

The Psychology of Tsismis: A Phenomenological Study About Housewives' Gossip Engagement

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Abstract. The act of gossiping, or "pakikipagtsismisan," is often observed in Filipino culture and pervasive throughout its society. This study explores the psychology of "tsismis" through the perspectives of housewives in selected areas of the National Capital Region (NCR) of the Philippines. Its aim is to investigate the phenomenon of "pakikipagtsismisan" within the Filipino community, particularly among housewives. The study also seeks to understand the motivations of participants for engaging in this activity, as well as the potential advantages and disadvantages they derive from it. A qualitative research design, specifically a phenomenological approach, was employed to explore this phenomenon. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 participants until saturation was reached. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the gathered data, revealing several themes that addressed the research questions posed by the study. "Tsismis" was found to be deeply ingrained in Filipino culture for these housewives, serving various purposes for them individually. Some participants viewed it as a form of entertainment, a source of information, a means of connecting with others, and even as a defense mechanism. Additionally, the results indicated that "tsismis" significantly impacts the well-being of these housewives.

Keywords: Tsismis; Gossip; Housewives; Phenomenological study; National Capital Region.

1.0 Introduction

If you want to know about the latest happenings, all you have to do is keep your ears open, and Filipinos will be talking about it.

Filipinos are well-known to be sociable people. Most of them are not shy about interacting with others, be it through face-to-face communication or digital means. It is not surprising that this sociability extends to how they engage with others in conversations, or what they call "*pakikipagkuwentuhan*" or exchanging stories. *Pakikipagkuwentuhan* is typically a way of recounting events and talking about them with other people. However, when Filipinos exchange stories, they are also open—or at least expecting—the possibility of gossip to make their way into the conversation (Tan, 2016).

Gossiping, or the act of "*pakikipag-tsismisan*" in Filipino terms, has always been a part of the culture in the Philippines. According to the Philippine Entertainment Portal (2022), gossiping and gossipers have played a significant part in Philippine society since before the arrival of the Spaniards. The phenomena may or may not have descended from the pre-colonial "*umalohokan*" which referred to the town crier of the community. Inevitably, these town criers were overshadowed by the Spanish government, which means that stories that did not directly come from the Spaniards were considered "*tsismis*"—the Spanish term for gossip.

In the present, gossiping has been prevalent in the Filipino culture as seen in the majority of the respondents of Philstar Global's (2009) inbox question where they stated that gossiping is the Filipinos' favorite pastime activity. One may see one or two, or even clusters of people, chitchatting in front of a *sari-sari* store, or a house, or maybe in offices and even public places. These scenarios are usually seen—and sometimes, typical—in Filipino communities. Meaning to say, Filipinos are very social creatures and gossiping is only among the many ways they communicate with each other.

Relative to this, it is important to mention that gossiping is more often connoted in a negative light. However, various studies showed that there is more than one form of gossiping—which includes positive gossip. According to Miller (2019), the majority of gossip focuses on sharing information about who did what with whom. Meanwhile, Fox (2001) defined gossip as “the process of informally communicating value-laden information about members of a social setting.” With these definitions, gossiping is not entirely negative or positive. Thus, for this study, the researchers opted to view gossiping in a neutral light.

Marites, an old name turned local internet meme, and a slang term for gossipers—or *tsismosas*, which have been characterized as information gatekeepers, determining whether to communicate or conceal information about others (Foster, 2006). It's hard not to know about her in the Philippines, especially if you spend a significant amount of time using the internet. Every Filipino probably knows a *Marites* in their life or has encountered one. Whether it be a family member, a neighbor, or a colleague, gossipers can be seen in any place and at any time. With this thought, one may wonder why in most cases, gossipers can be observed to appear almost always around the neighborhood. It brings ideas that these gossipers may have more means of engaging in social communities, which is why it is more often associated with individuals who are often seen at home—hence, in relation to housewives.

This research aims to study the phenomena of gossiping within the Filipino community and its ties to its members—in particular, among the housewives. The study attempts to know the reasons for the participants to engage in gossip or *pakikipagtsismis*. In addition, the researchers also seek to see the advantages and disadvantages of engaging in the said activity. The researchers are particularly interested in this topic as it is a long-standing phenomenon seen in many circumstances and stages in life. It has been witnessed throughout Filipino society again and again with a lack of understanding as to why they happen so often. Furthermore, most studies in regards to the phenomena are from international sources, and may not apply to the Filipinos due to differences in cultural norms and practices. This stands to reason that despite the prevalence of the phenomena throughout history and in everyday life, little to no studies are conducted within the country that are up to date on the current social status of the Philippines. Conclusively, exposure to what the majority may term the “*Marites* culture” yields curiosity and awakens the inner *Marites* in them.

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Research Design

The researchers employed phenomenological research, an approach that is beneficial in describing the experiences of an individual (Prakash Srivastava, 2021). Since this study's primary aim was to explore and comprehend the phenomenon of gossiping in the Filipino community, this method was best suited because it focuses on people, experiences, and phenomena.

2.2 Research Participants

The research was conducted primarily in Mandaluyong, Manila, and Quezon City. The researchers explored different barangays and social media for participants who managed to meet the study's pre-determined criteria. Face-to-face interviews were conducted, particularly in the households of the participants. The researchers had eleven participants for this study who were specifically chosen based on the study's pre-determined criteria. The researchers also concluded that they had reached saturation of the study after the 11th participant.

Participants were chosen based on the following criteria for this study: a) The participants must be Filipino housewives residing in the National Capital Region (NCR) who can speak the Filipino language, b) Participants must gather in a certain place where researchers can sense the amount of gossip that is probably happening, c) To fit the pre-determined criterion, the participants must be self-proclaimed (optional) and/or observed by

multiple people (two or more) in the community to frequently engage in gossip or “pakikipag-tsismisan”, d) According to previous studies, there is no specific age for the participants who often engage in gossip (Regala and Gorospe, 2015). As a result, the participants must be between the ages of 20 and 40, according to the researcher's preference, e) Participants must have a life partner or significant other, as well as children or someone they consider as their child, f) Participants must be unemployed or self-employed, and g) housewives who are working must be working from home without a formal job or an employer.

2.3 Research Instrument

The researchers utilized an interview guide for the researcher's initial data collection technique. The questions were composed of open-ended questions as specified in the data-gathering procedure. The researchers also used pen and paper throughout the interview with the participants to take note of important information shared within the conversation. In addition, the researcher also used recording devices such as phones, laptops, etc., during the interview to capture what transpired in the whole session and help to fill in the holes in the notes that were taken. This made it easier for the researchers to return to the information needed for the study's data analysis.

2.4 Data Gathering Procedure

In this study, in order to develop knowledge that is contextualized within indigenous concepts, it is critical to examine and understand the local language and describe the phenomenon through the lens of the native Filipino. Thus, the indigenous methods of pakikipagkuwentuhan (exchanging stories), pakapa-kapa (groping), and pakikipagpalagayang-loob (being-in-rapport) was employed for this study (Pe-Pua and Marcelino, 2000). The study utilized pakapa-kapa to look for participants who met the study's predetermined criteria. In pakapa-kapa, a characterized suppositional approach to a social scientific study by groping, exploring, and probing through an unorganized mass of social and cultural facts to find order, significance, and research directions. Moreover, before the interview, the researchers also tried to establish rapport with the participants by engaging with them in conversation. Pakikipaglayang-loob is critical, especially in Sikolohiyang Pilipino, to bridge the gap between researchers and participants and establish a comfortable interaction. While in pakikipagkuwentuhan, the researchers encouraged the participants to share their thoughts on the subject. Pakikipagkuwentuhan seeks to use systematic techniques, including a semi-structured, predefined interview protocol. Moreover, flexibility in the questions was still allowed. The researchers looked for participants who met the study's predetermined criteria. The participants then received a consent letter asking for their approval to be part of the study. Following the participants' approval, the researchers scheduled a time that was most convenient for them. Participants were also informed that the interview would be audio recorded. The researchers then asked each participant for some basic information and their background to build rapport before they proceeded with the interview. The interview consisted of open-ended questions that aimed to explore the experiences of Filipino housewives who frequently engage in gossip.

2.5 Data Analysis Procedure

The qualitative data collected in this study were hand-coded. A qualitative codebook was utilized to list predetermined clustered themes and then analyzed using thematic analysis. To provide a broader, more expansive analysis of the entire body of data, an inductive approach to thematic analysis was employed to determine the themes in this study. Moreover, in identifying the core patterns or clustered themes, also to compare with the existing body of literature, there was a six-step process that was utilized: (1) researchers' familiarization with the data; (2) generating initial clusters; (3) searching for themes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) defining and naming the formed themes; and lastly, (6) producing the report.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

The researchers gave a consent agreement form providing participants with information about the nature and goal of the research study. The participants also received assurances of confidentiality to make them feel more at ease when sharing and clarifying their own opinions. The informed consent statement explains the study's main objective and methods, including the participant's time commitment of one (1) session, benefits, and the confidentiality of their data to the potential subject of study. The participants were given the option of participating in the study or declining at any moment. Before the interview, the participants signed an informed consent form that guaranteed the confidentiality of their responses. Their names were asked optionally and the

researchers used code names to refer to them in the paper for anonymity. Audio recordings, photographs, and hard copies of the transcripts were obtained along with the written consent form and instrument paper, including participant feedback, which will be maintained and accessible only to the researchers. Before, during, and even after the study, participants have the chance to access further information, as well as their answers to the questions in the study. The participants were also given the researchers' phone numbers and email addresses. Participants can contact the researchers if they have any questions or concerns regarding the study. The researchers took care to limit any harm to the participants by ensuring that they understood the statements included in the informed consent form, determining whether they had any objections to participating in the study prior to the session, and emphasizing their ability to withdraw at any point of the study if they anticipate any negative consequences as a result of their participation, and/or they feel reluctant to participate any longer.

3.0 Results and Discussion

In learning more about the Psychology of *Tsismis*, the researchers were able to identify common themes or patterns in the participants' perspectives, experiences, and knowledge, which are supported by clustered themes derived from the responses of the participants in the study. These themes are interrelated with each other, especially in answering the research problems of the study.

Theme 1: *Tsismis is Part of Filipino Culture*

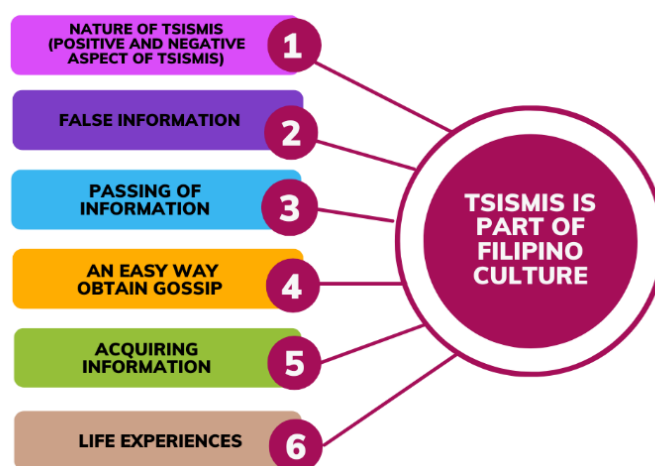


Figure 1. Tsismis is part of Filipino culture

To move forward in the theme of '*tsismis is part of Filipino culture*', there were five clustered themes that have been identified. The first one, the *nature of tsismis*, is seen as a positive and negative aspect that has already been attached to the word *tsismis*. The participants acknowledge that the word *tsismis* does not only pertain to the negative aspect but has also some positive aspects. In accordance with this, according to Beck (2014), a study published in the late October issue of *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, people profit from gossip as well. Not only because a timely piece of information could save people from being exploited, but also because understanding others can also help people evaluate themselves. Additionally, Ro (2018) stated that most of the gossip is positive or neutral, rather than bad. According to one prominent study of British talk, only 3-4% of the gossip samples were malevolent.

The next clustered theme talks about the *false information* that the participants are experiencing when they engage in gossip or "*pakikipag-tsismisan*". This could be further supported by Gallego (2022) who states that "*tsismis*" or "*tsismosas*" (a common term used to refer to those who indulge in *tsismis*) are frequently thought to be liars and people who make up stories or, if the narrative is true, embellish specific portions of it. In short, *tsismis* is a blend of truth and deception. Gossip is when you take rumors, those unsubstantiated pieces of information—and share them, perhaps disseminating "false news" (Anander, 2022).

Third, the *passing of information* is also seen as attached to the word *tsismis*. The majority of the participants have stated that the word "*tsismis*" comes from person to person spreading personal or private affairs of others or

someone who repeats stories about other people. Daskal (2014) stated that being social creatures, humans naturally engage in "*pakikipag-tsismisan*," or the act of gossiping, which is a type of communication through the sharing of information and stories.

Next, the fourth clustered theme pertains to *easy ways to obtain gossip*. Participants see gossip as available access everywhere they go. And, as mentioned by Maresca (2020), one of the things that distinguish Filipinos is that they spend long hours chit-chatting or, in Filipino, indulging in *kuwentuhan*. Filipinos are gregarious people who prefer to be extroverts rather than introverts. They grow up in house compounds where the entire extended family lives and people come and go throughout the day, with the typical Filipino invitation of "*halika, kuwentuhan tayo*" ('come in, let's talk'). This explains why most of these housewives can readily access or acquire *tsismis* just by leaving their front door or minding their own business.

Moreover, the researchers were able to identify themes that intermingle with each other. These themes include a couple of clustered themes under '*tsismis is part of the Filipino culture*', and clustered themes under '*engaging in tsismis is a source of entertainment and pastime*,' '*tsismis is a means to get close to others and share sentiment and resources*,' '*too much tsismis wastes people's productivity and time*,' '*tsismis is used as defense mechanism*,' and lastly, '*being subjected to tsismis hurt people's feelings and reputation*.'

In *acquiring information*, according to participants, gossip can be a way to gather information and be informed about the world we live in or about a particular person. Gossip used as a method for vicarious learning can help people understand the world and alter their behavior without having first-hand experience. In addition, it has been suggested that gossip is a sort of "social grooming" that is unique to humans and is similar to physical grooming practiced by other primates to help individuals create close relationships and trust (Jolly and Chang, 2021).

Further, under the first theme is the *life experiences* of the participants. Most of the participants' responses ranged from gossiping about their or others' current life situations. Contrary to popular belief, gossip plays a crucial part in assisting us in getting to know ourselves and adjusting to our environment, noting that while some gossip may be harmful at times, most of it is said in good faith (Levine, 2015). These housewives share sentiments, share information with the people they trust, and seek validation through *pakikipag-tsismisan*. The knowledge obtained makes a person aware of their social surroundings and their role within (Martinescu et al., 2014).

Theme 2: Engaging in Tsismis is A Source of Entertainment and Pastime

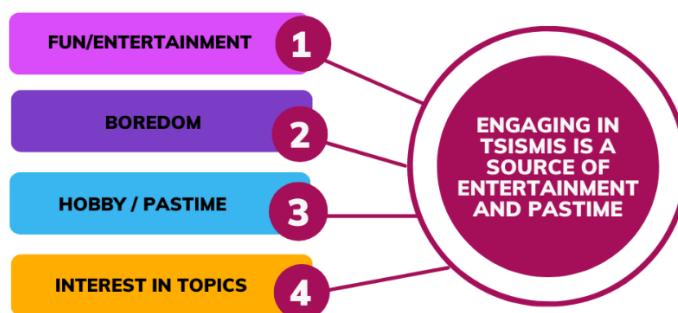


Figure 2. Engaging in tsismis is a source of entertainment and pastime

Moving on, in the theme of '*engaging in tsismis is a source of entertainment and pastime*', four clustered themes were identified: *fun and entertainment*, *boredom*, *hobby or pastime*, and *interest in topics*. To elaborate, *forms of entertainment*, *hobby*, and/or *to stave off boredom* are clustered themes that tend to show up together or followed by others. Furthermore, another clustered theme that showed up under the theme is the *participants' interest in the (topics) issues* being discussed during gossip or *pakikipag-tsismisan*. According to Hartung and Renner (2013), gossip or *pakikipagtsimismisan* appears to serve predominantly for entertainment purposes. It is a great way to

kill boredom and a source of entertainment since people involved in gossip are interested in the topics that are being discussed.

Theme 3: *Tsismis* is a Means to Get Close to Others and Share Sentiment and Resources



Figure 3. *Tsismis* is a means to get close to others and share sentiment and resources

The following clustered themes appear to show a reason for these housewives to engage in *tsismis*, and an advantage that these housewives receive from this engagement. Under the main theme of '*tsismis* is a means to get close to others and share sentiment and resources,' several clustered themes that support the main theme have been identified. Several participants are said to engage in *tsismis* as a form of "*pakikisama*". Aside from this, engaging in *tsismis* also serves to *form bonds* and *reconnect these housewives with people*. As stated by the participants, gossip or "*pakikipag-tsismisan*" drives social bonds that can strengthen ties and reconnection with other people.

Jolly and Chang (2021) stated that vicarious learning is aided by social information obtained through gossip, which directly influences future behavior and impression formation. Simultaneously, conversation partners start to influence one another, form roughly comparable impressions, and build strong social bonds. This supports the clustered theme that gossip allows the participants to form bonds or relationships and have a connection with the people they engage with.

In contrast, the opposite side of forming bonds and a healthy interpersonal relationship with others is how these housewives shared that they are *getting affected for people who are close to them* whenever these people become the subject of gossip. Moreover, the next thematic clusters that were identified within this theme is gossiping about *financial matters* or issues relating to money and *family matters*. These specific clusters include whether the person on the topic is financially stable and/or has issues relating to lending money (*utang*) and topics that focus on their family affairs. To support this, statements from participants showed that among life experiences, financial and family matters show up fairly frequently regarding the common issues and the housewives' sentiments discussed in gossiping or *tsismis*. Furthermore, according to Foster (2004), gossip can be a process of forming bonds with people. It can signal a desire to deepen a relationship and thus play an essential role in the formation of new friendships. Concerning this, when intimacy exists in gossip type of topics discussed, there could be a difference when compared to people they are not close with (Deangelis et al., 2012).

Giving way to the clustered theme of *social ties (Ibang Tao, Hindi Ibang Tao)*, this explains how participants verify the information they hear from others based on their relationship to the people who they engage with in gossiping or "*pakikipag-tsismisan*". Relating to this, having *multiple sources* as a clustered theme shows the participants' reason for engaging in gossip to verify the truthfulness of *tsismis*. According to Tegan (2023), a trusted source is unbiased and supported by facts. It should be written by or coming from a reliable individual or group. By having multiple sources, the participants in the study are examining the credibility of *tsismis* depending on how they know the other person.

Theme 4: Too Much Tsismis Wastes People's Productivity and Time

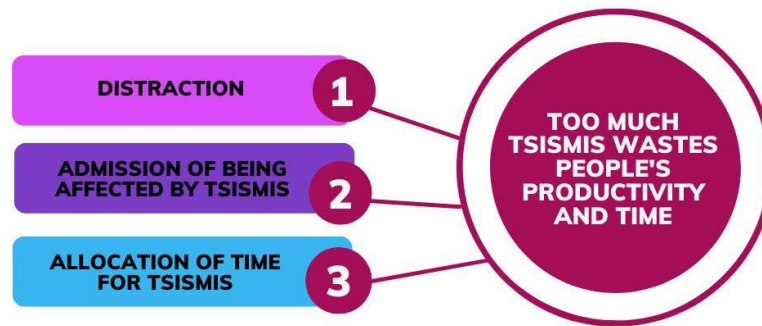


Figure 4. Too much tsismis wastes people's productivity and time

In contrast to the advantages of gossip engagement that were shared by the participants, the disadvantages of gossip engagement or *pakikipagtsismisan* are shown in the clustered theme stating *too much tsismis wastes people's productivity and time*. The first clustered theme that perfectly fits under this is *distraction*, in which, the participants' responses show that gossiping can sometimes distract them from things that they should be doing. According to Nekvapil (2021), gossip can be a massive distraction because by focusing on what people presume others are 'doing wrong' – as in most cases of gossiping – they avoid having to examine areas in their own lives that may require some scrutiny. This means that engaging in gossip too much may also prove to be a hindrance in our daily lives.

Another clustered theme that appeared related to *distraction*, particularly, how these housewives avoid being distracted by gossip, is the clustered theme of *allocation of time for tsismis*. This, in particular, pertains to how the participants divide their time for *tsismis* apart from their duties at home. Additionally, the clustered theme answering another research problem is shown by the *participants' admission of being affected by tsismis*. The participants were all hesitant at first and they kept on rejecting the notion that they are affected by *tsismis*, however, in the end, they verbally admitted to it and some even shared their personal stories.

As stated by Khamis (2018), some people engage in gossip to serve their own interests at the expense of others. This is an example of 'bad' gossip, and the responses of participants regarding this type of gossip reflect the disadvantages that gossip has on them. Moreover, according to Dr. Otilia Brown in an interview with Khamis (2018), to further one's own interests, gossip can be used to reap from others' misfortunes or circumstances and turn it against them when they are most vulnerable. This prevalent unfavorable habit can be utilized as a bullying strategy when gossip or *tsismis* circulate inside families, workplaces, or more generally, on social media.

Theme 5: Tsismis is Used as Defense Mechanism

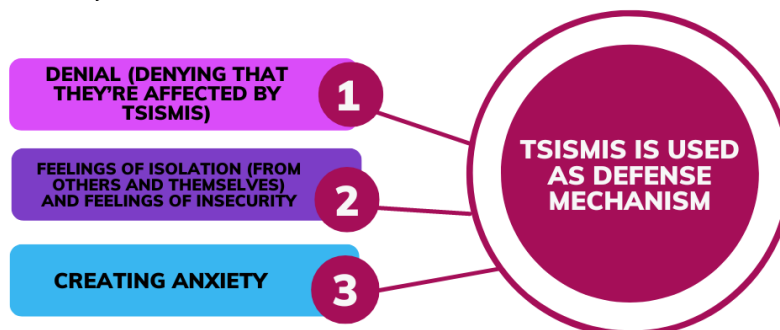


Figure 5. Tsismis is used as defense mechanism

Next, there were three thematic clusters under the theme of '*tsismis is used as defense mechanism*.' First is *denial*, or how participants deny that they're being affected by *tsismis*. Aside from denial, *tsismis* also causes feelings of

isolation and *insecurity*. Participants have expressed feelings of insecurity, which leads to feelings of isolation – both from others and from themselves. Lastly, under this theme, *tsismis* creates anxiety.

Defense mechanisms are ways for individuals to protect themselves from excessive hurtful feelings, motives, or ideas (Kreitler and Kreitler, 2004). There are different common defense mechanisms and one of the typical types is *denial* – this type of defense mechanism happens when someone refuses to accept reality and/or facts. Some participants have also demonstrated a type of defense mechanism called regression which is a way of how individuals escape an anxious-triggering scenario (Holland, 2022). From the answers of the participants, *tsismis* leads to feelings of insecurity, isolation, and anxiousness – at the same time, *tsismis* is also used by them as a defense mechanism to protect themselves from immoderate emotions, drives, and thoughts.

Theme 6: Being Subjected to Tsismis Hurt People's Feelings and Reputation

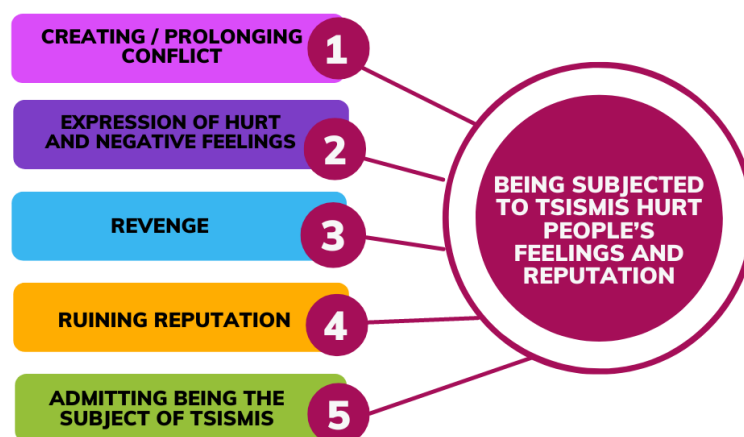


Figure 6. Being subjected to tsismis hurt people's feelings and reputation

Moving forward to the last theme that the researchers derived from the responses of the 11 participants, five clustered themes were constructed, mainly: *creating or prolonging conflict*, *expression of hurt and negative feelings*, *revenge*, *ruining reputation*, and *admitting being the subject of tsismis*. All these clusters are under the theme of 'being subjected to tsismis hurt people's feelings and reputation'.

One disadvantage seen from *pakikipag-tsismisan* through the lenses of the participants is how *tsismis* creates and prolongs the conflict. With this, participants have shared their expressions of hurt and negative feelings. Furthermore, the last three clustered themes are somewhat interconnected with each other. Participants admit being the subject of *tsismis* and with this comes the thought of revenge and ruining other people's reputations.

As seen by the responses of the participants in the interview, being subjected to *tsismis* hurt their feelings and reputation and this leads to conflict, negative feelings, revenge, and ruining someone's reputation. Through the lenses of these housewives, it has now become clearer why *tsismis* gained its negative connotation or why Filipinos often assume that *tsismis* and *tsismosas* are both negative things.

All the themes, together with the supporting thematic clusters that were derived from the responses of the participants from the study emphasize how profound their perspective is in sharing their thoughts about matters revolving around *tsismis*. This serves as a tool for the researchers to know more about the psychology of *tsismis* through the lenses of these 11 housewives based on their gossip engagement and personal experiences.

4.0 Conclusion

The following are the salient findings of this study:

- a. It was found in this study that *tsismis* has been deeply rooted in these housewives – as a culture with both positive and negative aspects. *Tsismis* played an important role in the lives of the participants and is now used by them as a tool to share sentiments and resources with others.

- b. In addition, it has been so prevalent that these housewives regarded *tsismis* as a great entertainment and pastime source. *Tsismis* has also become a means for them to get close to others and share sentiments and resources.
- c. Furthermore, this study found that *tsismis* has both advantages and disadvantages in the intrapersonal and interpersonal lives of these eleven (11) participants when they engage in gossip or *pakikipag-tsismisan*. *Tsismis*, like a spectrum, can provide benefits (such as how participants form bonds and make new friends through gossip) and drawbacks (such as how *tsismis* can cause problems that lead to the end of a relationship with other people). Relatively, it has been shown that *tsismis* can also be used as these housewives' defense mechanism, especially when they are being subjected to *tsismis* which may hurt people's feelings and reputation, particularly their own.

This study has contributed to the understanding of the psychology of 'tsismis' and housewives' gossip engagement. As the research progressed, a few areas emerged as potential future research areas. The recommendations are as follows:

- a. The settings for this study took place in the individuals' homes, and most of the gossip and stories that spread around the neighborhood revolved around their personal lives. Because more details can be learned from gossip in different settings, it is advised that future research be conducted in different locations, such as offices. This environment could provide a way to add to or contrast the diverse sorts of gossip that take place in various contexts.
- b. As this study is primarily focused on housewives and their individual experiences with gossip engagement, particularly, since housewives only include females, research about other gender groups should also be investigated. It is also beneficial to investigate how different genders—such as men's perspectives or people within the LGBTQIA+'s experiences—have contributed to our understanding of *tsismis*.
- c. Upon conducting the study, the researchers found that gossip may vary depending on a person's social standing or geographic location. Most of the participants also come from working-class and middle-class backgrounds only. Most frequently, their personal problems, debt, and family are the main subjects of their *pakikipag-tsismisan*. Examining and studying gossip contexts on different economic statuses, power, and hierarchical levels will be worthwhile.
- d. Since the researchers were only able to conduct one session with each participant, the data gathered was limited to what they were able to attain on the same day. Conducting two or more sessions of interviews with the participants may provide more data relevant to the study surrounding *tsismis*. Dividing the questions into multiple sessions with a focus on each specific objective of the study could enable participants to further analyze and accurately share their experiences with the researchers.
- e. Researchers focused on and provided a basis relating to housewives' involvement in gossip. Thus, the researchers recommend studying other individuals' potential involvement, perception, and engagement in gossip or *pakikipag-tsismisan* to better provide more context and understanding of the psychology of *tsismis*. Other inputs from members of the community and/or household members can prove to be beneficial to the understanding of the phenomena.
- f. As a qualitative study, the researchers have been unable to reach more individuals for data due to time and location constraints. Thus, the researchers recommend conducting a study leaning towards a quantitative approach in studying the phenomenon of gossip or *tsismis*, and other psychological variables related to the impact of *tsismis* on individuals, groups, or communities.

5.0 Contributions of Authors

The authors confirm the equal contribution in each part of this work. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of this work together with their co-author.

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7.0 Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest about the publication of this paper.

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