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Spatializing gossip as chaotic and multiple liminal space

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Abstract

How do we understand gossip as spatialization processes? How can we address such processes through liminal space? In this article, we challenge the trap of social determinism in understanding gossip, and argue that gossip should be conceptualized through the mutual constitution and contestations between social relations and space. We draw on a three-month participant observation case study to explore such interactive processes and relations through the lens of liminal space. This article contributes to the existing literature on gossip by addressing the overlooked importance of ‘space’ in theorizing and understanding gossip. We emphasize that space acts as a localized context for, and an active participant in, enabling or constraining social interactions for gossip. In doing so, we explore the theoretical potential and empirical possibility of theory blending of liminal space and gossip that can shed light on future research on unmanaged and marginalized social practices in organizations.

Keywords

evaluation of gossip, gossip, liminal space, organizational space, spatial turn

Introduction

Over a quarter of a century ago, Noon and Delbridge (1993) set out the significance of gossip for organization studies. Since then, although there has been an increasing amount

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of research into this area, gossip remains a rather marginal topic. Yet being estimated to account for two-thirds of all conversational time (Emler, 1994), gossip is one of the most basic and perhaps one of the most misunderstood communications at work. It is a major engine for social networks and is indeed claimed to be 'at the core of human social relationships (Waddington, 2016: 811). From this perspective, rather than being merely circulated within the confines of organizations, gossip is a fundamental part of the 'unmanaged organization' (Gabriel, 1995) – a form of organizational hinterland where myths and stories animate organizing (Fan et al., 2021; Waddington, 2016).

Although the 'slippery' nature of gossip has been predominantly understood as and through the social characteristics of contexts, its interactions with space have been largely overlooked. This lacuna within the literature on gossip is to be regretted, as highlighted by Lefebvre (1991: 85) that 'space is both a precondition and a result of the social interactions'. It is reflected in the colloquial comment of gossip as 'watercooler talks' that often makes reference to space (or at least spatial location). Yet the practices of 'watercooler talk' have been explored predominantly in terms of the 'talk' as the gossip content, rather than the 'watercooler' as its spatial relations. As Fayard and Weeks (2007) show, this 'trap of social determinism' fails to explore the significance of the interactive roles and elements of architectural discourses, physical environment, material artefacts, and embodied experience in shaping informal interactions, and is therefore insufficient to explain the social and contextual characteristics as to how gossip is constructed, maintained, or disrupted.

To address the 'trap of social determinism' in understanding gossip, we build upon a Lefebvrian understanding of space, specifically Lefebvre's triad, that brings forward the integrative relations between social interactions and space. The Lefebvrian understanding of space is consistent with a strong process view ontologically committed to see the world as a constant process of *becoming* where the meaning of this process is derived from a continually situated experience (Langley and Tsoukas, 2016; see also Bakken and Hernes, 2006). Once situated in this view of understanding space and spatial interactions, the assumption of organizational space as a static container, as largely employed by extant studies on gossip, is challenged and replaced by the ongoing process of how organizational space is *being* produced and evolves.

Located within this processual and integrated understanding of space, this article draws on a three-month participant observation case study on gossip and argues that gossip is an ongoing spatialization process constructed by mutual constitution and competition between space and social interactions. Specifically, we draw on the Lefebvrian conceptualization of space where spatialization conditions and is conditioned by ongoing production processes of social relations enacted through embodied social interactions (Dale and Burrell, 2008; Lefebvre, 1991; Liu and Grey, 2019). This means that spatialization of gossip is bounded by a particular social reality that constructs this gossip and is simultaneously an attempt to break through this reality via the socially evaluative nature of gossip. Such an inherently paradoxical nature of the spatialization process can be addressed through the lens and concept of liminality to explore the unsettling and chaotic dynamics formed in and forming the coming-into-being processes of gossip.

The term 'liminal', introduced by Arnold van Gennep (1909/2019: English translation, 1960) and developed by Victor Turner (1969, 1974, 1982), has been widely used by

geographers to metaphorically depict crossings of spatial threshold. The notion of liminality that highlights the particular experience of being ‘betwixt and between’ (Garsten, 1999) has inspired empirical investigations of our everyday experience in specific spaces. From corridors (Hurdley, 2010), streets (De Meis, 2002), airports (Adey, 2008), prisons (Moran, 2013), to cyberspace (Madge and O’Connor, 2005), these spaces are approached as limbo-like experiences beyond social norms and cultural constraints. Within such borderlands, transitive experience and contingent social practices are produced, materialized, and spatialized underneath the dominant routines. These social practices might not be of surprising and dramatic matter and might be seemingly mundane and trivial, yet they partake in the construction of individual experience as and in space (e.g., Lefebvre, 1991). Gossip is an example of such practices.

This article contributes to the extant understanding of gossip by exploring its largely dismissed quality of space. We reconceptualize gossip as a spatialization process and address the importance of considering gossip as and through the mutual constitution and contestation between social interactions and space. We illustrate how space acts as a localized context *for* and an active participant *in* enabling or constraining social interactions for gossip. This reconceptualization involves and emphasizes theoretical and empirical possibilities of theory blending, which sheds light on its potential for new ways of approaching future explorations of aspects of ‘unmanaged organization’ (Gabriel, 1995).

More broadly, we take part in the ongoing discussion within organization studies to ‘bring space back in’ (e.g., Beyes and Holt, 2020; Kornberger and Clegg, 2004; Shortt, 2015; Taylor and Spicer, 2007) that acknowledges the intimacy between space and organization and enables the reconsideration of experiences and interactions occurring in space, apart from the interests of space itself. Through spatializing the social processes of gossip, we actively engage in the call for revealing the legacies of the ‘spatial turn’ that re-emphasizes the significance of space in unfolding our everyday organizational experience, a view of space that is not relegated to an end-product of social relations, but is intimately entangled in their construction (Warf and Arias, 2008).

To pursue these aims, this article is structured into five sections where theoretical construction is located in sections one and two, and empirical exploration is located in sections three and four, followed by a concluding discussion. For theoretical construction, in the first section, we problematize the role of space in extant literature on gossip and the role of gossip in the organizational space literature. Through this problematization, we argue that gossip should be reconceptualized as a spatialized process that arises and is disrupted by the mutual constitution and competition between space and social interaction. In the second section, we unpack such spatialization of gossip as fluid and transgressive processes and draw on the concept of liminal space for its theoretical construction. To clarify our understanding of ‘space’, we draw on the Lefebvrian understanding of space, specifically Lefebvre’s triad. This specific lens of space allows the theorization of the spatialization process of gossip as being actualized through entanglements of embodied materiality and social interactions. Such entanglements reveal gossip as chaotic and multiple liminal processes.

For empirical exploration, we present our fieldwork and method in the third section, which is followed by our findings in the fourth section demonstrating *how* gossip is spatialized in the two aforementioned interrelated ways. We show that the liminal

spatialization of gossip is ongoingly chaotic, and how such chaotic processes provoke the potentiality for multiple spatializations of gossip. This article concludes by emphasizing that this exploration of gossip is an example of theory blending and shows the legacy of the 'spatial turn' that carries rich potentialities in understanding unmanaged and marginalized social interactions in organizations.

Conceptualizing gossip as a spatialization process

The extant studies of gossip are rooted in a multiplicity of theoretical and disciplinary underpinnings across fields of anthropology, psychology, sociology, management studies, and organization studies, and present definitional challenges to researchers, as different authors across and within each discipline rarely agree on what gossip is (Noon and Delbridge, 1993). The origin of *gossip* derived from Old English *godsibb*, the combination of 'God' and *sibb* meaning 'a relative', which literally means 'a person related to one in God'. In Middle English, the sense evolved as 'a close friend, a person with whom one gossips'. Gluckman therefore articulated gossip as being 'among the most important societal and cultural *phenomena* we are called upon to analyze' (Gluckman, 1963: 307, emphasis added), as gossip can be 'talk of personalities and their involvement in events of the community' (Paine, 1967: 283) and perform as 'instrumental transaction in which A and B trade small talk about C for something in return' (Rosnow, 1977: 158).

More recently, definitions of gossip started highlighting the processual nature of gossip as both a phenomenon and an active practice that has been adapted by many studies (e.g., Fan et al., 2021; Waddington, 2016). In this article, we draw on this working definition as a way to participate in a general agreement that encourages the accumulation and development of understanding of gossip across studies (Michelson et al., 2010). Gossip is defined as 'the process of informally communicating value-laden information' (Noon and Delbridge, 1993: 25) about an absent third party or events (Fan et al., 2021; Waddington, 2012) that generally 'contains an element of evaluation or interpretation, [although] it might be implicit' (Waddington, 2016: 810; see also van Iterson et al., 2011). Although the 'evaluative element' has been established as a definitional trait for gossip processes (Waddington, 2012), it has not been sufficiently analyzed. Part of the scholarship sees it as talking about the absent third party in positive or negative, good or bad ways (e.g., Eder and Enke, 1991; Foster, 2004). However, we argue that the understanding of the 'evaluation' of gossip should go beyond the linguistic root. In this article, we consider such 'evaluation' as a selection process of social relations and their spatialization rather than merely about the content of gossip.

The socially evaluative nature of gossip

Being part of the 'unmanaged organization' (Gabriel, 1995), gossip is not merely circulated within the confines of an organization that simply reflects or replicates the social structure in which it is embedded (Fan and Dawson, 2022; Noon and Delbridge, 1993; Waddington, 2012). Rather, gossip partakes in the (re)formation and regulation of the social structure as it is inherently a boundary-drawing mechanism that unites some and

simultaneously alienates others. For example, choosing gossip participants involves evaluations of whether it is appropriate to gossip (in general) and to gossip about a topic (in specific) with particular individuals, and whether they will be on the same side (van Iterson et al., 2011). This might involve strategic ambiguity that facilitates gradual development and indirectness of evaluation (Fan and Grey, 2021; Hallett et al., 2009) where subtle praise or criticism of certain behaviour is implied first, leaving room for later modification and to learn what ‘appropriateness’ means to each other. Such ambiguity is not only a way of interacting, but also a means of shaping interaction and selection. Through selecting particular people to initiate and sustain gossip, a gossip circle is (re)formed and social relations are (re)actualized.

Through such processes, gossip creates a ‘shadow organization’: the socially evaluative nature of gossip can create specifically selected groups, free up constraints and insecurities covered within broader institutional forces, and confront normative responsibilities and dominant routines at work. It constructs a particular way of interpreting everyday practices at work as a process of social selection, identification, and group formation. As Noon and Delbridge (1993: 32) argue, gossip might be ‘the only means of influence available for those excluded from the formal power structure’ to exert power. Therefore, gossip can be considered as a type of ‘transgressive behaviour’ (Turner, 1974) that creates liminal space where formal roles, statuses, and structural relations are being suspended and a temporary re-ordering and re-patterning of social structure is being constituted (e.g., Handelman, 1973; Jaworski and Coupland, 2005). Considered as micro-politics (Ball, 1987; Clegg and van Iterson, 2009), gossip enables a transposition of reality. Such transitive processes, where an existing reality is being reconstructed and a new reality is not yet formed, in turn recognize the process of gossip as ‘coming into being’.

Bringing space into the evaluative process of gossip

Organizational space is significant for gossip as gossip emerges *in* interaction where some forms of ‘securing’ are required for its ‘discreet indiscretions’, such as the maintenance of privacy (Bergmann, 1993). Space such as an access-restricted room or a quiet corner can constitute such interactive securing and therefore play an important role in enabling or constraining the emergence and continuation of gossip. This extends the existing understanding of ‘evaluation’ of gossip by recognizing the potential role space plays in the process of organizing a social agreement for an interactive secure state between/among gossip participants. The essence of the ‘evaluation’ process for gossip is therefore entangled with both structural (re)configurations and spatializations of social relations among those who disseminate it, perceive it, and are affected by it. What ‘counts’ as or constitutes gossip is not simply about the content of evaluation, but more importantly the spatialization of evaluation.

However, space that shapes and is shaped by social processes of gossip have been largely overlooked in the existing studies on gossip. For example, the first (and thus far only) special issue on workplace gossip within management and organization studies (Michelson et al., 2008) was indeed a notable effort to explore its antecedents, process and consequences in/around organizations. Yet spatial context was lightly touched upon. As part of the special issue, Mills (2010) draws on varied purposes (e.g., gain closure; be prepared; achieve certainty) of

gossip across three phases of a CEO succession, and contributes to the importance of temporal frames and geosocial contexts for understanding gossip. Despite such importance, it remains unclear how space influences and is influenced by the processes of gossip.

Although some gossip literature explicitly employs the word 'space', it is used metaphorically. For example, to make social evaluation processes possible, gossip is considered as a 'communicative space' (Fan et al., 2021), and thrives in a 'space outside of [formal] control' (Clegg and van Iterson, 2009: 276; see also Michelson et al., 2010). It enables participants to create 'a space for their emotions' (Hafen, 2004: 234) 'behind closed doors' (Waddington, 2005: 35). Studies therefore recognize gossip as an 'aberrant space' (Jaworski and Coupland, 2005: 687) and a 'revolving door' (Hafen, 2004: 223) that provokes the social (re)construction of group and identification. Despite the mentions of 'space', the studies remain aspatial, as they share the same assumption of space criticized by Lefebvre (1991: 3) as a Euclidean and geometrical metaphor of 'empty area' or 'empty container'.

Whereas physical space is taken into account by Grow and Flache (2019) as an analytical assumption, it is part of the application of the agent-based computational modeling of gossip dynamics (see also Centola et al., 2007) where physicality of space is prioritized and social interactions are marginalized. Inhabitants of the space are regarded as inactive participants. It overlooks the interactive dynamics *between* space and social relations of gossip. As gossip is colloquially referred to as 'watercooler talk', the lack of analytical attention to and qualitative curiosity of the 'watercooler' calls for further investigation of spatial constructs and processes around and within gossip.

We move from the extant studies on gossip to the limited roles of gossip mentioned by a small group of organizational space literature. Gossip is employed as an example in the discussions of informal communication and interaction within organizational space with the underpinning assumption that space is an embodiment of control and power relations (e.g., Baldry, 1999; Hirst and Schwabenland, 2018) and an enabler of resistance (e.g., Zhang et al., 2008). Within this assumption, gossip is largely understood as an end-product of space produced through one-way interaction *from* space *to* gossip, rather than the co-creative relationship *between* space *and* gossip. This problematic and oversimplified understanding fails to integrate the social evaluative processes of gossip into the construction process of space. For example, the quiet corner behind the photocopier is seen as a good place for exchange of informal information simply because of its secluded location (e.g., Baldry, 1999; Halford, 2004). Similar to the mentions of 'space' in the gossip literature, such one-way interaction positions the mentions of 'gossip' as aspatial.

Besides the end-product consideration, gossip is also regarded as a by-product emerged through changes of spatial movement deviated from organizational norms (e.g., Zhang et al., 2008). For instance, Zhang and Spicer (2014) study the context of a Chinese Bureau where hierarchical power strictly dominates and regulates the physical design and use of space, such as the embodied movement and walking order when executives enter the conference room. Any change of who goes into the room first would spur an excitement of gossip across the organization (Zhang and Spicer, 2014). However, the lack of close scrutinization and analytical attention to gossip contributes to gossip as a self-evidently transgressive outcome of spatial dynamics. This overlooks the significance of the inherently integrative condition *within* spatial analysis where space does not incidentally generate gossip but constitutes and is constituted by gossip. In our article, to

bring space back 'in', we do not focus on gossip or space separately, but the interactive and generative dynamics between gossip and space.

From the perspective developed here, we argue that gossip is a spatialized process, within which social interaction and space ongoingly compete against and constitute one another. The space acts as an accentuated localized context *for* and an active participant *in* gossip, forming the indigenously produced meanings and processes of gossip. The emergence and continuation of gossip involve entanglement, supplementation, and perhaps enlargement of space as a condition and production of gossip. Features of spatial environments might advance social attachment within a social group and heighten social tensions between social groups (Percival, 2000; see also Fayard and Weeks, 2007). When such space can make particular social relations possible, it in turn requires the social relations for it to be understood. Therefore, the spatial influence on socialization of gossip can constitute how the spatialization of gossip is perceived, experienced, and negotiated by participants (e.g., Fayard and Weeks, 2007; Lefebvre, 1991; Moran, 2013). Gossip in this sense is a process organizing and organized by interaction and tensions between spatial and social entailments.

Building upon this understanding, gossip as a spatialization process requires and constitutes participants to distinguish between an outside and an inside, to draw and redraw a boundary. The spatial embeddedness of gossip 'helps to define the [social] situation' (Goffman, 1959: 13) by negotiating and engineering the physicality of boundaries to engender a comfortable environment where evaluations and interpretations, rather than simply information, can be shared and managed. It might involve a series of spatial (re)arrangements, such as emptying, intruding, waiting, cutting through, extending (Hurdley, 2010), to 'recast' (Thrift, 2006) a specific space for social engagement and collaboration. In this sense, spatialization of gossip can make relations of (re)connection and disconnection possible, clarify the social (re)configuration, and redefine a sense of appropriateness for subsequent interactions (e.g., Fayard and Weeks, 2007). These are not clean-cut or well-organized processes; on the contrary, they can be temporary, unsettling, and chaotic, as participants are *being* connected in the process of gossip, which might be interrupted or discontinued by the interactions and tensions between space and gossip. The chaos of this spatialization therefore is derived from its 'betwixt and between' liminality and is fueled and sustained by the evaluative nature of gossip.

To further develop the theoretical construct of such chaotic spatialization as and through the temporary and unstable existence of the spatialization of gossip, in the following section, we draw on Lefebvre's triad to capture such interactions and tensions as it allows us to explore the integrative construction process of space by attending to the temporal and chaotic nature of social interactions emerging in gossip. Within the Lefebvrian understanding of space, the transitions and deviations spurred in the processes of interactions and tensions urge us to further develop the spatialization of gossip as and through liminal space.

Through Lefebvre's triad: Spatializing gossip as multiple liminal processes

Lefebvre's triad (also known as the spatial triad) is the most widely applied framework for scholars who investigate liminal space as socially constructed and subjectively experienced (e.g., Kingma, 2008; Wasserman, 2011; Wasserman and Frenkel, 2011). It is

particularly powerful in re-emphasizing the importance of social interactions in understanding space. Highlighted by Shortt (2015) as ‘encapsulations’ of both subjective experience and physicality of space, Lefebvre’s triad makes it possible to look into the inner dynamics of space where organizational space that shapes actions and interactions is simultaneously reshaped by such actions and interactions. Lefebvre’s triad is a unitary framework that ties together different conceptualizations of space: if specific space can be *perceived*, then its semiotic abstraction, including architectural discourse and dissemination of architectural ideas, can be *conceived* as a medium through which inhabitants can interact in that space (*lived space*) (Lefebvre, 1991). His theorization of the conceived–perceived–lived triad is derived from French phenomenology and influenced by Bachelard and Merleau-Ponty. Yet where Lefebvre’s triad differentiates is through his emphasis on the process rather than the subjects, meaning the process of social production of conception, perception, and experience (Schmid, 2008).

In applying Lefebvre’s triad, it is important to avoid using it as a typological and abstract technique of analysis that separates empirical evidence into isolated triadic elements. Various interconnections *within* the triad should be emphasized (Lefebvre, 1991). For instance, conceived space establishes an idea or prospect of how this space should be perceived and lived. Perceived space would be shaped by conceived space through enacted architectural discourses, which would inform or be changed by how space is actually lived. Although lived space contains spatial elements and legacies of conceived and perceived space, it is differentiated by and is subject to the subjective experience of users who might resist or be in agreement with the original conception of space (e.g., De Vaujany and Vaast, 2014; Salovaara and Ropo, 2018). Lefebvre’s triad therefore should be understood and applied as an integrative and heuristic tool (Lefebvre, 1991): interactions within the triad should be stressed where the triadic dimensions are simultaneously present. Within this, organizational space can be unpacked as constituted entanglements of materiality and social interactions without marginalizing either component (Lefebvre, 1991; see also Dale and Burrell, 2008). Once a space is produced, it can only be reproduced by changed or emerging actions and interactions with the perceived materiality.

Located within the Lefebvrian triadic understanding of space, liminal space offers an integrated lens to further unpack our central argument as to *how* social interaction and space mutually constitute and compete against one another within and through gossip. This spatialization of gossip is therefore further understood as being actualized through the interaction between materiality and social interactions as an embodiment process. Through such interaction, we can then investigate transgressive actions and behaviours of gossip as embodied spatial experience and a site of struggle and power relations that constitutes liminal space, which in turn fosters ‘new’/re-emerged gossip as a coming-into-being process. And it is to liminal space we now turn.

The chaotic betweenness: Exploring the ambiguity and potentiality of liminal space

Liminal space emerges when transitions, transformations, and reclassifications of realities are evoked (van Gennep, 1909/2019). A liminal space is ambiguous and chaotic in the sense that its inhabitants cannot fully understand what is involved or anticipate what

will be involved. This concept was further developed by Victor Turner (Turner, 1969, 1974, 1982), who emphasized social processes of transitions experienced by individuals and social groups as the centre of defining liminality as the space of 'betwixt and between' (Turner, 1974). Such spatial betweenness has been contextualized in organization studies as a transitive experience free from clear sets of rules and norms (Shortt, 2015; Vesala and Tuomivaara, 2018) and therefore '[holds] an ambiguous potential' (Küpers, 2011: 199; see also Lucas, 2014; Meira, 2014; Vesala and Tuomivaara, 2018) within and through such space. This potentiality is experienced and materialized by inhabitants of liminal space, within which boundaries are redrawn and around which social norms and relations are recreated. This process reflects what Turner (1969: 97) defined as a realm of 'possibility and opening', enabling the un-structuring and restructuring of existing orders through both transgression and collusion, provoking both anxiety and excitement, reforming a sense of existence and social bonding.

Turner's theorization of liminality has inspired empirical inquiries in organization studies to understand specific space and spatial experience through investigating how transitive and ambiguous betweenness participates in or constructs these spaces; and how atypical behaviour or chaotic experience is motivated and accentuated within such space (Shields, 2003; Sweeney, 2009; Thomassen, 2012). For example, Iedema et al. (2012) capture how hospital corridors act as ad-hoc spaces for doctors' exchanges of informal conversations such as gossip that are avoided in wards. In this sense, such mutual constitution and constraint between space and social interaction are constitutive of liminal space. This is also reflected in Shortt's (2015) study on a hair salon where a towel cupboard is experienced and used as a space for meet-ups and gossip. The liminality of this space is constituted by the transitive experience lived by the staff in comparison with its conceived space designed for storage and washup of towels formally. This informality is cultivated by the materiality of the space being 'much darker than the rest of the salon', and simultaneously strengthens the spatialization of the cupboard to *become* a liminal space for gossip (Shortt, 2015).

Normative orders are being transcended in liminal space, stimulating the inhabitants' imagination or perhaps misjudgement of risks and opportunities involved in and generated through this process (Garsten, 1999; Turner, 1982). Such ambiguity can be constituted by the multiplicities of unfoldings, movements, and transformative experiences of specific space. Yet it is through the undefined and ambiguous space where alternative individual behaviour, liberated from normative constraints, may happen (Turner, 1974). Within and through such chaotic betweenness, gossip is spatialized as an embodiment process actualized through interaction between materiality and social interaction.

Hazel and Mortensen (2014) draw on a Danish university kitchen as a liminal space to demonstrate the process of linguistic co-construction and language shift between Danish and English, where gossip briefly emerged, through the interactions between the materiality of the kitchen and the deviating experiences of the users. Students and staff can enjoy the freedom of choosing which language to use in the kitchen compared with the official language policy of using English in other spaces within this university. In this sense, liminal space makes it possible to scrutinize how users produce social spaces through a temporal suspension of norms (Lucas and Wright, 2015). Preston-Whyte (2004: 350) describes this moment or process of temporary escape as 'a dreamtime that

resonates with transformation'. Although such transformation can spur freedom and emancipation to emerge from established social norms and realities, it might in turn stimulate anxiety and uncertainty through straddling between the experienced and the imagined. This could generate an unknown such as 'what might happen afterwards' that confuses individual experiences in the post-liminal stage and constitutes the 'unsettling' characteristic (Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003: 282) of liminal space.

From chaotic betweenness to the multiplicity of liminal space

While chaotic betweenness of liminal space can encourage challenges towards existing boundaries (e.g., Sturdy et al., 2006) in and of organizations and foster opportunities for autonomy (e.g., Garsten, 1999), it can simultaneously engender concerns and constrain the variety of alternative behaviour available to individuals. Therefore, differentiated from demarcated spaces of organizations, liminal space, as the space 'on the border' (Shortt, 2015: 634), is pregnant with competing possibilities and potentialities in organizational life. It is such competing dynamics that provoke the multiplicity of liminal space.

For example, Pritchard and Morgan (2006: 764) find that contemporary hotels are a peculiar juxtaposition of closed and open as negotiable spaces that allow daily routines to be suspended and replaced by 'anonymity, romance and adventure' in multiple ways. This is also found in the example of the seaside carnival as a liminal space, in which participants' actions and bodies can spontaneously and temporarily escape from moral propriety (Shields, 2003). Such multiple transitory experiences and behaviours enacted in those liminal spaces will create and constitute new liminal spaces within or beyond the existing spaces of hotels and seaside carnivals. Yet the multiplicity might generate inconsistencies among the experiences owing to its definitional trait of being chaotic and transitive. This is actualized through the continuing redrawing of boundaries between temporary inclusion and exclusion, between liminal and non-liminal space, making the construction of liminal space remain in a constant flux. Such fluid processes of boundary redrawing in turn ongoingly contest the multiplicity.

Another example demonstrating this multiplicity is illustrated in Baker's (2018) study of summer camp. The spatial isolation and the community-centric nature of summer camp accumulates pressure for individuals to connect with other participants as a community within liminal space (Baker, 2018). It encourages gossip to be shared to construct social bonds within a subgroup as a new liminal space within the community. Yet the expectation of connecting more people across subgroups constitutes the breaking of such bonds by further conveying gossip and therefore crossing the subgroup boundary. This exemplifies the complex and multiple dynamics between spatial experiences and social relations emerging in liminal space that constitutes and foregrounds the multiplicity of liminal space (Söderlund and Borg, 2018). From the perspective developed here, we reject the understanding of liminal space as being linear or uncontested, and consider the construction of liminal space as multiple and chaotic sites of un/becoming for gossip, through which the process of gossip is transformed into a constant search and evaluation for meanings when participants negotiate their positions and relations within the social group of gossip.

In summary, we develop our main argument by drawing on liminal space as an integrated lens to explore the temporary, unsettling, and chaotic spatialization of gossip. We consider liminal space as an ongoing state of chaotic betweenness, which encourages the ongoing negotiations of boundaries that cultivates the multiplicity of liminal space. Through the lens of liminal space, the spatialization of gossip can be more specifically argued as, first, chaotic and second, multiple liminal processes, which are the focus of analysis in the Findings section. It is to the empirical study we now turn.

Field study and method

This article emerged from a three-month ethnographic participant observation conducted during the winter of 2015–16 at Quinza, a British media firm. This study focused on the constitution of informal communication in organizations with particular attention on examples of gossip and its related forms, where themes reflecting liminal space arose.

In viewing gossip as a social process, two important empirical considerations were included in positioning the study. First, attention was paid to not only the communication content, but also to the social relations and contexts where the content was produced. Second, rather than being isolated from wider forms of informal communication and interaction in the workplace, gossip is understood to be embedded within and emerging from them. Attending to these considerations, the study set out to observe and engage with chance happenings, with the informal conversations and interactions of people at work, to capture the narratives and actors' interpretations of situations and people as they occur (Silverman, 2000; Ybema et al., 2009).

The organizational context

Located in a modern glass-covered building in the centre of a British city, Quinza is recognized by most of its employees as a leading company with its commitment to knowledge innovation and high-quality work. The building is a guarded space with staff in black suits working at the security desk close to the flat barrier gates with card scanners. Visitors have to clarify who they are visiting, visits are verified by the security telephoning the host for confirmation, and visitor cards are issued for limited building access. Covering two floors of this building, Quinza's office space organizes and is organized through a clear division of departments, such as Finance, Marketing, and Production, based on the space needed for a particular function. At first glance, one would hardly identify differences in status, rank or power: the office is open-plan with modern and identical cubicles connected and separated into several sections. Walking further inside, senior managers' offices and bookable meeting rooms are located on the periphery. Each of these rooms is decorated with a glass wall that faces the central space and is frosted horizontally across the middle. One can tell whether a room is occupied without obtaining a clear view of what the occupiers are doing. The open-plan office area is quiet, with people sitting at individual workstations wearing headphones. This spatial structure is significant for the study, as it allows little by way of space for any kind of communication, let alone informal communication and gossip that form the focus of the

study. Instead, the main spaces of interaction are corridors, toilets, and the communal kitchen and dining area, as well as out-of-office locations like the Christmas party.

Data collection

The fieldwork was conducted by the second researcher working as a full-time intern for around 40 hours per week in the organization, undertaking a wide range of relatively mundane project tasks. The dual roles of the researcher were announced to all employees in the organization, and the anonymity and confidentiality of the organization and its employees were guaranteed. The intern role enabled the researcher to work with various people and departments at Quinza, allowing her to hang around, to listen to, and communicate with colleagues (e.g., Burgess, 1984). As she did so, she inevitably interacted both formally and informally with these people, which contextualized and enriched her understanding of the events and interpretations as they occurred. Such contextualization allowed the researcher to continually examine her involvement 'in the framing of the interaction [through] her eyes as well her ears' (Huber and Brown, 2017: 1112; Silverman, 2000: 128), to experience the ordinariness and the ambiguities and obscurities embedded within (Ybema et al., 2009), to enable the researcher to move from being a shadow to being a person (McCabe et al., 2020) in the field.

Through such observation and participation, the researcher made occasional notes as her intern work permitted. Spaces for note-taking included an empty stairway and corners of rooms shortly after informal conversations and interactions occurred. Alongside these contemporaneous notes, the researcher updated a detailed field diary at the end of each day, recording events such as social interactions, informal conversations, and instances of gossip. To accumulate and deepen these insights, the researcher included a section entitled 'feeling of the day' to record her interpretations and reflections for meaning making of the daily encounters through and beyond issues discussed via informal communication and gossip at Quinza. By the end of the fieldwork, approximately 200 pages of a field diary had been produced as a major resource for contextual analysis of the conversations and interactions of the people studied.

Throughout the data collection process, the researcher adopted a 'reflexive pragmatism' (Alvesson, 2003: 25) where uncertainties of field experience and self-critique coexist with adaptations to constraints and willingness to compromise. Reflecting upon the duality of the researcher's roles in the field, to understand the local interactions of and within gossip would require or constitute the researcher to engage in similar interactions. One methodological complexity here was that to avoid violating the ethical guidance of the project, while participating in gossip the researcher did not pass on gossip herself. Such duality roles of the researcher, which constitute the process of researching gossip as itself a liminal process where a state of 'betwixt and between' was ongoingly formed and contested, generate spatial struggles in the field. For example, although her researcher identity was overt and publicly announced, she took notes in liminal spaces such as corners and stairways as a way to avoid reminding colleagues at Quinza of her researcher identity. This simultaneously enabled her to openly maintain her researcher identity in a temporarily undisrupted space. Such note-taking, aimed by the researcher to avoid being liminalized, was achieved as and through a liminal process.

Data analysis

The data analysis was an iterative process and conducted in emerging stages of ‘them-ing’. It involved interactive reading, critical questioning, and reflexive discussions of the field diary between the authors as ‘collective sensemaking’ (McCabe et al., 2020). A particular challenge of this research was that the shift from general informal communication to gossip was not especially dramatic, nor was it announced with any great fanfare. Therefore, the field diary was first analyzed to extract examples of gossip. To do so, examples of informal communication were coded through types of communicative markers, including verbal (e.g., ‘bitch’, ‘controlling’) and nonverbal ones (e.g., rolling eyes, facial expression) that indicate elements and characters of evaluation. Through this process, the relevance of space curiously emerged where it played an explicit role in some examples of the verbal and nonverbal markers being initiated, interrupted, and re-emerged. It was at this stage that we decided to further explore the possible relationships between space and social interaction of gossip as the spatialization of gossip.

With this focus in mind, we pick out these examples to identify specific locations (e.g., open-plan offices, hallways, kitchen, the ladies’ room) and see how their spatial characteristics (e.g., open; enclosed) influences the emergence and changes of social interactions of gossip. During the line-by-line analysis of these examples, we noticed that in some cases, contradicting codes, such as ‘openness enables social interaction’ and ‘openness suspends social interaction’; ‘enclosed space allows social interaction’, and ‘enclosed space suspends social interaction’, emerged within the same examples. They share a commonality as the spatialized ambiguity of social interaction where gossip was *being* both temporarily formed and suspended. This then further shapes our analytical focus to the emergence of liminality in spatializing gossip. This coding process further led to the development of the main themes as ‘chaotic spatialization process of gossip’ and ‘multiple spatialization process of gossip’. Our findings are as follows.

Findings

Our empirical materials reveal *how* gossip is spatialized in two interrelated and competing ways. First, we show the spatialization of gossip as chaotic processes emerging from and giving rise to ongoing negotiations and contestations of social boundaries of gossip. Second, we demonstrate how the chaotic liminal spatialization of gossip is formed with the possibility of its disruption, which provokes the potentiality for multiple spatializations of gossip.

The chaotic spatialization of gossip as and through liminal space

An exemplified site for the chaotic spatialization of gossip is the office kitchen owing to its spatial duality for being both public and private space. It is perceived as public through the conceived architectural discourse of open-access to everyone in the organization with no lock on the door. Casual and informal interactions are not considered as intrusive here. Simultaneously, because of the spatial existence and arrangement of the door with a vision panel where inside activities can only be partially seen from the outside, it is

relationally private in comparison with the open-plan office. This public–private duality of the kitchen allows partial enclosure for socialization and partial openness for observation. The conceived and perceived duality of the kitchen provokes its inclusive open-access nature to be ongoingly negotiated by and competing with the emerging boundary drawing of social exclusion.

We observe this occurring over breakfast, lunch, and coffee breaks when new people entering the kitchen often trigger colleagues to initially stop chatting before gradually repositioning themselves toward the relative isolation of the watercooler. Subsequently, as people encroach on their space, they position themselves yet further from the crowd at a couch that is the farthest area from the door and the table. Their voices lower and rise as others first come closer before walking away. ‘You know upstairs has a little room with a bed in it?’ Mark talks to the researcher next to the coffee machine that is next to the kitchen door and makes any new entrance to the kitchen observable: ‘it is supposed to be a first-aid room. But people go there mostly when they are drunk. So they can lie down’, he laughs. With colleagues entering the kitchen for coffee, Mark and the researcher gradually move to the table in the middle of the room. ‘You know Victoria . . .’, Mark pauses, as a colleague is walking closer to him and the researcher. When the colleague is walking away from them, Mark then illustrates further details: ‘Because she is our director, drinks are her only opportunity to know what is going on, like “ground sniffing”. After I go out for drinks with her, I would relax in “the room”’, he says when doing a quotation mark gesture about ‘the room’, ‘Nobody would see’. ‘But this rule of using “the room”’, as Mark quickly finishes the conversation when observing another colleague is about to enter the kitchen, ‘is an understanding’.

The continuous embodied movements, from gossiping, moving away, resuming gossip, pausing again to quickly finishing the conversation, illuminate ongoing negotiations of the appropriateness for gossip where the spatial duality of the kitchen is competing with and constituting informally evaluative interaction. The perceived privateness of the kitchen enables the initial temporary moment of social interactions for gossip. This is continuously disrupted owing to the conceived public nature and perceived social inclusiveness of the kitchen. To contrast against this public nature of space, the interlocutors use an embodiment process to show their social exclusion of others from joining the conversation. Such conceived and perceived duality of the kitchen provokes ambiguity of how it is lived and experienced. Yet it is such ambiguity that triggers the ongoing movements and changes of embodied materiality, which encourages the resuming of gossip. This temporary and transitive process of boundary drawing, which both enables and disrupts the emergence and maintenance of gossip, spatializes gossip as an embodied and liminal experience.

This is also illustrated during a lunch conversation between Ryan and the researcher about how Ryan does not find gift hunting for Quinza’s office Secret Santa a festive task. The crowded kitchen over the lunch break ‘forces’ Ryan to lower his volume for gossip within only his and the researcher’s earshot, especially when he sits close to the microwave with a queue of colleagues waiting to use it. ‘I didn’t want to get anything personal, especially as she’s at a higher level than me’, Ryan almost whispers. He then lowers his voice even further, ‘And she looks nerdy, so I got her a penholder’. Ryan looks around, waits for the microwave to finish for a colleague who stands right

next to him to leave, and then continues, ‘Here (in Quinza) . . . You can’t really do casual or fun stuff. Otherwise the boss’s face would be, ‘what have you done?!’ . . . In a company I worked at before, I just bought my colleague a small bag of weed. What’s a better gift than that!’

Similar embodiment process, triggered by constant transitions between the emergence and disruption of gossip, is observed in an afternoon tea-and-cake break among five assistants (the researcher included) in the kitchen. Monica gossips negatively about a freelancer who made reimbursement claims of every single expense such as a bottle of water: ‘he is such a DICK’, emphasized by Monica. Beth pauses, looks around, sees Alana walking closer to the table, turns around to look at us, turns back and sees Alana walking away from the table, and then whispers: ‘maybe [Alana] heard you said her favourite contributor is a dick’. At the end of the tea-and-cake break, Monica illustrates why the kitchen is chosen as the appropriate site for gossip: ‘but that’s Alana . . . She’s weird. That’s why we normally have cake here [in the kitchen]. If she heard us, she would never understand’.

The embodiment process, such as ‘pauses’, ‘lowers voice’, ‘turns around’, ‘turns back’, and ‘whispers’, is entangled with constant social evaluations to simultaneously create belongingness and otherness. This facilitates the ongoing repositioning of boundary drawing that allows participants to enable or intermit gossip, and negotiates an appropriate sense of spatialization of social interaction *for* gossip. This is also evident in the following example where Ross and the researcher take a coffee break in the empty kitchen:

- Ross:* Right, I haven’t told anyone in the office that I’m going to apply for the project. So can you keep it between us?
- Researcher:* Not even Victoria?
- Ross:* No. I don’t want them to have an opinion that I will not be able to do my work anymore . . .
- Researcher:* No problem . . .
- Ross:* . . . [looking at the kitchen door] someone is coming.

Two days later in the afternoon kitchen, the researcher walks in and sees there is only Ross in the kitchen. Ross picks up the topic that was interrupted:

- Ross:* Frances is SUCH A BITCH [in a low voice with emphases].
- Researcher:* What happened?!
- Ross:* She commented on my application report and said I don’t have enough experience for this kind of project.
- Researcher:* How’s that possible?
- Ross:* Right! She said I don’t have enough knowledge about it. And if I got accepted, I can only be a marginal member to start with.
- Researcher:* What?! [in a surprised and disagreeing tone]
- Ross:* Yeah. I’m not going to be a marginal member . . . I have enough knowledge for the project – I do similar things here myself! I have experience!
- . . .
- Ross:* . . . I should tell her that if it doesn’t get passed, then I wouldn’t help her with anything anymore!

In the first conversation, the spatial emptiness of the kitchen itself creates a moment of safety and appropriateness for gossip. Yet it is then interrupted after Ross's indication of 'someone is coming', invalidating the social appropriateness. In the second conversation, the same gossip re-emerges in the same space when its spatial emptiness is restored and the social appropriateness for gossip is re-established. Similar to the previous examples, the spatial boundary is not fixed, which gives Ross and the researcher the flexibility in response to potential spatial intrusion and social interruption. The boundary permeability generates chaos as disruptions and instability of the spatialization process of gossip.

Swaying between emergence and interruption of appropriateness constitutes the continuous contestation and negotiation of boundary drawing for gossip. This is actualized through embodied materiality and spatializes the emergence, interruptions, and re-emergence of informally evaluative interaction in the kitchen as a liminal and chaotic process of gossip coming into being. The need of the inhabitants to create such socially exclusive space through intentionally embodied acts is itself a powerful reminder of how the kitchen is conceived originally as a public space that discourages gossip, which enhances the recognition of the conflictual duality of the kitchen. Yet it is this duality that allows inhabitants in the kitchen to adjust their interaction to constrain what others can see and hear. Through the liminal experience of the kitchen, gossip is constituted as spatial practices, and generates what Lynn Stewart describes as local forms of knowing that are geographically and temporally contingent.

From ambiguity to potentiality: Spatializing gossip as and through multiple liminal spaces

Following the previous examples, the perceived spatial duality of the kitchen constitutes the ongoingly contesting and chaotic lived experience in that particular space, contributing to the transitive process where existing norms of how the kitchen should be used and experienced as a public space becomes invalid temporarily. Yet because of such shifting between the emergence and the disruptions of gossip, the spatial duality might constrain the kitchen's potential in forming liminal space for gossip. In a kitchen conversation between Victoria and the researcher, the kitchen fails to maintain a sense of social boundedness with possibilities of intrusion. Its *inappropriateness* for gossip is being re-evaluated and perceived. Victoria then suggests in a low volume, 'Do you want to go somewhere else to talk?' Victoria and the researcher then leave the kitchen and walk into an empty office nearby that belongs to Andrea. Victoria locks the door before they start talking again.

The locked door along with the three other walls of the room generate acoustic, visual, and social isolations, providing a boundary that creates a physical discontinuity from the outside and spatializes the office into a particular social unity between Victoria and the researcher. It is symbolically powerful in *Quinza*, in particular, where closing office doors is not usual. Precisely because the door is perceived to remain open, its being closed temporarily transcends the physical separation between inside and outside into a potentiality of how this space can be lived alternatively. This enclosed materiality

entangles with a sense of social exclusiveness and stability for gossip, allowing Victoria and the researcher to control the boundary, figuratively and literally. In this way, the boundary becomes both a field and a basis of action (Lefebvre, 1991): it is a field of action for the potentiality of forming a liminal experience and a basis of action for sustaining its liminal status (by creating stability and control). Yet, importantly, there is an ambiguity here: if this liminal spatialization is made meaningful through its ongoingly enclosed materiality, we might start to question if it continues to be ‘liminal’ at all (Shortt, 2015; Turner, 1974).

When Victoria and the researcher are talking in Andrea’s office, Victoria constantly looks through the office’s glass wall below its frosted area as if she is keeping an eye on whether Andrea comes back. She then reminds the researcher, ‘Oh, Andrea is back. It’s her office’. They then stop the conversation before Victoria opens the door for Andrea:

- Victoria:* [Talks to Andrea] Hi, this is your welcome committee!
- Andrea:* [Looks surprised to see us in her office] Oh, hey! I like this kind of welcome! Would you like a cup of tea here? Anything interesting?
- Victoria:* [Smiles] Oh that would be nice. We were just catching up. Hope I didn't interrupt you. I will find a meeting room now. Have a nice afternoon.
- [Victoria and the researcher then walk away from the office to a hallway outside the open-plan area and continue the chat there before Victoria’s next meeting comes up.]

The process within this example depicts how transitive ambiguity stimulates the emerging potentiality of liminal space as multiple. By avoiding intrusions of others in the kitchen, Victoria and the researcher intrude into an office that is not theirs. Although the enclosed office as liminal space enacts a transient moment for membership construction and appropriation, Andrea’s presence interrupts the maintenance of the liminal spatialization, engendering a fleeting moment of the social interaction between Victoria and the researcher for gossip. In this way, being perceived by Victoria and the researcher, the enclosed materiality and embodied experience for gossip is intruded upon by the owner Andrea coming back and reinstating her ownership. However, Andrea’s look of surprise indicates the perception of her office as a relatively exclusive space that is conceived and perceived for her own private conversations and interactions as how this space can be lived. Hence, for Andrea, she might perceive Victoria and the researcher as intruders of her office and assume that she is invited to participate in the liminal space for gossip created by Victoria and the researcher within this space.

Through this process, the ongoing re-evaluations of how Andrea’s office could be lived (alternatively) fosters potentialities for emerging and different liminal spatialization for gossip formed alongside with the possibility of its instability and disruption. When the social exclusive boundary between Victoria and the researcher is *being* invaded and redrawn by Andrea, this ‘between and betwixt’ process of boundary redrawing might spur new liminally spatialized interactions between Andrea and two others. Such multiplicity of liminal spatializations for gossip emerges, sustains, and is destabilized through

the ongoing chaos and contestations of how it should be lived constituted by entanglements between embodied materiality and informally evaluative interactions. This multiplicity is also exemplified in the office Christmas party.

The day of the office Christmas party, with its unique festive and celebratory atmosphere, provokes liminal spatialization of the open-plan office into an appropriate and popular space for gossip. Particularly comparing with the normal working hours where the 'code' for toilet gossip is 'what is gossiped in the ladies' room stays in the ladies' room', the open-plan office is *being* transformed from a gossip desert, where colleagues avoid being seen gossiping, to be an ad-hoc extension, physically and socially, for toilet gossip. The spatial distance between the open-plan office and the ladies' room witnesses changes of dressing style from office-wear to party-wear with blow-dried hairstyles and makeup. Lydia tells the researcher that she and Grace saw Andrea in the ladies' room and gossiped about how she cannot stand Andrea's over-applied perfume. Grace comes back to the office from the ladies' room and rolls her eyes, 'You can't believe what was going on in there [the ladies' room]. Everyone was either putting on makeup or changing makeup.' Lydia first nods and then shakes her head before she informs Grace that the researcher knows about Andrea. Grace asks the researcher if she knows what Lydia means and emphasizes, 'her perfume! Ugh!' Both of them express puzzlements about Andrea's makeup efforts, as Lydia further questions, 'I wouldn't do it myself. I don't know what these efforts are for? Who does she think is going to see?'

This sharing of toilet gossip with the researcher in the office is a process of boundary negotiations for social inclusion, extending the liminal spatialization of gossip. The extension in turn is itself an effective social cue for Lydia, Grace, and the researcher to re-evaluate, re-perceive, and re-live the office where its conceived and perceived openness that constrains gossip is being transitioned into a temporarily appropriate site for gossip. Such re-evaluation can stimulate further emergence of new and multiple liminal spatializations for gossip actualized through the potentiality for the three involved to share the gossip further with others in the office. In this way, constructions of liminal space that represent a temporary interruption and suspension of normative interactions stimulate ambiguities and potentialities through such a liminal way of experiencing that space. Yet the temporary suspension of normality seldom lasts long, as it would be interrupted and replaced by norm-governed experiences and actions as time goes by. After the office Christmas party, toilet gossip returns to be a spatially bounded experience in the ladies' room, and the open-plan office goes back to being a gossip desert as it normally is.

Similar to this process, but unlike the social agreement formed among Lydia, Grace, and the researcher that extends gossip, the next example indicates how disagreement suspends gossip in its liminal spatialization, which provokes new and different gossip. When the Christmas party starts and alcohol is being served, Elle, Laura, and the researcher sit on the same table:

Elle: I have a spreadsheet full with details for the trip plan in case she turns into a control freak, which happens every single time!

Laura: Maybe you need to tell her about it.

Elle: I don't NEED [emphasizes] to tell her. It's a trip and I know there should be someone to organize it, like destinations, food and transport. But I don't think she HAS TO [emphasizes] be the one to organize it.

- Laura:* Maybe just tell her the idea.
Elle: Why? I don't see the point. You know how she is. I think everyone should have fun, not only her. It's not too much to ask, right?
Laura: Ok.

Laura shortly leaves the table. Mark walks to the table and asks why Laura leaves just now:

- Mark:* She doesn't look happy. What did you guys say to her?
Researcher: Nothing really.
Elle: Don't know what's wrong with her tonight. She should be on my side! Am I really wrong?

Laura's 'maybe just tell her' sets a specific tone of judgement and indicates to some extent that she has a second thought of what Elle did. Laura's response gives rise to a social disagreement that disrupts the construction process for a unity of social norms and morals shared in the gossip group. This disruption shapes further selection of 'what should be talked about' in the group, stimulating re-evaluations of the boundary of such a 'group' and whether it is still appropriate to continue this gossip. Laura's departure destabilizes the existing liminal spatialization of gossip, and in turn prompts the emergence of new gossip where social norms (e.g., 'Am I really wrong?') are being re-negotiated. In this case, although the Christmas party with its festive atmosphere and alcohol provides the temporary openness for gossip, such openness enables social disagreement being expressed more freely that suspends gossip. Yet such suspension generates potentiality for multiple and new liminal spatializations constituted by the new and re-negotiated boundary where a different social agreement might emerge.

Through the above examples, the liminal spatialization of gossip is a process of constant negotiations and contestations where the temporary emergence of such spatialization breeds the possibility of its disruption that carries the potentiality for multiple and perhaps inconsistent liminal spatializations. Shifting between such constructions and suspensions of liminal spatialization generates chaos and ambiguity of how a space can be re-conceived, re-perceived, and re-lived in multiple ways. In this way, such ongoing formation, deformation, and reformation of spatialization of gossip further reinforces its status as being 'betwixt and between' that entails ambiguities in perceiving and experiencing liminal space without clear boundaries and therefore entwines with potentialities.

Concluding discussion

Our primary contribution both challenges and develops the existing understanding of gossip that largely dismisses the roles 'space' plays in processes of gossip. We problematize extant literature on gossip where 'space' is metaphorically understood (e.g., Michelson et al., 2010) and on organizational space where the limited attention paid to gossip sees it as either an end-product or by-product of space (e.g., Hirst and Schwabenland, 2018; Zhang et al., 2008). We challenge the oversimplified view of gossip as entrapped by social determinism and reconceptualize gossip as a spatialization

process constructed through the mutual constitution and competition between social interactions and space. Drawing on Lefebvre's triad, we further unpack the spatialization of gossip and theorize the mutual constitution and competition as being actualized through the entanglements and negotiations of embodied materiality and social interactions. The fluid and transgressive processes within such entanglements bring forward the focus on liminal space as a lens of investigation for the spatialization of gossip. Specifically, we draw on the concept of liminal space as the experience of 'betwixt and between' where temporally transitive experiences of inhabitants can emerge and be disrupted (Turner, 1969, 1974). We integrate such understanding into showcasing the complexities and subtleties underlying the liminal spatialization processes where gossip is temporarily formed through constantly re-appropriating social interaction and re-negotiating boundary drawing shaped by a space. Such temporary formation in turn enables alternative or inconsistent (re)evaluations of appropriateness for gossip and engenders a conflictual sense of perceiving and experiencing the space.

Drawing on the theoretical construction, we show how the reconceptualization of gossip can be studied empirically. Drawing on the participation observation case study, we elaborate how such liminal spatialization emerged, maintained, or disrupted in two interrelated ways. First, we show the chaotic spatialization processes of gossip constituted by and constituting the ongoing negotiations and contestations of boundary drawing and redrawing. Specifically, we draw on the conceived and perceived duality of the kitchen and illustrate how the duality provokes its inclusive open-access nature to be ongoingly negotiated by and competing with the emerging boundary drawing of social exclusion. Such ongoing negotiations generate ambiguity of how this particular space can be lived, which both enables and disrupts the emergence and maintenance of gossip. For example, from the gossip being initiated between Mark and the researcher to be temporarily suspended and then resumed before it was about to be interrupted again, the changing embodied movements are an active process of re-interpreting the spatial duality's appropriateness for informally evaluative interaction. The spatialization of gossip is experienced in a constant flux of re-evaluating and re-perceiving what 'appropriate' behaviour is in lived space and consequently how the space can be lived. Straddling between the public and private nature of the kitchen space and through ongoing negotiations of social appropriateness for gossip, the ambiguous lived experience of the kitchen is constituted by, and in conflict with, its conceived and perceived character. This engenders potentiality for transitive experiences of specific space as a chaotic process of spatialization of gossip as and through liminal space.

Second, we draw on such potentiality and take a step further to problematize the singularity of liminal space. We argue that multiple liminal spaces are created through the chaotic and ambiguous negotiations and evaluations of how it should be re-perceived and re-lived. In the example of Elle, Laura, Mark, and the researcher during the Christmas party, the spatialization of gossip with the temporary openness allows the social disagreement between Laura and Elle to be more openly expressed, which destabilizes such spatialization. Laura's departure and Mark's arrival allow the re-appropriation and re-negotiation of a different social agreement that is derived from a suspension of gossip and can give rise to a new spatialization of gossip. Also in the Christmas party, the open-plan office is transformed from a gossip desert into an extended spatialization for toilet

gossip in the example of Lydia, Grace, and the researcher. The re-evaluated spatial appropriateness for gossip might encourage the three involved to circulate the gossip further and create new and multiple liminal spatializations for gossip. However, these re-evaluations stimulated by liminal spatialization of gossip are temporary and would be replaced by normality as time goes by, as indicated in the example of the open-plan office returning to a gossip desert after the Christmas Party.

We hope to use this study as an example to encourage gossip scholars to (re)engage with their existing and future studies through the lens of spatialization, which can be a direction of development for the existing dialogue of the ‘nontrivial trivialness’ of gossip (e.g., Michelson et al., 2010; van Iterson et al., 2011). For example, as our study shows, the temporary emergence of and constant negotiations within the spatialization of gossip breed its instability and disruptions, stimulating the emergence of new and multiple liminal spatializations for gossip. In this sense, gossip creates alternative experiences within the same space as well as constructing new experiences. Swaying between such constructions and disruptions generates further chaos and ambiguity of how a space can be re-conceived, re-perceived, and re-lived in multiple or perhaps inconsistent ways. Through making up the daily fabric and aspects of social/spatial organizations at work, gossip is an important part of organizational work – the work of making or constituting organization.

For possible future developments of this reconceptualization and broader re-engagements of gossip, this article underlines the potential of theoretical and empirical theory blending and of how to apply blended theoretical understanding to the empirical examples. Emerging as a promising trend in the field of organization studies, the concept of theory blending is proposed by Oswick et al. (2011) to problematize the one-way theory borrowing and to advocate a synthesized way for theory development through the mutual correspondence between theories to generate a new idea of theorization. Through our blending of gossip with liminal space, we bring forward the reconceptualization of gossip as a liminal spatialization process, an idea that has been largely ignored and problematically understood. In doing so, we hope to encourage future investigations of unmanaged and marginalized social interactions and experiences in organization without falling within the trap of social determinism. We echo Beyes and Holt’s (2020) call for organizational theory to fully appreciate the meaning of spatial turn as thinking and writing spatially and to explore the implication of such. We advocate, in and through this article, a legacy of the spatial turn that carries rich potentialities for us to consider organization as a site of spatial contestation that gathers, maps, reflects, and constitutes our organizational life (Beyes and Holt, 2020). It enables us, as observers and inhabitants of organizations, to experience the social intricacy and artistic meaning of a topographical imagination in and of organization.

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