



Whispered words and organizational dynamics: The nuanced evaluation of gossipers' personality and its effect on workplace advice seeking[☆]

Lijun (Shirley) Zhang¹, Nahid Ibrahim¹, Shankha Basu^{*}

Leeds University Business School, University of Leeds, Leeds LS2 9JT, United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

Prior research has extensively studied workplace group dynamics within the gossip triad (i.e., sender, receiver, and target). This research shifts the focus to third-party observers outside the gossip triad, examining how they evaluate gossipers and non-gossipers, and whom they turn to for advice. Across five pre-registered experiments ($N = 1400$), the present work builds on an integrative definition of gossip and provides a functionalist account of observers' nuanced evaluation of gossipers' personality from a global perspective. Observers perceive gossipers as less moral and competent, but more sociable, than non-gossipers (Experiment 1). Consequently, observers are less likely to seek advice from gossipers (vs. non-gossipers) for tasks requiring high morality (e.g., enforcing ethical conduct; Experiment 2a) and high competence (e.g., managing excess inventory; Experiment 2b), yet more likely to do so for tasks requiring high sociability (e.g., organizing a welcome lunch; Experiment 2c). A moderation-of-process approach shows that incidental cues signaling morality, competence, and sociability influence observers' evaluations of and advice-seeking from gossipers (versus non-gossipers) on relevant tasks (Experiments 2a–2c). These findings remain robust in an incentive-compatible setting (Experiment 3). This research advances our understanding of observers' evaluation of gossipers and its implications for workplace advice seeking.

1. Introduction

“...not all gossip is a Mean Girls style Burn Book. Sometimes people talk to get advice or vent or share news. It doesn't have to be malicious.”

– Reddit User

Imagine you have a colleague, Alex, who likes to gossip. Whether it is everyday happenings in the company or your co-workers' personal lives – good or bad – Alex talks about all of them. What is your impression of Alex? How would you interact with Alex at work? Specifically, would you solicit advice from Alex to resolve workplace issues?

Gossip, a form of communication between a sender and a receiver about an absent or unaware target, is prevalent in organizations (Dores Cruz, Nieper, et al., 2021; Lian et al., 2023; Sun et al., 2022), with around 90% of employees admitting to gossiping at work (Grosser et al., 2012). The wide prevalence of workplace gossip warrants a greater understanding of how people perceive those who gossip and its influence on workplace dynamics. Prior research has extensively studied how

gossip impacts the relationship among the members of the gossip triad – the sender, the receiver, and the target – and its implications for groups and organizations at large (e.g., Dores Cruz et al., 2019; Dores Cruz, Thielmann, et al., 2021; Farley, 2011; Feinberg et al., 2014; Giardini & Wittek, 2019; Kniffin & Wilson, 2005; Michelson et al., 2010; Wittek & Wielers, 1998). However, how organizational members beyond the gossip triad (i.e., third-party observers) evaluate and interact with agents who engage in gossip (i.e., gossipers) and those who do not (i.e., non-gossipers) in the workplace has received relatively less attention (for exceptions, see Dores Cruz et al., 2019; Farley, 2011).

On the one hand, third-party observers should offer a more unbiased evaluation of gossipers (vs. non-gossipers) due to their lack of direct involvement with gossip and its related parties (Konow, 2003). On the other hand, these observers lack access to detailed information about each gossip episode, including its content, valence, and context, as well as the underlying motivation behind the gossip. This limitation may lead to a less accurate judgment of gossipers' (vs. non-gossipers') personality. In such cases, observers might adopt a holistic perspective – forming

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^{*} Corresponding author.

E-mail address: s.basu1@leeds.ac.uk (S. Basu).

¹ Authors contributed equally.

broad impressions of gossipers (vs. non-gossipers) on a handful of fundamental dimensions (Cuddy et al., 2011; De Freitas & Hafri, 2024) – based on their overall engagement in gossip rather than specific details of each episode. This approach allows observers to form more stable global perceptions of individuals who typically engage in gossip versus those who refrain from it (Biesanz et al., 2007; Carney et al., 2007; for a review, see Funder, 2012).

In the present research, we adopt an integrative definition of gossip, controlling for its content, valence, and the formality of the context in which it is shared (for a review, see Dores Cruz, Nieper, et al., 2021), and examine its evaluative and behavioral consequences for gossipers and non-gossipers in organizational contexts. First, we aim to shed light on how third-party observers evaluate gossipers (vs. non-gossipers) across three fundamental personality dimensions, namely *morality*, *competence*, and *sociability* (Brambilla et al., 2011; Goodwin et al., 2014; Leach et al., 2007). While observers perceive gossipers as less moral and competent than non-gossipers, they also regard them as more sociable. Furthermore, we provide a functionalist account to show how observers strategically employ these distinct evaluations when accomplishing goal-specific tasks (Orehek & Forest, 2016; Testori, Giardini, et al., 2023). Notably, we identify that observers leverage the personal characteristics of both gossipers' and non-gossipers' as distinct skills to navigate tasks in organizational settings. While observers are less likely to turn to gossipers (vs. non-gossipers) for advice on tasks that require high morality and high competence, they are more likely to do so on tasks that require high sociability. Hence, this research contributes to a nuanced understanding of how third-party observers evaluate gossipers versus non-gossipers from a global perspective and leverage the evaluations in workplace dynamics.

1.1. Evaluations of gossipers versus non-gossipers

Organizational research has identified varied evaluations of gossipers, depending on content, valence, and motivation (Dores Cruz, Nieper, et al., 2021; Lee & Barnes, 2021). Lay beliefs commonly depict gossipers as engaging in malicious talk, leading to the general perception of those sharing negative gossip as norm-violators and, consequently, of lower status (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012; Lian et al., 2023). Moreover, gossipers who disseminate negative information about others are perceived to possess high coercive power but are seen as less likable and trustworthy (Duffy et al., 2002; Farley, 2011; Kurland & Pelled, 2000). When receivers interpret gossip as selfishly motivated, resulting in harm or aggression against others (Crothers et al., 2009; Jeuken et al., 2015), their evaluations of gossipers become more negative (Lian et al., 2023; Peters & Kashima, 2015).

Conversely, positive evaluations of gossipers occur when the content and valence of their gossip are positive, or when their motivation to gossip is to benefit the group. Gossipers are perceived to have higher status and reward power when sharing positive information about co-workers, serving the function of norm clarification (Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Lian et al., 2023). Additionally, individuals favorably evaluate gossipers they believe to share honest information compared to those spreading dishonest gossip (Fonseca & Peters, 2021). Thus, when individuals interpret gossip as prosocial or relationally motivated, such as clarifying and reinforcing group norms (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2011; Feinberg et al., 2012), they evaluate gossipers more positively (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012; Peters & Kashima, 2015). Similarly, gossipers are perceived as more moral when the gossip involves diagnostic information about another group member's morality or when they intend to regulate group relationships by sharing information about others (Peters & Kashima, 2014, 2015).

Existing research is limited in its ability to uncover the lay perception people hold about gossipers for various reasons. First, prior research has mainly studied how people perceive gossipers based on various features of a gossip episode (e.g., valence, work-relatedness, and credibility), the context in which gossip occurs, and the motivation of the gossipers in

specific gossip interactions (Lian et al., 2023; Testori, Dores Cruz, & Beersma, 2023). However, over time, the same agent may engage in gossip that varies in valence and content with different underlying motivations. Additionally, observers may not always know the specific details of each gossip episode, undermining the accuracy of their judgment (Blackman & Funder, 1998; Funder & Colvin, 1988). This warrants further research into how observers form global evaluations of these agents independent of the gossip's context and content.

Second, prior research has primarily focused on the impact of gossip on the members of the gossip triad – i.e., the sender, the receiver, and the target, and its consequences for them as future interaction partners (e.g., Dores Cruz et al., 2023; Peters & Kashima, 2007; for a review, see Wax et al., 2022). In such triads, gossip requires a degree of discretion and mutual trust between the gossipers and the gossip recipient (Bergmann, 1993; Gluckman, 1963; Spacks, 1982), which may override the effect of gossip's characteristics on future interactions. For example, sharing gossip can increase trust in colleagues (Ellwardt, Labianca, & Wittek, 2012; Ellwardt, Steglich, & Wittek, 2012) and supervisors (Bai et al., 2020; Langlinais & Houghton, 2019). Critically, the gossip receiver evaluates the target based on the degree to which the gossip content holds implications for the receiver (Abele & Wojciszke, 2014; Hauke & Abele, 2020). Similarly, gossip participants (i.e., sender and receiver) are less likely to view negative gossip as a strictly negative affective event, but rather as an opportunity to express their authentic thoughts and feelings to a colleague (Waddington, 2005; Waddington & Fletcher, 2005). On the other hand, as the victim (or beneficiary) of the gossip, the gossip targets show different reactions to the gossip depending on its content, valence, and veracity (Dores Cruz et al., 2019; Hauke & Abele, 2020). Therefore, the evaluation of gossipers from those belonging to the gossip triad (i.e., the sender, the receiver, and the target) may significantly diverge from that of organizational members beyond the gossip triad (i.e., observers), which calls for further investigation.

In this research, we adopt an integrative definition of gossip (for a review, see Dores Cruz, Nieper, et al., 2021) to shed light on how third-party observers evaluate gossipers, irrespective of the temporal variations in gossip's content and valence, and the formality of the context in which gossip is shared. Recent organizational research has voiced concern over the workplace gossip literature's broad yet fragmented nature (e.g., Brady et al., 2017; Sun et al., 2022). Due to divergent findings related to gossip's valence and one's role in the gossip triad (for a review, see Wax et al., 2022), there is a call for integrated research that conceptualizes and operationalizes gossip as both a negative and positive phenomenon, accounting for the possibility of neutral workplace gossip (Dores Cruz, Thielmann, et al., 2021; Robbins & Karan, 2020). Therefore, we draw on prior research on person perception and character judgments to develop an overarching understanding of gossipers' personality (e.g., Brambilla et al., 2011; Landy et al., 2016).

1.2. A functionalist account of observers' evaluations of gossipers versus non-gossipers

Research on person perception suggests that observers often do not have enough information or cognitive resources to form a detailed impression about a target (Cuddy et al., 2011). Instead, individuals form broad impressions of people based on two fundamental dimensions – warmth and competence (Cuddy et al., 2011). Warmth conveys how one relates to others and their likely intentions towards them (e.g., is this person kind towards others?). In contrast, competence conveys how likely one is to carry out their intentions towards others effectively (e.g., will this person succeed in their actions?) (Abele & Wojciszke, 2014; Brycz & Wojciszke, 1992). However, more recently, it has been suggested that warmth is confounded with two unique evaluative dimensions – morality and sociability (Landy et al., 2016; Leach et al., 2007). While morality refers to an agent's perceived righteousness (e.g., honesty, fairness, and sincerity), sociability refers to an agent's perceived social connectedness (e.g., friendliness, extroversion, and

playfulness; Brambilla & Leach, 2014; Brambilla et al., 2021).

Although earlier works in this domain suggest that both morality and sociability judgments go hand in hand (e.g., Abele & Wojciszke, 2007; Fiske et al., 2007), recent works show that morality and sociability, alongside competence, play distinct roles in impression formation (Brambilla et al., 2011; Brambilla & Leach, 2014). These works (e.g., Leach et al., 2007, 2015) conceptualize morality as one's deep-seated intentions (e.g., doing what is ethically correct), competence as one's likelihood of task achievement (e.g., being proficient and effective), and sociability as one's outer demeanor (e.g., acting in a friendly manner). Critically, the extent to which these evaluative dimensions relate to each other is largely dependent on the assessed target, the context of the assessment, as well as the nature of the target-observer relationship (for a review, see Abele et al., 2021; Imhoff & Koch, 2017).

The present research adopts the three-dimensional personality model and examines how observers evaluate gossipers (vs. non-gossipers) across morality, competence, and sociability dimensions. First, we propose that observers should perceive gossipers as low in morality. Gossip, often characterized by the exchange of negative information about absent others and its potential to damage one's reputation and relationships, is widely seen as a moral transgression against the principle of not causing harm to others (Emler, 1994; Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Robinson & Bennett, 1995). Consistent with these lay beliefs about gossip (Beer-sma & Van Kleef, 2012; Foster, 2004), gossipers are perceived to behave unscrupulously, often deceiving and exaggerating information about absent others, thereby undermining their perceived honesty and trustworthiness (Hess & Hagen, 2006; Peters & Fonseca, 2020). As the gossip target is often unaware of, and hence does not consent to, the disclosure of their personal matters, gossipers also breach the target's privacy, leading to a diminished perception of their moral standing (Michelson et al., 2010). Moreover, inferences about gossipers' self-driven motives, such as promoting self-image through defaming others, harming a rival, or benefiting an ally (Dores Cruz et al., 2023; McAndrew & Milenkovic, 2002; Michelson et al., 2010), would further decrease their perceived sincerity and fairness. Therefore, we theorize that observers evaluate gossipers to be less moral than non-gossipers.

In the competence dimension, we contend that observers are likely to judge gossipers as having low competence. Gossip is often labeled as unproductive, characterized by terms such as "idle talk," "chit chat," "empty talk," "trivial chatter," or "killing some time together" (Michelson & Mouly, 2002; Rosnow & Fine, 1976; for a review, see Foster, 2004). Accordingly, gossipers may be construed as inefficient, insufficiently contributing to their personal growth, upskilling, and pursuing meaningful activities (for a discussion, see Noon & Delbridge, 1993). This perception stems from the belief that gossipers' primary motivation is to derive amusement or seek relief from monotony (e.g., Gilmore, 1978; Rosnow, 1977). Additionally, gossipers are seen as untrustworthy and lacking expertise, as they often disseminate information untruthfully and without deep consideration, undermining their persuasiveness as communicators (Turner et al., 2003). Furthermore, gossipers frequently share others' private information indiscriminately, which lowers their perceived ability to use valuable information judiciously (Farley, 2011). Therefore, we theorize that observers evaluate gossipers to be less competent than non-gossipers.

Finally, we propose that observers tend to perceive gossipers as highly sociable. This perception is grounded in the recognition of gossipers' socially oriented traits, such as extraversion and playfulness, which arise from the inherent social and interactive nature of gossip (Robbins & Karan, 2020; Yao et al., 2014). Around two-thirds of freely forming conversations revolve around gossip related to various social topics, enabling gossipers to acquire and exchange rich social information (Dunbar, 2004; Sommerfeld et al., 2007). These social topics are usually entertaining and enjoyable, allowing individuals to easily identify in-group members and fostering social bonding and cooperation (Ben-Ze'ev, 1994; Wu et al., 2016). In addition, gossip exchange is underpinned by mutual trust, indicating acceptance as in-group

members, contributing to gossipers' expansive social networks (Fox, 2001). Indeed, gossipers usually have many friends (Jaeger et al., 1994). Furthermore, gossipers leverage gossip information to regulate group relationships, establishing norms and facilitating trust formation within the group (Martinescu et al., 2014). Consequently, people may see gossipers as socially well-connected individuals, who offer valuable workplace insights to predict and influence others' behaviors (Erdogan et al., 2015; Sun et al., 2022). Therefore, we theorize that observers evaluate gossipers to be more sociable than non-gossipers.

We posit that these nuanced evaluations of gossipers (vs. non-gossipers) in turn pave the way for observers to engage in instrumental, calculated, and strategic thinking within organizational contexts (e.g., Belmi & Laurin, 2016; Lee et al., 2015). Prior research shows that individuals commonly engage in instrumental thinking depending on their current and future goals (Belmi & Pfeffer, 2015; Gruenfeld et al., 2008) and the rewards contingent on these goal accomplishments (Belmi & Pfeffer, 2018; Kouchaki et al., 2013). As means are evaluated more favorably based on their perceived instrumentality (Fishbach et al., 2004), individuals tend to favor, approach, and choose others whom they consider to be most helpful in attaining their desired outcomes (e.g., Converse & Fishbach, 2012; Fitzsimons & Shah, 2008; Orehek & Forest, 2016). However, individuals may harbor multiple goals, pursued either concurrently or sequentially (Orehek & Vazeou-Nieuwenhuis, 2013). Effectively realizing these goals often warrants the support of others with distinct, sought-after characteristics (Casciaro & Lobo, 2008; Fousiani et al., 2022). Consistent with this view, we posit that observers tend to weigh gossipers' (vs. non-gossipers') personality dimensions differently depending on their active goals. In other words, observers' nuanced evaluations of gossipers (vs. non-gossipers) in terms of morality, competence, and sociability systematically affect how they interact with these agents in the workplace to accomplish different tasks. For example, the evaluation of sociability should be less instrumental in attaining goals that require one to have high morality or high competence, whereas the evaluation of morality and competence should be less instrumental in attaining goals that require one to have high sociability. This would result in observers' distinct preferences for gossipers and non-gossipers, depending on their salient goals. We test this hypothesis in the context of an important organizational behavior – advice seeking.

1.3. Implications for workplace advice seeking

Advice-seeking is a form of help-seeking behavior (Hofmann et al., 2009), where individuals actively seek guidance, suggestions, opinions, or recommendations from others as either a solution or a process to overcome a challenge (Goldsmith & Fitch, 1997; Harvey & Fischer, 1997). Advice-seeking is considered an important form of resource-seeking behavior that promotes both individual- and corporate-level benefits within organizations (Lim et al., 2020). For instance, advice-seeking facilitates knowledge sharing and learning (Haas & Hansen, 2007; Yaniv, 2004a, 2004b) and promotes improved and innovative solutions in the workplace (Cross et al., 2001). Hence, advice-seeking is a crucial aspect of organizational behavior. However, seeking advice entails potential social and emotional costs, including appearing incompetent and inferior (Bamberger, 2009; Lee, 2002) and feeling uncomfortable, nervous, and powerless (DePaulo & Fisher, 1980; Lee, 1997). Consequently, individuals tend to be thoughtful and goal-directed about *whom* and *when* they seek advice (Belmi & Pfeffer, 2018; Orehek & Forest, 2016), capitalizing on potential advisors' task-relevant expertise to improve their decision quality and attain their desired outcome (Nadler et al., 2003; Yaniv & Milyavsky, 2007; for a review, see Bonaccio & Dalal, 2006; Rader et al., 2017). For example, information seekers assess information providers' domain-specific expertise, valuing advice only when it aligns with the seekers' goals (Feng & MacGeorge, 2006; Sniezek et al., 2004). Similarly, we reason that individuals strategically seek advice from gossipers (vs. non-gossipers) based on the fit between the potential advisor's personal

characteristics and the task goal – i.e., the potential advisor’s perceived instrumentality in accomplishing relevant tasks. Specifically, we predict that when accomplishing organizational tasks requiring high morality and high competence, observers are less likely to seek advice from gossipers (vs. non-gossipers) due to their lower perceived morality and competence. On the other hand, when accomplishing organizational tasks requiring high sociability, observers are more likely to seek advice from gossipers (vs. non-gossipers), given their high perceived sociability.

Furthermore, consistent with prior literature on impression formation and updating (e.g., Cone et al., 2021; Cone & Ferguson, 2015), we posit that observers’ dynamic preferences for gossipers (vs. non-gossipers) as workplace advisors are influenced by additional goal-relevant information about these agents. This information may override observers’ intuitive evaluations of gossipers’ (vs. non-gossipers’) morality, competence, and sociability, promoting a detailed assessment of agents’ perceived instrumentality in attaining relevant tasks (Brambilla et al., 2021; Luttrell et al., 2022). We predict that when observers are exposed to incidental moral cues and competence cues about gossipers, these cues will boost their evaluations of gossipers’ morality and competence, respectively, in turn increasing their preference for seeking advice from gossipers for morality-related and competence-related tasks. On the other hand, when observers are exposed to incidental social cues about non-gossipers, these cues will boost their evaluations of non-gossipers’ sociability, in turn increasing their preference for seeking advice from non-gossipers for sociability-related tasks.

2. Overview of studies

We tested our theory in five pre-registered experiments (total $N = 1400$). In all experiments, we presented participants with hypothetical workplace scenarios about their colleague who was either a gossiper or a non-gossiper. Notably, participants assumed the role of observers – who were not part of the gossip triad. The scenarios also manipulated the gossiper (vs. non-gossiper) by describing their general tendency to gossip rather than focusing on single incidents.

We first tested whether observers perceive gossipers (vs. non-gossipers) as less moral, less competent, and more sociable (Experiment 1). We next examined the downstream consequences of observers’ nuanced evaluations of gossipers versus non-gossipers on their likelihood of seeking advice from these agents and their choice of an advisor to accomplish different tasks. Specifically, we tested whether observers are less likely to turn to gossipers (vs. non-gossipers) for advice on morality-related (Experiment 2a) and competence-related tasks (Experiment 2b), but more likely to turn to gossipers (vs. non-gossipers) for sociability-related tasks (Experiment 2c). Another aim of these three experiments was to provide process evidence for this downstream consequence. To this end, we employed a moderation-of-process approach (Spencer et al., 2005) by testing whether providing additional goal-relevant information about the agents – an incidental cue about the focal personality factor that observers think the agent lacks to accomplish the task – could attenuate the differences in observers’ likelihood of seeking advice from gossipers versus non-gossipers. Specifically, we tested whether the presence of an incidental moral cue (Experiment 2a) and an incidental competence cue (Experiment 2b) could increase observers’ likelihood of seeking advice from a gossiper for tasks that require high morality and high competence, respectively. Likewise, we tested whether an incidental social cue could boost observers’ likelihood of seeking advice from a non-gossiper for tasks that require high sociability (Experiment 2c). Finally, we used an incentive-compatible design to further examine whether observers are more likely to choose a non-gossiper for workplace advice on morality-related and competence-related tasks and a gossiper for workplace advice on sociability-related tasks (Experiment 3).

We preregistered all experiments. For all experiments, we report all participants who completed the studies, as well as all manipulations and

measures we used. We asked basic demographic questions, such as gender and age, across all experiments. In the main manuscript, we report findings relevant to our focal hypotheses. We report additional pre-registered measures for exploratory purposes, post-hoc sensitivity power analyses for all experiments, and the full wording of the stimuli in Supplementary Materials. The pre-registrations, Qualtrics surveys, data, and analyses scripts for all experiments can be found at <https://osf.io/4byr6/>.

3. Experiment 1

Experiment 1 examined observers’ global perceptions of gossipers versus non-gossipers in the dimensions of morality, competence, and sociability. In order to examine a more holistic perception of these agents, we described whether the agent generally engaged in chit-chat with others or not as our manipulation of the gossiper and the non-gossiper, respectively. We predicted that gossipers would be perceived to be less moral, less competent, and more sociable than non-gossipers.

3.1. Participants and methods

We conducted a power analysis using G*Power (Faul et al., 2009) with an assumed medium effect size of Cohen’s $d = 0.50$ (Cohen, 1988; independent sample t -test: $\alpha = 0.05$, power = 80%). The analysis suggested a minimum sample size of 64 participants per cell. To increase the power of the experiment even further, we recruited 299 US participants on Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) using the CloudResearch platform. Participants were randomly assigned to either the *gossiper* or the *non-gossiper* condition (123 women, 174 men, one other gender, and one participant did not report demographic information, $M_{\text{age}} = 41.31$ years, $SD = 11.92$).

In the *gossiper* condition ($N = 149$), participants learned that their colleague, Alex, liked to engage in chit-chat about others. Whether it was everyday happenings in the company or their co-workers’ personal lives – good or bad – Alex talked about all of them. In the *non-gossiper* condition ($N = 150$), participants learned that Alex did not like to engage in chit-chat about others and did not talk much about daily occurrences within the company or the personal lives of their colleagues. As mentioned earlier, we designed the stimuli such that we only manipulated Alex’s tendency to gossip but not the content, valence, or context of the act.

Next, participants evaluated Alex’s personality on the dimensions of morality (moral, fair, and honest; $\alpha = 0.95$), competence (competent, effective, and talented; $\alpha = 0.95$), and sociability (extroverted, sociable, and friendly; $\alpha = 0.87$)² on seven-point scales ranging from *not at all* to *extremely* (adopted from Landy et al., 2016). The presentation order of the dimensions was counterbalanced.

As a manipulation check, participants indicated the extent to which they considered the agent, Alex, a gossiper (i.e., someone who enjoys talking informally to people about private affairs of others) on a seven-point scale ranging from *not at all* to *extremely*. We developed this measure based on prior research theorizing gossip’s motives and functions (e.g., Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012; Turner et al., 2003). We also included a self-gossip tendency scale as an exploratory measure (adapted from Erdogan et al., 2015; Nevo et al., 1993; see details and results in Supplementary Materials).

² In our experiments, we did not force participants to respond to any of the questions in compliance with the ethics protocol. Therefore, whenever the response to one item was missing, it was replaced by the average score for the other items. Specifically, for the nine personality items (a total of 2691 data points from 299 participants), five missing values were replaced by the average score of that particular item.

3.2. Results

Manipulation checks. Participants in the *gossiper* condition ($M = 6.12$, $SD = 1.30$) considered Alex to be more of a gossiper than participants in the *non-gossiper* condition ($M = 1.65$, $SD = 1.39$; $t(297) = 28.65$, $p < .001$, $d = 3.31$, 95% CI = [4.16, 4.77]), suggesting that our manipulation of the agent's tendency to gossip was successful.

Personality dimensions. We ran separate independent-samples t -tests to compare the three personality dimensions between the *gossiper* and the *non-gossiper* condition. Results revealed that Alex was perceived to be less moral in the *gossiper* condition ($M = 3.41$, $SD = 1.55$) than in the *non-gossiper* condition ($M = 5.16$, $SD = 1.15$; $t(297) = -11.12$, $p < .001$, $d = -1.29$, 95% CI = [-2.07, -1.44]). Moreover, Alex was rated to be less competent in the *gossiper* condition ($M = 3.91$, $SD = 1.38$) than in the *non-gossiper* condition ($M = 5.07$, $SD = 1.12$; $t(297) = -8.01$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.93$, 95% CI = [-1.45, -0.88]). In contrast, Alex was considered more sociable in the *gossiper* condition ($M = 5.13$, $SD = 1.16$) than in the *non-gossiper* condition ($M = 3.09$, $SD = 1.51$; $t(297) = 13.07$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.51$, 95% CI = [1.73, 2.35]). Fig. 1 depicts the violin plots showing the probability density of each personality dimension by the agent manipulation.

3.3. Discussion

Experiment 1 provided initial support for our theorizing that observers – who are not part of the gossip triad – perceive gossipers to be less moral and less competent, but more sociable than non-gossipers.

Experiment 2a – 2c

We had two objectives for the next three experiments. First, we aimed to examine a potential downstream consequence of observers' evaluation of gossipers versus non-gossipers in an organizationally relevant context – advice-seeking (Bonaccio & Dalal, 2006; Rader et al., 2017). Specifically, we posit that observers' perceived instrumentality of gossipers' (vs. non-gossipers') morality, competence, and sociability is task-dependent (Orehek & Forest, 2016; Testori, Giardini, et al., 2023). The nuanced evaluation of the agent's personality serves as an indicator of how effective or helpful they will be in achieving various goals. Accordingly, we examined observers' likelihood of seeking workplace advice from gossipers versus non-gossipers depending on whether the task at hand requires one to have high morality, high competence, or high sociability as a personal characteristic. We predicted that participants would be less likely to seek advice from gossipers (vs. non-gossipers) in workplace tasks that require high morality

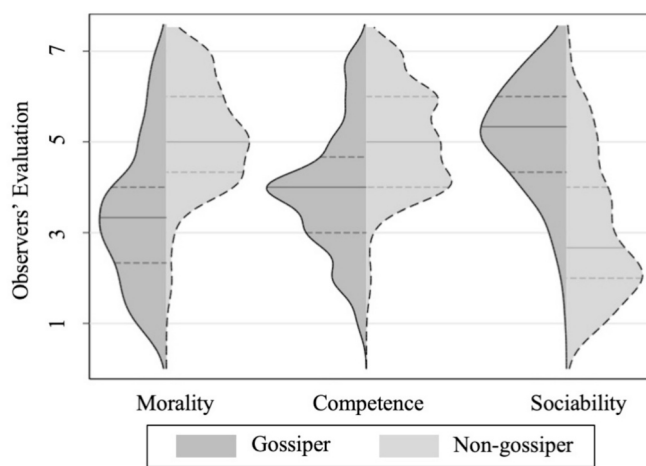


Fig. 1. Violin plots showing probability density of perceived morality, perceived competence, and perceived sociability by the agent manipulation for Experiment 1. The three lines within a violin shape denote the first quartile, the mean, and the third quartile.

(Experiment 2a) or high competence (Experiment 2b) as a personal characteristic. Conversely, participants would be more likely to seek advice from gossipers (vs. non-gossipers) in workplace tasks that require high sociability (Experiment 2c) as a personal characteristic.

Second, we aimed to examine the underlying mechanism for the above downstream consequence via a moderation-of-process approach (Spencer et al., 2005). Specifically, we examined whether presenting an incidental cue about the focal personality dimension that observers think the agent lacks to accomplish the relevant task could attenuate the difference in observers' likelihood of seeking advice from the gossiper versus the non-gossiper. This would indicate whether that specific personality dimension is a key psychological driver of observers' likelihood of seeking workplace advice from gossipers versus non-gossipers.

4. Experiment 2a

In Experiment 2a, we tested whether observers are less likely to seek advice from gossipers (vs. non-gossipers) for a task that requires the advisor to have high morality. We also examined whether presenting an incidental moral cue could increase observers' likelihood of seeking advice from gossipers for the same task, thus testing for morality perception as an underlying mechanism for the initial differences in seeking advice from gossipers versus non-gossipers.

4.1. Participants

Given our focus on understanding how gossipers are perceived in their workplace, starting from Experiment 2a, we only recruited participants who were either full-time or part-time workers. We recruited 300 US participants on CloudResearch's Connect platform and randomly assigned them to one of three between-subjects conditions: *gossiper* ($N = 97$), *non-gossiper* ($N = 99$), and *gossiper with a moral cue* ($N = 104$) (134 women, 164 men, one other gender, and one participant did not report demographic information, $M_{age} = 38.14$ years, $SD = 11.13$).

4.2. Procedure

We manipulated the agent's tendency to gossip (i.e., gossiper vs. non-gossiper) using the same descriptions as in Experiment 1 that varied in terms of the behaviors of the agent – Alex (i.e., engaging in chit-chat about others vs. not engaging in chit-chat about others). In addition, to further distinguish between a person who gossips and one who does not, we manipulated the non-gossiper to be someone who did not talk about daily occurrences within the company or the personal lives of their colleagues at all. More importantly, we included an additional condition, *gossiper with a moral cue*, where participants read additional information that signals Alex's morality compared with the *gossiper* condition. Specifically, participants read that Alex often takes the initiative to organize volunteering activities and donation drives in the company. Participants then indicated their opinions about Alex's morality using the same scale as in Experiment 1 ($\alpha = 0.92$).

Next, we presented participants with a morality-related scenario for which they needed advice from other colleagues. Specifically, participants read that they were responsible for managing the ethical conduct of employees in their company. While the company prohibited employees from receiving gifts from clients that exceeded a specified value, some employees had violated the policy, thus requiring disciplinary actions. To ensure making an impartial decision, participants decided to seek advice from other co-workers for their perspectives on the matter. A separate pretest (see Supplementary Materials) validated that morality (e.g., being moral, honest, and fair) was considered a more important personal characteristic for an advisor to have for this task than both sociability and competence. After reading this scenario, participants indicated how likely they were to seek advice from Alex on two items ("How likely are you to seek advice from Alex?"; "How likely are you to consult Alex?"; $r = 0.93$) for making disciplinary decisions using a seven-

point scale (1 = “very unlikely”, 7 = “very likely”). Finally, participants responded to the same measures of the other two personality dimensions (i.e., sociability and competence)³ and the manipulation check question.

4.3. Results

Manipulation checks. A one-way ANOVA showed that the effect of agent manipulation on the manipulation check question was significant ($F(2, 297) = 668.86, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = 0.82$). Tukey post-hoc tests revealed that participants considered Alex to be more of a gossip than in the *gossiper* condition ($M = 6.47, SD = 0.89; p < .001, d = 5.12, 95\% CI = [4.82, 5.57]$) and in the *gossiper with a moral cue* condition ($M = 6.09, SD = 1.29; p < .001, d = 3.97, 95\% CI = [4.44, 5.17]$) than in the *non-gossiper* condition ($M = 1.28, SD = 1.12$), suggesting that our manipulation of the agent’s tendency to gossip was successful. Participants also perceived Alex to be more of a gossip in the *gossiper* condition than in the *gossiper with a moral cue* condition ($p = .043, d = 0.34, 95\% CI = [0.02, 0.76]$).

Perceived morality. A one-way ANOVA with the agent manipulation as the independent variable and the perceived morality as the dependent variable revealed a significant main effect of the agent manipulation ($F(2, 297) = 96.16, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = 0.39$). A Tukey post-hoc test revealed that Alex was perceived to be less moral in the *gossiper* condition ($M = 3.07, SD = 1.22$) than in the *non-gossiper* condition ($M = 5.45, SD = 1.04; p < .001, d = -2.10, 95\% CI = [-2.80, -1.96]$). Importantly, as predicted, Alex was considered to be more moral in the *gossiper with a moral cue* condition ($M = 3.76, SD = 1.43; p < .001, d = 0.52, 95\% CI = [0.27, 1.10]$) than in the *gossiper* condition. Yet, Alex was considered to be less moral in the *gossiper with a moral cue* condition than in the *non-gossiper* condition ($p < .001, d = -1.35, 95\% CI = [-2.11, -1.28]$).

Advice seeking. A one-way ANOVA with the agent manipulation as the independent variable and the advice-seeking likelihood as the dependent variable revealed a significant main effect of the agent manipulation ($F(2, 297) = 24.39, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = 0.14$). As predicted, a Tukey post-hoc test revealed that participants were less likely to seek advice from Alex in the *gossiper* condition ($M = 2.22, SD = 1.42$) than in the *non-gossiper* condition ($M = 3.98, SD = 2.11, p < .001, d = -0.98, 95\% CI = [-2.37, -1.16]$). Furthermore, participants were more likely to seek advice from Alex in the *gossiper with a moral cue* condition ($M = 2.83, SD = 1.79; p = .048, d = 0.38, 95\% CI = [0.02, 1.21]$) than in the *gossiper* condition. In addition, participants were more likely to seek advice from Alex in the *non-gossiper* condition than in the *gossiper with a moral cue* condition ($p < .001, d = 0.59, 95\% CI = [0.55, 1.74]$).

4.4. Discussion

Results from Experiment 2a supported our theory that observers are less likely to seek advice from gossipers (vs. non-gossipers) on morality-related tasks. Furthermore, presenting an incidental moral cue about the gossip increased observers’ likelihood of seeking advice from gossipers (vs. non-gossipers), suggesting that observers’ lower perception of gossipers’ morality is a key psychological driver of the initial difference observed in their likelihood of seeking advice from gossipers versus non-gossipers for morality-related tasks.

5. Experiment 2b

Experiment 2b had a similar design as Experiment 2a. We tested whether observers are less likely to seek advice from gossipers (vs. non-gossipers) for a task that requires the advisor to have high competence.

³ To ensure completeness of our measures, we measured all three personality dimensions across Experiments 2a-2c. We only reported the analysis of the relevant dimension for readability. Analysis of the other two dimensions is available in Supplementary Materials.

We also examined whether an incidental competence cue could increase observers’ likelihood of seeking advice from gossipers for the same task, thus testing for competence perception as an underlying mechanism for the initial difference in advice seeking from gossipers versus non-gossipers.

5.1. Participants

Following the sample size of Experiment 2a, we recruited 301 participants who were either full-time or part-time US workers on the Connect platform. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three between-subjects conditions: *gossiper* ($N = 103$), *non-gossiper* ($N = 99$), and *gossiper with a competence cue* ($N = 99$) (144 women, 156 men, one other gender, $M_{age} = 38.84$ years, $SD = 10.28$).

5.2. Procedure

The *gossiper* and the *non-gossiper* conditions in this experiment were the same as those in Experiment 2a. In the *gossiper with a competence cue condition*, we provided participants with additional information that signals Alex’s competence compared with the *gossiper* condition. Specifically, participants read that Alex actively pursues professional development opportunities, such as training programs and workshops, to stay up-to-date on industry trends. Participants then indicated their opinions about Alex’s competence using the same scale as in Experiment 1 ($\alpha = 0.93$).

Subsequently, we presented participants with a competence-related scenario for which they needed advice from other colleagues. Specifically, participants read that they were responsible for dealing with excess inventory in their company. They needed to decide whether to provide significant discounts to expedite inventory clearance or retain the inventory with the expectation of selling it at regular prices. The objective was to efficiently release company resources while minimizing the impact on the company’s financial position. To formulate an optimal plan, participants decided to seek advice from other co-workers for their perspectives on the solution. A separate pretest (see Supplementary Materials) validated that competence (e.g., being competent, effective, and talented) was considered a more important personal characteristic for the advisor to have for this task, than both morality and sociability. After reading this scenario, participants indicated their likelihood of seeking advice from Alex using the same two-item, 7-point scales as in Experiments 2a ($r = 0.93$). Finally, participants responded to measures of the other two personality dimensions (i.e., sociability and morality) and the manipulation check question.

5.3. Results

Manipulation checks. A one-way ANOVA showed that the effect of agent manipulation on the manipulation check question was significant ($F(2, 298) = 528.15, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = 0.78$). Tukey post-hoc tests revealed that Alex was perceived to be more of a gossip both in the *gossiper* condition ($M = 6.30, SD = 1.13; p < .001, d = 4.87, 95\% CI = [4.62, 5.43]$) and the *gossiper with a competence cue* condition ($M = 5.94, SD = 1.53; p < .001, d = 3.70, 95\% CI = [4.26, 5.07]$) than in the *non-gossiper* condition ($M = 1.27, SD = 0.92$), suggesting that our manipulation of the agent’s tendency to gossip was successful. Participants’ perception of Alex did not differ between the *gossiper* condition and the *gossiper with a competence cue* condition ($p = .108, d = 0.27, 95\% CI = [-0.04, 0.77]$).

Perceived competence. A one-way ANOVA with the agent manipulation as the independent variable and the perceived competence as the dependent variable revealed a significant main effect of the agent manipulation ($F(2, 298) = 56.89, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = 0.28$). A Tukey post-hoc test revealed that Alex was perceived to be less competent in the *gossiper* condition ($M = 3.34, SD = 1.24$) than in the *non-gossiper* condition ($M = 5.02, SD = 0.98; p < .001, d = -1.50, 95\% CI = [-2.06, -1.28]$). Importantly, as predicted, Alex was considered to be more competent in

the *gossiper with a competence cue* condition ($M = 4.65$, $SD = 1.28$; $p < .001$, $d = 1.04$, 95% CI = [0.91, 1.69]) than in the *gossiper* condition. Alex was considered to be marginally less competent in the *gossiper with a competence cue* condition than in the *non-gossiper* condition ($p = .082$, $d = -0.32$, 95% CI = [-0.76, 0.02]).

Advice seeking. A one-way ANOVA with the agent manipulation as the independent variable and the advice-seeking likelihood as the dependent variable revealed a significant main effect of the agent manipulation ($F(2, 298) = 35.00$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.19$). As predicted, a Tukey post-hoc test revealed that participants were less likely to seek advice from Alex in the *gossiper* condition ($M = 3.15$, $SD = 1.54$) than in the *non-gossiper* condition ($M = 5.02$, $SD = 1.51$, $p < .001$, $d = -1.23$, 95% CI = [-2.40, -1.33]). Furthermore, as predicted, participants were more likely to seek advice from Alex in the *gossiper with a competence cue* condition ($M = 4.38$, $SD = 1.77$; $p < .001$, $d = 0.74$, 95% CI = [0.69, 1.76]) than in the *gossiper* condition. In addition, participants were more likely to seek advice from Alex in the *non-gossiper* condition than in the *gossiper with a competence cue* condition ($p = .018$, $d = 0.39$, 95% CI = [0.10, 1.18]).

5.4. Discussion

Results from Experiment 2b supported our theorizing that observers are less likely to seek advice from gossipers (vs. non-gossipers) on competence-related tasks. Moreover, presenting an incidental competence cue about the gossiper increased observers' likelihood of seeking advice from gossipers (vs. non-gossipers), suggesting that observers' lower perception of gossipers' competence is a key psychological driver of the initial difference observed in their likelihood of seeking advice from gossipers versus non-gossipers for competence-related tasks.

6. Experiment 2c

In Experiment 2c, we tested whether observers are more likely to seek advice from gossipers (vs. non-gossipers) for a task that requires the advisor to have high sociability. We also examined whether an incidental social cue could increase observers' likelihood of seeking advice from non-gossipers for the same task, thus testing for sociability perception as an underlying mechanism for the initial difference in advice seeking from gossipers versus non-gossipers.

6.1. Participants

Following the sample size of Experiments 2a and 2b, we recruited 300 full-time or part-time US employees on the Connect platform. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three between-subjects conditions: *gossiper* ($N = 99$), *non-gossiper* ($N = 100$), and *non-gossiper with a social cue* ($N = 101$) (161 women, 139 men, $M_{\text{age}} = 39.56$ years, $SD = 11.50$).

6.2. Procedure

The *gossiper* and *non-gossiper* manipulations were the same as those in Experiments 2a and 2b. In the *non-gossiper with a social cue* condition, we provided participants with additional information that signals Alex's sociability compared with the *non-gossiper* condition. Specifically, participants read that Alex often hangs out with friends and colleagues after work and joins various group outings. Participants then indicated their opinions about Alex's sociability using the same scale as in Experiment 1 ($\alpha = 0.92$).

Subsequently, participants were presented with a sociability-related scenario for which they needed advice from other colleagues. Specifically, participants read that they were responsible for organizing a welcome lunch for new employees at their company. Their aim was to create a warm and welcoming environment where these newcomers could establish connections with their colleagues and feel a strong sense

of belonging. To plan an intimate gathering, participants decided to seek advice from other co-workers to ensure the success of this event. A separate pretest (see Supplementary Materials) validated that sociability (e.g., being sociable, friendly, and extroverted) was considered a more important personal characteristic for the advisor to have for this task than both morality and competence. After reading this scenario, participants indicated their likelihood of seeking advice from Alex with the same two-item, 7-point scales as in Experiments 2a and 2b ($r = 0.93$). Finally, participants responded to the same measures of the other two personality dimensions (i.e., morality and competence) and the manipulation check question.

6.3. Results

Manipulation checks. A one-way ANOVA showed that the effect of agent manipulation on the manipulation check question was significant ($F(2, 297) = 922.36$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.86$). Tukey post-hoc tests revealed that Alex was perceived to be more of a gossiper in the *gossiper* condition ($M = 6.36$, $SD = 1.15$) than both in the *non-gossiper* condition ($M = 1.15$, $SD = 0.72$; $p < .001$, $d = 5.44$, 95% CI = [4.89, 5.54]) and the *non-gossiper with a social cue* condition ($M = 1.34$, $SD = 1.00$; $p < .001$, $d = 4.66$, 95% CI = [4.70, 5.35]). In addition, participants' perception of Alex did not differ between the *non-gossiper* condition and the *non-gossiper with a social cue* condition ($p = .523$, $d = -0.22$, 95% CI = [-0.51, 0.14]).

Perceived sociability. A one-way ANOVA with the agent manipulation as the independent variable and the perceived sociability as the dependent variable revealed a significant main effect of the agent manipulation ($F(2, 297) = 132.13$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.47$). A Tukey post-hoc test revealed that Alex was perceived to be more sociable in the *gossiper* condition ($M = 5.29$, $SD = 1.00$) than in the *non-gossiper* condition ($M = 2.40$, $SD = 1.28$; $p < .001$, $d = 2.51$, 95% CI = [2.46, 3.33]). More importantly, Alex was considered to be more sociable in the *non-gossiper with a social cue* condition ($M = 4.53$, $SD = 1.56$; $p < .001$, $d = 1.49$, 95% CI = [1.70, 2.56]) than in the *non-gossiper* condition. Yet, Alex was considered to be more sociable in the *gossiper* condition than in the *non-gossiper with a social cue* condition ($p < .001$, $d = 0.58$, 95% CI = [0.33, 1.20]).

Advice seeking. A one-way ANOVA with the agent manipulation as the independent variable and the advice-seeking likelihood as the dependent variable revealed a significant main effect of the agent manipulation ($F(2, 297) = 15.88$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.10$). As predicted, a Tukey post-hoc test revealed that participants were more likely to seek advice from Alex in the *gossiper* condition ($M = 3.55$, $SD = 1.73$) than in the *non-gossiper* condition ($M = 2.92$, $SD = 1.89$, $p = .043$, $d = 0.35$, 95% CI = [0.03, 1.24]). Furthermore, participants were more likely to seek advice from Alex in the *non-gossiper with a social cue* condition ($M = 4.36$, $SD = 1.83$; $p < .001$, $d = 0.77$, 95% CI = [0.84, 2.05]) than in the *non-gossiper* condition. In addition, participants were more likely to seek advice from Alex in the *non-gossiper with a social cue* condition than in the *gossiper* condition ($p = .006$, $d = 0.45$, 95% CI = [0.20, 1.41]).

6.4. Discussion

Results from Experiment 2c supported our theorizing that observers are more likely to seek advice from gossipers (vs. non-gossipers) on sociability-related tasks. Furthermore, presenting an incidental social cue about the non-gossiper increased observers' likelihood of seeking advice from non-gossipers (vs. gossipers), suggesting that observers' lower perception of non-gossipers' sociability is a key psychological driver of the initial difference observed in their likelihood of seeking advice from gossipers versus non-gossipers for sociability-related tasks.

Together, Experiments 2a–2c replicated and extended the findings of Experiment 1 by demonstrating the downstream effects of observers' perceptions of gossipers versus non-gossipers on workplace advice seeking. We examined whether observers' distinct evaluations of these

agents in terms of their morality, competence, and sociability, drive their tendency to seek advice from gossipers versus non-gossipers for corresponding organizational tasks. The results provided convergent evidence in support of our theorizing. While observers were less likely to seek advice from gossipers (vs. non-gossipers) in tasks that required high morality or high competence, they were more likely to do so in tasks that required high sociability.

Furthermore, we employed a moderation-of-process approach to tap into the underlying mechanism of these downstream effects. The results show that providing additional goal-relevant information about the agents – an incidental cue about the focal personality factor that observers think the agent lacks to accomplish the task – can attenuate the difference in observers' likelihood of seeking advice from gossipers versus non-gossipers. The presence of an incidental moral/competence (sociability) cue that aids the lower perceived morality/competence (sociability) of gossipers (non-gossipers) can boost observers' likelihood of seeking advice from gossipers (non-gossipers) in relevant tasks. These findings support our theorizing that observers tend to seek advice from gossipers (vs. non-gossipers) based on the perceived instrumentality of their distinct skills in resolving the tasks at hand.

Moreover, these findings suggest that providing incidental moral, competence, and social cues about gossipers and non-gossipers can be an effective intervention strategy to rectify their weaker personality dimensions, increasing observers' likelihood of seeking advice from these agents in relevant tasks. We discuss these implications further in the General Discussion.

7. Experiment 3

Experiment 3 aimed to test the robustness of our findings in Experiments 2a–2c, using an incentive-compatible design. We tested, given the choice between two potential advisors – one who gossips and the other who does not – whether observers are less likely to choose the gossip (vs. the non-gossip) for advice on morality-related and competence-related tasks, but are more likely to choose them for advice on sociability-related tasks.

7.1. Participants

We recruited 200 full-time or part-time workers in the US from Prolific (108 women, 89 men, three other gender, $M_{\text{age}} = 37.84$ years, $SD = 12.05$). Participants had an average of 16.01 years of work experience from a mix of micro-enterprise (13.0%), small or medium sized company (39.5%), large private company (28.5%), and large public company or the government (13.5%), and others (5.5%). Participants also worked in a variety of industries, including management and professional (44.5%), service (23.5%), sales and office (17.0%), government (5.5%), construction, extraction, and maintenance (5.0%), production, transportation, and material moving (3.0%), and others (1.5%). More than half of the participants (64.5%) had managerial experience.

7.2. Procedure

We told participants that the study was about “decision-making in the workplace,” where they would be presented with a series of workplace scenarios. Each scenario entailed a specific task, where participants would need to choose between their two co-workers, Alex and Taylor, to receive some workplace advice. We informed participants that both of these co-workers were in the same department, and then described one of them as a gossip and the other as a non-gossip (counterbalanced between Alex and Taylor) using the same manipulation used in Experiments 2a–2c that varied whether the agent engages in chit-chat about others or not.

We then presented participants with three workplace scenarios in a random order. These were the same scenarios involving morality-,

competence-, and sociability-related tasks in Experiments 2a, 2b, and 2c, respectively. For each scenario, we asked participants to indicate between Alex and Taylor, whom they would seek advice from for that specific task. We also informed participants that their choice should be based on who they think would be more helpful with that particular task.

To ensure that participants' choices were incentive-compatible, thus increasing the study's external validity, we followed a protocol from Madan et al. (2022). Specifically, before participants indicated their choices, we informed them that we would ask a panel of experts to judge which of the two co-workers they believed would offer better advice for the specific task. If participants' choice of advisor matched that of the expert panel in all three scenarios, they could win a \$5 bonus. One day after the experiment, we contacted five randomly chosen participants and paid them a \$5 bonus each.

Participants also responded to an attention check question by recalling between Alex and Taylor, who liked to engage in chit-chat about others. Finally, they responded to some additional questions about their work experiences.

7.3. Results

Advisor choice. We tested whether participants were more likely to choose the gossip (vs. non-gossip) for the sociability-related task compared to the morality-related and competence-related tasks. We used a multilevel logistic regression as each participant made three choices (i.e., choice responses nested within participants). We entered advisor choice as the dependent variable (0 = non-gossip, 1 = gossip). The scenario manipulation nested within individuals formed the level-1 independent variable, with a random intercept and random slope. We created two dummy variables to test if participants had a lower likelihood of choosing the gossip for the morality-related and competence-related tasks compared to the sociability-related task. The first dummy variable was labeled “morality” (scenarios: morality = 1, sociability = 0, competence = 0), and the second dummy variable was labeled “competence” (scenarios: competence = 1, sociability = 0, morality = 0). We then entered these two dummy variables as the independent variables. As predicted, results revealed that participants were more likely to choose the gossip (vs. non-gossip) for the sociability-related task (87.0%) than for both the morality-related task (32.0%; $b = 2.97$, 95% CI = [2.34, 3.60], $SE = 0.32$, $z = 9.25$, $p < .001$, odds ratio = 0.05) and the competence-related task (31.5%; $b = 2.99$, 95% CI = [2.36, 3.62], $SE = 0.32$, $z = 9.29$, $p < .001$, odds ratio = 0.05). See Fig. 2 for the distribution of participants' advisor choices across the three tasks.

7.4. Discussion

Using an incentive-compatible design, Experiment 3 provided

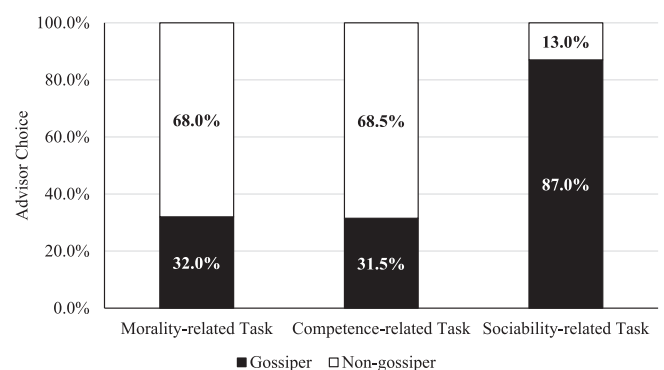


Fig. 2. The percentage of participants choosing the gossip (vs. non-gossip) as the advisor across three workplace tasks.

further evidence that observers tend to be selective and goal-directed in seeking advice from gossipers versus non-gossipers. Consistent with results from Experiments 2a–2c, we find that participants were more likely to choose gossipers (vs. non-gossipers) as advisors for sociability-related tasks than both morality-related and competence-related tasks.

8. General discussion

How do third-party observers beyond the gossip triad perceive and interact with gossipers and non-gossipers in their workplace? Five pre-registered experiments show that while observers perceive gossipers as less moral and competent, they also consider them more sociable than non-gossipers (Experiment 1). An additional supplementary experiment (Experiment S1, see Supplementary Materials) shows convergent findings using another established personality trait scale. Consequently, they are less likely to seek advice from gossipers (vs. non-gossipers) for tasks requiring high morality and high competence but are more likely to do so for tasks requiring high sociability (Experiments 2a–2c). Moreover, offering additional information about the personality dimension the agent is perceived to be deficient in increases observers' tendency to seek advice from that agent (Experiments 2a–2c), supporting the proposed effect of personality evaluation on advice-seeking behaviors. These results remain robust in an incentive-compatible setting (Experiment 3). Thus, this research advances our understanding of how gossipers (vs. non-gossipers) are evaluated by third-party observers from a global perspective and delineates workplace implications for these agents as interaction partners.

8.1. Theoretical contributions

We contribute to the extensive literature on workplace gossip in three ways. First, while prior literature has been predominantly interested in the perception of gossipers within the gossip triad, the present research provides a unique perspective from third-party observers who are not part of the gossip triad. Focusing exclusively on the perspective of the gossip triad may introduce biases in these agents' evaluations due to the relational dynamics among the triad members (Ellwardt, Labianca, & Wittek, 2012; Ellwardt, Steglich, & Wittek, 2012; Waddington, 2005). In contrast, third-party observers, not directly affected by the gossip exchange, should offer a less biased, but potentially less accurate, perception towards gossipers due to a lower conflict of interest and a lack of specific details about the gossip (Konow, 2003). Hence, we contribute to the extant research on gossip perception by examining how third-party observers beyond the gossip triad evaluate gossipers versus non-gossipers.

Second, we respond to the recent call for more integrated theoretical and empirical research by examining the continuous behavior of gossipers versus non-gossipers, rather than focusing solely on episodic encounters (Brady et al., 2017; Dores Cruz, Nieper, et al., 2021; Farley, 2019). Diverse conceptualization and operationalization of workplace gossip in prior organization research, based on various features of gossip episodes and specific motivations behind sharing gossip (Lian et al., 2023; Testori, Dores Cruz, & Beersma, 2023), has led to a limited understanding of how gossipers and non-gossipers are evaluated in general. To address these concerns, we adopt an integrative definition of gossip (Dores Cruz, Nieper, et al., 2021) that controls for the temporal variations in the features of gossip episodes (e.g., content, valence, motivation, and context). In doing so, we shift our focus from a one-off and context-dependent evaluation of gossipers (vs. non-gossipers) (e.g., Kakarika et al., 2023; Lian et al., 2023; Peters & Kashima, 2015) to a broader and more holistic evaluation of these agents in organizational settings. Prior research on universal dimensions of social cognition suggests that individuals tend to form broad impressions of others when having limited information about the target (Abele et al., 2021; Fiske et al., 2002, 2007; Leach et al., 2007). Thus, we examine how observers systematically diverge in their holistic evaluation of gossipers (vs. non-

gossipers) across three fundamental dimensions of person perception – morality, competence, and sociability. Consistent with the three-dimensional model of person perception (Landy et al., 2016; Leach et al., 2007), we find that individuals (i.e., third-party observers) tend to form distinct evaluations of gossipers (vs. non-gossipers) within an organization in terms of their morality, competence, and sociability, which provides functional and adaptive benefits in the workplace.

Furthermore, our research also contributes to the literature on workplace gossip and its implications for organizations by showing a novel consequence of gossip perceptions on workplace advice-seeking behaviors. The present research suggests that observers' nuanced evaluations of gossipers versus non-gossipers along the three personality dimensions (i.e., morality, competence, and sociability) serve as a gauge for these agents' perceived instrumentality in accomplishing different tasks within the workplace (Orehek & Forest, 2016). Prior research shows that individuals tend to be discerning in whom they seek advice from and when due to the inherent socio-emotional costs associated with advice-seeking (Bamberger, 2009; Lee, 1997). Consistently, we find that observers strategically harness potential advisors' personal characteristics to guide their selection of workplace advisors to optimize their task accomplishments (Nadler et al., 2003; Yaniv & Milyavsky, 2007). When seeking advice for morality-related and competence-related tasks, they leverage non-gossipers' high perceived morality and high perceived competence, respectively. By contrast, they heavily rely on gossipers' high perceived sociability when seeking advice for sociability-related tasks. Importantly, these findings remain robust in incentive-compatible settings, when observers' selection of advisors has economic or financial consequences (e.g., Belmi & Pfeffer, 2018; Fousiani et al., 2022). Moreover, we contribute to the advice-seeking literature by showing that employees' choice of advisor is contingent upon the alignment of the advisor's personality with the task goal at hand. Considering the prevalence of gossip in organizational settings, our findings hold substantial implications for effective organizational functioning through cooperation (e.g., Giardini & Wittek, 2019; Wu et al., 2016).

8.2. Limitations and future research

Our findings point to several directions for future research. First, in this research, we focus on observers' evaluation of gossipers versus non-gossipers from a global perspective – irrespective of temporal variations in the features of gossip episodes. Future research could examine how observers' evaluations of these agents' personal characteristics may evolve based on their sustained interactions, providing them with additional details about gossip episodes (Cone et al., 2021; Cone & Ferguson, 2015). For example, gossip recipients (vs. observers) may hold a less polarized evaluation of gossipers' morality, competence, and sociability based on their frequency of interactions with these agents (see Experiment S1 in Supplementary Materials), which calls for further examination. Besides, whether gossip is shared in formal versus informal settings may have a significant impact on one's tendency to gossip as part of the organizational culture (e.g., legitimization vs. sanction; Kurland & Pelled, 2000), thereby affecting how observers evaluate gossipers versus non-gossipers on their fundamental personality dimensions. Moreover, following the functionalist account of gossip (e.g., McAndrew, 2019), observers may perceive gossipers in people-oriented professions (e.g., customer relationship officer, diversity and inclusion specialist) to be more competent – i.e., consider obtaining and sharing information on others an essential skill to performing their job effectively, than those in non-people-oriented professions (e.g., data analyst, quality control officer, etc.). However, observers may also consider the former to be less moral for violating others' privacy or showing a lack of discretion in sharing confidential information with others. Therefore, further examination is required to ascertain how gossipers (vs. non-gossipers) across their formal or designated work roles are perceived along the fundamental personality dimensions.

Second, further exploration is required to identify the conditions under which observers' evaluations of gossipers' versus non-gossipers' personality diverge and converge. In the present research, we show that providing incidental cues about specific personality dimensions can be considered an effective intervention strategy to rectify agents' weaker personality dimensions without necessarily altering whether they are seen as gossipers or not. However, we note that while presenting an incidental moral cue and an incidental competence cue about gossipers improved observers' assessments of their perceived morality and perceived competence, respectively, these cues did not rectify these evaluations to the same levels observed for non-gossipers (Experiments 2a & 2b). In contrast, the perceived sociability of non-gossipers can be elevated to the same level observed for gossipers (Experiment 2c). These asymmetries suggest that people may apply stricter criteria when appraising agents' morality and competence compared to their sociability (e.g., Wojciszke et al., 1993; Yzerbyt & Cambon, 2017). Future research should examine other interventions that can improve gossipers' perceived morality and competence.

Third, this research sheds light on a downstream consequence of observers' nuanced evaluation of gossipers and non-gossipers – seeking advice to resolve workplace issues. The act of seeking advice from others is strongly coupled with the willingness to follow the advice one receives (Liljenquist, 2010) and establish a relationship of trust and cooperation (Brooks et al., 2015). Future research could extend these findings to examine other forms of interpersonal exchange and cooperation between observers and agents. For example, would observers offer advice or other forms of support to gossipers (vs. non-gossipers) either proactively or in reciprocity? Although reciprocity is considered a universal moral code (Deckop et al., 2003) and vital to organizational functioning (for a review, see Gervasi et al., 2022), people tend to dehumanize individuals who are perceived to be immoral (Bastian et al., 2011; Rodríguez-Gómez et al., 2021, 2022), which is manifested in the form of disrespect, condescension, and neglect (Bastian & Haslam, 2011; Haslam & Loughnan, 2014; for a review, see Christoff, 2014). Notably, in the “mechanistic” form of dehumanization, individuals are perceived as inert or instruments, devoid of warmth, emotion, and individuality (Haslam, 2006). Similarly, prior research shows that gossip senders – especially those in broker positions who control the flow of information in organizations – often become the target of negative gossip themselves (Estévez & Takács, 2022), which may affect how observers see them as exchange partners. Based on our core finding that gossipers (vs. non-gossipers) are perceived to be low in morality and competence, but high in sociability, future research could examine – within an actual work context – which dimension plays the central role in dictating observers' decision to provide these agents with workplace support proactively and in reciprocity.

8.3. Conclusion

Workplace gossip is an integral part of organizations and is vital for their functioning (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2011; Peters et al., 2017; Wu et al., 2016). Therefore, it is crucial to understand the perceptual and behavioral consequences for organizational members who engage in gossip versus those who refrain from it. In this research, we shed light on how gossipers versus non-gossipers are evaluated by observers beyond the gossip triad and investigate its implications for organizational advice-seeking behaviors. We hope that our work will spur more research in understanding the dynamics of gossip in the workplace.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Lijun (Shirley) Zhang: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Software, Resources, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Nahid Ibrahim:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Software, Resources, Methodology, Investigation,

Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Shankha Basu:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Software, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

All authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data availability

Data for all experiments available at: <https://osf.io/4byr6/>

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2024.104643>.

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