He Said, She Said: Perceived Risks and Rewards of Gossip in Rural Towns

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ABSTRACT

The following study analyzed what individuals perceive as the risks and rewards of gossip in rural towns. Twelve interviews were conducted with individuals who have lived in a rural town for at least ten years. Thematic analysis was used to evaluate their perceptions, and nine major themes were observed. The analysis was compared to previous research to better understand the history of the risks and rewards of gossip. Interviewees shared diverse perceptions of gossip in rural towns and offered insight as to how it affects everyday life. The perceptions reported support the idea that gossip is highly influential in constructing positive and negative consequences in rural towns. Individual's experiences with gossip had a meaningful effect on the way in which their rural town communicated.

INTRODUCTION

Approximately 62 million people, or nearly one in five Americans, live in rural towns (Sergo, 2014). According to the United States Department of Agriculture, a town is considered to be 'rural' if its population is less than 2,500 people (La Caille John, 2014). Rural towns are greatly valued in America (Berry, 1994). They contribute immensely to the economy by providing an abundant amount of agricultural products and employment (McManus, 2012). In addition, rural towns are important to one's self-identity. Rural towns create a strong sense of belonging, which contributes to a strong sense of local community and potential for resilience (Bell, 1992).

There are many common characteristics of rural communities such as availability of land, which makes agriculture the primary industry for most rural areas (Courtney & Errington, 2010). Other shared characteristics of rural communities include abundant wildlife, social solidarity, and knowing everyone, including the details of community member's lives. Knowing the majority of people shapes the community's behavior in a rural context (Haugen & Villa, 2006). While providing comfort and familiarity, this closeness in rural communities also applies a form of social control over individuals' behavior. This is because individuals feel pressure to maintain a good reputation and avoid becoming the "talk of the town," or what many people gossip about (Haugen & Villa, 2006).

Gossip is the unverified news about the personal affairs of others and is shared between individuals informally (Haugen & Villa, 2006). According to Farley (2011), gossip is defined as evaluative talk about others while not in their presence. Gossip is especially prevalent in rural towns because of the low population growth, closeness, and connectivity between individuals. While many people perceive gossip to be negative, gossip is necessary for social functions including communicating cultural norms, relaying positive information, and demonstrating power (Farley, 2011). Gossip is an influential component of society, as it has many social consequences and is central to community life (Haugen & Villa, 2006).

Due to the prevalence of gossip in today's society, the field of communication has extensive research on gossip and its effects on those involved. However, the relationship between rural-life and gossip remains relatively unexplored. As society is heavily reliant on technology, the majority of communication studies explore gossip and social media, as the two often intertwine (Herriman, 2010); however, there is little research focusing on people's perceptions of the use and effects of gossip, especially in rural communities. The purpose of this study is to use the communication privacy management theory to examine the perceived risks and rewards of gossip in rural towns.

In order to be a proficient communicator, it is crucial to consider other's differences and values, which are attributed to an individual's background and life experience. Even though four out of five Americans reside in metropolitan areas, much of society is connected to individuals from rural towns through relocation, travel, business, and education (Parr & Philo, 2003). Because gossip is an influential factor in rural communities, by understanding

gossip and people's perceptions on gossip, one gains a better sense of communication (Haugen & Villa, 2006). This paper will explore the perceived risks, rewards, and rules surrounding gossip in rural towns.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The following section will provide an overview of the existing research on rural communities and gossip to indicate how the current study ties in. By gaining a more extensive understanding of gossip in rural communities, it is easier to interpret the perceived risks and rewards of gossip in rural towns. The communication privacy management theory is addressed, as it explicates an individual's need to disclose certain information while keeping other information private. Researchers' previous explorations on the communication privacy management theory will be considered in relation to gossip in rural towns.

Gossip

The topic of gossip has been a widely studied research area that has been explored in various contexts. According to Hansen (1993):

> Gossip may consist of simple information that includes both good and bad tidings, such as news of a sister's wellbeing or of a neighbor's death. Alternatively it may be talk to discredit with potentially destructive repercussions. Most often, gossip is information tinged with judgment – explicit or assumed. (p.43)

With the advent of social media, current research often focuses on Internet platforms, which people often use as an outlet for gossiping (Herriman, 2010). While the Internet may dissolve community boundaries, there are still people behind those platforms. This is why it is important to consider previous research on gossip, much of which focuses on particular people in particular communities, resulting in very narrow and focused studies. The current study factors in various rural towns, which creates broad research results.

Beginning the examination of past research, one such study focused on people of the past. In Hansen's (1993) study on the role of gossip in antebellum New England, the research focused on written accounts from diaries and letters that provide intimate details on the day-to-day discussions of New Englanders. Through the correspondence, Hansen showed that gossip served as a form of social control because a person's reputation was central to their ability to function in their communities. In one particular instance, a schoolteacher's chastity was called into question as a result of communal rumors, eventually resulting in a community trial. The jury ruled in favor of the schoolteacher, who also won a countersuit for libel in the attempt to damage her reputation. Though there are other examples in the study, this one in particular showcased the seminal role that gossip played in antebellum New England to control everyday life (Hansen, 1993). This study is similar to the current study because it focused on the importance of gossip within a community. However, it did not touch on people's perceptions of gossip, which is a main focus of the current study. In addition, this study is out of date, while the current study was contemporary.

In other research, Farley (2011) focused on the relationship between gossip, power, and likability. In the study, questionnaires were used to shed light on how individuals perceive people that gossip in varying amounts and in either positive or negative ways. The study concluded that those who gossip with lower frequency, or not very often, are perceived as more powerful than those who gossip with high frequency, or those who gossip regularly. The study also found that those who gossip positively at a high frequency were perceived to be more powerful than those who gossip negatively at a high frequency. Thus, high frequency, negative gossipers were perceived to be the least powerful (Farley, 2011). This is one of the few studies that incorporate people's perceptions on gossip. However, where this study focused on people's general perceptions of power and gossip, the current study focused on a particular segment of the population, that being the rural population.

Rural Communities

The closeness and social connectedness in rural communities makes it difficult for individuals to keep their lives private. This lack of privacy makes gossip more prominent in rural communities (Kennedy, 2010). This is because people are naturally more interested in the affairs of others in rural towns because their personal relationships with one another allow them to be. Even personal decisions such as political affiliation in rural communities must be carefully considered, as there is lack of privacy and prevalence of gossip (Peterson, 1990).

In relation to lack of privacy, some scholars have focused on how particular groups handle the tightknit relations of rural communities. In Kazyak's (2011) study, it was found that individuals who identify as non-heterosexual or other less traditional sexual orientations construct their personal identities within rural communities. Where this research centers on the individual's sexual identity in a rural community, evaluating and navigating rural

culture, gossiping included, the current study focused on how individuals in rural communities view the role of gossip.

In other research, scholars evaluated the structure of rural life, hoping to understand its routines and mechanisms (Jayne, 2011). Various studies highlighted the effects of budgetary issues in rural school systems. In one particular study, schools that see lower student enrollment or dwindling budgets took on a "make-do" attitude with their classes and programs. In these types of studies, the attitudes of rural communities are evaluated (Cole, 1988). The current study focused on individual's attitudes and perceptions about gossip and its importance in their lives.

Communication Privacy Management Theory

Petronio's (2007) communication privacy management (CPM) theory argues that individuals choose to disclose certain information about them while also keeping some information private. Before doing so, individuals weigh the risks and rewards of disclosing information. This theory is exemplified by Haugen and Brandth (2014), who composed a study on farm couples breaking up in rural communities. In the study, farm couples that decided to divorce were faced with the decision of how and when to make the community aware of their relationship status. According to Haugen and Brandth (2014):

> The interviews showed that farm couples often withheld information about their break up from others and that in many cases they deliberately refrained from seeking help. This finding resonates with that of other researchers, who have shown that the disclosure of personal problems and the erosion of privacy facilitate gossip, leads to stigma, and positions people as out of place. (p. 239)

The CPM theory centers on privacy boundaries, which are the limits of what people are willing to share with other individuals. The privacy boundaries separate private information from public information. The CPM theory also focuses on a rule-based management system. Individuals rely on the rules imbedded in the CPM theory to control their private information (Petronio, 2013). When individuals disclose private information to a peer, and they do not effectively follow the privacy rules, boundary turbulence often occurs (McLaren & Steuber, 2015). Boundary turbulence can be very stressful and upsetting to those involved (Petronio, 2007).

The CPM theory is relevant to the current study because it demonstrates people's attempts to keep certain information private, even though it is not always possible to do so in rural communities. It exemplifies the risks of private information being shared, which is often done so in the form of gossip. In addition, boundary turbulence is often present when an individual is being gossiped about, which is a large component of the CPM theory. By applying CPM theory to the current study, one can better understand the risks and rewards of gossip in rural towns.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

According to the CPM theory, people weigh the risks and rewards of disclosing information, before choosing to do so (Petronio, 2007). The current study focuses on what the perceived benefits and risks of gossip are, according to rural community members. Thus, the first two research questions are posed:

RQ1: What do people in rural towns perceive as the risks of gossip?

RQ 2: What do people in rural towns perceive as the rewards of gossip?

The CPM theory emphasizes particular rules that people consider before deciding whether to disclose or keep information private. The current study further considered the rules that people used in regard to gossip in rural communities. This gives a better understanding of how people perceived the usage of gossip. Thus, the third research question is posed:

RQ3: What are the rules surrounding gossip among residents of rural towns?

METHODS

The goal of this study was to interpret people's perceptions of gossip in rural towns. The following section lays out the research methods, paradigm, participants, and details of the study to assist in developing a better understanding of the process of the research study.

Method Description

This research study incorporated a qualitative method in order to conduct the research. The main objective of using a qualitative approach was to interview participants to gain a better understanding of individual's perceptions of gossip in rural towns. The qualitative approach was necessary for this study because it focuses on the idea that meaning is socially constructed by individuals in interaction with their world (Horsburgh, 2002).

The interpretivist paradigm was utilized to conduct the research. The interpretivist paradigm attempts to interpret meanings by developing a rather in depth understanding. In addition, it emphasizes that each participant involved in the study has diverse experiences and interpretations. The interpretivist paradigm provided a solid understanding of how rural community members perceive gossip. According to Tuli (2010), "The interpretive research paradigm views reality and meaning making as socially constructed and it holds that people make their own sense of social realities" (p.100). Since many of the participants had differing perceptions of gossip, the interpretivist paradigm was evident.

Participants

The target population for the study consisted of rural town members, who were at least 18 years or older of age. These participants consisted of both males and females and came from a variety of rural towns throughout the Midwest region. In order for a town to be considered rural, the population must have been of 5,000 or fewer residents. In addition, participants must have lived in the rural town for at least 10 years. A total of twelve participants were recruited through convenience sampling via Facebook. The twelve participants were comprised of seven females and five males.

Measurement

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant. The interview incorporated questions that relate to RQ1, as they were asked the benefits of gossip in their rural town. In addition, the interview contained questions that relate to RQ2, which asked what the negative aspects of gossip are in rural towns. The rest of the interview encompassed questions that corresponded with RQ3. These included questions about how gossip makes its way through town, the main topics of gossip in the rural town, and the ways in which rural town members typically gossip.

During the interview, the participants were asked a set of questions along with follow-up questions, in order to gain a better understanding of the participants' experiences with gossip. The first set of questions was aimed to establish rapport with the participant. The next set of questions was to better understand RQ1, followed by questions to answer RQ2 and RQ3 (See Appendix for protocol).

Procedure

The first step was to create an informed consent form and a set of questions for the interview protocol. The purpose of the informed consent form was to make participants aware of how the interview process would be conducted, as well as the potential risks and benefits of participating in the study. The semi-structured interview protocol allowed a framework for conducting the interview, as well as the ability to ask any necessary follow-up questions. In order to recruit participants, a Facebook post was drafted to solicit interested rural town members.

After individuals agreed to participate in the study through Facebook or email, they were interviewed face-to-face or via Skype. The interviews lasted between 10 and 40 minutes. The semi-structured face-to-face and Skype interviews were conducted in private locations, selected by the participant, which provided a comfortable space for the participant and researcher. Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Confidentiality was vital to the research and each participant was guaranteed anonymity. All participants were given a pseudonym and all other identifying characteristics were changed. Transcriptions were saved in a password-protected device and were destroyed immediately after the data were analyzed. All of the information above was made aware to participants through the informed consent form.

Data Analysis

After the twelve interviews were conducted and transcribed, the data were analyzed for themes using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The first step was to get familiar with the data by thoroughly reading the transcripts. The twelve transcription texts were then analyzed with RQ1 in mind. Any responses that indicated what the risks are of gossip in a rural town were highlighted and properly coded. Once all relevant responses were coded, these sections were analyzed repeatedly and placed into piles based on the similarity of the utterances. After all codes were placed into a pile, the piles were repeatedly read through again until the final themes emerged. After RQ1 themes were solidified, the same process was repeated for RQ2 to help answer the question what the risks of gossip are in a rural town. The process was again repeated for RQ3, which aimed to understand the rules surrounding gossip in a rural town.

RESULTS

The interviews generated a total of nine themes. The themes that arose answered the three research

questions that were presented. Themes derived from each participant's experiences, responses and perceptions of gossip in their rural town. RQ1's themes included getting a bad rep, risky business and that's depressing. RQ2's themes were takin' care of business, come together right now, and entertainment weekly. RQ3's themes consisted of fast and furious, there's no I in gossip, and #gossip.

RQ1: What do people in rural towns perceive as the risks of gossip?
        The primary focus of RQ1 was to determine the perceived negative aspects of gossip in rural towns. Three themes developed from RQ1, which include getting a bad rep, risky business, and that's depressing.

Theme 1: Getting a Bad Rep. Ten out of the twelve participants reported that the main risk of gossip is getting a bad reputation from fellow community members. They mentioned that individuals often form perceptions on people, solely based on gossip, whether it is true or false. The participants reported various ways that people in rural towns are affected, including through their education and jobs.
Colleen, who has lived in a rural town for over ten years, reported:
> In high school, one of my best friends was a senior and she went to a party. She wasn't one to party much in high school and so a lot of rumors spread that she attended the party and a lot of gossiping was done about it. She was so worried because people were talking about it and teachers heard about it. People even openly discussed it in class. I remember that she felt so bad that her teachers thought so little of her.

Colleen added:
> It can be harmful to someone's self-esteem or self-image because how people perceive you will be different after gossiping is done. Most people think really highly of you but that can be changed so easily if gossip is going around. If want to do something out of the ordinary, it just turns into a big deal.

Sherry stated:
> When I was high school, a girl spread around the school that one of my classmates cheated on her boyfriend. It never actually happened but it still made its way throughout the school. Nearly everyone was talking about the incident and it really affected the people involved. This incident proved how detrimental gossip could be to someone's reputation.

Many participants furthered their explanation and mentioned that gossip does not simply affect those being gossiped about. Participants mentioned that many reputations are at stake, including friends and family of the individual that is the subject of gossip. Sherry provided an example to support this idea:
> Gossip may not affect you, but it may affect someone in your family. For example, consider if a mom cheated on her husband. That story is likely to spread around town and come back to you. It's likely that you'll go to school or work and everyone will be talking about what's going on with your family.

Many of the interviewees exemplified the idea that gossip does not have to be true in order for people to form negative perceptions of others. They acknowledged that these discernments have the capability to ruin an individual's reputation, whether there is truth in the gossip or not. Andrew emphasized this point by stating:
> People can look at you in a negative light based off of information that may or may not be true. Also, gossip can often spread to rumors that aren't true. This can really affect people's lives in a negative way. It might not even be all negative. It just might not be accurate and therefore, it won't reflect what the real situation is.

> Multiple participants recognized that as gossip damages one's reputation, it also leads to negative

consequences in the workplace. Alison emphasized this by stating, "Sometimes if you get a new employee, it could be someone that the rest of the staff hasn't even met yet. All it takes is one piece of information to be spread about them and they are judged immediately."
Colleen added:
> If one person doesn't like you, then they spread a rumor that makes another person not like you and it's a snowball effect. It can continue and if the wrong person ends up hearing about it, it can affect you employment or your overall reputation.

The ten participants made it clear that rural community members have rather delicate reputations, since gossip has the overall power to damage it. Participants noted that this creates a sense of control over community members, considering they have a reputation to vindicate. Participants also explained that gossip could affect businesses' reputation, which is illustrated by the next theme.

Theme 2: Risky Business. Another theme encompassed into RQ1 is the idea that gossip negatively affects businesses in rural towns. Eight of the twelve participants considered gossip to have a negative effect on the businesses in their rural town. They believed that this is a consequence of bad experiences at local businesses as

well as negative perceptions on how the business is managed. Participants stated that when a fault is depicted in a business, gossip promotes the negative perceptions. Consequently, the discernment typically spreads quickly throughout the town. Participants explained that this can be detrimental to a businesses' well-being, making it challenging for businesses in rural towns to survive. Lynn stated, "If you have a bad experience at a small business, it can ruin that business' reputation by word of mouth. It can even affect an employee negatively, if something they do spreads."

Andrew, a realtor in his rural town, noted:

> People judge realtors in relation to their business, so if they were to do something – just theoretically, if one were to break the law and get a speeding ticket and it were in the paper, then people could see that they are in legal trouble. This could definitely come back to hurt their business. People don't want to work with someone after they do an act that is perceived as wrong.

Alison, focused on how gossip hurts the fundamentals of business from an inside perspective, stating:

> I think it hurts businesses more than anything because gossip among employees is one of the worst things ever. It can make your employees feel uncomfortable if other people in the workplace judge them. I think this makes a lot of people insecure. It's hard for them to do a good job at work if they constantly feel judged.

Many of the participants felt that business owners are forced to uphold a strong reputation, in order to protect their business. They elaborated by saying that gossip puts a sense of control over business owners as well. Many believed that business owners and employees feel pressure to not be negatively subject to gossip, in order to protect them at a business standpoint. As gossip has the ability to harm reputations, participants noted that this may lead to more serious consequences, which is introduced in the next theme.

Theme 3: That's Depressing. The third theme that arose from RQ1 is the perception that gossip negatively affects individuals' mental health. Six out of the twelve participants mentioned that individuals' mental health is likely to be at risk because of gossip. The primary mental health disorders that participants acknowledged were anxiety and depression. The six interviewees that focused on mental health as a negative aspect of gossip declared that gossip has the tendency to cause individuals to be outcasts. Participants noted that often times people are ostracized because they are a part of gossip in a rural town, even if there is little or no truth behind said gossip. Lynn lived in a rural town for 18 years of her life. She stated, "Gossip can cause people to be outcasts in school and have no friends. Sometimes, it affects them even after they leave the small town. They never forget those years."

Of the six participants that shared their perceptions of mental illnesses deriving from gossip, three participants extended their thoughts by disclosing that suicide may be prevalent because of gossip. Lynn disclosed, "If gossip is really bad, it can lead to depression, anxiety, and maybe even suicide." When asked about the risks surrounding gossip in rural towns, Steve firmly stated "Suicide," with no hesitation. He expanded on the reason behind the suicidal acts and said, "Depression is huge element, especially in junior high and high school."

Sherry stated:

> Gossip can affect people negatively. For example, I think gossip has unfortunately taken the lives of several people, especially those in high school. These kids, they are bullied and gossip is going on about them. Unfortunately, they feel that there is no way out, besides taking their own life, so that is always a risk of gossip.

Of the three participants that revealed suicide as a risk factor of gossip, all of them disclosed that suicides as the result of gossip had never occurred in their rural town. They cited the media as to where they learned of such suicides. Sherry said, "Suicide hasn't happened in the town that I am from but I've read it in a lot of magazines." In addition, Lynn stated, "I don't have any experiences with suicide in my rural town but I've seen it happen and heard about it in the media." While the participants had no experiences with suicide as a result of gossip in their rural town, many of the individuals stated that they have seen individuals suffer mentally because they were the subjects of gossip. Aside from the various risks of gossip, participants also presented various benefits of gossip in rural towns, which are presented through RQ2.

RQ2: What do people in rural towns perceive as the rewards of gossip?

The purpose of RQ2 was to determine what people in rural towns perceive as the benefits of gossip. Overall, participants struggled to come up with positive results of gossip, which was apparent through considerably long pauses. One participant, Nick, stated that there are no benefits to gossip in his rural town. However, through the eleven participants, three themes for RQ2 emerged, which include come together right now, takin' care of business, and entertainment weekly.

Theme 1: Come Together Right Now. The most evident benefit to gossip in rural towns was that it enables community members to come together, especially during difficult times. Participants reported that gossip allows news to spread throughout the town, which typically results in the gathering of community members to offer support. Participants acknowledged that gossip allows the community to come together for positive events, such as celebrations and milestones, as well as hardships.

Lynn stated:

> If it's good gossip, like so-and-so had a baby, people find out. If somebody has cancer, most of the town finds out and starts bringing dishes to them or comes by to see how they can help. I guess, as long as it is positive gossip, it can be rewarding.

Many of the participants explained that it is easy to provide support, since news travels quickly throughout rural areas. This allows individuals to be there for each other immediately when social support is needed, despite it being unasked for.

Brittany said:

> I learn a lot through gossip and that allows me to offer help. For example, if somebody is sick or if a friend of mine is getting married, I learn about it quickly through gossip in my small town. I don't have to hear it directly from the person that is going through life changes. This lets me offer support, even when it's unasked for.

Renee spoke about her personal experiences in reference to community involvement:

> An example is when a flower shop burnt down in the community. People gossiped about the incident and the community pulled together before an official announcement was even made. Shortly after it happened, the community gathered together for a benefit dinner, which thousands of people attended. That to me is huge and it makes it rewarding to live in a small town.

Andrew also mentioned:

> You get things in the community that makes it a tighter community. If news is going around about a sports team or things like that, then word gets out and people support it even more. People just stay tied to their community. If someone important in the community passes away, word gets around quickly and people come out to support their local community members that way.

The eleven participants that recognized gossip empowers people to come together, noted that it has benefitted the community in which they live. Many of the participants stated that relationships significantly strengthen when the community is able to support one another, which often stems from gossip. Participants also explained that gossip affects businesses in a positive manner, which is explained in the next theme.

Theme 2: Takin' Care of Business. Another major theme that arose from RQ2 was the idea that gossip positively impacts businesses in rural towns. Many of the participants mentioned that when a business excels, town members speak of their satisfying experiences at the business and it spreads to the rest of the community. Through the exchange of gossip, business in rural towns is stimulated. Lynn emphasized this idea by stating, "My family has a small business so I think they can get the benefits of people gossiping by saying they had a good experience there. A lot of times, they have returning customers." Sherry also mentioned that her family owned a small business. She stated, "With my family owning a business, most of the business comes from people in the community so gossip does have a positive effect on communities as well, not just negative."

Sherry continued by saying:

> The word gets out. If we have a new product in store or if we offer a new service, you just need to tell a few people and pretty soon the entire town is talking about it. This is true for when a business opens up as well. A café opened up in town and some people went there and really enjoyed the menu and great food. Pretty soon it was going around town, so gossip definitely helped the business bring in new people.

Many of the participants addressed that gossip can go the opposite direction as well, which consequently could hurt a business. However, they stated that most businesses work hard to maintain a good image to its town members. They also recognized that most businesses take advantage of the prevalence of gossip in rural towns, by using it to their advantage. Participants mentioned many businesses do this through strong customer service skills and engaging in eco-friendly business practices. Aside from gossip positively contributing to business practices, participants found another beneficial component of gossip, which is explicated in the next theme.

Theme 3: Entertainment Weekly. Seven out of the twelve participants noted that a benefit of gossip in a rural town is for entertainment purposes. Many of the individuals believed that gossip is an interest for the majority of rural town members. Participants noted that people like talking about other people, which is a primary factor for the occurrence of gossip. The seven participants that reported gossip as entertainment displayed remorse for

considering this a primary benefit of gossip in rural towns. Lynn mentioned, "It can be kind of entertaining sometimes to people. I think it's fun for people to talk about other people and share some of the better things that they have done." Alison found very few benefits to gossip, but still noted entertainment as one.
Lynn mentioned:

> I think that's what is interesting to the majority of people. I think they like to hear about other people. I think they even like to hear about people's misfortunes because it makes them feel better about their own life.

Many of the participants mentioned that there is little entertainment in rural towns. They noted that rural areas lack opportunities, socialization, as well as social events. Therefore, participants revealed that this causes individuals to turn to gossip as a source of entertainment. Many participants believed that if there were more happenings in rural areas, less attention would be focused on the exchange of gossip. They further explained that gossip is less predominant in large cities, primarily because there are more activities to divert attention to. Participants further their perceptions on gossip in rural towns by discussing the rules surrounding it, which is revealed in RQ3.

RQ3: What are the rules surrounding gossip among residents of rural towns?
The purpose of RQ3 was to comprehend the rules surrounding gossip in rural towns. Three themes arose from RQ3, which include #gossip, fast and furious, and there's no I in gossip.

Theme 1: #Gossip. All twelve of the participants explained that social media serves as an immense platform for gossip in rural towns. Many of the participants exemplified that social media, as a medium for gossip, is a fairly recent transition. They noted that in previous years, those involved in gossip relied primarily on face-to-face interactions. However, as society becomes increasingly reliant on technology, more individuals have used social media as an outlet for gossip.
Alison explained that many law enforcement groups also use social media, which proliferates gossip on social media:

> Even the newspaper now and the news are connected with Facebook and that feeds into it a ton. Both of the newspapers and the sheriff's department have their own Facebook page. This feeds into the idea that gossip is being spread even quicker, without even having to see somebody. You don't have to go to the bars or wherever to talk about people anymore. You can just simply see it on Facebook.

Renee also mentioned that news outlets increase the spread of gossip on social media. She said, "Especially with news outlets sharing stories on Facebook, they spread like wildfire. 2,000 shares later and the entire town knows about a news story."
Some of the participants acknowledged the prevalence of gossip on social media, but also mentioned that they were never exposed to it because when they lived in a rural town, social media was not very prominent.
Lynn explained:

> Well, when I was in high school a long time ago, there wasn't really social media so when people gossiped, it was mostly through word of mouth and phone. There were also certain environments where gossip spread more, such as bars. But now a days, I'd say that social media is probably the biggest location for gossip to spread, like through Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.

Sherry also considered gossip on social media from a negative standpoint:

> I think that adolescents are relying a lot more on technology in their everyday life. Unfortunately, this leads to a lot more gossiping being done on social media. In school, adolescents gossip in person, but when they go home it doesn't end there. They have ways to communicate with other people such as through their cellphones and especially through texting. Most kids have cellphones these days, which is also a main reason gossip is increasing on social media.

Many of the participants acknowledged that gossip on social media often leads to cyber bullying. Since social media is easily accessible, participants noted that gossip on social media sites has the ability to reach a wider audience, including individuals outside of rural towns. Gossip's ability to spread is further explained in the next theme.

Theme 2: Fast and Furious. Another major theme embedded in the rules of gossip in rural towns is that it spreads exceptionally fast. Participants noted that gossip spreads especially fast in rural towns in comparison to large cities. When questioned about the factors that play into the speed, all of the participants referred to the close proximity that is present in rural areas as well as the perception that everybody knows everybody.
Sherry explained:

> In a small town, you are going to have gossip spread around much faster because everybody knows everybody. Also, things are going to travel faster when it doesn't have as far to travel. It's like saying you are going to get there faster if you only have one mile to run versus ten miles to run. The news only has a little ways to go before it is completely spread around.

In addition, many of the participants considered the speed of gossip to be dependent on the lack of opportunities and happenings in rural areas. Since life in rural towns lacks entertainment due to the desolation, many people divert their attention to gossip. Many participants felt that this increases the speed of gossip.

Sherry mentioned:

> When you live in a small town, there isn't as much going on and there isn't as much to do or think about. Therefore a lot of people will start gossip, out of boredom. They don't have as much going on in their lives, such as new places opening. If you ever live in a small town versus a big city, you'll notice that in a small town, a lot of the conversation is based off of gossip and what is going on in the community. The need for gossip in rural towns only quickens the speed that it is spread at.

Many of the participants mentioned that the speed of gossip can have positive effects. If the gossip is true, such as a news story or event occurring in the town, people learn of it quickly and are able to act accordingly such as by showing support. Although the participants believed that gossip spread quickly throughout their town, they believed that they were not involved with the exchange. This is explained in the next theme.

Theme 3: There's No I in Gossip. All twelve of the participants spoke in second and third person when referring to gossip. They excluded themselves in gossip but also recognized that gossip is a large component of how their rural town functions.

Brittany stated:

> Gossip can definitely break apart relationships. Sometimes, bad gossip spreads around about you and it might not even be true. If someone you are close to hears something bad about you through gossip, it is likely going to affect your relationship.

Alison added:

> I feel like it's never good for people that are in relationships in a small town. It's hard for you to meet someone in a small town. It's hard for you start dating somebody, because even if you don't know them very well, you've heard things about them from other people and it's hard to depict if what you hear it is true.

Participants explained their experiences and perceptions of gossip in their rural town, without using the first person narrative. Rather than speaking of their own experiences, they referred to situations their peers have encountered due to gossip in rural towns.

DISCUSSION

The objective of this study was to understand rural town members' perceptions of gossip. Each participant was unique based on individuality, age, gender, and location, but strong themes still emerged.

RQ1: What are the risks of gossip in rural towns?

RQ1 attempted to gain insight on the negative aspects of gossip in rural towns. The three themes that developed from RQ1 include getting a bad rep, risky business, and that's depressing. Each instant a participant mentioned gossip leading to a bad reputation, being detrimental to businesses, or impacting one's mental health, it was incorporated into these themes.

The findings from this study indicated that gossip is influential in regards to one's reputation. This study suggested that members of rural towns are at risk of damaged reputations due to the high prevalence of gossip. Rural community members are aware of their reputations being at stake. This allows gossip to be a form of control over individuals in rural towns. This finding supports Hansen's (1993) work on the power of talk in Antebellum New England. Hansen (1993) stated that gossip serves as a form of social control since a person's reputation is central to their ability to function in communities. Because people care about their reputations, gossip acts as a mechanism to regulate people's behaviors. Gossip has the power to make or break a reputation (Hansen, 1993).

This study established that gossip in rural towns is detrimental to businesses. If a business fails to meet customers' expectations, news of the businesses' faults travel in the form of gossip. Gossip makes rural town members aware of shortcomings within a business, which leads to negative repercussions for the business. In addition, gossip is likely to affect employees within a business. If an employee is the subject of gossip, it is likely to lead to judgment from others in the workplace. These findings extend Kniffin and Wilson's (2010) study, which recognized the occurrence of gossip within organizations. Often times, employees gossip within an organization for

personal gain, with no consideration of its impact on the workplace (Kniffin & Wilson, 2010). Kniffin and Wilson's (2010) study did not consider how gossip outside of a workplace affects business, whereas this study did.

The current study recognized mental health disorders to be a negative effect of gossip within a rural town. Those that are subject to negative or inaccurate gossip are likely to become social outcasts. Potentially, this could lead to depression, anxiety, and in serious cases, suicide. No previous research supported this finding.

RQ2: What are the rewards of gossip in rural towns?

The second research question aimed to understand the positive outcomes of gossip in rural towns. The three major themes that emerged from RQ2 include come together right now, takin' care of business, and entertainment weekly.

According to Farley's (2010) study, gossip is necessary for social functions and the relaying of positive information. In addition, gossip is a central component of community life with various social consequences (Haugen & Villa, 2006). This study supports Farley's (2010) study as well as Haugen and Villa's (2006) findings. This study recognized gossip as a necessary component of rural communities. Gossip allows news to be spread throughout rural towns, which enables the community to come together for social functions or during hardships. This strengthens relationships in rural towns and forms tight bonds. Gossip allows social support to be offered, even if it is unasked for.

This current study depicted gossip as beneficial to businesses in rural towns. When individuals have a good experience at a local business, it is likely to spread to other individuals in the form of gossip. In addition, changes implemented in businesses spread through rural towns because of gossip. This indicates that businesses in rural towns are likely to take advantage of the common gossip, in order for it to strive. No previous research supported this finding.

The current study revealed that gossip serves as entertainment for residents of rural towns. With there being little to do in rural areas because of the isolation, many individuals turn to gossip for amusement. This indicates that most people enjoy talking about other individuals, as well as occurrences in a rural town. This finding supports Goldsmith's (2009) work, which discovered that people are naturally interesting in talking about and hearing about the behavior of other people.

RQ3: What are the rules surrounding gossip in rural towns?

RQ3 aimed to understand the rules surrounding gossip in rural towns, in relation to the Communication Privacy Management Theory. The three themes that arose from RQ3 are #gossip, there's no I in gossip, and fast and furious.

According to Herriman's (2010) work, many people use social media as a tool to gossip. This is becoming more common, since technology usage is continuously increasing. This study supported Herriman's (2010) work. It acknowledged that rural community members perceived social media platforms to proliferate gossip, since it is easily accessible and does not rely on face-to-face interactions. Individuals in rural communities believed that the usage of social media for gossiping is steadily increasing, as society continues to rely heavily on technology in everyday life. They believed that gossip on social media can be damaging to an individual's self-esteem and can even come in the form of cyber-bulling. However, rural town residents acknowledged that positive gossip is also observed on social media, including milestones and celebrations. The increase of gossip on social media indicates the importance of gossip in rural towns. People utilize many outlets for gossiping, rather than simply relying on face-to-face interactions.

This study found that when speaking about the topic of gossip, rural town members speak in second or third person rather than implementing a first-person narrative. Residents of rural towns acknowledged the prevalence of gossip in their community however; they separated themselves and admitted to no involvement of gossip. Their purposeful exclusion of themselves from gossip indicated that they did not partake in said gossip. However, they reported gossip being of high prevalence in their rural town. Therefore, they revealed that they perceive themselves as innocent bystanders with no involvement in gossip. In relation to the Communication Privacy Management theory, individuals consider the effects of disclosing certain information. By failing to acknowledge any participation with gossip, this study ultimately discovered that individuals consider there to many risks of using gossip as a form of communication. There is no previous research on gossip being explained in second and third person.

The study also found that gossip spreads extremely fast throughout rural towns. This indicates that members of rural towns are in close proximity with one another. It also exemplifies the idea that 'everybody knows everybody', which makes gossip extremely accessible. This finding supports Kennedy's (2010) work, which found

that lack of privacy in rural communities makes it difficult for individuals to keep their lives private. The closeness and social connectedness in rural communities allows gossip to spread at an impressive rate.

LIMITATIONS

The major limitation to this study was the lack of variance in individual's geographical locations. All twelve of the participants were from rural towns in Wisconsin. Findings of the study may have been altered if the participants were from various other regions throughout the country. Another limitation to this study is that none of the participants were over the age of 40. Individuals of older generations may have had different perceptions and experiences of gossip in rural towns.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Future researchers could further identify the reasons behind people's perceptions of gossip being primarily negative. When asked what the benefits of gossip is in rural towns, all of the participants paused, exemplifying intense contemplation. One of the participants stated that there are no benefits to gossip in a rural town. However, when asked what the negative aspects of gossip in a rural town are, the participants easily reflected the perceived negative dynamics of gossip.

In addition, further research could analyze why no one speaks about gossip in first person. All twelve of the participants spoke about their experiences and perceptions in second and third person. Their language usage indicated that they do not partake in the exchange of gossip. While participants spoke on tremendous effects, both positive and negative, of gossip in rural towns, they failed to acknowledge that they endure any effects of gossip.

In conclusion, this study found that gossip has various perceived effects on rural towns. While it was found to have negative effects, such as being detrimental to one's mental health, hurting business, and giving people a bad reputation, participants acknowledged that gossip is necessary for their towns to function. They noted the positive effects of gossip are that it helps businesses, it allows the community to come together, and it is a source of entertainment. Aside from the risks and rewards of gossip, this study found that many people rely on social media as an outlet for gossip. While they acknowledged that gossip is highly prevalent in their rural town, they excluded themselves from partaking in gossip as communication.

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Appendix

Background Information (to build rapport):
1. What is the population of the town you live in?
2. How long have you lived in a small town?

Research-Related Questions:
3. What are some negative aspects of gossip in a rural town?
4. What are the benefits of gossip in your rural town?
5. What are some risks of gossip in your rural town?
6. What are some rewards of gossip in your rural town?
7. How accurate do you think gossip is in your rural town?
8. What are some topics that people gossip about in your rural town?
    a. Why?
9. How do people normally gossip in your rural town?
10. How does gossip make its way through your town?

Clearing House/Wrap-up:
11. Is there anything you would like to add?
12. Are there any questions you would like to ask me about my research or this interview?