

# **Explanation for Rumors as Assimilation-Contrast Theory: Neutralization and Immunization**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Rumors could be true, but may also be false or ambiguous but no matter what the rumors are, it always lack of authenticity. Rumors with negative point of views can be affects a company's image, the morale of the armed forces, the price swings in the stock markets and etc. Therefore, to rein in rumors is the most important lesson for the enterprise, organization and government. Rumors arise in the uncertain situation, and credible resources can not be available. Explanation is one of the defense rumor strategies because it can reduce human uncertainty directly. This study attempts to explain the explanation by the assimilation-contrast theory. The marketer can use immunization (feed-forward explanation) and neutralization (feedback explanation) to defense the rumors. This study also regards the various reference point message as the negative rumor or passive evidence which explain the rumor. We discuss the immunization and neutralization as the present order of the passive evidence and

negative rumor. The aims for this study are as follows: (1) to analyze the difference defense effect of the different rumor types. (2) Aim to gain an understanding the immunization and neutralization effect. (3) Aim to compare the effect of the immunization and neutralization.

**Keywords: anchoring effects, assimilation-contrast theory, immunization, neutralization, reference point message, rumor**

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The rumor is usually difficult to study, because the rumor is lived everywhere, but some rumor is too small to find. Some rumor is great, but the researcher found the rumor exist so late that the rumor is past or enter the last period. The researchers use the content analysis, case study or examine and interview the rumor receiver. However, the receiver may forget afterwards, or is unable to reflect the overall picture originally true. It is more difficult that we build a false the rumor and examine the rumor effect, transmission and defense effect etc.

Bordia and DiFonza (2004) discuss the Rumors, by providing an explanation arising from the collective sensibilities of the rumor public, restore a sense of predictive control over ambiguous events or phenomena. Although this idea has been present nearly five decades, the dynamics of this process were never elaborated and no empirical analysis was performed because of the difficulty of acquiring naturalistic data). This study attempts to explain the defense effect by a assimilation-contrast process theory. According to Chen's 2004 research, the performance of idea communication is affected by the idea classification and reference point message, this rumor study base on the reference point message will be used. This study has three aims: The first aim is to analyze the difference defense effect of the different rumor types. The second aim is to gain an understanding the prevention and neutralization effect. The third aim is to compare the effect of the prevention and neutralization.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Rumors**

Rumors are unverified accounts or explanations of events circulating from person to person and pertaining to an object, event, or issue in public concern (Peterson and Gist, 1951). Rumors arise in situations that are personally relevant but ambiguous or cognitively unclear, and when credible explanations are not available from traditional sources such as the massmedia, government agencies, or corporate management (Difonzo and Bordia 1998). Rumors are not always false and hypocritical message. In fact, rumors are probably factual but lack authenticity (Mowen, 1990). Even rumors may be confirmed truth in the future and not groundless utterances.

Rumors are spread in situations of ambiguity to help resolve feelings of uncertainty (Rosnow, 1991). The resolution may involve creating negative or positive feelings depending on whether the consequences of the rumor are negative or positive. Wish or Pope-dream rumors are those that predict pleasant consequences and may represent wishful thinking (Knapp, 1944). Unfortunately, Knapp's (1944) study of rumor in the United States during World War II found that over 90% of the rumors reported had negative consequences and only 2% dealt with pleasant events (Kamins, Folkes and Perner, 1997). These negative rumors are dread rumors and wedge-driver rumors.

Positive rumors create the product goodwill, make people dream, and let people do the positive things. However, negative rumors can affect a company's image, the morale of the armed forces, the price swings in the stock markets and mental depression (Bordia and Difonzo, 1994, 1998, 2000, 2004 ; Kapferer, 1990). Therefore, we should understand and combat the negative rumors.

## **2.2 Evidences**

Evidence consists of factual assertions, quantitative information (like statistics), eyewitness statements, narrative reports, and etc. The rational appeal is the message which supports the opinion by number, evidence and laws. Marketers let people do the rational choices by the rational appeal. Factual statements originating from a source other than the speaker, objects not created by speaker, and opinions of persons other the speaker that are offered in support of the speaker's claims (McCroskey ,1969).

The use of evidence produces more attitude change than the use of no evidence than the use of no evidence. By evidences, marketers substantiate their claims and increase their credibility. Evidences are also more apt to change attitudes, the more plausible and novel it is (Morley and Walker, 1987). When marketers let individuals accept the idea promoted and do the actions that consist with the idea, marketers must let they know and understand the importance of their change, so marketers should offer

the evidence.

The speaker can promote the people toward the right way by evidence. When the negative rumors influence people toward reverse way, we should explain it by the true evidence. The research regards the evidence as the positive message to combat the negative rumor.

### **2.3 Reference Point Message**

The reference point information is often used in the price perception. A reference price can be defined as any price in relation to which other prices are seen (Biswas and Blair, 1991). Reference price can be external or internal reference price. External reference price is often meant that the supplier provides to the consumer. Internal reference price is the price which the consumer considers. Internal reference price is stored in the consumer's memory. Internal reference price serves as reference points for evaluating the external price.

The reference point information is not only used in the price perception but also used in the decision-making, salary, persuasion theory (Kahneman, 1992; Ordóñez, Connolly and Coughlan, 2000; Chen, 2004). Ordóñez, Connolly and Coughlan (2000) examined the effects of two referents on ratings of salary satisfaction and fairness. And the results were that fairness ratings showed a different pattern of asymmetric effects of

discrepancies from the reference salaries: the focal graduate's salary was judged somewhat less fair when others received lower offers, and much less fair when others received higher offers. Chen (2004) discusses the communication effect of the persuasive ad which is used in non-reference point, low-reference point and high-reference point. In *Altruism*, the low-reference point is the best communication effect. In *Egoism*, the high-reference point is the best communication effect.

The reference point message is the reference point information which is used in communication or persuasion. High-reference point and low-reference point have different communication effect. This study regards the reference point message as the passive evidence and negative rumor, and this study points:

Proposition 1: When the audiences receive the different reference point message, there will be produced different effect.

#### **2.4 Assimilation-Contrast Theory**

Sherif (1963) proposed the Assimilation-Contrast Theory that explains the change of the attitude. This is also called the "social judgment-involvement approach," or more simply the "social judgment theory." He thought the change of personal attitude is mainly due to the interaction of following three factors: (1) audience original attitude; (2) messages that might be cause the attitude change (or the other's opinion); (3) the

credibility of the messages.

Sherif (1963) established three zones of attitudes: latitudes of acceptance, rejection, and non-commitment (see Fig.2-1). When reference point is presented to accord with the percept of audience' expected, the assimilation effect is likely to occur, and it means that the presented reference point is fallen into the audience' *accepted area*. On the contrary, when reference point is presented to be larger than the percept of audience' expected, the contrast effect is likely to occur. The *latitudes of non-commitment* are those positions which are neither accepted nor rejected.

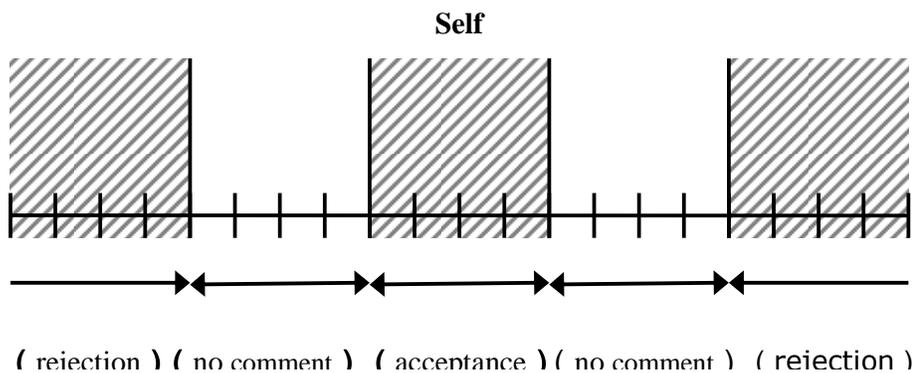
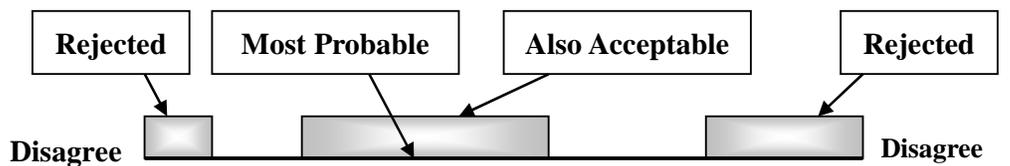


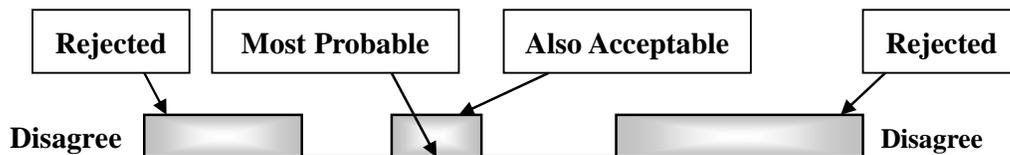
Fig. 2- 1 The Audience's Comment on Product  
SOURCE: Sherif (1963)

A person's position on an issue is dependent on the person's most preferred position (their anchor point), the person's judgment of the various alternatives (spread across their latitudes of acceptance, rejection, and non-commitment), and the person's level of ego-involvement with the issue. From the viewpoints of ego-involvement, highly involved individuals differ from less involved persons in three ways. First, when

people are involved in, or care deeply about, a social issue, they have larger latitudes of rejection relative to their latitudes of acceptance and non-commitment (see Fig.2-2). This means they reject just about any position that is not in sync with their own. Second, they contrast mildly disagreeable messages from their attitudes more frequently than folks who are not as invested in the issue. Third, when concerned deeply about an issue, people are apt to assimilate ambiguous messages only when the arguments are generally consistent with their preconceived stitudes (Sherify et al, 1965).



**A. assimilation-contrast area for an individual less-involved**



**B. assimilation-contrast area for an individual highly-involved**

Fig. 2- 2 assimilation-contrast area for an individual with different degree of involvement

source: Kotler (1975)

People evaluate issues based on where they stand on the topic. Persuasion occurs at the end of the process where a person understands a message then compares the position it advocates to the person's position on that issue. People have categories of judgment by which they evaluate persuasive arguments. When they receive persuasive

information, they use their categories of judgment to assess it. Their level of ego-involvement affects the size of their latitudes. They generally distort incoming information to fit their categories of judgment. Small or moderate differences between their anchor positions and the one being proposed will cause people to change.

When applied to social judgments, these effects show that the most effective position to advocate for changing another's attitude judgment is the most extreme position within that person's "latitude of acceptance," within which assimilation effects will make your position seem more like their own. Beyond this latitude lies the latitude of rejection, within which any position will be seen as more different from one's own due to contrast effects. This study discusses the credibility of the rumor by Assimilation-Contrast Theory to explore the change of the attitude, and this study posits:

Proposition 2: When the presented reference point is fallen into audiences' accepted area, there will be produced significantly the effect. On the contrary, when the presented reference point is fallen into audiences' rejected area, there will be not produced significantly the effect.

## **2.5 Combating Rumors**

Allport and Postman (1947) proposed the rumor transmission formula: rumor is

equal to importance multiplied by ambiguity. Therefore, to control the rumor is to reduce the importance and ambiguity. The opinion is the challenge recently, but DiFonzo et al. (1994) proposed the rumor raised in the situation that are personally relevant but ambiguous or cognitively unclear, and credible explanations are not available. Rosnow and Kimmel (2000) regarded the rumor as unverified message. The message is not confirmed by not only the enterprise but also personality, government and so on. To response the rumor to reduce the ambiguous is the main defense strategy. Enterprises usually use the preventing, ignoring and denying strategies.

To be silent is a strategy that the rumor will calmed down .automatically. To response positively makes people's attention and the rumor will transmit more fast (Edward, 1989). DiFonzo et al. (1994) regards the ignoring strategy as the weakest neutralizing tactic. A rumor may be safely ignored when the rumor is so implausible that it will die on its own and the rumor don't arise from people's uncertain sensation and anxiousness.

The most direct response decision is explanation for rumors that is divided by feed-forward explanation and feed-back explanation. Feed-forward explanation is to explain the rumor when the rumor didn't raise and happen. Feed-back explanation is to explain the rumor when the rumor raises and happen. McGuire (1964) proposed the

inoculation theory that inoculation is used to describe the attribution of greater resistance to individuals or the process of supplying information to receivers before the communication process takes place in hopes that the information would make the receiver more resistant. By preventing the rumor, people can get the immunization for the rumor, and this study posits:

Proposition 3: When audiences get the immunization for the rumor, there will be produced significantly the effect.

Feed-back explanation is to reduce people's ambiguous and cognitively unclear. Confirming the truth or refuting effectively is used. Although sometimes a strong refutation is needed to reduce confidence in the rumor, caution is in order here. Dishonesty, especially a false denial, doubles the damage by tarnishing the reputation. False denials also are doomed to fail because there are always informants around. A denial may actually increase credulity in a rumor (DiFonzo et al., 1994). Based on the truth stands the best chance of diminishing someone's belief in a rumor. Besides being ethical, honesty also is the best policy. By feed-back explaining the rumor, people can get the neutralization for the rumor s, and this study posits:

Proposition 4: When audiences get the neutralization for the rumor, there will be produced significantly the effect.

What is the best combating strategy, neutralization or immunization? Not like both literatures treat these neutralization or immunization as static, because it is not easy to find the same rumor and examine the same time. Contemporary research on attitude change processes is reviewed for implications regarding the relative influence of successive opposing messages on final judgments. Some researches pointed out that former will have the better effect, which is called the *primacy effect*. Then, there are evidences show that the latter will have the better effect, which called the *recency effect*. There is no conclusive evidence in favor of either primacy or recency (Rowe, 1974; Rowe & Rowe, 1976; Dewar, Cuddy, & Mewhort, 1977; Prosser,1995; Chao & Knight,1996) In this study, we focus on the explanation order effect of reference point message on combating the rumors. As previously mentioned, there are different results about whether primacy effect or recency effect will be occurred, and this study is to examine the explanation order effect of combating the rumors when the audiences receive different presented order of reference point message. Therefore, based on results of prior research, this study posits:

Proposition 5: When audiences receive faces the different rumor type, (a) the immunization effect is better than the neutralization effect (b) the neutralization effect is better than the immunization effect.

## **2.6 A Dynamic Process Model of Assimilation-Contrast Theory**

Judging how far a message is from our own anchored position is the first stage of attitude change. Shifting our anchor in response is the second (Griffin, 2006). Anchoring and adjustment is a psychological heuristic which influences the way people intuitively assess probabilities (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). Based on these theories, people will adjust their attitude to accommodate the new input. Sherif wasn't specific the distance that influences our persuasive effect, but he claimed that greater the discrepancy, the more hearers will adjust their attitude. However, an extreme distance will be a boomerang effect that suggests people often reverse the attitude positions (Sherif, 1965).

People's initial attitude is a blend of one's initial latitude of acceptance and rejection. Further, people's updated attitude is a mix of one's updated latitude of acceptance and rejection which are both influenced from four sources, including an individual's initial attitude, initial latitude of acceptance and rejection, current messages, and width of acceptance area. Further, an individual's updated attitude is a mix of one's updated latitude of acceptance and rejection (Huang, 2007). The audience receives the reference point message by neutralization and immunization, the final anchor is partial toward the reference point of the rumor or evidence. And this study points:

Proposition 6a: When audiences get the neutralization for the rumor, the final anchor is significantly partial toward the reference point of the evidence.

Proposition 6b: When audiences get the immunization for the rumor, the final anchor is significantly partial toward the reference point of the evidence.

Lavidge & Steiner (1961) proposed the Hierarchy of Effects that is the most often used on the communication effect of advertisement and the effect on the action process. The Hierarchy of Effects of the communicational effect and separated into three parts, and to know the communicational effect of audiences' ideal cognition, attitude, and behavior intention after they received commercial messages. Based on prior research, the subject's assimilation-contrast area was shifted following the given reference point (Chen, 2006; Huang, 2007). The shift of assimilation-contrast area (anchor) is the communicational effect of audience's ideal cognition. We operate the reference point as the negative rumor and the passive evidence to discuss communicational effect of audience's attitude and behavior intention.

Proposition 7: The anchor is partial toward the reference point of the evidence, there will be produced the better communication effect.

#### **4. Management Implications**

The purpose of this study is to find a useful method to circulate rumor and rumor defense to objects and change their cognition, attitudes and behaviors. This study examines the effect of the immunization and neutralization. According the results of this research, we will indicate the following conclusions and suggestion:

(1) The rumor is usually difficult to study, especially in the static examination.

This study also regards the various reference point message as the negative rumor or passive evidence which explain the rumor. The researcher can build the simply model to discuss the rumor and the rumor defense.

(2) The rumors may be interesting news, tattles or gossips, and they spontaneous just for fun. They aren't harmful and don't influent the attitude of people. We don't waste any time and money to prevent or refute them, just ignore them. We expect to find some negative rumor don't influence the attitude of people.

(3) The most positive strategy to response the rumor is the preventing strategy. Before the rumors appear, we can prevent to avoid the injury and growth of the rumor. However, the rumor is lived everywhere so that we can not prevent all of rumors. We will compare the effect of the immunization and neutralization in the different rumor types. Based on the result of this study, we just do feed-back explanation instead of prevention in some rumor types.

(4) What the anchor is partial toward, there will be produced the significant communication effect. An audience forms updated latitude of acceptance and rejection on the basis of their initial one. It is said that initial latitude of acceptance and rejection cannot be ignored. Getting to know initial latitude of acceptance and rejection of audiences, it helps doing the rumor defense strategy and communicates well and more effectively.

(5) Message, in this study we use reference point, can be manipulated to change the stands of the audience. It will help not only to combat the rumor but also to communicate with the audience and promote effectively and efficiently.

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