# GOSSIP AND HIDDEN TRANSCRIPT IN THE ONLINE AND OFFLINE INTERACTION:
# THE CASE OF CLOSED GROUP COMMUNICATION

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## ABSTRACT

Despite having negative content, gossip and backstage talks can also be a medium to learn about differences and provide information for the rest of the community. Furthermore, backstage talks not only contain mere gossip, but also reflect the hidden transcripts by individuals who perceived themselves to be less powerful than the power holders. Given the phenomena, this paper attempted to investigate the online backstage talks between community members and their face-to-face interaction with the object of their gossips by using the concepts of Goffman's dramaturgy, gossip, and hidden transcript. The study found that Goffman's (1959) concept of performance, while useful, could not fully work in analyzing deviant behaviors. This study further confirms Wittek and Wielers' (1998) affirmation that *coalition* triads as the best predictors of gossip behavior. However, another triad model, called *neutralization,* is proposed to predict the occurrences of gossip. Finally, the study also confirms the existence of the hidden transcripts by community participants who felt being oppressed by the powers that be.

**Keywords**: Gossip, Hidden Transcript, Goffman, Dramaturgy, Behaviour.

# INTRODUCTION

In order to take part in social interactions, people adopt the values upheld in the society and adapt to the changes. Nevertheless, being involved in the social interactions does not mean that they can become uniformed because they bring with them unique personal characteristics and values which influences the interactions. At the public level, the unique characteristics are hardly noticeable due to the shared values and norms. However, if viewed at the interpersonal level, differences between individuals seem to be visible and, at the same time, inevitable considering the unique traits that each individual has.

If these differences are not understood and handled, they might lead to frictions that can create injurious experiences for certain individuals. Consequently, as Abel and Sarat (1980-1981) assert, the transformation of unperceived injurious experience (unPIE) to perceived injurious experience (PIE) will emerge into an open conflict. The transformation itself, according to Abel and Sarat, elevates in three stages: *naming* which reflects a condition of "saying oneself that a particular experience has been injurious" (p. 635). The next stage is *blaming* in which PIE is taken to a stage of a grievance where an individual blames other people to be responsible for his/her injury. Final stage is *claiming* in which having blamed others for his/her injury, an individual expresses the grievance to those who are responsible for the injury and seeks for a remedy from them.

However, if the frictions are only kept in private or in certain social circles and not for public consumption, they may only lead to backstage talks which will not damage an individual's reputation publicly. Since the backstage talks exist in many cultures, societies, and social classes, they become a natural phenomenon that we find in our everyday interactions with different circles of friends or acquaintances. What makes it more interesting is that backstage talks are responded with different types of emotions. Therefore, it is not surprising if Foster (2004) labels them as "an important social behavior that nearly everyone experiences, contributes to, and presumably intuitively understands" (p. 78). Naturally, backstage talks become a part of our phenomena as social beings and have already become our psychological, cultural and social traits and behaviors in interacting with each other.

Since the frictions may or may not be the result of power struggle, the backstage talks can be regarded as either hidden transcript or mere gossip. Therefore, this paper attempts to analyze whether the offline and online conversation between members of a group about certain issues on someone or something falls in the categories of gossip or hidden transcript. Considering that gossip also flourishes in the internet (Hura, 1998), this paper also compares the participants' online backstage talks about a target individual to their face-to-face interaction with the target individual using Goffman's (1959) framework of performance. Finally having analyzed the pattern of interaction related to gossip, this

paper also attempts to critique Wittek and Wielers' (1998) network model of gossip behavior.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

**Goffman's (1959) Framework**

Goffman's explication of interaction by using a "dramaturgical approach" is important in explaining what constitutes as interaction. The notions that he introduces are based on his assumption that "when an individual appears before others he will have many motives for trying to control the impression they receive of the situation" (p. 19). This assumption provides a theoretical foundation to view how individuals act in private or public spheres. The presentation of self to others is crucial for an individual in order to maintain his image as he wants it to be projected and to be seen and accepted by others. Goffman's work not only resonates with the way we interact in with others at the levels of interpersonal, but also reflects how people interact and maintain self-images at the inter-*teams* and mass communication levels. The application of dramaturgical approach in analyzing communication and interaction brings an implication that everything can be "staged." In addition, this approach implies that the true self is not for public consumption because of fear of rejection from the audience and other parties such as *actors/teams/society* once an individual uncovers his/her true self which may not be in accordance with the upheld norms and values.

In addition, Goffman (1959) also introduces the concept of *impression making* in which an individual attempts to make impression in front of the presence of others. This occurs in face-to-face interaction which he defines as "the reciprocal influence of individuals upon one another's actions when in one another's immediate physical presence" (p. 15). This presentation of self before others yields the concept of *performance* in which one's front stage act might be different from his/her back stage act.

The backstage act tends to be a sphere where individuals share *staging talk* (gossip) with their close friends in a limited and private circle of interaction. The implication of Goffman's (1959) notions of front stage and back stage is that in their interaction with the target individual, individuals tend to hide their true feelings and present themselves in a carefully-crafted manner. However, this masking is uncovered if the target individuals are out of sight. As a result, the individuals can freely talk behind the target's back because less constraint occurs in the situation. Goffman's face and behavior masking concepts establish a foundation in gossip research considering the fact that the concepts of front stage and back stage become useful when analyzing backstage talks or gossip. Furthermore, the concepts of front stage and back stage provide a useful framework in analyzing human behaviors related to the discrepancies between their front stage talks and backstage talks.

## Gossip

Gossip as a common phenomenon in interpersonal and organizational communication is sometimes difficult to define. Several studies have discussed gossip, for example, from the perspective of gender and its transmission among friends and in public (Hambaugh, 2011) and the role of interpersonal jealousy, mainly sexual and emotional jealousy, in gossip (Warber, 2013). In terms of its definition, all definitions offered by scholars have one commonality in which they point out the most important aspect of gossip namely talking about a third person. With reference to the third party aspect, Wittek & Wielers (1998) characterize gossip as "non-obligatory talk about absent third person" (p. 189). They emphasize on the aspects of voluntary conversation and absent target individuals as the most important features of gossip. In this definition, the negative characteristic of gossip as defamatory in nature is not of importance because of the possibility that the talk is merely a talk without any judgment included in it. Besides mentioning the aspect of a third person, other scholars emphasize the negative characteristics of gossip. Wert and Salovey (2004) defines gossip as "malicious or defamatory conversation out of earshot of others" (p. 122). In this definition the negative aspects are highlighted to present an assumption that most gossip is bad.

In a much more neutral way, Guendouzi (2001) refers gossip as "a term that has been used in the literature on discourse and gender to refer to many types of backstage talk" (p. 32). She further asserts that backstage talk consists of gossip (comprising peer group news giving and bitching) and small-talk (encompassing chatting and phatic talk). Consequently, the backstage talk according to this definition might take the negative or positive forms. However, since the term itself has been negatively labeled from the cultural point of view, many take for granted that gossip is a negative phenomenon which is morally and religiously forbidden. Baumeister and Zhang (2004) agree with this assumption because even at the scholarly levels "most psychologists have regarded the motive to gossip as rooted in the malicious desire to harm others by damaging their reputation" (p. 112).

However, as stated above, gossip does not merely contain negative contents. Baumeister and Zhang (2004) suggest that gossip has useful functions in the socializing and interaction process. They assert that gossip functions not only to strengthen the relationship between gossip tellers and hearers, but also to offer information about the target individual. Furthermore, according to Baumeister and Zhang, the most important function of gossip to communicate the values and norms of a certain culture or society which might be beneficial to the hearers. If the hearers are new comers in a community with a different social structure and cultural values, they might learn about the dos and don'ts in communicating in the community such as how to interact with members of the community and how to present themselves in appropriately.

In addition, Baumeister and Zhang (2004) also suggest that gossip is a cultural learning because "by hearing about the misadventures of others, we may not have to endure costs

to ourselves because we will have successfully avoided making the mistake they made" (p. 112). In accordance with this assertion, Foster (2004) states that despite its bad connotation, gossip has social functions such as for information, entertainment, friendship, influence, evolutionary utility, and dynamic utility and guilt. Foster's stance, along with other scholars, opens an alternative way of viewing gossip which apparently also plays an important role in our social interactions, especially in our interpersonal and organizational communication. In terms of power relations, gossip allows the oppressed people confidentially to warn those in similar position about the oppressors (Alfano & Robinson, 2017).

In determining the nature of gossip, Wittek and Wielers (1998) explicate how gossip behaviors are carried out in a network model. Based on Burt's theory (as cited in Wittek & Wielers, 1998), two models are commonly found in the social settings of gossip, namely *constraint* and *closure*. *Constraint* refers to a triad in which the ego knows both the alter and the tertius while the latters do not know each other. *Closure* comprises a setting in which the three actors know and have good personal relationships with one another. In addition to these models, Wittek and Wielers suggest another rivaling model—*coalition*—which can predict the occurrence of gossip in interpersonal communication. *Coalition* represents a situation in which the ego and the alter ego know the tertius, but their relationship to the latter is not good. The following Figure 1 (Wittek & Wielers, 1998, p. 193) describes graphically the gossip behaviors in the three network models.

*Figure 1*
*Coalition, constraint and closure triads*
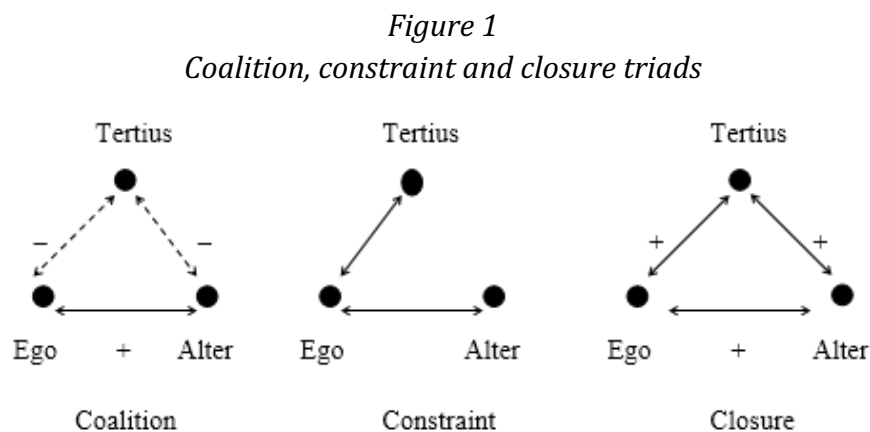


Based on their study, Wittek and Wielers (1998 uncover that "coalition triads turn out to be the best and most consistent predictor of gossip behavior" (p. 201). However, this claim needs to be thoroughly investigated because, I suspect many factors such as individuals' personal moral and religious values, genders[1] (see Guendouzi, 2001), and personalities will come into play to determine whether the *coalition* model works.

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[1] Guendouzi (2001) states that female responds more on 'women-only gossip,' while male responds more on everybody gossip.

**Hidden Transcript**

Relating the concepts of power struggle and resistance has become a focus of study among communication scholars. In explaining resistance of a given group toward another, Scott (1990) mentions that there are two concepts which need to be defined. The first is public discourse or *public transcripts* where individuals behave according to a set of rules and norms in which one should obey to have a smooth interaction between subordinates and dominating parties. The second is private discourse or *hidden transcripts* in which one can freely expresses their opinions and behave differently if they are in public areas or under the gaze of authoritative figures. In other words, the notion of *hidden transcripts* according to Scott is used "to characterize discourse that takes place 'offstage', beyond direct observation by power holders" (p. 4).

Further, Scott mentions that *hidden transcripts* may be seen from the social practices that the under powered conduct such as their speech acts and nonverbal behaviors/communication intended to criticize or reject the practiced rules, but they are done out of power holders' view. A study to use the notion of *hidden transcripts* to analyze some resistance to the power holders was conducted by Murphy (1998). In her study, she investigated flight attendants' resistance to their company's rules and the domination of those in powers such as pilots in airplanes and company rules on their physical appearance.

Resistance also occurs because of differences in power. While discursive formations reproduce power relations, Foucault (as cited in Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983) asserts that "the site of power could easily become the site of social disturbances, or even revolt" (p. 146). As illustrated in Murphy's (1998) study, some flight attendants have successfully exercised this notion in order to eliminate some rules which they thought to be discriminating and disparaging. In explaining this power relation, Foucault (as cited in Bertens, 2001) emphasizes his thought on the entity of power. First, he mentions that power is not possession, but more of strategies. Second, power is not localized but it spreads anywhere. Third, power does not always work through oppression and repression, but also through normalization and regulation. Finally, power is not destructive in nature, but productive.

# METHOD

**Participants and Data Generation Procedure**

The participants were members of a student organization in a state university interacting online through *chatgroup* and face-to-face. Participant observation was employed in the data collection procedure as I was the member of the organization and *chatgroup*. This allowed me to have access to the written conversation data and to analyze members' online messages and their offline behaviors. The collected data were focused on the

messages posted in relation to conflict mentioned below. While analyzing their messages, I simultaneously observed the members' behavior when interacting face-to-face with the target individuals.

The topic of discussion is about the friction and conflict that several members had with their landlords. This conflict was caused by cultural clash and presumed stereotypes that the members had upon the landlords and vice versa. Other members of the organization also felt to have been treated badly by the same landlords.

### Data Analysis and Observation

The data from the online message postings were analyzed based on the categories of gossip (Guendouzi, 2001) and hidden transcript (Scott, 1990). The data were compared to how the members presented themselves in front of the target individuals using Goffman's (1959) framework for front and back stage performance. A slight modification is made in the framework; the front stage refers to the presence of the third parties and the backstage refers to a situation when the third parties are absent.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Backstage Talks

As I observed, backstage talks were discussed through three stages, which I dub as *topic introduction*, *discussion* (consisting of two simultaneously opposing parts, namely <u>heating-up</u> and <u>cooling down</u>), and *wrapping up*. In the first stage, the topic was introduced by Member A who also had conflict with the landlords (henceforth referred to as the third parties). He mentioned that

> In my opinion, Member B's experience with the third parties should be discussed with our fellow members. I just can't understand why our fellow members ignore the fact that he has a big problem. If this problem is ignored, it is not impossible that the same thing will happen again in the future.

This topic introduction was then responded and endorsed by the chairperson of the organization by asking the rest of the members to share their ideas to solve the problem.

> Having heard the problem that our friends have, I personally feel insulted by the treatment that Member B receives from the third parties. However, I don't want to jump to conclusion without listening to other members' opinions about this matter

However, the chairperson added at the end of her posting a warning for all members to not spread the posted messages to non-members.

Please don't distribute these emails to non-members in order to avoid inconveniences. This is only the talk among us.

After the topic introduction by a member and endorsement by the chairperson, the issue was discussed in the mailing list. The first part of the second stage, heating-up, occurred right after the introduction when members exchanged negative messages about the third parties. The following is the message posted by Member C.

The problem Member B faces is not something new considering the madness level of the third parties. As a person who shares the same religious background with them, I frankly feel embarrassed by the culture that grows in the place where Member B lives . . . I often feel disgusted to see that after our religious meetings they embrace us and call each other brothers and sisters. ... I suggest that Member A and B move out. [Moving out] together will give a bad impression to the third parties and confirm the impression that they are barbaric.

Member B, as the center of the discussion, replied to the previous messages by presenting himself as a victim and calling the third parties as ignorant.

I ignored the warnings from several people about the possible occurrence of this problem. I tried to follow the management's requirements. Now, even by singing by myself, I am considered as a noisemaker as stated in the third parties' letter sent to me without ever consulting me.

He further confessed that he did not want to heat up the problem, so he took an act of silence to show his resistance.

Actually I don't want be bothered by this problem. That's why I remain silent with the hope that there won't be another problem. Alas, once I said something, the problem gets worse.

Member B further openly expressed his feeling when he was informed after a while that the third parties needed financial contribution. Hearing  this news, he called them as inconsistent people.

What is this contribution. They are so weird. When trying to evict people, they claim that the property is theirs. Now when they need some money, they call it ours. They are so inconsistent!

At this point, Member B used malicious or defamatory remarks to damage the third parties' reputation.

Despite the heating up of the issue, at the same time some members took a neutral stance by posting messages which were intended to cool down the overheated situation as is explicitly stated in Member D's comment.

For Member A and Member B, be patient men, it won't take long. Just don't let them feel satisfied by making you feel miserable. Stop spending your energy in thinking about it. It's not worth it.

A similar tune was also stated by Member E, who happens to be the oldest member in the mailing list and always try to calm us, the younger and angry people.

> Member B, I'm sorry for the problem that you have. I hope all of you still keep your head cool before taking any decisions. Being angry or upset about something or someone is okay, but please solve the problem elegantly and respectfully.

Another member F also expressed a similarly neutral message partly because of his close relationship with the third parties.

> This message is to express my regret about the occurrence of the problem that our members face. Please don't get me wrong because of my status of living with the third parties. I just think that this issue should not be complicated and prolonged. So, it's better to avoid any further conflict because we are all brothers and sisters.

Finally, member G also offers almost similar stance after being fed up with all defamatory messages that Member B posted in the mailing list.

> Member B, please knock it off. Not all things that we consider bad have to be responded negatively. Just show your kindness by showing it to others... Sorry, I humbly need to say this in order for us to be wise in responding to the problem.

Finally, having all opinions presented in the mailing list, the final stage, *wrapping-up,* took place. The chairperson wrapped up all the discussion about the matter by posting a closing remark and urging other members to keep responding if the problem developed to a new stage later.

> Friends, I really appreciate your comments and responses. I agree that our organization should not be involved formally in this matter. However, we as friends still need to support our members who need our attention and help. .. So thank you very much and I still expect our other members to express their opinions. The most important thing is that we have to support one another because, being far from our family, we are brothers and sisters.

**Behaviors in Face-to-Face Interaction**

In interacting face-to-face with the third parties, the members in conflict took different behaviors. Member A's behavior was in accordance with Goffman's (1959) concept of performance. At the front stage, he masked his emotion and feeling toward the third parties by giving the impression that he was what he was posed to be. He presented a self that respected the third parties. However, at the back stage among the fellow members of the organization, he unmasked his emotion and continued talking negatively about the third parties.

In contrast to Member A, Member B took an extreme behavior and action when it comes to face-to-face interaction. He tried as much as he could to avoid meeting and interacting face-to-face with the third parties. This act of complete avoidance was much more driven by his inability to fully mask his emotion and feelings at the front stage when meeting the third parties. If he met the third parties, he acted passively by remaining silent and did not take the initiatives to start and participate in conversation. This set of behavior was even openly unmasked when he was at the back stage setting. When his less successful

masking was uncovered, he became more offensive about the third parties when talking to other members of the organization or posting his messages in the mailing list. Therefore, in the case of Member B, using Goffman's (1959) framework to analyze his behavior seemed less suitable compared to analyzing Member A's behavior. Member B's front stage – back stage performance was clearly difficult to distinguish because the nuances of his behavior at these two settings (front and back stages) were not varied greatly.

## Summary of Analysis

In analyzing all the backstage talks that occurred online in the mailing list, I used the categories of hidden transcripts and mere gossip to classify all online talks. As hidden transcripts relate to power relation and distribution, Member A and Member B's message postings were the expression of their frustration with their lack of power in their confrontation with the third parties. Their positions as the tenants at the third parties' property made them less powerful because they were bound by an agreement that limited their power. Since they had no channel to express their dissatisfaction and criticism openly, they could only use the mailing list and face-to-face interaction with other members of the organization as a way to articulate their frustration. Despite this, Member A and member B simultaneously warn others about the landlords that they believed to be oppressors, which further support Alfano and Robinson's (2017) findings.

Other members' message postings, on the other hand, represent mere gossip because they did not have any power problem with the third parties (although some have had similar experience as Member A and Member B when living in the third parties. property). Therefore, it is not surprising that some members took a neutral stance and attempted to cool down the situation by advising Member A and Member B to be patient and not take any offensive moves against the third parties. In addition, although some other members presented negative gossip, some other members attempted to gossip on the positive consequences of the problem. This reflects Baumeister and Zhang's (2004) affirmation that gossip is a cultural learning because by learning about one's problems and misfortunes, other members of the society will have important information about the target individual (see also and Foster, 2004).

At the level of face-to-face interaction, Member B's silence can be regarded as a form of resistance to the third parties domination of powers. Therefore, I consider that Goffman's (1959) framework not thoroughly useful in analyzing Member B's behaviors because the differences between front and back stage performance are not extreme enough. Furthermore, Member B's behavior was strengthened by a *blaming* stage where, according to Abel and Sarat (1980-1981), an individual blames other people for the problem that he/she has.

Finally, this small study confirms Wittek and Wielers' (1998) affirmation that *coalition* triads will be the best predictors of gossip behavior. However, I suspect that this triad model only deals with negative type of gossip. My suspicion is based on the fact that Member A and Member B have good relationship with each other and mutually dislike the third parties. This state of relationship produces producing malicious and defamatory talks about the third parties. In accommodating the neutral stance and neutral or positive gossip, I propose another triad model which can predict the occurrences of this type of gossip called *neutralization*. The following model graphically presents the type of relationship that each party has with one another using the proposed triad. (Note: Positive sign represents good relationship, negative sign represent bad relationship, and zero represents neutral relationship).

Tertius

●

– $\quad$ 0

+

● ⟷ ●

Ego $\qquad$ Alter
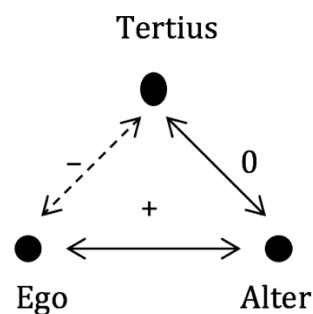
Neutralization

This model explains a situation in which the ego has a good relationship with the alter and bad relationship with the tertius. The alter, on the other hand, has neutral relationship with the tertius which allows him/her to critically judge the ego's negative gossip on the tertius and probably be able to provide a constructive view to counter the ego's negative judgment on the tertius.

## CONCLUSION

Studying gossip uncovers the characteristics that we have as human beings and social beings. Besides having negative content, gossip is also a medium to learn about cultural differences and to provide information for the rest of the community. This information is useful for the community to avoid similar misfortunes and to behave accordingly when a difficult situation occurs. In addition, backstage talks are not always mere gossip because they sometimes reflect the hidden transcripts by individuals who feel less power than the power holders do. As for those who talks neutrally about a third party, the setting for their neutrality can be best described by the suggested new triad model which explicates their unique position as neutral entity in the triad of gossip behavior.

In terms of interaction with the third party, using Goffman's (1959) concept of performance is a useful in comparing the behaviors between online interaction and face-to-face interaction. However, as suggested in the analysis, the concept cannot fully work in analyzing deviant behaviors, which are quite different from the usual pattern. In sum, further study needs to be conducted to investigate the issue presented in this paper. By and large, the scope of this paper is not intended for the purpose of generalization, but for the sake of presenting a piece of human behaviors in their interaction with one another at the level of interpersonal communication.

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