



THE CONDITIONAL NATURE OF GOSSIP: EXPLORING PSYCHOLOGICAL AND RELATIONAL PATHWAYS WITH FSQCA

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Abstract: Gossip is a complex social behavior shaped by multiple psychological and relational factors. This study explores the conditional nature of employees' gossip in organizational settings by applying fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA) to survey data coming from a mid-size company located in Poland. We identify configurations of psychological traits (credulity and openness to experience) and relational variables (team cohesion and relational climate) that jointly lead to high or low levels of gossip, differentiated by content: physical appearance, achievements, and social information. Our findings reveal that high credulity is a necessary condition for all types of gossip, while openness and relational context play more context-dependent roles. Gossip about achievements and social information shares similar pathways, while gossip about appearance follows a distinct logic. These results underscore the importance of viewing gossip not as a singular phenomenon but as conditionally driven by interacting factors. The study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of informal communication in organizations and highlights the value of set-theoretic methods in organizational psychology.

Keywords: workplace gossip, credulity, openness to experience, relationships with coworkers, FSQCA.

1. INTRODUCTION

Organizations perceived as social, open systems are inherently human-centered - socially constructed through shared understandings, language, and norms. Their rules, structures, and even goals are not naturally given but are instead agreed-upon arrangements (Czarniawska, 2006; Weick, 1974, 1979). For years, many studies have explored various aspects of organizational functioning, often focusing on formalized elements such as strategies, plans, and structures, while paying less attention to what happens “under the umbrella” of formally organized units.

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However, considering the social origins and construction of all organizations, informal and less observable processes - such as individual actions, relationships, and behaviors - may have a greater influence on everyday organizational functioning. Communication within organizations, when perceived as social systems, plays a critical role, as it enables shared understanding and the formation of norms that define the basic features of organizations.

A particularly important dimension of communication is informal information exchange - such as stories, rumors, and gossip. Surprisingly, our knowledge about the role of gossip in everyday organizational life remains limited (Kim et al., 2023). Scholarly attention to such informal communication methods is scarce compared to the extensive research on formal communication. For example, as of April 25, 2025, Google Scholar returns only 106,000 results for the phrase “gossip in the workplace,” compared to 4,330,000 for “communication in the workplace.” As noted by Dores Cruz et al. (2021), the concept of workplace gossip is underdefined, and our understanding of why, how, and when employees engage in it remains incomplete.

This paper aims to deepen our understanding of the reasons behind gossiping and to show which individual characteristics are associated with gossiping in the workplace. Using empirical data from 156 employees of a mid-sized company in Poland, we explore the influence of employee openness (Fasth & Tengblad, 2023), gullibility/credulity (Laroche, Steyer & Theron, 2019), and coworker relationships (Meyer & Choo, 2024) on workplace gossip.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Gossip in the workplace – communication through the backdoor

Management scholars often study gossip as a form of informal communication that occurs within formally structured organizations (Roberts & O'Reilly, 1978). However, the concept of gossip in organizational contexts remains ambiguous. Recent efforts, however, have sought to clarify its definition and role (Sun, Schilpzand & Liu, 2023; Wax, Rodriguez & Assencio, 2022).

At its core, gossip involves the transmission of information from a sender to a receiver about a third party - the target - who is typically absent or unaware of the discussion (Dores Cruz et al., 2021). This information can portray the target in either a positive or negative light. While gossip can occur through both formal and informal channels, it is predominantly associated with informal communication. It is especially relevant in triadic interactions, where the subject of the discussion is not present. Depending on its nature, gossip can enhance or damage the target's image.

Kniffin and Wilson (2010) argue that gossip is a natural element of social organizations and that certain conditions encourage organizational members to share rumors and socially relevant gossip. The consequences of gossip can be both functional and dysfunctional, depending on the context. For example, when organizational rewards are perceived as fair, gossip may serve group-oriented functions. Kuo et al. (2015) further argue that gossip may concern job-related or unrelated matters, affecting the message's content.

In this paper, we define gossiping as a process in which a sender transmits information to a recipient about a target who is absent or unaware of both the discussion and its content. The message may or may not be related to work, and it can have positive or negative consequences for individuals, teams, or entire organizations (Michelson, Van Iterson & Waddington, 2010). Gossip may be used to achieve certain benefits, but it may also occur without specific intent - simply because the sender perceives the information as worth sharing (Feinberg et al., 2012).

2.2. Why employees gossip?

Employees gossip in the workplace for assorted reasons, mainly due to personal predispositions and intentions - for example, to gain power or credibility (Kim et al., 2023), in reaction to the behavior of other organizational members, or as a response to perceived organizational decisions (Dores Cruz et al., 2019). In this paper, we focus on individual predispositions - personal characteristics - that may play a significant role in triggering gossiping behaviors.

Among the wide range of personal traits studied in previous research - such as helping behavior (Zhao & Ma, 2025), knowledge hiding (Zhao et al., 2024), psychological distress (Soliman et al., 2024), emotional exhaustion (Wu et al., 2018), or interpersonal trust (Greenslade-Yeats et al., 2023) - we concentrate on three traits that we believe may be especially relevant for gossip.

First, we propose that openness to experience - defined as receptiveness to new ideas and experiences - may foster gossiping behaviors. Employees who are open to new experiences are more likely to share information, are better at understanding themselves, make more informed decisions, and often seek personal growth. These employees may be more inclined to share information informally, as they are often more aware of their value and may feel encouraged to spread information further (Cucu-Ciuhan & Raban-Motounu, 2012). To our knowledge, the role of openness to experience in workplace gossip has not yet been studied in the field of management.

Second, credulity - defined as a tendency to believe that something is true - may be associated with gossiping behaviors. Employees who easily believe the information they receive may be more likely to pass it on. Although this is closely related to rumor spreading, few studies in management have examined credulity or gullibility in the workplace (Laroche, Steyer & Theron, 2019).

Finally, the perceived quality of relationships with coworkers (Golden & Veiga, 2018) might influence gossiping behavior. However, there is limited empirical evidence in management literature regarding whether mutual trust and positive relationships among coworkers increase or decrease gossip (Khan et al., 2023).

To summarize, this paper investigates the roles of openness to experience, credulity, and coworker relationships in predicting gossiping behaviors in the workplace. Given the limited literature on this topic in management studies, we conducted a mixed-methods research project to address this gap.

3. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

3.1. Sample characteristics

To address our research question, we conducted an empirical study examining the impact of openness to experience, credulity, and coworker relationships on workplace gossip. The study took place in January 2025 at a mid-sized Polish FMCG production company located in the Silesia region. All employees were invited to complete an online questionnaire. Out of approximately 320 employees, we received 151 usable responses, resulting in an effective response rate of roughly 47%. The sample included 73 women, 75 men, and 3 respondents who did not disclose their gender. Most respondents were between 25 and 34 years old, with an average age range of 35 to 44. On average, participants had worked at the company for 6–10 years, with a considerable number employed for over 21 years.

3.2. Measures

To facilitate fuzzy set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA), all questionnaire items (except for age, gender, and tenure) were measured on a 10-point Likert scale.

Workplace gossip was measured using 19-item long scale adapted from Nevo, Nevo and Derech-Zehavi (1993) (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0,944$), however two items, referring to dating and talking about problems at work were dropped, as requested by the representatives of the company. The modifications of original items involved adding/specifying the information, that gossiping relates to the company itself and workplace behaviors. Exploratory factor analysis (KMO=0,924, Bartlett's test of sphericity – chi-square=1866, $p<0,001$), with three factors – physical appearance (3 items), achievements and sublimated gossip (6 items), and social information (6 items) (instead of expected original four-factor structure), explained 61% of cumulative variance. Two items, related to reading gossip information on the web/newspaper and biographies of famous people were found unrelated to the rest of the statements and removed. Such structure was used in further analyses (namely, confirmatory factor analysis).

Openness to experience was measured using the 7-item self-created scale based on the study by Cucu-Ciuhan and Raban-Motounu (2012). Items referred to openness to personal emotions, thoughts, needs, living here and now and involvement in personal feelings and emotions, making decisions free from evaluations and preconceptions, desires to evolve and discover to better know oneself and capacity to experiment with new roles – as the main constructs in the tool used by Authors. Cronbach's α for the scale equaled to 0,720, one item, related to openness to thoughts was dropped because of the negative influence on the reliability of the scale, and it increased the α to the level of 0,775. Exploratory factor analysis (KMO=0,739, Bartlett's test of sphericity - chi-square=248,5, $p<0,001$) revealed two factors: openness to emotions, needs, and feelings (4 items), and openness to discovering and experimenting (2 items), explaining 53% of cumulative variance was used for further analyses.

Credulity was measured using 5-item scale following Campbell et al. (2021) recommendations (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0,752$). It was expected to form single dimension, but exploratory factor analysis (KMO = 0,674; Bartlett's test of sphericity: chi-square = 239,9, $p<0,001$) revealed two factors – situational credulity (2 items), and retrospective credulity (3 items). Such structure was chosen for further analyses.

Relationships with other workers was measured using 12-item scale following Czerw (2019) recommendations (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0,934$). Exploratory factor analysis (KMO = 0,912; Bartlett's test of sphericity: chi-square = 1388; $p<0,001$) revealed two factor structure explaining 64,5% of cumulative variance. The first factor reflects relational climate (5 items), the second – team cohesion (7 items).

To confirm internal consistency (reliability) and convergent validity, for each scales Cronbach's alphas and AVE's were calculated using confirmatory factor analysis results as a starting point. The model was estimated with fit measures – RMSEA = 0.068; and CFI and TLI 0.892 and 0.879 respectively (slightly below accepted level of 0.9) indicating acceptable fit.

Overall, apart from openness to emotions, the scales are reliable with reliability and convergent validity indicators displaying acceptable levels. For FSQCA usage we calculated metavariables for each construct using arithmetic mean.

Table 1. Reliability, convergent validity, overall reliability (Cronbach's alphas, AVE, and CR)

	Coefficient ω	Coefficient α	AVE	CR
Physical appearance	0.944	0.942	0.848	0.943
Achievements	0.873	0.879	0.546	0.879
Social information	0.893	0.892	0.583	0.892
Openness: emotions	0.744	0.742	0.428	0.748
Openness: discovering	0.713	0.708	0.555	0.712
Situational credulity	0.788	0.778	0.654	0.788
Retrospective credulity	0.758	0.776	0.535	0.778
Relational climate	0.888	0.871	0.592	0.887
Team cohesion	0.910	0.919	0.622	0.992
total	0.940	0.878	N/A	N/A

3.3. Data preparation for FSQCA analysis

Given the configurational nature of our research question - namely, under what combinations of openness, credulity, and coworker relationships gossiping behavior is observed - we employed fuzzy set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA) as our primary method. FsQCA is well-suited to examine causal complexity, particularly when multiple factors may interact to produce an outcome, and where the same outcome can result from different combinations of conditions (Ragin, 2009).

Before conducting the analysis, we calibrated all Likert-scale variables into fuzzy sets using the direct method. This approach involves specifying three qualitative anchors: full membership, the crossover point, and full non-membership (Ragin, 2009). In the first step, before the FSQCA analysis, we calculated median, 5th and 95th percentile, to transform our data into fuzzy sets following recommendations of Pappas and Woodside (2021). Table 2 presents calculated statistics for constructs.

Table 2. Descriptives and percentiles as a starting point for FSQCA analysis.

	Mean	Standard deviation	95th percentile	Median	5th percentile
Gossiping: Physical appearance	3.541	2.658	9.000	2.333	1.000
Gossiping: Achievements	3.969	2.093	7.733	3.667	1.000
Gossiping: Social information	3.647	2.036	7.467	3.167	1.000
Openness: emotions	7.740	1.554	10.000	8.000	4.650
Openness: discovering	7.609	1.800	10.000	8.000	4.500
Situational credulity	4.076	2.007	7.500	4.000	1.000
Retrospective credulity	4.662	2.156	8.000	4.667	1.667
Relational climate	8.164	1.394	9.880	8.400	4.800
Team cohesion	7.301	1.701	9.286	7.714	3.829

Using 95th, 50th, and 5th percentile in the fsQCA software, in the next step we transformed (calibrated) all calculated metavariables into fuzzy sets. In the following step we continued with truth table algorithms, which is reported in the results section.

4. RESEARCH RESULTS

In the study there were three types of messages conveyed by gossiping, related to physical appearance, achievements and sharing social information. For every outcome we treated dimensions of openness to experience, credulity, and relationships with coworkers (identified in earlier section) as conditions. Results of configurations computation leading to high and low levels of three types of gossiping behaviors are graphically presented in tables 3 and 4. To facilitate the process of identifying similarities and differences, all estimations are presented with shapes of different colors in the table (3 solutions for high level of three types of gossiping are presented in table 3; and 3 solutions for low levels of three types of gossiping are presented in table 4).

Table 3. Conditions leading to high predispositions to gossip on physical appearance, achievement and social information

Configuration	Openness: emotions	Openness: discovering	Situational credulity	Retrospective credulity	Relational climate	Team cohesion	Raw coverage	Consistency
1	⊗		•	•		⊗	0.396	0.847
2	⊗	⊗	•	•	⊗		0.335	0.831
3		•	•	•		⊗	0.310	0.859
4	•	⊗	•	•	•	•	0.282	0.842
5		•		•	⊗	⊗	0.350	0.849
6	⊗⊗		••	••		⊗⊗	0.391 0.399	0.883 0.899
7	⊗	⊗	•	•			0.377	0.830
8	⊗⊗	⊗⊗	••		⊗⊗	⊗⊗	0.331 0.341	0.855 0.877
9	••	⊗⊗	••		••	••	0.332 0.330	0.873 0.866
10	⊗	⊗	⊗	⊗	•	•	0.266	0.866
11	⊗⊗	••	••	⊗⊗	••	••	0.256 0.255	0.863 0.862
12	⊗	⊗	•	•			0.393	0.862
13	⊗	•		•	⊗	⊗	0.284	0.861
14		•	•	•	⊗	⊗	0.297	0.870
	Physical appearance		Achievements			Social information		
Solution coverage	0.501		0.664			0.603		
Solution consistency	0.813		0.779			0.785		
Consistency cutoff	0.842		0.866			0.862		
Frequency cutoff	3		3			3		

Legend: Full large circles – high level of a core condition; full small circle – high level of peripheral (non-necessary) condition; crossed large circle – low level of a core condition, crossed small circle – low level of peripheral (non-necessary) condition; lack of sign – condition is irrelevant or absent in the configuration. Black solutions – configurations promoting gossip about physical appearance; blue solutions – configurations promoting gossip about achievements; red solutions – configurations promoting social information gossip.

Configurations leading to high levels of gossip among employees are diverse, indicating that diverse types of gossip content are driven by distinct sets of conditions. Nevertheless, some

general observations can be drawn from the analysis. First, solution coverage and consistency are moderate, suggesting that the results should be interpreted with caution. However, coverage levels exceeding 0.5 may be considered meaningful, and consistency levels approaching 0.8 across all three solutions suggest that the findings are reliable.

Second, both situational and retrospective credulity appear in most configurations and represent a core condition for all types of gossip. In every case, employees who are more credulous are more likely to engage in gossip about physical appearance, achievements, or to share social information.

Third, gossip related to achievements, and the sharing of social information tends to be associated with similar factor configurations. Of the seven configurations identified for each type, four are identical and the remaining ones are closely aligned. High credulity, low openness to emotions, and low team cohesion are key triggers for gossip about achievements and for sharing social information in most configurations. This pattern contrasts with that observed for gossip about physical appearance.

Finally, gossip about physical appearance is primarily associated with high levels of credulity, and to a lesser extent, with low levels of relational climate and team cohesion.

The solution coverages and consistencies for the three configurations presented in Table 4 are slightly lower than those reported in Table 3, but can still be interpreted as moderate. Naming conditions associated with a high proneness to gossip is easier than identifying those that contribute to limited gossiping. Nevertheless, several observations can be made in this regard.

First, in most solutions, low levels of both situational and retrospective credulity are associated with lower levels of gossip. This may suggest that more critical or skeptical members of an organization are less likely to spread unnecessary or unverified information to their colleagues.

Second, both high and low levels of openness to experience can lead to a decreased tendency to gossip, depending on the presence of other conditions - showing that the role of openness is highly context-dependent.

Third, in general, poor relationships with coworkers may reduce the willingness to gossip within organizations. However, this relationship is not linear; in some configurations, good coworker relationships also coincide with a decreased inclination to gossip.

Finally, it is worthwhile to consider the conditions that lead both to high and low willingness to gossip. In general, a low level of openness to experience is more often associated with increased proclivity to gossip, whereas a high level of openness may reduce this tendency. Similarly, elevated levels of credulity lead to more gossiping, while low levels of credulity are associated with reduced gossip. Relationships with coworkers - whether positive or negative - can be linked to both increased and decreased tendencies to gossip, depending on the broader configuration of factors. Overall, however, poor coworker relationships are associated with both heightened and reduced proneness to gossip, highlighting the complexity of social dynamics in the workplace.

Table 4. Conditions leading to low predispositions to gossip on physical appearance, achievement, and social information

Configuration	Openness: emotions	Openness: discovering	Situational credulity	Retrospective credulity	Relational climate	Team cohesion	Raw coverage	Consistency
1			⊗	⊗	•	•	0.373	0.822
2	⊗	⊗	⊗		⊗	⊗	0.285	0.825
3	•	•	⊗		⊗	⊗	0.294	0.86
4		•	⊗	•	⊗	⊗	0.265	0.851
5	••	⊗⊗		⊗⊗	••	••	0.304 0.314	0.883 0.866
6	⊗	•		⊗	•	•	0.270	0.861
7	⊗	⊗		⊗	⊗	⊗	0.308	0.848
8	⊗	•		⊗	•	•	0.285	0.861
9	•	•	⊗	⊗	⊗	⊗	0.252	0.873
10	⊗	•	⊗	•	⊗	⊗	0.231	0.888
11		⊗	⊗	⊗	•	•	0.2978	0.848
12	•	•	⊗		⊗	⊗	0.324	0.908
13		•	⊗	•	⊗	⊗	0.287	0.878
14	•	•		•	⊗	⊗	0.292	0.866
15	•	⊗		⊗	•	•	0.316	0.87
16	•	•	⊗		•	•	0.3644	0.866
17	⊗	⊗	•	⊗	⊗	⊗	0.230	0.869
	Physical appearance		Achievements			Social information		
Solution coverage	0.593		0.557			0.618		
Solution consistency	0.782		0.789			0.807		
Consistency cutoff	0.843		0.865			0.864		
Frequency cutoff	3		3			3		

Legend: Full large circles – high level of a core condition; full small circle – high level of peripheral (non-necessary) condition; crossed large circle – low level of a core condition, crossed small circle – low level of peripheral (non-necessary) condition; lack of sign – condition is irrelevant or absent in the configuration.

Black solutions – configurations limiting gossip about physical appearance; blue solutions – configurations limiting gossip about achievements; red solutions – configurations limiting social information gossip.

5. DISCUSSION

Gossip is present in every organization—regardless of size, industry, or age. While these informal processes are largely beyond direct organizational control, they can yield both positive (Chang & Kuo, 2021) and negative consequences (Kuo, Wu, & Lin, 2018). Our study underscores the contextual nature of workplace gossip. Drawing on social information processing theory (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978), which explains how individuals use social cues to interpret events and shape attitudes and behaviors, we found that the tendency to engage in gossip is primarily driven by an unexpected individual characteristic: credulity. Highly credulous employees—those who tend to accept information uncritically—are more susceptible to social cues, making them more likely to take part in gossip. Conversely, individuals with low credulity show reduced interest in informal communication about others.

Openness to experience and interpersonal relationships with coworkers function mainly as peripheral conditions, and their influence on gossip appears secondary. However, considering social exchange theory (Thomas & Gupta, 2021), gossip may serve as a form of

informal exchange that fosters trust, reciprocity, or social status. In general, poor coworker relationships may reduce gossip due to a lack of trust - especially across group boundaries - but may also increase gossip as an act of retaliation or resistance (Semerci, 2024).

Our findings offer several implications for practice. First, organizations aiming to reduce gossip might focus on promoting critical and independent thinking through interventions such as scenario-based learning and “lessons learned” exercises (Liu et al., 2020). While our results support this approach, further research is needed to confirm its effectiveness. Second, although positive relationships among employees were largely absent from our configurations, negative relationships appeared as important in both easing and limiting gossip. This suggests that middle managers play a key role in managing gossip through active engagement in conflict resolution and relationship-building (Glover, 2001). Finally, while openness to experience had a limited direct effect in our study, low openness was part of several configurations linked to increased gossip. Encouraging risk-taking, self-reflection, and growth-oriented tasks may indirectly reduce gossip tendencies (Wang et al., 2022), though more evidence is needed.

Future research should be grounded in stronger theoretical frameworks. To date, no comprehensive systematic review of workplace gossip appears to exist, although semi-systematic reviews have recently been published (e.g., Sun, Schilpzand, & Liu, 2023; Wax, Rodriguez, & Asencio, 2022). We view this as a significant gap that limits conceptual development in this field. Additionally, the rise of remote and hybrid work environments (Goel, Game, & Sanz Vergel, 2023) calls for new investigations into how gossip manifests in virtual contexts—an area that remains largely unexplored. Lastly, although we understand a fair amount about the antecedents and motives of gossip (Lian et al., 2023), more research is needed on the mechanisms and dynamics of gossip as it unfolds in real time.

This study has several limitations. First, it was conducted in a single, specific organizational context, which limits generalizability. To address this, we employed a mixed-methods design. Second, we focused on only three antecedents of gossip, chosen deliberately due to constraints in sample size and representativeness. Third, the study relied entirely on self-reported data from a single source. Future research should incorporate dyadic or triadic data collection (e.g., mutual reports of gossip), which was beyond the scope of this study but would enrich understanding of interpersonal dynamics.

6. CONCLUSION

Gossip, as a workplace phenomenon, has rarely been the subject of systematic scholarly debate. Yet it remains a constant presence in organizations - sometimes serving functional purposes, other times causing harm. Our study highlights the complex interplay of motives, individual traits, and perceptions that influence gossip in organizational settings. While we show how credulity, openness to experience, and relationships with coworkers affect individuals’ willingness to share knowledge informally, our findings also underscore the need for further research in this area. Organizations, managers, and researchers should strive to better understand the reasons behind the stories shared in private, behind closed doors. Doing so would enable them to respond more effectively and navigate the complexities of organizations as social systems.

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