

## The Relationship between Epistemic Curiosity and Social Desirability among Indian Students

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Epistemic curiosity, tendency to gossip, and social desirability are social constructs relevant to interpersonal relationships and acquisition of information. Gender and cultural factors may moderate these variables in an important manner. 100 Indian college students ( $M_{age} = 21.05$ ,  $SD_{age} = 4.41$ , range: 16 - 45) participated in this study, which was an exploratory research to understand the relationship between curiosity, gossip, and social desirability constructs moderated by gender in an Indian sample. It was hypothesized that the reporting of epistemic curiosity and tendencies to gossip were mediated by social desirability. MANOVAs and correlational analyses revealed that epistemic curiosity and social desirability were negatively correlated for male participants, suggesting existence of high curiosity with a low need to portray a favourable self-image. Male participants scored higher on the three constructs, implying gender differences in the Indian sample. Considerations for future research are discussed.

**Keywords:** Gossip, Social Desirability, Epistemic Curiosity, Interpersonal Curiosity, Gender Differences.

In order to function in the society, individuals constantly seek information about others in the social and relational context. Individuals are also interested in pursuing non-social knowledge, such as learning new skills. To study the relevance of curiosity and gossip constructs in the Indian context, we aimed to examine the relationship between them as well as with social desirability in an exploratory study.

### ***Epistemic Curiosity***

Curiosity - a desire for new information and knowledge - was divided into perceptual and epistemic curiosity by Berlyne (1954). Epistemic curiosity (EC) was the desire for knowledge that motivates individuals to learn new concepts, acquire new information, and answer questions based on such information (Berlyne, 1954; Loewenstein, 1994). Berlyne (1954) described EC as a uniquely human "drive to know" which accelerated individuals to seek knowledge. Litman and Spielberger (2003) conceptualised EC as a dispositional personality trait with positive emotional-motivational states of interest and the intrinsic pleasure of learning.

Two types of EC were proposed by Litman and Jimerson (2004) - interest induction (I) and deprivation elimination (D) - reflecting different types of curiosity corresponding to different motives for acquiring new information. I-type curiosity involved the anticipated pleasure of new discoveries and the desire to learn for the joy of understanding things (similar to mastery-oriented learning). On the other hand, D-type curiosity suggested the need to know information, which was related to reducing uncertainty. The latter motivated an individual to acquire information to eliminate undesirable states of ignorance (similar to performance-oriented learning; Litman, 2008).

Loewenstein (1994) proposed epistemic curiosity existed due to inconsistencies and gaps in information we already possess. Thus, it was a combination of internal, external, and situational factors that motivated an individual to bridge the information-gap, which was manifested as that individual's curiosity. Loewenstein (1994) also proposed that individuals might resort to guesswork and speculation if the desired information was not readily available, a notion that may be applied to the tendency of individuals to engage in gossip.

### ***Tendency to Gossip***

Gossip (n.d.), a pervasive social phenomenon, has been defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as “casual or unconstrained conversation” and “involving details which are not confirmed as true.” Nevo, Nevo, and Derech-Zehavi (1993) suggested the link between gossip and social comparison, based on Festinger’s (1954) theory, since information about others helps an individual evaluate himself. Nevo et al. (1993) proposed that several variables would determine an individual’s tendency to gossip, like gender or vocation. In a similar vein, we hypothesize that an individual’s level of epistemic curiosity is a relevant variable.

In order to explore curiosity in a social context, the construct of social curiosity was proposed to refer to the motivation for acquiring information about the social world (Renner, 2006). An important function of curiosity was the need to live in a predictable and controllable social world (Swann, Stephenson, & Pittman, 1981). Further, social curiosity being an interest in new social information could be linked to the motivation to gossip. Hence, individuals perceived the exchange of gossip as providing useful information for their own lives (Baumeister, Zhang, & Vohs, 2004). Moreover, social curiosity was positively related to social functioning, along with factors like extraversion and social competence (Hartung & Renner, 2013). Similarly, Dunbar (2004) proposed that gossip served a crucial evolutionary function since it provided information about learning and development in interpersonal interactions, facilitating large-group bonding.

A study by Hartung and Renner (2013) aimed to understand the relationship between gossip and social curiosity. The key distinction between social curiosity and gossip was that individuals gossiped with the motive of entertainment. Thus, gossiping was perceived more negatively than expressions of social curiosity. On the other hand, social curiosity referred to a broader domain of gathering information about other people to understand how they think and feel, which was perceived as a positive trait. However, Hartung and Renner (2013) did not examine the

relation between gossip and EC and whether there was a specific I- or D-type need among individuals to engage in gossip.

In addition to the relationship between gossip and curiosity, the linkage between gossip and gender has been reported extensively (e.g., Dillard, O’Dwyer, & Bonvillian, 2008; Hall, 2011; Nevo et al., 1993; Watson, 2012). The tendency to gossip has often been found to be higher in women, initially proposed to be influenced by women’s vocational interests (Nevo et al., 1993). Levin and Arluke (1985) found that although men could have a high tendency to gossip, they tended to underreport the same.

Watson (2012) suggested that collectivism versus individualism could be a factor for cross-cultural differences in gossip. He found that the content of male gossip had higher agency and achievement-related concerns for themselves, whereas women were characterised by caring for others, which constituted the majority of their gossip content.

Due to under- or over-reporting of behaviours, there was a need to measure the social desirability of participants when employing such self-report scales of gossip and curiosity. Further, since gossip was likely to have a negative connotation in most cultures, it was predicted to have an inverse relationship with social desirability. Consistent with this, Nevo et al. (1993) and Litman and Pezzo (2007) found negative correlations between the tendency to gossip and social desirability.

### ***Social Desirability***

Social Desirability (SD) refers to the defensive tendency of individuals to respond in a manner consistent with societal norms or beliefs (Herbert et al., 1997). Thus, SD is generally measured in behavioural studies since respondents might tend to give biased responses in order to portray an overly positive image of their true selves (Uziel, 2010).

Earlier studies have focused on the tendency of SD to influence self-report results; for instance, a study by Dunbar, Marriott, and Duncan (1997) found that for two-thirds of the time, male and female conversations tended to involve gossip.

However, when asked to report how much they gossiped in a conversation, men and women reported that they gossip less than 30% of the time. This discrepancy between observational and self-report studies on gossip was likely due to the perceived undesirability of gossiping behaviour (Hartung & Renner, 2013). Thus, the inverse relationship between gossip and social desirability was warranted.

Hartung and Renner (2013) proposed that this discrepancy in gossip reportage might arise from an ambiguous conception and understanding of the term gossip. While researchers may broadly define gossip as any social exchange in order to foster social relationships or gather information, a layman's perception of gossip may be much narrower.

### **The Present Study**

We aimed to link the constructs of epistemic curiosity, gossip and social desirability through exploratory research with an Indian sample. Using the EC, TGQ, and SD scales, we sought to determine social desirability effects on the reporting of gossiping behaviour and levels of epistemic curiosity. Although, past research has explored the influence of SD on the tendency to gossip, there have been fewer studies explaining the impact of SD on curiosity, particularly EC (Litman & Pezzo, 2007). Since the cultural differences in understanding of learning process and search for information and knowledge may have an influence on relation between EC and SD (J. Litman, personal communication, Nov 16, 2013), we hypothesised that:

H1: There will be a direct relationship between the EC and SD constructs upon correlation.

Supplementary analyses were also conducted to explore gender differences and relationships between the three scales and their subscales in the Indian sample. Further, the cultural flexibility of the constructs was examined through reliability measures.

### **Method**

#### **Participants:**

One hundred English-speaking participants, of which 50 were males ( $M_{age} = 21.74$ ,  $SD_{age} =$

4.42, range = 17 - 45) and 50 were females ( $M_{age} = 20.36$ ,  $SD_{age} = 4.32$ , range = 16 - 43) were recruited. Most participants were college students, and the questionnaires were administered online as well as manually.

#### **Materials:**

*Tendency to Gossip Questionnaire (TGQ):* This scale was used in its 20-item, 7 point Likert scale format (1 = never to 7 = always; Nevo et al., 1993). An item from the scale is "I tend to gossip." This measure had high internal consistency ( $\alpha = .84$ ) in the present study.

*Epistemic Curiosity Scale (EC).* This scale was used in its 10-item, 4 point Likert scale format (1 = almost never to 4 = almost always; Litman, 2008). An item from the scale is "I enjoy exploring new ideas." This measure had relatively high internal consistency for the current sample ( $\alpha = .74$ ).

*Social Desirability Scale (SDS).* This measure was administered in its 17-item, True-False format (Stöber, 2001). Participants responded to statements like "I sometimes litter." This measure had low internal consistency in the present study ( $\alpha = .56$ ).

#### **Procedure:**

Participants responded to the three questionnaires online or in person after instructions were given for each scale. After the three scales were completed, participants were debriefed and thanked for their time.

### **Results**

Correlations were computed between the subscale and full-scale scores of the Epistemic Curiosity, Social Desirability, and Tendency to Gossip measures. Table 1 displays this data for all participants. The TGQ subscales of Appearance, Achievement, Social Information, and Sublimated correlated significantly with each other and with the full scale. While Appearance correlated negatively with SDS, Social Information and Sublimated correlated positively with the Deprivation subscale of EC. Sublimated correlated positively with EC and negatively with SDS. On the whole, TGQ did not correlate with either EC or SDS. The EC subscales of Interest and Deprivation correlated

**Table 1. Correlations for the Epistemic Curiosity, Social Desirability and Tendency to Gossip scales and subscales for all participants (N = 100)**

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Appearance	1								
2. Achievement	.30**	1							
3. Social Information	.55***	.53***	1						
4. Sublimated	.48***	.44***	.60***	1					
5. TGQ	.75***	.75***	.84***	.76***	1				
6. Interest	-.16	.08	.02	.14	.01	1			
7. Deprivation	.01	.14	.21*	.24*	.17	.24*	1		
8. EC	-.09	.14	.15	.25*	.12	.76***	.81***	1	
9. SDS	-.22*	.11	-.09	-.21*	-.13	-.08	.07	0.00	1

Note. TGQ: Tendency to Gossip; EC: Epistemic Curiosity; SDS: Social Desirability Scale. \*p < .05, \*\*p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001.

**Table 2. Correlations for the Epistemic Curiosity, Social Desirability and Tendency to Gossip scales and subscales for males (N = 50)**

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Appearance	1								
2. Achievement	.43**	1							
3. Social Information	.47***	.46***	1						
4. Sublimated	.27	.35*	.45***	1					
5. TGQ	.74***	.78***	.79***	.63***	1				
6. Interest	-.09	.04	-.05	.31*	.08	1			
7. Deprivation	-.21	.09	.13	.15	.03	.32*	1		
8. EC	-.19	.08	.06	.27	.06	.78***	.84***	1	
9. SDS	-.19	-.02	-.08	-.24	-.16	-.40**	-.09	-.29*	1

Note. TGQ: Tendency to Gossip; EC: Epistemic Curiosity; SDS: Social Desirability Scale. \*p < .05, \*\*p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001.

**Table 3. Correlations for the Epistemic Curiosity, Social Desirability and Tendency to Gossip scales and subscales for females (N = 50)**

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Appearance	1								
2. Achievement	.34*	1							
3. Social Information	.70***	.52***	1						
4. Sublimated	.69***	.50***	.70***	1					
5. TGQ	.84***	.72***	.88***	.85***	1				
6. Interest	-.18	-.01	0	-.02	-.10	1			
7. Deprivation	.27	-.06	.18	.27	.19	.10	1		
8. EC	.06	-.04	.12	.17	.06	.74***	.74***	1	
9. SDS	-.2	0	-.27	-.29*	-.23	.10	.04	.09	1

Note. \*p < .05, \*\*p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001. TGQ: Tendency to Gossip; EC: Epistemic Curiosity; SDS: Social Desirability Scale

significantly with each other and with the full scale. Contrary to the hypothesis, EC and SDS showed no relationship for all participants.

Gender-wise correlations were also computed for the data obtained. For males (Table 2), TGQ subscales and full-scale scores showed positive correlations; similarly, EC was highly correlated with its Interest and Deprivation subscales. It was interesting to find a significant negative correlation between social desirability and epistemic curiosity, in particular, in the Interest subscale.

For females (Table 3), TGQ and its subscales were positively correlated amongst each other, as was EC and its subscales. Although, there was no significant correlation between EC and SDS, the value was positive. The Sublimated subscale of the TGQ correlated negatively with SDS.

To identify gender differences, the relationship between EC, TGQ, and SDS was analysed using a Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA). Multivariate analysis revealed significant gender differences among the three scales (Pillai's Trace = .226,  $F(3, 96) = 9.32$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .23$ ). Univariate analyses also showed significant differences for gender for the three scales, Tendency to Gossip,  $F(1, 98) = 4.41$ , MSE = 1436.41,  $p = .04$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .04$ ; Epistemic Curiosity,  $F(1, 98) = 9.80$ , MSE = 240.25,  $p = .002$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .09$ ; and Social Desirability,  $F(1, 98) = 9.65$ , MSE = 65.61,  $p = .002$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .09$ . Males scored significantly higher on all the three scales as compared to females.

Two MANOVAs conducted on the subscales of TGQ and EC revealed interesting results. For TGQ, Pillai's Trace = .25,  $F(5, 94) = 6.12$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .25$ . With respect to subscales, males scored significantly higher than females. Achievement and Social Information subscales of TGQ showed significant gender differences.  $F$  or Achievement,  $F(1, 98) = 17.87$ , MSE = 660.59,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .15$  and Social Information,  $F(1, 98) = 5.56$ , MSE = 172.27,  $p = .02$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .05$ . For EC, Pillai's Trace = .10,  $F(2, 97) = 5.45$ ,  $p = .006$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .10$ , while the Deprivation subscale was significant for the variable of gender with males scoring higher;  $F(1, 98) = 9.80$ , MSE = 108.16,  $p = .002$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .09$ .

### Discussion

The current study examined the interactions between epistemic curiosity, tendency to gossip

and social desirability in an Indian sample. We hypothesized a direct relationship between the EC and SDS scores, but, epistemic curiosity motivations could be linked to portraying a better image of oneself. The results partially supported H1 and a significant negative correlation was found between EC, particularly in its Interest subscale, and SDS for males. This may imply that although males were interested in learning new ideas and engaging in problem solving activities (Litman & Spielberger, 2003), they were more likely to do so for their personal growth and not to be seen as socially desirable. The current finding was in line with Ben-Zur and Zeidner (1988), who examined curiosity as a state or trait in an Israeli sample and observed that men demonstrated higher levels of state-curiosity as compared to women.

Further, the results demonstrated that there was no correlation between TGQ and EC. In their study, Litman and Pezzo (2007) found low correlations of .01 ( $N = 229$ ) and .20 ( $N = 324$ ) between the TGQ and EC scales. Given that the current study had smaller sample ( $N = 100$ ), and yielded no correlation between the scales, the results were in line with prior work. Further, Litman and Pezzo (2007) also found that TGQ was positively correlated with a similar construct, Interpersonal Curiosity, rather than EC. Thus, by acquiring information about other individuals and not abstract knowledge, Interpersonal Curiosity and TGQ were distinct from EC, which was simply the desire for knowledge (Berlyne, 1954). Although earlier research (e.g., Nevo et al., 1993) found a significant negative correlation between the TGQ and SDS, the current work obtained a lower magnitude of the negative directional relationship between the constructs, possibly due to the smaller sample size.

Supplementary analyses demonstrated gender differences for the three scales in the current sample. Males scored significantly higher on EC, TGQ, and SDS as compared to females. Males were also more likely to gossip about the achievements of others and acquire social information during gossip, in line with Watson (2012). Further, male participants had greater EC stemming from a Deprivation motive to reduce uncertainty.

Lowenstein (1994) proposed that individuals who have high EC resort to guesswork to acquire information that is not readily available, which may lead to the tendency to gossip. Therefore, males in the current sample, whose EC scores were high, were more likely to score higher on the TGQ. Even though, it may be assumed that women gossip more than men, Foster (2004) stated that there was very little evidence to prove this claim.

For female participants, the correlation between EC and SDS was not significant; however, it was in the positive direction. Further, research utilizing a larger sample and more robust methodology might provide evidence for a significant relationship. Dillard et al. (2008) suggested that women gossip about relationships, their own and other's, more than men. Thus, they may tend to report gossiping behaviour more readily. In the context of epistemic curiosity however, women may report higher curiosity with the aim of appearing more socially desirable. The latter was only a conjecture and was not supported by the current study.

Further, females scored significantly lower on all three scales as compared to males. This was contrary to Nevo et al. (1993) who found that the tendency to gossip was higher in women. However, Hall (2011) argued that gossip helps males more than females to be independent in friendships, by being involved in shared activities without an emotional attachment. Similarly, Watson (2012) stated that females might form intimate relationships without the extensive use of gossip. The observation that males tend to enjoy activities that are more external (Hall, 2011) might explain why they show higher EC than females, which in turn, may lead to their tendency to gossip (Lowenstein, 1994).

A major limitation of this study was low internal consistency of the SDS in the current sample ( $\alpha = .56$ ). Griffith and Peterson (2008) argued that scores on SDS do not provide meaningful information about the participant, but only address the situational responses to items while taking the test. The responses to the SDS may in fact, represent actual behaviour patterns and not necessarily socially desirable or undesirable ones. Another explanation for low reliability of the SDS may be unsuitable content for an Indian sample as several SDS scales are

standardized on Western samples. For instance, Kapoor and Agneswaran (2014) found the internal consistency of the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale (1960) to be extremely low ( $\alpha = .12$ ) on a sample of 120 Indian participants. Thus, using culturally relevant social desirability scales is required for future research.

Although predictions were partially supported, exploratory research using the EC, TGQ, and SDS scales was conducted on an Indian student sample. The results have academic significance as they demonstrate that the constructs of EC and TGQ have cross-cultural applicability, given their high internal consistency for the current sample. With significant gender differences for the constructs and a negative relationship between EC and SDS for males, future research can be employed in this subfield to assess the validity of gossip, social desirability and epistemic curiosity constructs in the Indian population.

Using a more robust measure of Social Desirability such as Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale (1960) and administering tools such as Attitudes Towards Gossip (Litman & Pezzo, 2005) and Interpersonal Curiosity (Litman & Pezzo, 2007) can improve the current design. The scales could also be administered on a sample with a wider age range. Future research can focus on cross-cultural gender differences that cause participants to respond differently to these constructs.

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