

# An Empirical Validation of the Psychological Anatomy of Gossip\*

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## **Abstract**

*This study validates the theory on the psychological anatomy of gossip. A person's inclination to gossip is tested and validated in relation to one's self-concept and anxiety level. Utilizing researcher-developed questionnaires and employing regression analysis, this paper tested the relationship between a person's self-concept and anxieties with one's propensity to gossip. The results of this study supported our three hypotheses: (1) that a person's self-concept is inversely related to one's anxieties, (2) that a person's self-concept is inversely related to one's propensity to gossip, and (3) a person's anxiety is directly related to one's tendency to gossip.*

*Keywords: self-concept, anxiety, gossip, communication*

## **1.0 Introduction**

Gossip is undeniably an interesting phenomenon. Despite the fact that it has captured the attention of many researchers, gossip remains mysterious and captivating. Various studies have been made to understand it better, and yet a lot still remains unknown. The mystery of gossip lies in its ubiquity, in its apparent immunity against the many negative perceptions attached to it.

Few people know that the term gossip has its roots in the Old English word *godsibb*, which surprisingly means god-parent. Originally referencing to the idle chatter by a mother's guests who are present during a child's birth (Rosnow and Fine, 1976), gossip's reputation has seen quite an intriguing evolution. What started as something seemingly innocent has, for most of history, been labeled as destructive, malicious, and harmful. The redemption of gossip's reputation has been slow. However, recent studies have started to recognize that gossip does not necessarily have to be negative. Evolutionary psychology even contends

that homo sapiens are hardwired to gossip, thereby making it nearly impossible to eradicate the said activity (Nicholson, 1998). The fact is people cannot help but gossip. At one point in time, we all have maintained a love-hate relationship with gossip. No one seems completely resistant to its appeal. For one reason or another, gossip is here to stay. Taking this into consideration, this paper aims to examine gossip from a psychological perspective. In an attempt to answer the question of why some people are more inclined to gossip than others, we take a look into how a person's propensity to gossip can be affected by self-concept and anxieties.

Despite the interest of many researchers in this phenomenon, empirical studies on gossip still remain scarce. The covert nature of gossip makes it an elusive research subject matter. Adding to this, the biases society holds against gossip contribute to certain difficulties met by researchers. For example, respondents are not very keen in providing information about their gossip activity. Finding out that they are being made respondents

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to a study about gossip normally makes them feel defensive and uncomfortable. Despite the universality of gossip, it cannot be denied that it still carries with it a moral and social stigma, thus hampering a truly objective evaluation of the said phenomenon. Another factor that makes empirical studies on this subject matter challenging is its spontaneity. Gossip is ordinarily free-flowing and unstructured. It can occur anywhere and at any given time. In some instances, even the parties engaged in a gossip episode are not aware that they are gossiping, unless somebody points it out. Yerkovich (1977) vividly describes this when he said, "Unless a conversationalist specifically draws attention to the fact that gossiping is occurring, it is likely to proceed relatively unhindered". This serves as a challenge to the researcher. It is nearly impossible to "box in" gossip. Attempting to observe gossip in its natural habitat involves trying to find a balance between penetrating the intimacy of the social network (Michelson and Mouly, 2004) and being discreet. Notwithstanding these difficulties, this study aims to provide an empirical approach into the psychological anatomy of gossip, aiming to fill the gap for a more objective examination of the phenomenon of gossip. By viewing gossip as a projection of the gossipers' life issues, we tap into one's self-concept and anxiety to determine whether this has, indeed, a relationship with a person's tendency to gossip.

## **2.0 The Theory and Theory Validation**

This section is dedicated to the validation of the theory on the psychological anatomy of gossip. By using axiomatic theory development, we have gathered from existing studies a minimal set of axioms or self-evident truths that led us to our core theory. This paper will validate the theory that was previously formulated by proposing a set of hypothesis that will be tested. This section also presents the research design used to test each of

the proposed hypotheses.

Gossip is defined by different authors in different ways. In this paper, we draw on the definition by Foster (2004) of gossip as the exchange of personal information about an absent third party that is conveyed in an evaluative manner.

### **Theory**

Based on the theory we have previously formulated, we posit that the nature of gossip is a projection of the gossipers' life issues which are basically grounded on one's overall self-concept. The poorer one's self concept is, the higher one's level of complexes (i.e. inferiority and superiority). Gossip runs on social support. Without social support, the transfer of information is halted, and the gossip ends. Thus, man's inability to compensate for life's needs and demands together with the social support received by gossip increases the propensity to gossip.

### **Hypotheses**

Each person has a perception of oneself. This "perception" is what is known as self-concept. Rogers (1959) identifies three aspects of a person's self concept, namely: self-image, self-esteem, and the ideal self. Self-image is how one views one's self. Self-esteem, on the other hand, is how a person values one's self. When an individual's self-image, self-esteem, and ideal self are in harmony, a person is said to be self-actualized. Consequently, a lack of harmony among these three aspects increases the tendency for a person to feel frustrated, inadequate and, ultimately, anxious.

How an individual perceives oneself highly influences the behavior and disposition in life. When one feels good about oneself, the attitude towards life and people will be positive. Feelings of confidence, competence, and spontaneity will help reduce feelings of anxiety. Conversely,

when one feels bad, a person is more likely to entertain feelings of inadequacy, incompetence, and frustration. Said feelings eventually fuel one's apprehensions. As such, we propose that a person's self-concept/self-esteem has an impact on the person's anxieties.

H1: There is an inverse relationship between a person's self-concept and one's anxieties.

Thus, the poorer a person's self-concept, the higher the person's anxieties.

The sociometer theory (Leary, 2000) posits that a person's self-esteem serves as a personal monitor or gauge that measures the degree to which an individual perceives oneself to be accepted or rejected by other people. Using this view, it is said that every person has a built-in psychological device that assesses the possibility of exclusion from or avoidance by a social group. It has also been put forward that this very same sociometer influences a person's behavior. When one's sociometer detects a possible exclusion or change in the inclusionary status, it releases a negative affect on the person, leading the individual to feel upset (Leary, 1995). In a study related to the sociometer theory, it has been proven that low self-esteem people put much weight on the possibility of being accepted or rejected when it comes to social decision making (Anthony, 2007). Moreover, in the realm of social comparison, low self-esteem individuals tend to keep away from direct comparisons with a competitor unless they were sure that the outcome will be to their favor (Wood, 1994). In a related albeit different light, Adler (1969) further submits that a person's drive can be summed up in one single force --- the striving for success or superiority. Innate in each person is the instinct for survival and dominance. In fact, evolutionary psychology even goes as far as saying that embedded in a human being's innermost nature is the impulse to seek superiority or security

in hierarchical systems (Nicholson, 1998).

When man's self-esteem feels threatened, it sends a warning of the possibility of being rejected and, eventually, being hurt. This "warning", in turn, makes one inclined to take on a defensive stance by trying to avoid the circumstance that would lead to rejection. On the other hand, a person with low self-esteem may choose to go on the offensive. This means that one will be leaning towards taking actions that will prevent one's rejection. This is where the need for information comes in. Information allows the people with low self-esteem to be aware of their environment, especially if it is new to them, without the risk of being rejected. Considering that persons with low self-esteem generally strive to steer clear of direct comparisons, they may have the tendency to obtain information through indirect means and covert sources. This is where the one of the functions of gossip is served. According to Foster (2004) one of gossip's functions is information. The bridging of the gap between what is known and unknown makes those people with low self-esteem more confident in dealing with situations, especially those they consider new and unfamiliar. Horney (1945) also listed the need for affection and approval as one of the ten neurotic needs of man. This particular need answers another function of gossip that relates to intimacy or friendship. People with low self-esteem may have a tendency to gossip if this increases their chances of being part of the group.

As such, we propose that persons with low self-esteem/self-concept will have a more tendency to gossip than those with high self-esteem/self-concept owing to the fact that they put more weight on social acceptance in their social-decision making processes. Since we hypothesized that self-concept has an inverse relationship with anxiety, we also propose a person's tendency to gossip is also affected by one's anxieties.

- H2: There is an inverse relationship between a person's self-concept and one's tendency to gossip. Thus, the poorer a person's self-concept, the higher is the tendency to gossip.
- H3: There is a direct relationship between a person's anxieties and the tendency to gossip. Thus, the higher the anxiety, the higher also is the tendency to gossip.

### 3.0 Research Design and Procedures

#### Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to validate the theory on the psychological anatomy of gossip by establishing whether a relationship exists among the variables of self- concept/self-esteem, anxiety, and a person's tendency to gossip.

#### Participants

A total of 108 respondents (sixty-four students and forty-four faculty members) from a local university were tapped for this study. Since the study does not consider gender and age as relevant factors in the determination of one's tendency to gossip, no data regarding these variables were collected.

#### Measures and procedures

To establish the variable of self-concept/self-esteem, we assembled 25 face-valid statements describing how the respondents view themselves in different areas such as physical appearance (e.g. *I am physically attractive*), interpersonal relations (e.g. *I have good relations with my neighbors*), and achievements (e.g. *I am proud of my achievements*). The participants were asked to rate each item using a four-point Likert scale, with their choices ranging from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree". We conducted a pretest and tested for reliability by employing Cronbach's alpha to determine internal

consistency. The pretest revealed a relatively high alpha (Cronbach's alpha = 0.6737). After further analysis, we came up with a final 15 item self-concept questionnaire.

To determine the variable of anxiety, we assembled 25 face-valid statements describing feelings and emotions ordinarily associated with anxiety (e.g. *I am afraid of not being able to meet others expectations*). The participants were asked to rate each item using a four- point Likert scale, with their choices ranging from "Always" to "Never". We conducted a pretest and tested for reliability by using Cronbach's alpha which revealed a relatively high internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = 0.7887). After further analysis, we came up with a final 15 item anxiety scale questionnaire.

Finally, to ascertain the variable of one's tendency to gossip, we assembled 30 face- valid statements describing actions or preferences that make people inclined to gossip (e.g. *I enjoy sharing with my friends my observations about other people's physical characteristics*). The participants were asked to rate how much they identify with each statement by the use of a four-point Likert scale, with their choices ranging from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree". We conducted a pretest that yielded a relatively high Cronbach's alpha (Cronbach's alpha = 0.8622). After the pretest, we then came up with a final 20 item gossip questionnaire. Since people normally have biases against being evaluated about their gossip tendencies, each statement was carefully worded so as not to give the respondents any inkling that what they are answering is a gossip questionnaire. This would, in a way, help ensure an objective assessment. In addition, we changed the title of the questionnaire to one indicating it is about social relationships. After coming up with the final set of questions, we simultaneously administered the instrument to the respondents. Responses were then tallied and analyzed.

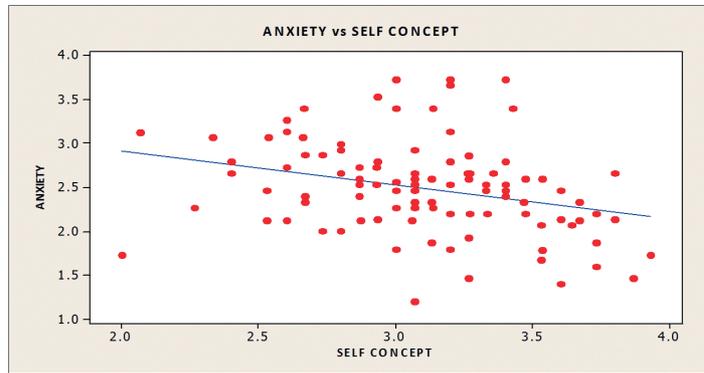


Figure 1: Scatter plot of anxiety and self concept

Table 1: Summary of results for regression analysis of the variables self concept and anxiety

Regression Statistics	
Multiple R	0.293934
R Square	0.086397
Adjusted R Square	0.077778
Standard Error	0.494374
Observations	108

ANOVA					
	df	SS	MS	F	Significance F
Regression	1	2.449964	2.449964	10.02416	0.002018
Residual	106	25.90702	0.244406		
Total	107	28.35698			

	Coefficients	Standard Error	t Stat	P-value	Lower 95%	Upper 95%	Lower 95.0%	Upper 95.0%
Intercept	3.688349	0.381974	9.65603	3.33E-16	2.931049	4.445649	2.931049	4.445649
X Variable 1	<b>-0.38684</b>	0.122183	-3.1661	0.002018	-0.62908	-0.1446	-0.62908	-0.1446

**4.0 Results**  
**Hypothesis 1**

Our first hypothesis predicted that there is an inverse relationship between a persons' self-concept and one's anxieties. People who have a low perception of themselves and their value will tend to have more anxieties in life than those with a better self-concept. Based on responses from the participants, we performed regression analysis on the variables of self- concept and anxiety with the condition that self concept is our independent variable. Figure 1 shows

the scatter plot for anxiety and self-concept while Table 1 presents the results of the regression analysis. The downward slope indicated in the scatter plot shows the inverse relationship between anxiety and self-concept. Furthermore, our regression equation of  $y = 3.69 - 0.387x$  (where  $y =$  anxiety and  $x =$  self-concept) points to a slope of  $-0.387$ . This means that, for every decrease of  $0.387$  in self-concept, there is a corresponding increase of  $1$  in anxiety. The negative slope in this analysis supports our first hypothesis.

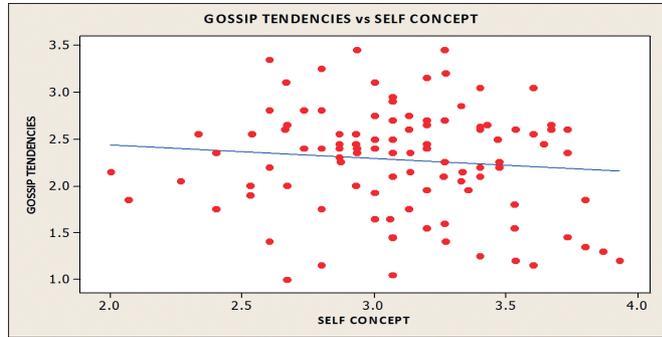


Figure 2: Scatter plot of gossip tendencies and self concept

Table 2: Summary of results for regression analysis of the variables gossip tendencies and self concept

Regression Statistics	
Multiple R	0.1017
R Square	0.010343
Adjusted R Square	0.001007
Standard Error	0.563502
Observations	108

ANOVA					
	df	SS	MS	F	Significance F
Regression	1	0.351769	0.351769	1.107813	0.294951
Residual	106	33.65868	0.317535		
Total	107	34.01045			

	Coefficients	Standard Error	t Stat	P-value	Lower 95%	Upper 95%	Lower 95.0%	Upper 95.0%
Intercept	2.732983	0.435385	6.277167	7.7E-09	1.86979	3.596176	1.86979	3.596176
X Variable 1	<b>-0.14658</b>	0.139268	-1.05253	0.294951	-0.4227	0.129529	-0.4227	0.129529

**Hypothesis 2**

We proposed, in our second hypothesis, an inverse relationship between a person’s self-concept and gossip tendencies. We predicted that people who have poor self- concept will tend to gossip more. This may be because by gossiping about other people, they will redirect their attention from their own insecurities to those of others’ misfortunes. It can also be a way for those persons to convey, consciously or subconsciously, their aspiration to be like the person they gossiped about. Based on responses from the participants, we performed regression analysis on the variables of self-concept and gossip tendencies with the condition that self- concept is our independent

variable. Figure 2 shows the scatter plot for gossip tendencies and self-concept while Table 2 presents the results of the regression analysis. It can be noted that the downward slope indicated in the scatter plot is not very distinct. While it points to an inverse relationship between gossip tendencies and self-concept, the statistical relationship is not very significant. In addition, the regression equation of  $y = 2.73 - 0.147x$  (where  $y =$  gossip and  $x =$  self-concept) shows that for every 0.147 decrease in self-concept, there is a corresponding increase of 1 for gossip tendencies. While the results already support our second hypothesis, we suggest that this relationship be studied in more depth. Since self- concept encompasses self-

image, self-esteem, and ideal self, it may be more ideal to focus on one or each of these three aspects in relation to the person’s gossip tendencies (e.g. self-esteem versus gossip tendencies).

**Hypothesis 3**

Our third hypothesis predicted that there is a direct relationship between a person’s anxieties and one’s tendency to gossip. The functions of gossip (Foster, 2004) pertaining to information, entertainment, intimacy, and influence all have the potential to appease a person’s anxieties. As such, the more a person becomes anxious, the more the person is inclined to gossip. Based on responses from the participants, we performed regression

analysis on the variables of anxiety and gossip tendencies with the condition that anxiety is our independent variable. Figure 3 shows the scatter plot for gossip tendencies and anxiety while Table 3 presents the results of the regression analysis. The recognizable upward slope indicated in the scatter plot shows a strong positive or direct relationship between gossip tendencies and anxiety. The regression equation of  $y = 0.963 + 0.529x$  (where  $y =$  gossip tendencies and  $x =$  anxiety) points to a positive slope of 0.529. This means that, for every increase of 0.529 in anxiety, there is a corresponding increase of 1 in gossip tendencies. The positive slope in this analysis supports our third hypothesis.

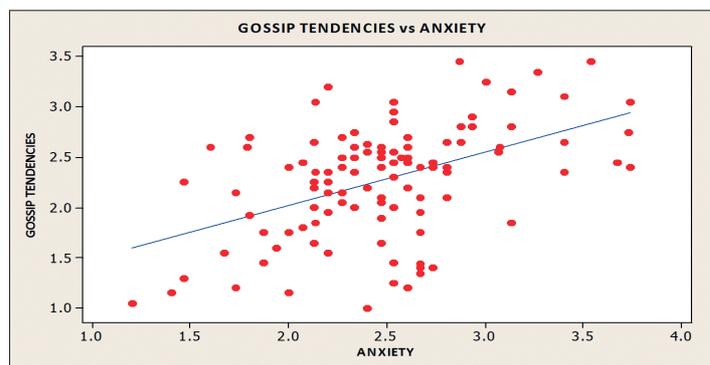


Figure 3: Scatter plot of gossip tendencies and anxiety

Table 3: Summary of results for regression analysis of the variables gossip tendencies and anxiety

Regression Statistics	
Multiple R	0.48278
R Square	0.233076
Adjusted R Square	0.225841
Standard Error	0.496054
Observations	108

ANOVA					
	df	SS	MS	F	Significance F
Regression	1	7.927035	7.927035	32.21456	1.21E-07
Residual	106	26.08341	0.24607		
Total	107	34.01045			

	Coefficients	Standard Error	t Stat	P-value	Lower 95%	Upper 95%	Lower 95.0%	Upper 95.0%
Intercept	0.962631	0.236667	4.067454	9.16E-05	0.493416	1.431846	0.493416	1.431846
X Variable 1	<b>0.52872</b>	0.093154	5.675787	1.21E-07	0.344034	0.713405	0.344034	0.713405

## 5.0 Discussion

All three hypotheses were modestly supported by the results of the study conducted. In an attempt to establish a relationship between a person's self-concept, anxieties, and tendencies to gossip, we were able to ascertain various associations. For one, the poorer a person's perception of oneself (i.e. self-concept), the more anxious the person is. This can be inferred from the incongruence among the three aspects of self-concept (i.e. self-image, self-esteem, and ideal self). The less congruent the three aspects are, the more room there is for self-doubt, uncertainties, and apprehensions. This, in turn, has the potential to increase a person's anxieties. The responses we have analyzed through regression showed a negative slope, indicating the inverse relationship between a person's self-concept and anxieties. Thus, the poorer a person's self-concept, the more anxieties the person is likely to entertain. Secondly, what the person gossips and who is gossiped about can be a manifestation of a person's view of oneself. For example, choosing to talk about someone behind their backs can be a way for a person to elevate one's poor self-concept by pointing out the troubles of others. Therefore, the poorer one's self-concept is, the higher is the tendency to gossip. Our results indicated this negative relationship, albeit the downward slope was observed to be not very distinct. This means that there is a negative relationship between self-concept and gossip tendencies; however, the relationship is not very significant. This can be caused by the magnitude of the theory of self-concept. Considering that various factors come into play when one talks about self-concept, it may be more accurate to consider gossip tendencies in relation to a specific element of the self. Finally, we posited that there is a positive connection between a person's anxieties and gossip tendencies. We expect that a person who entertains a lot of apprehensions,

fears, doubts, and anxieties is likely to gossip more in order to ease one's worries. The responses we have analyzed strongly supported this. There is a very clear upward slope in the regression analysis for anxiety and gossip tendencies, indicating that as one grows more anxious, one is more likely to engage in gossip.

The results of this study not only underlie the statistical significance of the relationships between the variables of self-concept and anxieties to a person's gossip tendencies, more importantly, they confirm the practical significance of the relationships tested.

## 6.0 Conclusion

For most people, religion, and cultures all across the globe, "gossip" as an activity has received quite a notorious reputation. Persons who are labeled as gossips are ordinarily prejudged as those who have nothing better to do than ruin the lives of the people around them by spreading stories behind their backs. While it is true that gossip has had its fair share of adverse effects, this study revealed that people's gossip tendencies are related to their self-perception as well as their anxieties. Therefore, persons who gossip more than others may actually be sending a message about their insecurities and apprehensions in life. The findings of this study have contributed to an awareness of the versatility of gossip, and the multifaceted reasons behind a person's gossip tendencies. Being aware that self-concept and anxiety are possible explanations to a person's gossip tendencies can lead to a more perceptive view towards gossiping and gossipers. Since gossip is ubiquitous, people and organizations can use this view to ascertain the root of the presence of gossip and the reasons behind the gossip tendencies of others in order to design preventive and/or corrective measures, or simply to broaden one's understanding of the actions of others.

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