

WHISPERS IN THE HALLS OF ACADEMIA: THE COMPLEX ROLE OF GOSSIP AMONG ACADEMIC MANAGERS

SUSSURROS NOS CORREDORES DA ACADEMIA: O PAPEL COMPLEXO DA FOFOCA ENTRE GESTORES ACADÊMICOS

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Abstract

This study investigates the presence and strategic use of gossip among academic managers at a public university in Turkey. Employing a phenomenological approach, data were collected from 25 academic staff members occupying various positions to explore their perceptions of managerial gossip behavior. Findings indicate that gossip is prevalent within the academic environment and that many managers do not merely engage in gossip passively but actively seek it for various purposes. The analysis reveals two central motivations behind managerial gossip: organizational/managerial interests and personal benefits. Moreover, managerial gossip practices were classified into two types: the “protective” style, which aims to preserve institutional relationships or individual positions, and the “embellishment” style, where information is exaggerated or enhanced for influence or persuasion. This research addresses a significant gap in the literature by shedding light on the intentional and functional use of gossip in academic management, offering new insights into interpersonal dynamics in higher education institutions.

Keywords: Gossip. Informal Communication. Gossiping Style. Rationale for Gossip. Set.

Resumo

Este estudo investiga a presença e o uso estratégico da fofoca entre gestores acadêmicos em uma universidade pública na Turquia. Empregando uma abordagem fenomenológica, foram coletados dados de 25 membros do corpo acadêmico que ocupam diferentes posições, a fim de explorar suas percepções sobre o comportamento de fofoca gerencial. Os resultados indicam que a fofoca é prevalente no ambiente acadêmico e que muitos gestores não apenas participam dela de forma passiva, mas a buscam ativamente para diversos fins. A análise revela duas motivações centrais por trás da fofoca gerencial: interesses organizacionais/administrativos e benefícios pessoais. Além disso, as práticas de fofoca gerencial foram classificadas em dois tipos: o estilo “protetor”, que visa preservar relações institucionais ou posições individuais, e o estilo “ornamental”, no qual as informações são exageradas ou embelezadas para fins de influência ou persuasão. Esta pesquisa aborda uma lacuna significativa na literatura ao iluminar o uso intencional e funcional da fofoca na gestão acadêmica, oferecendo novas percepções sobre as dinâmicas interpessoais em instituições de ensino superior.

Palavras-chave: Fofoca. Comunicação Informal. Estilo de Fofoca. Racionalidade da Fofoca. Gestores Acadêmicos.



1 INTRODUCTION

Gossip is a pervasive form of communication in both formal and informal organizational contexts (Dores *et al.*, 2021). However, engaging in gossip does not always stem from altruistic intentions, as noted by Greenslade-Yeats *et al.* (2023). Gossip is inherently purposeful and can fulfill personal or social needs, aligning with Social Exchange Theory (SET), which posits that interactions within organizations occur on both economic and social dimensions (Ahmad *et al.*, 2023; Martinescu *et al.*, 2019). According to SET, individuals engage in exchanges that yield mutual benefits, which can extend to gossip as a form of social exchange where individuals seek information, influence, or validation. From the perspective of SET, gossip can be seen as a strategy to enhance one's position in the social exchange network by influencing perceptions and behaviors within the group. Thus, it is insufficient to categorize gossip merely as a communicative act aimed at social control or sanctions without considering its broader strategic implications (Michelson *et al.*, 2010).

Gossip, in this line, has significant ramifications for workplace relationships and organizational structures (Wax *et al.*, 2022). While it can have positive outcomes—such as serving as a channel for informal communication and information exchange—this information may be incomplete or inaccurate (Kuo *et al.*, 2018). Additionally, gossip can help disseminate organizational traditions, values, and ethics and contribute to group exclusivity (Elitok, 2023). In some cases, gossip can also serve some goals, such as maintaining group norms and discouraging free riding (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012). Michelson *et al.* (2010), suggest that gossip can even expose issues from the grassroots level to management, thereby facilitating problem-solving and decision-making. Notably, if the gossip is unrelated to business, it is less likely to foster cynicism (Kuo *et al.*, 2018).

However, the negative effects of gossip should not be overlooked. It can damage self-esteem (Cole & Scrivener, 2013) and reputations (Foster, 2004), disrupt relationships (Song & Guo, 2022), and harm group cohesion (Witteck & Wielers, 1998). These negative outcomes resonate with Power and Influence Theory, which highlights how communication and informal networks can be used to challenge or undermine formal power structures within organizations (Kanter, 1977). From a managerial perspective, gossip may be seen as disruptive "noise" that undermines formal authority and challenges legitimate organizational goals (Waddington, 2012). As such, many organizations seek to minimize gossip or eliminate its harmful effects (Gabriel, 1995).

Despite the attention to its negative aspects, there remains a gap in comprehensive research on gossip (Cole & Scrivener, 2013). Although gossip is prevalent in workplaces, it has often been overlooked in management research (Akgeyik, 2012; Hafen, 2004) and treated as a peripheral phenomenon in organizational studies (Noon & Delbridge, 1993; Housmanfar & Johnson, 2003). While studies on gossip are increasing (Altuntaş, 2017; Kuo *et al.*, 2015; Wax *et al.*, 2022), most existing research focuses on sociometric structures and the gossip behaviors of subordinates (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012; Cole & Scrivener, 2013). Notably, little is known about how gossip shapes relationships in a top-down direction, particularly within the "unmanaged spaces" of organizations (Gabriel, 1995; Greenslade-Yeats *et al.*, 2023).

Furthermore, existing literature often implies that managers do not engage in gossip, as it is typically viewed as a horizontal communication phenomenon between colleagues and subordinates (Bai *et al.*, 2019; Kuo *et al.*, 2015). However, it is possible that gossip may be the only form of influence available to those excluded from the formal power structures, particularly at lower levels of the organization (Noon & Delbridge, 1993). Interestingly, only a few studies have examined gossip within administrative processes (Kuo *et al.*, 2015; Noon & Delbridge, 1993; March & Sevon, 1984). Michelson and Mouly (2004) suggest that gossip can improve managerial behavior, enhance management information systems, and aid organizational coordination. Kuo *et al.* (2015) identified that supervisors may gossip about subordinates' skills, behavior, work performance, and evaluative information. However, unanswered questions persist regarding the mechanics of gossip, its effects on those involved (Cole & Scrivener, 2013) and managers' engagement with gossip.

The current study examines the use of gossip among academic managers in a public university in Turkey. The research aims to explore whether academic managers engage in gossip, and if so, how and why they purposefully do it. A phenomenological approach was employed, involving 25 academic staff members at various levels. The findings reveal that gossip is prevalent among academics, with many managers not only benefiting from it but actively seeking it out. The study identified two primary motivations for managers' engagement in gossip: managerial/organizational interests and personal interests. Furthermore, managers' gossiping approaches were categorized into two distinct styles: the "protective" gossip style, aimed at safeguarding relationships or interests, and the "embellishment" style, where information is exaggerated or enhanced for specific purposes. Finally, the study also explores gossip through the lens of SET, which helps to contextualize the advantages gossip provides to managers and its ethical implications.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Gossip, as an informal communication mechanism, plays a critical role in organizational processes by interacting with both formal and informal channels. It aids in sensemaking, information exchange, and social dynamics (Mills, 2010), often filling the gaps left by formal communication structures (Bordia *et al.*, 2004). Unlike formal communication, which follows regulated channels and hierarchical structures, gossip spreads quickly through informal networks (Mishra, 1990; Michaelson & Mouly, 2002). While this informality allows gossip to disseminate both accurate and inaccurate information swiftly (Baker & Jones, 1996; Ellwardt *et al.*, 2012), it also serves several organizational functions such as sensemaking, reputation management, and learning (Baumeister *et al.*, 2004; Mills, 2010).

To understand the dynamics of gossip, SET provides a useful framework. SET suggests that individuals weigh the costs and benefits of their social interactions, aiming to maximize rewards while minimizing costs (Thibaut, 1959). Key principles of SET include the notion that social behaviors are driven by exchange, where rewards come with associated costs, and that these exchanges influence interpersonal relationships within teams (Redmond, 2015). Gossip, as a process of information exchange (Sun, *et al.*, 2022), can help managers assess informal information and manage their interactions with employees (Kuo *et al.*, 2015).

In the workplace, gossip is a double-edged sword, yielding both positive and negative outcomes. Historically, gossip has been viewed negatively in organizational studies, often associated with unproductive behavior and poor morale (Bennett & Robinson, 2000; Einarsen *et al.*, 2009). Negative gossip, characterized by malicious intent, can damage reputations and create toxic work environments (Grosser *et al.*, 2010), particularly when trust between employees and managers is low (Ellwardt *et al.*, 2012). However, recent studies recognize that gossip can also have positive effects, such as fostering trust, cooperation, and team cohesion (Jolly & Chang, 2021). Positive gossip has been linked to improved performance and stronger leader-member exchanges (Kuo *et al.*, 2015). Therefore, the impact of gossip depends largely on its management and intent (Brady *et al.*, 2017; Labianca, 2010). When managed effectively, gossip can serve as a valuable tool for managers to gather insights, shape policy reception, and enhance organizational cohesion (Mishra, 1990; Solmaz, 2006).

Managers can also use gossip as an informal feedback mechanism, offering insights into employee concerns, conflicts, or resistance to change (Michelson *et al.*, 2010). This feedback allows managers to preemptively address issues before they escalate, promoting a more harmonious work environment (Atak, 2005). By engaging with informal networks, managers

can make more informed decisions and build trust with their employees (Liff & Wikström, 2021). However, studies suggest that negative gossip about managers increases when employees experience low trust or infrequent contact with them (Ellwardt *et al.*, 2012).

Effectively managing gossip requires recognizing its dual nature. Dismissing gossip as trivial can harm a manager's credibility and erode trust (Liff & Wikström, 2021). Suppressing gossip entirely is impractical, as it is a natural part of workplace social interactions (Mishra, 1990). Instead, managers should focus on minimizing harmful gossip while encouraging positive, constructive gossip that benefits the organization (Michelson & Mouly, 2000). Hence, proactively managing gossip can help managers gauge employee reactions and adjust their approach (Michelson *et al.*, 2010; Mishra, 1990).

Motivations for gossip include feelings of mistreatment, a desire to reinforce organizational norms, or efforts to undermine perceived threats (Rooks *et al.*, 2011). Fan and Dawson (2022) emphasize that confidential gossip can challenge power dynamics within formal authority structures, acting as a form of micro-resistance. Organizational culture also significantly influences gossip, as in environments where informal communication is discouraged, gossip may become the primary means for employees to exchange information and seek social support (Kurland & Pelled, 2000).

In academic settings, gossip can have profound effects on professional relationships and organizational culture. Academics tend to be hesitant to engage in gossip with their managers, due to concerns about potential misuse or misinterpretation (Altuntaş *et al.*, 2018). Leaders in academia can mitigate harmful gossip by fostering a culture of openness and improving communication channels (Kurland & Pelled, 2000). However, in academic environments with pronounced hierarchical structures, gossip can be both a tool for collaboration and a means of manipulation, further complicating its management (Pheko, 2018).

3 METHOD

We employed qualitative research methods for this study, recognizing their effectiveness in exploring under-researched phenomena, particularly those that are not fully understood (Atabek *et al.*, 2021; Reuber *et al.*, 2022). Our focus was on understanding how subordinates perceive managers' use of gossip within academic organizations. Given the exploratory nature of this topic, phenomenological analysis was selected as the most appropriate method. Phenomenology is a qualitative approach that allows individuals to reflect on their lived experiences, particularly those from the past (Giorgi, 1992; Giorgi, 1998), making

it ideal for uncovering subordinates' perceptions of their managers' approaches to gossip (Giorgi, 1997; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

3.1 Research context

This study was conducted in the context of a public university in Istanbul, Turkey, specifically focusing on whether academic managers engage in gossip, and the motivations and styles behind its use. We chose to conduct our research at Health Sciences University, a relatively newly established institution, founded in 2017. The university has 22 faculties, 7 vocational schools, and 5 institutes offering postgraduate education, with a total academic staff of approximately 4,300. Notably, the university operates primarily in health sciences and ranks as one of the leading institutions in this field in Turkey.

The motivation for focusing on an academic organization stemmed from the suggestion that academics use gossip to overcome challenges, share experiences, and cope with stress (Altuntaş, 2017). Additionally, little research has explored whether gossip functions as a form of informal communication among academics, particularly in the context of their interactions with managers. Given the unique characteristics of this university and its faculty's diverse academic backgrounds, we aimed to explore whether academic managers engage in gossip, and if so, to understand its rationales and styles.

We specifically focused on the perceptions of academics in lower-level roles rather than managers themselves, to avoid potential biases and to ensure the authenticity of the data. Including managers in the sample might have introduced issues of suspicion or manipulation in responses, given that gossip is often viewed negatively (Dores *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, we chose to base the study on the perspectives of academics with more experience as subordinates rather than as superiors, as this better aligns with the research aim to explore subordinate perceptions of managerial gossip (Giorgi, 1998; Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

3.2 Sample set

While interpretive phenomenological analysis typically involves smaller sample sizes (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014), we opted to include 25 participants to capture a broader range of perspectives. Our sample consisted of 5 participants from each of five academic titles: professors, associate professors, assistant professors, lecturers, and research assistants. This purposive sampling approach enabled us to ensure a diverse range of experiences while maintaining a manageable sample size for in-depth analysis (Foster, 2004; Miles *et al.*, 2014). Given that the faculty where the research was conducted has a total of approximately 70 academic staff, our sample represented one-third of the academic community. This level of participation ensured sufficient diversity and data saturation, as we were able to capture a range of insights across different academic ranks.

The sample was homogenous in terms of academic experience and likely exposure to gossip. Inclusion criteria were based on participants' academic titles and their experience with witnessing or participating in gossip. We excluded participants who reported never having witnessed gossip. Additionally, to maintain a balanced representation across academic roles, we restricted the sample to a maximum of five participants per title.

A brief summary of specific information about our interviewees is presented in Table I:

Table 1

Information about interviews

Interviewee	Gender	Academic Title	Interview	
			Type	Duration (minutes)
I1	Female	Research Assistant	Face to face	15
I2	Female	Research Assistant	Face to face	15
I3	Female	Research Assistant	Face to face	10
I4	Female	Research Assistant	Face to face	15
I5	Male	Research Assistant	Face to face	10
I6	Female	Lecturer	Face to face	15
I7	Female	Lecturer	Face to face	15
I8	Male	Lecturer	E-mail	-
I9	Female	Lecturer	Face to face	10
I10	Female	Lecturer	Face to face	10
I11	Female	Assistant Professor	Face to face	15
I12	Female	Assistant Professor	E-mail	-
I13	Female	Assistant Professor	Face to face	15
I14	Female	Assistant Professor	E-mail	-
I15	Female	Assistant Professor	E-mail	-
I16	Female	Associate Professor Dr.	Face to face	17
I17	Female	Associate Professor Dr.	Face to face	10
I18	Female	Associate Professor Dr.	Face to face	20
I19	Male	Associate Professor Dr.	E-mail	-

I20	Male	Associate Professor Dr.	E-mail	-
I21	Male	Professor Dr.	Face to face	10
I22	Male	Professor Dr.	E-mail	-
I23	Female	Professor Dr.	E-mail	-
I24	Male	Professor Dr.	E-mail	-
I25	Male	Professor Dr.	E-mail	-

3.3 Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed participants to share their personal experiences with gossip in an open yet focused manner. The interviews lasted between 10 minutes – 20 minutes. The interview questions were developed in line with Social Exchange Theory (SET) and the existing literature. To assess their appropriateness and clarity, pilot interviews were conducted, and necessary revisions were made to the interview guide. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for subsequent analysis. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and ethical principles were strictly observed; participants' identities were anonymized to ensure confidentiality. Face-to-face interviews were conducted in quiet and appropriate settings, while follow-up clarifications were sought in email-based interviews when necessary to enhance contextual depth.

3.4 Data analysis

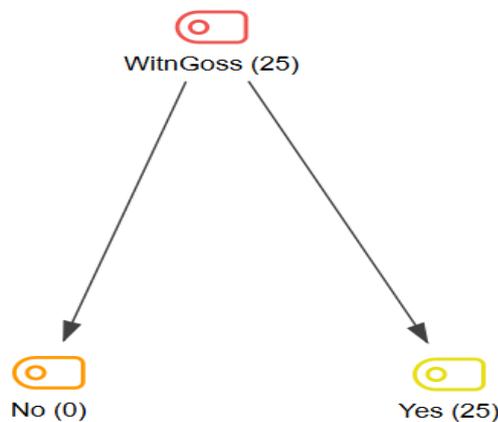
Data analysis followed the principles of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), as outlined by Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014). The analysis aimed to understand how subordinates perceive the use of gossip by managers, the motivations behind, and the styles of its use. We conducted our analysis using MaxQDA (version 2022), engaging in a comprehensive process of data immersion that involved thoroughly reading and coding transcripts and memos to identify key themes and insights. After this coding process, we generated distinct visual representations for each finding. We then interpreted these emerging themes and situated them within the literature on gossip. We systematically compared participants' responses with the existing literature and also cross-compared their narratives with one another to ensure that our findings were both theoretically informed and grounded in the lived experiences captured in the data.

4 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Our study was conducted to determine whether academic managers engage in gossip and if yes, why and how? Before moving on to the findings regarding the main objectives of our study, it is necessary to examine the responses about whether the participants had witnessed gossip in their organizations. The responses to this question are presented in Figure I below:

Figure 1

Participants' Accounts of Observing Gossip



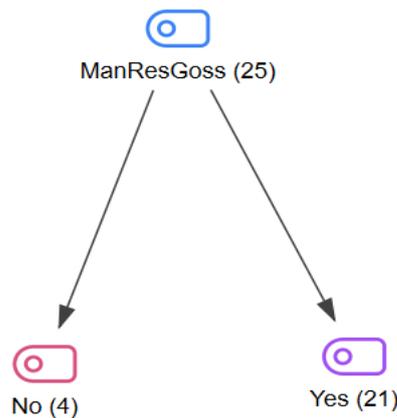
This is an interesting finding because, while academic organizations are considered to be highly qualified institutions—especially regarding moral, ethical, and other values (Costea et al., 2017)—and Altuntaş *et al.* (2017) argue that academics avoid gossip due to concerns about its potential misuse, our study shows that gossip is prevalent even in academia. Foster (2004) employs a comparable generalization: “*virtually all of us frequently find ourselves producing, hearing, or otherwise participating in evaluative comments about someone who is not present in the conversation, even when it is considered unethical and/or morally appropriate to do so.*” As a result, almost everyone in organizations—whether academic or not—encounters or witnesses gossip in one form or another.

4.1 Managers' use of gossip

Our findings in this section aim to analyze managers' positions on gossip. Specifically, our findings in this section focus on our main research question: “Do academic managers engage in gossip?” According to the data we obtained, 21 of the participating academics—representing the vast majority (84%)—stated that managers engage in gossip, use it as a managerial resource and take advantage of it. This finding directly answers this question (Figure II).

Figure 2

Managers' Engagement in Gossip



Based on the available data, it appears that there is no significant difference in gossip engagement across managerial levels. In other words, managers at all levels prioritize and actively seek the advantages that gossip can offer. Like this, March and Sevon (1984) suggest that managers may even invest in gossip. One of our participants highlighted this point with the following statement:

“My manager engages in gossip. Senior managers can also engage in gossip in very critical times. In matters such as assignment, appointment, etc.” (I18)

Two different participants stated that managers tend to take advantage of gossip because they are aware of its effect as a resource on their subordinates:

“Yes, he tries to use gossip. Furthermore, he seeks to understand the underlying reasons. He deliberately employs gossip in his interactions with subordinates, viewing it as a tool to consolidate his formal power.” (I4)

“Yes, she definitely benefits from gossip. If the existing gossip is about co-workers with whom she has not gotten along or has had problems before, she will use this information in meetings, during one-on-one discussions, or to complain to upper-level managers.” (I2)

Another participant associates his manager's engagement in gossip with the manager's personal qualities, specifically his character. This leads us to conclude that while the manager benefits from gossip, he is also suited to it by nature.

“He benefits. This situation is related to the character of the person. Some people act as mixers for their own interests or to elevate themselves to a higher level. In these cases, character comes into play. My manager believes that the power will be in his hands with the results he gets, he engages gossip. Due to his character, he can use gossip as a resource for his own purposes.” (I13)

Although their contexts are different, the statements in which the participants shared their experiences reveal that managers, even those in academic positions, often engage in gossip and seek to benefit from the advantages it provides. If gossip is not to be viewed as deviant or disruptive behavior but rather as an integral part of organizational communication (Kurland & Pelled, 2000), it is inconceivable that managers are immune to the gossip that circulates throughout the organization via communication channels (Atabek et. al., 2021; Kuo et. al., 2015; Mishra, 1990). In the same line, Dunbar *et al.* (1997) claim that people spend 65% of their day-to-day conversations gossiping. Similarly, Foster (2004) argues that almost all of us create, listen to, or participate in gossip even if it is not moral. Hence it should not be surprising for our findings that managers engage in gossip as well. Therefore, our finding is quite consistent and can be regarded as a comprehensive representation of gossip as a social reality (Waddington, 2012). According to SET, which holds that people manage relationships based on a balance of economic and social factors, managers who engage in gossip to serve their own interests and gain advantages can be seen as acting in line with SET (Blau, 1964).

As is clearly evident, managers often benefit from gossip and may even be prepared to use it strategically as a resource. Therefore, it seems unrealistic to expect managers to remain entirely unaffected by gossip. While gossip may be a natural human tendency, its intentional use by managers for personal or organizational gain raises ethical concerns. When managers, who are expected to be role models for other employees, exceed these boundaries (Baker & Jones, 1996), it may encourage others to do the same. Managers are expected to act objectively

and serve common interests (Abernethy et. al., 2017; Chen et. al., 2019), yet many prioritize personal gain, even resorting to harmful tools like gossip. The information provided by gossip not only strengthens managers' positions but also places them in an advantageous position. This situation encourages managers to utilize gossip and aligns with the benefit and cost principle of SET.

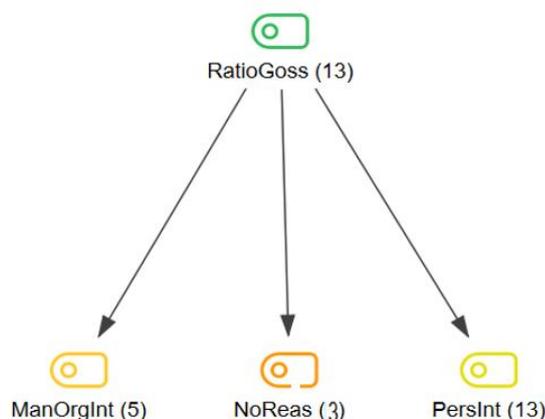
4.2 The rationales behind managers' gossiping

This section of our findings addresses the question of “*why managers engage in gossip*”. Through data coding, we identified two distinct themes: managerial/organizational interests and personal interests. However, based on the direction of our interviews, we argue that what is labeled as managerial interests often serves to mask underlying self-interest. In essence, managers may invoke organizational concerns as a justification for pursuing personal benefits.

As illustrated in Figure III, the responses to the question regarding the motivations behind managerial gossip were confirmed by 13 participants and yielded notable findings. It is important to note that three individuals chose not to respond to this question. Among the 13 respondents, the distribution between the two categories — managerial/organizational interests and personal interests — was evenly split, with 5 participants selecting each option. However, the frequency with which the various expressions associated with these themes appeared in the responses varied significantly.

Figure 3

Manager's Use of Gossip



Several interviewees suggested that managers engage in gossip primarily to protect their personal interests and, in some cases, to mask these motivations by framing

them as managerial concerns in order to advance their own agendas. While Stirling (1956) argued that the motivation to gossip can be both conscious and unconscious, with conscious motivations being far less common, our study highlights a significant divergence from this claim: a strikingly high frequency of conscious, intentional rationales for gossip among managers. This finding aligns with other studies that emphasize the role of self-interest and power dynamics in managerial behavior (Beersma & van Kleef, 2012; Bolino *et al.*, 2012). Specifically, one of the main motivations for managerial gossip in our research appears to be the desire to maintain power, coupled with a personal inclination to generate gossip. Further, our findings suggest that managers often use gossip manipulatively, leveraging it to turn situations to their advantage. These actions are unmistakably tied to the personal interests of managers, as exemplified in the following interview excerpts:

“My manager believes that he can maintain power through the results he achieves, which leads him to engage in gossip. Given his character, he tends to employ gossip for managerial purposes.” (I13)

“My manager generates gossip and uses it as a tool to display manipulative behavior regarding the decisions she wants to make in order to steer the situation in her own direction.” (I22)

Another participant's statement further illustrates this point, emphasizing the use of gossip for self-promotion:

“My manager generates gossip to use it for his own interests, to turn an event against him to his advantage, to reflect himself differently. To do his own PR. To cover his gap.” (I17)

Moreover, one interviewee noted that gossip is frequently employed by managers to protect their positions:

“Most managers use gossip to serve their personal interests; however, there are instances where a manager may use it for managerial or organizational gain. This is particularly true when the gossip concerns a managerial issue. For example, when gossip revolves around a managerial situation, my manager tends to take it personally and responds reflexively to protect her position, often sidelining organizational interests in the process.” (I25)

An additional interviewee emphasized the desire for power and control in their manager's use of gossip:

“My manager, as an undemocratic manager primarily driven by legitimate power, uses gossip for his own benefit. He specifically employs it to pacify subordinates he finds difficult to manage, to intimidate powerful subordinates he perceives as rivals or threats, or simply out of jealousy towards others' success.” (I14)

Our findings contribute to the limited research on the causes and consequences of gossiping behaviors in organizational contexts (Cole & Scrivener, 2013). Broadly, our findings indicate that managers primarily use gossip to serve personal interests, often under the guise of managerial concerns. These findings support theories of power dynamics within organizational behavior, which suggest that gossip serves as a tool for consolidating influence and managing interpersonal relationships (Kurland & Pelled, 2000). More specifically, our findings demonstrate that managers engage in gossip to fulfill personal desires for power, protect their positions, and gain advantages from shared information. These motivations align with the core assumptions of SET, which posits that interpersonal relationships, including those in organizational settings, are influenced by such self-serving behaviors (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1958).

In line with Beersma and van Kleef (2012), who argued that gossip is often used manipulatively to influence others, our findings suggest that gossip is indeed a self-serving behavior aimed at manipulating others for personal or managerial/organizational gain. Furthermore, Pheko (2018) defined gossip as a strategic tool for both cooperation and manipulation, further confirming our results. Some scholars (e.g., Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Michelson *et al.*, 2010) also noted that managers may be more prone to gossip as they seek to base decisions on information gathered from informal networks, a tendency that our study corroborates. By integrating these theoretical perspectives, we show that managers' engagement in gossip is not merely a byproduct of informal communication, but a deliberate and strategic behavior aimed at achieving personal, political, or organizational objectives.

Our research builds on these theoretical foundations by offering a more nuanced understanding of the specific motives behind managerial gossip. Contrary to the common characterization of gossip as a means of social bonding or informal communication, our findings indicate that it often serves distinct and deliberate personal purposes—such as the desire for power, self-protection, gaining influence, and manipulating organizational dynamics. While gossip may ostensibly align with managerial or organizational goals, it frequently functions as a strategic tool through which personal interests are pursued under

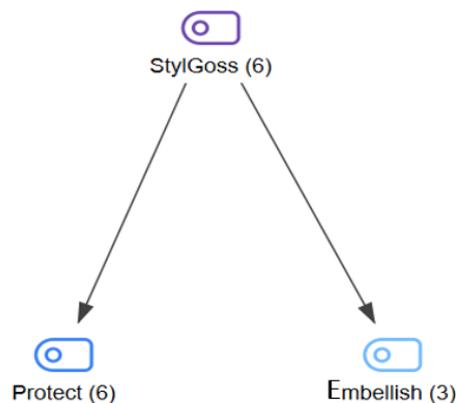
the guise of professional concerns. These motivations, while in line with existing theories, have not been explored in such detail in the context of managerial behavior, making our study a significant contribution to this area of research.

4.3 Styles of managers' gossiping

The final finding of our study pertains to our research question about how managers engage in gossip. In this context, we outline the gossiping styles of managers based on the data we collected, categorized into two distinct styles: *the protective gossiping style* and the *embellishing gossiping style*. According to the responses gathered, managers strategically generate gossip by distorting and amplifying negative thoughts and impressions, whether directly or indirectly acquired, into actual or seemingly real events, conversations, or expressions that align with their interests. The findings suggest that when managers engage in gossip for their own interests, they primarily interact with small groups of individuals they consider close and disseminate the gossip through these connections. This behavior may be primarily driven by motivations such as self-protection, self-preservation, or the desire to avoid being identified as the source of the gossip (i.e., covering up). Additionally, it has been identified that managers engage in gossip by embellishing the information they obtain and adding their own interpretations or details to enhance the rumors. Below, we present excerpts from our interviews that illustrate these gossiping styles, following Figure IV that shows our coding on this topic.

Figure 4

Styles of Managers' Gossiping



One of our interviewees noted that her manager tailors his gossip based on its potential impact, adjusting the intensity of his reactions according to the severity of the gossip:

“If my manager witnesses gossip, he will not remain silent; he will react. If the gossip is about him, he will definitely respond and become angry. If it concerns someone else, he will react based on his own interests. If the person being gossiped about is close to him, he will defend their rights; however, if the gossip involves someone more distant, his reaction may be less forceful. In other words, his interests come into play once again.” (I13)

Similarly, for a manager who seeks to gossip to feel safe or protect herself, and slightly differing from the previous statement, one of our participants shared the following. Accordingly, even if the rumors are false and even if serious decisions are made based on them, managers do not hesitate to gossip if they trust the source of the gossip:

“She embraces gossip and takes action based on information shared by individuals with whom she has sympathetic relationships. Conversely, she disregards gossip brought to her by those she does not sympathize with. For instance, she decided to impose a disciplinary action on an academic based solely on gossip from a trusted associate. However, upon meeting the affected individual and realizing the situation was misrepresented, she opted to merely warn the person who brought her the gossip verbally.” (I16)

One interviewee stated that her manager gossiped in small groups, but even so, she contributed to spreading the gossip:

“I have observed my manager bringing up a circulating gossip, especially in small groups or during one-on-one interactions, and contributing to those who were unaware of it becoming informed.” (I1)

Another interviewee, like mentioned above, stated that his manager does not gossip with everyone and is cautious about this matter:

“He is more cautious in how he shares it. He does not disseminate the gossip to everyone.” (I8)

Based on these statements, managers are aware of the risks that gossip can create and strive to be as cautious as possible to minimize any potential harm it may cause to

them. As outlined in SET, managers aim to navigate processes in alignment with their own interests, seeking to maximize benefits while minimizing costs (Blau, 1964).

Another participant stated that her manager embellishes the information she hears or obtains indirectly from someone else, thereby generating gossip and using it for his own interests:

“My manager has a knack for generating gossip. For instance, I’ve seen her embellish information she already knows or overheard while someone was speaking to another person, then use that information to steer the situation in her preferred direction. In this way, she manipulates gossip to influence outcome.” (I2)

A different participant mentioned that his manager gossiped about a co-worker by adding negative comments in order to damage his reputation in the eyes of upper management:

“I once had a manager who strategically generate gossip. For example, she would convey unverified information about someone who was critical of upper management, adding negative comments to tarnish that person’s reputation.” (I16)

Considering these statements, it is reasonable to infer that managers use gossip as a tool for organizational control. Through the strategic use of gossip, managers are able to shape perceptions of academic personnel and take proactive measures to address potential crises, positioning gossip as a key control mechanism within the organization (Blau, 1964).

The literature provides limited information on gossip styles, and the contexts often vary. However, it is difficult to find evidence concerning managers in any of these contexts. Nonetheless, several relevant points can be noted: Farley (2011) discusses how managers are selective about what they hear from others. Stirling (1956) speaks of publicized gossip (although not specifically about managers) as a style of gossip, and Foster (2004) describes a form of gossip as vitriolic gossip. Additionally, in Gilmore’s study (1978), different forms of gossip were categorized according to four variables (such as the number of gossipers, the status of gossipee, instrumentality, and legitimacy). Among these, deceptive and legitimate gossip, classified under the category of legitimacy, stand out as notable types of gossip. Yet, our findings differ from these studies particularly in terms of the gossiping managers’ tendency to seek protection as well embellish and exaggerate rumors they hear. One reason for seeking protection from the potential harms of gossip is that, as Fan and Dawson (2022) argue, gossip can challenge

power dynamics within formal authority structures. Hence, in a workplace with few managers and a majority of employees, managers may understandably choose to be cautious in revealing themselves. Moreover, Haviland (1977) argues that gossip is a powerful and dangerous weapon within a broader set of behaviors that limit intimacy and promote evasion. He further contends that bad words are like physical blows that violate personal space, and such heated exchanges lead to colder but harder legal and social repercussions—tearing apart kin, friends, and neighbors. Therefore, it seems understandable that managers would be more cautious about gossip. This does not appear to be inconsistent behavior in a work environment where people operate in confined spaces and are often curious about idle talks (Haviland, 1977). Embellishing and exaggerating gossip is likely seen as a tactic to enhance the credibility and effectiveness of the rumor. Similarly, Foster (2004) argues that some rumors would be discounted depending on their source and presumed to be exaggerated or untrue. However, it is necessary to emphasize once again that these points are not intended to vindicate gossip but to assess the situation objectively.

5 LIMITATIONS

While this study provides valuable insights into the role of gossip in academic organizations, there are some limitations to consider. The sample was drawn from a single university, and the findings may not be readily generalizable to all academic settings. Most critically, the study relies on participants' subjective evaluations of gossip, and there is the potential for recall bias or social desirability bias in their responses.

6 CONCLUSION

While it is widely acknowledged that gossip can have both positive and negative outcomes in organizational settings, there is a significant gap in the literature regarding how managers specifically benefit from gossip and the ways in which they utilize it. This study helps address this gap by exploring the ways managers in academic settings engage with gossip, thus contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the potential risks and rewards associated with this informal communication channel. By shifting the focus from the traditional top-down view of gossip, this approach provides a deeper, more

comprehensive perspective on the phenomenon. The advantages of gossip, such as gaining access to critical information, reinforcing authority, and establishing mechanisms for control, incentivize managers to engage in gossip strategically. From the perspective of SET, managers assess the costs and benefits of engaging in gossip. When used effectively, gossip can enhance reputations, build trust, help eliminate competitors, strengthen ties with management, and preserve corporate integrity. However, the absence of gossip may result in reputational damage or a loss of trust, negatively impacting the manager's relationship with subordinates and the organization as a whole.

In conclusion, managers, particularly in academic settings, not only benefit from gossip but actively seek it out. While they often frame their use of gossip as serving organizational interests, it is evident that managers may also leverage gossip to further personal agendas. The exchange of information through gossip fosters a reciprocal relationship between managers and employees, aligning with principles of SET—where both parties seek to maximize rewards and minimize costs. Furthermore, managers tend to adopt more protective and embellishing styles of gossip. This protective approach aims to safeguard personal interests, while the embellishing style adds elements to gossip to make it more persuasive and socially acceptable. In this way, managers strategically navigate gossip to maintain both their personal and professional standing within the organization.

7 THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

This study contributes to the theoretical development of gossip research within organizational behavior by providing a deeper understanding of managers' engagement with gossip. It challenges the traditional view of gossip as a purely disruptive or negative phenomenon and introduces a more nuanced perspective that acknowledges the strategic functions of gossip in organizational settings. By applying SET, this study provides a framework for understanding how managers assess the costs and benefits of gossip and how these assessments influence their behavior. The findings suggest that gossip should be viewed not only as a form of informal communication but as a complex, dynamic tool that managers can use to navigate power dynamics, build relationships, and gain insights into organizational functioning.

Additionally, this research broadens the scope of SET by showing how the theory can be applied to informal communication channels, adding a new layer of understanding to the development of interpersonal and group relationships within organizations. Future research could further explore how managers in different sectors or organizational cultures use gossip and how these practices align with various leadership styles.

8 PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

On a theoretical level, the study reinforces the applicability of SET in understanding managerial behavior, showing that gossip is often used by managers to maximize personal benefits. It also challenges conventional views of gossip as purely destructive, suggesting that it can be used to reinforce power structures and manage organizational outcomes. These findings open new avenues for research into the ethical dimensions of gossip, its impact on organizational culture, and the ways in which gossip influences power dynamics in the workplace. Future studies could explore how different types of gossip affect organizational outcomes and further investigate the ethical considerations surrounding its use.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors fulfilled the journal's minimum authorship criteria by (a) actively participating in the discussions of the results and (b) reviewing and approving the final version of the manuscript.

Individual contributions based on the CRediT Taxonomy are as follows:

Büşra Tekin: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Writing – Original Draft, Visualization.

Oktay Koç: Literature Review, Validation, Writing – Review & Editing, Supervision.

Rıdvan Yurtseven) Data Curation, Methodology Support, Interpretation of Results, Writing – Review & Editing.

All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the relevant ethics committee prior to data collection (2024/4-35, 29.03.2024).

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

All data generated or analyzed during this study are included in this published article and its supplementary information files.

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Authors' Contribution

All authors contributed equally to the development of this article.

Data availability

All datasets relevant to this study's findings are fully available within the article.

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