

Gossip in Organizations: What Do We Know and Where Are We Heading?

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Abstract: Workplace gossip is a pervasive form of informal organizational communication, yet its conceptual boundaries, antecedents, and consequences remain fragmented across the management literature. This paper reviews research on workplace gossip using a systematic literature review based on the SPAR-4-SLR protocol. The review covers 216 articles identified in Web of Science and Scopus and combines bibliometric mapping with content analysis. The findings show that research has increasingly moved beyond treating gossip as uniformly dysfunctional and now emphasizes its positive and negative forms, multiple functions, and role-dependent effects. We organize the determinants of gossip into individual, relational, leadership-related, organizational/team-level, and target-characteristic factors, and map its consequences for senders, receivers, targets, and teams or organizations. Building on the definitional discussion, we propose a management-oriented conceptualization of gossip as informal, evaluative communication about an absent or unaware third party that falls outside direct professional responsibilities. The review concludes by identifying boundary, process, configurational, and digitally oriented directions for future research.

Keywords: workplace gossip; informal communication; organizational behavior; systematic literature review; gossip triad; antecedents; consequences

INTRODUCTION

Every organization is created, sustained, and animated through ongoing discourse among its members (Boje et al., 2004). Within this discursive fabric, gossip – understood as communication between a sender and a receiver about an absent or unaware third party (Dores Cruz et al., 2021) – constitutes a fundamental yet often overlooked dimension of organizational life. Despite being an omnipresent feature of informal organizational communication, workplace gossip received relatively limited attention in mainstream management research until the late 2010s (Sun et al., 2023; Wax et al., 2022). This neglect may partly stem from managerial preferences for formal, structured communication channels such as meetings, emails, and official reports, which are easier to document and control. Informal exchanges, by contrast, are spontaneous, unpredictable, and more difficult to capture empirically. Since 2018, gossip has

gained increasing prominence in management research, yet this aspect of organizational life remains conceptually ambiguous and is frequently misunderstood. The growing interest in such informal interactions – whether casual hallway conversations, spontaneous encounters in break rooms, or virtual side chats – is related to the role they play in organizations. They frequently serve as conduits for the exchange of organizational knowledge, including not only official or job-related information but also rumors, speculation, and social evaluations. These exchanges shape perceptions, influence workplace dynamics, and contribute to organizational culture. Despite their significance, gossip and similar informal communicative acts remain under-theorized and insufficiently conceptualized in current scholarship. Despite the rapid growth of research and several systematic literature reviews published in recent years on gossip in organizations, numerous questions remain unanswered and several areas still require clarification. To address this gap, the aim of this paper is to critically assess existing studies of workplace gossip and propose a refined conceptualization that captures its distinctive features in the organizational context. The study begins with a systematic literature review (SLR), which provides the basis for a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon, its determinants, and its outcomes.

RESEARCH METHODS

The methodological foundation of the paper is a systematic literature review based on the SPAR-4-SLR protocol (Paul et al., 2021). The review focused on peer-reviewed studies in management, applied psychology, and economics indexed in the Web of Science (WoS) and Scopus databases. The guiding research question concerned the current state of knowledge on workplace gossip and the identification of its defining characteristics. The search was conducted in December 2025. The search strategy employed the keyword "gossip*" across all years and disciplines. In WoS, 5,804 results were retrieved, of which 276 articles were relevant to management, applied psychology, business, operations research, economics, and industrial relations. A similar search in Scopus yielded 5,745 papers, of which 239 fell within business, management and accounting, economics, and related disciplines. After duplicates were removed using Python-based processing of RIS files, 359 articles were retained for initial screening.

Screening was conducted with the assistance of ASReview, an AI-based tool that helps researchers prioritize articles for inclusion after an initial supervised coding phase. Although the process was AI-supported, final inclusion decisions were made manually. Following screening, 216 articles were selected for full-text analysis. These were retrieved from academic repositories and publisher databases, including Google Scholar, ProQuest, EBSCOhost, Wiley, ScienceDirect, Academia.edu, and ResearchGate. Bibliometric and content analyses were subsequently conducted using Biblioshiny (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017), an R-based interface for bibliometric mapping.

Apart from the natural focus on gossip (105 occurrences), the studies emphasized the workplace as the main setting in which gossip occurs (55 occurrences) (Greenslade-Yeats et al., 2025). A substantial portion of the literature focused on behavioral aspects related to the gossiper, receiver, or target (Kniffin & Wilson, 2010), with performance emerging as an important consequence of gossiping (Kim et al., 2025). Determinants of gossiping behavior were frequently linked to leadership – particularly abusive supervision (Kuo et al., 2015) – and to power-related issues (Fan & Dawson, 2022). Many studies also had a theoretical focus, reflected in the range of models proposed in the literature (Chang & Kuo, 2021; Zinko et al., 2017). Negative gossip was the most frequently studied valence (Ajay & Mudiyansele, 2025), while positive gossip was less common, although still clearly present in the literature (Wax et al., 2022). Other prominent constructs included communication (Fehr & Sutter, 2019), perceptions (Khan & Chaudhary, 2023a, 2023b), trust (Grosser et al., 2010), and conservation of resources theory (Liu et al., 2020) as an underlying theoretical perspective.

In the next step, key topics were identified using trend-topic analysis. The results are presented in Figure 2.

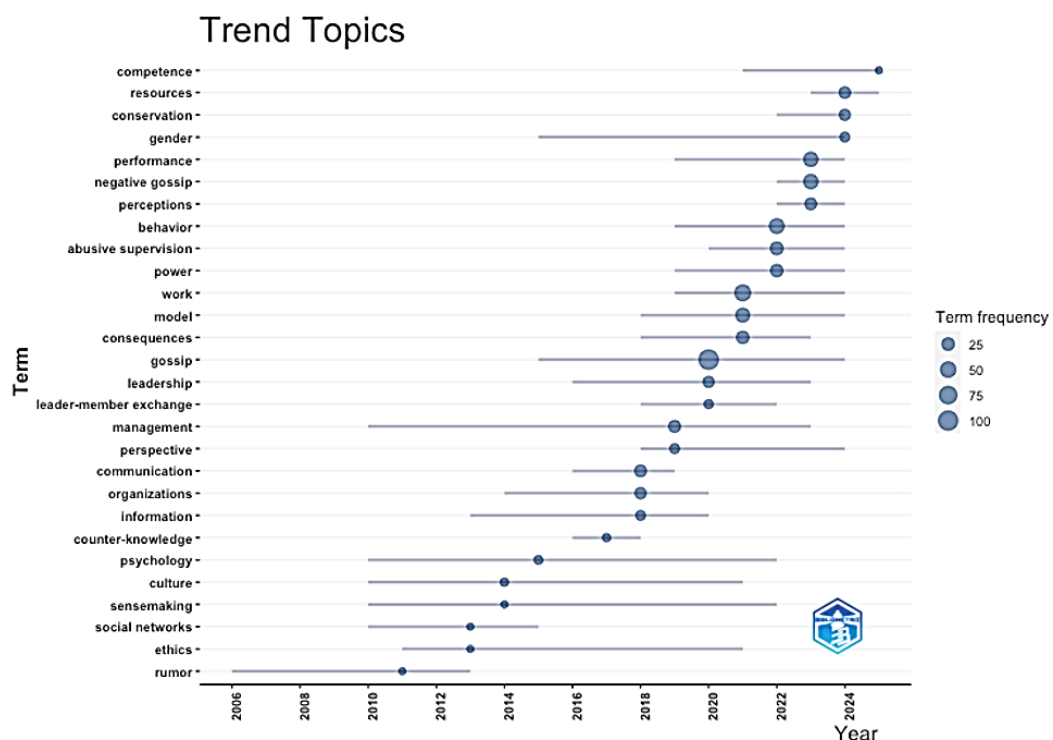


Fig. 2 Trend topics

Source: self-elaboration based on keywords from the analyzed literature

Trend-topic analysis complements simple frequency counts by showing when particular concepts became prominent in the literature. The most recent areas of growing interest include competence (Zhu, Cheng, & Zou, 2025), resources (Murtaza et al., 2023), gender (Li et al., 2024), and conservation of resources theory (Khan et al., 2023).

In the final step, a co-word analysis of the 50 most frequently occurring keywords was performed. The results are presented in Figure 3.

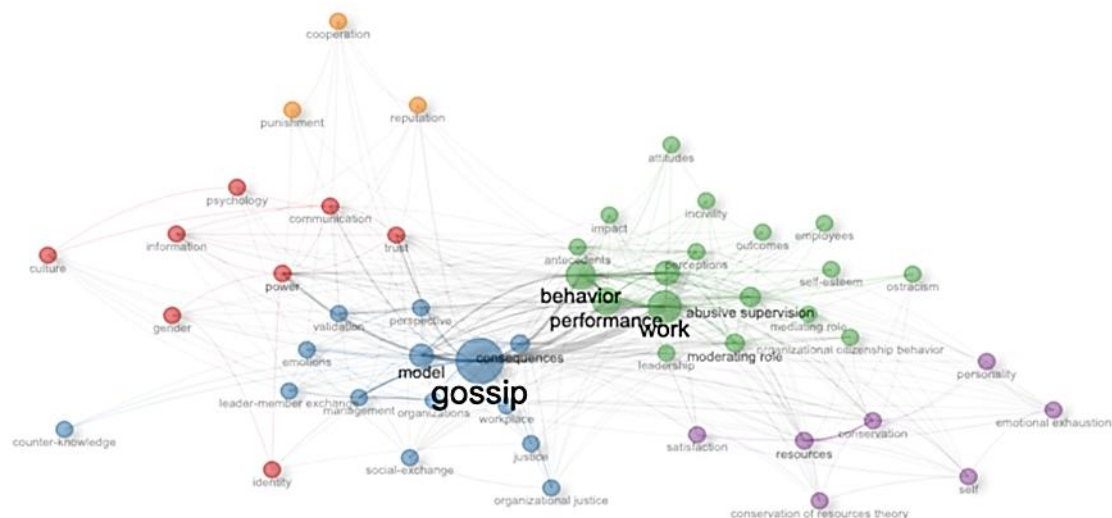


Fig. 3 Co-word analysis results

Source: self-elaboration based on keywords from the analyzed studies

The systematic literature review reveals five clusters of studies on gossip in organizations. The blue cluster, focused on gossip itself, is associated with consequences (Wang et al., 2025), emotions (Ye et al., 2022), leader-member exchange (Kulik et al., 2008), justice (Varty et al., 2021), and knowledge flow (Cegarra-Navarro & Martelo-Landroguez, 2020). These studies concentrate on explaining the phenomenon and developing general conceptualizations. The second cluster (green) focuses on behavioral aspects (Martin & Hine, 2005), performance (Xiao et al., 2025), and leadership, including abusive supervision (Wei et al., 2023), while also addressing antecedents (Waseem et al., 2024) and the organizational relevance of gossip (Tan et al., 2021). The third cluster (red) highlights power (Kakarika et al., 2024), trust (Bencsik & Juhasz, 2020), identity (Zhang et al., 2025), information sharing (Cheng et al., 2024), and culture (Myers, 2002), with particular emphasis on antecedents of workplace gossip. The fourth cluster (purple) draws attention to conservation of resources theory (Xie et al., 2020) and individual determinants and outcomes, such as satisfaction (Wax et al., 2022), emotional exhaustion (Liu et al., 2020), and personality traits (Spoelma & Hetrick, 2021). Finally, the smallest cluster considers gossip through the lenses of cooperation (Molho et al., 2019), punishment (Schreiber et al., 2025), and reputation (Righi & Takacs, 2022). Overall, the literature focuses on gossip itself (definitions, measurement, and related concepts), its antecedents, determinants, and outcomes, its psychological foundations and implications, and power- and trust-related processes.

DISCUSSION

Gossip in the management literature - the prevailing definitional problem

One of the most influential contributions is the systematic analysis of gossip definitions by Dores Cruz et al. (2021), which synthesized 324 definitions from a variety of fields. Their proposed definition – "a sender communicating to a receiver about a target who is absent or unaware of the content" – is now widely adopted. Although theoretically rigorous and comprehensive in scope, it has limitations when applied to the management context. Specifically, it risks conflating informal gossip with formal professional communication. For instance, a manager discussing a potential promotion with HR without the employee's awareness would technically fall under this definition, even though such communication is a routine, formal aspect of managerial work. The same applies to performance-review discussions between a supervisor and HR: a supervisor may discuss an employee's performance without the employee being present or aware. Although such communication is evaluative and concerns an absent party, it is formal, role-prescribed, and intended to inform institutional decisions rather than informal social exchange. Similarly, a project leader may debrief a team member about another person's contribution after a meeting, for example by noting that an analysis needs to be checked. Although evaluative and focused on an absent party, such communication serves a task-related, instrumental function. These examples illustrate how an overly broad definition may stretch the construct to the point at which it loses its distinctive character.

The methodology used by Dores Cruz et al. (2021) privileges definitional frequency over conceptual nuance. For example, informality was excluded from the final definition because it appeared in only 28.7% of the definitions reviewed, despite being emphasized in numerous management-oriented conceptualizations (e.g., Kuo et al., 2018). The quantitative dominance of definitions originating in fields such as psychology and sociology may therefore have diluted the construct's relevance for organizational studies. Moreover, the definition does not explicitly address the relationship between gossip and work-related duties, potentially blurring the boundary between gossip and formal evaluative communication. Building on Dores Cruz et al. (2021) and the broader organizational gossip literature, we propose that, for the purpose of management studies, gossip can be understood as informal, evaluative communication between a sender and a receiver about an absent or unaware third party, except when such communication is a direct function of professional responsibilities and is expected to result in formal disclosure or institutional action. This approach retains the informal (Mills, 2010) and evaluative (Xie et al., 2024) nature of gossip, preserves the sender-receiver-target structure (Dores Cruz et al., 2021), and restricts the construct to communication that extends beyond the direct job duties of the sender and receiver (Tian et al., 2019).

Mapping the research field on organizational gossip

To briefly synthesize the literature, we first focus on gossip as a process. As emphasized above, gossip is primarily a form of informal communication, but it can occur in both informal settings (e.g., unplanned encounters in corridors, cafeterias, or outside organizational premises) and formal settings (e.g., during planned meetings or through emails, messages, and short notifications; Bencsik et al., 2019). In terms of form, gossip mainly involves verbal or written messages transferred from a sender to a receiver. The gossiper may share information for amusement, simply to make information available to others, to gain power or influence, or for other reasons. For example, attributed intentions may be prosocial, self-serving, or genuine (Greenslade-Yeats et al., 2025). The message may be primarily informational or explicitly evaluative (Fan & Dawson, 2022). Its valence may be positive, negative, or neutral (Lee & Barnes, 2021), and its content may concern behaviors, individuals or groups, achievements, or relationships (Khan & Chaudhary, 2023a, 2023b). The target may be a single third party, a manager, or a group of people.

The list of gossip determinants is extensive, and capturing all of them remains challenging. Nevertheless, the content analysis enabled us to group them into individual, relational, leadership-related, organizational/team-level, and target-characteristic determinants. The resulting categorization is presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Gossip determinants

Determinants	Examples
Individual factors	Narcissism, core self-evaluation (Khan & Chaudhary, 2023a), perceived overqualification (Liu, 2024), work stress (De Clercq et al., 2023)
Relational factors	Trust (Ellwardt et al., 2012), friendship (Grosser et al., 2010), interpersonal conflict (Dijkstra et al., 2014), ostracism (De Clercq, 2022), workplace romance (Sethi & Srivastava, 2024)
Leadership factors	Arrogant leadership (De Clercq et al., 2021), narcissistic leadership (Aboramadan et al., 2021), abusive supervision (DeCoster et al., 2013), authentic leadership (Cheng et al., 2022)
Organizational/team factors	perceived organizational politics (Khan & Chaudhary, 2023a, 2023b), justice (Kim et al., 2019), group structure (Martinescu et al., 2019), organizational change (Bordia et al., 2006)
Target characteristics	political skill (Yu et al., 2024), star status (Xiao et al., 2025), visibility, moral behavior

Source: self-elaboration on the basis of systematic literature review

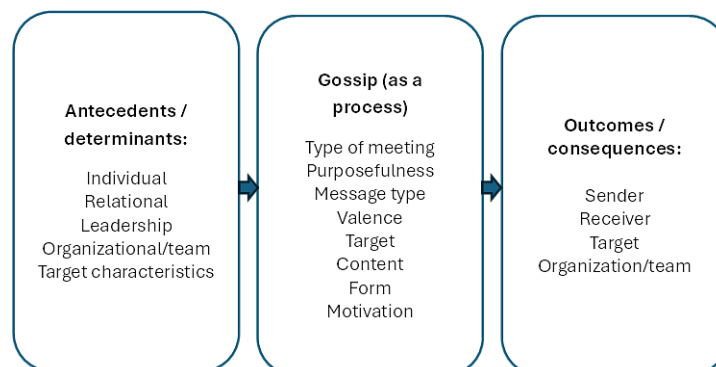
Thus, gossip appears particularly likely to emerge when employees experience strain, relational threat, injustice, uncertainty, or social comparison, whereas supportive leadership, justice, and trust may redirect or suppress negative gossip in the workplace.

The analysis also reveals numerous and diverse outcomes that depend on the role occupied in the gossip episode and on the level of analysis. Table 2 summarizes outcomes of workplace gossip for the different parties involved, covering both individual and team/organizational levels.

Table 2 Analysis of workplace gossip for the various parties involved

Role/level	Gossip results
Sender/actor	Expert power, voluntary turnover (Kim et al., 2025), workplace status (Lian et al., 2023), anxiety, guilt, workplace deviance, impression management toward supervisor (Gao et al., 2024), helping behavior toward coworkers (Zhao & Ma, 2025), work engagement (Zhong, Tang, & Lee, 2024), supervisor avoidance, belonging with coworkers/cooperation (Bonner et al., 2025), helping received from gossip recipient (Outlaw & Baer, 2024), abusive supervision received (Naeem et al., 2019), employee cynicism (Kuo et al., 2015), job performance (De Clercq et al., 2023).
Receiver	Dyadic trust/relationship quality with sender and target (Greenslade-Yeats et al., 2025), state happiness, perceived social exchange quality (Outlaw & Baer, 2024), reflective learning, job performance (Bai et al., 2020), vicarious learning, task performance, interpersonal deviance (Zhu et al., 2022), cognitive/affective rumination, sleep quality, next-morning vitality, work engagement, supervisor-directed OCB (Hu et al., 2024), perceived warmth, interaction avoidance toward sender, willingness to cooperate with sender (Zhu, Cheng, & Zou, 2025), commitment to manager, well-being, team empowerment, job embeddedness (Chang & Kuo, 2021), leader-member exchange, perceived supervisor ostracism (Kuo, Wu, & Lin, 2018).
Target	Task performance (Xie et al., 2020), feedback-seeking behavior (Zhu et al., 2024), thriving at work (Zhu, Wei, & Moin, 2024), life satisfaction (Xie et al., 2024), proactive service performance (Tian et al., 2019), creativity (Liu, Kwan, & Zhang, 2020), social inclusion, OCB (Martinescu, Jansen, & Beersma, 2021), organization-based self-esteem (L.-Z. Wu et al., 2018), knowledge hiding (Zhao et al., 2024), subjective well-being (Cheng et al., 2023), political acts (B. Cheng et al., 2022), proactive behavior (X. Wu et al., 2018), helping behavior (Khalid et al., 2025), service sabotage (Zhang et al., 2025), work engagement (He et al., 2025), career growth (Cheng et al., 2024), work-family conflict (Zhu & Cheng, 2025), family undermining (Zhu & Cheng, 2025), unethical work behavior (Guo et al., 2022), quiet quitting (Srivastava et al., 2024), knowledge sharing (Li et al., 2023), employee silence, compulsory citizenship behavior (Wang, Xia, & Bi, 2025), revenge intention (Akgunduz, Kayran, & Metin, 2024), customer service performance (Babalola et al., 2019), service performance, customer-oriented OCB (Ye et al., 2019).
Team/organization	Social loafing, team performance (Spoelma & Hetrick, 2021), trust (Fonseca & Peters, 2018), interaction efficiency (Fehr & Sutter, 2019), personal reputation formation (Zinko et al., 2017), organizational trust (Bencsik & Juhasz, 2020), knowledge sharing / IT project success (Shah, Hashmi, & Naz, 2021), corporate crisis spillover (Kim & Lee, 2023), cooperation (Righi & Takacs, 2022), effects of abusive supervision climate (Zhong et al., 2025).

Source: self-elaboration based on systematic literature review

**Fig. 4 Gossip as the process in broader individual and organizational context**

Source: self-elaboration using the information from systematic literature review

The number and diversity of outcomes examined in the literature point to considerable fragmentation in the field. To simplify this picture, we prepared a shortened map of workplace gossip research that positions the phenomenon within its organizational context (Figure 4).

Future research directions

The reviewed studies emphasize the complex nature of workplace gossip. A central challenge remains the contextualization of gossip as a process in organizational settings (Kniffin & Wilson, 2010). Future research should pay greater attention to the joint role of gossip valence, function, and consequences, as these dimensions are closely interconnected: the valence of information may shape both the function gossip serves and the outcomes it produces. More situational and configurational studies may therefore help explain when and why gossip has particular effects in organizations (Yao et al., 2020). Another important issue concerns the organizational role of gossip. Although many studies emphasize its negative effects, gossip may also function as an informal medium of knowledge exchange (Fan & Grey, 2021), including in virtual work settings.

A further question concerns the boundaries of the construct. The basic issue remains unchanged: when does gossip end and formal organizational communication begin? As shown above, the boundaries are blurred, and formal and informal communication are often intertwined. This creates room for conceptual ambiguity and overinterpretation. Future research should therefore devote greater attention to distinguishing gossip from ordinary work-related communication and other forms of informal organizational discourse.

Finally, gossip is increasingly understood as a process (Michelson et al., 2010), yet existing studies have not provided a complete process description that simultaneously considers the perspectives of the sender, receiver, target, and relevant third parties. More process-oriented studies are needed to clarify the similarities and differences among these roles and to explain the motives and consequences associated with gossip in organizations. The field would also benefit from wider use of digital ethnography, network analysis, and AI-supported discourse analysis, which could help uncover mechanisms that are difficult to capture with traditional cross-sectional designs.

CONCLUSION

This review shows that workplace gossip is best understood not as a single dysfunctional behavior but as a heterogeneous form of informal organizational communication. Its meaning and consequences depend on who communicates, who receives the message, who becomes its target, what the message contains, and why it is shared. The literature therefore supports a role-sensitive view of gossip in which the same episode may create different outcomes for the sender, receiver, target, and the wider team or organization.

The review also highlights a persistent conceptual boundary problem. Broad definitions that focus only on communication about an absent or unaware third party may inadvertently include formal managerial and professional communication. For management research, adding informality, evaluative content, and separation from direct role-prescribed duties helps preserve the distinctiveness of the construct. At the same time, the evidence summarized in this paper suggests that gossip should not be treated as inherently harmful. Negative gossip is frequently associated with strain, exclusion, reduced well-being, and counterproductive behavior, but gossip may also support learning, reputation formation, cooperation, social bonding, and knowledge exchange. Taken together, these findings point toward a more contextual and process-oriented research agenda. Future studies should examine gossip valence, function, direction, and consequences jointly; distinguish more clearly between sender, receiver, and target perspectives; and investigate how gossip unfolds over time and across face-to-face and digital settings. Such an approach may help move the field from fragmented lists of predictors and outcomes toward a more coherent understanding of gossip as a socially embedded organizational process.

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