

# Age differences in women's tendency to gossip are mediated by their mate value

Citation for published version (APA):

Massar, K., Buunk, A. P., & Rempt, S. (2012). Age differences in women's tendency to gossip are mediated by their mate value. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 52(1), 106-109. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2011.09.013>

## Document status and date:

Published: 01/01/2012

## DOI:

[10.1016/j.paid.2011.09.013](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2011.09.013)

## Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

## Please check the document version of this publication:

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Published as:

Karlijn Massar, Abraham P. Buunk and Sanna Rempt, 2012  
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# Age differences in women's tendency to gossip are mediated by their mate value

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*In the current study it was investigated whether age differences in women's tendency to gossip exist, and whether these could be accounted for by self-reported mate value. It was expected that younger women would report a higher tendency to gossip after reading a scenario in which a romantic rival was introduced, because they are at an age when competition for mates is salient and often intense. Moreover it was hypothesized that this higher tendency to gossip would be attributable to these women's higher mate value, since younger women have a higher reproductive capacity than older women. The results confirm these expectations: age differences in women's tendency to gossip disappeared when controlling for mate value. Discussion focuses on the interpretation and implications of these results.*

## Introduction

According to the Oxford English Dictionary (1989) gossip is 'easy, unrestrained talk or writing, especially about persons or social incidents'. Almost two thirds of adult casual conversations are devoted to matters of social importance and can thus be considered gossip (Levin & Arluke, 1985; Dunbar, 2004). Gossip can benefit individual members of a group: it can be used to enforce group norms and enhance conformity, to detect cheaters, and to discourage free riders (Dunbar, 1996; 2004). However, in addition to being socially beneficial, gossip can also be used to the benefit of the individual. Gossip – honest or deceptive – may be one strategy by which individuals compete for scarce resources by using information to damage their opponents' reputations and improve their own (Barkow 1992; Buss & Dedden 1990; Emler 1994; Hess & Hagen 2006).

Indeed, an evolutionary approach to gossip (e.g. Buss & Dedden, 1990; Campbell, 1999, 2004; Dunbar, 2004) views it as a strategy used in intrasexual competition, more specifically as a form of competitor derogation, especially for women. Competitor derogation refers to any act that is performed for the purposes of decreasing, relative to oneself, a rival's mate value, and is focused on the traits that are preferred most by the opposite sex, such as attractiveness for women (e.g., Buss & Dedden, 1990). Since women's intrasexual competition tactics are less directly aggressive than men's intrasexual competition strategies, an evolutionary view on gossip assumes that this tactic is mostly used by women. Moreover, this perspective leads one to expect that individuals would be especially interested in the activities of same-sex others, and that the content of gossip centers on damaging other women's sexual reputation and physical appearance, since these are characteristics central to female mate value. Indeed, both these expectations have been confirmed by recent research.

Regarding the focus of the gossip, McAndrew and Milenkovic (2002) found that participants were most interested in information about others of the same sex, were more likely to pass along negative

information about rivals, but were more likely to protect negative information about friends and relatives. Interestingly, although no sex differences were found in the interest in reputation gossip about potential mates (De Backer, Nelissen, & Fisher, 2007), research has shown that differences in the recall of gossip about sexual rivals do exist: Women more than men recalled information about the mating skills of potential rivals, irrespective of their relationship status. Similarly, McAndrew, Bell, and Garcia (2007) report that women were three times as likely as males to be interested in gossip about same-sex others, i.e. rivals, as they were in gossip about their own lovers. Women also indicated they would be just as likely to share gossip with their same-sex friends as with their romantic partners, whereas men were much more likely to confide in romantic partners than in male friends.

Regarding the content of the gossip, research (Buss & Dedden, 1990; Owens, Shute, & Slee, 2000) has shown that especially derogative comments about other women's appearance and to a lesser extent her sexual reputation, rank high in female gossip topics. Moreover, these negative remarks about other women's attractiveness seem to have the intended effect on men, i.e. to make the rival less appealing to them. A study by Fisher and Cox (2009) showed that men judged the appearance of a woman's rival as less attractive when derogative remarks about this rival's appearance were made. Moreover, they were more influenced by these remarks when the gossiping was done by an attractive than by an unattractive woman. However, in another study (Fisher, Shaw, Worth, Smith, & Reeve, 2010) it was shown that gossiping also affects one's own desirability as a mate: men's evaluations of a derogator's friendliness, kindness, trustworthiness and overall desirability significantly decreased by her gossiping. Interestingly enough, their opinions of her attractiveness and promiscuity were not affected by the fact that she made derogatory remarks about other women.

The research summarized above suggests that gossip is an effective way for women to make same-sex members less attractive to the opposite sex – especially when the gossip comes from someone with a high mate value. Indeed, Campbell (2004) posits that women compete with each other by employing two strategies at the same time: As well as advertising their own strong points through the enhancement of their appearance (e.g. by wearing make-up or tight clothes), they gossip about other women to damage their reputation and social standing. Interestingly, in extreme cases when women resort to physical violence, research (Campbell, 1986) has shown that the most common reason (accounting for 46% of fights) was an attack on the girl's personal integrity, which included instances where there had been allegations about the girl's promiscuity, or gossiping behind her back. Especially young women, who are in their reproductive years, when competition for mates is salient and often intense, have been shown to resort to gossiping as an intrasexual competition tactic (Campbell, 2004). In the current study we therefore focus on female participants, and we expect younger women to have a higher tendency to gossip than older women.

Research has shown repeatedly (e.g. Buss, 1989; Kenrick & Keefe, 1992) that younger women have a higher mate value than older women, due to their greater reproductive capacity. Indeed, recent research (Jokela, 2009) showed that attractive women, that is, women with a high mate value, were more likely to marry, and had more children than their unattractive counterparts. Therefore, we hypothesize that the expected age differences in gossip tendency will disappear when controlling for our participants' self-reported mate value. In the current study we will confront female participants

with a situation in which a romantic rival is introduced, and will ask them how likely they will be to tell negative things about her to other people, i.e. their tendency to gossip. We expect younger women to gossip more than older women, and that this can be explained by their higher self-reported mate value.

## **Method**

### *Pilot study*

In an online pilot study among 160 female students of the University of Groningen (age  $M = 20.03$ ,  $SD = 2.97$ ) it was investigated whether the responses to our scenario did indeed measure a tendency to gossip. Participants in this study first completed the Attitudes to Gossip scale (ATG; Litman & Pezzo, 2005). This questionnaire consists of 12 items, examples of which are: 'It is fun to talk about other people', 'Gossip is often true', and 'I love to know what is going on in people's lives'. Responses on this questionnaire are given on a 5-point scale (1 = disagree strongly, 5 = agree strongly);  $M = 2.94$ ,  $SD = .50$ . Participants then read the scenario and answered the questions (see materials section below). Coefficient alpha = .94;  $M = 2.07$ ,  $SD = .40$ . The ATG and our own gossip questionnaire were positively correlated with each other:  $r = .19$ ,  $p < .05$ . Thus, we conclude our questionnaire does indeed measure a – state – tendency to gossip.

### *Participants*

Eighty-three females participated in the current study (age range 20-50,  $M = 30.37$ ,  $SD = 12.29$ ). They were approached on and near the leisure areas of the University of Groningen and asked to participate in a study on interpersonal relationships. At the time of the experiment, 79.5% of the participants reported having a relationship: 24% of participants were in a relationship but not living together, 23% were living together, and 32.5% were married. All methods and procedures in this study were approved by the Ethical Committee Psychology of the University of Groningen.

### *Materials and procedure*

All participants received a paper and pencil questionnaire. After providing some demographic information (age, relationship status) they filled in the Dutch translation of the Self-Perceived Mating Success Scale (Landolt, Lalumière, & Quinsey, 1995). On a five-point scale (1 = not at all, 5 = very much) participants indicated how applicable certain statements about their 'market value' were to them. Examples are: 'I receive many compliments from members of the opposite sex', and 'I receive invitations for sex from members of the opposite sex'. Coefficient alpha = .89,  $M = 2.99$  ( $SD = .85$ ).

The next part of the study consisted of the experimental manipulation. Participants first read the following scenario:

*Imagine the following situation: Meet your new neighbor, Karen. You are single, and you have been in love with a man that has been living on your street for a while now. Lately, Karen has also started to show an interest in this man. She is constantly flirting with him and trying to get his attention. You*

*really like this man and you are very upset that you now have a rival. How would you feel in this situation?*

After reading this scenario, participants answered a series of questions about their reactions in a situation like this. First of all, they indicated on a 5-point scale how kind, intelligent, loyal, caring, understanding, and dedicated they thought Karen was. Coefficient alpha of these items was .91, so it was decided to average them into a variable we labeled 'Opinion about the rival' ( $M = 2.77$ ,  $SD = .62$ ). Participants then answered 16 questions about their tendency to gossip in this specific situation, for example: 'I would tell negative things about Karen to other people', 'I would tell my friends that Karen is unkind', and 'I would tell the man I am in love with that Karen isn't faithful in relationships' (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Coefficient alpha = .98. Considering this high alpha we averaged the scores on these questions into a variable we labeled 'Tendency to gossip',  $M = 2.22$  ( $SD = .99$ ). After completing all questions, participants were thanked for their participation and debriefed.

## **Results**

### *Exploratory analysis*

To investigate how our independent and dependent variables were associated with each other, we first conducted an exploratory correlation analysis. As predicted, participant age was negatively associated with both the Tendency to gossip ( $r = -.27$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and with self-reported Mate value ( $r = -.38$ ,  $p < .001$ ), but not with Opinion about the rival ( $r = -.04$ , ns). Mate Value and Tendency to gossip were positively correlated with each other ( $r = .44$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Self-reported Mate value was negatively correlated with the Opinion about the rival ( $r = -.27$ ,  $p < .05$ ). We also entered Relationship status into the analysis, but this variable was not associated with any of the other variables ( $r$ 's  $< -.20$ , ns).

### *Mediation analysis*

To test our main hypothesis, mediation was investigated using hierarchical regression analysis. As predicted and as can be seen in Figure 1, the relationship between participant age and tendency to gossip is mediated by mate value. The standardized regression coefficient between participant age and tendency to gossip decreased substantially when controlling for mate value ( $t(78) = -1.28$ , ns). The other conditions of mediation were also met: Participant age was a significant predictor of mate value ( $t(79) = -3.67$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and of the tendency to gossip ( $t(80) = -2.59$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and mate value was a significant predictor of the tendency to gossip while controlling for participant age ( $t(79) = 4.40$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Thus, we conclude that younger women have a higher tendency to gossip than older women, but that this elevated tendency can be attributed to their higher mate value.

We also conducted a regression analysis on the Opinion about the rival. This revealed no significant effect of age ( $B = -.03$ ,  $t(74) = -.34$ , ns). However, mate value turned did have a significant effect on women's Opinion about the rival:  $B = -.18$ ,  $t(73) = -2.43$ ,  $p < .05$ . Women with a high mate value (+1SD) reported a significantly lower opinion than women with a low mate value (-1SD):  $M = 2.60$  and  $M = 2.96$  respectively. Furthermore, the opinion about the rival was a significant predictor of the

tendency to gossip ( $B = -.55$ ,  $t(74) = -5.80$ ,  $p < .001$ ), indicating that the more negative their opinion about the rival, the higher women's tendency to gossip about her. However, there was no support for mediation or moderation when these variables were entered into a regression analysis together. Moreover, regression analysis showed that relationship status was not a significant predictor of the tendency to gossip, and that it did not influence the other variables ( $B's < -.12$ )<sup>1</sup>.

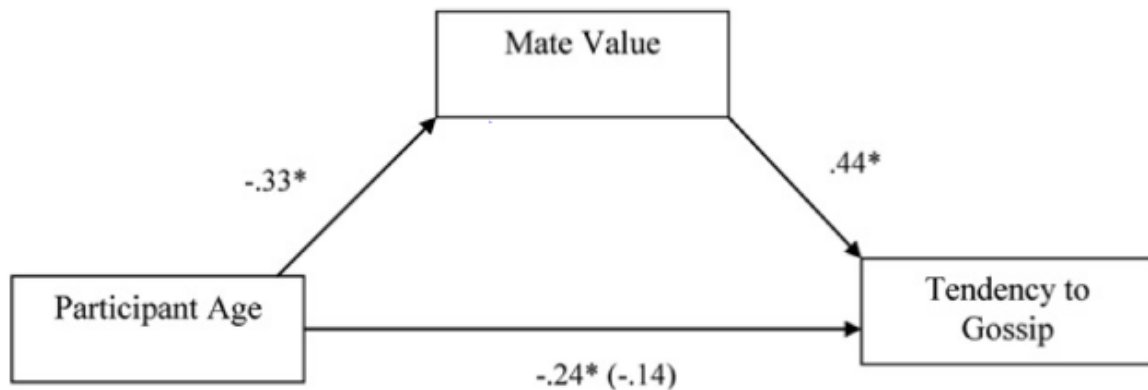


Figure 1. Standardized regression coefficients for the relationship between participant age and tendency to gossip as mediated by mate value. The standardized regression coefficient between participant age and tendency to gossip controlling for mate value is in parentheses.

\*  $p < .05$

## Discussion

In the current paper, we investigated whether there are any age differences in women's tendency to gossip, and whether these might be due to younger women's higher mate value. The results showed there was indeed an effect of age on women's tendency to gossip. Overall, younger women reported a higher tendency to gossip about a rival. However, a mediation analysis showed that this difference was due to the fact that younger women have a higher mate value: the effect of age on the tendency to gossip disappeared when mate value was entered into the analysis. This result fits in with research by Fisher and Cox (2009), who showed that derogative gossip about another woman's appearance was more successful – that is, men subsequently rated this woman as less attractive – when the gossiping woman was attractive herself. The current study adds to this literature by showing that, as was reasoned by Campbell (2004), younger women indeed have a higher tendency to gossip than older women, presumably because they are in a stage of their life when competition for mates is very salient and relevant, and that these age differences can be explained by younger women's higher mate value. Interestingly, women's opinion about the rival was not influenced by their age, but mate value did influence this opinion: the higher women's mate value, the more negative their opinion about the other woman was. Moreover, this opinion in turn influenced their tendency to gossip: a more negative opinion led to a higher tendency to gossip about the rival.

<sup>1</sup> Regression analysis showed that relationship status was not a significant predictor of the tendency to gossip, and that it did not influence the other variables ( $B's < -.12$ ). We therefore do not consider this variable any further in our analyses.

The results from this study fit in with an evolutionary account of women's intrasexual competition tactics, which would predict that it is indeed younger women with a higher mate value who would be most likely to use gossip to compete with each other for mates, by derogating other women's appearance and reputation. Interestingly, although one would expect that women who are currently not in a relationship would have a higher tendency to gossip, since for them intrasexual competition is even more salient, we found no effect of relationship status on participants' mate value, or their tendency to gossip. This finding is in line with earlier research (De Backer et al., 2007), which also found that irrespective of relationship status, women recalled more information about their rivals' mating skills than men. The current result could be due to the fact that whereas women who are not in a relationship compete with rivals to attain mates, mated women compete with rivals to retain their mates. Both these situations thus lead to intrasexual competition, albeit caused by different motives.

Our results also fit in with a social comparison perspective on gossip (Wert & Salovey, 2004), which assumes that negative gossip may be seen as a response to certain situational triggers that heighten social comparison motives, for example the presence of a sexual rival. Wert and Salovey (2004) argue that the threat of a rival evokes jealousy because one makes upward comparisons with the rival, and negative gossip about her could be an indirect – and socially accepted – way to express this jealousy. Moreover, even though comparing oneself to the rival may produce negative emotions like jealousy or envy, it also provides an opportunity to assess which qualities of the rival might appeal to one's (prospective) partner. It thereby also functions to highlight which qualities one needs to improve in oneself. In this sense, gossip functions as a tool for self-improvement as well as a tool to compete with other women. It would be interesting in future studies to investigate how women's tendency to compare themselves to other people, and especially to romantic rivals, influences one's opinion of the rival and one's tendency to gossip.

Interestingly, a social comparison account of gossip also leads to predictions in the opposite direction, i.e. that low mate value women would be more likely to gossip than women with a high mate value. For example, the literature on contrast effects in attractiveness (e.g., Kenrick & Gutierrez, 1980; Wade & Abetz, 1997; Gutierrez, Kenrick, & Partch, 1999) would predict that these women have a harder time competing with a rival for mates, which would lead them to gossip more about their rivals. For example, Gutierrez et al. (1999) report that women lowered their self-ratings of their desirability as a marriage partner after exposure to a physically attractive female. These authors suggest that these results could be caused by changes in the perceived population of competitors rather than direct changes in self-perceptions of mate value. With regard to intrasexual competition, one could hypothesize that these women could be more likely to resort to gossip to derogate the rival's attractiveness, which would help to restore their self-views. To investigate this, future studies could manipulate the attractiveness of the rival, e.g. by accompanying the scenario with a picture of an attractive or unattractive woman, to see whether this has an effect on participants' self-reported mate value and their subsequent tendency to gossip about a rival.

#### *Limitations and future research*

The present study has some limitations that need to be addressed. For example, although we did ask participants' opinion about the rival, we focused most on reputation gossip in the current study, and



we do not know our participants' opinion of the physical attractiveness of the rival, which, as we discussed above, could be an essential variable that determines the tendency to gossip. Another limitation of the present study could be that the current study provided participants with possible statements they could make about the rival, to gauge the likelihood that participants would make these kinds of remarks to the people in their social network. However, it could also be interesting to ask participants in an open-ended question about their 'natural behavior' in situations like these. Perhaps some women also use more direct intrasexual competitive tactics, like approaching the rival and commenting on her behavior, in addition to merely gossiping about her. Based on our results and the literature, we would predict these more direct competitive tactics would be more frequent among women with a low mate value than among women with a high mate value. Since gossip is more effective when it comes from women with a high mate value than when it comes from women with a low mate value (Fisher & Cox, 2009), this latter group of women might have to resort to additional, more direct, competition tactics. Moreover, age differences could be investigated here as well. Finally, it would be interesting to examine the influence of age and mate value on the tendency to gossip in situations other than those involving mating. For example, we would like to investigate how these factors influence gossip in organizations to examine whether gossip in these settings also comes from women with high mate value, and whether and how mate value interacts with power.

To conclude, the results from the study reported in the current paper are in line with the suggestions made by Campbell (2004): Especially young women, who are in their reproductive years when competition for mates is salient and often intense, are likely to resort to gossiping as an intrasexual competition tactic – especially when they have a high mate value.

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