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I heard it through the grapevine: Gossip as observational learning at college

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Gossip as observational learning at college

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Senior Thesis

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Abstract

After personally engaging in the communication networks present at Vassar College, I have chosen to research the function of gossip in small communities such as college campuses. After collecting data on the many facets of gossip and informal information sharing of college students, I argue that one of the primary purposes of gossip for college students is a type of observational learning that aids their transition into their community. By establishing social norms and building relationships through the transfer of knowledge, gossip can ultimately be beneficial for the formation and maintenance of a culture. I designed an anonymous survey to gather qualitative data that would create a clearer picture of how and why Vassar students gossip, and analyzed the results in comparison with previous research on gossip. This type of research adds to the already established literature in that it can help us understand why a behavior riddled with negative social stigma continues in our society, especially so among young adults. The survey accumulated results that could have implications for further study of communication patterns of college students, such as the tendency to build social networks among members of the same class year, the growing trend of anonymous social media platforms, and the need for gossip to help develop a culture.

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A final thanks to the students of Vassar College—you were my inspiration and I feel privileged to have such "insider information" to the culture of such a close-knit school. Thank you for your honesty and further insight into our "Vassar bubble!"

Forward

Before beginning my project I would like to make a note of its unorthodox format and content, and explain its background a little further. At the beginning of this process, I was very lost; I was interested in the communication patterns of college students, and knew I wanted to research gossip, but had little direction in where I wanted to go from there. I reached a bit of a roadblock when I had difficulty getting my project approved but finally got a late start on my research.

To further complicate things, about a month before my thesis was due I became very ill and was unable to work for a couple of weeks. With the guidance of my advisors and the support of the Department, I was able to negotiate the structure of my thesis, which is why readers may notice its brevity and unusual composition.

Just as my major marries anthropology and psychology, my thesis will be a combination of anthropological and psychological methods. Because of the late start I had to rely on an anonymous survey, even though follow-up interviews may have provided better insight into the gossiping behaviors of students. The survey given to Vassar students was intended to be analyzed using statistical software and make comparisons using mostly psychology literature; however, the discussion of the results will take a more ethnographic tone and rely on personal analysis as well. To better support the argument, statistical tests could be done to determine the significance of the results. Because the survey yielded such varied information, this project will serve as a broad review of the gossiping behaviors of Vassar students that could perhaps be the basis of further, more in-depth research in the future.

Chapter 1

Understanding Gossip

Previous literature on gossip analyzes this type of communication as primarily negative discourse, but equally convincing arguments exist that advocate for its beneficial qualities as well. In order to explain why engaging in gossip is a form of observational learning to increase cultural capital, I will define "gossip" and its multiple functions in a broader context. Psychologists, anthropologists, and sociologists have examined gossip to explain the number of important functions that this discursive act serves. The combined research helps form a multi-disciplinary description of gossip, one that proposes that human inclination to gossip is an adaptation that enables individuals to be socially successful in their environments (McAndrews, Bell, and Garcia, 2007).

1.1 What is Gossip?

Often stigmatized as "idle talk" and associated with ill will, gossip is a method of communication that transfers knowledge about other individuals throughout a community. Because of incomplete social connections, it is impossible to glean information from primary sources all of the time. To function effectively in a social environment, humans require information about others and their surroundings (Foster, 2004; Dunbar, 1997). However, looking at gossip as a mere circulating of news would be insufficient as the action also serves as a mechanism for community building.

This paper will define gossip as usually evaluative discourse about a subject or individual that is shared through an intermediary source. Gossip can be a mechanism for the transfer of information about the affairs of an organization or community, or it can

deal with more informal information about an individual's personal life. While studies show that official information can be passed through this type of "informal" communication, most people associate the term "gossip" with the sharing of personal information that may seem trivial to the outside observer. Similarly, traditional research and views of gossip focus on its negative tendencies, such as its ability to harm an individual emotionally and its inclination to evolve into falsified information over time. Subjects of gossip "may be hurt by seeing how others perceive their affairs, by distortion or manipulation of information, or by the violation of private matters" (Foster, 2004).

Because of this, quite often community norms condemn the gossiping about the personal or private affairs of others. In fact, the term "gossip" often has a pejorative connotation associated with it, most likely developed from established social norms focused around privacy. So, gossip poses a contradiction of rules and behaviors: despite commonly accepted social sanctions against gossip, we still continue to take part in this type of communication (Yerkovich, 1977). In fact, about 60-70% of everyday conversation will consist of information about an absent third party (Emler, 1994; Dunbar, 2004). There must be some value in gossip as a communication tool if we continue to ignore (even implicitly) established rules of society.

Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that not all gossip is of negative bias or intended to do harm (although it may do so unintentionally). The informal transfer of information that is indeed considered gossiping can center on celebratory or even neutral topics that serve to solely spread information. This can than shift into a sharing of opinions, which can then take on a negative or positive attitude, but it does not have to

begin as a purely adverse subject. Later on, I will examine why there tends to be such a shift, and why it tends to be towards the negative.

According to Foster (2004), most people would agree that the label of "gossip" is justified by the exchange of information about absent third parties. However, some instances refute that definition, such as in the case of "gossip about the self," as defined by Medini and Rosenberg (1976, as cited in Foster, 2004). This would most likely be relevant during the scenario in which an individual would share personal or private information about him or herself with the knowledge that it would be likely shared with another party. However, according to Foster, this may be defined as "self-disclosure" and only becomes gossip when transferred on to another individual. Could sharing one's own personal information serve to benefit oneself or the greater community? As we explore the functional usages of gossip, we may determine that the transfer of knowledge, no matter what the source, can serve as a tool for community building.

What may set gossip apart from other circulation of news or knowledge is the evaluative qualities of the interaction. Older literature leaves out this characteristic of gossip; Tannen (1990) defined gossip as only requiring the spread of information about a third party, similarly to Bergmann's (1993) discussion of the social organization of gossip. However, I would argue that gossip becomes most useful to a small community such as a college campus when it (either explicitly or implicitly) includes the opinions and evaluations of those engaging in discourse.

More popular gossip research has focused on the negative evaluation of gossip-like communication, without which there would not be this widespread social sanction decrying gossip. Additionally, with the spread of information usually comes some type of

evaluation (whether negative or positive), which could help with the flow of conversation. Such judgments carried along with conversation have implications for the relationship between speaker and hearer, and for the lessons or knowledge taken away from the interaction. On the surface, gossip may appear frivolous or trivial (idle talk, as characterized above) but may in fact hold significant value when it comes to understanding how the speakers choose to interact with each other. This facet of human communication may be one of the ways in which a community is built and maintained; gossip has the ability to strength interpersonal relationships and to act as a learning tool to establish and sustain community norms.

1.2 Functions of Gossip

Traditionally, gossip has been seen as a malicious form of communication that serves to hurt an absent third party, providing social status and power to the gossiper. There is evidence supporting this argument; people may pass along information that can serve to make someone else look bad, encouraging the community to hold negative opinions of that person and perhaps exclude them from that part of society. But even though there seems to be an awareness of the negative consequences of speaking ill of someone, the practice continues. In addition, it's known that not all gossip consists of adverse information about someone. People gossip about celebratory things as well, or will share stories without that intent to harm someone. So then what is the purpose of speaking about the personal lives of other community members?

Research has looked for answers as to what purpose gossip serves a community, especially if it can have the negative ramifications of hurting an individual or group. I

argue that this evaluative communication can build community and strengthen relationships through observational learning of cultural norms. Through speaking with peers and friends about the lives of others, community members regulate these norms and learn how to function properly within that particular social sphere. Moving beyond the original research of malicious intent behind gossip, I will look at ways gossip is necessary to support a cohesive community and help build a culture.

Other plausible theories of gossip have evolved to look at the potential benefits of sharing information, even when speaking negatively of someone else. Robin Dunbar (1997), known for his research on evolutionary bases for gossip, argues that this form of informal information sharing has stemming from apes' practices of social grooming. He proposes that as our communities grow larger, they need more efficient ways to maintain social coherence. The development of language has allowed humans to stay in contact with wider spheres of social groups but for the same amount of time. Dunbar says that in gossip we share information about ourselves and our community, strengthening the bonds of social relationships. This is done in two ways: the bond between the speaker and hearer is strengthened as they spend increasingly more amounts of time together, and, the information contained in the gossip can give the hearer clues about how to pursue his or her relationship with that third party to make that more successful as well (Conein 2011).

Gossip can strengthen the bonds of a community by spreading information about itself. The individual "gets a map of his social environment" (Hannerz, 1967, as cited in Foster, 2004) through gossip about peers. It creates a picture of a large social network that may be difficult to accumulate just through formal means of communication. Functioning well in a community such as a college campus would require having an

active knowledge of the goings-on and general culture. It would be impossible to get a firsthand account of every student's personal experience, so gossip provides an efficient method of gathering information about the community.

Bonding and relationship building is a primary focus of any community; seeking strong ties between others has a multitude of benefits both on the personal and group scale. Dunbar's research has been expanded upon to look at the development of interpersonal relationships through gossip; Bosson, Johnson, Niederhoffer, and Swann (2006) revisit the study of negative gossip to understand how humans bond through sharing negative attitudes about others. In a study designed to see if strangers were more likely to feel closer with each other if they shared negative or positive emotions about a third party, they found that even though participants thought they would form stronger friendships by sharing positive attitudes about others, they would actually like someone more if they talked about negative qualities of a third person.

Talking negatively about a third party is widespread practice; this common act of sharing negative attitudes is found quite often in everyday discourse (Turner, Mazur, Wendel, & Winslow, 2003). Sharing negative attitudes is alluring because it established group boundaries, boosts self-esteem, and conveys information about the attitude holders. Yoo (2009), in his discussion of negative information in a dialogical context, asserts that expressing a negative attitude about a subject or person is more likely to shift one's opinion about that subject. Although the participants of the Boson et al. (2006) study seemed unaware of the benefits acquired from talking badly about someone else, they were serving both their personal interests and the interests of the potential community they were beginning to form with the other participants.

So is sharing negative attitudes about a person through gossip necessarily a bad thing? It seems to be a natural characteristic of human communication, and if it provides benefits to the individual and the community, it may serve an advantageous purpose. But we do know that not all gossip revolves around negative attitudes and malicious intent, so what other uses do we have for gossip? While Bosson et al. did focus on shared negative attitudes, it could be possible that shared attitudes and emotions in general could foster positive relationships, establishing a " psychological balance" (Heider, 1946, as cited in Bosson et al. 2006) that promotes friendship.

Eder and Enke (1991) observed adolescent girls over the period of three years to find that gossip in which there was a high degree of expressed agreement helped strengthen the social relationships of the subjects. Their findings are indicative of the usual effects of shared responses to gossip and are supportive of literature that looks at either previously established social groups or those in development,. Other research has found that expressive friendships and relationships are related to both positive and negative gossip (Grosser, Lopez-Kidwell, and Labianca, 2010; Yoo, 2009).

Wert and Salovey (2004) also investigated the factors that trigger negative talk about others in the presence of social sanctions against such talk. They propose that gossip stems from social comparison in which our evaluations of others help us make judgments about our own behavior. By listening to gossip about peers, we can learn valuable lessons about how to behave or what behaviors to avoid. This type of learning through gossip has been largely discussed and could be, as I argue, one of the driving forces behind gossip in a setting such as a small college community.

One function gossip can serve in a community is to create and maintain culture. By talking about the experiences of others, those new or established in a community can confirm cultural norms and learn how to function successfully within that culture. Baumeister, Zhang, and Vohs (2004) discuss how gossip can be seen as a type of cultural observational learning that serves the interest of both the speaker and hearer. They posit that by hearing about mistakes of others, we can avoid costs to ourselves by avoiding the same mistakes that they have made. And furthermore, learning about the successes of others can serve as a model for making the correct decisions in a community.

This study found that participants were most likely to gossip about people that they know, perhaps due to the appeal of narrative information about people one can relate to. In addition, findings from a questionnaire revealed that there was a link between negative emotions and learning a lesson. While the incident of gossip may not have been in direct relation to a desire to harm someone, just talking about a story that invokes negative emotion might be most engaging to the gossipers.

Observational learning in the form of gossip could serve as a way to build upon and maintain social norms. College students are likely at the most independent point of their lives when they are trying to navigate new relationships, living on their own, and adapting to new surroundings. When they discuss the goings-on of other students, especially those of upper classmen who have more cultural capital as experienced members of the community, they are learning how to better function within this piece of society. "What begins as a trusted exchange in private becomes at the group level the knowledge, norm, and trust boundaries of tribes, clans, and cultures," writes Foster (2004).

Peers can achieve this knowledge through the transfer of personal information about each other and then gauging the reaction to that piece of news. The evaluative quality of gossip is central to this theory; comparing another's behavior to how society reacts can help one form his or her own opinions about what is acceptable and also make decisions about how to behave appropriately in the future. He or she also avoids potential conflict by making these observations indirectly, as talking about an absent third party has less prospective hazard than of making social comparisons against another directly (Suls 1977).

Another aspect of gossip's contribution to culture is its collaborative means of communication. Baumeister et al. (2004) writes that gossip is not a storytelling behavior in which the active gossiper or actor presents evaluative information to a passive hearer or observer, but is rather "a shared and collaborative experience that encourages hearers to elaborate and thus contribute to the story." In gossiping about other students and members of the community, individuals are engaging in a practice that is not only familiar to that community but also adding to the richness of the culture in a sort of group-directed behavior. Gossip is perhaps most effective as a community-building tool in between friends due to shared social meanings and histories that are unfamiliar to strangers (Dunbar 2004). The collaborative means of gossip allows for a multi-dimensional approach to storytelling and creates a sense of solidarity among community members learning about one another.

1.3 The place of the online technology in college students' gossip

Contemporary literature has begun to focus on the developing methods in which individuals gossip with each other. With the advent of social networking sites (SNS) and the proliferation of technology use, members of a community can share information much more rapidly than by word of mouth. The "information age" is rapidly shifting the way people communicate with each other. This is especially relevant in a college setting where students are likely to use such tools to give and receive information. Social networking sites in particular are intriguing pieces of the gossip network of communities because they allow individuals to seek out information from others that they may not communicate with on a regular basis, and it allows them to share personal knowledge with a larger audience (Tufecki 2008).

Social networking sites (SNS) are web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public profile within a contained setting, create a list of connections, and explore that list of connections (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). Sites such as Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter are examples of such sites where people can easily share information about themselves and efficiently look into the social networking activity of people they have "connected" with. Many of these sites provide a platform for word-of-mouth communication ("chatting" or private messaging, much like email) but they also allow for more indirect acquisition of knowledge about peers through the very public activity that is inherent to the mission of these sites. Pictures can be posted, which can serve as a type of intermediary sources that allow someone to make inferences about the personal life of the poster, "statuses" give SNS users the opportunity to share their

thoughts with their networks, and any other activity (which varies site to site) gives members of social networks the ability to learn about the goings-on in their community.

SNS use is extremely common among college students; research has found that college students are nine times more likely to use SNS than the average population (Raacke and Bonds-Raacke, 2008). A study of 92 undergraduates indicated that students used Facebook for an average of 30 minutes a day as part of their daily routine (Pempek, Yermolayeva, and Calvert, 2009). The same study also found that students spent more time observing content on Facebook than actually posting information. If we view this type of behavior as a kind of gossip, then the observational learning hypothesis fits quite well into the results of the study. Searching for information on the social and/or personal lives of fellow students could be a way of gaining knowledge about their community. Konetes and McKeague (2011) found that university students were using SNS to increase their social and cultural capital by achieving more balanced communities and knowledge about that community.

SNS also represents an aspect of observational learning because it allows for widespread feedback. Interactions online can address questions of function within the community or more personal inquisitions about behavior and identity. However, there are social norms that dictate what should and should not be shared on SNS such as Facebook. For example, an openly negative opinion directed at an individual would not be accepted in the social networking community. There are exceptions to this rule, which are present in the ever-growing use of anonymous posting boards. While not intensively studied, results of this paper's study found an overwhelming response to questions regarding anonymity online. If an individual has a question or comment but sees the potential for

repercussions of attaching his or her name, the cloak of anonymity is a safeguard against embarrassment or unfavorable responses from the community.

1.4 Cultural capital and gossip among college students

Baumeister et al. (2004) theorizes that taking part in gossip is a form of cultural learning that enables an individual to function more successfully in their society. Information sharing carries a wealth of information that proves to be useful in organizations, families, and other small communities. "Gossip is a potentially rich source of informal narrative knowledge and management information that can illuminate understanding about a range of organizational issues," write Waddington and Michelson (2007). This is especially relevant on a college campus where students strive to accumulate information about their peers. Evolutionarily, in order to survive an individual needs to be as informed as possible about his or her surroundings. It is accepted that to "survive" socially, being in the know about social norms, shared opinions, and people who are "surviving" successfully, is imperative.

First year students are particularly in need of environmental information in an efficient way to help them adapt as quickly as possible to a new school. That's not to say information sharing isn't effective among upperclassmen as well; transfer of information among the classes help maintain the social norms of the school. Gossip is a vehicle for this transfer and helps students gain the cultural capital valued within their enclosed community.

Chapter 2

Case Study: "Gossip Makes Vassar Go Round"

A college is an ideal setting for the study of gossip among a closed community; social norms are established, a school culture is maintained, and students are at an age where interpersonal relationships are of utmost importance. To determine whether gossip can be a mechanism for cultural learning, I surveyed students at Vassar College, a liberal-arts college in Poughkeepsie, New York, of approximately 2,400 students. I chose this site not only for its convenience and my insider knowledge (I am a current student at the time of this project) but also for its size and reputation for "feeling like you know everyone" (personal communication, Vassar College student, 2013). The anonymity of the survey prevented me from conducting follow-up interviews, but information gleaned from the results illuminate the patterns of cultural learning behaviors of Vassar students.

2.1 Methods

To assess the gossip behaviors of students on a college campus, I conducted an anonymous, online survey that consisted of multiple-choice and open-ended questions (see appendix for survey questions). Two hundred and eight (208) volunteer participants responded, all of who were college students ranging from freshmen to seniors. To control for an isolated community of college students, the study was confined to students currently attending Vassar College. As a Vassar student I was able to have an insight into the culture of information sharing present on this campus; this was the impetus for the beginning of this research. Information regarding the culture of Vassar comes from both personal experience and generally accepted knowledge at the school.

SurveyMonkey.com, an online forum, was used to create and distribute the survey. Due to time constraints, discussion of the collected data was mostly confined to qualitative analysis. However, a simple crosstab of responses was performed on a number of responses to determine the class year of the respondents.

Survey questions were designed to focus on a range of issues related to gossip and information sharing. Many of the questions depended on Vassar-specific language, such as publications and websites familiar to only members of the community. Therefore, the survey would have to be adjusted if applied to other communities, such as larger college campuses or organizations. In addition, the survey was created with personal knowledge of participation in gossiping at Vassar, so the questions were tailored toward this specific community.

Two questions were established personality and perceived gender measures, initially intended to analyze the personality types of students who engaged with gossip in different ways. While left out of this study, further analysis could be done to inquire about the personality differences involved with different gossiping behaviors.

2.2 Demographics and relevance of class year

All 208 participants were volunteer and current Vassar students. 23.1% (48) of participants were members of the class of 2016 (freshmen), 25.5% (53) were from the class of 2015 (sophomores), 17.8% (37) were from the class of 2014 (juniors), and 33.7% (70) were from the class of 2013 (seniors). The unequal distribution of class years could be due to the fact that one of the methods of distribution was through my own social networks, which are predominantly made up of seniors (my own class). Due to the anonymity of the survey, I did not gather other identifying information.

As I began this study, I predicted that freshmen would rely the most on gossip to gather information about their new community. Because older students would have greater social and cultural capital on campus, newer students would look to these "informational role models" for information on how to "survive" at college. One response at the end of the survey mentioned this: "I think [gossip] has a larger role freshman year, and every year after it has less of an impact." Another participant identified as a senior writes, "I think it was more important to read sayanything (sic) and participate in social media as a freshman because I was establishing/figuring out my place or spaces on campus."

However, quantitative results of the study found that this was not necessarily the case. A decreasing trend beginning with seniors and ending with freshmen resulted when asked which group of students knew the most about Vassar's culture. But, when compared with the class years of the respondents, it showed that students from each year felt their own class knew the most. This could be compared to the results of another question, which asked which group of students shared gossip with. And 91.7% of students who said they were most likely to receive gossip from freshmen were freshmen, 82.6% who would receive the most from sophomores were sophomores, 80% who responded "juniors" were juniors, and 98.1% of those who responded "seniors" were seniors. The same pattern applies to a survey question that asked participants who they were most likely to share gossip with.

Similarly, members of each class were most likely to talk *about* students in their own class. 94.6% who speak about freshmen, 87% who speak about sophomores, 79.2% who speak about juniors, and 93.7% who speak about seniors were all members of that

same class. This "class-centric" pattern of gossip does not support the argument that as class year decreased, the source of gossip would increase. The findings are consistent with McAndrews and Milenkovic's (2002) argument that people have the greatest interest in gossip about peers of the same age. Perhaps gossip patterns in college are not that unique after all; I had thought that with such easy access to older individuals who had gone through similar experience would make their gossip the most desirable. However, this does not devalue the role of gossip in determining social norms necessary for the function of the community, but instead reveals methods of gaining and maintaining these norms in a way that is concentrated within one's class year. If this is commonplace on a larger scale, it is possible that it creates "subcultures" within each class year that are communities of their own.

2.3 Frequency of gossip

Participants were asked to estimate the amount of time they spent talking about an absent third party. The majority of respondents (40.6%) reported approximately 20-40% of a typical conversation contains such information (99 out of 176 participants). 32% reported about 40-60% of a typical conversation revolved around speaking about an absent third party, which is what previous research has found to be the most common frequency (Emler, 1994; Dunbar, 2004). On a similar scale, 82% (71 of 175) said they sometimes talk negatively about an absent third party. Lastly, 82 out of 165 (49.7%) estimated that some time is spent talking about peers, while 22.4% said they spend a lot of time, 27.3% said they spend a little of time, and .6% said they spend no time talking about peers.

Because of these numbers and the abundance of qualitative information participants volunteered regarding gossip, we can make the assumption that Vassar students employ informal information sharing methods frequently. Personal communication with a number of students reported that gossip can often dominate a conversation. "Gossip makes Vassar go round," writes one student in his or her open-ended narrative in the survey. 92.1% of 174 students responded that they had recently spoken about an absent third party. Additionally, 81% of 174 students reported that they had been aware of someone sharing their own personal information without their consent. It's telling that so much time is spent gossiping; while that is considered normal for average human conversation, we can now look at specifics such as methods and subject of the information to determine the purpose of gossip among college students.

2.4 Methods of gossip

Participants were asked about their gossiping behavior and how they were most likely to share or receive gossip. Of the 185 students that answered a scale of different tools they would utilize to find information about peers, 57.3% answered they were most likely to use Facebook, while 39.5% said they most likely relied on direct communication with another student. Answers of "texting" and "face-to-face interactions" also came up throughout the survey as means of sharing or receiving information about peers.

An overwhelming 84.7% of 183 respondents indicated they are most likely to talk about Vassar students *with* Vassar students. Additionally, when prompted to share how information relevant to the entire student body is disseminated through the community,

42.7% of 164 respondents reported it would be most likely through Facebook, while 32.9% indicated email would be the first method of communication.

While the proliferation of the Internet and technology use may be affecting communication styles of younger generations, this data reflects the fact that college students are still using a wide variety of methods to gather information. Due to the sensitive nature of personal matters, face-to-face communication can ensure privacy and help gauge the validity of information. Social media sites like Facebook can help an individual learn about a peer that they might not interact with on a regular basis without letting others know that they are inquiring about this person. The use of anonymous online platforms (which I will discuss more in depth later on) reflects this same pattern of seeking information without letting the community know they are actually looking for it. This could be a result of the social stigma associated with being *too* interested in someone's personal life; if one does not have a developed relationship with a peer their invested interest in the other's personal life would be questioned.

Looking at patterns of gossip use could provide insight into reasons why college students communicate in this way; social media platforms such as Facebook or Twitter allow information to reach large networks of people efficiently while having a one-on-one conversation with a friend allows for a strengthening of that friendship.

2.5 Subjects of gossip

Participants reported a number of topics they would be interested in talking about with peers; personal information about other students ranked the highest at 46.2% of non-academic information participants would want to know. Other options provided to

participants that were still highly rated were events going around on campus and current events. In one question designed to rank what students were most likely to gossip about (previous questions did not employ the biased term "gossip") the highest ranked subject was "students" (86.7%). Following that, topics highly rated were: "parties/social life," "student organizations," "administration and relevant actions," and "professors." There seems to be a wide variety of what students talk about, but there is a strong favor for personal information about peers.

One topic that was overwhelmingly present in both the multiple-choice and open-ended questions was the subject of romantic relationships. Students talk about who is "hooking up" with who, reasons behind breakups, and the intricacies of seemingly private matters between couples. Of the 120 participants who offered a description of an interaction in which they spoke about an absent third party, the highest concentration of topics had to do with sex and relationships, about 39%. Similarly, friendships seem to be a highly talked about topic as well. This is one of the matters that would make a follow-up interview helpful; students did not offer reasons as to why they were so interested in others' relationships. Could information about how other students navigate interpersonal relationships help one develop their own?

An interesting pattern developed in the relationship of the gossiper and the subject of the gossip (the absent third party). Participants were asked who they were most interested in learning about: a very close friend, a close friend, an acquaintance, someone they don't know but think is cool, or someone they've never heard of. There was a decreasing trend of interest starting from the person they had a closest relationship with and ending with someone they'd never heard of. However, participants ranked interest in

"someone they don't know but think is cool" on an equal scale with "a close friend."

This jump could reflect a desire to gather information on someone participants perceive to be well adjusted and thriving socially in the community. Within one participant's response to an open-ended question he or she touches on this phenomenon: "It's also kind of entertaining to gossip about students/faculty you don't know very well--- there are definitely some campus-celebrities that I only know through people's gossip."

Interestingly, despite literature that decries gossip as almost exclusively negative, only 10% of the personal narratives were explicitly described as having negative intent (by my judgment and the appearance of contextual wording). Many of the experiences described could have had negative repercussions had the absent third party been aware of the gossip, but only 12 of the 120 responses admitted a malicious motivation.

When prompted, students reported they are least comfortable talking about family matters, grades, and mental health issues of fellow students. This could imply there are certain levels of the social stigma against gossip: one can talk about *certain* personal information about others, but there are other topics that are regarded highly off-limits.

The things that students talk about are quite relevant to their lives *at school*. While current national and international events, family matters, and the arts are discussed, the students surveyed have a strong desire to gossip about their own community. Is that due to the immediateness of their environment and easy access to information, or is there a learning aspect of this type of information that helps students "survive" in their community? Previous research does show that people are likely to gossip about peers in their own community, but with further analysis this data could

support the argument that observing the behaviors of fellow students through the telling and hearing of stories teaches valuable lessons about adapting to a culture.

2.6 Perceptions and opinions of gossip

It is accepted that people can still partake in a behavior despite its rejection by social norms. Even though 92.1% of participants said they had spoken about an absent third party at least once, I was interested in their opinions of gossip in the Vassar community. 54.4% of participants reported that the sharing of information is "very important" to Vassar's culture, while 26.3% said it was "extremely important." The remaining participants were either neutral or said it was "somewhat important," but interestingly, no one said it was "not at all important." This would suggest that there is a general acceptance of information sharing as commonplace at Vassar. 64.8% said that gossip is sometimes useful in their community, which would suggest that the context and subject of the gossip could play an important role in measuring its usefulness.

As mentioned earlier, the social stigma against gossip is still very apparent in the results of the survey despite the prevalence of gossip use. 49% of participants said gossip is "sometimes" harmful to the community, and 48.4% said it's "often" harmful. This contradiction of "usefulness" versus "harmful" poses a dilemma: can a behavior be both useful and harmful?

Between 49 and 53% of participants said that academics, friendships, and romantic relationships are "somewhat controlled" by informal means of communication, such as spoken gossip or social media sites, and between 42 and 45% said that campus events, parties and social life, and the formation and maintenance of social groups are

"very controlled" by these means. These six subjects all represent aspects of social life at college. This is by no means a new finding; it continues to support the use of informal information sharing as a means of maintaining social bonds.

One hundred and fourteen (114) participants responded to the open-ended question "What role do you think gossip and information sharing plays in the formation and maintenance of Vassar's culture/community?" The use of anonymous, online surveys does limit the ability to follow up with participants and ask for clarification; however, certain phrases and perceptions of gossip at Vassar did repeat through many of the responses. One common opinion respondents had of gossip was that it aided in community building throughout the school. As I had heard (and witnessed) through personal experience, many students echoed the perception that "news travels fast at a small school." "It makes the community feel really small," writes one student. Seeing as the community is physically small (relative to larger universities), one might conclude that gossip aids in the closeness of community apparent at Vassar. "Without such high levels of information, VC would not have the small 'you know everyone' feel," explains one participant. While there were a couple of outlying responses that described the choice not to engage in gossip at Vassar, there was a strong acknowledgement of the use of gossip at Vassar.

One participant wrote, "[Gossip is] unifying and dividing. It allows for the dissemination of information and facilitates the development of connections and relationships. However, secrets and gossip can taint reputations and create prejudices that might prevent some people from developing relationships with others." Community is built through the strengthening of interpersonal relationships, so not only would the

information spread maintain these bonds, but the actual action of gossiping could improve relationships as well. The increased time spent with a friend and the solidarity built through shared opinions of another are mechanisms known to aid the development of friendships.

The following quote could represent how gossip fills the need to develop the norms of a community in an efficient way: "It can be harmful (everyone knows each other's business) but also helpful in establishing a moral economy -- like the things we all care about or are offended by." This student provides an insight into the awareness students have of the consequences of gossip. Certain pieces of this "moral economy" can be more apparent than others; for example, news spread regarding an incident of hate speech scrawled on campus property could create an explicit discussion about what is appropriate or not and most likely produce a consensus that such behavior is unacceptable. However, what gossip research has discovered is that even discussion of "typical" gossip subjects (such as the actions or personal information of a specific individual) can play a role in the formation of cultural norms as well. Peers can bond through shared evaluations of the actions of another. One response echoes this sentiment: "I think it helps shape people's ideas about each other and their environments, and can serve a bonding function when the person you gossip with and yourself share an opinion." Similarly, another student writes: "It control's student opinion heavily."

An interesting perspective one response brings is the idea that gossip itself becomes a cultural norm as we continue to employ it in everyday conversation: "Gossip also becomes a culturally accepted norm within a small group, and so can lead to more of the same. I think that groups of friends talking about campus events, campus climate,

etc., though, is how a lot of ideas are spread, and interest and energy. That, I think, creates dominant cultures of thought and behavior, which continue to influence student perspectives and behavior." By continuing to engage in this type of communication, we are implicitly accepting the behavior.

When asked if Vassar students communicate in a unique way, there was a strong pattern of responses that believed all college campuses have a culture of gossip and informal information sharing; it just seems more apparent because Vassar is small and one is more likely to know the subject of the gossip. There was mention of Vassar-specific mediums, such as anonymous online posting boards, but generally students feel that in a community like a college campus, peers will talk about each other no matter what. Many responses of students echoed this simple response: "Information sharing is crucial in any community."

2.7 "Anonymity is powerful:" The role of anonymous platforms

Like much of the information gathered from this study, the findings regarding anonymous information-sharing platforms could provide the basis for further research on the gossiping practices of college students. The results of this study provided a plethora of information on the social media practices of Vassar students; the following section will give a basic review on the findings.

In the past couple of years, anonymous online platforms have become commonplace at college campuses. One of the first, [College] ACB (Anonymous Confession Board) is now almost completely defunct, but has laid the groundwork for many similar websites. "SayAnything VC" is a Vassar-specific site moderated by an

anonymous student where other students can post questions, opinions, and grievances without attaching their identifying information to their post. Other students can also anonymously respond to these posts. This website has grown in popularity over the past couple years but is often talked about with a negative tone. Although a large number of respondents discussed "SayAnything VC" in their responses, an equally large number of students expressed their displeasure at the fact the site has become a place to posters to express anger, complain, or stir up controversy with pointed questions.

The results of this study do not point to "SayAnything VC" as a primary source for gossip: the average score on a scale of 1-7 in which students rated where they were mostly likely to get information about their peers was a 4.71. However, 60.2% of 176 respondents admitted they had posted on an anonymous information-sharing medium such as "SayAnything VC" in the past. Additionally, many students brought up the topic of anonymous postings in their open-ended narratives about information sharing on campus. When asked what the benefits were of contributing to such sites, students offered responses such as "honesty without consequences," "allows students to get things off their chest," and "more freedom to ask embarrassing questions."

One student writes, " It allows people to participate in the public discourse in a way that minimizes negative repercussions." It is responses like this that that made me question the place of anonymity in college students' communication styles. "SayAnything VC" is moderated; full names are not permitted and there is very rarely a post pointed at a specific individual. Could this type of discussion be a type of gossip in that it allows students to have open conversations about topics relevant to the entire campus? I would argue that just as face-to-face gossip provides a type of observational

learning, so does this type of behavior. Students who may be embarrassed or have reservations about asking questions regarding their community have the opportunity to receive feedback from their peers without the repercussion of being spoken about later on.

Students can ask explicit questions about the campus: "So during senior week, which food places on campus will be open?" (sayanythingvc.wordpress.com, retrieved April 29, 2013) or raise on opinion designed to start a conversation about larger campus opinion: "Students here seem to be more interested in theorizing about social problems than actually doing something about them" (sayanythingvc.wordpress.com, retrieved April 29, 2013). Because other students reading the forum have the opportunity to respond to these posts, the original poster can gather information from his or her peers to enable him or her to function in the community better. Granted, one of the largest criticisms of the website is students' tendency to stir up trouble for no purpose, which may not have the same educational intent as students actually seeking information to aid their place in the community.

Further analysis of this data could lead to a greater understanding of why anonymous platforms have garnered such popularity and their value within a closed community. For the purpose of this project, it adds to the argument that informal communication mediums in a college community serve a purpose to develop and maintain its culture.

Conclusion

Gossip as a Form of Observational Learning at College

The results of this study support the idea that gossiping among members of a social group enhances cultural capital and serves as a type of observational learning. Patterns present in a case study of students at Vassar College are consistent with previous gossip research that explores the functions of informal information sharing.

The history of gossip's bad reputation is reflected in the pejorative connotation of the word. Yet we still continue to engage with gossip on a regular basis; despite occasional feelings of guilt, members of a community arguably enjoy speaking about the personal details of each other's lives. The findings of the research could serve as a defense of the communication technique to explain the persistence of this behavior despite the social sanctions against it.

In spite of whatever academic or professional setting a community exists in, individuals are likely to direct their conversations to more "informal" topics that are characteristic of stereotypical gossip. What are the gains to be had from speaking of a peer while he or she is not present? Analyzing a study of gossip at Vassar College may provide an understanding of the contradiction a small community presents when they actively engage in a behavior that is widely considered to be morally wrong.

If we consider the previous literature on the functions of gossip and apply a theory of observational learning to the gossip patterns of college students, we may discover an unconscious desire to supplement one's knowledge of his or her surroundings. The motivation to engage in gossip, whether that means spreading or sharing information, could be personal in that it enhances one's cultural capital and allows them to function

more effectively within that society, or it could keep the community's cohesion in mind as it strengthens social ties and affirms cultural and social norms.

In conjunction with Baumeister et al.'s (2004) discussion of gossip as cultural learning, the subjects and methods of gossip that students at Vassar employ are indicative of a similar type of learning. If defining a conversation as "gossip," students are less likely to talk about academic subjects or information they can get from more official sources. Instead, they seek out the information that clues them into the personal lives of their peers, and quite often they are most interested in the tribulations of those peers. It could be argued that the reason this type of information is so interesting is that it helps the gossiper in the long run. The gossiper learns from the mistakes of his or her peers, and can use that knowledge to avoid making that same mistake because he or she is trying to function in that same community. The information distributed passes on cultural expectations of what is or is not appropriate.

One shortcoming of this project was the inability to conduct follow-up interviews that could have allowed for a more complete ethnography of the gossip behaviors of Vassar students. The constraints of an anonymous, online survey limited the types of questions that could have been asked, thus restraining the depth of analysis taken from students' personal narratives. Still, important information has been gleaned from the accounts of Vassar students, and could be the starting point for further research on the place and perceived benefits of gossip in a college community.

Gossip is not just part of a culture, it also helps sustain that culture. Members of communities cannot exist in isolation; communicating about what goes on within the group is necessary for solidarity and establishing norms of the community. Further

research could be done to isolate specific patterns of communication that mediate these community norms, but as of now gossip cannot be written off as merely "trivial" or "idle talk" as it seems to have advantageous qualities that support the development and maintenance of a group.

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Online survey

1. Please indicate your class year.
  a. 2016 **b.** 2015 **c.** 2014 **d.** 2013
2. From which of these sources are you most likely to get information about your peers? Please rank the following in order (1=most likely, 7=least likely)
  b. AskBanner **b.** Facebook **c**. SayAnything **d.** Twitter
  e. Direct communication with another student **f.** Student publications **g**. other
3. Who are you most likely to share information with?
  a. Friends at Vassar **b.** Friends from home **c.** Family **d.** public social media
  e. Anonymous posting boards
4. What type of non-academic information are you most interested in? Please rank in order (1=most interested, 6=least interested)
  a. Personal information about students **b.** Personal information about faculty
  c. Events that are going on around campus **d.** Current events **e.** Arts **d.** Other
5. Of the information you hear about individuals on campus, about what percentage do you think is true?
  a. 0-25% **b.** 25-50% **c.** 50-75% **d.** 75-100%
6. Have you ever posted on an anonymous information-sharing medium?
  a. Yes **b.** No
  If so, what was the general content?
7. How are you most likely to share or receive information about peers? Please rank (1=most likely, 5=least likely)
  a. Facebook **b.** Texting **c.** Face-to-face interactions **d.** Phone calls **e.** Emails
8. Have you ever shared personal information with someone about a third party that was not present?
  a. Yes **b.** No.
9. Have you ever been aware of someone sharing personal information about you without your consent?
  a. Yes **b.** No
10. Approximately how much of a typical conversation with friends contains information about an absent third party?
  a. 0-20% **b.** 20-40% **c.** 40-60% **d.** 60-80% **e.** 80-100%
11. How did you learn about Vassar before coming to college? Please rank (1=most used source, 6=least used)
  a. Admissions website **b.** Facebook **c.** SayAnything **d.** College Confidential
  e. Friends **d.** Family
12. To what extent were your preconceived views of Vassar true?
  a. Not at all **b.** Somewhat **c.** Fairly **d.** Almost entirely **e.** Completely
13. What were you most interested in learning about Vassar's culture before arriving? Please rank (1=most interested, 5=least interested)
  a. Classes **b.** Professors **c.** Residence halls **d.** Parties **e.** Fellow students
14. How often do you talk negatively about an absent third party?
  a. Never **b.** Sometimes **c.** Often **d.** Always

15. Have you ever expressed displeasure when someone else spoke about an absent third party's personal life?

      a. Yes **b.** No

16. What are you most uncomfortable talking about when the person being talked about is absent?

      a. Friendships **b.** Romantic relationships **c.** Grades **d.** Family

      e. Others (please specify)

17. How do you prefer to keep in contact with friends at school? Please rank (1=most used, 5=least used)

      a. Face-to-face interactions **b.** Phone calls **c.** Texting **d.** Facebook **e.** Email

18. Which group of students do you talk about the most

      a. Freshmen **b.** Sophomores **c.** Juniors **d.** Seniors

19. Have you ever shared information about yourself with the expectation that it would be shared with someone else?

      a. Yes **b.** No

      If you answered yes, what did it entail?

20. How important do you think the sharing of information (through gossip, social media, etc) is to Vassar's culture?

      a. Not at all important **b.** Somewhat important **c.** Neutral **d.** Very important

      e. Extremely important

21. To what extent are these aspects of Vassar's culture controlled by means of informal communication (gossip, Facebook, SayAnything, etc)? Please rate either: not at all controlled, somewhat controlled, very controlled, or extremely controlled?

      a. Academics **b.** Friendships **c.** Romantic relationships **d.** campus events

      e. Formation and maintenance of social groups **f.** Parties/social life

22. When information that affects the entire student body is made available, how is it most likely spread? Please rank (1=first mode of communication, 6=last)

      a. Word of mouth **b.** Email **c.** Facebook **d.** Texting **e.** Phone **f.** Twitter

23. Which group of students do you think knows the most about Vassar's culture? Please rank (1=most knowledgeable, 4=least knowledgeable)

      a. Freshmen **b.** Sophomores **c.** Juniors **d.** Seniors

24. During interactions with your friends, how much time is spent talking about your peers?

      a. None **b.** A little **c.** Some **d.** A lot

25. If you hear a rumor about another student, how do you go about verifying that information?

      a. Posting it on Facebook **b.** Posting it on SayAnything **c.** Asking that student's
      friends **d.** Asking that student directly **e.** Assume the information is true

26. Which group of students do you think is talked about the most?

      a. Freshmen **b.** Sophomores **c.** Juniors **d.** Seniors

27. How do you feel when you share a new piece of social information with another student? Please check all that apply.

      a. Excited **b.** Powerful **c.** Anxious **d.** Doubtfu**l e.** Happy **f.** Upset

      g. Relieved **h.** Annoyed **i.** Other (please specify)

28. How do you feel when you share a piece of social information with another student, only to find out they've already heard it?

a. Excited **b.** Powerful **c.** Anxious **d.** Doubtfu**l** **e.** Happy **f.** Upset
g. Relieved **h.** Annoyed **i.** Other (please specify)

29. What gossip do you find the most interested? Gossip about (on a scale of 1-5, 5 being the most interesting)
a. Very close friend **b.** Close friend **c.** Acquaintance **d.** Someone you don't personally know, but think is cool **e.** Someone you've never heard of

30. When you heard gossip, how true do you typically think it is?
a. Never true **b.** Sometimes true **c.** Very often true **d.** Always true

31. In which of these places do you feel free to gossip? Please check all that apply.
a. ACDC **b.** The Retreat **c.** Your room **d.** Common area in your place of residence **e.** The quad **f.** Organization meetings **g.** Other (please specify)

32. Are you more likely to receive gossip from
a. The same gender **b.** The opposite gender **c.** No distinction

33. Are you more likely to share gossip with
a. The same gender **b.** The opposite gender **c.** No distinction

34. Are you more likely to share gossip with
a. Freshmen **b.** Sophomores **c.** Juniors **d.** Seniors

35. Are you more likely too receive gossip from
a. Freshmen **b.** Sophomores **c.** Juniors **d.** Seniors

36. For what reason(s) do you think people gossip? Please rank (1=most common reason, 5=least common reason)
a. To be more interesting **b.** To get gossip in exchange **c.** To feel more powerful **d.** To spread information

37. Who/what are you most likely to gossip about? Please rank (1=most likely, 8=least likely)
a. Students **b.** Professors **c.** Adminstration **d.** Administration **e.** Student body movements **f.** Parties **g.** Celebrities **h.** Family **i.** Current events

38. Do you believe gossip is ever useful in your community?
a. Never **b.** Sometimes **c.** Often **d.** Always

39. Do you believe gossip is harmful to students and other community members?
a. Never **b.** Sometimes **c.** Often **d.** Always

Open-ended questions:
40. Please briefly (no names or identifying information, please) describe an interaction in which you were talking about a third party not present

41. What role do you think gossip and information sharing plays in the maintenance of Vassar's culture/community?

42. What are the benefits of posting on an anonymous medium (SayAnything, college Confidential, writing under a pseudonym)?

43. Is there a way that Vassar students communicate that is unique to our community? Why or why not? Do college students communicate in a unique way?

*Note: The online survey also included established personality and perceived gender measures, but was left out of this project