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## From Rumour to Reality: Grapevine Communication and Identity (Re)Formation in Selected Indian Folktales

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### Abstract

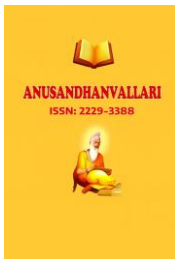
Grapevine communication refers to communication taking place through informal or unofficial channels within interpersonal, group, or organizational context. Such informal channels usually are full of gossip or rumors passing from one person to many or vice versa. Single strand chain, gossip chain, probability chain, and cluster chain are the primary routes of communication within a grapevine network that play a vital role in building, breaking, and rebuilding people's perceptions and interpretations about self and others. Thus, grapevine communication influences in shaping individuals' views, opinions, and identities. My study tries to understand how various networks of grapevine communication influence and shape individuals' identities and help people in creating meaning of life as well as cope with life's difficulties. For my analysis, I choose two Indian folktales, because folktales are timeless classics which represent a vivid description of personal realities without taking stringent views. The folktales selected are: 1. "A Plague Story" from A.K. Ramanujan's *Folktales from India* (1991) and 2. "The Bowl of Thenthuk: Hemis, Ladakh" from the text *Curious Tales from the Himalayas* by Shaguna Gahilote & Prarthana Gahilote (2017). My analysis is dependent on anthropologist and psychologist Robin Dunbar's seminal work *Grooming, Gossip, and the Evolution of Language* (1996) where gossip is considered as an essential social and survival skill for human's evolutionary process.

**Keywords:** Gossip, Gender, Identity, Perception, Social cohesion

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### Introduction:

Grapevine communication refers to communication taking place through informal or unofficial channels within an interpersonal, group, or organizational context. Such informal channels usually are full of gossips or rumors passing from one person to many and vice versa. Therefore, inevitably, grapevine communication influences in shaping individuals' views, opinions, and identities. Grapevine plays a vital role in building, breaking, and rebuilding individuals' perceptions and interpretations about self and others. This chapter captures how grapevine communication primarily through gossips and rumors, influence, and shape individual identities as well as their sense-making in a context of complex survival challenges, as portrayed in two Indian folktales. The prime reason behind choosing folktales as research materials could be ascribed to the reason that folktales are timeless classics which represent a vivid description of personal realities without taking stringent views. Our folktales, being the culturally preserved repository of people's lived stories passed down from generations, present an unapologetic and open-ended view of human vulnerability. The folktales selected are for this study are: 1. "A Plague Story" (pp. 61-62) from A.K. Ramanujan's *Folktales from India* (First published 1991) and 2. "The Bowl of Thenthuk: Hemis, Ladakh" (pp. 7-14) from the text *Curious Tales from the Himalayas* by Shaguna Gahilote & Prarthana Gahilote (2017). To examine the strings of grapevine communication and its impact on identity formation, my analysis resorts to British anthropologist and evolutionary psychologist Robin Dunbar's ideas of Machiavellian



hypothesis and importance of language for social bonding proposed in his text *Grooming, Gossip, and the Evolution of Language* (1996) where gossip is considered as an essential social and survival skill for human's evolutionary process. My study also hinges on the social functions of gossip and rumor as articulated by many recent researchers.

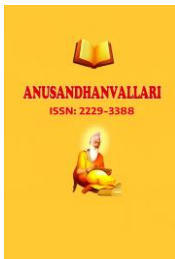
The primary investigative questions that this study pursues are:

How does grapevine communication primarily through gossips and rumor shape the worldviews of people in rural and marginalized communities of India, as depicted in the selected folktales?

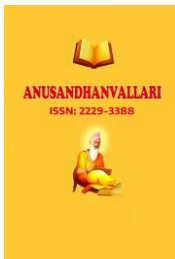
How do gossips affect societal perceptions and identity constructs of individuals in close knit groups? Are gossips and rumor always bad?

### Literature Review

The term "grapevine" is originated during the early Civil War. This network similar to grapevines, was loosely structured, often comprising of lines strung between trees (Rakes & Cox, 1993). Because of the haphazard ways in which those stings were hung, the messages sent through them became distorted often and eventually any form of unofficial grapevine communication was designated as grapevine (Rakes & Cox, 1993). Grapevine communication refers to the "informal transmission of information, gossip or rumor from person to person" (Mishra, 1990, p.213). Used mostly in organizational context, grapevine comes into picture spontaneously and mostly it is situationally derived (Hellweg, 1983, as cited in Rakes & Cox, 1993). Grapevine is inevitable in all democratic interactions, as it is an exercise of freedom of speech (Mishra, 1990) and is as "fickle, dynamic, and varied as people", "a natural, normal activity" (Mishra, 1990, p. 214). Basically, it is an interpersonal face-to-face communication or word of mouth, due to which it moves faster than print media (Davis, et al., 1977). Usually, Information becomes distorted through interpersonal communication. Individuals at the end of an information diffusion chain are typically exposed to less information that is less accurate or precise than information at the start of a chain (Carlson 2018; Moussaïd, Brighton, and Gaissmaier 2015, as cited in Carlson, 2019 ).Though information flowing in grapevine is largely perceived as unreliable and personal, however grapevine messages can also be effective and accurate ( Rakes & Cox, 1993). Hence, Grapevine represents informal network of communication consisting mainly of gossips and rumours determined by social relationships and are prevalent in any organization or unit. Use of language in grapevine networks has been a thoroughly investigated phenomenon and most conversations in grapevine concern about social topics initiated by third party, which are called as gossips (Sommerfeld et al., 2007). Gossip operates as a normatively charged form of communication, serving as a tool for partner control and choice through the practice of ostracism (Alfano & Robinson, 2017). Gossips and rumor escalate during periods of organizational turbulence, ambiguity, and tension. While occasionally advantageous, they can also yield detrimental consequences. These include inducing anxiety, cultivating animosity, fostering division, impeding productivity, and inflicting significant harm on both individual reputations and identity (Alfano & Robinson, 2017). Through gossip, individuals caution others about wrongdoers, including oppressors, and advocate for alternative methods of punishing misconduct, typically avoiding direct confrontation. The main criticism of gossip lies in its potential, and frequent occurrence, of being untrue (Alfano & Robinson, 2017). Though very often gossip and rumour are used interchangeably, both terms have subtle differences. Ribeiro & Blackley (1995) states those differences. Gossip typically circulates within the confines of a small social circle, addressing either factual or fabricated information related to social events of interest to the gossipers or the personal lives of individuals within their acquaintance. In instances concerning personal matters, gossip often adopts an evaluative and judgmental tone. In contrast, rumor extends far beyond these intimate groups, reaching a wider audience. It commonly transmits unverified information and focuses on impersonal subjects, including public figures and large social groups or organisations (Ribeiro & Blackley, 1995).



Social functions of gossip can be manifold. Gluckman (1963) posited gossip as a mechanism for social control, serving to maintain cohesion within a community by safeguarding its moral and value systems while managing competing factions and ambitious individuals. Anthropologists, such as Gluckman (1963, as cited in Bertolotti & Magnani, 2014) and Yerkovich (1977, as cited in Bertolotti & Magnani, 2014), have emphasized gossip as a tool for social regulation. However, the mechanism often perpetuated a sense of social exclusion or "otherness." Ellickson (1991, as cited in Sommerfeld et al., 2007) demonstrated that within this small-scale society, group norms were upheld and strengthened through the mechanism of gossip, which was later supported by Wilson et al., (2000 ; Kniffin & Wilson, 2005, as cited in Sommerfeld et al., 2007). Gossip as a cultural learning was established by Baumeister et al., (2004) and Robin Dunbar's social grooming hypothesis (1993, 1996, 2004) states that language is a coping mechanism to deal with large sized social groups and increased connections. Hence according to Dunbar's theory, both language and gossip acts as a mechanism of social cohesion via increased number of interaction partners. Robin Dunbar's text *Grooming, Gossip, and Evolution of language* (First published 1996) is a treatise on evolution of human's interactive behaviour and language skills based on his observations drawn from group behaviour of monkeys and apes, i.e. the primates. Dunbar hypothesises that language shapes the primates the same way that grooming does (Turkel, 1999). Therefore, language acts as a unifying mechanism for social interaction and cohesion rather than information transmission. Dunbar posits that group cohesion in primates is mainly done through grooming where there is a constant selection pressure of abilities that reinforce social interaction (Turkel, 1999). As Dunbar (1996) quotes "Language is thus a crucial factor in the history of ideas. It allows us to build on the knowledge of earlier generations. But it also allows us to exchange knowledge amongst ourselves so that the whole community becomes wrapped up in the same set of beliefs." ( p.105). Initially, languages undergo diversification manifested in local dialectal variations. Over time, these linguistic variants evolve to the extent of mutual incomprehensibility, primarily due to the imperative of local communities to safeguard their distinct identities amidst competitive pressures emanating from external social entities (Dunbar, 1996, p. 170). Dunbar (1996) comes out with Machiavellian hypothesis (pp. 22-24 ) in his second chapter "Into the Social Whirl" where he delineates coalitionary behavior to be facilitated by comprehension of the behavioural patterns of other individuals and their assessment of their suitability as allies in potential group conflicts. Such understanding often involves types of knowledge that may not be readily obtained through direct personal experience. This form of inference concerning social dynamics, coupled with a keen awareness of the trustworthiness of potential allies, appears to constitute the fundamental basis of Machiavellian hypothesis upon which primate alliances are established. At the cognitive level, these processes represent highly sophisticated forms of social inference. Dunbar (1996) inclines towards brighter aspects of gossip under the section *Black Art Propaganda* by leaning onto research of Enquist and Leimar which states that "gossip may have evolved as a mechanism for controlling the activities of free riders. By exchanging information on their activities, humans are able to use language both to gain advanced warning of social cheats and to shame them into conforming to accepted social standards when they do misbehave" (p. 172). Dunbar gives brownie points to language of gossip for keeping track of free-riders and coerce them to conforming, rather than tracking friends and acquaintances (p. 172). As a conclusion, Dunbar proposes that language emerged in human evolution as a substitute for social grooming, because the time needed for grooming in our large social groups requires enormous time and hence not practical. Dunbar contends that language evolved to address this challenge by enabling us to utilize our available time for social interactions more effectively (p. 192). In this process, human gossip and self-advertising play a crucial role to enhance human interactions (p.192). Dunbar contends that the genesis of gossip is intimately intertwined with the emergence of language itself. This perspective aligns with the sociobiological stance of Wilson et al. (2002), which emphasizes the pragmatic-moral roots of gossip. According to this view, gossip functions as a collective mechanism that monitors, reports, and disciplines deviant behavior and free riders by disseminating social information (Bertolotti & Magnani, 2014). Gossip serves multifaceted roles within social dynamics, encompassing functions such as the economical enforcement of societal norms by penalizing



transgressors (Dunbar, 2004; Feinberg et al., 2012, as cited in Robinson, 2016) prompting the voluntary segregation of groups with heterogeneous normative frameworks (Savarimuthu et al., 2013, as cited in Robinson, 2016), and fostering the enhancement of interpersonal bonds (Shaw et al., 2011, as cited in Robinson, 2016).

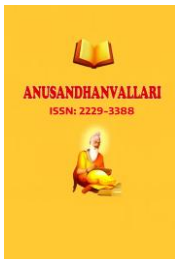
Other research pertaining to this field include gossip and its link to self-interest (Paine, 1967), role of grapevine to effect change in schools (Rakes & Cox, 1993), ways of gossip and rumor management (Ribeiro & Blackley, 1995), gossip as a direct observer of indirect reciprocity in games (Sommerfield et al., 2007), gossip as a means of informal social control and crime management (Brewer et al. 1998; Ariel et al., 2019), social functions of gossip within power dynamics as either virtue or vice (Spacks, 1982; Holland 1996; Cuonzo 2008; van Niekerk 2008; Bertolotti and Magnani 2014; West Johnson, 2016; Alfano & Robinson, 2017), gossip as knowledge generator (Bertolotti & Magnani, 2014), Gossip as an epistemological view of Harriet Martineau (Pond, 2014), interrelationship between gossip and holding power (Kurland & Peeled, 2000), Gossip as a means of holding friendship and raising sociometric status (McDonald et al., 2007). Other research joining the domain of identity, language and literature include formation of group culture and role of innovation, conflict, sharing of interpretative frameworks, construction of joint meaning towards retaining identity of group culture (Fine, 2018), language choice as a means of forming identity (Fuller, 2007), folklore as a means of social and political change (Kaiser & Kaiser, 1997), Folktales as source of law (Kytov, 2008), review work of A.K. Ramanujan and search for secularism (Behl, 1993; Joy, 2003; Narayan, 2008), studying folktales from an anti-colonial perspective (Bhattacharya, 2015), masculinity perceptions in North Indian rural traditions (Chowdhry, 2015), karma and aspects of fate in Indian folktales (Kent, 2009), reviewed folktales of Pandit Ram Gharib Chaube and William Crooke by Sadhana Naithani (Pauwels, 2009), women representations in Tamil oral traditions (Ramaswamy, 2010). Since there is a dearth of research work that opens up deliberations on influence of gossip chains on the personal identity formations of people within close knit rural groups, therefore it constitutes as a research gap in my chapter.

There exist four primary origins of identity delineations: personal or individual identity, role-based identity, category-based identity, and group membership-based identity (Owens et al., 2010). Personal identity represents the foundational form of identity, posited as the social categorisation of an individual into a solitary category (Rosenberg, 1979, as cited in Owens et al., 2010). It signifies a distinct individual whose self-definitions derive from their personal narrative and distinctive amalgamation of experiences. In identity theory, the essence of an identity resides in the classification of oneself as occupying a particular role, along with the assimilation of the meanings and anticipated behaviors linked to that role and its fulfilment (Burke and Tully, 1977; Thoits, 1986, as cited in Stets & Burke, 2000). Identities that guide people's social action come from role relationships, affiliation with social groups, identification with social categories, or personal narratives (Owens et al., 2010).

## Analysis & Discussion

### Folktale I : "The Plague"

"A Plague Story" is a folktale from Bengal province of India. It is a short tale wherein a massive bubonic Plague hits entire Asia and when it is about to affect Bharat (ancient name of India), the pious king of Bharat requests priests for a solution. The priests start worshipping of Lord Shiva. Lord Shiva becomes satisfied with the prayers and blesses the people that Lord Shiva's servant Nandi would protect the country against all evils including the Plague. However, on one fine day there arises a violent war between Nandi and the Plague. Finally, a truce is made with the consensus that the Plague will stay at the capital only for one day and would claim only one man as victim. However, the next day there is tremendous hue and cry since it is found that hundred men died. As a response to Nandi's angry question as to why Plague broke the terms of the truce, the Plague responds—"I did actually take only one man as I promised, but the other ninety-nine died out of fear. What could I do? These people

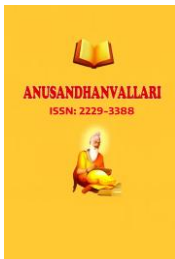


had a simple fever and a little swelling of the glands, and they mistook them for signs of my approach, and they died out of fear” (Ramanujan, 1991, p.62). At Plague’s response, Nandi sets him free.

The folktale depicts a society where villagers in their limited social group are gullible given the context of disease and fear of death. However, since the translated story says that Plague killed only “men,” in my analysis I am not considering that the Plague killed men, not women. Why were women excluded from Plague’s attack is not clear. The story shows a rural setting with higher predominance of grapevine across horizontal level (amongst villagers) as compared to formal communication between villagers and the king or king’s messengers. The personal identities and meaning making of life for simple villagers are mostly governed by immediate seeing, believing, and validating those believed perceptions through group talks. Their identities get shaped through shared consensus with their peer over experiential perceptions, very often without shred of doubt. When gossip performs the role of releasing intense emotions, it acts as a vehicle of cathartic social function (Ribeiro & Blakeley, 1995). In this folktale, we see massive cathartic gossips filled with fear and anxiety flowing through the grapevine, the outcome of which is seen in finding hundred dead men. A failure on the authorial side is also observed who could not provide security and instructions against fear mongering gossipers during an epidemic. Dunbar’s (1996) proposed Machiavellian hypothesis states that intelligence has always evolved within social contexts. Specifically, individuals who excel at leveraging and manipulating others within their social circles, while minimizing the risk of disruption and potential factionalism that could lead to overt aggression, typically constitute a Machiavellian setting (Byrne, 1995). These manipulative tactics may encompass cooperative endeavors as well as conflicts and involve behaviors ranging from sharing to hoarding (Byrne, 1995). However, the underlying motive in each instance remains exploitative and self-serving. In case of this folktale, a failure of Machiavellian hypothesis is observed because the villagers could not differentiate the elements of truth from gossip. Instead of questioning and preventing the fear laden gossip information and minimizing the risk, the deceased villagers fall prey to existing grapevine resulting in absolute annihilation of self and identity. The folktale shows that in instances where uninterrupted cathartic gossips carrying emotions of fear, anxiety, or survival threat spread rapidly along the horizontal level, amongst individuals of similar financial and social gradation in a rural group, it leads to failure of Machiavellian hypothesis. Hence, gossip could no longer perform its constructive role of eradicating or warning the cheats/ frauds/ lies. In conclusion, this folktale hints that fear inducing gossips along grapevine very often lead to loss of human rational identities at a collective level and give rise to distorted meaning making of life, which is dreadful and dark. This phenomenon is seen and recorded in many Indian folktales which represent close knit rural and marginalised communities where formal communication networks are usually less. This folktale, as a moral lesson for readers also presents the scope for controlling fear and dis/misinformation by encouraging us to talk and gossip about how individual and social intelligence fails, as shown in this tale.

### 3.2 Folktale II: “The Bowl of Thenthuk: Hemis, Ladakh”

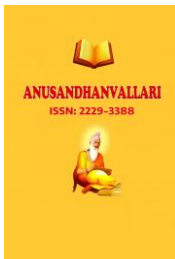
This folktale narrates the story of an old couple Angchuk (he) and Rigzen (she) living in a small village called Chilling in Ladakh district, at the foothills of Himalayas, a place full of wildlife such as eagles, bear, and snow leopards. “Thenthuk” refers to a special dish of dried noodles cooked with balls of dough, vegetables, and dried mutton. The story revolves around gossip and rumor surrounding the appearance of a snow leopard in Chilling which is first spotted and talked about by a ninety-year-old man Tenzin *dai*. Eventually all sorts of gossip about the leopard spreads across the village like a wildfire. The snow leopard takes shelter in the barnhouse of Angchuk’s home with an attempt to kill Rigzen in her husband’s absence. However, after Angchuk returns, the leopard overhears the quarrel between Angchuk and Rigzen where they were shouting over each other with words such as ‘kill’, ‘chop’, ‘hungry dogs’, and ‘minced meat’ (Gahilote & Gahilote, 2017, p.13), and the leopard mistakes the commotion as a plan to kill him. He feels the noise of hundred villagers marching towards his hiding place. He concludes that everyone is out there to slaughter him. The leopard immediately flees from Angchuk and Rigzen’s home and disappears into thick jungle towards village border and is never to be seen again. The villagers



who were coming to placate Angchuk and Rigzen find out the escape of the leopard. Hence, all start to praise the old couple as; 'Bravehearts!' (Gahilote & Gahilote, p.13) bestowing thanks to their cacophony because of which the leopard ran away. Eventually, the couple becomes village heroes.

This beautiful folktale presents memorable characters such as Dolma, the neighbor to Angchuk who is full of nervous excitement and childlike innocence (Gahilote & Gahilote, 2017, p. 8) and always takes extreme pleasure in listening to gossips and rumor. Another notable character is village senior Tenzin, the ninety-year-old man whose vision is imperfect. Despite his failing eyesight, Tenzin *dai* is the first one to spot the leopard in the village which many including Angchuk thought of as a baseless rumor and believed Tenzin's claim to be unconvincing. Tenzin is also the first one to spot the leopard fleeing from old couple's home, which turned out to be true. Hence, we argue that Tenzin who takes active part in village grapevine, and acts as carrier and disseminator of gossips actually contribute to social cohesion, because he carries elements of truth. The grapevines amongst the villagers indicate a widespread prevalence of gossip and rumor amongst people of similar social standing. In the village, information tends to rapidly spread along gossip chain, where one communicates with many others in a non-selective way or/and sometimes along probability chain where one communicates with others in a selective way according to laws of probability. The village square which is typically a meeting place of villagers to talk on important issues is considered to be a formal place where information pours in, gets re-created, restructured, exaggerated, sometimes rectified, often amplified, and gets disseminated. Hence, even though it is a quasi-formal platform of communication within that small rural locality, it is primarily shaped through word-of-mouth, gossip, and rumor. For many, it is favorable time pass spot. As the story says: "They arrived at the square, and Angchuk listened to more and more exaggerated tales of the leopard..." (Gahilote & Gahilote, p. 8), "Since the spotting of the snow leopard, the story about him had changed many times, with each villager trying to undo the other" (p.8), "while the spotting of a snow leopard was serious business, it was also some sort of entertainment" (p. 8). When gossips are used as a favorable pastime, those gossips perform social entertainment function (Ribeiro & Blakeley, 1995). Likewise, when gossips perform only the act of carrying information of personal nature it is said to perform information function (Ribeiro & Blakeley, 1995). Hence, this folktale shows gossip performing both entertainment function and information function, thereby molding people towards more of information seeking and entertainment seeking identities. Since, the villagers were fear stricken too, their gossips vented out fear and anxiety which was indeed a cathartic relief for them.

Rumors serve the function of mitigating ambiguity and uncertainty within social contexts (Ribeiro & Blakeley, 1995). Individuals who propagate rumors, colloquially referred to as "rumormongers," engage in the dissemination of narratives aimed at elucidating ambiguous circumstances or those characterized by secrecy. The ending of the story shows villagers making sense of leopard's flee as an outcome of valiant cacophony created by Angchuk and his wife and therefore hailed the couple as braveheart. This incident shows villagers' dependency on creating rumors towards (de)constructing people's identities to deal with any complex or ambiguous situation. Hence, I argue that this folktale shows a closed rural society which is greatly dependent on rumor and gossip within their lived grapevines for meaning making of life and shaping each other's identity. In this story, fear and self-survival form the basic instincts of life where the villagers can successfully navigate through gossips and rumors for an increased social cohesion, hence effectively upholding Dunbar's Machiavellian hypothesis. Also, it is worth noted that, even co-existing with massive degree of anxiety and entertainment gossips and rumors, a problem-solving mindset of a group possesses greater capacity for social interaction and opinion formation towards a positive outcome within a Machiavellian hypothetical situation. This folktale underscores that gossips and rumors (re)frame identities of the receiver, sender, and also of the subject of talk within the concerned grapevine. Gossips and rumor consistently undo monopoly narratives and power dynamics amongst individuals.



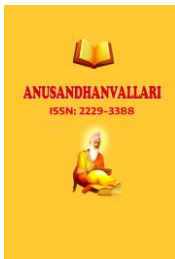
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## Conclusion

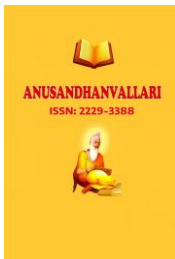
Interpretation of life or meaning making is profoundly shaped by language and human's ability to influence formal and informal communication at all stages. Informal communication networks such as grapevine is a conscious human survival mechanism where people voluntarily engage in (re)creating identities of self and others. Those identities are often vulnerable and fluid which get formed through over-belief, fear, repetition-induced truth within the many channels of grapevine communication. This is particularly common in close knit rural Indian communities where safety, security, and survival matter the most, as depicted in the analysis of the selected folktales. Gossips and rumors emerge as self-sustaining mechanism in closed social groups, however, if laden too much with negative emotions such as fear and anxiety without any third party/authorial intervention, they might profoundly damage the social group. When situated within the context of Dunbar's Machiavellian hypothesis, most of the Indian folktales show gossips and rumors as a genuinely essential survival strategy within social circles because information gathered through grapevine communication networks helps one detect friend vs enemy and planning out what to do next towards forming robust social cohesion within a gender divided society. This clarity opens ways towards fulfillment of self-interest through inventing and re-inventing identities of self and others. Specially, in a context of resource scarcity and having too many competitors on the path of goal fulfillment, gossips and rumors serve as a major perceptual strategy, which if used wisely in the meaning making of life can lead to a holistic well-being of self and others. This phenomenon is profoundly reflected in most of the Indian folktales. Having said that, this study also leaves open a few unexplored questions, i.e.: Do human groups consciously like exaggeration, hyperboles, dis/misinformation because such engagement gives temporal relief from fear? How do people across gender participate in gossips & rumors within informal communication networks for a favorable quid pro quo in social interactions? Future study into these core issues will reveal interesting facets about human's survival instincts and role of everyday communication for an enhanced social bonding.

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