YES, BUT DID YOU HEAR ABOUT...?
EMERGING ADULTS' USE OF SOCIALLY AGGRESSIVE GOSSIP
IN EVERYDAY CONVERSATIONS.

A thesis submitted to
the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in Partial Fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

Masters of Arts

by

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Abstract

The present study investigated emerging adults' (18-29 years old) use of socially aggressive gossip (SA gossip), their levels of moral disengagement, their goals for using SA gossip, and their outcome expectancies for SA gossip use from three perspectives (the person being talked about, the person who listened to the gossip, and the person who started or spread the gossip). The study included 140 participants (34 males and 106 females). Significant findings included: higher moral disengagement was associated with higher levels of SA gossip use; older emerging adults (24-29 years old) reported using significantly more socially aggressive gossip than the younger emerging adults (18-23 years old); and higher levels of moral disengagement, are linked to goal choices that indicated a desire to justify the SA gossip use. These findings are encouraging and support the continued examination of SA gossip use and moral disengagement.

Keywords: emerging adulthood, emerging adults, gossip, moral disengagement, social aggression, socially aggressive gossip

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Yes, but did you hear about...?

Emerging adults' use of socially aggressive gossip in everyday conversations.

For the past two decades many researchers have focused their attention on describing and measuring behaviours that make up social aggression (SA). Social aggression consists of actions that are intended to cause social harm by damaging another person's self-esteem, social status, or friendships, for example, gossip, exclusion, disparaging remarks, sneering, name-calling, and eye-rolling (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Galen & Underwood, 1997). Developmentally, social aggression is present through most periods, from preschool up to and including emerging adulthood (18-29 years). As soon as children begin to interact with others there is an opportunity to use socially aggressive behaviours (Underwood, 2003). Some research indicates that there are developmental differences in the use of social aggression, such that younger adolescents are more likely to use more direct forms of social aggression (exclusion, name-calling, insults) while college-age individuals (18-23) prefer the more covert strategy of gossip (Goldstein & Tisak, 2004). This sophistication of the use of social aggression demonstrates increased social development and reasoning skills and supports the present study's focus on the use of socially aggressive gossip within an emerging adult population.

There is a growing body of evidence that suggests there are considerable consequences for individuals who are victimized using social aggression, as well as for those who use social aggression to harm others. Consequences for those victimized include examples of maladjustment and psychopathology, such as, low self-esteem and

symptoms of depression (Prinstein, Boergers, & Vernberg, 2001). Likewise, in a study of adolescent females, Storch and Masia-Warner (2004) found that individuals who had been victimized by socially aggressive behaviours had higher levels of social anxiety, internalizing problems and substance use. However, there are also serious consequences being found in emerging adult populations for individuals who use social aggression to harm others, such as antisocial behaviour and symptoms of borderline personality disorder (Werner & Crick, 1999).

The motivation to design this research study began after listening to the stories of students who attended anti-bullying workshops and social aggression seminars given by members of the Healthy Relationships Lab at Carleton University. Much of the work done by the Lab has been focused on developing intervention strategies and workshops designed to help those victimized using social aggression. The attendees of these workshops talked about their loss of friendships, hurt feelings, feelings of betrayal, and in general, the personal ramifications of gossip used in socially aggressive ways. For these individuals there was a clear difference between the gossip they exchanged to entertain and inform each other, and the socially aggressive gossip they had used or experienced. As explained in detail later, for the purpose of the present study, gossip was defined as *evaluative talk about an absent third person that requires others to participate*. In order for gossip to be considered socially aggressive two conditions must be met – *the information must be negative in tone or implication, and there must be an*

intention on the part of the person who starts or spreads the gossip to cause social harm to the absent third party – the subject of the gossip (Paquette & Underwood, 1999).

Imagine that you are in a meeting with a colleague. After a few minutes spent discussing the weather, your colleague begins to tell you some gossip about a mutual colleague. What do you think your colleague hopes to achieve by telling you the gossip? Is the goal self-serving, causing social harm to the person targeted by the gossip, while making the person who gossiped look better? If so, does that mean that the gossip is a socially aggressive strategy? Do we evaluate the social harm of gossip based on our perspective? That is, whether or not we are the person who listens to the gossip, the person who is the subject of the gossip, or the person who starts or spreads the gossip. What relationship do we have with the person we most often gossip to and gossip about? What moral sanctions must be over-ridden in order to use gossip in a socially aggressive way? This research was designed to answer these questions and, in the process, develop an understanding of the use of socially aggressive gossip within emerging adulthood.

Social aggression research routinely includes a measure of gossip, for example, *Some people try to make their friends not like others by spreading rumors about them or talking behind their backs. How often do you do this?* (original measure by Crick, 1997). To date, Goldstein and Tisak (2004) are the only researchers to isolate and investigate specific socially aggressive strategies, in their case, gossip and exclusion. Similarly, research about moral reasoning has been focused on situations where individuals would be willing to use direct physical or verbal aggression, rather than covert socially

aggressive behaviours such as gossip (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996). It was necessary to learn more about the relationship between socially aggressive gossip and the development of moral reasoning in order to design effective intervention programs in the future, as well as to have productive discussions with individuals who have been victimized by gossip.

The primary purpose of the proposed research was to gain a sense of the goals being achieved by those who use gossip in socially aggressive ways within their close friendships, e.g. to increase one's social status, or to socially exclude the person targeted with the gossip. A second purpose of this work was to see if there were differences in the stated goals and outcome expectancies of socially aggressive gossip depending on the perspective of the participants; the perspective of person telling the gossip, the perspective of the person listening to the gossip and the perspective of the person who is being gossiped about. To investigate these perspectives, participants reflected on three hypothetical gossip vignettes imagining themselves in each of these three situations. Finally, these variables were examined as a function of age, gender and level of moral disengagement.

Social, Relational, or Indirect aggression: What's in a name?

Aggression researchers disagree about how best to describe non-physical aggression (for a recent review, see Archer & Coyne, 2005). The terms indirect, relational, and social aggression are often used interchangeably, but each one has distinguishing features. Archer and Coyne concluded that these three types of aggression

have a similar adaptive goal in their desire to exclude, and/or to manipulate the reputations of others, in order to gain personal status. Generally speaking, these goals are achieved via covert acts of manipulation and there is an intention to harm on the part of the perpetrator. Building on the foundational work in aggression by Buss (1961), Feshbach (1969), and Cairns, Cairns, Neckerman, Ferguson, and Gariépy (1989), current researchers have endeavoured to more clearly define these terms (as cited in Underwood, 2003; and Archer & Coyne).

Indirect aggression, for example, as envisioned in 1988 by Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, and Peltonen, was focused on acts of covert or hidden aggression where it was possible to harm others without getting caught, or being identified as the aggressor (as cited by Björkqvist, 2001). This notion of anonymous, indirect aggression did not explain the overtly aggressive behaviours Crick and Grotpeter (1995) were witnessing within relationships, and they began to focus their research on these non-physically aggressive acts, which they called, relational aggression. Relational aggression specifically includes any intentional behaviour that causes harm by damaging, or threatening to damage, relationships or, feelings of acceptance or love (Crick & Grotpeter).

Spurred on by these empirical results, and the discussion by Cairns et al. (1989) that their term, social aggression described the aggressive behaviours most often used by girls, Galen and Underwood (1997) began to examine, modify, and redefine non-physical aggression as social aggression. Recall that social aggression consists of behaviours intended to cause social harm by damaging another person's self-esteem, social status, or

friendships (e.g. gossip, exclusion, disparaging remarks, sneering, name-calling, and/or eye-rolling). Gossiping, sneering, and/or eye-rolling are very common strategies used during middle childhood and adolescence for making social comparisons and developing in-out groups of peers (McDonald, Puttallaz, Grimes, Kupersmidt, & Coie, 2007; Wert & Salovey, 2004). The present study focused on *gossip* and investigated whether or not emerging adults continued to use gossip in socially aggressive ways in their close friendships and what they hoped to achieve when they used such behaviours.

Gossip

Everyone gossips. Gossip is embedded in all cultures and supports a thriving genre of the tabloid publishing industry. Most informal conversations include a dollop of gossip. Research in anthropology, sociology, and psychology has observed that the majority of gossip is either positive or benign (Foster, 2004). Gossip is used to make social comparisons, to develop in-out groups of peers, and to further our cultural learning of norms and social rules (Baumeister, Zhang, & Vohs, 2004; Foster; McAndrew, Bell, & Garcia, 2007; Wert & Salovey, 2004). Like most interesting phenomena, gossip is easy to recognize but difficult to define. For his research into the functions of gossip, Foster gave a sparse but widely-used definition of gossip as “the exchange of information about absent third parties” (p. 81). Foster noted four broad social functions of gossip: information, friendship-building, influence and entertainment. He emphasized that gossiping allows us to learn from each other both culturally, and at a more intimate, social group level and if it were possible to eradicate gossip, we would lose these

opportunities to learn vicariously through the experiences of others (for others who support this view, see Baumeister et al., 2004; Wert & Salovey). Foster concluded that gossip was too valuable a social tool to discard simply because some used it as a tool of social harm.

Although much of it is part of a social bonding ritual (Wert & Salovey, 2004) and is amusing and benign, a persistent proportion of gossip is negative, created and distributed with ill intent. McAndrew et al. (2007) have suggested that gossip can be used to socially control members of groups. Gossipy tales emphasize shared norms and values, while reminding everyone in the group of the consequences and dangers for those who violate these rules. Alternatively, individuals are mainly interested in hearing the most negative and potentially damaging information about higher-status individuals and rivals, demonstrating that gossip is also used in a self-serving way to increase status and reputation (McAndrew et al.). Consider for example the following three examples of gossip. *Look at this painting, Pat is very talented.* This statement is an example of positively-toned gossip. *I wish I were going to Europe this summer - Chris is so lucky!* The second statement is merely evaluative, information sharing and is an example of benign gossip. *All that sucking up to people just shows that Jesse is really fake.* The final gossip example is definitely an evaluation that is negative in tone. Foster's simple definition and focus does not address the *evaluative* tone found in most gossip, however, a definition used by Eder and Enke (1991) does: "evaluative talk about an absent third person." So how is gossip any different from the news?

People gossip to exchange information, to entertain each other, and sometimes, in order to be hurtful. It differs from information communicated by news media in two important ways. News is based on objective, substantiated facts and it does not require personal interaction with others. This condition for gossip to have personal interaction is not addressed by Eder's and Enke's (1991) definition either. Research by Xie et al. (2002) found that using gossip to cause social harm always involved a larger number of people than was required for other types of aggressive behaviours, "If it takes two to fight, it takes at least three to gossip" (p. 218). Gossip requires at a minimum, the participation of three people: someone to start or spread the gossip; someone to listen; and, someone to talk about. All three of these perspectives are examined in the present study.

Gossip as a Strategy for Social Aggression

Gossip becomes a socially aggressive behaviour when two conditions are satisfied – *the information is negative in tone or implication, and there is an intention on the part of the perpetrator(s) to cause social harm to the absent third party* (Paquette & Underwood, 1999). Thus, not all examples of negative gossip are socially aggressive because it is possible to convey negative, evaluative information without intending harm. Take for example the following anecdote shared by students who live in residence about potential next-year room mates. *Jesse is getting a single room next semester so Chris is looking for a new room mate. If you don't mind clutter, Chris is fun to live with.* This does contain a negative comment about Chris's housekeeping habits but it is not intended to cause social harm, merely to give the listener a heads-up about the gossipers' previous

experiences with Chris. It is a sharing of negative information but is not an example of social aggression. Contrast the previous example with this socially aggressive example of negative gossip: *I hear Jesse has asked for a single room next year. Small wonder given that Chris is such a slob. If I were you I would steer clear of Chris and tell your friends to as well. I sure wouldn't want to share a room with Chris, last year their room always looked like a cyclone had hit it.* There is a clear negative evaluation and the purpose is to cause Chris social harm.

For researchers interested in aggression, gossip is considered the perfect tool of social aggression for three reasons: gossip is ubiquitous; within a social network gossip can be an excellent way to increase the power and status of the person who starts or spreads the gossip while tarnishing the reputation of the individual being talked about; and, it is inherently covert as the target of the gossip is, by definition, not present when the behaviour occurs.

Gossip is ubiquitous and is found throughout the world, in all cultures (Baumeister et al., 2004; Foster, 2004; Wert & Salovey, 2004). Over time we become used to hearing gossip and it becomes a natural part of the social conversations around us. This makes it much easier for gossipers to spread their malicious tales without getting caught, or being identified as the aggressor (Björkqvist, 2001). Children learn social norms and values through their daily experiences with other people and it is likely that socialization presents children with many opportunities to see how gossip is used (Baumeister et al.). One of the first lessons children learn is that if they want to be

aggressive, it is best not to get caught. To achieve this goal, children who wish to be aggressive may choose more covert, socially aggressive behaviours such as malicious gossip.

The second reason gossip fits so perfectly with social aggression is that gossip is an excellent way for those who use it to increase personal power and status while tarnishing the reputation of those individuals who are the subject of the gossip. As Rose, Swenson, and Waller (2004) found, adolescent girls who were very adept at socially dominating their peer groups had a lot of power, status, and perceived popularity. Gossiping is, by definition, a covert strategy and behaviours such as talking negatively behind someone's back, spreading rumours, betraying confidences, and disclosing secrets – all with the intention of causing social harm, are inherently socially aggressive.

The third and final reason gossip is frequently used as a way to cause social harm is that it comes in three flavours – positive, benign, and negative, allowing those who use it to feign innocence when challenged about their use of gossip in a socially aggressive way. By changing the tone of voice used, or emphasizing specific words, or adding an eye-roll and a sneer, socially-skilled individuals can *imply* unspoken criticisms or nasty alternatives while deflecting responsibility for the gossip (Underwood, 2003). Some research has demonstrated that girls, compared to boys, were much more sensitive about the ramifications of the social cues and socially-aggressive intentions that accompany gossip (Goldstein & Tisak, 2004; Paquette & Underwood, 1997). This made gossip an

ideal technique for social aggression given the desire to be covert and avoid being caught when being socially aggressive (Björkqvist, 2001).

Studying Socially Aggressive Gossip in Emerging Adulthood

Most of the research to date on socially aggressive behaviours has focused on childhood and adolescence. In addition, a few studies have examined the use of both physical and social aggression in first year college students but beyond first year university students (aged 18-23) no social aggression research could be found that has focused on the emerging adult population.

Research by Arnett (2000), has suggested that in Westernized, developed nations there is a distinct, transitional period between adolescence and young adulthood. This period is called emerging adulthood and has recently been expanded to include those aged between 18 to 29 years. Citing Arnett's work, Ostrov and Houston state that emerging adulthood is defined by essential biological, cognitive and social development, such as, "further separation/independence from caregivers, identity moratorium, the salience of peer and romantic relationships, fundamental shifts in moral reasoning, an increase in risk-taking behaviors, and changes in cognitive flexibility" (2008, p. 1149). Because development is still occurring during this stage it is important to determine how social aggression manifests and indeed if there are consequences that are similar to (or different from) those found for adolescents (Goldstein & Tisak, 2004; Ostrov & Houston). Thus the current study focused on the use of malicious gossip as a socially aggressive strategy across the spectrum of emerging adulthood. Two groups of emerging adults

(EA): Early EA (18-23) and Later EA (24-29) were compared in order to determine if socially aggressive gossip behaviours change, increase, and/or decrease as individuals get older. Age differences in the use of socially aggressive gossip may exist in emerging adulthood as developmental differences have been identified through childhood and adolescence as well as into early adulthood.

Developmental Differences and Normative Beliefs

Qualitative studies done by anthropologists and sociologists have found gossip to be prevalent in groups of same-sex children as early as middle childhood (for a review, see Underwood, 2003). In an observational study that investigated preadolescent children's assessments of the authenticity of hypothetical gossip vignettes, Kuttler, Parker, and La Greca (2002) examined how children reacted to and interpreted gossip experiences. Kuttler et al. (2002) found that even the youngest participants (in grade three) were suspicious about the veracity of the gossip content and very critical about vignette characters who shared gossip that was false. Of most interest to the present study was the finding that the youngest group of participants was also aware of how gossip worked and that socially aggressive gossip should be exchanged in a covert manner (Kuttler et al.). This indicated that individuals acquired their normative beliefs about socially aggressive gossip as young as middle childhood, just as children's moral development begins in earnest (Bandura et al., 1996).

In a conversation regarding normative beliefs about the use of relational/social aggression, Nicole Werner (personal communication, May 1, 2009) explained that the

section about gossip use/sharing secrets was removed from their measure on reporting (Werner & Nixon, 2005) because there was very low variability in the children's answers (almost all children indicated "that it is never OK to gossip or share secrets"). Werner stated that for children, in grades three through six, "social desirability operates heavily when it comes to malicious gossip – children simply won't admit to doing it because they know it is wrong" (personal communication, May 1, 2009). This finding is in stark contrast to relational/social victimization where socially aggressive gossip is almost always reported as a prominent method of victimization. Werner's experience supported Baumeister et al.'s (2004) notion that gossip is used to increase cultural or social learning but it also validated the notion that gossip can be used to cause social harm, even from a young age. Baumeister et al. (2004, p. 123) stated that "gossip is a potentially powerful and efficient means of transmitting information about the rules, norms, and other guidelines for living in a culture" and theorized that children in any group who first begin to gossip, convey to the other group members their superior knowledge of social rules and norms. These children were using gossip to gain status (Rose et al., 2004). This quest for status and place within the social group could explain the goals individuals hope to achieve when they use gossip in socially aggressive ways despite the explicit social sanctions against it (McDonald et al., 2007; Underwood, 2003).

The present study extends earlier work done by Goldstein and Tisak (2004) who examined the use and impact of two socially aggressive behaviours (gossip and social exclusion) within friendships and dating relationships across three age groups (middle

adolescence, late adolescence, and college youth). Using hypothetical gossip scenarios Goldstein and Tisak investigated the outcome expectancies and emotional consequences of gossip and social exclusion. They discovered some interesting gender differences in the way adolescents think and make judgments about gossip and social exclusion, noting that females, as compared to males, rated social aggression as having a greater number of negative consequences and as being more hurtful and damaging to their relationships. Goldstein and Tisak also found that their college sample showed an increased preference for using gossip when compared to exclusion.

Similar to Goldstein's and Tisak's (2004) research the scenarios in the present study (see *Gossip Scenarios Questionnaire*, Appendix C) *implied* the socially aggressive use of gossip and asked participants to assess the emotional and social consequences of this behaviour. The proposed research differed from Goldstein's and Tisak's study in that the hypothetical scenarios were all placed within the context of close friendships and were described from three perspectives (the person being talked about, the person who listened to the gossip, and the person who started or spread the gossip). In addition to the emotional consequence of how hurtful the gossip was, the current study also asked participants about levels of anger and betrayal associated with the gossip.

In another observational study about gossip use and friendship, McDonald et al. (2007) relayed that for grade four girls the goals and consequences of gossip varied depending on the context and the participants. McDonald and her colleagues established that gossiping within girls' dyadic friendships was found to be a socially-competent

behaviour that increased intimacy by creating opportunities for self-disclosure. The focus of their research was the relationship between the gossiper and the listener, as they shared tales of others and their own secrets, rather than the effects of the gossip on the target of the gossip. Interestingly, the bond between the friends sharing the gossip was strengthened, while the girl who was the subject of the gossip was perceived more negatively and pushed away from the friendship.

McDonald et al.'s (2007) results indicated that when an individual's status within the group was challenged, gossip was used to gain power, forge alliances, and manipulate the bonds between group members. The researchers postulated that gossip may have different functions depending on the context (for example, between members of the same group versus a popular girl gossiping about a rejected peer) and group size (for example, dyadic friendship versus larger peer group). Using gossip against other group members to increase personal status (a self-serving goal) demonstrates a sophisticated ability to develop in-out groups but it is no longer mere social comparison, it is social aggression (Rose et al., 2004; Wert & Salovey, 2004). The contextual differences found by McDonald et al. supported Underwood's (2003) earlier research indicating that during pre-adolescence girls' transitions from predominantly dyadic friendships into larger, looser peer groups where many of the girls begin to use socially aggressive strategies such as gossip to manage their relationships. Within the larger social network, these socially aggressive strategies should no longer be considered socially-competent

behaviours because they are being used against individuals considered to be part of the “in” group (McDonald et al., Wert & Salovey).

By examining the use of gossip within the close friendships of emerging adults, present study focused on determining if a more sophisticated use of these behaviours occurred with age, as well as examining other changes that take into consideration the increased possibility of the use of socially aggressive gossip in romantic relationships. Although McDonald et al.’s work was limited to pre-adolescent girls the present study was extended to include both males and females between 18 and 29 years of age. It may be that strategies for managing power, tension, and difficulties within friendships, learned at a much earlier age, are still being used by emerging adults. For example, an individual may want to maintain his/her relationship with a close friend and thus gossip to a romantic partner or another close friend about relationship difficulties.

Gender Differences in the use of Gossip

A study by McAndrew et al. (2007) contributes to our knowledge about gender and gossip from an evolutionary perspective. From this perspective, gossip is seen as a mechanism that allows humans to be more socially successful by sharing and extolling the accomplishments of our friends and allies, by socially controlling members of groups, and by providing a way to deal with the cheaters among us. McAndrew and his colleagues asked participants three questions about 12 hypothetical gossip scenarios: 1) *Who would you most like to hear the additional gossip about?*; 2) *How likely is it that you would pass the gossip information to others?*; and 3) *Who would you most likely tell the*

gossip to? The answers revealed some interesting gender differences and similarities. Female participants were three times more inclined than men to seek out gossip about same-sex others over gossip about their romantic partners. Women were as likely to share gossip with same-sex friends as often as they did with partners. This finding was in stark contrast to males who most often shared gossip with their romantic partners. The authors interpreted this result as indicating that many women have a deep regard for their same-sex friendships and hold these friendships in high esteem, on par with their romantic relationships and that they frequently use gossip within these relationships.

Interestingly both men and women were concerned with hearing the most negative, exploitable information about people they considered same-sex rivals, illustrating that one of the goals of *listening* to gossip may be to gather facts that can be used against the rival, giving the listener a competitive edge. McAndrew et al. (2007) has suggested that this finding demonstrates “that gossip does indeed function in accord with the selfish interests of individuals and does not always serve the interests of the group as a whole” (p. 1574).

Goals Gained by using Gossip in Socially Aggressive Ways

The main focus of this research was to determine the goals of individuals who use gossip in socially aggressive ways within their close friendships. In previous research, when asked what they hoped to achieve by gossiping, some of the goals given included: *strengthening friendships; increasing status and popularity; alleviating boredom and creating excitement; manipulating another person’s reputation in order to look better to*

a potential romantic partner or friend; and to maintain exclusivity in our most important relationships (Owens, Shute, & Slee, 2000).

In a study that examined the functions and relationships of four types of aggression (social, physical, verbal, and direct relational), Xie et al. (2002) established that gossip was often used to begin a process of social aggression that occurred over time and had several episodes or events. Likewise, McDonald et al. (2007) found that gossip was used by higher status girls to exclude less centrally located girls from the peer group and that the gossiping was seen as a socially-competent behaviour used to establish position within the dominance hierarchy.

Using sociometric nominations, Rose et al. (2004) found that for adolescent girls, but not boys, increased social aggression was associated with increased perceived popularity. These findings support a social development pathway where girls learn to use social aggression to increase their perceived popularity, and they also use their increased perceived popularity to give themselves permission to be socially aggressive. The current study extends the research done by Rose et al. by asking whether or not emerging adults believe that using gossip to be socially aggressive helps individuals achieve the goal of increased popularity and social status.

To determine whether or not gossip was used as a self-enhancing strategy, McAndrew et al. (2007) had participants rank their curiosity about gossip vignettes, as well as, to whom the participants would want to tell this gossip. The results suggested that gossip was used to control group members and to enhance the status of the gossiper

because participants were always interested in the "... most exploitable information" (McAndrew et al., p. 1574). Participants indicated that they would pass on to others negative or malicious gossip about targets (considered high-status or rivals) indicating that the target had behaved in a socially-unacceptable way. To garner the attention that comes with sharing interesting information, participants would gossip to people they cared about when the gossip vignettes contained positive information. There was evidence from both quantitative (McAndrew et al.; Xie et al., 2002) and qualitative research (McDonald et al., 2007; Owens et al., 2000) to suggest that gossip has been used in calculated ways by individuals who did not want to be seen by others as manipulative or aggressive.

For example, McAndrew et al. (2007) found that SA gossip use in college students was mainly used as a self-enhancing strategy to make the person who started or spread the gossip look better to others at the expense of the person who was being talked about. Shute et al. (2008) found that for adolescent boys who used sexually explicit SA gossip their self-reported goal was to harm the social reputations of the girls over a perceived slight, such as being rebuffed. Interestingly, when challenged about their gossiping behaviour, the boys tried to diminish the harm being caused by stating that they were only joking and that the girls didn't have a sense of humour. Owens et al. (2000) found that adolescent girls reported several goals for using SA gossip, such as strengthening friendships; increasing status and popularity; manipulating another person's reputation in order to look better to a potential romantic partner or friend;

alleviating boredom/entertainment; and to maintain exclusivity in our most important relationships. Like the boys in the Shute et al. study the girls in the Owens et al.'s study also tried to diminish the harm by emphasizing the entertainment value of SA gossip.

The notion that the need to achieve specific goals drives the use of socially aggressive gossip builds upon earlier work done by Goldstein and Tisak (2004). These researchers examined the emotional and personal consequences of using two socially aggressive behaviours, gossip and social exclusion, within three relationship contexts – between acquaintances, close friends, and romantic partners.

In the current study, participants were asked what they thought the person who started or spread the gossip was trying to accomplish (i.e. *What do you think your close friend was [would be] trying to achieve by talking about you behind your back?*).

Participants then rated the likelihood of six specific goals (e.g. *My close friend was trying to increase his/her popularity or social status.*). Participants were also asked to describe any goal(s) that they felt might be important. Results from the present study were analyzed to determine if the goals were similar to previous research (Owens et al.) and also if they differed depending on the perspective of the participant (person being talked about, the listener to the gossip, and the person who started or spread the gossip). The emotional and relationship consequences (desire to remain friends with and level of trust for the person who started or spread the gossip) were examined by gender, perspective and age.

Some of the questions that could not be answered by Goldstein and Tisak's (2004) research were answered by the proposed study. For example, the links between participants' use of gossip as a socially aggressive strategy and their level of moral disengagement was examined. Research by Bandura et al. (1996) and Paciello, Fida, Tramontano, Lupinetti, and Caprara (2008) found significant relationships between the moral reasoning of pre-adolescent students in relation to their physically and verbally aggressive behaviours. The present study investigated if these relationships held true for the use of social aggressive gossip during emerging adulthood.

Moral Disengagement and Gossip: Permitting Ourselves to Hurt Others

Research by anthropologists and psychologists has described a sophistication in the use of SA gossip from middle childhood through adolescence into emerging adulthood (for a review, see Underwood, 2003). Initially, gossip is used to strengthen dyadic friendship bonds and keep interlopers out, to make social comparisons and develop in-out groups of peers, and to further our cultural learning of norms and social rules (Baumeister et al., 2004; McDonald et al., 2007; Wert & Salovey, 2004). As children mature and are socialized, they learn that there is less to feel threatened by and less need to be aggressive to those we deem as different from us. During this same time period, children's moral reasoning is expanding and developing.

In order to behave immorally without self-condemnation, for example to be socially aggressive, individuals must disengage their moral self-sanctions, "In social cognitive theory, moral reasoning is translated into actions through self-regulatory

mechanisms through which moral agency is exercised” (Bandura et al., 1996, p. 364).

Moral agency does not occur in isolation and is influenced by an individual’s social experiences, relationships, and goals. In an excellent review about moral emotions and moral behavior, Tangney, Stuewig, and Mashek (2007) echo the importance of integrating emotional, cognitive, and social development perspectives into research about the development of moral reasoning.

Dispositional theories, such as social cognitive theory, emphasize the role of individual differences, goals, and behaviours interacting as a self-regulatory system of moral control via three sub-functions – self-monitoring, judgmental, and self-reactive. This suggests that individuals choose to be morally disengaged by overriding such self-regulation processes, as guilt and fear of punishment (Bandura et al., 1996). For example, sometimes people will choose to lie, even though they know that it is wrong, because they do not want to get caught doing something that is not socially sanctioned. Children learn to be moral beings by making decisions about how to act based on an evaluation of whether the intended goal (e.g. doing well on a test for which they are ill-prepared) is worthy of their action (looking at a classmate’s test paper). With maturation and increased cognitive development children are better able to consider the effects of their behaviour on the lives of others, as well as the social consequences. According to Bandura et al. within societies, individuals are socialized to develop self-sanctions that help maintain their moral principles even without external reinforcements, such as punishment or praise.

In 1996, Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, and Pastorelli developed the *Mechanisms for Moral Disengagement* questionnaire (MMDQ) to examine the moral reasoning of pre-adolescent students in relation to their use of direct physically and verbally aggressive behaviours, and incidents of delinquency. The authors made a strong case for the suitability of using the concept of moral disengagement to explain the all-to-common presence of social aggression within relationships and social networks.

The items in the MMDQ (Bandura et al., 1996) are structured to elicit participants' level of agreement about acting physically aggressive (hitting, kicking, slapping, etc.), verbally aggressive (threatening, name-calling), or in delinquent or criminal ways (substance abuse, lying, stealing), in specific situations. For example, *Compared to the illegal things people do, taking some things from a store without paying for them is not very serious*. Not surprisingly, Bandura et al. found that males had higher levels of moral disengagement than females, most likely because of the focus on direct, overt acts of physical and verbal aggression, delinquency and criminal behaviours.

Bandura et al. (1996) identified eight mechanisms of moral disengagement which have more recently been grouped into four larger categories that reflect how they are used (Perron & Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, 2009). The first category includes moral justification and euphemistic language two of the mechanisms which focus on the individual's behaviour. These methods are used to convince the individual that their behaviour is good, not bad or immoral. The second category has mechanisms that are used to minimize personal agency namely displacement and diffusion of responsibility. The third category

of mechanisms is used to minimize the harm that will result from the behaviour and includes advantageous comparison and disregarding/distorting the consequences. The fourth, and, perhaps most insidious category includes two mechanisms, attribution of blame and dehumanization, that are used to make the targeted individual less worthy of humane and moral treatment, and in fact, responsible for his/her mistreatment.

Observational research and qualitative interviews are rich with the personal nuances where those who have used social aggression often speak of the heady rush of power, and those who have been victimized using social aggression often speak about feelings of betrayal and hurt. It is difficult to investigate the reasoning behind the actions of individuals and even more difficult to pry out the details of negative behaviour within relationships. Shute et al. (2008) found social aggression, in the form of sexual victimization, to be an everyday occurrence in the lives of the young women they interviewed. The young men in the study used two of the mechanisms of moral disengagement to justify their aggressive behaviour: firstly, they minimized the harmful intentions of their in-group by claiming that harassment was only meant in fun; and secondly, they suggested that the out-group was to blame - the girls took their actions too seriously. As long as the young men do not have to acknowledge the negative consequences of their actions self-censure will not be activated.

More recently, Paciello et al. (2008) conducted a longitudinal study about the developmental trajectory of moral disengagement by following two groups of 12-year-olds over an eight year period. Like Bandura et al. (1996) they looked at participants'

level of moral disengagement and use of physically and verbally aggressive behaviours, but not socially aggressive behaviours. Their findings suggested that participants who maintained higher levels of moral disengagement (10.7% of the total sample, with a gender breakdown of 89.7% male and 10.3% female) throughout adolescence had higher levels of aggression and violence, and lower levels of guilt and remorse (Paciello et al., 2008). The authors explain this difference by citing numerous studies which have found that girls, when compared to boys, have higher moral emotional competence, and lower levels of moral disengagement and aggressive behaviors (p. 1303). Perhaps these findings were also influenced by social desirability and most participants (both females and males) were reluctant to admit that it is ever okay to behave in the ways described in the measure.

For the present research, the MMDQ (Bandura et al., 1996) was revised to create the, *Interacting with Others* questionnaire (IWOQ, see Appendix D). In the IWOQ, the items that featured choices with physical aggression in the MMDQ were replaced with examples of socially aggressive gossip (e.g. gossiping, talking negatively behind someone's back, spreading rumours, and disclosing secrets). Statements in the MMDQ that dealt with choices about delinquent behaviours (drinking, taking drugs), and criminal acts such as, stealing, were replaced with references to lying and cheating in the IOWQ. The decision to make these changes to the MMDQ was based on two reasons. First, measures of moral disengagement are context-specific, that is, they measure participants' level of agreement with specific examples of behaviour, such as delinquent behaviours and physical aggression (Bandura et al.). It was only possible to measure relations

between social aggression and moral disengagement if the measure was changed. Second, because participants were emerging adults (18 – 29 years old), if they used aggression, they were more likely to use socially aggressive behaviours such as gossip (Goldstein & Tisak, 2004).

To summarize, it was hoped that by examining participants' moral reasoning for behaving in socially aggressive ways it would be possible to determine which of the mechanisms were used to become morally disengaged and if these mechanisms were related to the level of socially aggressive gossip use or the emotional consequences and goals of the gossip.

Scenario-based Research Paradigms

Archer and Coyne (2005) emphasize the need to ask participants to self-report on their experiences with social aggression because it is not easy for parents, peers, and teachers to observe everything that happens during socially aggressive exchanges. A scenario-based methodology was used in the current study to assess participants' reflections about the consequences of socially aggressive gossip. Scenario-based methodology has been used successfully in both social aggression and gossip research, with findings that show participants' responses about outcome expectancies about aggression reflect their actual behaviours and beliefs (Galen & Underwood, 1997; Goldstein & Tisak, 2004; McAndrew et al, 2007). This is especially important during adolescence and emerging adulthood when young people begin to assert their

independence. The present study was an opportunity to learn more about self-reported SA gossip use using a self-report scenario-based methodology.

The Present Study

The present study investigated emerging adults' use of socially aggressive gossip (SA gossip), their goals for using SA gossip, and their outcome expectancies for SA gossip use from three perspectives (the person being talked about, the person who listened to the gossip, and the person who started or spread the gossip) as a function of age, gender and moral disengagement. The study was designed so that it could be completed online. This offered an extra level of privacy for participants who were not required to meet in person with researchers.

Hypotheses

Hypotheses for the present study were inspired by two previous studies that included participants from the emerging adult age group (18-29 years old). These studies were focused on developmental changes in socially aggressive gossip use (Goldstein & Tisak, 2004), and level of moral disengagement (Paciello et al., 2008), respectively. Findings for their emerging adult groups (18-23 years old, Goldstein & Tisak; 18-20 year olds, Paciello et al.) led to hypotheses made in the present study.

Who do we talk about and who do we talk to?

The present study included two questions that examined participants' experiences with gossip behaviours during the past two years: (1) *What relationship did [do] you have with the person you most often talked about?* and, (2) *What relationship did [do]*

you have with the person you most often talked to? To more closely mirror McAndrew et al.'s (2007) questions, participants were also asked whether or not the people identified were male or female (see HUG, Appendix E). Participants could choose from one of eight relationship labels: Close friend, Friend, Acquaintance, Frenemy, Romantic Partner, Rival, Family Member, or "Other" categories. McAndrew et al.'s findings inspired the following research question: Do women and men choose to *talk to* and to *talk about* the same or different categories of people?

Based on McAndrew et al.'s research it was hypothesized that female participants would to be more likely than males to choose to tell gossip to same-sex close friends and that males would be more likely to choose to tell gossip to their romantic partners. Participants were also expected to be more likely to talk about people who were not in their close social network, for example, acquaintances, rivals, or frenemies.

Emotional consequences of socially aggressive gossip

Two predictions for the emotional consequences (hurt, anger, and betrayal) of SA gossip were postulated based on the work of Goldstein and Tisak (2004) who found that: females, compared to males, reported greater levels of emotional consequences (e.g. more hurtful) when victimized using SA gossip within close friendships; and, that adolescents (the younger group), compared to college students (the older group), reported greater levels of emotional consequences when victimized using SA gossip. The present study expanded the emotional consequences to three, adding anger and betrayal to hurt.

Based Goldstein & Tisak's (2004) findings, a main effect for age was predicted. Early emerging adults (the younger group) were expected to indicate that socially aggressive gossip had greater emotional consequences (e.g. more hurtful) than later emerging adults (the older group). A main effect for gender was also predicted based directly on the finding by Goldstein & Tisak that compared to male participants, female participants, would report that being victimized by socially aggressive gossip within close friendships was more hurtful and that they would feel more betrayed and angry.

Paciello et al. (2008) found that participants with higher levels of MD had lower levels of guilt and remorse. Like guilt and remorse, hurt, anger, and betrayal are examples of negative affect or emotions. By analogy, it was predicted that participants with higher levels of moral disengagement would indicate lower levels for emotional consequences when compared to participants with lower moral disengagement.

Based on the findings discussed previously, a three-way interaction between age, gender, and participants' level of moral disengagement was also predicted. It was expected that there would be a relationship between increased moral disengagement and decreased reported emotional consequences and that this relationship would vary by gender and age (Early EA and Later EA).

Relationship consequences of socially aggressive gossip

Again, research done by Goldstein and Tisak (2004) was used to support the predictions of two hypotheses about the desire to maintain the friendship after being victimized using SA gossip. Goldstein and Tisak found that males, compared to females,

reported higher levels of desire to maintain their friendships after SA gossip. Goldstein and Tisak investigated their questions from three relationship contexts (friends, acquaintances, and dating) and found that, as a group, adolescents reported higher levels of desire to maintain their friendships, compared to dating relationships, after SA gossip. The present study expanded the relationship consequences to include trust but, confined the gossip to close friendships. It was hypothesized that similar results for the desire to remain friends would be found for level of trust in the person who spread or started the gossip.

Based Goldstein and Tisak's (2004) finding where adolescents commented on their close friendships, a main effect for age was predicted in the present study. Compared with the older group, Later EA, the younger group Early EA, were expected to report higher levels of desire to maintain their friendships and trust, after experiencing SA gossip. A main effect for gender was expected, predicting that compared to female participants, male participants, were expected to report higher levels of desire to maintain their friendships and trust, after SA gossip (Goldstein & Tisak).

Goals achieved using socially aggressive gossip

The hypotheses about goals of SA gossip were based on the limited previous research on adolescents and college students that included any discussion about goals. The goals of SA gossip use were assessed from the perspective of participant as the aggressor and included five self-enhancing goals: increase popularity/status; exclusion; desire to look better to others, revenge, and strengthen friendships; and, one goal that was

not self-enhancing, just joking. The following hypotheses were predicted to explain the goals underlying SA gossip use.

A main effect for participants' level of moral disengagement (Lower MD, Mid-MD, and Higher MD) was predicted in participants' choice of the goal to explain their SA gossip use. It was expected that Higher MD participants, when compared with Lower MD and Mid-MD participants, would choose the goal, *just joking*, as the goal they believed most likely explained their use of SA gossip. This hypothesis was based on Shute et al.'s (2008) research which showed how male participants used two of the mechanisms of moral disengagement, euphemistic language and attribution of blame, to explain their SA gossip use. The female participants in Owen et al.'s (2000) study also used euphemistic language (SA gossip as entertainment) to explain their SA gossip use.

Based on McAndrew et al.'s work with college students, a main effect for age (Early EA, Later EA) was predicted in participants' choice of the goal that would explain their SA gossip use. Compared with the older group, Later EA, the younger group Early EA, were expected to choose self-enhancing goals more often than *just joking* to explain their use of SA gossip.

Reactions to being victimized using socially aggressive gossip

This variable was based on the work of Goldstein and Tisak (2004) who asked how likely it was that someone victimized using SA gossip would "get back" at the aggressor. They found an interaction between gender and age for desire for retaliation. Males adolescents, compared to college student males, and all aged-females, reported that

the victim would be more likely to retaliate against the aggressor for SA gossip use. In order to learn more about how participants would likely react, the present study expanded this question to include four possible reactions to SA gossip: confront the aggressor about the gossip; ignore the gossip and pretend it didn't happen; start or spread some gossip about the aggressor; and, avoid the aggressor. Because this analysis looked at reactions to socially aggressive gossip, the dependent variables were from the perspective of someone victimized using SA gossip.

Based on Goldstein's and Tisak's (2004) finding, an interaction between gender and age was expected. It was predicted that compared to Later EA males, and females of both age groups, Early EA males will be more likely to choose the reaction, *start or spread some gossip about the aggressor*, because it represents the most direct retaliation against the aggressor that was available (Goldstein & Tisak).

Level of socially aggressive gossip use

A three-way interaction between gender, age, and level of moral disengagement was expected. Previous research has found links between the following: (1) gender and the increased use of socially aggressive gossip (Goldstein & Tisak, 2004); (2) higher levels of moral disengagement and higher levels of physical/verbal aggression (Paciello et al., 2008); and, (3) age and the decreased use of socially aggressive gossip (Goldstein & Tisak). It was predicted that there would be a relationship between increased moral disengagement and the increased use of socially aggressive gossip and that this relationship will vary by gender and age (Early EA and Later EA).

The present study was designed to answer two over-arching questions: Would Paciello et al.'s (2008) findings for moral disengagement (MD) and aggression (physical and direct verbal) be found for MD and SA gossip (covert social aggression, within emerging adulthood (18-29 years old)?; and, Would Goldstein's and Tisak's (2004) findings for gender and age differences in self-reported SA gossip use and outcome expectancies for SA gossip use exist for the expanded categories of goals for SA gossip, reactions to SA gossip, and emotional consequences of SA gossip, within emerging adulthood (18-29 years old)?

The primary purpose of the proposed research was to examine some of the factors that influence an individual's decisions to use gossip in a socially aggressive manner. Participants were presented with three hypothetical scenarios (i.e. perpetrator of socially aggressive gossip, listener of socially aggressive gossip and target of socially aggressive gossip) designed to assess emotional reactions and social goals as a function of age, gender and level of moral disengagement. This study was important and unique for several reasons: 1) the age group studied was emerging adulthood (18 - 29 years old), an area that has received little attention until now; 2) participants were asked to reflect on fictional gossip scenarios from three perspectives: perpetrator, victim and bystander, rather than using the more common strategy of collecting peer reports of gossiping behaviour; and, 3) links between moral disengagement and socially aggressive gossip had not been previously explored.

Method

Participants

One hundred and sixty-one participants were recruited for this study (41 males and 120 females). Of this total, 42 participants were recruited from the Psychology Department's undergraduate participant pool via the SONA system, and the remaining 119 participants were recruited using snowball sampling from social networks. Participants referred other people they knew who fit the study requirements. When the referred participants contacted the principal investigator they were directed to the secure survey site. The only restriction was the age requirement (between 18-29 years old).

In addition, all participants could choose to enter a raffle for a chance to win one of three cash incentives (\$50 gift cards). To enter the raffle, participants left their names and email addresses. This was done using a link on the last page of the survey that was not connected to survey responses. A copy of all raffle entries was printed and placed in the raffle box. The raffle took place in early September once data collection was finished. Raffle winners were contacted by email, and once the incentives had been claimed, all raffle entries were destroyed.

The final sample used for analyses in the present study was reduced to 140 participants (34 males and 106 females) because 21 of the surveys were missing more than 90% of their data. Participants were quite well-distributed between the two age groups, early emerging adulthood (59) and later emerging adulthood (81) however, the gender distribution was highly skewed in favour of female participants. This may have

been due to traditionally higher numbers of females in the psychology participant pool available to participate, or to the fact that the principal investigator is female and was snowball sampling using mostly female friends. Both males and females finished the questionnaires in a thorough and timely manner. Participants completed a short demographic form indicating their age, gender, highest level of education and training, and whether or not they were still students (see Appendix B). The mean age of subjects was 23.68 (SD=2.92) with a range of 18-29 years. The highest level of education participants were pursuing (or had obtained) was as follows: High school – 4 (2.9%); Undergraduate degree, College Diploma, or Skilled Trades Diploma – 98 (70%); Master's degree – 29 (20.7 %); and, Ph.D. – 9 (6.4%). Of the 140 participants, only 31 were no longer attending school.

Measures

The survey consisted of three questionnaires that were used to learn more about participants' beliefs and behaviours about gossip used in socially aggressive ways. The three questionnaires included: the *Gossip Scenarios' Questionnaire* which had three hypothetical gossip scenarios (see Appendix C, GSQ, Menard, 2009); a revised moral disengagement measure, the *Interacting with Others Questionnaire* (see Appendix D, IWOQ, Menard, 2009); and, a new questionnaire designed to measure the use of socially aggressive gossip, the *Hurtful Use of Gossip* measure (see Appendix E, HUG, Menard, 2009).

Gossip Scenarios' Questionnaire (GSQ)

The GSQ (see Appendix C) was based on the *Relational Aggression Questionnaire* (RAQ) developed by Goldstein and Tisak (2004). The RAQ has been used in the past to measure the consequences of socially aggressive gossip use and social exclusion within three relationship types (close friends, acquaintances, and opposite sex romantic partners). This differed in the present study where social exclusion was treated as one of the *goals* that may be achieved by using socially aggressive gossip. To ensure that both researchers and participants were defining important terms in the same way, the first page of the GSQ included a detailed definition of gossip:

Gossip is evaluative talk about an absent third person that requires others to participate. People gossip to exchange information, to entertain each other, and sometimes, in order to be hurtful. Gossip differs from information communicated by news media in two important ways. News is based on objective, substantiated facts and it does not require personal interaction with others. Other terms for gossip include spreading rumours, breaking confidences/telling secrets, and talking behind someone's back. When these behaviours occur online, or on the phone, they are still considered gossip.

In addition, the term “close friend” was also defined: *A close friend is a person you trust who offers you emotional support and with whom you share your vulnerabilities, fears, and secrets.* Each of the subsequent scenarios included this definition of a close friend.

The GSQ (see Appendix C) presented scenarios from the perspectives of the three main roles in socially aggressive gossip: the person who was the subject of the gossip; the person who listened to the gossip; and the person who started or spread the gossip. To limit the possibility of confounds being introduced to the study all the scenarios were set

within close friendships. Again to limit confounds, in the second scenario where participants were the listener to the gossip, questions were asked about consequences for the listener rather than the person who was the subject of the gossip. Participants were asked to recall a time within the past two years when they were involved in this type of situation or to imagine this scenario happening in their lives. Take for example the first scenario:

Think of a time when you learned that a close friend talked about you behind your back to other close friends. The things that your close friend was supposed to have said were not very nice at all.

The GSQ included: three emotional consequences hurt, angered, and betrayed; the types of goals achieved using socially aggressive gossip and the likelihood of using each goal; the types of reactions a participant might have after experiencing socially aggressive gossip and the likelihood of using each reaction; the retention of trust; and, lastly, the likelihood that the person targeted by the gossip would continue to trust the person who initiated the gossip.

Emotional Consequences of Socially Aggressive Gossip (GSQ, see Appendix C)

- *Level of hurt.* For each scenario this question measured the participants' assessment of hurt and sadness as a consequence of the gossip experience using a seven-point Likert scale anchored by 0 (Not at all hurt) and 6 (Extremely hurt). For example, scenario one asked, *How hurt or saddened were you [would you be] by what happened?*

- *Level of anger.* For each scenario this question measured participants' assessment of anger as a consequence of the gossip experience using a seven-point Likert scale anchored by 0 (Not at all hurt) and 6 (Extremely hurt). For example, scenario one asked, *How angered were you [would you be] by what happened?*
- *Level of betrayal.* For each scenario this question measured participants' assessment of betrayal as a consequence of the gossip experience using a seven-point Likert scale anchored by 0 (Not at all hurt) and 6 (Extremely hurt). For example, scenario one asked, *How betrayed were you [would you be] by what happened?*

Outcome Expectancies of Socially Aggressive Gossip (GSQ, see Appendix C)

- *Desire to remain friends with the person who started or spread the gossip:* For each scenario this question measured participants' assessment of their desire to continue the relationship after the gossip experience. The level of desire to maintain the relationship was assessed using a seven-point Likert scale anchored by 0 (Not at all likely) to 6 (Extremely likely). For example, scenario one asked, *How likely is it that you would want to remain friends with your close friend who talked about you behind your back?*
- *Level of trust in the person who gossiped.* For each scenario this question measured participants' assessment of continued trust after the gossip experience using a seven-point Likert scale anchored by 0 (Not at all likely) to 6 (Extremely

likely). For example, scenario one asked, *How likely is it that you would trust your close friend after something like this happened?*

Goals for using Socially Aggressive Gossip (GSQ, see Appendix C)

Based on this question (example from scenario three), participants rated the likelihood of six specific goals being what the aggressor was trying to achieve: *What were you (would you be) trying to achieve by talking about your close friend behind his/her back?* The six goal statements were:

- *I was trying to increase my popularity or social status.*
- *I was trying to exclude my close friend because I felt threatened by him/her.*
- *I was just joking around.*
- *I was trying to manipulate my close friend's reputation in order to make me look better to others.*
- *I was trying to get revenge against my close friend over a previous perceived slight*
- *I was trying to strengthen my friendships with others.*

Participants were also able to supply any goal(s) that they felt might be important. These were included in the discussion but not in the analyses of the data because only 40 participants supplied other possible goals.

Reactions to Socially Aggressive Gossip Use (GSQ, see Appendix C)

Based on this question (example from scenario one), participants rated the likelihood of four reactions to being victimized using SA gossip: *How likely would you be to react in the following ways if a close friend talked about you behind your back?* The reaction statements were:

- *Confront this close friend about the gossip*
- *Ignore the gossip, pretend it never happened*
- *Start some negative gossip about this close friend*
- *Avoid this close friend*
- The “Other” reaction choice was prefaced by the statement, *Get back at this close friend (seek revenge) by...*

Participants were also able to supply any reaction(s) that they felt might be important and these were included in the discussion but not the analyses of the data because only 16 participants provided other possible reactions.

Reality of the Experience with Socially Aggressive Gossip (GSQ, see Appendix C)

Participants’ actual experiences with the use of socially aggressive gossip were measured using the first question in each scenario, *Has this happened to you?* This resulted in a categorical independent variable, Yes/No as to whether or not participants had experienced SA gossip from the three perspectives: the person who was the subject of the gossip; the person who listened to the gossip; and the person who started or spread the gossip. The answers to these questions were used to gather more descriptive information about SA gossip use during emerging adulthood and were examined for associations between the other independent variables, moral disengagement and age

Score for level of Victimization using Socially Aggressive Gossip (GSQ, see Appendix C)

Within the GSQ there was one question in scenario one that measured participants’ self-reported levels of victimization using socially aggressive gossip: *In the last two years, how often has a close friend talked about you behind your back?*

Participants’ levels of victimization was assessed using a six-point Likert scale from 0

(Never) to 5 (All the Time). The scores for being victimized using socially aggressive gossip (SAG Victim) ranged from zero to five ($M = 1.31$, $SD = 1.08$).

Score for Socially Aggressive Gossip Use (GSQ, see Appendix C; HUG, see Appendix E)

Within the GSQ there was one question in scenario three that measured participants' self-reported levels of socially aggressive gossip use: *In the last two years, how often have you talked about a close friend behind his/her back?* The answer to this question was combined with the answers to the five questions from the *Hurtful Use of Gossip* (HUG) measure that was designed specifically for the present study. The HUG measure included questions such as, *Sometimes people gossip about another person because he/she doesn't fit in with the group or acts different. In the past two years, how often have you done this?* Participants' levels of SA gossip use was assessed using a six-point Likert scale from 0 (Never) to 5 (All the Time). The scores for the six questions were summed and then the total was divided by six, resulting scores for socially aggressive gossip use ranged from zero to five. The scores for socially aggressive gossip use (SA Gossip) ranged from zero to five ($M = 1.38$, $SD = .75$).

Who do we talk about and who do we talk to? (HUG, see Appendix E)

Finally, two questions examined participants' experiences with gossip behaviours during the past two years: (1) *What relationship did [do] you have with the person you most often talked about?* and, (2) *What relationship did [do] you have with the person you most often talked to?* The answers to these questions were used to add more

descriptive information to the picture of socially aggressive gossip use that was developed through this study.

As just described, the GSQ and the HUG measure generated data for 10 dependent variables (DV). The dependent variables measured by the GSQ were: hurt, anger, betrayal; trust, desire to remain friends, goals and reactions to SA gossip use; levels of SA victimization and SA gossip use, and who we talk about/talk to. Although 10 DV may seem like a lot of variables, one of the purposes of the present research was to learn more about the goals that are achieved using socially aggressive gossip, who is involved, and the consequences of socially aggressive gossip. To this end, the GSQ and the HUG measures were designed to offer more choices to participants than the only other measure that focused on gossip, namely the RAQ (Goldstein and Tisak, 2004).

Level of Moral Disengagement (see IWOQ, Appendix D)

Participants' levels of moral disengagement was measured using the *Interacting with Others* questionnaire (IWOQ, see Appendix D), a revised version of the *Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement Questionnaire* (MMDQ) first developed by Bandura et al. (1996). As explained in the introduction, because the focus of the present research is on gossip used as social aggression most references to physical aggression in the MMDQ were replaced with examples of social aggression in the IWO questionnaire. In order to update the measure and to make it more salient for an emerging adult population some of the revisions made to the MMDQ by other researchers have also been included (Boardley & Kavussanu, 2007; Paciello et al., 2008). All of the previous MMDQs contained 32

items, grouped into units of four statements that correspond to each of the eight mechanisms of moral disengagement: 1. moral justification, 2. euphemistic language, 3. advantageous comparison, 4. diffusion of responsibility, 5. displacement of responsibility, 6. distorting consequences, 7. dehumanization, and, 8. attribution of blame. To minimize repetition, the IWOQ includes 24 items, with three statements representing each of the eight mechanisms. To better illustrate the revisions Table 1 has been included. Please note that items from the original MMDQ are ***bolded*** and ***italicized***. Items that have been modified have no emphasis.

The level of moral disengagement scores ($M = 36.04$, $SD = 17.33$) for the present study ranged from 0 - 144. These scores are very similar in both range and distribution to scores from previous research on physical aggression (Bandura et al., 1996). In order to create an independent variable for moral disengagement, participants were sorted by their scores, into three groups: Lower MD (27 or less); Mid MD (27.01 to 40); and Higher MD (40.01 to 89). The scores for measures of moral disengagement tend to be skewed and previous researchers have created groups that can be compared using this type of binning (Boardley & Kavussanu, 2007; Paciello et al., 2008).

Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the 24 statements as they related to their interactions with others. Like Boardley and Kavussanu (2007), the IWOQ used a seven-point Likert scale from 0 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). In contrast, the original MMDQ used a three-point scale (Bandura et al., 1996) and Paciello et al. (2008) increased this to a five-point scale. Scores for the

Table 1.

Comparison of Items from the Original MMDQ and the IWOQ

1.	<i>It is okay to lie to keep your friends out of trouble.</i>
2.	<i>Taking someone's motorcycle or car without their permission is just "borrowing it."</i> Bending the rules is a way of getting ahead at work.
3.	<i>Stealing some money is not too serious compared to those who steal a lot of money.</i> Taking as your own, ideas from a paper you found online is not very serious when you consider that others look at classmates' answers on an exam.
4.	<i>A member of a group should not be blamed for trouble the group causes.</i>
5.	<i>Youths cannot be blamed for using bad words when all their friends do it.</i> People cannot be blamed for gossiping when all their friends do it.
6.	<i>People do not mind being teased because it shows interest in them.</i>
7.	<i>It is okay to treat somebody badly who behaved like a "worm."</i> It is okay to treat badly someone who behaves like a "weasel".
8.	<i>People who get mistreated usually do things to deserve it.</i>
9.	<i>It is alright to fly off the handle to protect your friends.</i> It is all right to spread rumours about someone who bad mouths your friends.
10.	<i>Slapping and shoving someone is just a way of joking.</i> Gossiping about someone is just a way of joking.
11.	<i>Compared to the illegal things people do, taking some things from a store without paying for them is not very serious.</i> Compared to writing the insult on a bathroom wall in a bar, leaving an anonymous nasty comment in someone's "Honesty Box" on "Facebook" is not very serious.
12.	<i>Youth cannot be blamed for misbehaving if their friends pressured them to do it.</i> Individuals cannot be blamed for spreading rumours if their friends pressured them to do it.
13.	<i>A person who only suggests breaking rules should not be blamed if others go ahead and do it.</i>
14.	<i>It is not serious to tell small lies because they don't hurt anybody.</i>
15.	<i>Some people have to be treated roughly because they lack feelings that can be hurt.</i> It is okay to gossip about some people because they lack feelings that can be hurt.
16.	<i>People who are excluded from group activities usually bring it on themselves.</i>
17.	<i>It is alright to beat someone who bad mouths your family.</i> It is all right to hurt a person's reputation if they spread rumours about your group.
18.	<i>It is not a bad thing to "get drunk" once in awhile.</i> Telling someone's secrets is a way of helping to solve his/her problems.
19.	<i>It is not serious to insult a friend because beating him/her up is worse.</i> It is not serious to insult a friend because slapping him/her would be worse.
20.	<i>It is unfair to blame an individual who only had a small part in the harm caused by a group.</i>
21.	<i>If youth are not disciplined at home they should not be blamed for misbehaving.</i> Individuals who "steal" romantic partners can't be blamed if everyone at school does this.
22.	<i>Teasing someone does not really hurt him/her.</i> Talking behind someone's back does not really hurt him/her.
23.	<i>Someone who is detestable does not deserve to be treated like a human being.</i>
24.	<i>If people are careless about where they leave their belongings it is their own fault if their things get stolen.</i>

IWOQ measure ranged from 0 – 144, with higher scores indicating a greater inclination to use the mechanisms of moral disengagement. Psychometric properties for the revised scale used in the present study included a very strong overall internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha of .88.

Procedures

Participants were recruited from the SONA website (<http://carleton.sona-systems.com>) and could link to the *Informed Consent Form* (see Appendix A) page of the survey. Participants were required to read the consent form and “agree” before being able to continue. At this point, to ensure confidentiality and anonymity, all participants who consented to participate were assigned an individual pass code. This ensured that no names were associated with responses and that IP addresses were not tracked or collected. Participants were also told that the survey had to be completed in one sitting, and that it should not require more than one hour of their time.

When the survey was completed and submitted, participants were linked to the written debriefing (see Appendix F). At the end of this written debriefing there were links to health resources in case of distress and a link that took participants to the raffle entry page. In this way, participants' contact information for their raffle entry was kept separate from the survey data. This study (09-116) was approved by the Carleton University Ethics Committee for Psychological Research.

Results

Gender. The final dataset ($N = 140$) had unequal numbers of males and females. In fact, with 106 females and 34 males, there was a ratio of more than three females to each male participant. It was unclear why more females than males completed the questionnaires for the present study but one possibility was that the principal investigator knew more females in the age range of interest and, as such, invited more females to participate. Another possibility was that more females were attracted to the nature and subject of the present study. A third possibility is that this distribution accurately reflects the gender distribution in the population of interest (most subjects were drawn from a pool of University students studying in the social sciences which is more heavily female-based). To address the gender disparity in this sample, before beginning any parametric testing, chi-squares of independence were conducted between gender and the other independent variables. The chi-square tests were used to determine if the proportion of males to females was the same for each of the other categorical variables: age group (Early EA and Later EA) and group level of moral disengagement (Lower MD, Mid-MD, and Higher MD).

A Chi-square test for independence (using Fisher's Exact Test) found no significant association between gender and age group (Early EA and Later EA) with $\chi^2 (1, n = 140) = .109, p = .691, \phi = .045$. This meant that the proportion of males in either age group (Early EA and Later EA) was not significantly different from the proportion of females in either age group.

A Chi-square test for independence (with Yates Continuity Correction) found a significant association between gender and group level of moral disengagement (Lower MD, Mid-MD, and Higher MD), with $\chi^2 (2, n = 135) = 10.92, p = .004, \phi = .29$. This meant that the proportion of males in each group level of moral disengagement (Lower MD, Mid-MD, and Higher MD), was significantly different from the proportion of females in each group level of moral disengagement (Lower MD, Mid-MD, and Higher MD). Fifty-six percent of the male participants were in the Higher MD group compared to only 25% of the females. Forty percent of the females were in the Lower MD group compared to only 20% of the males. Thirty-five percent of the female participants were in the Mid MD group compared to 23% of the males. Based on the findings of the Chi-square tests for independence the effect of gender was included for the remaining analyses.

Who do we talk about and who do we talk to?

Two questions examined participants' experiences with SA gossip behaviours during the past two years: (1) *What relationship did [do] you have with the person you most often talked about?* and, (2) *What relationship did [do] you have with the person you most often talked to?* Participants chose from one of eight relationship categories: Close friend, Friend, Acquaintance, Frenemy, Romantic Partner, Rival, Family Member, or "Other" categories. All the category totals for each of the questions are contained in Table 2.

Table 2.

“Who do we talk about and who do we talk to?”

	Close friend	Friend	Acquain- tance	Frenemy	Romanti c Partner	Rival	Family Member	Other
Talk about N = 135	19 (14.1%)	39 (28.9%)	22 (16.3%)	21 (15.6%)	4 (2.9%)	15 (11.1%)	7 (5.2%)	8 (5.9%)
Talk to N = 136	74 (54.5%)	20 (14.7%)	3 (2.2%)	1 (0.7%)	27 (19.9%)	2 (1.4%)	7 (5.2%)	2 (1.4%)

Note: In the Results, the “Other” categories for the two questions were not included in the description of the category selections. Therefore, the final sample size differed between Table 2 and the Results, with N = 127 and N = 134, respectively. Percentages total to 100.

Who we talk about. First, the category of “Other” was examined for details with eight participants reporting that they were referring to ex-romantic partners, co-workers, and a classmate. Based on the definitions given in the present study, ex-romantic could have been included in the close social network grouping. Likewise, both co-workers and a classmate fit within the definitions for Acquaintance however, because participants clearly indicated that they did not believe their choices fit into any of the categories, their responses were not integrated. That left 127 participants who selected one of the seven predetermined categories of relationships. Of these responses, 65 participants (51.2%) reported that they most often talked about someone who was part of their close social network (Close friend, Friend, and Family Member). Another 58 participants (45.7%) reported that they most often talked about a person who was not part of their close social network (Acquaintance, Frenemy, and Rival). The remaining four participants (3.1%) reported that they most often talked about their romantic partners. In general, participants were equally likely to gossip maliciously about individuals within their close social network as they were to gossip about those outside their close friendship group.

Who we talk to. Again, the category of “Other” was examined for details with two participants reporting that they were referring to a room-mate and co-workers. Following the procedure outlined for “Who we talk about” because participants clearly indicated that they did not believe their choices fit into any of the predetermined categories, their responses were not integrated into the final examination of choices. That left 134 participants who selected one of the seven predetermined categories of relationships.

Of these responses, 101 participants (75.4%) reported that when they gossiped, they most often talked to someone who was part of their close social network (Close friend, Friend, and Family Member). Only 6 participants (4.5%) reported that they most often talked to a person who was not part of their close social network (Acquaintance, Frenemy, and Rival). The remaining 27 participants (20.1%) reported that they most often talked to their romantic partners. In general, participants were much more likely to gossip to individuals within their close social network as they were to gossip to those outside their close friendship group.

Real Experience with Socially Aggressive Gossip

After reading the description of a gossip scenario (three scenarios from the *Gossip Scenarios Questionnaire*) in which socially aggressive gossip use was described, participants were asked if this experience had ever happened to them. The responses became three independent variables: subjects who had experienced real life victimization by SA gossip (from Scenario 1, Victim); subjects who had experienced listening to SA gossip (from Scenario 2, Listener); and, subjects who had experienced using SA gossip in real life (from Scenario 3, Aggressor). Chi-square tests of independence were conducted between gender and the three real experience variables. The chi-squares were used to determine if the proportion of males to females was the same for each of these categorical variables: real experience of the participant as Victim; real experience of the participant as Listener; and, real experience of the participant as Aggressor.

Chi-square tests for independence (using Fisher's Exact Test) found significant associations between gender and two of the real experience variables, being victimized and being the aggressor. For participants who had experienced being victimized using SA gossip there was a significant effect for gender with $\chi^2 (1, n = 140) = 7.39, p = .01$. This meant that the proportion of males, compared to females, who had experienced being victimized using SA gossip, was significantly different. Eighty-six percent of females compared to 65% of males reported that they had experienced being victimized using SA gossip in real life.

For participants who had experienced using SA gossip (as the Aggressor) there was also a significant effect for gender with $\chi^2 (1, n = 140) = 12.59, p = .001$. This meant that the proportion of males, compared to females, who had experienced using SA gossip, was significantly different. Eighty-seven percent of females compared to 59% of males reported that they had experienced using SA gossip in real life. There were no significant findings for the third real experience variable, listening to SA gossip. Descriptive statistics for real experience by gender are presented in Table 3.

Age effects for real life experiences

Chi-square tests of independence were next conducted between emerging adult age group and real experience, to determine if the proportion of Early EA to Later EA was the same for each of the three real experiences. There were no significant results for age group on any of the three real experiences with socially aggressive gossip use: subjects who had experienced real life victimization by SA gossip (from Scenario 1,

Table 3.

Participants' Real Experiences with Socially Aggressive Gossip by Gender

		Gender		
		Male	Female	Total
Has a close friend ever talked about you behind your back? (Scenario 1)	No	12 (35.3%)	15 (14.2%)	27
	Yes	22 (64.7%)	91 (85.8%)	113
	Total	34	106	140

		Gender		
		Male	Female	Total
Has close friend ever talked to you about another close friend behind his/her back? (Scenario2)	No	2 (5.9%)	2 (1.9%)	4
	Yes	32 (94.1%)	104 (98.1%)	136
	Total	34	106	140

		Gender		
		Male	Female	Total
Have you ever talked about a close friend behind his/her back? (Scenario 3)	No	14 (41.2%)	14 (13.2%)	28
	Yes	20 (58.8%)	92 (86.8%)	112
	Total	34	106	140

Victim); subjects who had experienced listening to SA gossip (from Scenario 2, Listener); and, subjects who had experienced using SA gossip in real life (from Scenario 3, Aggressor). Descriptive statistics for real experience by age group are presented in Table 4.

Role of Perspective in emotional and relationship consequences

Before proceeding to the multivariate analyses, correlations between the dependent variables were examined. Recall that participants responded to questions about gossip from three different perspectives: Scenario 1 - the person being talked about; Scenario 2 - the listener to the gossip; and, Scenario 3 - the person who starts or spreads the gossip. This created a within-subjects variable, perspective, for each of the emotional and relationship consequences, such that each consequence was reported from the three perspectives. Please see Table 5 for the correlations for all perspectives of the emotional consequences of hurt, anger, and betrayal. Instead of using all three emotional consequences since they were highly and significantly correlated with each other (see Table 5) for all three perspectives a decision was made to only examine the role of “hurt” in order to be able to compare the present study’s findings to that of the earlier work of Goldstein and Tisak (2004).

Table 4.

Participants' Real Experiences with Socially Aggressive Gossip by Age Group

Two Emerging Adult (EA) Groups				
		Early EA (18-23)	Later EA (24-29)	Total
Has a close friend ever talked about you behind your back? (Scenario 1)	No	12 (20.3%)	15 (18.5%)	27
	Yes	47 (79.7%)	66 (81.5%)	113
	Total	59	81	140

Two Emerging Adult (EA) Groups				
		Early EA (18-23)	Later EA (24-29)	Total
Has close friend ever talked to you about another close friend behind his/her back? (Scenario2)	No	0 (0%)	4 (3%)	4
	Yes	59 (100%)	77 (97%)	136
	Total	59	81	140

Two Emerging Adult (EA) Groups				
		Early EA (18-23)	Later EA (24-29)	Total
Have you ever talked about a close friend behind his/her back? (Scenario 3)	No	15 (25.4%)	13 (16%)	28
	Yes	44 (74.6%)	68 (84.0%)	112
	Total	59	81	140

Table 5.

Correlations Between the Emotional Consequences by Three Perspectives

Perspective	Variable	Hurt <i>N</i> = 140	Anger <i>N</i> = 139	Betrayal <i>N</i> = 139
Scenario 1: Participant as Victim of SA Gossip	Hurt		.561**	.776**
	Anger			.540**
	Betrayal			
Scenario 2: Participant as Listener to SA Gossip	Hurt		.795**	.837**
	Anger			.783**
	Betrayal			
Scenario 3: Participant as Aggressor using SA Gossip	Hurt		.799**	.854**
	Anger			.807**
	Betrayal			

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

When the two relationship consequences (retention of trust and desire to remain friends) were assessed for each perspective, they too were highly and significantly correlated. There was strong, positive correlation between the retention of trust and the desire to remain friends with that person for all three perspectives; (participant as the person being talked about, $r = -.65, p = .01$, participant as the listener to the gossip, $r = .71, p = .01$, participant as the person who started or spread the gossip person the person being talked about, $r = .75, p = .01$). A decision was made to only examine the variable, “desire to remain friends” in order to be able to compare the present study’s findings to that of the earlier work of Goldstein and Tisak (2004).

Does perspective influence how the emotional and relationship consequences of SA gossip vary by gender, age, and level of moral disengagement?

To answer this question, a mixed between-within groups’ MANOVA was conducted to assess the impact of gender, age group (Early EA and Later EA), and level of moral disengagement (Lower MD, Mid-MD, and Higher MD) on two dependent variables: hurt and the desire to remain friends, from the three perspectives.

There were no significant interactions between any of the independent variables and perspective. There was a however, a significant main effect for perspective, Wilks’ Lambda = .71, $F(4,492) = 21.19, p < .001, \eta^2 = .15$. Levels of hurt were highest for the first perspective, participant as the person being talked about ($M = 4.43, SD = 1.29$), and lowest for the second perspective, participant as the listener to the gossip ($M = 2.25, SD = 1.51$). For the desire to remain friends, the mean score was highest for the second

perspective of listener ($M = 2.79$, $SD = 1.51$) and lowest for the first perspective, victim ($M = 2.24$, $SD = 1.48$). When the dependent variables were considered separately, there were no significant main effects for gender, age, or level of moral disengagement.

Level of socially aggressive gossip use

A three-way interaction between gender, age, and level of moral disengagement was hypothesized for social aggressive gossip use. To answer this question, a three-way between-groups analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to determine the effects of gender, age (Early EA and Later EA), and level of moral disengagement (Lower MD, Mid-MD, and Higher MD) on the SAG score (calculated using the five questions from the HUG measure and the one question from the GSQ).

Two of the two-way interactions were significant (see Table 6 for all the mean scores and standard deviations). There was a statistically significant interaction between gender and age (Early EA and Later EA) on SA gossip use, $F(1,121) = 3.88$, $p = .05$, $\eta^2 = .03$. An inspection of the mean scores on socially aggressive gossip use indicated that females, compared to males, reported using significantly more socially aggressive gossip in both groups of emerging adults. There was also a statistically significant interaction between gender and level of moral disengagement (Lower MD, Mid-MD, and Higher MD) on SA gossip use, $F(2,121) = 3.18$, $p = .04$, $\eta^2 = .05$. An inspection of the mean scores on socially aggressive gossip use indicated that females, compared to males, reported using significantly more socially aggressive gossip in both the Lower MD group and the Higher MD group, but not in the Mid-MD group. As this is an interaction the

Table 6.

Mean Scores for SA Gossip use by Gender, Age, and Levels of Moral Disengagement

Level of Moral Disengagement	Male		Female	
	Early EA	Later EA	Early EA	Later EA
Lower MD	$M = .90^*$ $SD = .25$	$M = 1.08^*$ $SD = .12$	$M = .93^*$ $SD = .50$	$M = 1.30^*$ $SD = .65$
Mid MD	$M = 1.16$ $SD = .60$	$M = .88$ $SD = .64$	$M = 1.07$ $SD = .53$	$M = 1.56$ $SD = .62$
Higher MD	$M = .83^*$ $SD = .63$	$M = 1.22^*$ $SD = .73$	$M = 1.55^*$ $SD = .62$	$M = 2.44^*$ $SD = .61$
Total	$M = .94$ $SD = .48$	$M = 1.14$ $SD = .68$	$M = 1.15$ $SD = .59$	$M = 1.49$ $SD = .77$

* Mean scores are significant at .01.

effect is symmetrical so the effect of gender is different for the Lower and Higher MD groups than it is for the Mid-MD group. Likewise, the level of moral disengagement is different for females and males. This finding is further supported by results from the chi-square tests of independence that 56% of the males were in the Higher MD group compared to 25% of the females, whereas 40% of the females were in the Lower MD group compared with only 20 % of the males.

What goals are achieved using socially aggressive gossip (SAG)?

Correlations. The first step in this analysis was to run correlations to assess the relationships between the six goals used to explain SA gossip use: increase popularity/status; exclusion; just joking; desire to look better to others, revenge, and strengthen friendships (see Table 7). Because this analysis was looking at goals of SA gossip, the dependent variables were considered from the perspective of the SAG Aggressor. Interestingly, “just joking” was not significantly correlated with any of the other goals (r ranged from $-.08$ to $.10$). MANOVA has a requirement that dependent variables need to be somewhat correlated to be analyzed together (Pallant, 2007). Since this is not the case for “just joking” it will be examined using an ANOVA. The remaining five goals were moderately to strongly correlated (r ranged from $.13$ to $.65$), and were examined together using a MANOVA.

Table 7.

Correlations Between Goals Used to Explain Socially Aggressive Gossip

Goals	1	2	3	4	5	6
1 Increase Popularity & Status		.513**	.031	.586**	.125	.504**
2 Exclusion			-.080	.649**	.259**	.382**
3 Just Joking				.100	-.075	.050
4 Look Better to Others					.289**	.446**
5 Revenge						.179*
6 Strengthen Friendship s						

Note: For Goals 1, 2, 5, and 6, N = 140. For Goal 3, N = 139. For Goal 4, N = 138.

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Do some participants choose the goal “just joking” as a more likely explanation of SA gossip use?

A three-way between groups ANOVA was conducted to determine the effects of gender, age (Early EA and Later EA), and level of moral disengagement (Lower MD, Mid-MD, and Higher MD) on the goal, just joking. None of the interactions was significant. There was a statistically significant difference between the three levels of moral disengagement (Lower MD, Mid-MD, and Higher MD) on “just joking”, $F(2, 128) = 4.317$ $p = .01$, $\eta^2 = .063$. A post hoc Tukey’s HSD test revealed significant differences for the goal, “just joking” between the groups, Lower MD ($M = 2.23$, $SD = 2.27$) and Higher MD ($M = 3.47$, $SD = 1.94$), and between the groups Mid-MD ($M = 2.34$, $SD = 1.96$), and Higher MD ($M = 3.47$, $SD = 1.94$). Participants in the Higher MD group, compared to both the Lower and Mid MD groups, indicated that the goal “just joking” was more likely the goal that explained what could be achieved through the use of socially aggressive gossip. There were no statistically significant main effects for age or gender.

A three-way MANOVA was conducted to determine the effects of gender, age (Early EA and Later EA), and level of moral disengagement (Lower MD, Mid-MD, and Higher MD) on the remaining five goals given to explain SAG use: increase popularity/status; exclusion; desire to look better to others, revenge, and strengthen friendships. There were no statistically significant interactions or main effects for any of the combined variables, and as such, no post hoc tests could be run.

Reactions to being victimized using socially aggressive gossip (SAG)

Correlations. The first step in this analysis was to run correlations to assess the relationships between the four reactions given in response to being victimized using SAG, within a close friendship: confront the aggressor; ignore the gossip; start some gossip about the aggressor; and, avoid the aggressor. Because this analysis looked at reactions to SA gossip, the dependent variables were examined from the first perspective with participant as someone who has been victimized using SA gossip. Participants were asked to rate how likely it was that someone victimized using SA gossip would react in each way. The reactions were not mutually exclusive and participants considered each reaction individually. The correlations for reactions were very mixed with r values that ranged from $-.023$ to $-.594$, see Table 8. Since at least one correlation was significant at the .01 level the reactions were examined together using a MANOVA (see Table 10).

A three-way MANOVA was conducted to determine the effects of gender, age (Early EA and Later EA), and level of moral disengagement (Lower MD, Mid-MD, and Higher MD) on the four reactions given in response to being victimized using SAG, within a close friendship: confront the aggressor; ignore the gossip; start some gossip about the aggressor; and, avoid the aggressor. There were no statistically significant interactions on the combined dependent variables, nor were there main effects for gender or level of moral disengagement. There was a statistically significant main

Table 8.

Correlations Between the Reactions to Being Victimized Using Socially Aggressive Gossip

Reactions	Confront the Aggressor	Ignore Gossip	Start Gossip about Aggressor	Avoid Aggressor
Confront the Aggressor		-.594**	-.023	-.187*
Ignore Gossip			.053	.050
Start Gossip about Aggressor				.088
Avoid Aggressor				

Note: For Goals 1 and 2, N = 139. For Goal 3, N = 140. For Goal 4, N = 138.

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

effect of age (Early EA and Later EA), $F(4,123) = 2.457, p = .04$; Wilks' Lambda = .93, $\eta^2 = .074$. However, when the results for the dependent variables were considered separately none of the differences reached significance.

Summary of the findings

To summarize, there were both important and significant findings in the present study. To address the gender disparity in this sample, chi-square tests of independence were conducted between gender and: age group (Early EA and Later EA); group level of moral disengagement (Lower MD, Mid-MD, and Higher MD); and real experience with SA gossip. Age and gender were independent of each other but there was a significant association between gender and group level of moral disengagement. There were also significant associations between gender and two of the real experience variables, being victimized and being the aggressor.

When hurt and the desire to remain friends, were assessed from the three perspectives, these findings really highlighted the differing degrees of consequences for the various roles in the gossip trio. It was not surprising that levels of hurt were highest for the victim perspective and lowest for the listener perspective. For the desire to remain friends, the mean score was highest for the listener perspective and lowest for the victim perspective.

A three-way between-groups ANOVA was conducted to determine the effects of gender, age (Early EA and Later EA), and level of moral disengagement (Lower MD, Mid-MD, and Higher MD) on SA gossip use. There were two significant interactions:

the first between gender and age; and the second, between gender and level of moral disengagement (Lower MD, Mid-MD) on SA gossip use.

An ANOVA indicated that there were also significant findings for goal choice, such that, individuals with self-reported higher levels of moral disengagement, compared to individuals from both the Lower and Mid MD groups, indicated that the goal *just joking* was more likely the goal that explained what could be achieved through the use of socially aggressive gossip.

Discussion

The primary purpose of this research was to examine some of the factors that influence individuals' decisions to use socially aggressive gossip to achieve their social goals. These factors included gender, age, and level of moral disengagement. The current study was successful in exploring ideas new to the field of social aggression. For example, this was the first time that the socially aggressive gossip behaviours of emerging adults (18-29 years) were isolated and examined. In addition, this work has extended aggression research about emerging adults that has, until now, stopped at age 23 (Goldstein & Tisak, 2004; Ostrov & Houston, 2008). The sample for this research went beyond the confines of the "introductory psychology pool sample" and recruited participants from the larger community of emerging adults. This was done for two reasons: first, so that comparisons could be made between the early and later age groups to look for developmental differences; and second, to increase the ability to generalize the findings by having a sample that was more representative of the emerging adult population. Finally, this study

investigated the moral reasoning behind socially aggressive gossip use by assessing participants' levels of moral disengagement (Bandura et al., 1996). To do this, Bandura et al.'s measure, the MMDQ (*Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement Questionnaire*), was revised to include examples of socially aggressive gossip, resulting in a new measure called the *Interacting With Others Questionnaire* (IWOQ, see Appendix D). Before examining the findings for the present study, a short discussion about the independent variables was necessary.

Gender

As explained in the Results, the final dataset ($N = 140$) had unequal numbers of males and females, such that the distribution of males ($n = 34$) and females ($n = 106$) was disparate. After rigorous research and many discussions about possible remedies for this problem, the gender disparity was handled in the following ways. First, non-parametric tests (chi-squares of independence) were used to examine associations between gender and the other independent variables. Once these results were known gender was included in the parametric analyses and evaluated for violations of assumptions for each analysis. The principal investigator has continued to collect data and although this data was not used in analyses for this thesis, it will be used for any subsequent re-analyses or publications.

Who do we talk about and who do we talk to?

In contrast to McAndrew et al.'s (2007) findings that individuals choose to gossip mainly *about* people outside their close social networks (acquaintances, rivals, and

frenemies), the present study found that 51.2% of participants gossiped mainly about people within their close social network (close friend, friend, and family friend). Only 45.7% gossiped about someone who was not part of their close social network. The remaining 3.1% reported that they most often gossiped about their romantic partners. This is consistent with McAndrew et al who did not find that any of his participants reported talking about their romantic partners. McAndrew and his colleagues studied the gossip behaviours of early emerging adults (18-23 year olds). The differences in the present study may reflect how social networks change as people get older. As individuals become more involved in intimate relationships and begin their own families, their close social networks get smaller because there is less time to spend with friends.

Similar to McAndrew et al.'s (2007) findings, 75.7% of participants in the present study chose to gossip to people in their close social networks. 19.8% gossiped to their romantic partners, while only 4.5% gossiped to people outside their close social networks. It was apparent that SA gossip had some negative connotations and thus in early adulthood individuals chose to gossip predominately to close friends who may be less likely to judge them. Social comparison theory maintains that gossiping behaviour can also be used to build positive connections and feelings of in-group behaviour in these friendships (Wert & Salovey, 2004). It is likely that while gossiping in their close social networks individuals learn how to gossip in socially appropriate ways, for information gathering, entertainment, and getting to know others. This is most likely where they learn how to use SA gossip as well.

Real Experience with Socially Aggressive Gossip

Real experiences with SA gossip (see Table 3) was illustrated by three independent variables: subjects who had experienced real life victimization by SA gossip (from Scenario 1, Victim); subjects who had experienced listening to SA gossip (from Scenario 2, Listener); and, subjects who had experienced using SA gossip in real life (from scenario S, Aggressor). Using chi-squares, associations were found between gender and two of the three real experience perspectives. For example, 86% of female participants, compared to 65% of male participants reported that they had experienced being victimized using SA gossip in real life. Likewise, 87% of females compared to 59% of males reported that they had experienced using SA gossip in real life. This suggested that for both those who have used SA gossip and those who have been victimized using SA gossip, the proportion of males, compared to females, was significantly lower. Perhaps males lack the experience of using SA gossip when compared to females (Underwood, 2003).

In general, both males and females are familiar with SA gossip and previous research has indicated how pervasive social aggression has become (Craig 1998). The information about real experience with socially aggressive gossip added to the present knowledge about social aggression. This information can be incorporated into intervention programs because it made clear the fact that few individuals enter emerging adulthood without experiencing SA gossip and that for most of the present study's participants SA gossip was a salient experience.

Role of Perspective in emotional and relationship consequences

A within-subjects variable, perspective was created for each of the remaining emotional and relationship consequences, hurt and desire to remain friends. When the emotional and relationship consequences were found to be highly and significantly correlated, hurt and desire to remain friends were retained because they were previously examined in a study by Goldstein & Tisak (2004). No support was found for these predicted hypotheses but a main effect for perspective was found. Levels of hurt were highest for Scenario 1, with participant as the person being talked about ($M = 4.43$, $SD = 1.29$), and lowest for the Scenario 2, with participant as the listener to the gossip ($M = 2.25$, $SD = 1.51$). For the desire to remain friends, the mean score was highest for the second perspective of listener ($M = 2.79$, $SD = 1.51$) and lowest for the first perspective, victim ($M = 2.24$, $SD = 1.48$). This may be because the questions for SAG Listener were crafted so that they asked about the emotional and relationship consequences for the Listener. Perhaps the differences in the mean scores are simply that participants believed there were fewer consequences for those who listen to SA gossip than for those who are victimized using SA gossip. The questions were asked this way in order to learn more about the emotional and relationship consequences for all the people involved in the gossip. SA gossip does not occur in isolation, it requires a minimum of three people (Xie et al., 2002).

The fact that the emotional consequences variables (hurt, anger, betrayal) and the relationship consequences (trust and desire to remain friends) were highly correlated

may have indicated that perhaps Goldstein and Tisak (2004) were correct in only choosing the level of hurt and desire to remain friends. During the design phase of the present study it seemed limiting to only use one variable. It may be the case that the five dependent variables: hurt/betrayal, anger, desire to remain friends, trust in the aggressor used to measure emotional and relationship consequences need to be re-thought in any future research.

Level of socially aggressive gossip use

A three-way interaction between gender, age, and level of moral disengagement was hypothesized for social aggressive gossip use. The present study found support for two of the previous findings: (1) gender and the increased use of socially aggressive gossip (Goldstein & Tisak, 2004); and, 2) higher levels of moral disengagement and higher levels of physical/verbal aggression (Paciello et al., 2008).

The first finding, an interaction between gender and age for SA gossip use indicated that females, compared to males, reported using significantly more socially aggressive gossip in both groups of emerging adults. The second finding was a significant interaction between gender and level of moral disengagement (Lower MD, Mid-MD on SA gossip use, which suggested that females, compared to males, reported using significantly more socially aggressive gossip in both the Lower MD group and the Higher MD group. To put these mean scores in perspective, they indicated that on average, participants self-reported being victimized by SA gossip between “once in a while” and “a few times” during the previous two years.

Goldstein and Tisak (2004) did not find an interaction between gender and age for socially aggressive gossip use. What they did find was that college age participants preferred to use SA gossip more than social exclusion, because SA gossip was a more covert strategy. Perhaps for Goldstein's and Tisak's college students the covert nature of gossip allowed it to be used as an aggressive strategy and, once individuals began to use it, they continued. For gender differences, Underwood (2003) found that many adolescent girls began using socially aggressive strategies such as gossip to manage their relationships when they moved into larger, looser social networks.

Emerging adults are more likely to have mixed-sex social networks, and it may be within these groups that individuals perfect their use of SA gossip. This might explain the lack of decreased SA gossip use in the present study. Another explanation could be that participants in the present study reported that, in general, they gossiped most frequently about someone within their close social network. Perhaps a pattern was established early in the relationship that allowed for SA gossip use without increased emotional and relationship consequences.

However, the "Other" reactions provided by some participants did seem to indicate that there were important, if not significant, consequences for using SA gossip against a close friend, for example: *"Discretely letting others know that she is untrustworthy, not pursuing chances to talk about her, but mentioning it if this type of issue (gossiping) comes up with others (people don't only gossip, they discuss gossip itself)."* Because emerging adults appeared to use SA gossip within their close

relationships perhaps their moral reasoning skills have also developed to accommodate this behaviour. Consider the process involved in the preceding example: the victim of the SA gossip wanted to continue being friends with those in her social network but needed to also deal with the aggression. By letting other friends know that the aggressor was untrustworthy (based on SA gossip use in friendship) she warned them, thus indicating she was trustworthy. The victim also most likely derived some positive feedback and commiseration from the friends she talked to, thus strengthening her bonds to the group. This was a well thought out solution to being victimized using SA gossip.

Goals Achieved Using SA Gossip

The present study also investigated two dependent variables – goals of SA gossip and reactions to SA gossip – not previously examined in relation to moral disengagement and emerging adulthood. The decision to include goals and reactions as dependent variables was based three separate pieces of previous research. First, Owens et al. (2000) found that adolescent girls reported several goals for using SA gossip: *strengthening friendships; increasing status and popularity; manipulating another person's reputation in order to look better to a potential romantic partner or friend; alleviating boredom/entertainment; and to maintain exclusivity in their most important relationships*. Second, Shute et al. (2008) found that for adolescent boys who used sexually explicit SA gossip their self-reported goal was to harm the social reputations of the girls over a perceived slight, such as being rebuffed. However, both the adolescent boys in Shute et al.'s study and the adolescent girls in Owens et al.'s study tried to diminish the harm they

had caused with their SA gossip use by emphasizing the entertainment value of SA gossip.

In contrast, the third study by McAndrew et al. (2007) found that for both male and female college students, SA gossip was most often used as a self-enhancing strategy to make the person who started or spread the gossip look better to others at the expense of the person who was being talked about. So based on these studies, the goals of SA gossip use for the present study included five self-enhancing goals: *increase popularity/status*; *exclusion*; *desire to look better to others*, *revenge*, and strengthen friendships; and, one goal that was not self-enhancing, *just joking*.

Based on McAndrew et al.'s (2007) study about goal choice and the age differences (between adolescents and college students) found by the three studies, it was predicted that compared with the older group, Later EA, the younger group Early EA, would choose self-enhancing goals more often than *just joking* to explain their use of SA gossip. This hypothesis was not supported. A second exploratory hypothesis was proposed about goals and moral disengagement. It was predicted that Higher MD participants, compared to participants with Lower MD, would indicate a preference for the goal *just joking* as the likeliest goal that explained what could be achieved through the use of socially aggressive gossip. This hypothesis was supported and individuals with self-reported higher levels of moral disengagement, compared to individuals from both the Lower and Mid MD groups, indicated that the goal *just joking* was more likely the goal that explained what could be achieved through the use of socially aggressive gossip.

According to the theory of moral disengagement, *just joking* is moral justification for using socially aggressive gossip (Bandura et al., 1996). When moral disengagement is used, individuals are choosing to override self-sanctions that would usually prevent the antisocial behaviors. None of the other hypotheses was supported and there were no significant findings between moral disengagement and any of the five remaining goals: *strengthening friendships; increasing status and popularity; manipulating another person's reputation in order to look better to a potential romantic partner or friend; alleviating boredom/entertainment; and to maintain exclusivity in their most important relationships.*

The question about goals also included a space for "Other" goal that participants believed might explain the use of SA gossip. Forty-two participants included alternative goals. Some participants (16) talked about venting and then went on to describe a situation where they seemed to be using gossip to cope with some frustration in their friendship, by venting to a third friend. For example: *"Just venting frustration to my boyfriend - I didn't go around bad mouthing her - she is my best friend."* These types of statements did not seem to be examples of SA gossip being used to harm their friend. However, some of the other goals suggested were more likely examples of SA gossip:

"Rather than manipulating their reputation to make myself look better, I manipulated their reputation to make them look worse than others had previously thought."

“Trying to create an interesting conversation with other friends, who I know are very interested in hearing about these kinds of things. Sometimes I exaggerate some of the gossip involved, just because I know it will make a better story. Maybe this is similar to trying to strengthen my friendship with others?”

“I was trying to understand the friend’s behaviour, and therefore decided to bring it up with another friend as a way of coming to terms with it, and of feeling better about a perceived slight.”

“When I say mean things behind a friend’s back it’s because they aren’t being a loyal trusting friend. I’ll confront the people involved and the friend.”

“A friend did something ridiculous and uncalled for and this is what was discussed.”

“I sometimes want to feel I am not such a bad person as compared to a friend....”

These “Other” goals provided a glimpse into how the participants’ explained their use of SA gossip within a close friendship. Given the amount of detail some of the participants included it could be suggested that it was important for them to make it understood what conditions were required in order for them to use SA gossip. Their candour was refreshing.

Reactions to Socially Aggressive Gossip Use

Four reactions were offered as responses to being victimized using SA gossip within a close friendship: *confront the aggressor*; *ignore the gossip*; *start some gossip about the aggressor*; and, *avoid the aggressor*. Participants rated their perceptions of the likelihood that someone victimized using SA gossip would be to react in that way. Because this analysis looked at reactions to socially aggressive gossip, the dependent variables were from the SA gossip *victim* perspective (Scenario 1). It had been predicted that there would be differences between the age groups in their choice of reactions. A significant main effect was found for age differences. However, when the results for the dependent variables were considered separately none of the differences reached significance. A larger sample size may have made a difference in this case or perhaps a reduction in the number of dependent variables.

In hindsight, a better design strategy might have been to replicate the question asked by Goldstein and Tisak (2004), *How likely is it that the victim will retaliate?*, and then provided an open-ended question where participants could supply their own reactions to SA gossip use, as was done for the “Other” reaction choice offered to participants. Of the 140 participants, 16 provided their most likely personal reaction to being victimized using SA gossip. Some of responses were variations on the reactions choice offered (e.g. negative gossip, confront aggressor in public) but some reactions demonstrated the considerations and moral reasoning that occur when a close friend uses

SA gossip. These statements were some of the reactions given after being victimized using SA gossip:

“Discretely letting others know that she is untrustworthy, not pursuing chances to talk about her, but mentioning it if this type of issue (gossiping) comes up with others (people don't only gossip, they discuss gossip itself).”

“Ignoring the gossip- they aren't worth my time.”

“They would lose me as a friend. I wouldn't stoop down to their level and do something hurtful back.”

“In the situation in question, I did not get back at the friend. Rather, by avoiding contact with her and having those she told the gossip to continue to be better friends with me was, in essence, a satisfying ‘revenge’ against her.”

“Most likely I would simply talk to the other friends about what happened thereby turning them against her.”

It was possible to learn more about how SA gossip was used in friendships because participants evaluated their “Other” reactions and included specific information that indicated their intentions. The participants who wrote these reactions made it very clear that they understood that SA gossip: was not appropriate behaviour (*she is untrustworthy*); that it had consequences for friendships (*“they aren't worth my time”*); and that it can be used to hurt others (*“I would simply talk to the other friends about what*

happened thereby turning them against her”). The “Other” responses added a personal perspective that enriched the results.

Age

Recall that for Westernized societies, emerging adulthood (18 -29 years old) was described as the transitional period between adolescence and young adulthood, defined by essential biological, cognitive and social development (Arnett, 2000; Ostrov & Houston; 2008). The present study tried to extend previous work done with emerging adulthood by including participants who were 18 to 29 years old, rather than limiting the sample to the usual college-aged sample of 18-23 years old (Goldstein & Tisak, 2004; Ostrov & Houston). For the analyses, participants were divided into two groups of emerging adults (EA): Early EA (18-23); and Later EA (24-29).

This was done for two reasons: 1) to create a categorical independent variable; and, 2) to investigate whether or not there were any differences between the younger and older participants, Early EA (18-23 years old) and Later EA (24-29 years old) that would support previous contentions that emerging adulthood was a separate developmental stage (Arnett, 2000; Ostrov & Houston; 2008).

Moral disengagement

Participants were divided into three groups: Lower MD (27 or less); Mid MD (27.01 to 40); and Higher MD (40.01 to 89), based on their level of moral disengagement (as measured by the IWOQ, where scores could range from 0-144). In the present study, scores ranged from 0 to 89. A higher score for moral disengagement indicated a greater

inclination on the part of participants to use the mechanisms of moral disengagement to explain their behaviour when interacting with other people (Bandura et al., 1996). The IWOQ presented a series of statements about how an individual might act in specific situations, all of which involved some form of anti-social behaviour or aggression (see Table 1). In general, moral reasoning is not a fixed, black-and-white process there are grey areas where individual goals, needs and desires are accommodated. It is during this cognitive process where the decision to ignore self-sanctions is believed to occur (Bandura et al.).

Bandura et al. (1996) described a person who is morally disengaged as being someone who ignores internal self-sanctions in order to behave in socially inappropriate ways when interacting with other people. Morally disengaged individuals relieve themselves from feeling guilty or remorseful by justifying their actions, or blaming the victim, or by minimizing the harm done. This is not a rigid process where the self sanctions that guide one's actions are always ignored. Rather, each situation is evaluated (moral reasoning) and depending on the context a decision is made about how to behave (moral agency). That would explain how someone with a higher level of moral disengagement could be intensely loyal to a friend, or have a self-image that includes the concept of honour, but still be able to justify being aggressive and beating up someone they didn't like.

The beauty of the IWOQ (and Bandura et al.'s MMDQ, 1996) was that it provided contextual situations for participants to think about how they would act (moral

reasoning) and then choose their level of agreement with the behaviour (moral agency). The revised measure for moral disengagement (IWOQ) used in this study, which substituted socially aggressive gossip for examples of physical and verbal aggression, was generally very successful at measuring participants' willingness to use moral disengagement to explain SA gossip use and anti-social behaviour such as, lying and cheating. The inter-item correlations were all above .3, with a majority above .5, with an overall strong internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha of 0.88). In the present study, to reduce the chance of bias, participants completed the IWOQ after they had completed the *Gossip Scenarios Questionnaire* (see Appendix C) but before they completed the measure for SA gossip use (the HUG, see Appendix E).

Limitations and Future Directions

As with most research, the present study has some limitations. Although the sample size (140 participants) was large enough to produce some significant results, a larger sample size might have allowed further tests and even greater confidence in the results. The emerging adult age group was quite evenly distributed by age, but the same cannot be said for gender distribution, (Females: 106; Males: 34). Possible solutions for this problem were discussed earlier. The previous research on gossip utilized for this study provided examples of data sets that had no gender problems (Goldstein & Tisak, 2004; McAndrew et al., 2007), and some of the analyses used in the present study also found significant results. The gender findings were very interesting and should be investigated further.

All of the measures in the study are self-reports. Previous research suggests that there could be shared method variance concerns (Pallant, 2007). However, self-report methods are very useful for gathering personal information about peoples' behaviour and this is not an aspect of the measures that needed changing. There was also some concern that participants might not be discussing the same behaviours because the hypothetical scenarios would not specific. This type of limitation could be avoided using interviews and group discussions rather than scenarios and self-reports. A limitation of online surveys may be that because researchers and participants are not in the same physical space it is difficult to know how motivated individuals are to complete the surveys properly or if they just rush through, clicking answers without reading the questions.

The revised measure for moral disengagement (IWOQ) used in this study substituted socially aggressive gossip for examples of physical and verbal aggression, and was very successful at measuring participants' willingness to use moral disengagement to explain SA gossip use and antisocial behaviour. While the new measure showed strong internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.88, the IWOQ did not have test-retest reliability, or any validity measures beyond face validity. The sample size was also too small to run a factor analysis, thus in future a larger sample size would allow for additional testing to improve the measure. Given these limitations, caution must be exercised when interpreting the results on moral disengagement from the present study.

Conclusion

This study resulted in some intriguing findings about socially aggressive gossip and moral disengagement. Building on previous work in the field of moral disengagement and direct forms of aggression (physical and verbal), this was the first study to explore how moral disengagement might be related to socially aggressive gossip. The results indicated that higher levels of moral disengagement were related to higher levels of socially aggressive gossip use. This was important because it demonstrated that the link between moral disengagement and direct forms of aggression found by Paciello et al. (2008) also existed for socially aggressive gossip and moral disengagement. In addition, this finding was for emerging adults (18-29 years old) and suggested that the link between MD and SA gossip use continues beyond the early EA period as found by Paciello et al. and may further support the idea of emerging adulthood as a distinct developmental period (Arnett, 2000; Ostrov & Houston, 2008).

Furthermore, as described in detail previously, while the Later EA group reported using SA gossip more often than the Early EA group, all age groups reported using SA gossip mainly within their close social network (Goldstein & Tisak, 2004; McAndrew et al., 2007). This has important implications for research into friendship groups, social networks and aggression because these relationships are thought to be safe havens and places of support. If the results for the present study are common for emerging adults, then the majority of SA gossip occurs in their close social networks. Future research

could investigate how emerging adults cope with the SA gossip behaviours and how they maintain friendships and trust.

The present study was inspired by individuals who have shared their personal stories about socially aggressive gossip and its consequences. While listening to them, it was apparent that there was a need for validation that they had, indeed, been victimized, and that it was not appropriate to hurt others by talking about them behind their backs. The findings of this study, combined with the very high prevalence of experience with SA gossip reported by the respondents (80%), provided the validation that SA gossip occurs within friendships and that most participants understand the experience intimately. The relationship between moral disengagement and socially aggressive gossip in emerging adulthood underlined the importance of further exploration to learn more about participants who are in this group, trying to answer such questions as: *What goals do they achieve using SA gossip within their friendships?* and *Why do they override their moral self-sanctions in order to be aggressive?*

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Appendices

Appendix A. Informed Consent Form

Informed Consent Form

The purpose of this consent form is to provide you with adequate information about the requirements of this experiment so that you can decide whether or not you wish to participate.

Study Title:

Yes, but did you hear about...?
The use of hurtful gossip in everyday conversations.

Research Personnel: Lisa Menard (Principal Investigator), Department of Psychology, Carleton University; Email: lmenard@connect.carleton.ca.

Tina Daniels, Ph.D. (Supervisor), Department of Psychology, Carleton University; Phone: 520-2600 Ext. 2686; Email: tina_daniels@carleton.ca.

Should you have any ethical concerns about this research, please contact Dr. Monique Sénéchal, monique_senechal@carleton.ca (613-520-2600 ext. 1155), Chair of Carleton University Ethics Committee for Psychological Research. If you have any questions about any other aspect of this research, please contact Janet Mantler, Ph.D. (Chair, Department of Psychology) at 520-2600 Ext. 2648 or janet_mantler@carleton.ca.

Purpose: The aim of the present study is to gain a clearer sense of how hurtful gossip is experienced and used by young adults (18 – 29 years of age).

Information about the study and task requirements: Everyone gossips. Most everyday conversations include a bit of gossip because it is an entertaining and informative way for people to connect. It can also, on occasion, be used to cause hurt to be hurtful. We are interested in learning more about how gossip is used within your relationships. If you chose to participate in this online survey you will be asked to complete three questionnaires. The survey should take about one hour to complete. A .5% course credit will be given to all qualifying participants (e.g. Carleton PSYC 1001/1002 students).

In addition, all participants can choose to enter a raffle for a chance to win one of three cash incentives (\$50 gift cards. To enter the raffle you will need to send me your name and email address. This is a link on the last page of the survey and is not connected to your responses. A copy of all raffle entries will be printed and placed in the raffle box. The raffle will take place in early September once data collection is finished. Raffle winners will be contacted by email (see below for more details).

Potential risk/discomfort: It is possible thinking about their experiences with gossip may cause some mild emotional discomfort to some participants. In the debriefing at the

end of the study there is a list of resources that you can access to help alleviate any potential upset you might experience.

Right to withdraw and Anonymity/Confidentiality: Participation in this study is **completely voluntary** and you can **withdraw** from the study at any time, for any reason. You can also omit specific questions without penalty. The information collected will be completely anonymous and your name will not be disclosed. Because you will be assigned an individual pass-code when you access the survey, your name will not be linked to any of the answers that you provide. The data collected will remain confidential and only be available to the researchers associated with the project.

The survey will take no more than one hour to complete but it must be completed in one sitting. Therefore, please ensure that you have an hour before you start the survey.

Consent: I have read the above description of the study entitled, “*Yes, but did you hear about...?*” The use of hurtful gossip in everyday conversations.”

I know that clicking the “next” button below will direct me to an online questionnaire about gossip. By clicking the “next” button I am indicating that I agree to participate in the study, but that this in no way constitutes a waiver of my rights outlined above.

When I “agree” to participate (by clicking the “next” button) I will be assigned an individual pass code.”

Each survey will be coded with an individual pass code and no names will be associated with my responses. When I have completed the survey and submitted my responses I will be linked to a debriefing document.

At the end of the debriefing document there are links to health resources and a link that will take me to a raffle entry form.

I understand that in order to contact the winners, the researchers need contact information (name and email address) for each raffle entry. This information will be kept separate from the survey data at all times.

This study has been approved by the Carleton University Ethics Committee for Psychological Research.

Appendix B. Demographic Questionnaire

Demographic Questionnaire

1. How old are you? _____ years
2. Are you? _____ Male or _____ Female
3. What is your highest level of education? _____

Appendix C. Gossip Scenarios Questionnaire
(GSQ, Menard, 2009)

Gossip Scenarios Questionnaire

In the present study, we are interested in how individuals interact with one another and how they use gossip to achieve their goals.

What is Gossip?

Around the world, in all cultures, most people gossip, or listen to gossip, from time to time. Gossip is evaluative talk about an absent third person that requires others to participate. People gossip to exchange information, to entertain each other, and sometimes, in order to be hurtful. It differs from information communicated by news media in two important ways. News is based on objective, substantiated facts and it does not require personal interaction with others. Other terms for gossip include spreading rumours, breaking confidences/telling secrets, and talking behind someone's back. When these behaviours occur online, or on the phone, they are still considered gossip.

How do we define who we know?

The survey you are about to complete asks about you and your close friends. A close friend is a person you trust who offers you emotional support and with whom you share your vulnerabilities, fears, and secrets.

Instructions for completing the questionnaires:

We are interested in learning more about how gossip is used within social situations. After reading the short scenario, please answer the questions and describe what you think happened based on your experiences with similar situations.

Gossip Scenario 1

Think of a time when you learned that a close friend talked about you behind your back to other close friends. The things that your close friend was supposed to have said were not very nice at all.

If this has happened to you, please recall the event and answer the questions below.
[If this has not happened to you, please try to imagine it then answer the questions below.]

1. Has this happened to you? ☐ Yes ☐ No

2. What do you think **your close friend** was *[would be]* trying to achieve by talking about you behind your back? *Please rate how likely each of the following possibilities is.*

My close friend was trying to increase his/her popularity or social status.

Not likely at all						Extremely likely
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

My close friend was trying to exclude me because he/she felt threatened by me.

Not likely at all						Extremely likely
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

My close friend was just joking around.

Not likely at all						Extremely likely
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

My close friend was manipulating my reputation so that he/she would look better to others.

Not likely at all						Extremely likely
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

My close friend was getting revenge against me over a previous perceived slight.

Not likely at all						Extremely likely
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

My close friend was trying to strengthen his/her friendships with others.

Not likely at all						Extremely likely
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

Other possible goal

Please describe _____

Not likely at all						Extremely likely
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

3. How hurt or saddened were you [*would you be*] by what happened?

Not at all						Extremely
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

4. How angered were you [*would you be*] by what happened?

Not at all						Extremely
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

5. How betrayed did you feel [*would you feel*] by what happened?

Not at all						Extremely
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

6. How likely would **you** be to react in the following ways if/when a close friend talked about you behind your back? *Please rate each of the following possibilities.*

Confront this close friend about the gossip

Not likely at all						Extremely likely
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

Ignore the gossip, pretend it never happened

Not likely at all						Extremely likely
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

Start some negative gossip about this close friend

Not likely at all						Extremely likely
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

Avoid this close friend

Not likely at all						Extremely likely
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

Re-evaluate the closeness of our friendship

Not likely at all						Extremely likely
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

Get back at this close friend (seek revenge) by (please describe)

Not likely at all Extremely likely
0 1 2 3 4 5 6

7. How likely is it that you would want to remain friends with your close friend who started or spread rumours you?

Not likely at all Extremely likely
0 1 2 3 4 5 6

8. How likely is it that you would trust a close friend who talked about you behind your back?

Not likely at all Extremely likely
0 1 2 3 4 5 6

9. In the last two years, how often has a **close friend** talked about you behind your back?

Remember, a close friend is a person you trust who offers you emotional support and with whom you share your vulnerabilities, fears, and secrets.

0	1	2	3	4	5
Never	Once in a While	A Few Times	Several Times	Many Times	All the Time

Gossip Scenario 2

Now think of a time when a close friend talked to you about another close friend behind his/her back. The things that your close friend said were not very nice at all.

If this has happened to you, please recall the event and answer the questions below.
[If this has not happened to you, please try to imagine it then answer the questions below.]

1. Has this happened to you? Yes No

2. What do you think **your close friend** was *[would be]* trying to achieve by talking to you about another friend? *Please rate how likely each of the following possibilities is.*

My close friend, who started or spread the gossip, was trying to increase his/her popularity or social status.

Not likely at all						Extremely likely
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

My close friend, who started or spread the gossip, felt threatened and wanted to exclude the other friend.

Not likely at all						Extremely likely
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

My close friend, who started or spread the gossip, was just joking around.

Not likely at all						Extremely likely
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

My close friend, who started or spread the gossip, wanted to harm the other friend's reputation, in order to look better to others.

Not likely at all						Extremely likely
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

My close friend, who started or spread the gossip, wanted to get revenge against my other friend over a previous perceived slight.

Not likely at all						Extremely likely
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

My close friend, who started or spread the gossip, wanted to strengthen his/her friendships with others.

Not likely at all 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 Extremely likely

Other possible goal

Please describe _____

Not likely at all 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 Extremely likely

3. How hurt or saddened were you [*would you be*] by what happened?

Not at all 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 Extremely

4. How angered were you [*would you be*] by what happened?

Not at all 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 Extremely

5. How betrayed did you feel [*would you feel*] by what happened?

Not at all 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 Extremely

6. How likely would **you** be to react in the following ways if/when your close friend talked to you about another close friend, behind his/her back? *Please rate each of the following possibilities.*

Confront your close friend who started or spread the gossip

Not likely at all 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 Extremely likely

Ignore the gossip, pretend it never happened

Not likely at all 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 Extremely likely

Start some negative gossip about your close friend who started or spread the gossip

Not likely at all 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 Extremely likely

Avoid your close friend who started or spread the gossip

Not likely at all 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 Extremely likely

Re-evaluate the closeness of my friendship with the friend who started or spread the gossip

Not likely at all 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 Extremely likely

Get back at your close friend, who started or spread the gossip (seek revenge) by (please describe) _____

Not likely at all 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 Extremely likely

7. How likely is it that you would want to remain close friends with someone who started or spread rumours about another close friend?

Not likely at all 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 Extremely likely

8. After this happened, how likely is it that you would trust the close friend who talked about another close friend behind his/her back?

Not likely at all 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 Extremely likely

9. In the last two years, how often has a **close friend** talked to you about another close friend behind his/her back?

Remember, a close friend is a person you trust who offers you emotional support and with whom you share your vulnerabilities, fears, and secrets.

0	1	2	3	4	5
Never	Once in a While	A Few Times	Several Times	Many Times	All the Time

Gossip Scenario 3

Now think of a time when you have talked about a close friend behind his/her back to another close friend. The things that you said about your close friend were not very nice at all.

If this has happened to you, please recall the event and answer the questions below.
[If this has not happened to you, please try to imagine it then answer the questions below.]

1. Has this happened to you? Yes No

2. What were **you** (would you be) trying to achieve by talking about your close friend behind his/her back? *Please rate how likely each of the following possibilities is.*

 I was trying to increase my popularity or social status.

Not likely at all						Extremely likely
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

 I was trying to exclude my close friend because I felt threatened by him/her.

Not likely at all						Extremely likely
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

 I was just joking around.

Not likely at all						Extremely likely
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

 I was trying to manipulate my close friend's reputation in order to make me look better to others.

Not likely at all						Extremely likely
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

 I was trying to get revenge against my close friend over a previous perceived slight

Not likely at all						Extremely likely
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

 I was trying to strengthen my friendships with others.

Not likely at all						Extremely likely
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

Other possible goal

Please describe _____

Not likely at all

0

1

2

3

4

5

Extremely likely

6

3. How hurt or saddened was your close friend [*would your close friend be*] by what happened?

Not at all

0

1

2

3

4

5

Extremely

6

4. How angered was your close friend [*would your close friend be*] by what happened?

Not at all

0

1

2

3

4

5

Extremely

6

4. How betrayed did your close friend feel [*would your close friend feel*] by what happened?

Not at all

0

1

2

3

4

5

Extremely

6

6. How likely would **your close friend** be to react in the following ways if/when you talked behind his/her back? *Please rate how likely each of the following possibilities is.*

Confront me about the gossip

Not likely at all

0

1

2

3

4

5

Extremely likely

6

Ignore the gossip, pretend it never happened

Not likely at all

0

1

2

3

4

5

Extremely likely

6

Start some negative gossip about me

Not likely at all

0

1

2

3

4

5

Extremely likely

6

Avoid me

Not likely at all

0

1

2

3

4

5

Extremely likely

6

Re-evaluate the closeness of our friendship

Not likely at all Extremely likely
0 1 2 3 4 5 6

Get back at me (seek revenge) by (please describe)

Not likely at all Extremely likely
0 1 2 3 4 5 6

7. How likely is it that your close friend would want to remain friends with you if you started or spread rumours about him/her?

Not likely at all Extremely likely
0 1 2 3 4 5 6

8. How likely is it that your close friend would still trust you after you talked behind his/her back?

Not likely at all Extremely likely
0 1 2 3 4 5 6

9. In the last two years, how often have **you** talked about a close friend behind his/her back?

Remember, a close friend is a person you trust who offers you emotional support and with whom you share your vulnerabilities, fears, and secrets.

0	1	2	3	4	5
Never	Once in a While	A Few Times	Several Times	Many Times	All the Time

Appendix D. Interacting with Others Questionnaire (IWOQ)

Adapted from *Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement* Questionnaire

(Revised - MMDQ, Bandura et al., 1996)

Interacting with Others Questionnaire (IWOQ)

Strongly Disagree			Strongly Agree					
1.	It is okay to lie to keep your friends out of trouble.	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
2.	Bending the rules is a way of getting ahead at work.	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
3.	Taking as your own, ideas from a paper you found online is not very serious when you consider that others look at classmates' answers on an exam.	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
4.	A member of a group should not be blamed for trouble the group causes.	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
5.	People cannot be blamed for gossiping when all their friends do it.	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
6.	People do not mind being teased because it shows interest in them.	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
7.	It is okay to treat badly someone who behaves like a "weasel".	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
8.	People who get mistreated usually do things to deserve it.	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
9.	It is all right to spread rumours about someone who bad mouths your friends.	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
10.	Gossiping about someone is just a way of joking.	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
11.	Compared to writing the insult on a bathroom wall in a bar, leaving an anonymous nasty comment in someone's "Honesty Box" on "Facebook" is not very serious.	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
12.	Individuals cannot be blamed for spreading rumours if their friends pressured them to do it.	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
13.	A person who only suggests breaking rules should not be blamed if others go ahead and do it.	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
14.	It is not serious to tell small lies because they don't hurt anybody.	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
15.	It is okay to gossip about some people because they lack feelings that can be hurt.	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
16.	People who are excluded from group activities usually bring it on themselves.	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
17.	It is all right to hurt a person's reputation if they spread rumours about your group.	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
18.	Telling someone's secrets is a way of helping to solve his/her problems.	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
19.	It is not serious to insult a friend because slapping him/her would be worse.	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
20.	It is unfair to blame an individual who only had a small part in the harm caused by a group.	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
21.	Individuals who "steal" romantic partners can't be blamed if everyone at school does this.	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
22.	Talking behind someone's back does not really hurt him/her.	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
23.	Someone who is detestable does not deserve to be treated like a human being.	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
24.	If people are careless about where they leave their belongings it is their own fault if their things get stolen.	0	1	2	3	4	5	6

Appendix E. The Hurtful Use of Gossip Measure
(HUG, Menard, 2009)

When do we Gossip and Who is Involved?

The Hurtful Use of Gossip Measure
When do we Gossip and Who is Involved?

In the present study, we are interested in how individuals get along with one another, and how they use hurtful gossip within social situations. *Please think about your relationships with other people and how often you do these things.*

1. Sometimes people talk behind another person's back because they don't like him/her. In the past two years, how often have you done this?

0	1	2	3	4	5
Never	Once in a While	A Few Times	Several Times	Many Times	All the Time

2. Sometimes people post nasty messages in the "Honesty Box" on other peoples' Facebook pages. In the past two years, how often have you done this?

0	1	2	3	4	5
Never	Once in a While	A Few Times	Several Times	Many Times	All the Time

3. Sometime when telling a good story, people include details from a friend's private conversation. In the past two years, how often have you done this?

0	1	2	3	4	5
Never	Once in a While	A Few Times	Several Times	Many Times	All the Time

4. Sometimes people gossip about another person because he/she doesn't fit in with the group or acts different. In the past two years, how often have you done this?

0	1	2	3	4	5
Never	Once in a While	A Few Times	Several Times	Many Times	All the Time

5. Sometimes people say mean things about another person because he/she is too know-it-all. How often have you done something like this?

0	1	2	3	4	5
Never	Once in a While	A Few Times	Several Times	Many Times	All the Time

How do we define who we know?

The next two questions ask about people you have relationships with such as, close friends or acquaintances. For clarification we have defined what we mean by these labels.

Close friend: A person you trust who offers you emotional support and with whom you share your vulnerabilities, fears, and secrets.

Friend: A person with whom you share activities and spend time with, but may not share your vulnerabilities, fears and secrets.

Acquaintance: A person you recognize and know superficially, perhaps have classes together, but you do not socialize with outside of wherever you are together, for example, school or work.

Frenemies: People from the same friendship group who appear to be friends, but who actually dislike each other. This may be because they feel the need to keep up appearances, or because they do not want to lose mutual friends.
(<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frenemy>)

Romantic Partner: A person with whom you have a mutual, personal relationship that may include intimate emotional and physical aspects.

Family Member: People with whom you have a relationship that you did not choose. You have a relationship because you are linked by “blood” or marriage.

Rival: A person you do not even pretend to be friends with, you may see them as an outsider to your friendship group, or competition on a team, or for a romantic partner.

Other: This category is for anyone you would like to include who does not fit in the previous categories as you personally define them, - please give details. e.g. a close friend’s romantic partner who you don’t hang around with.

*It can be difficult to slot people into categories but please choose the label/definition that best suits how **you want** to describe the relationship.*

Please think about the times, in the past two years, when you have talked about others behind their backs.

1. What relationship did [do] you have with the person you most often ***talked about***?

The person I most often ***talked about*** is a:

Close friend _____ Friend _____ Acquaintance _____

Frenemy _____ Romantic Partner _____ Family Member _____
 Rival _____ Other _____

The person I most often talked about is: _____ Male or _____ Female

2. What relationship did [do] you have with the person you most often ***talked to***?

The person I most often ***talked to*** was my:

Close friend _____ Friend _____ Acquaintance _____
 Frenemy _____ Romantic Partner _____ Family Member _____
 Rival _____ Other _____

The person I most often talked is: _____ Male or _____ Female

Appendix F. Written Debriefing

Written Debriefing

What are we trying to learn in this research?

The purpose of the proposed research is to examine some of the factors that influence how hurtful gossip is used, within the everyday conversations you have with your friend. This study will also examine the reasoning used to explain the use of this behaviour.

Why is this important to scientists or the general public?

Research has indicated that there can be serious consequences for individuals who are frequently hurt by gossip, for example, they may experience lower self-esteem and self-worth, and higher rates of depression and anxiety. Research about the development of reasoning about such behaviour has found links to the use of more serious hurtful behaviours such as physical aggression and delinquent/criminal behaviours. This study is important and unique because we are studying the experiences of young adults such as you, and because we gathered information about your personal reflections concerning gossip use and reasoning.

What are some of our hypotheses and predictions?

Given the exploratory nature of this study there were several predictions made about the results. Some of the major hypotheses are:

- We expect that young adults who indicate that they have thought about how hurtful gossip can be will engage in less hurtful gossip.
- It is anticipated that women will be more likely to gossip about other women in their friendship group, while men will tend to gossip about people in their larger social network.
- We expect that women, when compared to men, will indicate greater emotional consequences (hurt, anger, &/or, betrayal) for the person gossiped about in all three gossip scenarios.
- It is anticipated that participants will choose to tell the hurtful gossip to close friends more often than to people in their larger social network, for example, acquaintances.

The results should clarify if and how young adults use gossip in hurtful ways when interacting with others, the emotional consequences of gossip use, and some of the reasoning that occurs when individuals are deciding whether or not to use gossip to be hurtful.

Where can you learn more?

- Research Articles:

Bandura, A., Barbaranelli, C., Caprara, G. V., & Pastorelli, C. (1996). Mechanisms of moral disengagement in the exercise of moral agency. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 71(2), 364-364.

Foster, E.K. (2004). Research on gossip: Taxonomy, methods, and future directions. *Review of General Psychology*, 8(2), 78-99.

Goldstein, S. E., & Tisak, M. S. (2004). Adolescents' outcome expectancies about relational aggression within acquaintanceships, friendships, and dating relationships. *Journal of Adolescence*, 27(3), 283-302.

- Books:

Coloroso, B. (2002). *The Bully, the Bullied, and the Bystander: From Preschool to High School – How Parents and Teachers Can Help Break the Cycle of Violence*. Toronto: Harper Collins.

Dellasega, C. & Nixon. C. (2003). *Girl Wars: 12 Strategies That Will End Female Bullying*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Contact Information

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Ethical Concerns: Should you have any ethical concerns about this research, please contact Dr. Monique Sénéchal, monique_senechal@carleton.ca (613-520-2600 ext. 1155), Chair of Carleton University Ethics Committee for Psychological Research.

Any other concerns: If you have any questions about any other aspect of this research, please contact Janet Mantler, Ph.D. (Chair, Department of Psychology) at 520-2600 Ext. 2648 or janet_mantler@carleton.ca.

Resources

Thinking about negative experiences with hurtful gossip may be upsetting or emotionally draining for some people. If you would like to speak with someone about any feelings that may have arisen as a function of completing this survey, please contact the Distress Centre of Ottawa and Region at 613-238-3311, <http://www.dcottawa.on.ca/>. If you are a Carleton student, you may prefer to contact the Carleton University Health and Counselling Services at 613-520-6674, www.carleton.ca/health/services/counselling/index.html.