

How Negative Gossip Enforces Social Conformity in Vietnamese Communities

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Gossiping is generally considered the act of discussing the personal or private affairs of others, and it can involve spreading or fabricating false information. While gossiping doesn't always carry ill intent, it typically carries a negative connotation as it involves judgment of one's character and can impact one's reputation. Gossiping is prevalent in all cultures but is especially normalized in Asian communities. Sun asserts that "gossiping ... is extremely prevalent in Asian culture. In most Asian families, regardless of how closely knit, very little can happen without it being circulated through the family grapevine" (Sun, 2022). Gossiping also plays a significant role in *Crazy Rich Asians*, which, upon its release in 2018, was the "first modern story with an all-Asian cast and an Asian-American lead in 25 years" (Ho, 2018). While revolutionary for its time, the film portrayed Asian culture and the Asian-American experience, yet it also perpetuated Asian stereotypes, including gossiping. Within the first few minutes of the movie, a photo of the main characters, taken by a stranger, spreads from New York worldwide through text messages and social media, eventually reaching one of the photographed character's mothers in Singapore within minutes (Chu, 2018). This scene illustrates the power of gossiping and its integral role in Asian culture.

Gossiping affects three types of participants: those who are the subjects of gossip, those who actively spread gossip, and those who act as bystanders. Subjects of gossip may experience feelings of guilt, shame, and ostracization, leading them to alter their behavior and conform to social norms out of fear of exclusion and loss of status. Active gossipers may feel compelled to engage in gossip to stay relevant and feel influential in the discourse but may later experience remorse for harming others. Many bystanders become addicted to gossip; for example, Nhung, a

50-year-old resident in the central province of Thanh Hoa, admitted, "I feel uneasy if I don't go online for a few hours" (Nguyen, 2023), due to her fear of missing out on scandalous information. By staying informed about what others consider socially unacceptable, bystanders reinforce the majority's beliefs.

The fear of exclusion creates a cycle in which individuals who seek acceptance feel compelled to contribute to others' downfalls to reinforce their ideals, while those facing torment feel pressured to change their behavior to stop the harassment. Also, individuals who may not have previously believed something, may unintentionally conform to social norms through the pressure to gossip. Vietnamese communities demonstrate how negative gossip can lead to changes in behavior, interactions, and treatment for all involved, creating a culture that capitalizes on others' fear of public shaming and restricts individuals from developing and following their own beliefs. In Vietnamese communities, negative gossip enforces social conformity, and despite its harm, people continue to engage in gossip culture due to its effectiveness in perpetuating social norms.

Review of Research

Imada suggests that "gossip can promote cooperation via reputational concern" (2021). They found that the possibility of positive or negative gossip encourages individuals to display prosocial behavior, emphasizing the idea that a person's reputation being subject to review influences their actions. Although they argue that there is no significant difference between individuals' reactions to the threat of positive or negative gossip, this finding may not suit Asian cultures, where reputational damage and social exclusion are more threatening. Furthermore, Feinberg agrees that "reputation systems promote cooperation and deter antisocial behavior in

groups" (2012), demonstrating how gossip effectively deters selfishness and promotes groupthink. Shank also found that gossiping fosters human cooperation, referring to it as "norm talk," and states that "norm talk was found to help sustain cooperation by linking cooperation to status conferral and noncooperation to reputational damage" (2019). In an environment where judgment is prevalent, individuals are more likely to adhere to norms, and gossip effectively promotes cooperation for both the gossiper and the subject of gossip.

Charmaraman et al. conducted a study on Asian Americans and found that they interpret negative online comments as highly personal, leading them to share less personal information online due to "fear of negative social consequences" (2018). They fear judgment and criticism of their online posts, which could affect their reputation and image, especially significant for Asian Americans, as it could tarnish a family's reputation, leading to shame. This added stress and fear of being talked about has caused Asian Americans to limit their social media presence.

Regarding the gossiper, Lian et al. explores the relationship between gossip and gossiper status, arguing that negative gossip diminishes a gossiper's status as it is seen as a "norm violation" (2023). They study the workplace, where gossiping is considered norm-violating behavior, contrasting with Vietnamese communities where gossip is seen as norm-clarifying behavior and is only viewed as violating norms when it contradicts societal norms. Gossiping is sometimes classified as a form of bullying and has clear detrimental effects on subjects of gossip, adding stress to community members who become cautious of their actions, and risking the status and possibility of repercussions for gossipers.

In a study of resistance to sand extraction in the Red River Delta, Runeckles et al. (2023) found that communities protested through "within-village whisper or gossip," illustrating the power of gossip in effecting political change. Nguyen-Akbar writes about migrants coming to

Vietnam seeking a sense of belonging. They note that even fluent Vietnamese-speaking migrants struggle to fit into small communities where gossip is rampant, with someone stating, "In Saigon, everybody knows your business." Migrants concerned about their reputation learn to act in socially acceptable ways, fostering community solidarity through norm reinforcement. Gossip holds political power in Vietnam, and for those moving there, assimilating to the culture includes recognizing gossip's role in connecting everyone and conforming to norms to avoid negative gossip.

Negative Gossip Enforces Social Conformity in Subjects of Gossip in Vietnamese Communities

Celebrities

When Vietnamese celebrities are faced with negative media coverage, followed by backlash from their audience, they feel pressure to keep their behavior in line, especially when their fame and livelihood directly depend on the acceptance of their fanbase. Hoàng Thùy Linh, a Vietnamese singer and actress, was publicized as having an arrogant attitude during a press conference where she didn't directly answer questions. Following the conference, her audience was critical of her behavior, and she responded in a public statement to the media, saying "I understand that I am responsible for apologizing to the fans who have spent their love on me" (Linh qtd. in Nhat, 2023). After being called out for her condescending behavior, Linh made a public apology to her fans which limited further scrutiny. Another celebrity who had been in the middle of a scandal is Trần Thành—a Vietnamese comedian and actor. He raised public donations towards hurricane and flooding relief efforts, but faced scrutiny when audiences accused him of benefiting from the donations and they insisted on transparency, specifically for his financial

information to be made public. Thành responded by “posting more than 1,000 pages of bank statements ... donated to support flood victims” (Nguyen, 2021), and he stated in a Facebook video, “If I am wrong, the first thing I have to face is the law” (Thành qtd. in Nguyen, 2021). Thành stood his ground and complied and delivered what his critics asked for to stop the disputes and gossip against his character. Similarly, Khắc Việt, a Vietnamese musical artist, was under fire for cussing at people criticizing his brother, which led to a boycott wave against him. He apologized at a press conference, saying, “This is a lesson for me. I apologize to my brother and fans,” (Việt qtd. in Nguyen, 2021a). After massive backlash from netizens who believe celebrities shouldn’t be using vulgar language on social media, Việt made a public apology to preserve his reputation and to assert that he will learn from his mistakes. The Vietnamese community has the power, as the majority, to call to action celebrities they believe are acting out of line. They express their views through negative gossip, and it is up to the celebrities to apologize and act properly or face the repercussions of their actions.

Average Citizens

When average citizens in Vietnamese communities are met with negative gossip, they feel social pressure to conform or become avoidant, rather than being an outlier or feeling rejected. Stephen Turban was living in Vietnam during COVID-19, and his original beliefs when coronavirus began spreading were that masks “have no use ... they don’t protect you from contracting the virus and only stop from spreading it slightly”. However, he was surrounded in an environment where “the use of facemasks became almost universal” and the new norm, to the point where those who didn’t wear facemasks in public were openly shamed and criticized. After expressing his beliefs to his friends, they retorted, “so, why don’t we all wear it to slow the spreading?” (Turban, 2020). Turban’s environment and counters from his friends led him to

reflect and conform to the norm of considering others over oneself. Overseas Vietnamese (Việt kiều)—Vietnamese people who live outside of Vietnam, who returned to live in Vietnam also found that the “threat of gossip” affected their behavior and worked “as an informal sanction against those who violate norms” (Nguyen-Akbar, 2017). Thus, Việt kiều recognized the culture of gossip in Vietnam, and to fit in, they reinforced norms by acting socially acceptable. Another example of someone feeling judgment in Vietnam is from a Reddit user under the username: o0oMoonlighto0o, who wrote about her experiences living in Đà Nẵng for 22 years, saying “When living in Vietnam, I was constantly under lots of stress ... the disrespectful/ rude/ inconsiderate people on the street randomly judging/ giving comments on me.” (o0oMoonlighto0o, 2023). The negative gossip she faced put her under so much pressure that she chose to leave. Average Vietnamese citizens, when called out for straying from the norms, feel the need to conform or to find another way of avoiding negative gossip, rather than facing further harassment or critical comments. In some examples, citizens recognized their faults and found the virtue in having their behavior corrected, and it helped them to solidify a better connection with their community. In other examples, negative gossip led to citizens leaving when the stress of social exclusion and public punishment was beyond a tolerable limit.

Gossipers Enforce Social Conformity with Negative Gossip in Vietnamese Communities

Traditional Oral Gossipers

In traditional Vietnamese villages, oral gossipers enforce their beliefs on others, to restrict unacceptable behavior and to achieve a collective ethos. However, when different views become more widely accepted from the community, majority ideals shift, and the gossipers face backlash instead. This can be seen in Bắc Đòng, a village in Hà Nam Province, where a migrant,

Núi, was returning to her hometown after leaving for a few years, and she brought with her newfound riches, trying to share and donate her wealth with the villagers. Her economic success was initially met with mixed reactions, even leading to one of the villagers, Thúy, calling Núi “a selfish old hag ... a bad and immoral woman who had more than one husband and had used her wealth to shout at and scold villagers”. Thúy’s plan backfired as most people had taken a liking to Núi. The village leaders and authorities had threatened to discipline Thúy, and the villagers ended up gossiping about Thúy, calling her “a stubborn and undesirable woman” (Binh, 2016). Thúy faced many insults, and her plan of slandering Núi to elevate her own status had failed. The village collectively viewed Thúy’s actions as socially unacceptable, and Thúy was ostracized. In Vietnamese immigrant communities, Vietnamese women in traditional rural society used gossip “to cope with male authority in the family and community” by impacting their reputation. In one household, the father, Chau, was physically assaulting his wife, Thu. The women’s neighborhood group began gossiping about the abuse, and it brought pressure onto Chau. “Chau found his reputation throughout the community affected by the rapidly disseminated judgments of the women’s group ... Chau had been ostracized not only by the women but also by male friends and relatives”. The pressure led to Chau leaving the city, and Thu was able to live peacefully with her children. The gossipers enforced their beliefs that Chau’s abuse was unethical, and when Chau ended up isolated, he fled. This scenario of a community coming together to ostracize Chau further enforces the idea concluded from the study done by researchers at Stanford and the University of Maryland that “people are more likely to cooperate in the presence of a known gossip because they want to protect their own reputation and avoid falling victim to the rumor mill” (Pan, 2024). Gossiping provides a reward and incentive since people will usually cooperate with a known gossip, and this benefit inspires others to gossip. In

another instance, Lien was receiving objections from her husband to find employment, even though he was often unemployed, and they were struggling to make ends meet. At a gathering, the women began gossiping and discussing the situation, ultimately concluding that Lien must work to feed her children, and as a result, “Lien’s husband found himself under community pressure to accept Lien’s decision to work outside the home” (Kibria, 1990). Through gossip, the women were effective in swaying Lien’s husbands’ opinion to conform with what they believed was correct, given the situation. The gossipers enforced norms by making an example out of Chau and Lien’s husband of what was considered socially unacceptable in the community. This cycle coerces others into social conformity to avoid the threat of having their reputation at stake.

Modern Cyber Gossipers

Cyber gossipers are like oral gossipers, with the main difference being that they spread their gossip through social media rather than by word of mouth. Similarly, their goals are to fix the behavior of others or to send a message. It is up to others online to agree with these ideals, or to reject them and cause the gossipers to conform. Sofia, a Vietnamese singer, has experienced many body shaming comments online, and after growing upset, she responded, “In my singing career, I have never been in such a situation. Sad!” (Sofia qtd. in Di, 2023). Following this, the people leaving these negative comments were criticized, and they attempted to resolve the situation by saying “It was just a joke” (Di, 2023). Many fans tried to protect Sofia in the comments, and Sofia tearfully said, “Out there, there are many people who sympathize with the problem of body shaming and love me for my people and voice” (Sofia qtd. in MAI, 2023). Although many people criticized her body shape, this didn’t cause Sofia to conform because they became the minority after her fans rallied against them. This sent a powerful message and pushed more modern ideals since the gossipers immediately tried to backtrack and preserve their

reputation by stating that all their remarks were jokes. However, sometimes fans act against celebrities after a scandal, especially if it is based on deep-rooted Vietnamese ideals. In 2013, Hoàng Thùy Linh was a beloved Vietnamese actress who played a high school student upholding traditional virtues on a TV show. At 19-years-old, a sex video involving her began circulating online and she faced negative remarks and severe consequences to her career; notably, a high school teacher responded that “[Kids] often exceed the limits of morality. ... A good girl must keep herself clean until she is married. Thuy Linh should be condemned. If I ever see her again on TV, I will turn it off, for sure” (Khanh qtd. in Stocking, 2013). There may have been a handful of voices in Linh’s defense, but most media outlets used the video as a “target of jokes and condemnation” (Stocking, 2013). Linh’s show was canceled, and she had to apologize on national television, saying “I made a mistake, a terrible mistake. I apologize to you, my parents, my teachers and my friends” (Linh qtd. in Stocking, 2013). In America, when the same thing happened to Paris Hilton several years before this incident, Hilton was met with fame and opportunities, and her tape skyrocketed her reality TV series. As opposed to America, Vietnam has a sexually conservative culture towards women, and because of this, Linh was pressured to make a national apology, she was ostracized with no forgiveness, and she was punished by having her career destroyed. Another example of online criticism is when Quyên Linh, a famous Vietnamese actor, had claimed he had acid reflux, and that a tablet he was advertising cured his health problem. He was faced with uproar when audiences claimed he was exaggerating or being fraudulent to sell the medicine. Linh apologized to the media, saying, “I failed to exercise control when I said the product is 70 times better than others. This is a lesson for me after 20 years in showbiz. I apologize” (Nguyen, 2021b). Linh’s untruthful claims negatively affected his fans and damaged his reputation. When gossipers’ ideals are accepted by the majority, this sends a

message towards the Vietnamese community to use the subjects of gossip as an example of how others should not act, and in this case, the message is that celebrities should think before doing brand deals, because the audiences made it clear that they can see through the celebrities' deceptions.

Media Outlets

Vietnamese newsletters publicize and spread gossip with dirt and embarrassing headlines to attract subscribers. Their strategy of posting criticism online is effective in garnering attention and interaction with their content. VnExpress, one of the most popular websites in Vietnam, is notorious for this. One of their articles is titled, “‘Vietnamese Kim Kardashian’ denies asset freeze claims” (Anh, 2024). By using a globally recognized name like “Kim Kardashian”, and an eye-catching topic like “asset freeze”, they pull viewers in and maximize their audience to spread the rumors. Another one of their articles is titled, “Actress apologizes for dating scandal with tech entrepreneur” (Chung, 2023). Again, they used keywords people would be interested in, like “scandal” and “tech entrepreneur”. The post had comments, including one stating, “I’m not a gambler but I’ll bet that if Phoung Oanh and Binh get married in the future, the next thing that will happen is another divorce because Binh will find another younger woman” (claroojarioabarjr qtd. in Chung, 2023). The article was able to draw people in and have them interested in the content enough to make a comment to contribute to the conversation. *Chân dung Quyền lực* is another Vietnamese newsletter, but its primary focus is on exposing the corruption of high-profile politicians. An article on its front page is titled, “Information from the Central Health Protection Board: Mr. Nguyen Ba Thanh has been poisoned!” (*Chân dung Quyền lực*, 2023). The title named Mr. Nguyen Ba Thanh—a “member of the Party Central Committee, Head of the Central Internal Affairs Commission”, and used the dramatic word “poisoned”. The

strength of the article title amassed nearly 10,000 reactions. Media outlets understand their audiences and know what “juicy” titles will draw them in, and they use this to their advantage to maximize the spread of and interactions with their negative gossip for views and social capital, and thereby enforce social conformity.

Negative Gossip Enforces Social Conformity in Bystanders in Vietnamese Communities

Online Bystanders

Online users who sit back and watch as the drama and scandals unfold learn what is socially acceptable through consumption of content, and inadvertently adopt the norms. In a podcast spotlighting Ngoc Hieu, a resident of Ho Chi Minh City, Hieu talks about her fear of losing connection, and wanting to always be on her phone, even willing to wake up in the middle of the night to check for anything new posted online (Ngan, 2024). Only hours after the podcast was uploaded, the comment section became flooded with many commenters sharing similar stories, like Thanh Nguyen stating, “Connecting and updating news gives me a feeling of more power, more understanding and not being left behind” (Nguyen qtd. in Ngan, 2024). Bystanders believe constantly consuming the news helps them gain understanding, and what they’re learning is what the community deems is allowable. Another story of a Vietnamese resident addicted to being part of the gossip is Nhung, who reads her news online, and states, “the more I read, the more I’m addicted, especially posts about affairs or other exposes on [the private lives of] individuals. It has become a habit, and I feel uneasy if I don’t go online for a few hours” (Nhung qtd. in Nguyen, 2023). Furthermore, many Asian women in a study had a need to “stay on top of real-time information about events, activities, and conversations across their social networks” due to FOMO—the Fear of Missing Out. They were “more fixated on the fear of being the last to

know or becoming irrelevant if finding out or posting a reaction too late. This sense of urgency can fuel more pressure to stay on top of the latest news” (Charmaraman, 2018). Thus, many people in Vietnam share the same sentiment that their anxiety and fear of becoming disconnected fuels their addiction to drama and scandals.

Conclusion

In Vietnamese communities, negative gossip enforces social conformity towards the ones being gossiped, the gossipers, and the bystanders, through shame, ostracization, and restrictions. Gossiping capitalizes on the importance of reputation in Vietnamese culture and the significance of fitting into a social group, considering that “in Vietnam one’s self conception is not nearly as important as the views of the community at large”. Shame can be devastating to someone’s status, and “when someone loses face, others in their community look down at them and their social standing is lowered” (Bloomer, 2014). Thus, when the majority calls to action and pressures those who don’t follow the social norms, they are likely to fix their behavior, and this sends a message to the rest of the community of the consequences faced when going against the grain. When this message is spread out through media outlets, it’s consumed by netizens who then learn how to act to avoid being rejected by their community. Gossiping can be harmful, but it can also be beneficial when those being shamed reflect and agree with the majority ideals, and can, as a result, deepen their connection with the community.

Gossiping is not only effective in enforcing social norms, but it is also “a way for people to bond and get along” (Nguyen, 2018). Researchers found that honest gossip helps people to learn other’s reputations and to use that to choose who they want to connect with and foster

cooperation (Pan, 2024), making it beneficial for social circles where people with similar opinions can validate each other's emotions.

The fundamentals of gossip aren't restricted to Vietnam, and transcend gender, age, culture, and socioeconomic backgrounds (Pan, 2024). When used truthfully, gossip can be a tool and strategy that informs people of improper behavior and capitalizes on others' fear of public shaming to continue the cycle of using gossip to impose social norms and create social change.

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