’s perception of the speaker’s attitude as being meaner in target present conditions compared to gossip conditions. Further, according to Farley (2011), since the valence of all statements were negative, I predicted participants would rate both target present statements and gossip as mean.

Chapter II: Methods

Participants

Participants were required to be fluent in English to initially sign-up for my study. An a priori power analysis was conducted using G*Power 3.1 (Faul et al., 2009) to determine the suggested sample size for a 2x2x2 repeated measures ANOVA, using a small effect size ($f = 0.10$), alpha error probability $\alpha = 0.05$, power = 0.80, 1 group, and 8 measurements. The results of the power analysis indicated a minimum of 110 participants would be required to detect a

significant effect. In total, 208 undergraduate students were recruited from the introductory psychology courses at the University of Manitoba in Canada. However, 11 participants were excluded from the final data analysis because they did not provide a rating for one or more of the dependent variables. 197 participants were included in the final analyses (mean age = 20.44; 146 females, 46 males, 3 non-binary, 1 transgender male, and 1 genderfluid individual; 166 who reported speaking English in their home, 25 who reported being bilingual which included English, and 6 participants who reported speaking exclusively a non-English language in the home; and 153 who reported growing up in a North American country, 39 who reported growing up in an African country, and 5 who reported growing up in an Asian country).

Materials

Videos

Each participant watched a total of 16 videos. To manipulate statement type and trial order, four full versions containing a newly randomized set of 16 videos were created. An approximate equal number of participants were recruited for each version. A total of 64 videos were created and 32 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, 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. Characters were introduced by name to avoid confusion when participants were later asked to complete the questions in the response booklet after each video. Additionally, the valence of the statement was kept negative across all conditions.

Response Booklets

Participants were given a response booklet containing eight questions to be answered in writing after each video with wording adapted to each specific video:

1. Target Presence: This question was designed to confirm that 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 was designed to measure gossip’s function to share useful information. The participant rated how useful the listener would find speaker’s statement 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.”
3. Relationship Strengthening: This question was designed to measure gossip’s ability to strengthen relationships. The participant 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. Entertaining the Listener: This question was designed to measure gossip’s ability to entertain the listener. The participant rated how entertaining the listener would find the speaker’s

statement 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. Influencing the Listener’s Behaviour: This question was designed to measure gossip’s ability to influence the listener’s behaviour. The participant 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 was designed to measure the listener’s perception of the speaker’s attitude on a 6-point scale, ranging 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 was designed to measure to what degree the participant found the target character’s behaviour 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 question was designed to confirm that participants 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. The demographics page asked participants their birthday, gender identity, what language they speak at home, and what country they grew up in.

Procedure

Participants were gathered in groups in classrooms at the University of Manitoba. Participants sat at individual desks and were provided a consent form and a response booklet. An experimenter explained the instructions of the experiment. The experimental videos were displayed on a large screen at the front of the classroom where participants were shown sixteen 30-second videos. Participants were given 1-minute to answer questions on the corresponding page in the response booklet to the video that was just shown. Participants were shown two videos for each experimental condition, presented in a random order. After answering the questions about each of the sixteen videos, participants were asked to complete the demographic survey.

Results

All analyses included participants' ratings only when they correctly answered both the Target Present manipulation check question and Listener Occupation manipulation check for that video. A 2 (statement type: gossip, target present) x 2 (relevance: relevant, irrelevant) x 2 (violation: violates norms, does not violate norms) repeated measures analyses of variance (ANOVA; hereafter referred to as the repeated measures ANOVA) was conducted for each of the dependent variables. Bonferroni corrections were used for all post-hoc paired t-tests, and given my large sample size, a significance value of $p < .001$ was used to control for type 1 error.

Given the main premises of Dunbar's (2004) and Baumeister et al.'s (2004) theories, I predicted there would be a significant three-way interaction between statement type, relevance, and violation such that the mean ratings on the four dependent measures of usefulness, strengthening the relationship between the speaker and the listener, entertaining the listener, and socially influencing the listener would be highest in the gossip, relevant, and violates norms condition compared to all other conditions. Further, given that violating a group norm is

understood to be sustained by approval or disapproval, I predicted there would only be a significant main effect of violation on the problematic dependent measure, such that conditions with norm violations will be rated as more problematic than conditions that did not violate a social norm (Elster, 1989). Finally, given that gossiping may serve the functioning of saving face, I predicted there would only be a significant main effect of statement type on the speaker attitude dependant variable such that the speaker will be rated nicer in gossip conditions compared to conditions when the target is present.

Usefulness

After each video, participants were asked “How useful did Michelle (the listener) find this information?” and they made a rating on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (very useless) to 6 (very useful). To test if participants’ assessments of how useful the speaker’s message for the listener was dependent on the statement type, relevance, and violation variables, the repeated measures ANOVA was conducted on their mean useful ratings across conditions. The two-way interaction between statement type and violation was significant, $F(1,196) = 16.23$, $MSE = 16.96$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.076$, such that participants rated target present statements that did not violate a norm ($M = 2.93$, $SD = 0.98$, 95% CI [2.79, 3.07]) significantly more useful than gossip statements that also did not violate a norm ($M = 2.62$, $SD = 0.99$, CI 95% [2.48, 2.75]). The two-way interactions between statement type and relevance was also significant $F(1,196) = 5.55$, $MSE = 5.55$, $p = .009$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.034$, such that participants rated gossip statement that were relevant ($M = 3.84$, $SD = 0.96$, 95% CI [3.70, 3.97]) as more useful compared to gossip statements that were irrelevant ($M = 2.94$, $SD = 0.98$, 95% CI [2.80, 3.07]) and target present statements that were relevant ($M = 4.06$, $SD = 0.88$, 95% [3.94, 4.18]) as more useful than target present statements that were irrelevant ($M = 2.93$, $SD = 1.00$, 95% CI [2.79, 3.07]). Further, the

two-way interaction between relevance and violation was significant $F(1,196) = 7.93$, $MSE = 9.68$, $p = .005$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.039$ such that statements that were relevant and violated a norm ($M = 4.69$, $SD = 0.91$, 95% CI[4.57, 4.82]) were rated as more useful compared to statements that were irrelevant and violated a norm ($M = 3.52$, $SD = 1.06$, 95% CI[3.37, 3.67]), statements that were relevant and did not violate a norm ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 0.98$, 95% CI[3.07, 3.34]) were more useful than statements that were irrelevant and did not violate a norm ($M = 2.34$, $SD = 1.00$, 95% CI[2.20, 2.48]), relevant statements that violated a norm were more useful compared to relevant statements that did not violate a norm, and irrelevant statements that violated a norm were more useful than irrelevant statements that did not violate a norm. Additionally, there were significant main effects of statement type $F(1,196) = 4.18$, $MSE = 4.24$, $p = .042$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.021$, relevance, $F(1,196) = 306.01$, $MSE = 406.60$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.61$, and violation, $F(1,196) = 637.41$, $MSE = 701.56$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.77$. Contrary to my prediction, the three-way interaction, $F(1,196) = 1.01$, $MSE = 1.31$, $p = .32$, $\eta_p^2 = .005$ was not significant. Compared to statements that were irrelevant and did not contain a norm violation, listeners found conversations more useful when they contained information that was relevant and when a target violated a norm, with violation having a larger effect on the usefulness variable. Interestingly, in statements that did not violate a norm, gossiping was found to be associated with higher ratings of usefulness compared to statements that depicted the target being present to hear what was being said about them (See Figure 1).

Relationship Strengthening

After each video, participants were asked, “Would this conversation strengthen or weaken Bianca (the speaker) and Michelle’s (the listener) relationship?” and they made a rating on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (weaken a lot) to 6 (strengthen a lot). To test if

participants' assessments of the impact on the speaker and listener's relationship was dependent on the statement type, relevance, and violation variables, the repeated measures ANOVA was conducted on their mean relationship strengthening ratings across conditions. There were significant main effects for statement type, $F(1,196) = 27.94$, $MSE = 17.38$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.13$, relevance, $F(1,196) = 42.52$, $MSE = 23.51$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.18$, and violation, $F(1,196) = 91.84$, $MSE = 74.87$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.32$, such that participants rated gossip statements ($M = 3.49$, $SD = 0.67$, 95% CI [3.39, 3.58]) that were relevant to the listener ($M = 3.50$, $SD = 0.69$, 95% CI [3.41, 3.60]) and contained a norm violation ($M = 3.60$, $SD = 0.78$, 95% CI [3.49, 3.71]) significantly more strengthening of the speaker-listener relationship compared to target-present statements ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 0.67$, 95% CI [3.18, 3.37]) that were irrelevant to the listener ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 0.63$, 95% CI [3.17, 3.35]) and did not contain a norm violation ($M = 3.16$, $SD = 0.58$, 95% CI [3.08, 3.24]). Contrary to my predictions, the three-way interaction between statement type, relevance, and violation, $F < 1$, and the two-way interactions between statement type and relevance, $F < 1$, statement type and violation $F < 1$, and relevance and violation, $F(1,196) = 2.92$, $MSE = 1.43$, $p = .089$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.015$, were not significant. Participants found conversations that contained information that was relevant to the listener where a target violated a norm and when it was said when the target was absent as more strengthening for the speaker-target relationship than conversations that did not contain this information. Interestingly, it was the violation variable that had the largest effect on strengthening the speaker-target relationship variable.

Entertaining the Listener

After each video, participants were asked "How entertaining would Michelle (the listener) find this conversation?" and they made a rating on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (very boring) and 6 (very entertaining). To test if the participants' assessments of how

entertaining the listener would find the speaker's message was dependent on my three manipulated variables, the repeated measures ANOVA was conducted on their mean entertaining rating across conditions. The two-way interaction between statement type and violation was significant $F(1,196) = 7.03$, $MSE = 3.91$, $p = .009$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.035$, such that participants rated gossip statements that violated a norm ($M = 4.23$, $SD = 0.88$, 95% CI[4.10, 4.35]) as more entertaining for the listener compared to target present statements that violated a norm ($M = 4.05$, $SD = 0.91$, 95% CI[3.92, 4.18]), gossip statements that violated a norm as more entertaining than gossip statements that did not violate a norm ($M = 3.55$, $SD = 0.93$, 95% CI[3.42, 3.68]), and target present statements that violated a norm as more entertaining than target present statements that did not violate a norm ($M = 3.57$, $SD = 0.85$, 95% CI[3.45, 3.69]). The two-way interaction between relevance and violation was also significant, $F(1,196) = 22.09$, $MSE = 16.55$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.10$, such that participants rated statements that were relevant and violated a norm ($M = 4.46$, $SD = 0.95$, 95% CI[4.33, 4.60]) were significantly more entertaining than irrelevant statements that violated a norm ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 0.92$, 95% CI[3.69, 3.94]). Additionally, there were significant main effects for relevance, $F(1,196) = 79.16$, $MSE = 77.51$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.29$, and violation $F(1,196) = 153.03$, $MSE = 132.81$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.44$. Contrary to my prediction, the three-way interaction, $F < 1$, two-way interaction between statement type and relevance, $F(1,196) = 3.27$, $MSE = 2.10$, $p = .072$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.016$, and the main effect of statement type $F(1,196) = 2.90$, $MSE = 2.32$, $p = .090$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.015$, were not significant. Participants rated conversations that were relevant and contained a norm violation more entertaining to the listener than conversations that were irrelevant and did not contain a norm violation, with violation having the biggest effect on entertaining the listener. Interestingly, in statements that violated a

norm did participants find the listener would be more entertained when the statement was gossip compared when the target was present.

Influencing the Listener's Behaviour

After each video, participants were asked “How likely would this conversation influence Michelle’s (the listener’s) behaviour in the future?” and they made a rating on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (very unlikely) to 6 (very likely). To test if participants’ assessment of how influential the speaker’s message was dependent on my three variable manipulations, the repeated measures ANOVA was conducted on their mean influence ratings across conditions. The two-way interaction between statement type and relevance was significant $F(1,196) = 4.70$, $MSE = 3.52$, $p = .031$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.023$, such that participants rated gossip statements that were relevant to the listener’s interests ($M = 3.88$, $SD = 0.95$, 95% CI[3.75, 4.02]) as more likely to influence the listener’s behaviour than gossip statements that were irrelevant ($M = 3.33$, $SD = 1.02$, 95% CI[3.19, 3.47]), and participants rated target present statements that were relevant ($M = 4.06$, $SD = 0.90$, 95% CI[3.94,4.19]) as more likely to influence the listener’s behaviour than target present statements that were irrelevant. The two-way interaction between statement type and violation was also significant $F(1,196) = 5.54$, $MSE = 4.22$, $p = .020$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.028$, such that participants rated gossip statements that violated a norm ($M = 4.07$, $SD = 0.98$, 95% CI[3.93, 4.20]) as more likely to influence the listener’s behaviour compared to gossip statements that did not violate a norm ($M = 3.15$, $SD = 1.02$, 95% CI[3.01, 3.29]), and target present statements that violated a norm ($M = 4.05$, $SD = 0.91$, 95% CI[3.92, 4.17]) more likely to influence the listener’s behaviour compared to target present statements that did not violate a norm ($M = 3.34$, $SD = 0.98$, 95% CI[3.20, 3.48]). There were significant main effects of relevance, $F(1,196) = 121.71$, $MSE = 164.72$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.38$, and violation, $F(1,196) = 177.85$, $MSE = 259.49$, $p <$

.001, $\eta_p^2 = 0.48$, such that participants rated statements that were relevant to the listener ($M = 3.97$, $SD = 0.79$, 95% CI [3.86, 4.08]) and contained a norm violation ($M = 4.06$, $SD = 0.85$, 95% CI [3.94, 4.18]) were significantly more likely to influence the listener's behaviour than statements that were irrelevant to the listener ($M = 3.33$, $SD = 0.89$, 95% CI [3.20, 3.45]) and did not contain a norm violation ($M = 3.24$, $SD = 0.84$, 95% CI [3.13, 3.36]). Unexpectedly, the three-way interaction, $F < 1$, two-way interaction between relevance and violation, $F(1,196) = 2.88$, $MSE = 3.81$, $p = .091$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.014$, and the main effect of statement type $F(1,196) = 2.61$, $MSE = 2.81$, $p = .11$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.013$, were not significant. Thus, in support of my predictions, people found conversations that contained information relevant to listener's interests and norm violations as more influential their behaviour in the future compared to conversations that were irrelevant and did not contain a norm violation, with violation again having the largest effect on influencing the listener's behaviour. However, contrary to my prediction, this occurred in both gossip and target present scenarios.

Problematic

After each video, participants were asked "How problematic do you think a cashier (target's occupation) stealing customers' change is (norm or non-norm violation)?" and they made a rating on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all problematic) to 6 (very problematic). This variable was included to measure how problematic the target's behavior was in terms of impacting the participant's rating on gossip's four social functions across conditions. I predicted there would be no significant differences between conditions according to statement type and relevance, but that messages containing norm violations would be rated as more problematic compared to messages without norm violations. To test my prediction, I ran the repeated measures ANOVA on participants' mean problematic ratings across conditions.

There was a significant two-way interaction between statement type and violation, $F(1,196) = 11.70$, $MSE = 12.79$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.056$, such participants rated target present statements that did not violate a norm ($M = 3.14$, $SD = 0.95$, 95% CI[3.01, 3.27]) as more problematic than gossip statements that did not violate a norm ($M = 2.92$, $SD = 0.88$, 95% CI [2.80, 3.05]). There was also a significant two-way interaction between statement type and relevance $F(1,196) = 6.25$, $MSE = 7.27$, $p = .013$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.031$, such that participants rated gossip statements that were relevant ($M = 4.53$, $SD = 0.79$, 95% CI[4.42, 4.64]) as more problematic than gossip statements that were irrelevant ($M = 3.86$, $SD = 0.79$, 95% CI[3.75, 3.98]), and target present statements that were relevant ($M = 4.70$, $SD = 0.83$, 95% CI[4.59, 4.82]) as more problematic than target present statements that were irrelevant ($M = 3.77$, $SD = 0.72$, 95% CI[3.66, 3.87]). Further, there was a significant two-way interaction between relevance and violation, $F(1,196) = 20.33$, $MSE = 33.57$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.094$ such that participants rated relevant statements that violated a norm ($M = 5.66$, $SD = 0.47$, 95% CI[5.59, 5.72]) were more problematic than irrelevant statements that also violated a norm ($M = 5.15$, $SD = 0.67$, 95% CI[5.05, 5.24], and relevant statements that did not violate a norm ($M = 3.58$, $SD = 0.99$, 95% CI[3.44, 3.72]) were more problematic than irrelevant that did not violate a norm ($M = 2.48$, $SD = 1.02$, 95% CI[2.34, 2.63]). Further, there were significant main effects of relevance, $F(1,196) = 202.80$, $MSE = 252.64$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.51$ and violation, $F(1,196) = 2136.85$, $MSE = 2214.10$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.92$. The three-way interaction, $F < 1$ and the main effect for statement type, $F < 1$, were not significant. Thus, as predicted, participants rated statements as more problematic when the target violated a norm (e.g., stealing) compared to statements when the target did not violate a norm (e.g., crashing their car). Also as predicted, the presence or absence of the target from hearing the speaker deliver the message to the listener did not affect how problematic the

participants found the target's behaviour. Unexpectedly, however, the relevance of the statement also impacted how problematic participants found the statement to be. Although, as expected, statements with norm violations had a larger effect on the problematic variable than the statement's relevance such that statements with a norm violation were perceived as the most problematic compared to all other conditions.

Speaker Attitude

After each video, participants were asked "How mean or nice would Michelle (the listener) think Bianca (the speaker) was being for telling them this information?" and they made a rating on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (very mean) to 6 (very nice). According to politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1978), I predicted that participants would rate the speaker as more mean for statements when the target was present, compared to gossip (i.e., when the target was absent), as well as both statement types would fall below a mean rating of 3.5 (i.e., a little bit mean) since the statement contained a negative valence towards the target. Further, I predicted the relevance to the listener and whether the speaker's message contained a norm violation would have no effect on participant's speaker attitude ratings. I conducted the repeated measures ANOVA to test these hypotheses.

There was a significant two-way interaction between statement type and violation $F(1,196) = 4.92, MSE = 3.29, p = .028, \eta_p^2 = 0.024$, such that participants rated speakers that were gossiping about a norm violation ($M = 3.71, SD = 0.92, 95\% CI[3.58, 3.84]$) as nicer compared to when the speaker told the listener the norm violation when the target was present ($M = 3.45, SD = 0.93, 95\% CI[2.77, 2.97]$), rated speakers as nicer when gossiping about norm violations compared to gossiping about non-norm violations ($M = 2.87, SD = 0.71, 95\% CI[2.77, 2.97]$), and rated speakers as nicer during target present statements that violated a norm

compared to target present statements that did not violate a norm ($M = 2.79$, $SD = 0.77$, 95% CI[2.68, 2.90]). There was also a significant two-way interaction between relevance and violation $F(1,196) = 8.35$, $MSE = 4.58$, $p = .004$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.041$, such that participants rated speakers as nicer in when the statement was relevant and violated a norm ($M = 3.69$, $SD = 1.00$, 95% CI[3.55, 3.83]) compared to when the statement was relevant and did not violate a norm ($M = 3.05$, $SD = 0.77$, 95% CI[2.94, 3.16]), when the statement was irrelevant and violated a norm ($M = 3.47$, $SD = 0.85$, 95% CI[3.35, 3.59]) compared to when the statement was irrelevant and did not violate a norm ($M = 2.61$, $SD = 0.68$, 95% CI[2.52, 2.71]), when the statement was relevant and violated a norm compared to irrelevant and violated a norm, and relevant and did not violate a norm compared to irrelevant and did not violate a norm. There were significant main effects for statement, $F(1,196) = 17.18$, $MSE = 11.39$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.081$, relevance, $F(1,196) = 61.26$, $MSE = 42.56$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.24$, and violation $F(1,196) = 211.02$, $MSE = 223.13$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.52$, such that participants rated the speaker as being nicer when gossiping ($M = 3.29$, $SD = 0.67$, 95% CI [3.20, 3.39]), when the statement was relevant to the listener ($M = 3.37$, $SD = 0.76$, 95% CI [3.26, 3.48]), and when the statement contained a norm violation ($M = 3.58$, $SD = 0.84$, 95% CI [3.47, 3.70]) compared to statements that were said when the target was present ($M = 3.12$, $SD = 0.73$, 95% CI [3.02, 3.22]), that were irrelevant to the listener ($M = 3.04$, $SD = 0.63$, 95% CI [2.95, 3.13]), and did not contain a norm violation ($M = 2.83$, $SD = 0.62$, 95% CI [2.74, 2.92]). The three-way interaction between statement type, relevance, and violation, $F < 1$, and two-way interaction between statement type and relevance, $F(1,196) = 3.05$, $MSE = 1.85$, $p = .082$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.015$ were not significant. Consistent with my prediction, speaker attitude was rated under a mean of 3.5, indicating participants found statements containing negative valence to be perceived as mean, with the gossiping being

slightly nicer than saying the statement when the target was present. Interestingly, and aligned with my predictions, gossiping about a norm violation led the speaker to be perceived as nicer compared to speakers who said the same norm violation to the listener in the presence of the target. However, contrary to my prediction, the speaker's attitude was also impacted by relevant statements and statements that contained a norm violation, with violation having the largest effect size of all three main effects.

Discussion

My study aimed to determine which main feature of gossip best served gossip's four social functions of sharing information, strengthening relationships, entertaining the listener, and socially influencing the listener (Foster, 2004; Stirling, 1956), specifically when the statement had a negative valence (i.e., contained negatively framed information about the target). I designed my study to isolate the relevance and norm violation variables to examine participants' ratings of the four social functions to test both Dunbar's (2004) social grooming theory and Baumeister et al.'s (2004) cultural learning theory. Consistent with my primary hypothesis, participants rated all four of gossip's social functions significantly higher for statements that were relevant for the listener compared to statements that were irrelevant for the listener. They also rated the social functions of statements higher in scenarios when the statement contained a violation of a social norm (e.g., stealing) compared to statements that did not contain a norm violation (e.g., breaking their leg). Interestingly, out of the four social functions, strengthening the speaker-listener relationship was rated lowest by participants compared to the other three, suggesting that participants found relevance and violating a norm as having more of a direct benefit to the listener (e.g., usefulness, entertainment, and influencing future behaviour), while having less of a direct benefit to the speaker (e.g., creating a stronger relationship with the

listener). However, contrary to my secondary hypothesis, there was much more nuance when determining how gossiping compared to speaking in front of the target was perceived by the participants. The speaker's statement was perceived as more useful the conversating about a non-norm violation in the presence of the target compared to gossiping. Where relationship building was improved overall in gossip scenarios compared to target present scenarios. Gossiping about a norm violation was perceived as more entertaining compared to conversating about a norm violation in the presence of the target. But then gossiping had no effect on how the statement was perceived to influence the listener's behaviour in the future. Thus, the relevance to the listener's interests and presence of a norm violation were found significantly increase the social functions, however, the absence or presence of the target was found to affect each of the social functions differently.

Although my results support Dunbar's (2004) and Baumeister et al.'s (2004) theories that relevance and norm violations are important features for gossip's four social functions of sharing information, strengthening relationships, entertaining the listener, and socially influencing the listener, these features are not exclusive to gossiping. Interestingly, norm violations were the greatest contributing factor in increasing all four social functions compared to relevance and statement type. This suggests that statements that teach the listener about social norms are more useful to the listener, more facilitative of building the speaker-listener relationship, more entertaining to the listener, and more influential on the listener's behaviour compared to statements that are relevant to the listener. Thus, my findings provide support for the cultural learning theory to a greater extent than the social grooming theory. However, both the social grooming and cultural learning theory account for gossip's function within the gossip triad, where my study had participants view the character interaction from a fourth perspective: the

observer. It is likely that the four social functions may have been better served by both theories had the participant been placed within the gossip triad. Thus, the results of my study speak to how people view the intentions of the speaker from outside the gossip triad, which found that the cultural learning theory appeared to best explain how an observer would perceive the intentions of the speaker who is gossiping.

Further, I measured how problematic participants rated the target's actions. As expected, statements containing norm violations were seen as being more problematic than statements that did not contain norm violations. Also, as expected, participants' perceptions of how problematic the target's behaviour did not differ based on if the target was present or absent. Unexpectedly, however, the target's behaviour was rated as being more problematic in conditions when the statement was relevant to the listener compared to conditions when the statement was irrelevant. This is surprising since participants' evaluations of the target's behaviour should have only been influenced by if they had violated a social norm or not, whereas the relevance to the listener should not have impacted how participants perceived the target's behaviour. Interestingly, the problematic variable demonstrated the same trend as the aforementioned four social functions, such that violating a social norm had the biggest impact on increasing participants' ratings, relevant statements also increased the participants' ratings but had less of an influence than violating a norm, and the statement type had no effect at all. The relationship between the degree participants found the target's behaviour problematic and the participants' ratings on the social functions is uncertain, however, it appears that how problematic the target's behaviour was may have played a role when considering the influence of a speaker's statement on a listener.

Finally, the speaker's attitude was assessed from perspective of the listener, such that participants were asked to rate how nice or mean the listener would find the speaker. I found

participants rated the speaker as nicer when they gossiped about a norm violation when the target absent, opposed to when the target was present. This finding is consistent with Brown and Levinson's (1978) politeness theory that suggests that speakers using gossip would be perceived as being nicer than speakers talking about a target while the target was present, however, with the caveat that this only occurred when the statement contained a norm violation. That being said, both gossip and target present were perceived as "mean." This is consistent with Farley's (2011) finding that gossip that includes a negative valence, such as was used in my study, produces a negative evaluation of the speaker's attitude. Thus, being perceived as nicer by the listener may be an additional function that is served by gossiping, specifically about norm violations committed by the target.

Novel Contributions

Most prominently, my study considered how gossip is perceived from a perspective outside of the gossip triad by placing the participant in a fourth role as an observer. Also, my study is the first to directly test the two main theories of gossip from Dunbar (2004) and Baumeister et al. (2004), however, from the perspective of an observer. Further, gossip studies have traditionally utilized observational, survey, and vignette methods to study gossip, where my study is the first known study to create animated videos to experimentally manipulate variables for participants. Even further, my study was the first to directly test Stirling's four social functions of gossip by gathering participant ratings. My study considered the degree of how problematic the target's behaviour might have affected the participants' ratings on the four social functions, which has not been studied before in this context.

Strengths and Limitations

One strength of my study was the design and procedure which allowed gossip to be experimentally controlled and dependent variables isolated for analysis. Including the use of a 6-point Likert scale with no true neutral option provided participants a range of options whilst provoking their thoughts on whether the statement acted positively or negatively on each of the respective dependent variables. The use of the repeated measures ANOVA allowed for strong statistical power and internal validity. Scenarios were randomized across four different versions that were shown to participants to account for any one particular scenario skewing the results in a particular direction. The inclusion of the speaker attitude variable demonstrated consistency with prior literature regarding negative valence gossip being perceived as mean. Finally, my large sample size allowed for increased precision of means with smaller margins of error.

However, despite the use of animated videos being viewed as a new, innovative direction for gossip studies, the main limitation of my study was that the procedure required participants to infer how the listener might have received the speaker's information within hypothetical scenarios which may be difficult to answer without having been put in that scenario. For example, the full effect of the target's presence may not have been appropriately considered without there being consequences of the speaker's statements. Additionally, context of the speaker-listener prior relationship might affect the how all the dependent variables would be perceived, however, this relationship was not considered in the design of the current study. An additional procedural limitation of my study was that I did not include subtitles for the videos to ensure that all participants correctly understood what was said. Incorrect responses to the manipulation check questions were highest for the first and/or second videos. In my future studies, I would provide participants with a couple of practice videos to help them become accustomed to the procedure before they answer test questions. A final limitation was the study

sample consisted predominately of White, English-speaking women, between the ages of 18 and 22 years, meaning the results should not be generalized to other ethnicities, languages, genders, or age groups.

Implications

Despite the noted limitations, these results still contribute to the literature in both support for Dunbar's (2004) and Baumeister et al.'s (2004) theories of gossip such that both telling a listener about a norm violation that is relevant to them, is likely to serve the social functions of usefulness, strengthening the speaker-listener relationship, entertaining the listener, and influencing the listener's behaviour. It may also be important to consider that these functions are likely not mutually exclusive, such that statements that are useful and entertaining for the listener may naturally strengthen the speaker-listener relationship. As well, my results supported Farley's (2011) finding that negative valence statements are perceived as mean, therefore, should be avoided if the speaker's intention is to be perceived as nice. Finally, the impact of gossiping is, perhaps unsurprisingly, nuanced and cannot be generalized to impact the social goals of the speaker equally and uniformly without considering the context of statement, including its relevance to the listener and the norm violations of the target's behaviour.

Future Research Directions

Future studies seeking to uncover what element of gossiping provides it its unique ability to increase gossip's four social function should replicate the experimental design used here but with additional variables under consideration (e.g., social and power dynamics between the speaker, listener, and target such as prior relationships). Alternatively, studies challenging Foster (2004) and Stirling's (1956) assumptions of gossip's four social functions could replicate the experimental design done in the current study but with differing functions as dependent

variables for the participants to answer (i.e., an emphasis on the speaker-target relationship, an emphasis on other benefits to the speaker). Also, considering the same design but manipulating different independent variables other than norm violations and relevance may provide insights on what supports Foster's (2004) and Stirling's (1956) four social functions of gossip. Since my study exclusively used statements with a negative valence, future studies examining statements with a positive valence would likely yield different results (McAndrew & Milenkovic, 2002). Furthermore, future research studying gossiping scenarios in different cultures may elucidate a cultural aspect to gossiping, where in the current study, gossiping and not gossiping scenarios appeared to impact the four social functions equally.

Practical Applications

The findings of my study are applicable in daily communication such that, when we are speaking, we need to consider both the content of our message and how it may be relevant to the audience. Thus, such a consideration is likely to influence the functions the statement will serve for both the speaker and listener. Although my study did not uncover large differences between gossip and statements said in the presence of the target, I would nonetheless caution speakers of how the negative implication that disclosing private information about a target, particularly information of negative valence, may have on how the speaker is perceived by others and the effect on the speaker-target relationship.

Conclusion

I found that when observing gossip and non-gossip scenarios from an outsider perspective, people perceived a speaker's statement to be better serving of sharing information the listener would find useful, strengthening the relationship between the speaker and listener, entertaining the listener, and influencing the listener's future behaviour when the statement

contained information that was relevant to the speaker such as when the target shared the same occupation as them, and when the message contained information that violated a social norm. Interestingly, this pattern also occurred for the degree of how problematic the target's behaviour was, such that statements that were relevant and violated norms were also seen as the most problematic. Thus, how problematic the statement was (e.g., a firefighter breaking a leg compared to a pilot drinking alcohol before flying a plane) may be the defining variable influencing how serving of the four social functions are onto the listener and how speakers are perceived. Further, somewhat consistent with the gossip literature, strengthening relationships, entertaining the listener, and being perceived as nicer, albeit when the right conditions are met. The speaker being perceived as nice also may explain why a speaker may choose to gossip, as speakers were perceived to be marginally nicer to the listener when they were gossiping than when the target of the statement was present. The results of my study found that when observing gossip and non-gossip as an outsider, adults were able to evaluate whether relevance and violating a norm impacted the results of the social goals of the speaker of being useful to the listener, strengthening the speaker-listener relationship, entertaining the listener, and socially influencing the listener, finding that both relevance and violating a norm were relevant in achieving these goals. Further, adults in the outsider perspective were found to appreciate the effects of gossiping and provided a nuanced perspective of what led gossiping to be more effective in achieving social goals compared to target present situations.

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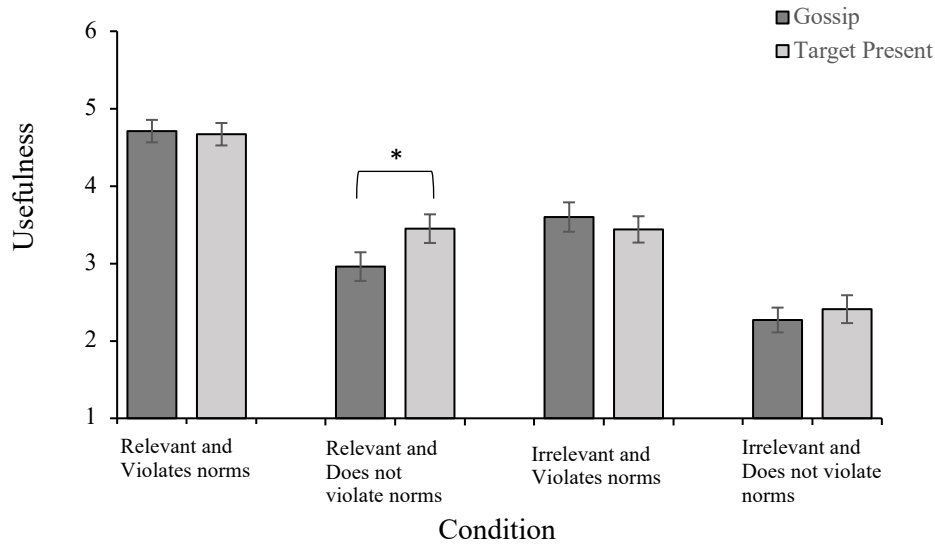
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Figure 1.

Mean Usefulness Ratings For Gossip and Target Present As a Function of Relevance and Norm Violation



Note. Participants were asked “How useful did Michelle (the listener) find this information?” and they made a rating on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (very useless) to 6 (very useful).

Participants rated both gossip and target present statements as more useful to the listener when statements contained information that was relevant to the listener and contained a norm violation compared to all other conditions. There was a significant difference between gossip and target present statements only in the relevant and does not violate norms condition. $*p < .001$.