Gossip in the Age of Digital Reproduction: Revisiting the practice of *tsismis* in online media

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Abstract

In recent years, the popularity of new media has largely shaped how Filipinos with access to technology interact and exchange information. It has provided us a means of production and distribution, and has also challenged the traditional structure of mass media as one-way and top-down. Further, Pertierra (2010) asserted that without the new communication technologies, the sociality of Filipinos would have remained undeveloped. This paper revisits the existing concepts and practices related to *tsismis* as applied to new media by looking at the important role that language plays, the functions of *tsismis*, and the differences and similarities it might have with the traditional practice of *tsismis* in mass media. While this paper pointed out the possibilities for a more liberative practice of gossip in new media, *tsismis* in Fashion Pulis has remained in the level of a communicative event, only serving as a form of entertainment for netizens with time to spare online and as a vehicle for maintaining existing structures of power, behavior and values imposed and deemed acceptable by society's standards. To this end, the commenters are just disembodied voices with no clear and collective goals that may help elevate the act of gossiping into a more political and discursive practice.

Keywords: Gossip, Tsismis, New Media, Discourse

The way Filipinos with access to technology interact and exchange information has been shaped by the popularity of new media. These new media have provided us a means of production and distribution, apart from challenging the traditional structure of mass media as one-way and top-down. Pertierra (2010) goes so far to assert

that without the new communication technologies, the sociality of Filipinos would have remained undeveloped.

The changes brought about by new media have been the subject of numerous studies with various scholars looking at its implications from a political, economic, cultural, and social standpoint. However, echoing Pertierra's observation, there are fewer studies on how technology has entered the everyday life of Filipinos to the point that its use has been taken for granted and accepted as something 'natural' especially for the newer generation of Filipinos considered as digital natives.

Seen from this perspective, it becomes interesting to look at how technology has been incorporated into and how it has 'modified' the daily lives of common Filipinos. While mobile phones are still the most accessible, the proliferation of internet shops offering a cheaper rate for internet access, the *Pisonet*, and even the popularity of cheaper smart phones have made access to the world wide web more available than ever before.

It is from this context that I have decided to look at one of our most popular pastimes – *tsismisan* – to see what form this practice has taken in the age of new media where information is easily available, reproduced, distributed, created, and even invented. For example, it is not uncommon to receive forwarded SMS (short messaging system) containing gossip or news about celebrities and public figures who was rumored to have died (or labeled gay), only to find out that the said celebrity is very much alive and promoting his/her latest film.

While *tsismis* was initially associated with the personal (between neighbors or within small groups) rather than the public, the establishment of mass media has institutionalized *tsismis* and made a billion-peso industry out of it. Today, *tsismis* is not just relegated to whispered conversations among friends or social groups but it can be read in tabloids, broadsheets, magazines, and even occupy primetime slots in television and radio programs every day of the week.

What is now the relationship between the popularity of new media and *tsismis*? This question becomes relevant in the light of the current figures that showed Filipinos ranking first – at 96.1% – in social media use among other countries in Asia (Comscore, March 2013). Does this mean that *tsismis* is not only institutionalized through the economics of mass media, but has taken on a virality that is associated with new media?

Pertierra argued that despite its universal features, the new communication media mirror and reproduce existing cultural orientations (2010, 9). Is this also the case when it comes to *tsismis*? What role do social media, particularly blogs, play in reproducing, reinforcing, and/or transplanting this Filipino social practice? Do blogs afford an alternative way of seeing, looking and explaining *tsismis*?

There is still a lack of studies dealing with the language and practice of *tsismis* in new media since existing literature are usually limited to its social functions; its virality or how it spreads (both in a person's social circle and in new media); how it serves as a form of 'news' found in tabloids or in broadsheets.

This paper is an attempt to problematize the existing conception and construction of *tsismis* in the age of new media and how, if it does, reconceptualize the practice of *tsismis* using one of the blind items found in *Fashion Pulis* (FP) (www.fashionpulis.com), a blog founded by Michael Sy Lim, as an exploratory case study. In revisiting the practice of *tsismis* in the disembodied world of new media, it is important to study the important role that language plays, its functions, and the differences and similarities it might have with the traditional practice of mass media *tsismis*. Lastly, this paper hopes to update existing local studies on *tsismis* by including perspectives in new media.

Defining *tsismis*

In the Filipino language, *tsismis* is also synonymous with *sitsit*, *satsat*, *tsismes* (chismes in Spanish), *yapyap*, *satsatan*, *salitaan*, *balita*, *bulungan*, *istorya*, *sali-salitaan*, *sabi-sabi*, *paninira*, and *alingasngas.* In the

age of the internet, it has also been associated with the word 'scandal'—which is arguably another voyeuristic outlet of Filipino netizens.

While it is also known by so many words in English, rumor and gossip have become the popular equivalent of *tsismis*. People tend to conflate the meaning of the two words so it is important to understand their differences for the purpose of understanding why gossip is the preferred translation of *tsismis* in this paper.

Rumor and gossip have been the topic of several studies done in the 70s and 80s. As theoretical concepts, existing literature suggest that while these two words were usually taken together as focus of various academic inquiries, scholars have also approached it as separate constructs. As for example, Rosnow and Fine (1976), who dealt extensively with the social psychology of rumor and gossip, differentiated the two terms. The former was defined as information that is neither substantiated nor refuted while the latter is small talk with or without a known basis in fact. Further, they said that the motivational hierarchies are different as rumor is often fuelled by the following: a desire for meaning and a quest for clarification and closure, while gossip is framed as being motivated by ego and status needs (4). From this definition, one can see that rumor – which usually deals with events and issues of great importance and magnitude – is somewhat positively defined than gossip – which deals with the more personal, private, affairs of individuals (11). Szekfu and Szvetelszky (2005) gave a more comprehensive definition of gossip that is relevant to this paper:

> (gossip is) non-public information about knowable people, interpreted in local contexts and its primary attribute is proliferation/spreading. The totality of gossip circulating in a given group at a given time is the kind of information cluster that constantly overwrites itself. Gossiping is instinctive communication of poly-hierarchic human organizations, characteristic of the whole of the human

species, manifesting itself in smaller communities. Gossip was the primary form of information transmission in the days before writing. Social life was based on oral communication, one could not compare two unrecorded versions of the same text till the 16th century, when printing gave birth to public and controlled information (309).

The definition above has recognized that gossip is viral, its cultural value is limited to the members of a particular group from which the gossip emanates, and a communal engagement. With the introduction of print media and the institutionalization of mass media, gossip has become 'verifiable' because it is now reproducible – the subject has transcended from the personal to the public, and it is now controlled (mass media gossip is regulated by gatekeepers).

Shibutani (1966) has also enumerated certain roles, though not clearly delineated, that people play in a communicative event such as gossip: the messenger or the source of information although this person is reporting it from an idiosyncratic standpoint; interpreter or the one who tries to place the news in a context by locating it in the past and future implications; skeptic or the one who expresses doubt, demands proof, and/or urges caution; the protagonist or the one who is in charge of several possible interpretations or plans of actions; the agitator who is the individual who is personally affected because he is either a friend or relative of the victim (or in the case of this paper, a fan of the celebrity involved in the gossip); the auditor is a spectator who says very little; and the decision maker who takes the lead in determining what needs to be done. These five roles are defined vis-à-vis the function of gossip in the everyday life of its participants.

Much of the earlier studies of *tsismis* in the Philippines made use of the concepts mentioned above. As for example, Nuevo (1980) explained that *tsismis* is resorted to as a way to disseminate information, pass the time, a way to voice opinion or expression, a form of catharsis

from the people whose values and behavior they do not agree with, and as evidence that they belong to a group. Other studies on *tsismis* in the local context range from the common expressions used in gossips (Nuevo, 1980); the relationship of gender and gossip (Aldana, 1980); to the language used in gossiping; to how gossip is located in the daily activities of the Filipinos (Santos, 1976 cited in Macasaet, 1980); gossip and bilingualism and its effect on information use (Cabanero cited in Macasaet, 1980); and the correlation of gossip and sensitivity to expression and feelings (Tayao, 1976 as cited in Macasaet, 1980). All these studies have pointed to a certain level of interest in *tsismis* using various perspectives and disciplines. However, there is a need to revisit these findings to see if they are still applicable in a globalized society where mass media and information technologies has taken on a more important role in the lives of Filipinos.

Functions of gossip

Various scholars also see gossip as more than a communicative event, but rather a manifestation of societal conditions. Gossip functions in various ways. On a personal level, it can serve as an expression of an individual's desire or expression of anger or uncertainty. It can also be seen as a wish fulfillment or a source of pride as one is perceived to be 'in the know'. This means that having first- hand information about the person being gossiped about contributes to preserving social status in an exclusive or highly organized group (1976, 88). On the level of the collective or society, Shibutani explained that gossip is a transaction where each member gives a contribution depending on their motivations and point of view. In this light, gossip is seen as a collective response to a certain societal problem. It becomes a form of communication for certain groups in an uncertain situation to try and find a solution. It is also through gossips that prevailing values and social mores are reinforced in society.

There are two ways of looking at the function of gossip that is relevant to this paper. Borrowing from Rosnow and Fine (1976), this paper will look at gossip as a social and economic transaction. As a social transaction, *tsismis* is "mediated by subtle anxieties and thus seems directed at reducing or avoiding possible strains or diffusing a

discomfort" (87). As mentioned above, gossip can be seen as a way for members of society to make sense of current conditions or to impose existing norms and values. As an economic transaction, it is assumed that gossip is a manufactured form of entertainment (in this case, the blind item or celebrity *tsismis*) benefitting both the producer and consumer of the product. Rosnow and Fine asserted that gossip has something to do with consumption, but the consumption is also based on certain class preferences that affect the behavior, supply, and inventories of its producers and distributors (87). This observation is especially relevant as this paper deals with *tsismis* in new media which, unlike the *tsismis* in tabloids that is written in Filipino or in *bekimon* (gay) language, is the domain of middle and upper class, specifically those with access to the internet, and with a good command of the English language.

Mass media gossip

When gossip is seen from the perspective of the mass media industry, it can be interpreted using Blumler & Katz's (1974) uses and gratifications approach. The producer of gossip is rewarded with the capacity to manage news (gatekeep) and with it comes a certain form of economic and political power, while for the consumer there is a gratification in the entertainment provided by the gossip, the diversion from the tedium of everyday life, the feeling of being a privileged insider and the perverse delight in knowing the shortcomings and misfortunes of successful people (1976, 88).

De Backer and Fisher (2012) list entertainers (celebrities) and royals as the most gossiped people followed by politicians and lesser known individuals. Further, they explained that celebrities were more likely to be talked about when they achieved prestige and had a positive change in their romantic relationships. While this is also true in the Philippines, what also holds true is that even negative *tsismis* is still 'sought' as this is still publicity and can still contribute to the celebrity's recall in the public consciousness.

Tsismis in the age of social media

Pertierra (2010) sees the problems inherent in the internet as a medium for free expression as anyone can post comments which can result in offenses against speech and privacy. The mediatization of everyday life, where information and leisure activities are now shaped to a large degree by mass media, has become a foremost concern to scholars. The speed of which any event, whether important or trivial, gets distributed in all parts of the world is largely due to the increasing role and dependence on the internet. Pertierra noted that an unexpected consequence of this information deluge is the difficulty in sorting reliable from unreliable information and sources. In the traditional broadcast and print media, gatekeepers (news editors, as for example) play an important role in 'deciding' what information gets out or is deemed relevant to the public, but in the age of new media where everyone is 'free' to source and distribute information, unverified and unreliable information become accepted as 'facts'. While this study does not deal with scandals as a form of spreading gossip about celebrities (that in itself is already an interesting study), it is still relevant to mention Mangahas' (2009 cited in Pertierra, 2010) pioneering work on internet scandal as some of her findings is relevant to this paper. Filipinos' penchant for scandal has reached a certain 'notoriety' as, according to Google Trends, the Philippines ranks first in the world for looking up the single search term "scandal" on the Internet using the Google search engine (32). Further, sex and so-called unconventional behavior remain to be the primary characteristics of the interest in video scandals and this has been enhanced to a large degree by new media. As Filipinos grapple with the implication of the 'freedom' that internet provides as opposed to the one-way nature of traditional print and broadcast media, the separation between private and public lives are blurred.

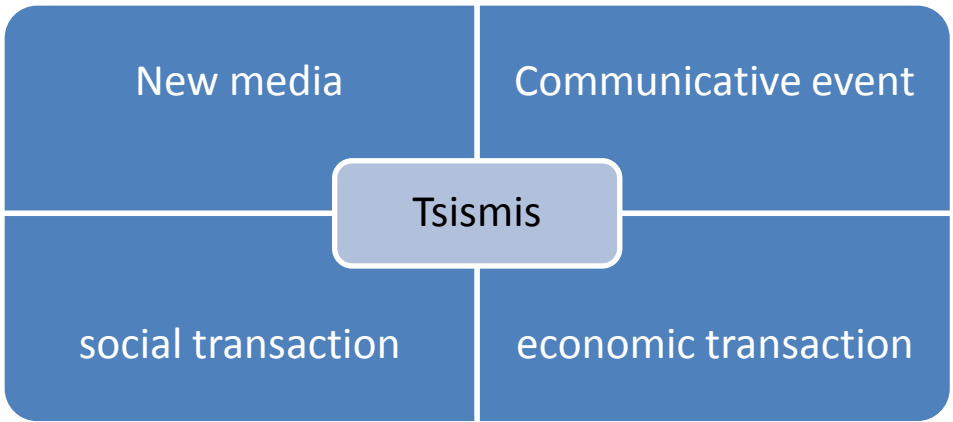| New media	Communicative event
Tsismis	
social transaction	economic transaction

Figure 1. Conceptual framework

All of the concepts discussed in the literature cited intersect to form this study's conceptual framework. Borrowing from Pertierra's explanation on how new media has influenced the sociality of Filipinos, *tsismis* in the form of Blind Items and coursed through new media takes on another form since it is more interactive and the flow of information is more "democratized" as compared to broadcast media. *Tsismis* is also seen as a communicative event where participants play certain roles to meet societal expectations and where prevailing value and belief systems are emphasized. Lastly, *tsismis* in FP also serve an economic function for Lim as his blog has taken on an economic aura via the number of hits, advertising revenues, and the fact that Lim now functions as a gatekeeper in the entertainment community.

Fashion Pulis

Since the internet has 'democratized' the process of distributing information, it is interesting to study how an individual like Michael Sy Lim has managed to accumulate economic, and to a certain extent, political power as he is able to challenge the traditional structures of the gossip industry in mass media. No stranger to the world of fashion, Lim, aside from being a blogger is also a wedding organizer and a professor of public relations in one of the top universities in the country. Judging from his social network (involving the fashion and entertainment

industry) where he typically gets his BI's, Lim is quite wealthy, wears designer clothes and carries designer bags in his public appearances, speaks fluent English during interviews, and according to his podcast with DJ Mo Twister (2014), loves to travel to Europe. Lim's political clout can be seen on how he's already "in the radar" of famous celebrities so much so that Sharon Cuneta, Kim Chiu, Jake Cuenca, Heart Evangelista, among others, have at one point, reacted to his BI's.

Lim started his blog in February 2011 and from being a site that talks about celebrity fashion, it evolved into everything celebrity-related, including gossips. As proof of this economic power, blogging network Nuffnang Philippines estimated that *FP* can command up to seven figures per annum in advertising revenues as the site has heavy visitor traffic (Moral, 2013). FP has consistently ranked in the top five of the country's most popular blogs with almost 120,000 hits a day and with each blog entry gaining hundreds of comments. What is interesting to note is that among the top ten (Sake, 2014), FP is the only entertainment-based blog that deals primarily with gossip. According to Lim (2014), unlike other popular sites with back offices and a number of staff, FP is being run by only four people (including him) which makes it a far cry from other more established entertainment websites like pep.ph. Lim is the one in charge of approving which BI's to post while his moderators are constantly monitoring the comments for any violation of the rules, especially name dropping of celebrities involved in the blind items.

Most of the sources of FP gossip (or BI's) apart from Lim's social network include those coming from the production staff of networks, haters of celebrities, and most importantly from his readers. Lim admits that a number of his posts including photos found in FP are mostly crowd sourced. He feels that one way of appreciating the readers is to post the BI and photos that they send him. Lim describes his readers as those with education and belonging to high income groups.

Lim maintained that he is "very strict" when it comes to approving comments on blind items and that he values his credibility as a blogger as evidenced by the fact that he was not afraid to go public to answer the accusation against him by certain celebrities, unlike other

bloggers who chose to remain anonymous ("I don't get why celebs fight back", 2012).

The reasons cited above have established the importance of studying Fashion Pulis in the context of how it was able to reconceptualize the practice of tsismis in new media. In order to do this, I used as a case study one blind item which appeared on FP last September 11, 2013 entitled *Another Jeopardizing Story of His Risky Actions* (Appendix A). The reason for choosing this particular BI is that during the time of the study (August to September 2013) it has managed to get the most number of comments (106), probably due to the fact that the actress is well-loved by fans. During that time it was also one of the most controversial BI's as it was shared and talked about in social media where it appeared on my own Facebook feed.

Briefly, the blind item (BI) talked about a familiar and popular celebrity couple whose marriage might be on the rocks because of a rumored sexually transmitted disease by the husband. While one BI in FP is not meant to be a representative of the whole blog, it will at least provide an entry point to which future studies on online *tsismis* can be approached.

I have decided to employ textual analysis since I am more interested in the meanings of the text and the language and in the concept of communicative event rather than the repeated occurrence of a phenomenon. The indicators for the textual analysis are based on my initial observation done in FP and from concepts extracted from the related literature such as use of words, use of emoticons (which can supplant the verbal gestures in real-life conversation), and the use of *tsismis* jargon. It will also identify the participants of gossip in an online environment in order to understand the dynamics involved in this communicative environment and how social relations are formed and how it functions as a form of social control at the level of the celebrities involved in the BI and within the norms reinforced by the commenters in FP.

The language of online *tsismis*

What makes BI popular in FP as compared to the other posts? How do netizens engage in *tsismisan*? And how important is the role of words in the online environment to create a communicative event?
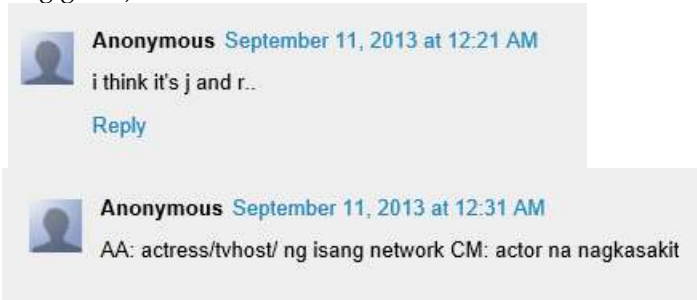
Posts in FP are written mostly in English owing to Lim's class background as well as his own admission that most of his readers are those with high income and educated. BIs are written similar to how BI in broadsheets are also written – short and with a few hints to identify who the subject is, but not too much so as to avoid specifics that will clearly give away the identity of the people involved in the BI. Lim explained that if the BI has the tendency to be defamatory then there will be fewer clues in order to avoid lawsuits.

The sample BI is only three paragraphs long with the first two paragraphs elaborating on the background of the celebrity couple involved so as to give the readers several clues before dropping the juicy 'news.' Unlike BIs in broadsheets, this post has a visual representation of what the *tsismis* is all about and even ends with a quote about enduring hardships in marriage and a warning to observe the guidelines when commenting.

This particular BI (as well as the others) in *FP* is not framed as a 'news' item as what BIs in broadsheets or even tabloids try to pass off, but as a kind of a 'guessing game' in which those who know the answer belongs to an 'exclusive' group of people. The metaphor of *tsismis* as a game is important to consider since part of the motivation for commenting is projecting to the other commenters that 'you got it.' The audience is then 'encouraged' to share their guesses, but not to the point of name-dropping; or to provide more clues to the people who was not able to get it. Lim explained that the readers find thrill in guessing the subject of the BI and has in fact even organized group chats and teleconferences outside of FP.

What is easily noticeable in this exchange of words is the use of codenames to hide the identities of the celebrities involved; through the

initials CM (commercial model) and AA (admirable actress), there is now a common code for everyone who wants to join in on the discussion (or the guessing game).

> **Anonymous** September 11, 2013 at 12:21 AM
> i think it's j and r..
> Reply

> **Anonymous** September 11, 2013 at 12:31 AM
> AA: actress/tvhost/ ng isang network CM: actor na nagkasakit

Further, FP also gives out clues by playing with words on the title or teasing the audiences with hints. This play on words by *FP* also serves as a point of pride to the people who gets it and has added to the perceived credibility of Lim as a celebrity blogger:

> **Anonymous** September 11, 2013 at 3:20 AM
> ang galing talga ni FP! nasa title ang clues!
> Reply
>
> ▾ Replies
>> **Anonymous** September 11, 2013 at 9:21 AM
>> oh yeah, he's a master

In order to join in the conversation, there is a need to be familiar with some jargon involved in celebrity *tsismis* in *FP* that is not being used in typical print media BIs. These jargon are also needed in order to maintain a sense of ambiguity to the people mentioned in the BI. What is interesting is that these jargon are associated with the network loyalties of the viewers as in the case of *KaH* (which means ka-Heart or Kapuso), or *KaF* (which means ka-Family or Kapamilya), and *Ka-Bro*, (which means Kapatid) – all these codes pertain to the branding of the different local networks.

Anonymous September 11, 2013 at 1:12 PM
KaF are pure? di ba pwedeng fantard ka? Hoy gumising ka mga KaF yang ang andyan sa BI! hindi be pwedeng wala akong pakealam sa network wars nyo? kelangan KaH ako? wow ha.

A sense of anonymity also pervades the *FP* comment section. This is the reason why conducting a follow up interview with the commenters is not possible since there are no links available to trace their identities. There are no identified names (not even codenames) and even the avatars do not have any visual representations. The commenters are not required by *FP* to register to be able to comment as some blogs do, but their comments are subject to the approval of Lim and his assigned blog moderator so as to maintain a sense of discipline and decorum. Further, because of the number of comments in a certain entry, the commenter can address a fellow commenter by using the time of post to call the commenter's attention as in the case below:

Anonymous September 11, 2013 at 1:24 AM
anon 12:46 why so serious?? chill pill you want? hahahahaha!

Lastly, there is minimal use of emoticons. Emoticons as online representations of non-verbal gestures and feelings are only used when driving home a point that the commenter does not want misinterpreted. The use of sad face by the commenters showed the inability to guess the people mentioned in the BI despite the clues provided, while an emoticon with a tongue sticking out means that the commenter is only joking and should not be taken seriously. The power of emoticons in the online environment is important because this serves as the medium for supplementing the written words as opposed to non-verbal gestures involved in face to face conversations.

The rules of online gossiping

While there are no formal, spoken rules about gossiping as it is used in everyday social transactions and even by mass media in its gossip columns and programs, the case is different in the online environment. Here, the rules are explicitly stated and netizens are strongly encouraged to follow these rules.

All the posts in *FP* have a disclaimer at the end indicating that the comments do not reflect the opinions and views of FP before proceeding to give the link to the guidelines page where explicit rules are outlined. It is worth pointing out that the explanatory note accompanying the guidelines page is the passage of Republic Act 10175, more popularly known as the Philippine Cybercrime Law. Lim exhorts the commenters to observe the rules, if only to avoid legal repercussions.

There are seven major guidelines that include a warning against rude behavior and the policy of no name dropping. The importance of language is once again underscored as abusive, profane and other offensive words are considered violations and will not be published in the comments page. Respect for each other's post is encouraged and while the commenters are expected to drop clues for the benefit of others, pointing to one specific incident that will lead to the identification of the celebrity is against the rules. In short, ambiguity and respect is the key to negotiating the world of online *tsismis*. In this world, Lim exerts a certain level of power as he 'dictates' the rules of the game and is seen as the enforcer of order and discipline.

Functions of online *tsismis*

Going back to Pertierra's assertion that new communication technologies also mirror and reproduce existing cultural orientations, we can see that *tsismis* is no exception as there are similarities to the way *tsismis* is practice in the offline and online world, with quite a few interesting differences.

As a communicative event

There seems to be a combination of the concept of power (coming from traditional gatekeepers and operating in a top-down manner) and Shibutani's identification of certain actors in a communicative event that is involved in online *tsismis*. To illustrate, Lim functions in a similar way to the traditional gatekeeper (or the "messenger" according to Shibutani) as the source of the information, however, the process is not linear as the netizens become active participants in the communicative event. While certain commenters can assume the role of interpreter, agitator, or even a skeptic, the online

world has also brought with it certain character types such as the *grammar nazi*, who is more concerned with the formal construction of language;

> Anonymous September 11, 2013 at 9:50 AM
> Pareho naman palang lalaki? Hahaha. His hubby. Kaloka!

the *troll*, who posts comments that are meant to provoke reactions from other commenters;

> Anonymous September 12, 2013 at 12:03 PM
> U're so lame 3:49. Get a life "U LOW LIFE LOSER"?'.

the *fantard* (combination of fan and retard), or the overzealous fan who, because of the interactive nature of internet, are free to comment, defend their favourite celebrity, or bash other celebrities they hate:

> Anonymous September 11, 2013 at 12:16 AM
> KaH to. They're lascivious and uncouth by nature. They always cross the moral line. KaF people would never do what they did because they are pure, chaste and innocent. They can become saints anytime. They are the bastion of morality.
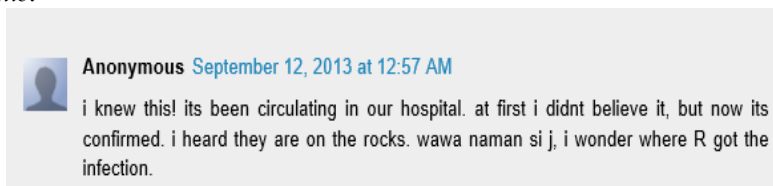>
> Reply

However, while the participants in Shibutani's communicative event does seem to work together towards a certain goal, there seems to be no common consensus towards creating an action or a resolution in the case of the participants in *FP*. In this sense, the *tsismis* in *FP* stops at the level of being a communicative event (in this case, a guessing game that is meant to entertain or pass the time only) than towards a more productive endeavor that scholars in gossip have previously asserted.

Further, when seen from a behavioral and sociological perspective, there seems to be a certain 'exclusivity' that emanates from engaging in online *tsismis* that may not be far from offline engagement with *tsismis*. This sense of exclusivity then results in a feeling of

inferiority (not being 'smart' enough to get the clues) as evidenced by the "Row 100"[1] comment and the sad face emoticon;

> **Anonymous** September 11, 2013 at 12:26 AM
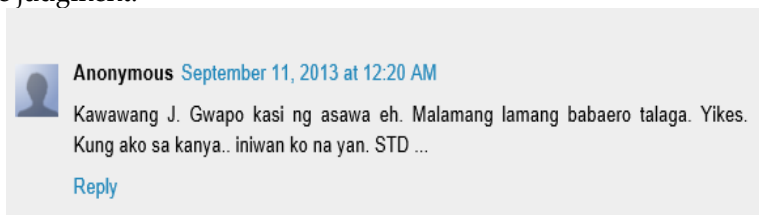> no clue ako FP :(row 100
> Reply
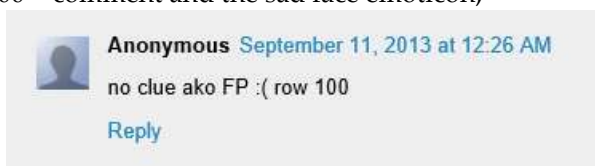
or superiority (pride in being able to know) as evidenced by the comment below which showed how the commenter is in a privileged position (of being in the hospital where the supposed event transpired) and being able to have first-hand information and confirmation about the *tsismis*:

> **Anonymous** September 12, 2013 at 12:57 AM
> i knew this! its been circulating in our hospital. at first i didnt believe it, but now its confirmed. i heard they are on the rocks. wawa naman si j, i wonder where R got the infection.

Tsismis as a form of social control

At first glance, while *tsismis* in *FP* is seen as a form of entertainment and to pass away the time, the comments also reveal something regarding certain values, norms, behavior and standards that the participants in gossip deem important. It is interesting to note the intensity of judgment emanating from this particular BI as commenters weigh in on this issue with CM (the husband) getting the brunt of negative judgment.

> **Anonymous** September 11, 2013 at 12:20 AM
> Kawawang J. Gwapo kasi ng asawa eh. Malamang lamang babaero talaga. Yikes. Kung ako sa kanya.. iniwan ko na yan. STD ...
> Reply

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[1] In the Philippine primary school setting, it is usual for the best in class to be seated in Row 1. *Ergo,* Row 100 is a hyperbolic reference to lack of intellectual ability.

▾ Replies

Anonymous September 11, 2013 at 1:45 AM

oh...sila ba ito? nagaya na si hubby sa mga kasama nya...tsk tsk tsk...

Anonymous September 11, 2013 at 5:10 AM

Tama ka 1:45am, kasi birds of a feather flocks together kagaya lang siya nung kanyang mga kasama. Sabagay me history naman si hubby during his single days so di nahawa. Na-enhanced lang. Kawawa si J.

Anonymous September 11, 2013 at 12:38 AM

Kawawa naman si J. Tsk..tsk. Naalala ko noon before they got married, lumabas yung balita about R's ex-GF. Appareny, matagal ng break si R and ex, but they kept a no strings attached relationship, meaning F buddy sila, kahit pa R is already in a committed relationship with J. J found out about the girl but stayed with R and got married nga. Maybe J thought she could change R? According din sa BIs, R has insatiable sex appetite..kaya siguro nagkanda loko loko na. Wawa si J..

Reply

As seen in the samples above, the commenters see CM's sexual promiscuity as something that is undesirable for a public figure and a married one at that. The judgment pertaining to CM reflects the desired (or group-approved) values or conduct of people in a given society.

Further, the fact that the commenters seem to know the personal life of the public figure, as exemplified by the post on "*sabagay me history naman si hubby during his single days*" (well, the husband already had a history during his single days) and the "F buddy" comment characterizes the dissolution of the line between the public and private lives of celebrities.

While a majority of the comments seemed to agree that CM is the villain in article, there are also a few negative comments about AA that seemed to come from the perspective of "you can't have your cake and eat it too", which reflected how *tsismis* seemed to function as a form of catharsis against people whose lives have been like a 'fairytale'. To this end, the "*mayabang*" comment against AA reflected the belief system

of the commenter who deemed that AA deserved the unfortunate luck of having a sexually promiscuous husband because she also exhibited traits that were deemed undesirable. This time, however, it is the person not the act that is considered objectionable.

> **Anonymous** September 11, 2013 at 9:35 AM
>
> super yabang nga ni J simula ng maging sila ni R. Feel na feel!!!

Criticizing the physical appearance of the subject of the *tsismis* is also a form of social control;

> **Anonymous** September 12, 2013 at 7:13 AM
>
> Kala mo naman katangkaran ang guy eh ang liit nya, and di naman ganun kagwapo,, eyebags. Tseh

While the value of the family in Philippine society is also reflected in the comments, there is a noticeable consensus that AA is better off without her husband. Further, even if majority of the posters' comments reflect an attitude that seemed to show that *tsismis* is just for fun, there are also comments calling for respect for the subject of the BI.

> **Anonymous** September 11, 2013 at 12:22 AM
>
> Kawawa naman si actress. I think dapat na siyang kumalas as early as now bago pa siya magaya kay Mrs. M. Magfocus na lang siya sa career and her kids.
>
> Reply

> **Anonymous** September 11, 2013 at 3:22 PM
>
> korek! ayaw nya magaya sa ibang showbiz couple na si nagwork relasyon sa hiwalayan din nauwi, her life is like a fairytale sayang lang!

> **Anonymous** September 11, 2013 at 12:43 AM
>
> i like this couple. i hope they survive this.
>
> Reply

What is also interesting to note is there were at least two comments which expressed a sense of connection to what AA was going through because they also experienced being in the same situation. Once again, *tsismis* served as a way to bridge connections between people who may not know each other personally, but who share similar experiences

– a behavior common in the world of online media. This expression of personal connection is not at all possible when compared with print-based or television-based gossip.

> **Anonymous** September 12, 2013 at 12:39 AM
>
> Masyadong maselan ang topic na to. Sana hindi nalang natin ilabas sa pagiging bi. Kawawa si J kng totoo man. Pano pa siya mgkakaron ng bagong jowa kng of ever maghiwalay sila? This is too devastating and no woman would ever wish na mangyari ito sa kanya. Ang sakit lang kasi nangyari din ito sa akin before, the difference is, normal na tao ako, eh si J public figure kaya kakabit sa pangalan niya yung ganung issue

Lastly, the enforcement of social control is not only to the subject of the *tsismis*, but also to the commenters whose attitude may not also fit the existing norms imposed by the group or the society in general. As seen in the sample below, a commenter 'sarcastically' addresses another commenter who posted a rather callous remark about the BI – the calling of attention constitutes a kind of social control in this online community whose members do not really know each other.

> **Anonymous** September 11, 2013 at 7:01 AM
>
> "hahaha" - really, 2:11 AM?
>
> Nice to know that other people's health risks, marital woes and possible disintegration as a family are sources of endless amusement for you. By any chance, do you also laugh out loud at funerals within hearing distance of the surviving relatives?

The practice of online *tsismis*

Is online *tsismis* just a transplanted activity? Is it just a reinforcement of existing cultural orientations? Or does it say something about the way Filipinos use technology or extend this social practice to new forms?

At initial glance, online *tsismis* do seem to reproduce existing rationalizations as to why people consume mass media gossip. In addition, gossip as an economic transaction is also reproduced as one can see that *FP*'s blog is littered with banner ads of popular products and services (samples include *Kashieca Apparel, SM, Belo Essentials*, etc.).

These products are mostly associated with middle-class material desires and consumption.

Further, technology has extended the way *tsismis* is practiced in new media as this ensures the virality of *tsismis* than what was previously possible in a short amount of time and in greater geographical distance. There is also the sense of anonymity provided for by technology. People are free to comment, express their support or disgust, or bash celebrities while hiding under the cloak of invisibility. Anonymity has brought with it concerns such as cyberbullying, identity theft, and other cyber-related crimes becomes a by-product of this online feature.

In addition, the consumption attitudes of television viewers in the country has pointed to *FP* as just another venue for the fans to bring their animosity to each other and engage in a network war among the three largest networks in the country. If this is the case, what happens to the discourse of gossip as a "collective response to a certain societal problem" (Shibutani, 1966)? Are the commenters just disembodied beings who express their opinions without any goal towards a resolution or action? This may seem to be the case as comments about the BI peter out when most people have already acquired enough clues to identify the subject of the BI or if another, more interesting, more scandalous BI comes along.

The answer may lie in explaining the nature of new media vis-à-vis existing structures of access to information. By establishing *Fashion Pulis*, Lim was able to circumvent the traditional sources of information – albeit even if it is in the form of gossip – that comes from mass media conglomerates which previously had a monopoly on news and information and to which consumers have become dependent on. These consumers have, for a long time, remained without any sense of power that comes from expressing their opinions that can be heard (or read) by a lot of people which FP has now provided. Through the comments section, a 'space' opened up for people to express their opinions, whether negative or positive, which resulted in these entertainers being 'stripped' of their aura of 'stardom' and 'celebrity-ness' (Tolentino, 2000)

and relegated into the same category of a neighbor or a friend who deserved to be talked about because of their deviation from societal norms.

However, this is not to say that online *tsismis* has become an empowering, liberative tool for self-expression and the creation of critical discourses about celebrity culture as it manages to both disrupt and maintain the prevailing economic and social practices of *tsismis*. How? One, while Lim did challenge the way information was distributed by mass media that power has now shifted to him and to the members of the *FP* community. This means that he has become the source of information and the enforcer of the rules in the community. He has effectively become the gatekeeper due to his power to choose what comments to approve and what articles to highlight. In his interview, Lim admitted to taking down stories from his blog because of requests from close friends who have social connections with the celebrities. To this end, his "power" is also limited to a certain level by the workings of the media industry.

Two, as seen in the comments, the kind of social control exerted over the subject of the *tsismis* and among members of the group is still based on the predominant values that society deems acceptable (importance of family, sexual taboos among others). It still failed to interrogate and provoke a deeper discussion relating to the unequal treatment between husbands and wives and gender discrimination in the Philippines. It seems that while online *tsismis* has the potential to provide a space to talk about taboo subjects in society which mainstream media relegates to the periphery, hegemonic voices still prevails in the discourse of online *tsismis.*

Conclusion

This paper has revisited the existing concepts and practices related to *tsismis* as applied to new media by looking at the important role that language plays, the functions of *tsismis*, and the differences and similarities it might have with the traditional practice of *tsismis* as exemplified by mass media. While this paper pointed out the possibilities for a more liberative practice of gossip in new media, *tsismis*

in FP has remained in the level of a communicative event, only serving as a form of entertainment for netizens with time to spare online and as a vehicle for maintaining existing structures of power, behavior and values imposed and deemed acceptable by society's standards. To this end, the commenters are just disembodied voices with no clear and collective goals that may help elevate the act of gossiping into a more political and discursive practice.

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