



Openness to being gossiped about: understanding gossip from the target's perspective

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ABSTRACT

It is often assumed that, if given the choice, people would prefer not to be gossiped about. We address this assumption by investigating reactions to gossip from the perspective of its potential targets. In two nationally representative samples, we assess whether people are ever open to being the topic of other people's gossip and find a general aversion to being talked about, unless positively. However, some people reliably do prefer to be the focus of gossip: a meta-analytic summary showed that being male and more narcissistic predicted a greater desire to be the focus of gossip, even when that gossip is negative. And, older adults had a lower desire to be positively gossiped about. We also test in confirmatory experiments whether people correctly perceive others' preferences and find that people overestimate the extent to which others want to be gossiped about, but only when the gossip is positive.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 13 November 2023
Revised 13 January 2025
Accepted 11 February 2025

KEYWORDS

Gossip; gender; age; narcissism; ostracism

"There is only one thing worse in the world than being talked about, and that is not being talked about." (Wilde, 1890/1993, p. 4)

Humans are deeply motivated to be liked, to fit in, and to feel good about themselves (Aronson, 1998; Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Taylor & Brown, 1988). Humans are also deeply bothered by the prospect of being ignored, forgotten, or otherwise treated as if they are invisible and "unworthy of attention at all" (James, 1890, p. 294; Williams, 2009). These two motives – to be liked and to be noticed – come into conflict when one considers the prospect of being the topic of other people's gossip. How do people choose to navigate this conflict? Here, we address this question and investigate predictors of people's openness to being gossiped about. We further ask whether people are aware of the preferences of others, or alternatively, simply assume that other people do not want to be talked about.

Gossip

Gossip – communicating about a target who is not present – has been studied primarily from the perspective of the individuals and groups who engage in gossiping (Dores Cruz

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et al., 2021a; Yucel et al., 2021). People often assume that gossip must be negative, but in practice, it frequently takes the form of moderate/neutral or even positive observations about non-present others (Robbins & Karan, 2020). Gossip is generally assumed to be unseemly and is largely met with social disapproval (e.g., Foster, 2004; Litman & Pezzo, 2005). Yet research attests to both its ubiquity and its usefulness. Gossip can bond groups together (Dunbar, 2004; Yucel et al., 2021), educate its participants on social expectations and lessons (Baumeister et al., 2004), and productively enforce norms of cooperation (e.g., Balliet et al., 2021; Feinberg et al., 2014). Clearly, gossip is not entirely negative for those who enjoy being on its giving-end. In contrast, less is known about how potential targets feel about being discussed by others when they themselves are not present.

Openness to being gossiped about

Conceptualization

In this research, we conceptualize openness to gossip as an attitude (Bohner & Dickel, 2011; Eagly & Chaiken, 2007). It reflects a target person's evaluation of the prospect of other people talking about them in their absence. As an attitude, such evaluations may vary in valence (e.g., negative, neutral, and positive) and also in strength (e.g., weak, moderate, and strong). Such attitudes are likely related to and informed by one's actual experiences and history of discovering that they were the target of gossip (which are typically negative, as reviewed below). As an attitude, it is measurable regardless of one's actual experiences of having received gossip. Indeed, an important feature of gossip is that the target may never learn they were gossiped about. Yet, people may have attitudes about such an event (analogously, people seem to have opinions about being lied to, Petrocelli et al., 2023, and those opinions are sensible, even if the deception is never uncovered). Understanding those attitudes is the focus of this research. Further, even when a target discovers they were gossiped about, a myriad of cognitive and affective forecasting biases could cause one's attitude toward future gossip to differ from their actual reactions to discovered gossip (e.g., Loewenstein & Schkade, 1999; Wilson & Gilbert, 2003).

Openness to gossip can be delineated from other related constructs. First, it is conceptually distinct from reactions to the discovery of *actual* gossip (which itself has historically been conceptualized in heterogeneous ways in the literature, Dorez Cruz et al., 2021b). Reactions to *actually* being the focus of gossip can only be measured if and when one learns that they were gossiped about, which may never occur. In contrast, attitudes toward the prospect of gossip can be assessed regardless of whether it has occurred. Openness to being gossiped about is also clearly separate from one's own use and motives for gossip (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012) because it pertains to one's attitude toward their own self being the topic of gossip, rather than attitudes and motives for being the *source* of gossip about others. It is also independent of people's preferences for seeking solitude (Ren & Evans, 2021), as gossip typically requires the target only to be absent from the gossipers, not necessarily fully alone. Also, it is likely related to, but not redundant with the need to belong (Leary et al., 2013). The need to belong might be related to higher openness to gossip to the extent that people with especially strong drives to affiliate may be concerned about being not being included in the scope of other people's discussions. But since gossip can often be negative and stigmatizing, the need to

belong does not conceptually equate to a greater desire to be talked about. Finally, openness to gossip is conceptually and logically not identical to one's attitude toward being acknowledged in general. Gossip entails acknowledgment, but it is merely one of the many ways in which someone can be acknowledged. In sum, these constructs are relevant, but not identical to, one's openness to being the focus of other people's gossip.

Gossip-as-threat account

One plausible assumption is that people prefer not to be gossiped about, for the simple reason that they risk being hurt by "distortion or manipulation of information, or by the violation of private matters" (Foster, 2004, p. 78). Given this clear threat to one's reputation, it is reasonable to expect a near-universal aversion to the prospect of being the target of gossip. Theoretical accounts of gossip emphasize its adaptive evolutionary function of punishing and alerting others to negative behaviors (e.g., Balliet et al., 2021). Whether one has actually behaved badly or not, being the target of gossip likely produces negative outcomes. Indeed, a growing body of research indicates that the practical effects of *actually* being gossiped about are unambiguously negative. It harms one's reputation (Dores Cruz et al., 2021; Sommerfeld et al., 2007; J. Wu et al., 2016), which can lead to social exclusion and forfeiting the benefits of group cooperation (e.g., Feinberg et al., 2014). And, learning that one was the target of negative gossip has been shown to lead to negative emotional reactions and lower self-esteem (Dores Cruz, Balliet, et al., 2019; Kong, 2018; Martinescu et al., 2019, 2021; L.-Z. Wu et al., 2018). For example, in the workplace, negative gossip was associated with being more emotionally exhausted, and subsequently engaging in less proactive behavior and in social undermining (X. Wu et al., 2018; Zong et al., 2024). Given these actual negative effects and correlations of gossip, it is reasonable to expect that people would straightforwardly want to avoid being gossiped about.

Gossip-as-acknowledgment account

However, there are reasons why being gossiped about might be seen as advantageous: being gossiped about means that one is included in the purview of other people's discussion. Also, learning that one is *not* discussed by others could bear similarity to experiences of being overlooked, ignored, or otherwise treated as uninteresting or unimportant. Research and theorizing on responses to social ostracism – being ignored and excluded – suggest that there may be ambivalence, as people have a fundamental need to be acknowledged and feel as if their existence matters (e.g., King et al., 2016; Rudert et al., 2017). For example, merely being denied eye contact (Wesselmann et al., 2012; Wirth et al., 2010) or being ignored while a conversation partner uses their phone (Hales et al., 2018, 2024) is sufficient to threaten one's sense of belonging and induce similar reactions to ostracism. And, more directly, when people are led to believe that another person has forgotten their name, or not remembered them at all, they experience a threatened sense of meaning (King & Geise, 2011; Wesselmann et al., 2016). Finally, at least in the case of positive gossip, there is a potential for direct reputational benefit (e.g., McAndrew, 2019).

Based on these findings, it follows that contemplating a world where others have nothing to say about you – good or bad – may also be aversive. Conversely, contemplating a world where you are noteworthy enough to be featured in other people's discussion

may even be appealing. So, on this account, it is reasonable to expect that gossip has the potential to, if nothing else, affirm one's social significance, and may therefore be favored by some.

Summary

People's attitudes toward gossip are important to understand, both for the straightforward reason that targets of gossip are a key party in the situation, and also because such attitudes may affect the types of situations targets seek out and the types of groups they choose to affiliate with. Those attitudes might be driven by two competing motives: to avoid potential reputational damage (gossip-as-threatening account) and, on the one hand, to feel at least worthy to hold others' attention (gossip-as-acknowledgment account). We propose that people differentially construe gossip as threatening versus acknowledging based on both stable individual differences and the social context.

Individual differences

The competition between the two above-mentioned motives is likely managed differently based on both features of the potential gossip (i.e., whether people are likely to say good or bad things) and the characteristics of the person contemplating being gossiped about. Here, we investigate three potentially relevant characteristics: gender, age, and differences in narcissism.

Gender

Regarding *gender*, it is plausible to expect men, relative to women, to be more open to being gossiped about. This is because 1) gossip represents a risky threat to one's reputation, and men tend to be more risk-tolerant (Byrnes et al., 1999), and 2) because women are thought to be more interdependent and communally oriented than men (Cross & Madson, 1997; Eagly, 2009), and thus may be more averse to gossip's potentially relationship-damaging aspects. This possibility is indirectly supported by findings that when people do gossip, women's gossip tends to be more positive than men's (Eckhaus & Ben-Hador, 2019). Gossip may be especially useful as a form of coalition building/indirect-aggression especially for women (e.g., Hess, 2017; McAndrew, 2014). Alternatively, given that men tend to be more motivated to pursue status than women (e.g., Badura et al., 2018), and gossip could easily interfere with status attainment, they may be especially averse to being talked about, at least when it comes to negative gossip.

Age

Similarly, *age* may play an important role. One's abilities and tendencies to gossip have been argued to develop drastically over the course of early childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood, going from tattling (i.e., telling on), to early and more advanced forms of gossiping (Ingram, 2019; Yucel & Vaish, 2018). Moreover, there might be age-related changes in how gossip is perceived over the course of people's lives. Socioemotional Selectivity Theory (Carstensen, 1995) predicts that younger people compared to older individuals are more invested in making new social contacts and extending their social networks to gain information, whereas older individuals are more focused on their close social contacts and the pursuit of emotionally gratifying interactions. This stronger focus

on broader social networks might result in younger people being more open to being gossiped about, that is, to be in the focus of other people's attention. Thus, being the topic of gossip might be preferable for younger individuals compared to being ignored and unnoticed altogether. This is further in line with studies that hint that experiences of being ostracized and ignored might represent a stronger threat for younger people compared to older individuals (Rudert et al., 2020). Particularly, being the recipient of positive gossip might be beneficial for younger individuals' goal attainment, at least in cooperative contexts (Yucel et al., 2021; albeit some research shows that even negative attention might be better than none; Rudert et al., 2017).

Narcissism

Finally, we expect that *narcissism* is a key psychological characteristic in the openness to being gossiped about. Narcissists believe they deserve admiration from others and are cognitively oriented toward pursuing status, even at the expense of affiliation (Campbell et al., 2002; Grapsas et al., 2020; Mahadevan & Jordan, 2021). Admiration and status begin with acknowledgment, so narcissists may be more motivated to be talked about by others. Indirect evidence of this possibility comes from research showing that narcissists are especially drawn to conspicuous consumption (e.g., Sedikides & Hart, 2022) – the sort likely to be noticed and talked about by others. Moreover, narcissists are strongly skeptical and disbelieving of negative social feedback (Kernis & Sun, 1994), so, when contemplating being gossiped about, they may be biased toward believing people will say positive things (even in the face of evidence to the contrary). Finally, narcissists are sensitive to even faint suggestions of worthlessness (Horvath & Morf, 2009) as well as ambiguous clues that might be indicative of ostracism (Büttner et al., 2025), suggesting that the idea of not being discussed by others would be especially unfavorable to someone higher in narcissism. Alternatively, even though it involves acknowledgment, gossip may well be construed as interfering with the quest for status. In this case, we might expect to observe that narcissists prefer to avoid gossip, at least when it is explicitly negative.

Contextual differences

Attitudes toward gossip likely vary across different contexts and situations. One specific context that is likely to elicit different – potentially stronger – reactions to the prospect of being gossiped about is *the workplace*. Prior research finds that in the workplace (as opposed to general social contexts), people more heavily weigh the conscientiousness (rather than the agreeableness) of potential targets of ostracism (Rudert, Hales, et al., 2021). This suggests 1) that people have different goals and priorities in the workplace versus the general social context, and 2) that they are more oriented toward results, productivity, and effectiveness at work. Indeed, people tend to engage in a more strategic and calculating mind-set in workplace contexts (Belmi & Schroeder, 2021), suggesting that they may harbor greater opposition to others talking about them in their absence. Further, people are likely to perceive reputational damage in the workplace as more consequential (i.e., potential loss of livelihood) than reputational damage in a social context (i.e., the potential need to find new associations). Moreover, much evidence documenting gossip's negative effects was gathered largely in workplace contexts (e.g., X. Wu et al., 2018), and gossip has well-

documented negative effects in this setting (e.g., Xie et al., 2024; Zhu et al., 2024). Together, this suggests that people may hold especially negative attitudes toward the prospect of being gossiped about at work.

Judgments of others' preference

In addition to examining factors that influence how open people might be to being gossiped about, we were also interested in how accurate people are in judging *other people's* openness to being gossiped about. Specifically, we considered whether people tend to under- or overestimate these preferences. These are important questions because people are generally opposed to causing harm to others (Graham et al., 2013; Gray et al., 2012). If they systematically misperceive the extent to which people find being gossiped about aversive, this could both affect the extent to which they engage in gossip, and – in case of a positive bias – also provide a justification for doing so. Theories of accuracy in person perception articulate that people can be systematically mistaken in their perceptions of others (e.g., Funder, 1995; Vazire, 2010), which may well extend to their judgments of others' preferences to be talked about.

Assuming that individuals differ in their desire to be the target of gossip, one's own desire to be the target of gossip might affect their judgments of other people's desire to be the target of gossip. Thus, on a larger scale, the desire to be the target of gossip could influence how acceptable people think gossiping about others is. That is, people may simply assume that others hold the same preferences that they do – a potential instance of a consensus bias (Marks & Miller, 1987; Mullen et al., 1985). Indeed, given the general sense that gossip is unseemly, most people may – possibly correctly – assume that others are universally opposed to being the topic of gossip.

Alternatively, just as lay conceptions of gossip can be mistaken (Robbins & Karan, 2020), people can also systematically under- or overestimate the extent to which other people are comfortable being gossiped about. When people estimate other people's preferences for different experiences, they tend to rely too heavily on their core representations of the experience, producing systematic over-estimations of people's preferences for positive experiences (Jung et al., 2020). Thus, people may assume that others are more open to being the topic of positive gossip than they actually are. In fact, people tend to assume that others have more active social lives than themselves, at least in part because people tend to more quickly call to mind their most extraverted friends (Deri et al., 2017). This bias may extend to judgments formed regarding the extent to which others would be open to being gossiped about; if people falsely assume that others are popular and socially active, they may also falsely assume that others are comfortable having information about them shared behind their backs.

Moreover, given the particular strength of negative information (Baumeister et al., 2001), if this overestimation bias exists, it is most likely to affect the extent to which others want to be the focus of *positive* gossip, but not necessarily *negative* gossip. People may regard negative gossip as universally unappealing while regarding positive gossip as differentially appealing based on whether it is happening to *me* versus *you*.

Accordingly, we predicted that people would reporter a higher *perceived* willingness for others to be talked about than their own self-rated willingness, but only for positive gossip. Understanding people's assumptions about the preferences of potential targets of

gossip will illuminate social dynamics surrounding when and how people choose to share information about others who are not present.

Current research

In the most basic situations, how commonly do people prefer to be the topic of other people's gossip? And how strongly do they hold this preference? Studies 1–3 address these descriptive questions and measure whether this preference varies by gender, age, and narcissism. Studies 1 and 2 use large and nationally representative samples, and Study 3 assesses these preferences across different contexts (i.e., social contexts versus workplace). Given their methodological similarity, these studies are reported together and summarized in an internal meta-analysis (Mcshane et al., 2017; see online supplement for full details).

Studies 4 and 5 go beyond these descriptive analyses and test whether people accurately judge the extent to which *other people* would want to be gossiped about in samples of young adults. These studies continue to assess gender and narcissism as predictors (but not age, which is held relatively constant due to lack of variability in these student samples). Study 5 also tests whether one's personal preferences to be gossiped about are affected by a situational factor known to increase attention motivation: ostracism.

Across all studies we manipulated the supposed nature of the gossip: whether it would be positive, negative, or ambiguous (either because people say good and bad things or because the target is alone in being gossiped about). We expected positive gossip to elicit the most openness to being gossiped about, and negative gossip the least, with ambiguous gossip in between.

It is important to note that the aim of these studies is not to test the actual effects of gossip (which, as reviewed earlier, are quite negative). Rather, these studies aim to explore people's attitudes toward being the topic of gossip, despite its actual negative effects. For all five studies, all measures, manipulations, and exclusions are reported, and the sample size was determined before any data analysis. The materials, data, and analysis code, as well as supplementary analyses, for all studies are available at <https://researchbox.org/1463>. The studies were approved by institutional review boards at the Universities of Virginia, and Mississippi.

Studies 1–3

Given the methodological similarities, Studies 1–3 methods and results are reported together with the primary results succinctly reported as a meta-analysis (Mcshane et al., 2017). Individual method's details and results are reported in the supplemental analyses.

Method

Design

Participants considered one or more scenarios confronting them with the prospect of being gossiped about. They rated the degree to which they would prefer to either *not* be talked about or, alternatively, to be talked about on a 1 to 6 spectrum. To assess how

much responses depend on one's expectations of the nature of the gossip (i.e., whether people are likely to be said good things or bad things about you), we randomly assigned people to one of the four scenarios: *negative gossip*, *ambiguous gossip*, *no gossip*, or *positive gossip*. The *ambiguous gossip* scenario was included to explore people's responses when the gossip is neither explicitly good nor bad, and the *no gossip* scenario was included to probe the possibility that social norms affect people's openness to being talked about (such that people could be less open to being talked about, if they are the only one receiving it).

In Study 1, participants were randomly assigned to read one of the scenarios, between-subjects. Studies 2 and 3 used within-subjects designs, with participants reading and responding to all four scenarios in counterbalanced order. Additionally, Study 3 included a between-subjects manipulation of context, with half the participants responding to the scenarios in a social context (as in Studies 1 and 2) and the other half responding to the same scenarios but in a *workplace* context. Study 3 was preregistered (https://osf.io/67byc/?view_only=998f452af4cc4ba98eb7b780fe9077b7)

Measures

Participants read and responded to one or more of the following four scenarios. Condition labels and bolding are included here to emphasize differences between scenarios but did not appear to participants in the studies:

Negative: Suppose that you are at a party with a pretty large group of friends having a good time. As the night winds down, people start to leave one-by-one. You notice that after each person leaves, the group naturally starts to **talk about them – criticizing everything** from what they are wearing to aspects of their personality. This happens again and again and again. Each time someone leaves, the group **talks about them negatively**.

Ambiguous: Suppose that you are at a party with a pretty large group of friends having a good time. As the night winds down, people start to leave one-by-one. You notice that after each person leaves, the group naturally starts to **talk about them – commenting on everything** from what they are wearing to aspects of their personality. This happens again and again and again. Each time someone leaves, the group **talks about them**.

No Gossip: Suppose that you are at a party with a pretty large group friends having a good time. As the night winds down, people start to leave one-by-one. You notice that after each person leaves, the group naturally **continues to socialize – talking about the same topics they have been**. This happens again and again and again. Each time someone leaves, **the group continues on**.

Positive: Suppose that you are at a party with a pretty large group of friends having a good time. As the night winds down, people start to leave one-by-one. You notice that after each person leaves, the group naturally starts to **talk about them – praising everything** from what they are wearing to aspects of their personality. This happens again and again and again. Each time someone leaves, the group **talks about them positively**.

All the participants responded on a 1–6 scale. In the ambiguous and no-gossip conditions, the scale anchors were 1 = "I would prefer that they do NOT talk about me at all when I'm not there" and 6 = "I would prefer that they DO talk about me when I'm not there." In the negative and positive conditions, the anchors were identical, except that in the upper-anchor, the valence of the gossip was reiterated

(i.e., “I would prefer that they DO talk [negatively/positively] about me when I’m not there”). This was done to make it explicit that the gossip one would receive would be similar to what the group had said about others. This disambiguates the scenario and minimizes the possibility that participants would self-promotingly assume that the group would find something positive to say about them even though the group had previously talked negatively about others. The measure presented an even number of response options, and thus respondents had to indicate at least some slight preference either *not* to be talked about (for those who select options 1, 2, or 3) or to be talked about (for those who select options 4, 5, or 6). The scenarios were designed not necessarily to represent any particular real-life situations but rather to highlight the essential conflict of motives that can occur when considering being talked about by others. Finally, to avoid unnecessarily activating negative associations with the term “gossip,” the scenarios deliberately did not use that term.

After the gossip scenario(s), participants responded to the single-item narcissism measure (Konrath et al., 2014) by rating their agreement (1 to 7) with the statement “I am a narcissist (Note: the word ‘narcissist’ means egotistical, self-focused, and vain).”

Differences between the studies. In Studies 2 and 3, the gossip scenarios were modified to use bolded text for ease of understanding and responding (given that participants were responding to four instead of one scenario, which differed from each other only marginally, it could otherwise have been easy to miss the scenario-specific details). The ambiguous and no-gossip scenarios were slightly reworded to more strongly emphasize the descriptive norm in each situation. That is, the ambiguous gossip scenario included this sentence added at the end: *Not a single person leaves the party without getting mentioned by the group after they leave.* The no-gossip condition had this sentence added at the end: *Not a single person gets mentioned by the group after they leave.* In Study 3, in the workplace condition the setting was changed from a party to lunch break: “Suppose that you are on a lunch break at work with a pretty large group of co-workers ...”

Participants

Studies 1 ($N = 1,187$) and 2 ($N = 510$) were conducted online through survey platforms with United States adult samples demographically matched to be representative on age, sex, and ethnicity. Study 3 ($N = 603$) was a sample of U.S. adults recruited through *Prolific Academic*. These sample sizes provided approximately 80% power to detect overall correlations of approximately $r = .08$ to $.11$ or stronger and an overall group mean difference of $d = .16$ to $.25$ or stronger (two-tailed).

Results

Overall openness to being gossiped about

Table 1 shows the percentage of participants who reported at least some preference to being gossiped about in each scenario (see online supplement for full distributions). In the negative, ambiguous, and no-gossip scenarios, people were

Table 1. Descriptive statistics showing the percentage of participants who express a preference to be gossiped about in each scenario.

	Total	Study 1 (n = 1,187)	Study 2 (n = 510)	Study 3 - social (n = 301)	Study 3 - workplace (n = 298)
Negative	15% [14, 17]	13% [9, 17]	27% [23, 31]	7% [4, 10]	7% [4, 11]
Ambiguous	24% [21, 26]	22% [17, 27]	34% [30, 38]	15% [11, 19]	16% [12, 20]
None	23% [21, 26]	20% [16, 25]	35% [31, 40]	17% [13, 21]	13% [10, 18]
Positive	64% [62, 67]	70% [65, 75]	59% [55, 64]	67% [61, 72]	64% [59, 70]

Total column is the percentage of *all* participants, across studies, endorsing the desire to be gossiped about within each scenario. Brackets show the 95% confidence intervals.

generally opposed to being talked about. However, there was still clear variability, with approximately 20% indicating some preference (i.e., a value of ≥ 4) to be talked about in the ambiguous and no-gossip scenario conditions. Even in the negative gossip scenario, a noticeable minority—15% overall – preferred to be talked about.

In contrast, people in the positive gossip condition tended to be much more open to the prospect of being talked about, with 64% indicating at least a slight preference for this. This leaves a surprisingly substantial minority of 36% who prefer not to be talked about, even when the group's comments are explicitly positive.

Individual differences

To synthesize and assess gender, age, and narcissism as predictors across studies, we conducted a set of internal meta-analyses using random effects models with the *metafor* package in R (Viechtbauer, 2010). Results are displayed in Table 2.

Gender. Men were consistently more open to being gossiped about than women in the negative, ambiguous, and no-gossip scenarios, *weakest* $d = .32$, $z = 4.73$, $p < .001$. However, on average, men and women did not differ in their openness to receiving positive gossip, $d = .01$, $z = .14$, $p = .890$.

Age. Age did not detectably predict openness to being gossiped about for negative or ambiguous scenarios, *strongest* $r = -.04$, $z = -.87$, $p = .386$. However, there was a small but detectable tendency for younger adults to be more open to gossip in the positive scenario, $r = -.10$, $z = -3.74$, $p < .001$, and in the no-gossip scenario, $r = -.09$, $z = -2.22$, $p = .026$.

Table 2. Meta-analytic effect sizes and 95% confidence intervals for Gender, Age, and Narcissism in Studies 1–3.

	Gender	Age	Narcissism
Negative	$d = .37$ [.15, .59]	$r = -.04$ [-.13, .05]	$r = .22$ [.04, .40]
Ambiguous	$d = .32$ [.19, .45]	$r = -.03$ [-.12, .06]	$r = .22$ [.07, .37]
None	$d = .38$ [.27, .49]	$r = -.09$ [-.17, -.01]	$r = .30$ [.16, .43]
Positive	$d = .01$ [-.19, .22]	$r = -.10$ [-.15, -.05]	$r = .15$ [.01, .28]

Brackets display 95% confidence intervals.

Narcissism. Narcissism positively predicted openness to gossip in all four scenarios, *weakest* $r = .15$, $z = 2.16$, $p = .031$.

Study 1 Discussion

Far from being universally opposed to being gossiped about, many people indicated at least some preference to be talked about, with approximately 1 in four participants indicating a preference to be the target of gossip when their valence is ambiguous or unspecified. Even when the gossip is clearly negative, a non-negligible 15% of the participants report a preference for this attention. For attitudes toward being targeted for positive gossip, surprisingly, people appear not to be universally in favor, with only 64% favoring such treatment. This leaves a substantial minority – 36% – who preferred not to be talked about positively. This could suggest a general unease with having information shared behind one's back and thus having no control of the presented narrative, or perhaps an assumption that even positive gossip has negative elements or can become negative quickly.

The desire to be talked about appeared to be especially pronounced among both men and participants who are higher in narcissism. Importantly, these effects were strongest for gossip scenarios *other than* positive gossip, suggesting that gender and narcissism are operative in motivating a desire for attention in situations where it is less plainly desirable (perhaps due to either a greater tolerance for risk or a tendency to judge that for *them* the gossip may end up being more favorable). Additionally, younger participants also appear to have a slightly stronger desire to be talked about, particularly for positive gossip, which fits assumptions from the Socioemotional Selectivity Theory (Carstensen, 1995). Finally, people did not appear to have substantially different attitudes toward being the topic of gossip in a workplace versus social context.

Study 4

In Study 4, we aimed to replicate many of the above-mentioned findings with two extensions. First, in addition to measuring narcissism, Study 4 also includes a measure of people's experiences of chronic ostracism. According to the temporal need-threat model of ostracism (Williams, 2009), ostracism threatens basic needs – including the need to feel like your existence matters and that you are noticed – and motivates people to restore these needs. Thus, we reasoned that people who are more chronically ostracized may have a stronger desire to be the focus of gossip, good or bad. Study 4 (and also Study 5) continue to assess gender and narcissism as predictors of gossip openness, but not age, as the young-adult college samples did not contain sufficient age variability to meaningfully analyze the effect of age. Second, Study 4 asks whether people accurately perceive the extent to which *other people* want to be talked about or if they falsely assume that others desire being the target of positive gossip more than they actually do. We suspected that people could potentially express overly high estimates of other peoples' desires to be talked about, which would align with previous findings that people tend to overestimate the extent to which other people

socialize (Deri et al., 2017), and people's tendency to overestimate the strength of other people's preferences (in this case, a preference to be gossiped about; Jung et al., 2020).

Method

Study 4 was largely exploratory and was preregistered as such (https://osf.io/xfwtz/?view_only=cf78f961e19549d3a2e96bf6f28cf78d). The aim, in addition to measuring judgments of other people's preferences for gossip, was to again observe the extent to which gender and narcissism predict willingness to be talked about in the four scenarios. Age was not analyzed, as this was a college sample without substantial age variability. Moreover, we measured judgments of how much respondents thought that *other people* would want to be the topic of gossip in each situation.

Participants and design

Participants were college students who completed our study online for partial course credit. A total of 402 people accessed the survey, but two did not answer any of the scenarios. An additional three, based on identification numbers, appeared to have taken the survey more than once. To be conservative, and for consistency with the other studies, these cases were removed from analysis, though this was not preregistered (Study 5 remedies this by a priori listing duplicated identifications as an exclusion criterion). The final sample consisted of 397 respondents (133 males, 261 females, 3 non-binary; 57% White, 25% Asian, 7% Black, 6% Hispanic, <1% Pacific Islander, 5% other category or not indicated; $M_{\text{age}} = 19.23$ years, $SD_{\text{age}} = 1.43$ years). Of these, one person did not respond to one of the gossip scenarios, and was included in any analyses not involving that scenario. A power analysis indicated that our target sample size of 400 provides approximately 80% power to detect a correlation of $r = .14$ or greater and a Cohen's $d = .28$ or greater, two-tailed.

Study 4 used a completely within-subjects factorial design: 4 (scenario: positive, ambiguous, no-gossip, and negative) \times 2 (target: self vs. other).

Procedure

An initial instruction page informed participants that on the following four pages, they would read about four different scenarios and, for each one, answer questions about 1) what *you* would want to happen, and 2) what you think *most other people* would want to happen. The scenarios were the same as in Study 1 (i.e., the no-gossip and ambiguous scenarios did not include the additional sentence used in Study 2), aside from a minor typo. As in Study 2, unique aspects of each scenario were bolded to aid in participant comprehension. In all scenarios, self-ratings were asked first, followed by ratings of what most others would prefer. The self-rating question wording and response options were identical to Studies 1 and 2. The other-rating question asked, "Now, how do you think *most other people* would respond to this scenario?" with options from 1 "Most other people would prefer that the group NOT talk about them at all when they are not there" to 6 "Most other people would prefer that the group DO talk [positively/negatively] about them when they are not there." As in earlier studies, for both questions, the words "positively" and

“negatively” only appeared in the response options for the corresponding questions to disambiguate that the group would indeed be talking about them in a specifically valenced manner. As in Study 2, the four scenarios were presented in a randomized order.

After responding to the gossip scenarios, participants completed measures of 1) narcissism and 2) chronic ostracism, in a randomized order (participants also completed two other measures beyond the scope of this current investigation: big five personality traits and one’s own tendency to gossip¹). To assess narcissism more reliably than Studies 1 and 2, we measured narcissism using the 40-item Narcissism Personality Inventory (Raskin & Terry, 1988), in which for each item people selected which of the two items better describes them (e.g., they would choose between: “A. I am no better or worse than most people/B. I think I am a special person”). Each participant was assigned a score that is the sum of the number of narcissistic options selected ($\alpha = .83$). Finally, chronic ostracism was measured with the Ostracism Experiences Scale (Carter-Sowell, 2010) with 8 items measuring the extent to which people are chronically ignored and excluded (e.g., “In general, others tend to treat me as if I’m invisible”) with responses from 1 “Hardly ever” to 7 “Almost always.” Items were averaged into a scale ($\alpha = .93$).

Results

Ostracism and self vs. Other openness to being gossiped about

Figure 1 shows the average of people’s own willingness to be the topic of gossip (light gray bars), and people’s judgments of others’ willingness to be the topic of gossip (dark gray bars). As preregistered, we conducted a 4×2 within-subjects analysis of variance,

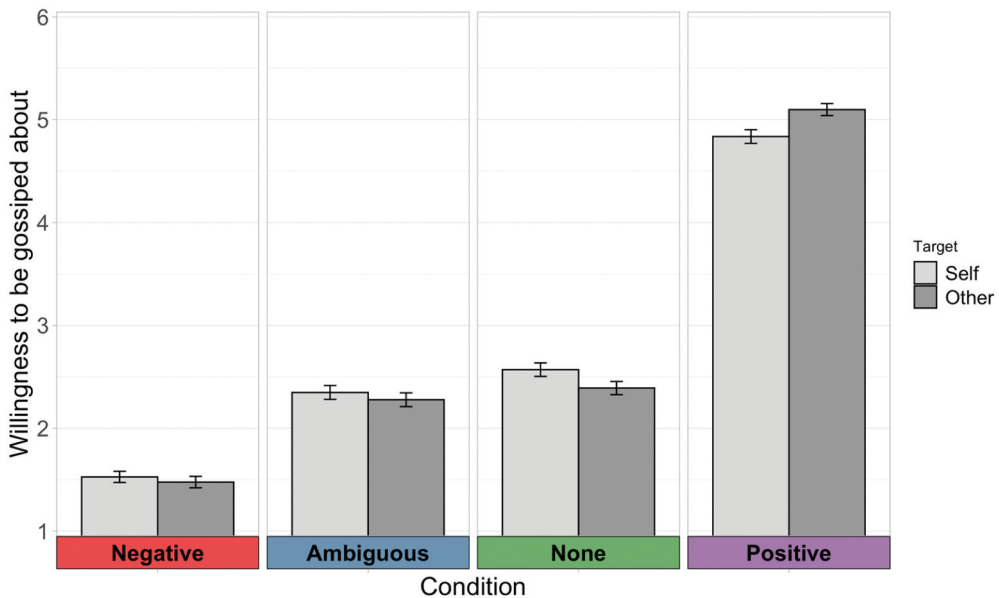


Figure 1. Openness to gossip by scenario and target in Study 4, $N = 397$. Bars represent mean response, and error bars represent standard errors of the mean.

which showed a main effect of scenario, $F(2.70, 1067.64) = 856.19, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .68$, no main effect of target, $F(1, 396) = .07, p = .790, \eta_p^2 < .001$, and a significant scenario \times target interaction, $F(2.81, 1112.10) = 16.96, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .04$.

We conducted simple effect tests within each condition, comparing self-rated desire to be talked about with judgments of other people's desire to be talked about, and found that people significantly overestimated the extent to which others want to be talked about in the positive gossip condition, $t(396) = 4.50, p < .001, d = .21, 95\% \text{ CI } [.12, .30]$, but not the negative gossip condition, $t(396) = -1.22, p = .224, d = -.05, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.12, .03]$, or the ambiguous gossip condition, $t(396) = -1.24, p = .216, d = -.05, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.14, .03]$. In the no-gossip condition, people attributed lower rating to themselves than to others, $t(396) = -3.25, p = .001, d = -.14, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.22, -.05]$ (as this specific difference did not replicate in Study 5, it is not interpreted below).

Individual differences

Figure 2 shows openness to being talked about as a function of gender, narcissism, and chronic ostracism.

Gender. As in earlier studies, men reported a greater willingness to be talked about than women did. An exploratory 2×4 mixed analysis of variance showed a main effect of gender, with men reporting greater willingness to be talked about $F(2.75, 1078.34) = 14.31, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .04, d = .18$. This main effect was qualified by a gender-by-scenario interaction, $F(2.75, 1078.34) = 13.62, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .03$. As depicted in Figure 2 Panel A, women were more responsive to variations in the scenarios than men were. Both men and women express greater willingness to be talked about positively than negatively, with the ambiguous and no-gossip conditions falling in the middle. However, these between-condition differences were greater for women than for men. For women, the Cohen's d comparing the positive condition to the pooled response of the other three conditions was 2.67 [2.33, 3.01]; for men it was only 1.76 [1.40, 2.14] (Full statistics for women: $t(260) = 32.87, p < .001$; Full statistics for men: $t(132) = 15.14, p < .001$). Further, examining gender differences within each

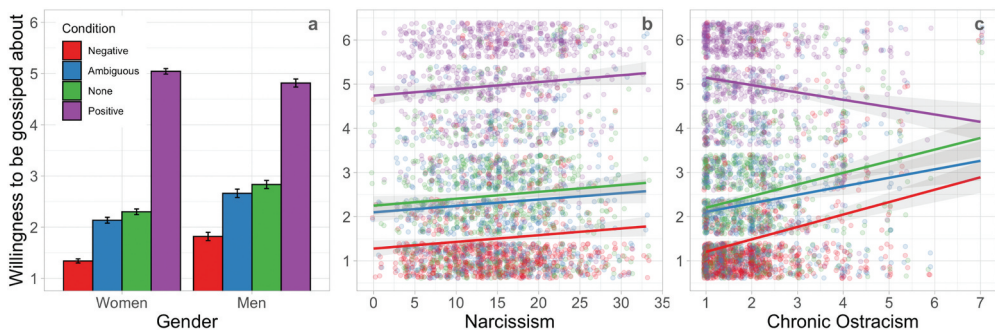


Figure 2. Openness to gossip by (a) gender, (b) narcissism, and (c) chronic ostracism in Study 4, $N = 397$. Points represent individual's responses to each scenario and are randomly jittered to display frequency of responses. Bars in Panel a display mean response for each group and error bars show standard errors of the mean.

condition showed that women actually preferred positive gossip to a greater extent than men did, $d = .25$ [.04, .46], $t(392) = 2.32$, $p = .021$, but they expressed more opposition to the other three forms of gossip than men did, negative: $d = -.48$ [-.70, -.27], $t(392) = -4.54$, $p < .001$, ambiguous: $d = -.43$ [-.63, -.21] $t(392) = -4.01$, $p < .001$, and no-gossip: $d = -.43$ [-.64, -.22], $t(392) = -4.01$ $p < .001$.

Narcissism. Narcissism predicted willingness to be talked about in all four conditions: the positive scenario $r = .11$ [.02, .21], $t(395) = 2.29$, $p = .023$, the negative scenario, $r = .12$ [.02, .22], $t(395) = 2.46$, $p = .014$, the ambiguous scenario $r = .15$ [.05, .24], $t(395) = 2.98$, $p = .003$, and the no-gossip scenario, $r = .15$ [.06, .25], $t(395) = 3.12$, $p = .002$. There was no evidence for an interaction between narcissism and condition, $\chi^2(DF = 3) = .02$, $p = .999$.

Chronic ostracism. The relationship between chronic ostracism and openness to gossip was significantly moderated by condition, interaction test, $\chi^2(DF = 3) = 49.88$, $p < .001$. In general, people who are higher in chronic ostracism reported greater willingness to be talked about. This was true for the ambiguous scenario, $r = .12$ [.02, .22], $t(395) = 2.42$, $p = .016$. The no-gossip scenario $r = .18$ [.08, .27], $t(395) = 3.95$, $p < .001$, and the negative gossip scenario $r = .26$ [.17, .35], $t(395) = 5.38$, $p < .001$. However, in response to the positive gossip scenario, chronic ostracism *negatively* predicted desire to be talked about, with more chronically ostracized individuals registering less of a desire to be the focus of positive gossip $r = -.16$ [-.26, -.07], $t(395) = -3.31$, $p = .001$.

Discussion

Study 4 largely replicated the relationship between narcissism and the preference to be targeted for gossip of all types that was observed in earlier studies.

Study 4 also indicates that people overestimate the extent to which other people desire to be talked about – but only positively. This accords with research indicating that when people estimate the preferences of others, they rely heavily on their assumptions about the core aspects of the experience leading to more extreme judgments (Jung et al., 2020). However, this finding was not explicitly predicted in Study 4, so Study 5 was conducted for confirmation.

Study 5

In addition to confirming the interaction observed in Study 4, Study 5 sought to clarify the relationship between ostracism and the desire to be talked about. In Study 4, consistent with the need-threat model (Williams, 2009) people who were more chronically ostracized had a generally greater desire to be talked about. An unexpected but interesting exception to this appears to be *positive* gossip; here, people who were more chronically ostracized actually wanted to be talked about less on average. It is possible – and also consistent with the *resignation stage* of the temporal need-threat model (e.g., Riva et al., 2017) – that people who are chronically ostracized are resigned to negative treatment and have internalized negative self-esteem, to the point where positive attention is a source of discomfort (e.g., Aronson, 1968). That is, from a consistency and self-verification perspective, people may view the positive gossip

as relatively less coherent and as uncomfortable (e.g., Swann et al., 2003). Also, plausible is that due to the framing of the positive gossip scenario, these participants were invited to imagine a threatening social comparison; the group presumably had something positive to say about all the prior guests. These chronically ostracized participants may have feared that the group would be unable to find something positive to say about them and preferred to avoid the attention altogether. It is also important to note that, as is visible in Panel C, chronic ostracism was heavily positively skewed. Those few participants who reported high degrees of chronic ostracism produce a restriction of range, making it difficult to precisely characterize the attitudes of those who are high in social ostracism. However, despite the restricted range, correlations were still visible. Study 5 provides a direct replication of these correlations.

To better understand the potential role of ostracism in preferences for attention, Study 5 experimentally manipulated ostracism to probe whether a situationally activated feeling of social exclusion would increase people's willingness to be gossiped about. Study 5 also again included a measure of narcissism and chronic ostracism.

Method

Hypotheses, analysis plan, and stopping rule were preregistered a priori (link: https://osf.io/cpn35/?view_only=24633fe9328947259e11896c1ff40155).

Participants and design

Participants were college students who participated in our study online for partial course credit. A total of 257 people accessed the survey, but 16 did not provide complete answers to the scenarios. An additional 7, based on identification numbers, appeared to have taken the survey more than once and were excluded from analysis as per the preregistered criteria. The final sample consisted of 234 respondents (98 men, 134 women, 2 non-binary; 64% White, 18% Asian, 10% Black, 4% Hispanic, 5% Other/not indicated; $M_{\text{age}} = 19.32$ years, $SD_{\text{age}} = 1.20$ years).

Participants were randomly assigned to be either included or ostracized, and then responded to all four scenarios indicating both their own preference and their estimated preference of others. This produced the following mixed factorial design: 2 (ostracized v. included, between-subjects) \times 4 (the four scenario variations, within-subjects) \times 2 (self v. other, within-subjects). We conducted a power analysis using Superpower (Lakens & Caldwell, 2021) with an alpha level of .05, assuming effect sizes indicated by Study 4. The target sample size of 250 provides approximately 80% power to detect the predicted scenario \times target interaction (approximate interaction effect size of $\eta_p^2 = .02$, accounting for correlations of dependent variables, and the additional ostracism factor added to the design).

Procedure

After consenting, participants engaged in Cyberball (Williams et al., 2000), an online ball-tossing game ostensibly to practice mental visualization. Participants played with two other players. In the inclusion condition, they were included fairly. In the ostracized condition, participants received the ball twice and at the beginning of the game but received no throws thereafter.

Following Cyberball, participants responded to the same four scenarios used in Study 4 in random order. To provide a more reliable measurement of participant preferences (i.e., more reliable than the single-item measure used in the first three studies), we used a four-item measure. For the first item, participants responded to the same 1 to 6 preference measure used in the earlier studies. For the next three items, participants rated their agreement from 1 (completely false) to 6 (completely true) with the statements, “I [most other people] would rather have the group talk about me than go unmentioned/unnoticed,” “I [most other people] would want the group to talk about me, even though I am [they are] not there,” and “I’d [most other people would] rather not be someone who goes unmentioned/unnoticed in this situation.” Responses on the four items were averaged into a composite scale separately for *self* and *others* within each scenario, forming 8 scores per participant (lowest $\alpha = .82$). Participants then responded to the single-item narcissism measure used in Studies 1 and 2, as well as the chronic ostracism measure used in Study 4 ($\alpha = .93$). Finally, as a manipulation check, participants rated the extent to which they were 1) ignored and 2) excluded during the game from 1 (not at all) to 5) completely. These two items were averaged into a manipulation check ($r = .78$). Participants also indicated the percentage of ball throws they received during the game.

Results

Manipulation checks

Compared to those who were included, people who were ostracized reported being more ignored and excluded during the game, $t(223.92) = 10.92$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.44$, and reported receiving fewer ball throws $t(204.90) = -8.41$, $p < .001$, $d = -1.12$.

Ostracism and self vs. other openness to being gossiped about

As preregistered, we conducted a mixed $2 \times 4 \times 2$ analysis of variance with inclusion status as a between-subjects factor, and scenario and target as within-subjects factors. This analysis confirmed the predicted interaction between scenario and target, $F(2.89, 670.45) = 4.34$, $p = .005$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$ (see Figure 3). The analysis did not detect any significant main or interaction effects involving inclusion status, strongest $F(1, 232) = 1.50$, $p = .223$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$. There was a main effect of the scenario, $F(1, 232) = 364.47$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .61$.

Following our analysis plan, we tested the simple effects comparing self-rated desire to be talked about with judgments of other people’s preferences, separately within each condition. Given the directional hypothesis, within the positive condition only, we conducted a preregistered one-tailed test (Hales, 2024); all other tests were two-tailed as preregistered. Replicating Study 4, people over-estimated the extent to which others wanted to be the focus of positive gossip, $t(233) = 3.76$, $p_{one-tailed} < .001$, $d = .21$, but not negative, ambiguous, or no-gossip, strongest $t(233) = 1.57$, $p = .118$, $d = .09$.

Individual differences

Figure 4 shows openness to being talked about as a function of gender, narcissism, and chronic ostracism. Although not the primary purpose of this experiment (as per the preregistration), we continued to examine these variables.

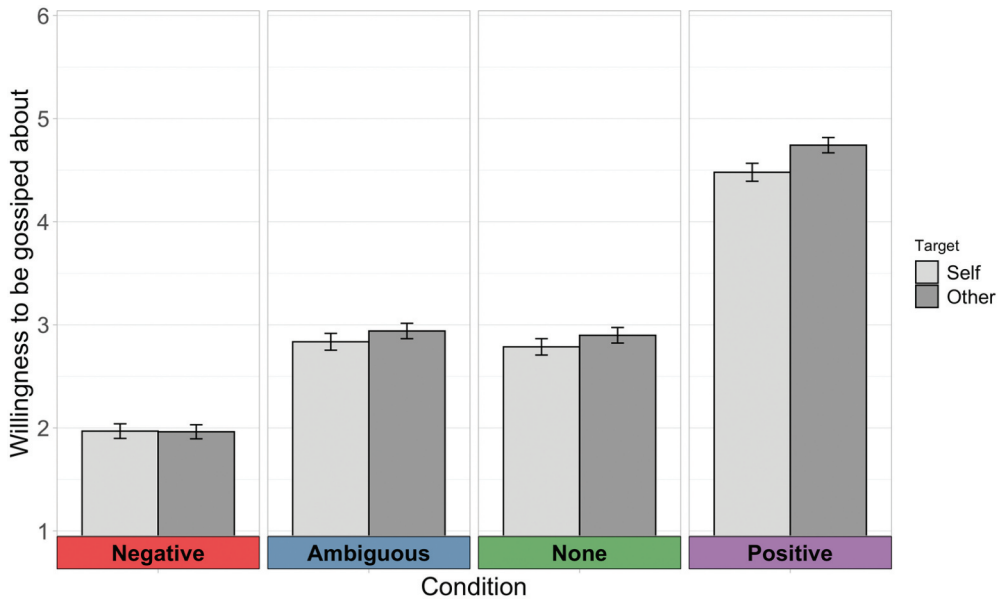


Figure 3. Openness to gossip by scenario and target in Study 5, $N = 234$. Bars represent mean response, and error bars represent standard errors of the mean.

Gender. An exploratory 2×4 mixed analysis of variance showed – unlike earlier studies – no significant main effect of gender $F(1, 230) = 1.55, p = .214, \eta_p^2 = .01, d = .09$. However, there was again a significant gender-by-scenario interaction of approximately the same shape as in earlier studies (see Figure 4, Panel A), interaction, $F(2.60, 597.80) = 6.79, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .03$. Again, both men and women express greater willingness to be talked about positively than negatively, with the ambiguous and no-gossip conditions falling in the middle. However, these between-condition differences were greater for women than for men. For women, the Cohen’s d comparing the positive condition to the pooled response of the other three conditions was 1.89 [1.57, 2.20]; for men, it was only 1.34 [1.02,

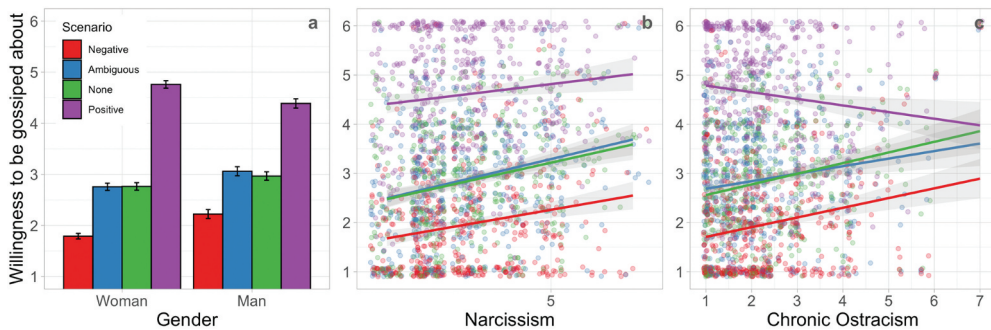


Figure 4. Openness to gossip by (a) gender, (b) narcissism, and (c) chronic ostracism in Study 5, $N = 234$. Points represent individual’s responses to each scenario and are randomly jittered to display frequency of responses. Bars in Panel a display mean response for each group and error bars show standard errors of the mean.

1.66] (Full statistics for women: $t(133) = 19.73, p < .001$; Full statistics for men: $t(97) = 11.40, p < .001$). Further, examining gender differences within each condition showed that women did not significantly prefer positive gossip to a greater extent than men did, $d = .25 [-.01, .51], t(230) = 1.88, p = .061$, but they tended to express more opposition to the other three forms of gossip than men did (although this was only significant in the case of negative gossip): negative $d = -.40 [-.66, -.13], t(230) = -2.99, p = .003$, ambiguous $d = -.26 [-.52, .01], t(230) = -1.94, p = .054$, and no-gossip $d = -.14 [-.40, .12], t(230) = -1.07, p = .288$.

Narcissism. Narcissism again predicted willingness to be talked about in all four conditions: the positive scenario $r = .21 [.09, .33], t(232) = 3.32, p = .001$, the negative scenario, $r = .23 [.11, .35], t(232) = 3.67, p < .001$, the ambiguous scenario $r = .31 [.19, .42], t(232) = 5.02, p < .001$, and the no-gossip scenario, $r = .29 [.16, .40], t(232) = 4.56, p < .001$. There was no evidence for a statistical interaction, $\chi^2(DF = 3) = 3.94, p = .268$

Chronic ostracism. Chronic ostracism predicted willingness to be talked about across conditions in a similar manner as Study 4. The relationship between chronic ostracism and openness to gossip was significantly moderated by condition, interaction $\chi^2(DF = 3) = 23.84, p < .001$. Those who are chronically ostracized reported less willingness to be talked about in the positive condition $r = -.15 [-.27, -.02], t(232) = -2.26, p = .025$, and greater willingness to be talked about in the no-gossip condition $r = .16 [.04, .29], t(232) = 2.53, p = .012$, and the negative gossip condition $r = .21 [.09, .33], t(232) = 3.31, p = .001$, but not the ambiguous condition, $r = .08 [-.05, .21], t(232) = 1.24, p = .217$.

Discussion

Results confirm Study 4's finding that people overestimate the extent to which others desire to be the focus of positive – but not negative or ambiguous – gossip. This study also provides further evidence that narcissism predicts the desire to be the focus of gossip of all valences.

Additionally, experimentally induced ostracism did not have a detectable effect on preferences for being talked about, but the correlational findings observed in Study 4 were also observed here with chronic ostracism negatively predicting desire for positive gossip, and positively predicting desire for other types of gossip. It is plausible that a two-minute ball tossing game is simply too minimal an experience of ostracism to shift people's preferences for being talked about by others. In contrast, given the more serious consequences of chronic ostracism (e.g., Riva et al., 2017; Rudert, Janke, et al., 2021), it is possible that only relatively intense and personally relevant forms of social exclusion induce a desire to be the focus of gossip. This accords with the observed negative correlations with the Ostracism Experiences Scale, which captures the types of real-life and long-term experiences of ostracism that could be sufficiently intense to affect openness to being gossiped about. It is also important to note that the ostracism induction bore no ostensible connection to the openness-to-gossip measure; it is possible that ostracism induces not a *general* desire for attention, but rather a situated and specific desire for attention (i.e., one that is only expressed if the gossip situation is relevant and connected to the ostracism episode).

Meta-Analyses

To provide more precise estimates of the effects of gender, age, and narcissism across all five studies, we performed the same meta-analyses as above, but with all five studies. Analyses are based on effects from approximately 2,010 participants for gender, 1,398 participants for age, and 2,035 participants for narcissism. Results are summarized in Table 3. Results are all consistent with the earlier meta-analysis but estimated with slightly greater precision.

General discussion

People are strongly motivated to fit in and be liked. They are also motivated to be noticed and acknowledged. With gossip, these motives collide. This research assessed – and largely validated – the assumption that people are opposed to the idea of being the target of gossip, albeit there is substantial variation depending on whether the gossip was thought to be positive, negative, or ambiguous. People are largely – but not universally – opposed to the idea of being talked about negatively, with the Studies 1–3 estimating 15% favoring this. In contrast, when it comes to positive gossip, people are largely – but not universally – in favor of being talked about, with an estimated 64% favoring the attention. The surprisingly high number of people – nearly 1 in 3 – who eschew positive gossip indicates that people may be made uncomfortable by the inherent lack of control that targets have over the gossip that is shared about them, or possibly suspicious that even positive gossip has negative elements or implications. Though surprising, this finding is in line with religious text forbidding partaking in gossip (i.e., *rechilut* or *lashon hara* in Judaism) even if the gossip is not negative.

Individuals' preferences for being gossiped about further depended on important individual differences. Men fairly consistently preferred to be the topic of gossip more than women. In Studies 1–3, younger adults especially preferred to be the focus of positive gossip, complementing theories on the development of gossip over early childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood (Ingram, 2019; Yucel & Vaish, 2018). This also fits Socioemotional Selectivity Theory (Carstensen, 1995) in that for younger (vs. older) people goals such as seeking out new social contacts and building/maintaining large networks are prioritized. In particular, being positively gossiped about might help achieve those aims (see Yucel et al., 2021), so a potential mechanism explaining this effect might be the one-s anticipated social network outcomes.

Finally, in Study 3, there was no evidence that attitudes toward being the topic of gossip vary as a function of context (i.e., social vs workplace): People indicated no less

Table 3. Meta-analytic effect sizes and 95% confidence intervals for Gender, Age, and Narcissism across the five studies.

	Gender	Age	Narcissism
Negative	$d = .39$ [.25, .54]	$r = -.04$ [-.13, .05]	$r = .21$ [.08, .33]
Ambiguous	$d = .33$ [.23, .43]	$r = -.03$ [-.12, .06]	$r = .22$ [.12, .33]
None	$d = .36$ [.27, .45]	$r = -.09$ [-.17, -.01]	$r = .27$ [.17, .37]
Positive	$d = -.07$ [-.24, .10]	$r = -.10$ [-.15, -.05]	$r = .15$ [.06, .24]

Brackets display 95% confidence intervals.

willingness to be gossiped about at work – regardless of the valence or type of that gossip. It is important to note that this particular operationalization of context may not have fully captured particular nuances of what could make gossip more or less appealing across different contexts, or indeed the way in which contexts can blur in real life (people socialize with work friends and work with social friends). It remains possible that attitudes toward gossip will differ depending on the particulars of a gossip scenario, such as whether the content of the gossip is work-focused versus socially focused.

Chronic ostracism generally increased individuals' desire to be talked about, which aligns with findings showing that even negative attention is preferable to being ignored altogether (Rudert et al., 2017). Surprisingly, however, people who were chronically ostracized specifically expressed a desire for *less* positive gossip attention. This relationship may be due to other factors (such as chronically ostracized people having lower self-esteem, and thus feeling less deserving of positive attention). It does suggest an ironic impediment to fixing one's chronic ostracism problem: positive gossip may make one a more attractive contact, yet it is nevertheless viewed as unfavorable by people in this situation. Finally, narcissism was the most consistent predictor of the desire to be the focus of gossip. This is consistent with conceptualizations of narcissism as a trait that motivates a desire for notoriety and special treatment (Grapsas et al., 2020) and findings that indicate a higher sensitivity of narcissists to clues indicating ostracism, i.e., not being talked about (Büttner et al., 2025). Thus, a likely mechanism through which narcissism predicts desire to be gossiped about is a desire for noteworthiness/status and attention.

People gossip for many reasons (e.g., Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012; Dores Cruz, Beersma, et al., 2019), and a likely contributing factor is being able to rationalize to oneself that the target would not mind if they knew about the gossip. Studies 4 and 5 further showed a reliable tendency for people to overestimate the extent to which others want to be the focus of gossip, but only when that gossip is specified to be positive. This tendency has important implications for understanding when and why people engage in gossip because virtually any observation could be framed as having positive elements. For example, a risk-taker could be characterized as courageous or as reckless. Similarly, gossipers can easily frame their motivations in a positive light. For example, gossip that to an outsider might seem critical and negative, may be spun by a gossip as actually motivated as an expression of compassion or concern (e.g., "Have you seen how s/he looks lately? I'm concerned"). With this flexible menu of ways to describe gossip as beneficent, people may have a surprisingly easy time justifying the gossip they share about others, by dressing it in a patina of positivity (even though, according to Studies 4 and 5, the targets of the gossip themselves would be less willing to be in that position than people are aware of). Not only could positively framed gossip be unappealing to the targets of gossip, but it could also cause actual damage to their reputation (Reynolds et al., 2025).

Regarding potential constraints on the generality of the current findings, Studies 1 and 2 used samples representative of the United States, suggesting that results are likely to be fairly robust within that country. As for cross-national generalizability, given the particular threat that gossip poses to one's relations, it is reasonable to expect a greater aversion to the prospect of negative gossip from people in cultures that emphasize interdependence (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). While levels of narcissism and desire for gossip may vary cross-culturally, we do not know any reason to expect the relationship between the two to

change across cultures. So, we believe that the primary relationships between variables reported here, if not the mean-levels of openness to gossip – will likely replicate cross-culturally, although more research will be necessary to confirm this. The focus here was on describing people's attitudes toward the prospect of being the topic of gossip – accordingly, this was only measured with regard to people's responses to the vignette/scenario descriptions they were provided with. Further research can extend this to examine the emotional consequences of discovering that one has been the topic of gossip (good or bad) or allowing people to exercise control over whether others have the opportunity to gossip about them and assessing the extent to which they intervene and disrupt the gossip, if given the chance.

Additional limitations include that, Studies 1 to 4 relied on a single-item indicator of openness to gossip, which is not ideal from a measurement perspective (and Study 5 expanded this into a reliable 4-item scale). Future work can build on this by establishing more elaborated instruments to assess people's openness to gossip. An additional important step for future research is to examine how the prospect of gossip and the individual differences examined here affect the types of situations people opt into (i.e., whether they avoid or seek out groups that are likely to engage in gossip) or the behaviors they engage in (i.e., whether they behave in ways that elicit additional gossip from others).

Is it the case that the only thing worse than being talked about is not being talked about? The answer likely is "it depends," as we find considerable variation based on situational as well as dispositional factors: While most individuals dislike negative or ambiguous gossip, positive gossip is preferred by a majority. In addition, men and individuals higher in narcissism, as well as those chronically ostracized, seem to have a stronger desire for attention, even if it is negative.

Note

1. This was measured with the Revised Gossip Functions Questionnaire (Yucel & Moulder, 2024). It was only weakly correlated with openness to gossip across all four scenarios. This was true both for the normative subscale (average $r < .01$, strongest $r = -.17$, 95% CI $[-.27, -.08]$), and for the relationships subscale (average $r < .01$, strongest $r = -.15$, 95% CI $[-.24, -.05]$).

Acknowledgement

The preparation of this article was supported by the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health & Human Development of the National Institutes of Health under Award Number F32HD108861 (MY).

Disclosure statement

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

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