WHISPERED WORDS AND ORGANIZATIONAL DYNAMICS
The Nuanced Perception of Gossipers’ Morality and Sociability and Its Effect on Workplace Advice Seeking
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Abstract
How do observers evaluate gossipers versus non-gossipers? While they perceive gossipers as less moral, they also perceive gossipers as more social than non-gossipers. Consequently, observers are less likely to turn to gossipers for advice on morality-related issues, but more likely to do so for sociability-related issues in the workplace.

Overview
Due to a lack of clear conceptualization of gossip in prior literature, how people evaluate gossipers versus non-gossipers in general remains largely inconclusive. By adopting an integrative definition of gossip [1] – controlling for its valence, content, and the formality of its context – we show that:

• Gossipers (vs. non-gossipers) are evaluated distinctively across two fundamental personality dimensions – morality and sociability.
• Gossip is construed as a means to gain social power by harming others’ reputations [2], thus lowering gossipers’ (vs. non-gossipers’) perceived morality.
• Gossip is also construed as an instrument to build social intelligence to succeed in the workplace [3], thus enhancing gossipers’ (vs. non-gossipers’) perceived sociability.
• The presence of incidental moral cues enhances gossipers’ perceived morality, whereas the presence of incidental social cues enhances non-gossipers’ perceived sociability.
• Observers seek workplace advice from gossipers (vs. non-gossipers) selectively based on these nuanced evaluations.

Studies 1a & 1b
Study 1a: N=299
Gossiper: chat-chat about others
Non-gossiper: not chat-chat about others
Study 1b: N=301
Gossiper: chat-chats about others
Non-gossiper: work-related topics

Indirect effect via perceived morality: b = .51*, SE = .45
Indirect effect via perceived sociability: b = .52*, SE = .45

Studies 2 & 3
Study 2: N=303 (chat-about others vs. not chat-about others)
Study 3: N=300 (chat-about others vs. work-related topics)

Incidental moral cues enhance gossipers’ perceived morality
Incidental social cues enhance non-gossipers’ perceived sociability

Studies 4
Study 4: N=302 (chat-about others vs. not chat-about others)
2 (agent) x 2 (scenario; within-subjects) mixed design

Indirect effect via perceived sociability: b = .65, SE = .15, 95% CI [.37, .95]
Indirect effect via perceived morality: b = .87, SE = .12, 95% CI [-1.12, -.64]

Studies 5
Study 5: N=301 (chat-about others vs. not chat-about others)
2 (agent) x 2 (scenario; within-subjects) mixed design

Indirect effect via perceived sociability: b = .51*, SE = .45
Indirect effect via perceived morality: b = .52*, SE = .45