

The evaluation of negative gossipers: testing the role of group membership and social anxiety

Brodie Patton & Hirotaka Imada

To cite this article: Brodie Patton & Hirotaka Imada (2025) The evaluation of negative gossipers: testing the role of group membership and social anxiety, Cogent Psychology, 12:1, 2489219, DOI: [10.1080/23311908.2025.2489219](https://doi.org/10.1080/23311908.2025.2489219)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311908.2025.2489219>



© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 08 Apr 2025.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

The evaluation of negative gossipers: testing the role of group membership and social anxiety

Brodie Patton and Hirotaka Imada

Department of Psychology, Royal Holloway, University of London, Egham, United Kingdom

ABSTRACT

While negative gossip serves important functions for groups, previous studies have revealed that individuals negatively evaluate negative gossipers. Given the ubiquity of gossip, there should be conditions under which negative gossipers get away with negative evaluations. In our study (N=386), we tested the hypothesis that individuals evaluate ingroup negative gossipers more leniently than outgroup negative gossipers and that those high in social anxiety evaluate negative gossipers more negatively than those low in social anxiety, potentially regardless of the group membership of negative gossipers. We found that individuals liked and evaluated negative gossipers less and less favourably than non-gossipers regardless of their group membership, inconsistently with our hypothesis. Contrary to our hypothesis, we found that individuals high in social anxiety liked and evaluated negative gossipers more and more favourably than those low in social anxiety.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 15 January 2025
Revised 31 March 2025
Accepted 1 April 2025

KEYWORDS

Negative gossip; group membership; social anxiety; gossip evaluation; intergroup processes

SUBJECTS

Social Psychology;
Psychological Science;
Mental Health

Introduction

Gossip, the act of a sender communicating to a receiver about a target who is absent or unaware of the content (Dores Cruz, Nieper, et al., 2021), is an omnipresent form of social interactions and plays a pivotal role in guiding day-to-day social behaviours (Dores Cruz, Thielmann, et al., 2021). Among various forms of social interactions, gossiping is particularly frequent and influential. Gossip, for instance, occupies a significant portion of daily conversations across contexts (Robbins & Karan, 2020). It serves important social functions such as enhancing social bonding, regulating relationships, and providing entertainment (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012; Peters & Kashima, 2015). In addition, gossip plays a critical role in clarifying and maintaining social norms (Eriksson et al., 2021; Imada et al., 2022; Molho et al., 2020; Peters et al., 2017) as well as promoting prosociality (Imada, *in press*; Imada et al., 2021; Wu et al., 2015).

Negative gossip, i.e. gossip about untrustworthy others and norm violators, is particularly useful as this allows individuals to punish them and clarify and enforce normative behaviours (Sun et al., 2023). Nevertheless, previous studies have shown that

individuals who engage in negative gossip (henceforth, negative gossipers) are often perceived negatively (Farley, 2011; Shinohara et al., 2021; Turner et al., 2003). Negative gossipers thus face a unique paradox: they serve their society but are punished for it.

To disentangle the puzzle, Testori and colleagues tested the hypothesis that individuals consider motivations of negative gossip when evaluating negative gossipers (Testori et al., 2024). Supporting this, they experimentally demonstrated that individuals base their trust on their inference of gossip motivation, showing that they trust gossipers more if they infer prosocial rather than prosocial motivations. They also found that they often misinterpret prosocially motivated negative gossip as selfishly motivated, and the perceived selfish gossip motivation led to the decreased level of trust towards negative gossipers. Overall, Testori et al. (2024) suggest that it is perceived gossip motivation that determines the evaluation of negative gossipers. Building on this work, our first aim of the present research was to test the hypothesis that individuals evaluate negative gossipers more leniently when they are ingroup members than outgroup members.

Previous research has consistently shown that individuals evaluate and interact with ingroup

CONTACT Hirotaka Imada  Hirotaka.Imada@rhul.ac.uk

© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

members more favourably than outgroup members (Imada, Mifune, & Shimizu, 2024; Tajfel et al., 1971). Borinca and colleagues found that individuals tend to perceive prosocial actions by ingroup members as being more prosocially motivated than those by outgroup members (Borinca et al., 2021, 2022). In addition, previous work suggests individuals, by default, assume that reputation systems (i.e. indirect reciprocity) are bounded by group membership (Imada, Mifune, & Shimizu, 2024; Imada, Mifune, & Zibell, 2024; Imada et al., 2023), implying that negative gossip by ingroup members, but not outgroup members, is exclusively seen as group-serving. Taken together, we expect that ingroup membership buffers against negative evaluations for gossipers. Specifically, we hypothesized that individuals display negative evaluations towards gossipers (vs. non-gossipers) only when gossipers are outgroup members (Hypothesis 1).

The second aim of the research is to investigate the potential role of individual differences in the evaluation of negative gossipers, which has been understudied in the existing literature (Peters & Kashima, 2015; Testori et al., 2024). More specifically, we examined the role of social anxiety, a persistent fear of social scrutiny (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-5TM, 2013). Social anxiety is associated with reputational concern, in particular, fear of negative evaluations (Winton et al., 1995). Past experimental work suggests that the potential to be gossiped about elicits reputational concern as gossip is a tool to disseminate reputational information (Imada, in press.; Imada et al., 2021; Wu et al., 2015). Taken together, social anxiety may influence how individuals perceive negative gossipers whose existence may amplify the concern over earning a negative reputation. Specifically, we expected that those high in social anxiety evaluate negative gossipers less favourably than those low in social anxiety (Hypothesis 2). We anticipated that the effect of social anxiety might nullify the effect of ingroup membership; those with high social anxiety may perceive negative gossipers negatively regardless of their group membership.

Overall, we experimentally examined the role of group membership and social anxiety in shaping the evaluation of negative gossipers. By exploring those variables, our research furthers the understanding of the ways in which social context and individual traits together shape the welfare of gossipers. We have data, study material, and analysis codes available at <https://osf.io/3bz8k/>.

Method

We distributed the survey using a snowballing sampling method during the two-month period. We initially received 423 respondents, and we excluded 39 participants who took too short or too long to complete the survey, using the median absolute deviation criterion (Leys et al., 2013). Thus, we had a final sample size of 386 ($M_{age} = 29.19$, $SD = 7.92$, 188 male, 187 female, 11 chose not to disclose their gender identity). We have obtained ethics approval from Royal Holloway, University of London Department of Psychology Ethics Committees prior to data collection (PSY_UG/51).

After giving consent, participants took part in an online study consisting of four sections. In the first section, we measured social anxiety, using a 10-item Likert scale (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-5TM, 2013). Participants responded to given statements by indicating the frequency, from *1=never* to *5=all of the time*, with which they have experienced behaviours, thoughts and feelings in social contexts over the past seven days (e.g. 'During the past seven days, I have felt moments of sudden terror, fear or fright in social situations', $\alpha = 0.927$). In the second section, we created experimental groups using the minimal group paradigm (Tajfel et al., 1971). Specifically, participants were presented with seven pairs of paintings and asked to choose one they preferred. For each pair, one was by Paul Klee and the other was by Wassily Kandinsky. Participants received feedback on their artistic preference and were categorized into either Group A (Klee) or Group B (Kandinsky).

In the third section, participants were randomly assigned to a non-gossiper or gossiper condition. Participants in the control (i.e. non-gossiper) condition read, 'Think about a member of Group A (Klee)/Group B (Kandinsky) who spends little time talking about other people when they are not around'. Those in the gossiper condition read 'Think about a member of Group A (Klee)/Group B (Kandinsky) who spends a lot of time saying negative things about other people when they are not around'. We thus orthogonally manipulated the group membership of the target and whether the target frequently gossiped about others. The manipulation instructions were adapted from (Farley, 2011). Participants then rated the target on four dimensions (likable, trustworthy, influential, and competent), using a scale from *1=strongly disagree* to *5=strongly agree*. We used likability and trustworthiness as focal dependent variables. Other variables in the survey were measured for exploratory purposes (e.g. influence

and competence, willingness to conform to the target's behaviour and to befriend the target, and perceived functions of the target's behaviour). Results associated with those measures can be found in online supplementary material. In the final block, we introduced measurements irrelevant to the present research. See the study material for more details. Lastly, participants were debriefed and thanked.

Results

Likability

We conducted a moderation analysis in which likability of the target was predicted by group membership (ingroup vs. outgroup), condition (control vs. gossip), social anxiety, and their interactions (Table 1). The main effect of social anxiety was significant, suggesting that as social anxiety increases, likability also increases ($\beta = .287, t=4.124, p < .001$), contrary to Hypothesis 2. In addition, replicating the previous findings (Farley, 2011), the main effect of condition was significant, suggesting that the target in the control condition is rated as more likeable than in the gossip condition ($\beta = 1.045, t=6.311, p < .001$). Contrary to Hypothesis 1, we did not find a significant effect of group as well as a significant effect of the group x condition interaction (Table 1). Yet, we

found a significant interaction between social anxiety and condition ($\beta = -.230, t=-3.313, p = .001$). We further probed the interaction with a simple slope analysis. We found that the effect of social anxiety was significant only in the gossip condition such as social anxiety increased, likability of the negative gossip increased (Figure 1), $\beta = -.230, t=-3.313, p = .001$. The other effects were not significant (see Table 1).

Trustworthiness

We conducted the same analysis on trustworthiness (Table 1). The main effect of social anxiety was significant, suggesting that as social anxiety increases, trustworthiness evaluation also increases, $\beta = .239, t=3.242, p = .001$. In addition, the main effect of condition was significant, suggesting that the target in the control condition was rated as more trustworthy than in the gossip condition, $\beta = 1.227, t=6.987, p < .001$. We found a significant interaction between social anxiety and condition, $\beta = -.287, t=-3.889, p = .001$. We found that the effect of social anxiety was significant only in the gossip condition such that higher social anxiety was associated with higher trustworthiness evaluations (Figure 1). The other effects were not significant (see Table 1).

Table 1. Regression results.

Terms	Likability			Trustworthiness		
	β	t	p	β	t	p
SA	.287	4.124	<.001	.239	3.242	.001
Condition	1.045	6.311	<.001	1.227	6.987	<.001
Group	-.106	-.641	.522	.006	.032	.974
SA x Condition	-.23	-3.313	.001	-.287	-3.889	.001
SA x Group	.065	.939	.348	-.002	-.054	.957
Condition x Group	.038	.23	.819	-.014	-.081	.936
SA x Condition x Group	-.021	-.302	.762	-.02	-.277	.782

Note. SA: social anxiety.

Discussion

This study investigated whether group membership of gossipers and social anxiety shapes the likability and trustworthiness of gossipers. Replicating the previous studies (Farley, 2011; Shinohara et al., 2021; Turner et al., 2003), we found that gossipers are generally evaluated more negatively than non-gossipers. Contrary to Hypothesis 2, individuals with high levels of social anxiety evaluated gossipers more positively than those low in social anxiety. Overall, we revealed

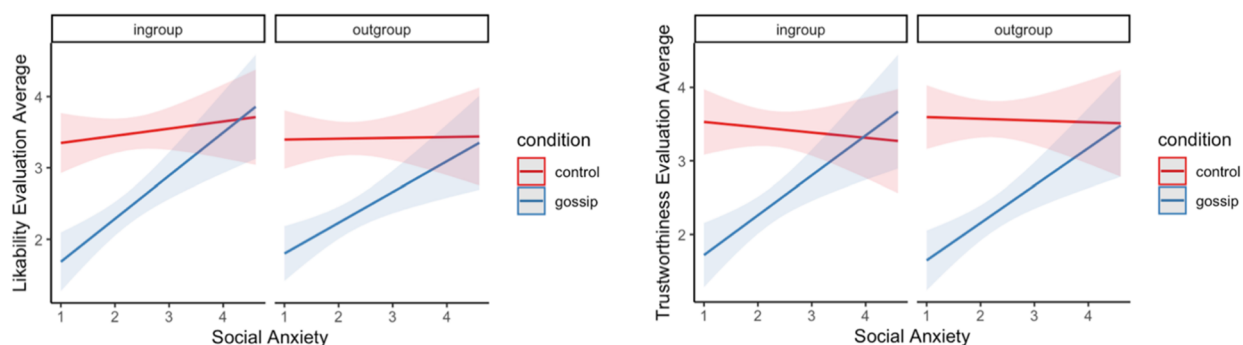


Figure 1. Moderation probe.

Note. The left and right panels present the moderation plots for likability and trustworthiness, respectively.

one condition of the gossipers' paradox: gossipers do not receive negative evaluations at least from those who are high in social anxiety.

Contrary to Hypothesis 1, we did not find that gossipers' group membership influenced the evaluation of gossipers. In addition, we did not find that the evaluation of the target in the control condition was higher in the ingroup condition than in the outgroup condition, failing to replicate ingroup bias (Tajfel et al., 1971). We followed the online minimal group procedure that successfully induced ingroup bias in numerous experimental studies including those specifically on gossip motivations, the willingness to gossip, and expectations about others' gossip (gossip motivation, the tendency to gossip, and expectation about others' gossip Imada et al., 2022; Imada, Mifune, & Zibell, 2024), but we used a fewer number of tasks in the artistic preference compared to previous studies (Imada, Mifune, & Shimizu, 2024; Imada et al., 2023). This might have impacted the strength of the minimal group induction. The effect of group membership in social dynamics involving gossip is relatively understudied and it is sensible that future work revisits the impact of ingroup membership in shaping gossip evaluations with a stronger manipulation (e.g., focusing on naturally formed groups).

Regarding our finding on the relationship between social anxiety and gossip evaluations, this first suggests that gossip might help those high in social anxiety feel a sense of control and predictability in social contexts. Additionally, people high in social anxiety might rely heavily on negative gossip to avoid interacting with potentially harmful individuals. Overall, our study suggests that negative gossipers may be perceived as useful allies who help mitigate social anxiety by having a sense of control over social interactions and guiding them away from potentially harmful social interactions.

Since social anxiety is associated with reputational concern (Winton et al., 1995), our finding can be interpreted as suggesting that the gossiper's paradox is present only in a context where people have relatively low social anxiety, i.e. reputational concern. Previous documented cultural differences in chronic fear of negative evaluation (Kusakabe et al., 2024). Specifically, Kusakabe et al. (2024) found that the tendency to be concerned about earning a negative reputation was negatively associated with relational mobility, how much opportunities a society affords individuals to select and replace social relationships based on their own preferences (Yuki & Schug, 2020). Taken together with our findings, future cross-cultural work may reveal cultural differences in

how severely and negatively individuals generally evaluate gossipers.

Acknowledgements

This work is part of the final year project conducted jointly with Ishaq Azad, Marla Leyhausen, Charline Westfield, and Pui (Ariel) Wong. We thank their effort in developing the study material, obtaining ethics approval, and sharing ups and downs while completing the project.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

About the authors

Brodie Patton (BSc) was an undergraduate student at Royal Holloway, University of London.

Hirotaaka Imada (PhD) is a lecturer at Royal Holloway, University of London, and a visiting associate professor at the Research Institute for Future Design at the Kochi University of Technology. His work focuses on intergroup relations.

References

- Beersma, B., & Van Kleef, G. A. (2012). Why people gossip: An empirical analysis of social motives, antecedents, and consequences. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 42(11), 2640–2670. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1559-1816.2012.00956.x>
- Borinca, I., Andrighetto, L., Valsecchi, G., & Berent, J. (2022). Ingroup norms shape understanding of outgroup prosocial behaviors. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, 25(4), 1084–1106. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430220987604>
- Borinca, I., Falomir-Pichastor, J. M., Andrighetto, L., & Durante, F. (2021). Outgroup prejudice and perceptions of prosocial intergroup behaviors. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 51(1), 40–53. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2712>
- Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders: DSM-5™. (2013). 5th ed., pp. xlv, 947. American Psychiatric Publishing, Inc. <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.books.9780890425596>
- Dores Cruz, T. D., Nieper, A. S., Testori, M., Martinescu, E., & Beersma, B. (2021). An integrative definition and framework to study gossip. *Group & Organization Management*, 46(2), 252–285. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1059601121992887>
- Dores Cruz, T. D., Thielmann, I., Columbus, S., Molho, C., Wu, J., Righetti, F., de Vries, R. E., Koutsoumpis, A., van Lange, P. A. M., Beersma, B., & Balliet, D. (2021). Gossip and reputation in everyday life. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London. Series B, Biological Sciences*, 376(1838), 20200301. <https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2020.0301>
- Eriksson, K., Strimling, P., Gelfand, M., Wu, J., Abernathy, J., Akotia, C. S., Aldashev, A., Andersson, P. A., Andrighetto, G., Anum, A., Arian, G., Aycan, Z., Bagherian, F., Barrera, D., Basnight-Brown, D., Batkeyev, B., Belaus, A., Berezina, E., Björnstjerna, M., ... Van Lange, P. A. M. (2021). Perceptions of the appropriate response to norm viola-

- tion in 57 societies. *Nature Communications*, 12(1), 1481. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-021-21602-9>
- Farley, S. D. (2011). Is gossip power? The inverse relationships between gossip, power, and likability. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 41(5), 574–579. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.821>
- Imada, H. (in press). The relative effectiveness of positive and negative gossip in promoting prosocial giving: The examination of the valence of gossip content and reputational consequences. *Japanese Psychological Research*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jpr.12473>
- Imada, H., Hopthrow, T., & Abrams, D. (2021). The role of positive and negative gossip in promoting prosocial behavior. *Evolutionary Behavioral Sciences*, 15(3), 285–291. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ebs0000218>
- Imada, H., Mifune, N., & Shimizu, H. (2024). Psychological mechanisms underlying ingroup favouritism in cooperation: Revisiting the reputation management and expectation hypotheses. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, 27(8), 1914–1930. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13684302241239860>
- Imada, H., Mifune, N., & Zibell, H. (2024). Group-bounded indirect reciprocity and intergroup gossip. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 115, 104657. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2024.104657>
- Imada, H., Romano, A., & Mifune, N. (2023). Dynamic indirect reciprocity: When is indirect reciprocity bounded by group membership? *Evolution and Human Behavior*, 44(4), 373–383. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evolhumbehav.2023.05.002>
- Imada, H., Rullo, M., Hopthrow, T., Van de Vyver, J., & Zagefka, H. (2022). Gossip about in-group and out-group norm deviations. *Comprehensive Results in Social Psychology*, 6(1–3), 113–133. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23743603.2022.2090327>
- Kusakabe, H., Maeda, Y., & Yuki, M. (2024). Where does the cultural difference in rejection avoidance come from? The role of relational mobility and reputational expectation. *Japanese Journal of Social Psychology*, 40(1), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.14966/jssp.2023-025>
- Leys, C., Ley, C., Klein, O., Bernard, P., & Licata, L. (2013). Detecting outliers: Do not use standard deviation around the mean, use absolute deviation around the median. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 49(4), 764–766. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2013.03.013>
- Molho, C., Tybur, J. M., Van Lange, P. A. M., & Balliet, D. (2020). Direct and indirect punishment of norm violations in daily life. *Nature Communications*, 11(1), 3432. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-020-17286-2>
- Peters, K., Jetten, J., Radova, D., & Austin, K. (2017). Gossiping about deviance: Evidence that deviance spurs the gossip that builds bonds. *Psychological Science*, 28(11), 1610–1619. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797617716918>
- Peters, K., & Kashima, Y. (2015). Bad habit or social good? How perceptions of gossip morality are related to gossip content. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 45(6), 784–798. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2123>
- Robbins, M. L., & Karan, A. (2020). Who gossips and how in everyday life? *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 11(2), 185–195. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550619837000>
- Shinohara, A., Kanakogi, Y., Okumura, Y., & Kobayashi, T. (2021). How do children evaluate the gossip of negative gossip? *Japanese Psychological Research*, 63(2), 111–117. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jpr.12279>
- Sun, T., Schilpzand, P., & Liu, Y. (2023). Workplace gossip: An integrative review of its antecedents, functions, and consequences. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 44(2), 311–334. <https://doi.org/10.1002/job.2653>
- Tajfel, H., Billig, M. G., Bundy, R. P., & Flament, C. (1971). Social categorization and intergroup behaviour. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 1(2), 149–178. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2420010202>
- Testori, M., Dores Cruz, T. D., & Beersma, B. (2024). Punishing or praising gossipers: How people interpret the motives driving negative gossip shapes its consequences. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 18(2), e12924. <https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12924>
- Turner, M. M., Mazur, M. A., Wendel, N., & Winslow, R. (2003). Relational ruin or social glue? The joint effect of relationship type and gossip valence on liking, trust, and expertise. *Communication Monographs*, 70(2), 129–141. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0363775032000133782>
- Winton, E. C., Clark, D. M., & Edelmann, R. J. (1995). Social anxiety, fear of negative evaluation and the detection of negative emotion in others. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 33(2), 193–196. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0005-7967\(94\)e0019-f](https://doi.org/10.1016/0005-7967(94)e0019-f)
- Wu, J., Balliet, D., & Van Lange, P. A. M. (2015). When does gossip promote generosity? Indirect reciprocity under the shadow of the future. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 6(8), 923–930. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550615595272>
- Yuki, M., & Schug, J. (2020). Psychological consequences of relational mobility. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 32, 129–132. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2019.07.029>