



# Age differences in women's tendency to gossip are mediated by their mate value

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## ABSTRACT

In the current study it was investigated whether age differences in women's tendency to gossip exist, and whether these could be accounted for by self-reported mate value. It was expected that younger women would report a higher tendency to gossip after reading a scenario in which a romantic rival was introduced, because they are at an age when competition for mates is salient and often intense. Moreover, it was hypothesized that this higher tendency to gossip would be attributable to these women's higher mate value, since younger women have a higher reproductive capacity than older women. The results confirm these expectations: age differences in women's tendency to gossip disappeared when controlling for mate value. Discussion focuses on the interpretation and implications of these results.

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## 1. Introduction

According to the [Oxford English Dictionary \(1989\)](#) gossip is 'easy, unrestrained talk or writing, especially about persons or social incidents'. Almost two thirds of adult casual conversations are devoted to matters of social importance and can thus be considered gossip ([Dunbar, 2004](#); [Levin & Arluke, 1985](#)). Gossip can benefit individual members of a group: it can be used to enforce group norms and enhance conformity, to detect cheaters, and to discourage free riders ([Dunbar, 1996, 2004](#)). However, in addition to being socially beneficial, gossip can also be used to the benefit of the individual. Gossip – honest or deceptive – may be one strategy by which individuals compete for scarce resources by using information to damage their opponents' reputations and improve their own ([Barkow, 1992](#); [Buss & Dedden, 1990](#); [Emler, 1994](#); [Hess & Hagen, 2006](#)).

Indeed, an evolutionary approach to gossip (e.g. [Buss & Dedden, 1990](#); [Campbell, 1999, 2004](#); [Dunbar, 2004](#)) views it as a strategy used in intrasexual competition, more specifically as a form of competitor derogation, especially for women. Competitor derogation refers to any act that is performed for the purposes of decreasing, relative to oneself, a rival's mate value, and is focused on the traits that are preferred most by the opposite sex, such as attractiveness for women (e.g. [Buss & Dedden, 1990](#)). Since women's intrasexual competition tactics are less directly aggressive than men's intrasexual competition strategies, an evolutionary view

on gossip assumes that this tactic is mostly used by women. Moreover, this perspective leads one to expect that individuals would be especially interested in the activities of same-sex others, and that the content of gossip centers on damaging other women's sexual reputation and physical appearance, since these are characteristics central to female mate value. Indeed, both these expectations have been confirmed by recent research.

Regarding the focus of the gossip, [McAndrew and Milenkovic \(2002\)](#) found that participants were most interested in information about others of the same sex, were more likely to pass along negative information about rivals, but were more likely to protect negative information about friends and relatives. Interestingly, although no sex differences were found in the interest in reputation gossip about potential mates ([De Backer, Nelissen, & Fisher, 2007](#)), research has shown that differences in the recall of gossip about sexual rivals do exist: women more than men recalled information about the mating skills of potential rivals, irrespective of their relationship status. Similarly, [McAndrew, Bell, and Garcia \(2007\)](#) report that women were three times as likely as males to be interested in gossip about same-sex others, i.e. rivals, as they were in gossip about their own lovers. Women also indicated they would be just as likely to share gossip with their same-sex friends as with their romantic partners, whereas men were much more likely to confide in romantic partners than in male friends.

Regarding the content of the gossip, research ([Buss & Dedden, 1990](#); [Owens, Shute, & Slee, 2000](#)) has shown that especially derogative comments about other women's appearance and to a lesser extent her sexual reputation, rank high in female gossip topics. Moreover, these negative remarks about other women's attractiveness seem to have the intended effect on men, i.e. to make the rival

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less appealing to them. A study by Fisher and Cox (2009) showed that men judged the appearance of a woman's rival as less attractive when derogative remarks about this rival's appearance were made. Moreover, they were more influenced by these remarks when the gossiping was done by an attractive than by an unattractive woman. However, in another study (Fisher, Shaw, Worth, Smith, & Reeve, 2010) it was shown that gossiping also affects one's own desirability as a mate: men's evaluations of a derogator's friendliness, kindness, trustworthiness and overall desirability significantly decreased by her gossiping. Interestingly enough, their opinions of her attractiveness and promiscuity were not affected by the fact that she made derogatory remarks about other women.

The research summarized above suggests that gossip is an effective way for women to make same-sex members less attractive to the opposite sex – especially when the gossip comes from someone with a high mate value. Indeed, Campbell (2004) posits that women compete with each other by employing two strategies at the same time: As well as advertising their own strong points through the enhancement of their appearance (e.g. by wearing make-up or tight clothes), they gossip about other women to damage their reputation and social standing. Interestingly, in extreme cases when women resort to physical violence, research (Campbell, 1986) has shown that the most common reason (accounting for 46% of fights) was an attack on the girl's personal integrity, which included instances where there had been allegations about the girl's promiscuity, or gossiping behind her back. Especially young women, who are in their reproductive years, when competition for mates is salient and often intense, have been shown to resort to gossiping as an intrasexual competition tactic (Campbell, 2004). In the current study we therefore focus on female participants, and we expect younger women to have a higher tendency to gossip than older women.

Research has shown repeatedly (e.g. Buss, 1989; Kenrick & Keefe, 1992) that younger women have a higher mate value than older women, due to their greater reproductive capacity. Indeed, recent research (Jokela, 2009) showed that attractive women, that is, women with a high mate value, were more likely to marry, and had more children than their unattractive counterparts. Therefore, we hypothesize that the expected age differences in gossip tendency will disappear when controlling for our participants' self-reported mate value. In the current study we will confront female participants with a situation in which a romantic rival is introduced, and will ask them how likely they will be to tell negative things about her to other people, i.e. their tendency to gossip. We expect younger women to gossip more than older women, and that this can be explained by their higher self-reported mate value.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Pilot study

In an online pilot study among 160 female students of the University of Groningen (age  $M = 20.03$ ,  $SD = 2.97$ ) it was investigated whether the responses to our scenario did indeed measure a tendency to gossip. Participants in this study first completed the Attitudes to Gossip scale (ATG; Litman & Pezzo, 2005). This questionnaire consists of 12 items, examples of which are: 'It is fun to talk about other people', 'Gossip is often true', and 'I love to know what is going on in people's lives'. Responses on this questionnaire are given on a 5-point scale (1 = disagree strongly, 5 = agree strongly);  $M = 2.94$ ,  $SD = .50$ . Participants then read the scenario and answered the questions (see materials section below). Coefficient alpha = .94;  $M = 2.07$ ,  $SD = .40$ . The ATG and our own gossip questionnaire were positively correlated with each other:

$r = .19$ ,  $p < .05$ . Thus, we conclude our questionnaire does indeed measure a – state – tendency to gossip.

### 2.2. Participants

Eighty-three females participated in the current study (age range 20–50,  $M = 30.37$ ,  $SD = 12.29$ ). They were approached on and near the leisure areas of the University of Groningen and asked to participate in a study on interpersonal relationships. At the time of the experiment, 79.5% of the participants reported having a relationship: 24% of participants were in a relationship but not living together, 23% were living together, and 32.5% were married. All methods and procedures in this study were approved by the Ethical Committee Psychology of the University of Groningen.

### 2.3. Materials and procedure

All participants received a paper and pencil questionnaire. After providing some demographic information (age, relationship status) they filled in the Dutch translation of the Self-Perceived Mating Success Scale (Landolt, Lalumière, & Quinsey, 1995). On a five-point scale (1 = not at all, 5 = very much) participants indicated how applicable certain statements about their 'market value' were to them. Examples are: 'I receive many compliments from members of the opposite sex', and 'I receive invitations for sex from members of the opposite sex'. Coefficient alpha = .89,  $M = 2.99$  ( $SD = .85$ ).

The next part of the study consisted of the experimental manipulation. Participants first read the following scenario:

Imagine the following situation: Meet your new neighbor, Karen. You are single, and you have been in love with a man that has been living on your street for a while now. Lately, Karen has also started to show an interest in this man. She is constantly flirting with him and trying to get his attention. You really like this man and you are very upset that you now have a rival. How would you feel in this situation?

After reading this scenario, participants answered a series of questions about their reactions in a situation like this. First of all, they indicated on a 5-point scale how kind, intelligent, loyal, caring, understanding, and dedicated they thought Karen was. Coefficient alpha of these items was .91, so it was decided to average them into a variable we labeled 'Opinion about the rival' ( $M = 2.77$ ,  $SD = .62$ ).

Participants then answered 16 questions about their tendency to gossip in this specific situation, for example: 'I would tell negative things about Karen to other people', 'I would tell my friends that Karen is unkind', and 'I would tell the man I am in love with that Karen isn't faithful in relationships' (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Coefficient alpha = .98. Considering this high alpha we averaged the scores on these questions into a variable we labeled 'Tendency to gossip',  $M = 2.22$  ( $SD = .99$ ). After completing all questions, participants were thanked for their participation and debriefed.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Exploratory analysis

To investigate how our independent and dependent variables were associated with each other, we first conducted an exploratory correlation analysis. As predicted, participant age was negatively associated with both the Tendency to gossip ( $r = -.27$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and with self-reported Mate value ( $r = -.38$ ,  $p < .001$ ), but not with Opinion about the rival ( $r = -.04$ , *ns*). Mate Value and Tendency to

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