

Tea and Tales: The Influence of Gossip in Social Life

Izzat, Family Honour and Perceived Stress among Indian Adults: A Mixed-Methods Study

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Abstract: *Gossip is one of the most ordinary things people do together, yet most of what psychology knows about it comes from Western, individualist samples. This mixed-methods study examined the social and psychological functions of gossip in everyday Indian life, with attention to family honour (izzat), gender, coping and WhatsApp-based digital gossip. One hundred Indian adults completed a survey comprising the Revised Gossip Functions Questionnaire, a researcher-developed Indian Social Context Questionnaire, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale and the Perceived Stress Scale, followed by semi-structured interviews with ten participants. The primary hypothesis was supported: izzat anxiety correlated positively with perceived stress ($r = .263, p = .008$), providing the first quantitative evidence that family honour operates as a stressor in daily Indian life. Gender and family-type differences were non-significant, indicating that both izzat anxiety and recognition of the gendered gossip double standard are broadly shared across demographic groups: 73% of participants agreed that women face harsher gossip consequences and 82% said men's equivalent talk is labeled "advice or concern". Gossip-as-coping did not reduce stress, and interviews revealed pervasive moral ambivalence (70% reported mixed relief and guilt). Four qualitative themes converged with the quantitative findings. Gossip in India emerges as a culturally embedded, psychologically complex behaviour whose benefits and costs are inseparable.*

Keywords: Gossip, izzat, collectivism, perceived stress, WhatsApp, gender, coping, India

1. Introduction

Gossip, the evaluative exchange of personal information about someone who is not present [1], has an unfair reputation. Studies that record everyday conversation find that most of it is neutral rather than malicious [3, 8]. It also does real work. It moves information through communities that have no formal channels, passes on norms and moral lessons [2], and helps people decide whom to trust. People talk about others to make sense of their own feelings and to feel less alone [9], and the habit leaves a mark on the speaker too: in one experiment, negative gossip lowered the gossiper's own self-esteem [10].

Nearly all of this work was done in individualist settings, where gossip is pictured as a private exchange between two people. India looks different. It sits among the most collectivist societies studied [4], and the self is understood through family and community rather than alone [5]. What is said about one person is felt by the whole household. The idea that carries this weight is *izzat*, a word for honour, dignity and standing that the family holds together, and the everyday question *log kya kahenge* ("what will people say?") is its anxious shadow. Cross-cultural evidence shows that gossip shapes reputation among Indian participants too [6], and Indian research has looked at gossip in workplaces [7], but the family and community level, where it probably matters most, has been left alone. Two further facts raise the stakes. Formal mental health care is scarce in India, so everyday talk may be carrying some of the emotional load. And WhatsApp, with over 500 million Indian users and its family, housing-society and office groups, has given gossip a speed and permanence that earlier studies never had to consider.

Gender adds another layer. Men and women gossip about equally often [8], yet women's social talk is more readily labelled and judged as gossip [16]. We drew on four

frameworks: Foster's functions of gossip [1], refined into normative and relationship functions by Yücel and Moulder [12]; Hofstede's individualism-collectivism dimension [4]; Rosenberg's view of global self-esteem [13]; and the appraisal model of stress behind the Perceived Stress Scale [14]. The study set out to fill five gaps: izzat has not entered the psychology of gossip, the gendered experience of gossip in India is unexamined, gossip as coping has not been tested there, digital gossip has had little attention, and generational change is undocumented. Our aim was to understand what gossip does, socially and psychologically, in everyday Indian life, and how it relates to self-esteem and perceived stress. We tested five hypotheses. H1: izzat anxiety is positively correlated with perceived stress. H2: women score higher than men on gender perception of gossip. H3: participants from joint families score higher on izzat than those from nuclear families. H4: gossip as coping is associated with lower stress. H5: relationship-function gossip is positively correlated with self-esteem.

2. Methodology

2.1 Design and participants

We used a sequential mixed-methods design, with the survey first so that it could shape what we asked in the interviews. The survey sample was 100 Indian adults aged 18 or above, recruited by purposive sampling through personal WhatsApp networks, email, and visits to colleges and community centres in Bengaluru and nearby semi-urban areas between August and September 2026. Participants had to be Indian residents who could read English, Hindi or Kannada; incomplete forms and people in an acute mental health crisis were excluded. Women made up 70% of the sample and men 30%. Almost half (47%) were aged 18–25. In all, 44% lived in urban, 33% in semi-urban and 23% in rural areas, and 36% came from

joint or extended families against 54% from nuclear ones. For the interviews we chose 10 survey participants to vary in gender, age and family type, with at least five women.

2.2 Measures

The Revised Gossip Functions Questionnaire (RGFQ; 11 items, 5-point scale) yields a Normative score (protecting the group and enforcing rules; range 5–25) and a Relationship score (bonding and enjoyment; range 6–30) [12]. The Indian Social Context Questionnaire was written for this study: 13 scenario-based multiple-choice items, each coded 1 to 4, grouped into izzat, digital gossip, gender perception and coping. It was reviewed for clarity and cultural fit under the guide's direction but has not been formally validated. Self-esteem was measured with the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (10 items, range 10–40) [13, 15] and perceived stress with the Perceived Stress Scale [14]; because of an export problem, nine stress items were analyzed (range 0–36).

2.3 Procedure, ethics and analysis

The survey ran as one Google Form of about 15–20 minutes. Interviews lasted 30–45 minutes, followed a guide of 11 open questions, and were held in each person's preferred language, audio-recorded with consent, transcribed and then deleted. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, people could withdraw at any point, and the survey closed with signposting to support services. We ran descriptive statistics, frequencies, Pearson correlations and independent-samples t-tests, all two-tailed, and analyzed the interviews thematically in six steps, from familiarization to the written report.

3. Results

3.1 Scale scores

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for scale scores (N = 100)

Scale	Possible range	M	SD
RGFQ Normative function	5–25	11.88	2.97
RGFQ Relationship function	6–30	14.78	3.6
Context: Izzat (family honour)	3–12	6.64	1.7
Context: Digital gossip	4–16	9.96	3.88
Context: Gender perception	4–16	11.13	2.47
Context: Coping	2–8	5.77	1.05
RSES self-esteem	10–40	24.48	2.59
PSS perceived stress (9 items)	0–36	20.96	3.25

Relationship motives (M = 14.78, SD = 3.60) scored a little above normative motives (M = 11.88, SD = 2.97), but the two scales have different numbers of items and the per-item means are close (2.46 against 2.38), so the two functions look like they run side by side. Of the context dimensions, gender perception was the most strongly endorsed (M = 11.13 out of 16), while izzat was moderate (M = 6.64 out of 12). Self-esteem was moderate and perceived stress moderate to high.

3.2 Patterns in the survey answers

Izzat showed up in behaviour more than in stated worry. Two-thirds of participants (66%) had stopped themselves from doing something because of community opinion, yet 53% said gossip about their family would not touch them personally. Digital gossip was common: 45% had passed on personal information about someone through WhatsApp, and 64% had received information about someone that was exaggerated or false. Views on gender were lopsided. Asked how it is treated when men share the same kind of information, 82% said it is seen as advice or concern, and 73% said women face harsher consequences when they are talked about. The coping answers were the most telling. Asked how they felt after talking over a difficult situation involving someone else, 70% reported both relief and guilt, 15% only relief and 13% only guilt.

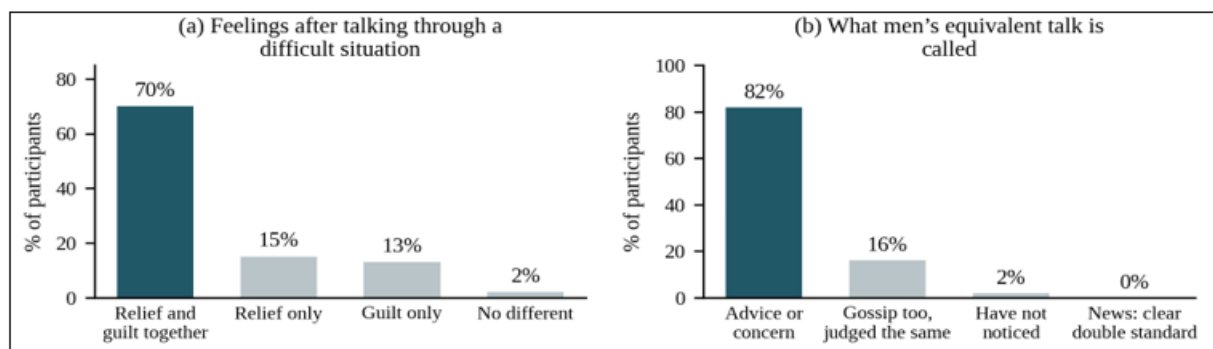


Figure 1: Feelings after talking through a difficult situation (a) and what men's equivalent talk is called (b), % of participants

3.3 Correlations and hypothesis tests

Table 2: Pearson correlations among scale scores (N = 100)

Scale	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. RGFQ Normative	—	.33**	0.17	0.12	0.05	.23*	0.01	.21*
2. RGFQ Relationship		—	.28**	0.07	-.07	.29**	-.02	0.16
3. Izzat			—	0.15	.21*	0.12	0	.26**
4. Digital gossip				—	0.08	0.14	0.01	.26**
5. Gender perception					—	0.13	-.04	0.08
6. Coping						—	-.03	0.15
7. RSES self-esteem							—	.27**
8. PSS perceived stress								—

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$ (two-tailed). Izzat and digital gossip scores were each related to perceived stress at the same strength ($r = .26$, $p = .008$), and normative gossip motives were too ($r = .21$, $p = .033$). Unexpectedly, so was self-esteem ($r = .27$, $p = .006$). The two gossip functions moved together ($r = .33$), and relationship motives were linked with izzat ($r = .28$) and with using gossip to cope ($r = .29$). Izzat was also related to gender perception ($r = .21$).

Table 3: Summary of hypothesis tests

Hypothesis	Test	Result	Outcome
H1 Izzat is positively related to perceived stress	Pearson r	$r = .26$, $p = .008$	Supported
H2 Women score higher than men on gender perception	t-test	$t(98) = 0.17$, $p = .868$	Not supported
H3 Joint-family members score higher on izzat	t-test	$t(88) = 0.92$, $p = .360$	Not supported
H4 Gossip coping is related to lower stress	Pearson r	$r = .15$, $p = .135$	Not supported
H5 Relationship function is related to higher self-esteem	Pearson r	$r = -.02$, $p = .819$	Not supported

Only H1 was supported, and the relationship was modest: izzat accounts for about 7% of the variance in stress. Women ($M = 11.16$) and men ($M = 11.07$) were almost identical on gender perception, and joint-family ($M = 6.81$) and nuclear-family participants ($M = 6.46$) did not differ on izzat. Coping was unrelated to stress, and relationship-function gossip was unrelated to self-esteem.

3.4 Interview themes

Six themes emerged from the ten interviews (six women and four men, five from joint and five from nuclear families). First, gossip is a family affair. As P4, a textile business owner, put it, “One bad rumour about one person ruins marriage prospects for their siblings. Always the family.” Second, *log kya kahenge* acts as an invisible regulator of choices about careers, weddings and where to live; P3 called it “an actual invisible family member”, although its grip seemed to loosen with age, independence and distance from home (P8, P10). Third, WhatsApp changes gossip in kind and not only in speed: “Face-to-face gossip fades, but digital screenshots last forever” (P7). Fourth, the double standard is common knowledge. Men and women both named it unprompted, and one man admitted that what men call business talk is often gossip under another name (P6). Fifth, venting brings relief with guilt attached. For P1 the guilt was religious as well, a pull between faith teachings against backbiting and the wish to talk, and P6 worried afterwards that his confidant would repeat what he had said. Sixth, generations differ: elders “gossip to control behaviour”, while younger people gossip to “make sense of relationships and set personal boundaries” (P7), and do it across digital networks instead of neighbourhoods (P10).

4. Discussion

The clearest result is that worry about family honour goes together with stress. The link is modest and cross-sectional, so we cannot say which comes first: people who are already stressed may attend more closely to what others think, or the pressure of being watched may produce the strain. Either way, it extends evidence that negative gossip raises anxiety at work [11] to everyday community life, and it suggests that standard stress assessments miss a culturally specific source of distress.

That digital gossip correlated with stress just as strongly fits what interviewees said about WhatsApp: it widens the audience and keeps the record.

The null results are informative. Izzat anxiety did not differ by family type, so it looks like a shared cultural value rather than a product of the joint family; P3, who lives in a nuclear household, described it as clearly as anyone. Gender perception did not differ either. Men and women recognize the double standard to the same degree, which parallels the finding that they gossip equally often [8] and fits the labeling costs women face [16]. Shared recognition is not shared experience, though: in the interviews women described the consequences first-hand, while men mostly described them as observers, and whether awareness ever changes behaviour remains open.

The coping and self-esteem results point the same way. Gossip used for coping was not associated with lower stress, and the 70% who felt relief and guilt together may explain why. Venting may soothe for a while and add a moral cost, a religious one for some and a fear of being repeated for others, leaving little net change. This supports the view that gossip helps people process emotion [9] while adding that, in a culture built on loyalty, it comes at a price. Relationship-function gossip was unrelated to self-esteem, and the positive link between self-esteem and stress, the opposite of what theory predicts, may reflect a young, educated and busy sample or the shortened stress scale; it needs replication. Because normative and relationship motives were similar in strength, collectivism does not seem to make Indian gossip mainly a tool of policing, and P7’s contrast between elders’ control and her peers’ sense-making hints at a generational shift worth following over time.

Earlier Indian work has looked at gossip in workplaces [7] and at how it steers resource decisions [6]; this study adds how it is lived at the level of family and community. The relief-and-guilt pattern gives empirical weight to the argument that gossip serves emotional processing [9], and it echoes the finding that talking negatively about others can dent one’s own self-regard [10]. Taken together, gossip here looks less like idle chatter than like an informal way of coping that people use knowingly and with some unease.

For clinicians, asking about family honour and fear of community judgment may bring out a source of stress that routine assessment misses. Organizations could set clear norms for workplace WhatsApp groups, and community mental health programmes might build on the talk networks that already exist to offer peer support that carries less guilt.

The sample was purposive, young (47% aged 18–25), mostly urban or semi-urban and 70% women, so the findings cannot be generalized and the gender comparisons have limited power. Everything was self-reported, and because gossip is stigmatized, people may have under-reported it or overstated their guilt. The context questionnaire is new and invalidated, stress was measured with nine items, the design is cross-

sectional, and ten interviews cannot guarantee saturation. Future work should validate the questionnaire in larger and more varied samples, follow izzat and stress over time, study the harms and benefits of WhatsApp gossip, compare states and language communities, and test whether recognizing the double standard ever changes behaviour.

5. Conclusion

Gossip in India is neither simply harmful nor simply helpful. It carries information, builds bonds and passes on norms. It also makes people anxious about the family name, leaves most of them feeling both lighter and guilty after confiding, and travels further and lasts longer on WhatsApp. The main finding is that izzat anxiety is measurably tied to stress; the most telling is that relief and guilt arrive together. A psychology of gossip that hopes to describe Indian life has to make room for the family, and not only the individual.

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