



University Informal Talk and Gossip: Building Trust and Social Cohesion

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examines the role of informal talk and gossip in university workplace communication among students and lecturers at Universiti Teknologi Brunei (UTB) and Telkom University Bandung, Indonesia. Despite substantial literature on informal communication in organisational settings, research addressing this phenomenon within Southeast Asian university contexts and digital communication environments remains limited. Guided by Walther's Social Information Processing Theory (SIPT), this study explores how informal talk and gossip occur and shape social relationships through both face-to-face and digital platforms. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 participants (ten students and four lecturers) and data were analysed using thematic analysis. Four themes emerged: (1) informal talk and gossip as everyday university communication; (2) the influence of digital communication on their nature and spread; (3) their role in shaping trust and interpersonal relationships; and (4) their effect on social cohesion and sense of belonging. Findings reveal that informal talk and gossip are prevalent communication practices with dual social functions. While they can strengthen trust, deepen interpersonal bonds, and foster a sense of belonging, they may equally produce misunderstanding and social conflict when mismanaged. Digital platforms have accelerated information dissemination while increasing the risk of misinterpretation due to the absence of non-verbal cues. This study contributes to the growing literature on informal communication in higher education, with particular relevance to Southeast Asian university contexts.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Purpose of Study

Informal conversations play a key role in the universities because they allow students and lecturers to express themselves and build up a social identity beyond institutional discourse (Johnson & Majewska, 2022). The development of advanced technology has opened up new channels for informal conversations at universities either offline or online for example through social media (Viererbl et al., 2022). Nevertheless, many researchers have focused on examining formal discourses rather than informal discourses in communication studies in university environments. Therefore, there has been insufficient literature on informal talk, particularly in creating interpersonal trust (Winslow et al., 2019). Out of all the types of informal communications, gossip is a very interesting and influential type of talk that entails evaluation of absent

people and social judgments (Jolly & Chang, 2021). Nonetheless, according to Zhang et al. (2024), there are various reasons for which gossiping can be considered to be advantageous in many ways, one of which is that it helps in ensuring information exchange, supporting group norms, and building social relations. Research has found that gossip leads to rumours and discrimination especially if information is exchanged quickly via platforms such as WhatsApp (Muhammed T & Mathew, 2022). In addition, previous study has also found that gossip influences reputation as well as social networks within a workplace setting (Küçük et al., 2025). While various studies have already been done on informal talk and gossip from an organisational and psychological perspective, these studies have focused solely on the Western organisational contexts, such as the role of informal communication within a collaborative workplace environment that has been explored through an analysis of informal interactions within multinational companies (Denner et al., 2024). Gossip is also prevalent in the virtual workplace as indicated by Wei et al. (2025), but this occurs primarily in professional settings. There is a lack of research on how informal talk and gossip occur in university settings especially from the Southeast Asian context, and through digital media channels such as WhatsApp or online learning platforms. Furthermore, current definitions of informal talk and gossip focus on the task-oriented and reputation aspects in an organisational setting rather than exploring their impact on trust building, interpersonal relationship, and social cohesion between academic community members (Sangavi & G., 2026).

1.2 Problem Statement

Traditionally, studies on communication performed within universities mainly focus on academic communication practices, including lectures, assignments, and institutional communication while neglecting informal communication as well as gossip. However, informal communication is an inseparable element of any communication process, and its results may significantly impact interpersonal relationships, formation of trust, and cohesiveness among both students and lecturers. The application of digital channels of communication through apps like WhatsApp has rendered informality one of the critical factors of interpersonal communication, which is a fundamental component of social relations within the members of a university community (Gazi et al., 2024). Digital tools can aid learning, promoting it to a higher level of metacognition (Valdez et al., 2026). Nonetheless, although the influence of gossip and informal talk in the organisational environment has been examined by several studies in the past, there is a lack of detailed information regarding the perception and interpretation of these communication practices in their everyday conversations. Therefore, there is a need for qualitative research that explores how informal talk and gossip shape trust, relationships, and social cohesion within university communities.

1.3 Theoretical Framework and Related Literature

This study is guided by Walther's Social Information Processing Theory (SIPT), which examines how individuals develop relationships through computer-mediated communication (CMC) in the absence of non-verbal cues. Rather than viewing reduced cues as a barrier, SIPT argues that individuals adapt by exploiting available textual cues such as language style, response time, and emoji to build relationships over time. This is particularly relevant as informal talk and gossip in universities now routinely occur across digital platforms. Prior studies confirm gossip's dual relational effects (Jolly & Chang, 2021; Küçük et al., 2025), the risks of digital misinterpretation (Viererbl et al., 2022), and informal communication's role in fostering belonging (Denner et al., 2024), yet none address Southeast Asian university contexts specifically.

1.4 Research Questions and Objectives

This study adopts a qualitative approach as informal talk and gossip are socially constructed communication practices involving personal interpretation, emotions, and shared meanings that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measurement alone. Guided by SIPT, the study is driven by four research questions: (1) How do informal talk and gossip occur in everyday communication among students and lecturers in university workplace settings? (2) How do digital communication platforms influence their spread? (3) What role do they play in shaping trust and interpersonal relationships? (4) How do they influence social cohesion? Correspondingly, the study aims to explore, examine, analyse, and identify these phenomena through thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with 14 participants across UTB and Telkom University Bandung.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptual Definitions

Six interrelated constructs underpin this study. Table 1 presents the conceptual definitions adopted in this research.

Table 1. Conceptual Defintions

Variable	Conceptual Definition	Source
Informal Talk	Spontaneous, unplanned dialogue occurring outside formal situations, encompassing personal story sharing, opinion exchange, and casual conversation.	Lütjens & Felfe (2025)
Gossip	Evaluative conversation about absent individuals involving the sharing of information, judgements, or assumptions.	Cruz et al. (2021)
Digital Communication	Message exchange through online platforms enabling rapid information sharing among users like WhatsApp, Instagram, and other social media platforms.	Viererbl et al. (2022)
Trust	Perceived sense of reliability and dependability in another person, developed through regular social interaction.	Jolly & Chang (2021)
Interpersonal Relationships	Bonds formed among individuals through sustained social interaction and mutual understanding.	Amerstorfer & Münster-Kistner (2021)
Social Cohesion	Degree of closeness, inclusion, group unity, and sense of belonging among community members that promotes positive social relationships.	Zhang et al. (2024)

2.2 Informal Talk and Gossip in University Social Dynamics

Gossip is viewed as communicative evaluation of the absent persons' actions that reveal social opinion (Cruz et al., 2019). Despite the negative attitude towards gossip that was observed in the past, researchers have begun paying more attention to the multifunctional nature of gossip in society. According to Jolly and Chang (2021), gossip can act as a mechanism that helps people obtain knowledge about other people without any face-to-face interaction. Similarly, Hartung et al. (2019) list several motivations of gossiping, including information seeking as well as social bonding, which serves as adaptive social functions. Informal talk is also important in terms of regulating emotions as well as maintaining relationships. Denner et al. (2024) identified that informal conversations serve multiple functions, one of that helps to reduce stress, foster friendships as well as promotes a sense of belonging among individuals. Moreover, Lütjens and Felfe (2025) demonstrated that informal talk can strengthen closeness in relationships and can also support leadership dynamics which highlights the significance of informal talk even in a structured environment setting. Wang (2025) stated that informal conversations between peers help them form communities where students construct knowledge outside formal academic settings collaboratively. Other than that, Küçük et al. (2025) also stated that gossiping can have positive impact which are strengthening emotional bonds as well as organisational commitment. However, the negative or inaccurate information of gossip may lead to the loss of trust and harm relationships. According to Winslow et al. (2019), gossip can increase cooperation in a short term, but it can decrease trust in the long run especially for the person being gossiped about. Chen et al. (2024) found that gossip causes anxiety, mistrust, and social withdrawal. According to Pan et al. (2024), gossip is also helpful because it allows us to recognise a group's social rules and expectations. In the study by Sangavi & G. (2026), gossip can be used as a bonding mechanism as well as conflict tool, depending on the gossip content as well as the context.

2.3 Digital Communication and the Circulation of Informal Talk and Gossip

The advances in digital technology have transformed the way people have informal talk and gossip, where they can now chat more frequently through online applications like messaging platforms as well as social media without needing to physically meet up. One of the most important impacts of digital communication is the speed at which information spreads and disseminated. According to Muhammed T & Mathew (2022), digital platforms promote the spread of inaccurate information which making it difficult and impossible to verify the information accurately. Zhang et al. (2024) found that if someone shares gossip, people might see them as individuals who are more sociable but less moral as well as less competent. Other than that, online platforms can promote harmful communication practices such as flaming, which causes anxiety and reduces positive interactions (Ngo et al., 2024). Furthermore, digital communication can increase the effect of gossip

as it is persistent and shareable. Unlike offline communication, online communication can promote long-term influence as they can be saved, forwarded to others, and revisited. The use of Artificial Intelligence such as ChatGPT also has increasing effects on students' writing (Roziamee & Mumin, 2025). Nonetheless, despite the significance of online communication, there have been very few studies about the effect of informal talk and gossip in the context of higher learning institutions since researchers only focused on work settings and consumer contexts, and not academic settings.

2.4 Theoretical Framework

The framework for this paper is the Social Information Processing Theory proposed by Walther, which examines the process where individuals adapt to communicating in Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) (Sumner & Ramirez, 2017). The theory challenges the assumption that the lack of non-verbal cues hinders relationship development, arguing instead that individuals compensate by using available cues over time.

2.4.1 Impression Formation

Impression formation in digital settings is a complex and dynamic process that relies significantly on limited as well as indirect information. According to Walther's hyperpersonal interaction model, the process of forming impressions in CMC can be intensified through selective self-representation and idealised perception (Walther, 2007). This is because people tend to portray themselves in a better way, while the receiver interprets the message in a manner that aligns with their expectations, creating a feedback loop that promotes existing perceptions. In the context of gossip, impression formation is important as gossip involves the evaluation of others, based on which people create mental representations of those individuals. However, in many cases, the information obtained from gossip is secondary and hence may be incomplete or biased. According to Zou and Tang (2020), people tend to employ heuristic processing information in such situations. This includes cue credibility and message frequency, meaning that even unverified repeated exposure of gossip can highly shape perceptions. Impression formation in universities may affect the student-student and student-lecturer relationships. For instance, students may form an opinion about the lecturer not based on the personal experience but on what other people talk about them. Likewise, lecturers may also build opinions of the students on the basis of gossip circulating in professional circles. Such impressions can determine a person's behaviour such as willingness to cooperate, participate, and communicate with another person. Moreover, digital technologies make the results of impression formation even stronger because any message can be transferred in various contexts and can be seen not only by its addressees. Dai et al. (2025) suggest that this can lead to "warranting effects," where information perceived as less controllable, for example, gossip shared by others is considered more credible than self-presented information.

2.4.2 Cues Filtered Out

Cues filtered out concept refers to the absence of or lack of non-verbal cues in CMC. Traditional communication theory viewed this as a drawback because the lack of cues would hinder the development of relationships. However, Social Information Processing Theory provides a different viewpoint as people adjust to the limitations through ongoing communication. In online communication, there are other types of cues such as the language styles, speed of response, emojis, and punctuation. Slang is also quite popular with current youth population (Suhaini & Mumin, 2025). However, all these cues are very ambiguous and open to interpretation. The limited non-verbal cues especially during emotional interactions, increase the chance of misinterpretations (Patterson et al., 2023). In terms of informal communication and gossip, the lack of contextual cues can cause difficulties. Gossip often includes personal judgements and opinions as different people interpret messages in different ways. Therefore, the lack of non-verbal cues such as facial expressions, tone of voice as well as body language make it hard to understand the real meaning or intention of the message, such as a sarcastic joke about a lecturer may result in serious criticism and a casual interaction might lead to harmful gossip leading to increase in misunderstandings and conflict, reducing trust and relationships, especially in online communication.

2.4.3 Flaming

Using aggressive and hostile messages in online discussions is known as flaming. Flaming is often associated in the reduction of social cues as well as increased psychological distance between the individuals who communicate through digital media channels. As stated by Syrjämäki et al. (2024), the online disinhibition effect gives people the freedom to express themselves in online settings than face-to-face interactions. In terms of the function of informal communication, it can be argued that the negative effects associated with gossiping could be increased due to flaming. For example, gossiping negatively may result in conflict

because individuals get defensive and aggressive. In addition, messages that are hostile are more likely to grab attention as well as being disseminated rapidly, increasing the impact on group dynamics. As argued by DeMarsico et al. (2021), anonymity as well as lack of accountability can increase flaming in online interactions. In university settings, flaming may affect social cohesion negatively as it may create tension between people and make them less willing to participate in discussions and engage in effective communication.

2.5 Research Gap

Although informal talk and gossip have been widely studied in literature, some areas remain underexplored. Firstly, many studies tend to explore organisational or corporate settings with limited attention in terms of universities context. Secondly, many previous studies have looked into Western settings while failing to consider Southeast Asian settings. Thirdly, although the role of technology in informal communications has been extensively discussed, little attention has been paid to the way informal talk and gossip take place via digital platforms specifically in the university setting. Most studies tend to focus on the use of social media in general and not context-specific communication environments such as class group chats or academic messaging platforms. Fourthly, most of the literature focuses on studying trust, interpersonal relations, and social cohesion as separate concepts without adequately connecting them together for a holistic understanding of the effects of informal communication. Finally, there is limited qualitative research in exploring the lived experience of informal talk and gossip among university members. Many researchers have adopted experimental or quantitative approaches that are inadequate to understand complex phenomena of interpersonal interaction. This study attempts to address these weaknesses through a detailed qualitative analysis of informal talk and gossip among university members, especially in a digitalised environment and their impact on trust, interpersonal relations, and social cohesion.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Approach and Design

This study employs a qualitative research design, utilising thematic analysis to examine the participants' experiences and meanings of informal talk and gossip within university communities. This approach is suitable as it aims to understand social phenomena from the perspectives of individuals and emphasises the interpretation of lived experiences rather than numerical measurement (Grossoehme, 2014).

3.2 Research Site and Participants

This research was conducted online for Universiti Teknologi Brunei (UTB) and on-site for Telkom University Bandung due to the researcher's academic internship placement at Telkom University during the data collection period. The choice of such universities was made because they provide active academic settings where students and lecturers communicate both formally and informally in both face-to-face as well as online communication. Another benefit of using two research locations is that it adds more depth to the data that is collected. In case of similar issues arisen from the two universities, then this might suggest that the results are not limited to one particular institution but might be representative and applicable to a larger pattern in university communication. Thus, the inclusion of both universities increases credibility and validity of the study. The sample used in the study included a total of 14 participants consisting of ten students and four lecturers.

3.3 Sampling Procedures

This research used purposive sampling, which is a non-probability sampling method that allows researchers to select participants who can provide the necessary experience related to the research topic (Campbell et al., 2020). Inclusion criteria for participants were:

- University students and lecturers
- Individuals who are actively involved in university communication setting
- Individuals with experience communicating via digital platforms (such as WhatsApp, Telegram, or any other social media applications)
- Individuals who are willing to share their experiences of informal talk and gossip.

Selection of participants from two universities also provided the researcher a way to get multiple perspectives and compare repeated communication experiences across different institutional environments.

3.4 Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were mainly used as the primary method for data collection. Semi-structured interview was chosen because participants can freely express themselves, allowing the researcher to guide the discussion on the research objectives (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). The topics discussed during the interviews included informal talk and gossip, digital interactions, trust, interpersonal relationships, and lastly, social cohesion. Interview sessions for UTB participants who agreed to take part were conducted online, while those from Telkom University were interviewed either face-to-face or online, depending on their preferences. Each interview lasted around 15 to 30 minutes where audio recording of the interview was done with the consent of the participants and transcribed verbatim to ensure the accuracy of the collected data.

3.5 Data Analysis

The interview data was analysed through thematic analysis. The thematic analysis has six stages as developed by Braun and Clarke. This includes the following: familiarising the data, generating initial codes, generating initial themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, interpreting the findings (Haan & Venema, 2025) in relation to the research questions and Social Information Processing Theory. Through these processes, four main themes were found which will be discussed in the findings section.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were strictly adhered to during the entire research process of the study because it involves the experiences of gossip and interpersonal communication which can be a sensitive topic and too personal. Since real names were not used for the participants, pseudonyms such as US1 (UTB Student 1), UL1 (UTB Lecturer 1), TS1 (Telkom Student 1), and TL1 (Telkom Lecturer 1) were used to protect their confidentiality. All data like audio recordings and transcripts was protected and is accessible to the researcher only. Participants were informed of this through the consent.

4. Results and Discussion

After multiple coding, reading and categorisation of the transcripts, four significant themes were found. The themes are related with the research questions, as well as the participant's experience of informal conversations and gossip. These can be seen in table 2 below, which is a summary of the main themes found through the interviews.

Table 2. Summary of Themes

Theme	Description
4.1 Informal Talk and Gossip as Everyday University Communication	Informal conversations and gossip are common aspects of daily interactions among students and lecturers.
4.2 Digital Communication Influences the Nature of Informal Talk and Gossip	Online platforms facilitate rapid exchange of information, which could lead to misunderstandings.
4.3 Informal Talk and Gossip Influence Trust and Interpersonal Relationships	The participants outlined some positive and negative influences on trust and social relationships.
4.4 Informal Talk and Gossip Affect Social Cohesion and Sense of Belonging	Informal communication may promote inclusion but may also lead to social exclusion and conflict.

4.1 Theme 1: Informal Talk and Gossip as Everyday University Communication

Informal talk was defined by most participants as a form of discussion which is spontaneous and happen outside of formal situations, and gossip are discussions about absent individuals, sharing personal feelings and opinions about them. Most of the participants explained that informal communication happens before or after class, during class discussions, lunch hours, and any informal meetings. Additionally, the participants revealed these conversations often move beyond academic matters and include personal experiences and discussions about other people.

One lecturer, UL1, described that informal talk happens regularly in the university setting:

"Informal talks happens all the time in the universities, often in very casual settings... students usually chat about assignments, about the other lecturers, and then, uh, or even personal matters, basically."

Similarly, a student participant, TS1 described gossip as something that takes place mostly between close friends:

"If I want to talk about the gossip, I think I usually talk with my close friends, not all of my friends... I don't care if my close friend think that I'm weird or, like, uh, crazy or stupid like that because I don't care about it."

The interview revealed that participants were not necessarily linking gossip with any kind of negative behaviour. Instead, many considered it to be a normal part of social interaction.

For instance, UL1 recognised that gossip naturally exists within university life:

"Informal talks, gossips are natural part of university's life, we all know that, right?"

Likewise, TL1 argued that informal communication should not be completely removed because it plays a role in sustaining good relationships among members of the academic community:

"I agree that conflict can happen. But if those things did not exist at all, then I think the social lubricant would disappear."

Therefore, it can be concluded that participants regarded gossip and informal talk as natural and unavoidable forms of communication in everyday university life, and not a purely negative communication behaviour.

4.2 Theme 2: Digital Communication Influences the Nature of Informal Talk and Gossip

The second theme highlights the role of digital communication in determining how informal talk and gossip take place in universities.

While most of the participants agreed that digital communication enables information to spread rapidly, they also believed that online communication increases chances of misinterpretation due to the absence of facial expressions, tone of voice, and immediate feedback.

As UL1 stated:

"For me, I have to be careful online because it leaves footprints, there is receipt... I prefer face-to-face."

Furthermore, the same participant explained that online communication is always confusing:

"Online sometimes we use exclamation mark like we're angry, right? That's not what I meant..."

Other than that, participants also reported that gossip spreads quickly across social media platforms.

As UL2 explains,

"Somebody forwarded me on Threads, screenshot of Threads, some students complaining about the parking."

Likewise, student participants also recognised the risks of misinformation:

According to US5:

"People tend to exaggerate when they gossip because, you know, it's more fun like that. So it definitely could, um, it could give some miscommunication or misunderstanding, just because you're not in the room and you don't know what really happened."

Meanwhile, TS1 believed that misinformation may occur because people do not always verify information:

"I think it's depends on the person itself and also, uh, many, uh, other, another person is like, uh, is, uh, so easily to trust the gossips or like the information, I think uh they they don't filter the information, is it hoax or a fact. So it depends on the person."

These observations prove how digital communication makes it more accessible and faster to engage in informal communication but at the same time increasing the likelihood of misunderstanding and inaccurate information.

4.3 Theme 3: Informal Talk and Gossip Influence Trust and Interpersonal Relationships

Moreover, another theme identified from the interview was the influence of gossip and informal talk on building trust and developing interpersonal relationships. For most participants, informal talk or gossip served as an effective mechanism in developing trust as it allowed them to share their experiences:

For example, US5 stated:

"I would say it gives me more trust because it shows that they're able to be vulnerable towards me by letting their guard down and talking about your feelings."

Similarly, UL1 added that:

"When um lecturers and lecturers ah maybe regularly share experience, so I think I can see that we become more comfortable with each other, which builds a sense of trust."

However, participants also emphasised that trust can easily be damaged when private conversations are being shared to other people or to the public.

UL1 shared:

"If someone says something, personal, in a casual conversation, and then later finds out that it has been discussed by others. So, I think I find that, um, leading to, you know, reduce trust significantly."

Some participants also claimed to be more careful while dealing with those people who have the habit of spreading gossip.

As mentioned by UL2:

"If I know that person to have a reputation of, uh, a gossip person, I tend to, um, be careful, be cautious, because you never know when you're gonna end up to, and become part of the gossip."

Likewise, US5 said that harmful gossip influences her choice of friends:

"If they gossip about things that are too far, like, um, for example, like mocking someone's appearances, like something that people can't change, then there is something that I distant myself from."

These findings show that informal conversation and gossip serve both functions in enhancing interpersonal trust through openness and sharing experiences, but at the same time reducing interpersonal trust when information is misused.

4.4 Theme 4: Informal Talk and Gossip Affect Social Cohesion and Sense of Belonging

The final theme relates to the influence of informal talk on social cohesion and sense of belonging. Some of the participants stated that informal conversations help in building relationships as well as improving collaboration.

As TS1 mentioned:

"I think it's making me comfortable 'cause it's like bonding. It's like the bonding to each, each person in the group. But we can talk the informal talk after we do the project. So we must know our priority first. Like, we do our project first and after it's done, we can talk about something else."

Similarly, US5 commented:

"Honestly sometimes, I feel like, gossip is what makes our bond stronger, because sometimes we just, we just don't want to talk much about what happens in school. Like, we don't, we don't find the fun in that. So like, if we wanna bond more, people tend to gossip."

Lecturer participants also recognised that sharing harmless information can strengthen community relationships.

UL2 stated:

"That will bring in like more, as you said, um, sense of belonging and um, so we are, we have something shared, shared information."

However, participants also recognised that negative gossip may cause exclusion and division among their circle:

UL1 described an incident where shared information caused another colleague to feel isolated:

"I noticed that one of my colleagues feels excluded. So, she just pretend to be busy... So it can something bad, but then again it may cause a chance of isolation."

Similarly, UL2 argued that gossip can damage a person's reputation and create division within department:

"If it is gossip that damages someone's reputation, that's another story. So, of course, it will cause, um, you know, a certain division within a department, I guess."

In addition, TL1 pointed out that gossip should never be used as a basis for any decision-making process because gossip can be harmful to both the organisations and relationships. The above findings indicate that informal conversation and gossip encourage social cohesion as it encourages people to share their experiences as well as increasing social connections. However, these processes might also lead to social exclusion and division when the conversations become toxic or harmful.

4.5 Discussion

4.5.1 Informal Talk and Gossip as Everyday University Communication

The first research objective was to examine how informal talk and gossip arise within students and lecturers' daily informal conversation in universities. Based on the results, the participants perceived informal talk and gossip as normal and inevitable parts of social interaction. Rather than perceiving gossip as a completely negative action, most of the participants regarded it as a normal communication act that helps in making social connections between individuals. This result is consistent with the study of Greenslade-Yeats et al. (2023) who observed that gossiping refers to a social process through which people are able to exchange information about their social surroundings. In addition, Yucel & Moulder (2024) observe that gossiping involved developing social relationships as well as improving group cohesion. It means that gossiping does not only serve a recreational role but also helps in building effective communication within the community. In other words, effective communication can improve better audience engagement (Suhaili & Mumin, 2024). Moreover, informal communication usually occurs before class, during lunch breaks, group discussions, and in casual meetings, in such informal settings, where the students and lecturers discuss various issues such as academic matters, their personal experiences, and social matters. It is evident that informal communication goes hand-in-hand with formal communication to foster social communication. This discussion can be explained by using Social Information Processing Theory, according to which relationships develop through constant communication and continuous information exchange. According to Walther, the formation of relationships does not depend entirely on face-to-face communication, instead, repeated communication allows individuals to gather social information and construct impressions over time (Calefato & Lanubile, 2010). Another important finding was that participants felt more comfortable within the university environment through informal communication which is consistent with the findings of Ellis et al. (2023) who highlighted the need for organisations to adopt informal communication networks to develop a supportive working environment. In university context, these networks play an equally important role for students and lecturers as it helps them to adapt in academic life and make meaningful social connections. The main implication of these findings is that universities should recognise gossip and informal talk as normal communication practices instead of viewing it as a problem. Therefore, the first objective of this research has been successfully achieved as the findings indicate that informal talk and gossip are integral parts of communication within the university environment.

4.5.2 Digital Communication Changes the Nature of Informal Talk and Gossip

The second research objective described the impact of digital communication on the spread of informal talk and gossip. The findings concluded that digital communication such as messaging apps and social media platforms have revolutionised the way information is disseminated within university members. It was observed that digital communication allowed for faster dissemination of information, however, it increased the chances of misunderstandings because of lack of non-verbal elements such as body language, tone of voice, gestures, and facial expressions. These results support Sillars & Zorn (2020) who found that text-based communication usually leads to inaccurate interpretation of emotions. Likewise, according to Johnson and Tchappi (2025), the lack of non-verbal cues may make communication more difficult to interpret. Furthermore, gossip communicated digitally may be distorted because people tend to pass information without verifying their credibility. This idea was aligned with Adams et al. (2023) who argued that rumours were quickly disseminated in situations where information is incomplete or uncertain. Many of the participants preferred face-to-face communication because online communication contains digital footprints where information can be recorded and forwarded to other people. According to Ruben et al. (2021), digital

communication creates permanent and searchable records that can affect future social relationships. Social Information Processing Theory helps explain the results found in this study as Walther stated that people learn to adapt with computer-mediated communication through available social cues and previous interactions (Kojima et al., 2021). However, the lack of social cues increases the possibilities for misunderstandings and misinterpretations. In general, digital communication has impacted on informal talk and gossip as information can now be shared rapidly which can increase misunderstandings and miscommunication. Therefore, the second research objective has been achieved.

4.5.3 Informal Talk and Gossip Influence Trust and Interpersonal Relationships

The third research objective focused on understanding the impact of informal talk and gossip in sharing trust and interpersonal relationships. The results indicate that informal communication could either improve or damage relationships based on the way information is disseminated. Participants tend to be more open and emotionally expressive as trust develops through informal interactions. The sharing of personal experience and emotions can form stronger interpersonal relationships as stated by Kramer & Tyler (1996) that trust is built upon repeated social interactions. Pietromonaco & Collins (2017) also suggests that communication openness is an important aspect of maintaining close interpersonal relationships. At the same time, participants reported that trust could be damaged if private discussions became public or when gossip contains false information. Some participants argued that they would be more cautious around individuals who frequently spread gossip as they are afraid that they would be the next target. The findings support the study of Estévez et al. (2022) where they emphasised that gossip may be either good or bad for interpersonal relationships as it serves as a mechanism for social regulation but also reduce trust as people believe that gossip is a way of criticising. These findings can be explained by using Social Information Processing Theory where impressions are formed based on available social information. Thus, positive or negative gossip might affect how people perceive others even if there are no direct interactions between them. Collectively, trust within university communities depends on responsible communication practices. Casual interactions can create positive relationships and emotional support networks, but harmful gossiping might damage relationships. Therefore, the third research objective has been achieved.

4.5.4 Informal Talk and Gossip Affect Social Cohesion and Sense of Belonging

Lastly, the fourth research objective identified the impact of informal communication on social cohesion in a university environment. The results show that participants perceived informal talk and harmless gossip as contributing factors in building stronger social relationships as well as sense of belonging. As explained by the participants, informal communication helps to establish deeper friendships and social relations beyond formal academic interactions, thus helping them feel more socially integrated and included. This observation supports the work of Ghahtarani et al. (2020) who described that cooperation and trust help strengthen connections and foster a sense of community. Social bonding is also one of the crucial components of a sense of community according to Plys and Qualls (2019). Furthermore, the findings also indicate that informal communication fosters group identity. Social bonds among individuals form over time and through several interactions, thus forming shared understandings and social norms. This aligns with the findings of Barandiaran et al. (2020) to which communication plays an essential role in developing collective identity. Although there are many advantages of gossip, the participants revealed that negative gossip may lead to isolation among social groups. People may feel isolated and would not want to interact socially if they find themselves to be the topic of negative gossip. The findings support the study proposed by Pardede & Kovač (2023) who emphasised that people have natural need for social belongingness. From Social Information Processing Theory perspective, people use communication cues to determine whether they are accepted into a community. Positive interactions contribute to social cohesion, while negative gossip may weaken it by creating social distance and uncertainty. It can be concluded that informal talk and gossip can positively impact social cohesion by creating bonds through shared experiences while also creating conflict among people when communication becomes harmful. Therefore, the fourth objective has also been achieved.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has explored the role of informal talk and gossip in university communication among the students and lecturers from Universiti Teknologi Brunei (UTB) as well as Telkom University Bandung. The findings achieved all four research objectives. It was revealed that informal talk and gossip are common communication practices in universities and serve both beneficial and harmful functions to students and lecturers. Although informal talk and gossip create trust, interpersonal relationships, social cohesion, and a sense of belonging, they may also lead to misunderstanding, lack of trust, and social conflict if used irresponsibly. Other than that, the findings revealed the advent of digital communication has changed the way

informal talk and gossip function through the rapid speed of information sharing. Social Information Processing Theory was used to explain how communication is interpreted and managed in the digital environment despite the absence of non-verbal cues (Walther, 1995). This study contributes to the literature on informal communication in higher education by providing empirical evidence from Southeast Asian university contexts, an area that remains underrepresented in existing scholarship. Despite that, this study also has its limitations. The sample was limited to 14 participants from two universities, which may not be fully generalisable to the broader population. In addition, there might be a response bias in using self-reported interviews as the responses were influenced by the participants' personal perceptions and experiences. To address these limitations, future studies should employ larger samples across diverse universities and cultural contexts. Moreover, researchers should explore specific social media platforms on informal communication and the long-term impact of gossip on the social relationships among the community members of the university. University administrators and lecturers are encouraged to recognise informal communication as a constitutive dimension of academic community life and to promote digital literacy among students to reduce miscommunication.

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