

Psssst! Want to know what makes good gossip?

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Most people enjoy a good bit of gossip, but what makes it worth passing on?

According to psychology researchers we gossip most about familiar people and the more interesting and unpredictable the story, the more likely we are to gossip about it.

"Intuitively it's not surprising that we are more likely to gossip about familiar people and interesting stories," said Dr Bo Yao the lead author of the paper.

"However, we are much more likely to gossip when a story unites a familiar person with an interesting scenario."

The researchers from the universities of Glasgow, Manchester, and the West of Scotland say "a key function of gossip may be to maintain our

reputation systems by receiving updates on the recent behaviour of our acquaintances."

To understand the psychological triggers for gossip, the researchers devised an experiment involving a series of fictitious stories.

They then asked participants to read the stories and indicate how likely they would be to share these stories with friends. For each story, participants also provided feedback on its predictability and whether their opinion of the main character had changed.

The researchers selected a list of 100 widely-known UK and US celebrities as familiar targets such as David and Victoria Beckham, Barack and Michelle Obama, and then fabricated a list of matching non-celebrities as unfamiliar targets such as Jamie and Connie Shannon, Robert and Theresa O'Hara.

These characters were embedded in fictitious scenarios that were considered either interesting – getting pregnant, having a 'domestic' in public, being caught with drugs – or boring – having coffee, going grocery shopping.

The research findings suggested that high levels of gossip were linked to story predictability and target reputation. When a story was considered less predictable and resulted in a greater change of opinion about the target, participants were more likely to pass on that information.

Dr Sara Sereno, senior author of the study, explained: "Gossip revolves around its content and its target. To us, a good piece of gossip should be judged as information that's worthy of being passed on to those who are well-placed to appreciate its content. In other words, gossip is interesting stuff about someone we care about.

"Gossip plays a big role in how we manage our social reputations. We hope our study provides a first step in understanding the specific factors that influence our gossiping behaviour."

The study, entitled "Familiarity with Interest Breeds Gossip: Contributions of Emotion, Expectation, and Reputation", was published in the online science journal *PLoS ONE*.

More information: *PLoS One*,
dx.plos.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0104916

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