# A REVIEW ON COMMERCIAL RUMORS AND ONLINE COMMERCIAL RUMORS

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**AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTION**

The sole author designed, analyzed, interpreted and prepared the manuscript.

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## ABSTRACT

We encounter rumors at every stage of life. Just as rumors can affect people's attitudes, intentions and behaviors, commercial rumors can also affect consumers and firms. The increasing use of digital communication channels, especially social media, increases the importance of commercial rumors for businesses. The increase in the number of people interacting with each other on the internet causes an increase in the social impact on consumption behaviors. To mitigate the negative effects of commercial rumors, it is important to know the nature, types and characteristics of rumors and factors that influence the spread of rumors. However, it is seen that the interest in the subject of commercial rumors is limited, especially in the domestic marketing literature. In this research, firstly, the concepts of rumor and commercial rumor are explained with examples. Then, the leading researches on the variables related to the effects and spread of commercial rumors in the traditional and digital communication environment are explained. In addition, the usability of Attribution Theory in the spread of commercial rumors is discussed. Finally, suggestions are made to researchers and businesses.

**Keywords:** Rumor; commercial rumor; online commercial rumor; attribution theory.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Rumors, which may be related to emergencies, like "get up, get up, the earthquake is coming, take some things on you, hurry!" may cause people to quickly leave their homes with their valuables and go to streets, sleep in their cars even if the weather is freezing, and evacuate cities since they perceive as dangerous [1]. Similarly, it is inevitable that commercial rumors, like certain products containing a harmful or foreign substance, will have impacts on consumers, which are often encountered in the marketplace.

Word of mouth is complementary to information sources such as advertising and expert opinions. At this point, customers also encounter word-of-mouth communication messages against brands and product that are not real, officially disclosed, and authenticated, especially in hostile customer forums [2]. It is necessary not to be indifferent to negative stories that occur offline or online and to manage them [3]. The fact that people frequently use digital media as an important source of information about products, brands and businesses, increases the importance of not ignoring commercial rumors.

## 2. RUMORS AND THEIR CAUSES

Rumor is defined as an assertion on a particular subject without official verification [4] or a particular claim about a belief that is passed from one person to

another without reliable standard-based evidence. Intensity and spread of rumors are affect by the situation and the importance of the information provided [5]. Moreover, rumor-induced anxiety and belief in the rumor also effective factors on rumors [6].

There are two main perspectives in explaining rumor behavior: Sociological and psychological. From the sociological point of view, it is claimed that rumors meet people's need for information in times of anxiety and uncertainty, that community members discover the importance of events occurring outside their communities in this way, and develop a common understanding to adapt to change. From a psychological point of view; attention is drawn to the role of psychological motivations such as being noticed by others and gaining status[7]. Rumor literature in psychology and sociology for traditional communication channels shows that the tendency to believe the rumor and spread the rumor is affected by factors like; the reliability of the source of the rumor, the relevance of the rumor, anxiety, uncertainty, the credibility of the rumor message and the relevance of the rumor [8,9,6,10].

## 3. COMMERCIAL RUMORS, CAUSES AND EFFECTS

Commercial rumors, where there is no certainty about the validity of the message, are explained as communications about assumptions about the market (products, brands, businesses, etc.) that are not based on confirmed evidence [11]. In other words, commercial rumors are unconfirmed informal information that are spread among people through various word-of-mouth communication channels [12].

Trade rumors may be related to marketing offerings. In today's world where the prevalence and importance of word of mouth communication is increasing, rumors and false news, which are difficult to detect and control, can reduce the effects of marketing communications. Adverse commercial rumors, can be related to marketing offerings like cell phones cause cancer, baby foods are harmful to health, and diapers cause infertility etc. Moreover, it can also be related to other activities such as mergers that require employees to relocate to another city and the layoff of a key employee [11].

Commercial rumors can arise from business or environmental factors. Business rumors; can be put forward for purposes such as attracting the attention of the customers to the products and arousing the curiosity of the customers or attracting the attention of the investors to the firm stock. In this regard,

commercial rumors, which may consist of vague, incomplete or contradictory claims, may arise when the business manager makes statements such as: "You will see more about our innovation, nobody knows the future of the new product, I have already learned a lot about the subject" [13,14]. Moreover, commercial rumors can be resulted from hostile or unsatisfied customers or competitors.

As a type of negative word-of-mouth communication by the consumer, the main reasons for rumors are related to people's desire for balance, and this behavior is an indicator of the consumer's effort to reduce the negativities in his life by sharing the negative situation [15]. Koenig [16] explains customer rumors under two titles: Conspiracy and contamination. While conspiracy rumors associate the target with a particular political, religious or ideological movement; contagious rumors are aimed at a specific target, such as that the product contains substances harmful to health.

Sudhir & Anandakuttan [17], expressed rumors as a type of word-of-mouth communication and they stated that rumors can be carried out online and offline. In their study, they gathered the factors that motivate the behavior of sharing commercial rumors under 21 items and four factors (anxiety management, information sharing, relationship management and self-enhancement). According to this, expressions such as feeling relieved after sharing the rumor, worrying about others and thinking that it will help, feeling a sense of control were constructs "anxiety management" motive. In the title of "sharing information"; there are elements such as informing others, revealing whether the message is correct, sharing to receive feedback about the message. "Relationship management motive" refers to people's desire to stay in touch with others, to help others communicate with them, and to want others to see them as experts. Finally, "self-enhancement motive" consists of elements such as informing others about their activities/interests and being entertaining [17].

## 4. ONLINE COMMERCIAL RUMORS

Since the internet has been increasingly used as a source of information in recent times, the effects of rumors on people increasing. For example, people are exposed to and influenced by rumors about candidates in political elections [18]. It is even argued that this condition is a threat to democracy [19]. Similarly, commercial rumors at online environment that can spread rapidly among people can affect consumer preferences. For example, given that most people use the internet to search for health-related information; it is possible that the information in this unconfirmed

communication channel about health, can cause health problems [20].

The prevalence of the internet, social networking sites, blogs and online discussion sites are among the important developments that affect the increase in rumors, the speed of their spread and the increase in their importance [21]. Negative rumors in the online environment can appear and spread over a long period of time and repeatedly in different channels [22] and it even leads to establishment of fact research websites like teyit.org.tr [23] to investigate accuracy of rumors. It is seen that the rumors about profit-oriented or non-profit institutions such as THY, Google, Snickers, Köfteci Yusuf, Tesla, Nutella, Kızılay, Pepsi, PayPal have been examined since 2015 on the mentioned website. In addition, it is seen that the accuracy of the rumors about product categories and parts such as toothpaste packaging and imported bananas are analyzed in general. Some other generally false or unconfirmed rumors examined on the site are about; The Gates foundation patented its drug and prepared a spread simulation 3 months before the coronavirus outbreak, Google did not use any Islamic doodles, Snickers and Mars brand chocolates were collected and destroyed in 55 countries because there was plastic in them, the results of the National Lottery draw were announced before the balls fell, palm oil in the Nutella causes cancer, there are pills inside the Luppo branded cakes of Şölen chocolate, the sale of Coca Cola is banned in a country, an employee at Pepsi has admitted that the drinks are infected with HIV, and that Starbuck admits to using elephant excrement in his coffees [24].

Considering that the most active users of online environments are pioneer customers and early adopters of innovations [25], it can be stated that the importance of online rumors has increased. Özdemir and Sarı's [26] study shows that people use social media to create rumors about destinations. Visitors can post tips and reviews, hotels, things to do, local customs, shopping opportunities and tourist traps on sites like virtualtourist.com. At this point, such rumors can reach millions of people.

The effects of online rumors can differ from traditional word-of-mouth. It is easy to post comments online and it is more difficult to be sure of the accuracy of comments because readers do not know the sender. Another feature of online rumors is that readers can have information about the audience (likes, shares, comments, etc.) in addition to the rumor. In particular, rumors that are believed to be true spread very quickly and are shared even on people's personal profiles. Although most of them are proven to be wrong, people's judgments can be affected [27]. At this point, it is an important research topic what factors affect people to believe, like and share online rumors (retweet, profile sharing, etc.).

Research into the spread of rumors in online channel shows that source credibility affects this, and involvement plays a moderator role in this effect [28]. However, the anonymity of the online environment makes it difficult to evaluate the reliability of information and increases the importance of clues. Since it is difficult to evaluate the source in the online environment; as more people talk about and believe in a rumor, others can follow it with reference to it (when information is scarce, people can make decisions based on the behavior of others, for example the most downloaded software gets more downloads). In addition, the credibility of rumors discussed in a social group of people with similar views increases with group or belief polarization [29]. In short, the tendency to spread the rumor online is affected by the volume and consistency of the rumor. In the experimental study of Wang et al. [27] it was concluded that the volume of claims and discussion increases the effects of rumors (belief change).

Recent studies on online rumors mainly focus on effects of online content about COVID-19 and vaccination on behaviors, since online media not only consisted of useful health related information, but also true and false rumors [30]. Even it is argued that social media platforms should adopt evidence-based measures to decrease online misinformation [31]. As a matter of fact, thousands of online health related rumors are shared millions of times by people. At this point, Solovev & Pröllochs [32] depicts that COVID-19 misinformation is more likely spread, even go viral than true information. So an online rumor about false and negative significant side effect of a successful vaccine, can lead a social health problem.

Similarly to the health related contents, online commercial contents can affect stakeholders inevitably. For example, Chernykh & Mityakov's [33] study shows that, consumers are susceptible to online publicly available rumors about bank crisis in Russia during Summer 2004. Moreover, some depositors made withdrawals based on these contents (online rumors about "blacklists" of banks).

Rapidly changing market environment forces businesses to take into consideration the online communication channel. For example, beliefs and rumors about a new kind of product called automated vehicles (AVs) like; "AVs will lead to the gradual end of car ownership, AVs are not safer than manually driven cars, AVs use out-of-reach technology and will never come true etc." [34] can be easily shared and accessed online.

In short, the main differences that the online environment brings to commercial rumors can be summarized as follows:

- Online communication environment is more convenient to sharing, storage and dissemination of commercial rumors
- Online environment makes commercial rumors available to more people and longer
- Online commercial rumors can spread faster than traditional business rumors
- Online commercial rumors can be as diverse as traditional trade rumors
- Online commercial rumors are more accessible and can be more effective
- It is difficult to be sure of the accuracy of online commercial rumors, some clues are considered by the reader
- The negative effects of false/fake commercial rumors can be expected to increase, especially for non-investigative people.

## 5. METHODOLOGICAL AND THEORETICAL DISCUSSION

The subject of rumors in digital media has take attention of researches from different disciplines recently. The research subject is relatively new and conceptualization is not sufficiently developed. For example, studies about dissemination of conspiracy theories in online environment, don't focuses on the differences of types of deceptive contents [35]. So review studies about the subject to conceptualize and classify the online content should be useful clarifying the issue.

It is possible to conduct a wide range of researches on the general topics of commercial rumors and online commercial rumors. At this point, it is possible to analyze the content of commercial rumors in the online environment, to examine the rumors by taking part in online communities with the netnography method, to carry out experiments on the causes and consequences of the rumor, and even to examine the perceptions and attitudes about the rumors with the descriptive research method.

As seen in the related article, the main research topics encountered in the title of commercial rumors are; the believability of rumor message, the credibility of rumor source, the intention to believe rumor, the intention to spread the rumor, benefits derived from rumor sharing or motivations for sharing the rumor, the perceptions and attitudes towards trade rumors, the tendency to search for the truth of commercial rumors, the anxiety and hate stemming from commercial rumors, etc. However, the context of

these variables can be commercial products and businesses, non-profit organizations, as well as extended product types such as politicians from the perspective of political marketing and touristic region from the perspective of place marketing. In addition to these, in a research to be carried out on the subject; it is possible to benefit from the theories in the field of communication regarding message and source credibility, sociology/social psychology, where people's interactions with others are investigated (like group identification etc.), and psychology, where people's emotions, perceptions and attitudes are examined intensively. For example, the potential of Attribution Theory, as a psychological approach, is discussed to contribute to the clarification of the issue in the following paragraphs.

It is possible to examine and research the tendency of consumers to believe the rumors about their business or products within the scope of Attribution Theory [36]. According to the attribution-based motivation viewpoint, causal antecedent evaluations of certain outcomes cause positive or negative emotions (pride, hope, shame, etc.) and affect behavior [37]. Attribution theory is used in marketing to understand consumer behavior and message effectiveness. For example it is seen that advertising messages can activate attribution processes and advertising persuasiveness is affected by causality attributions [38,39]. Similar to causality attributions about the messages that the business is the source of, it is possible for consumers to make causal evaluations about the messages put forward by other consumers and their preferences may be affected by these evaluations. Because perceived behavioral antecedents affect expectations, emotions and behaviors (like trusting, believing, persuading and spreading messages) [40].

It is thought that it is possible to examine the role of causality perceptions experimentally, especially in the consumer's intention to believe and spread online rumors. At this point, it is possible for rumors to be the subject of different causality evaluations such as altruism, socialization, gaining prestige, and expressing feelings. However, in an experimental design of online commercial rumors, it is important to consider factors such as the detail of the claim, the quality of the rumor, the type of product associated with the rumor, and the type of online communication channel (Facebook, Twitter).

## 6. CONCLUSION

It is known that commercial rumors can be used by consumers as a communication tool and can be effective variable for businesses [41,42]. In today's

market conditions, where competitive and technological developments force businesses to be closer to the consumer, and the number of consumers who can reach false information as well as accurate information, the importance of researching the subject of commercial rumors is likely to increase. In this research, commercial rumors and online commercial rumors and their effects on consumers and businesses are emphasized. As a result, it is seen that commercial rumors and commercial rumors in the online environment can have important commercial consequences, and it is thought that the researches to be carried out on the subject will contribute to the understanding of one of the important factor affecting consumers that are not sufficiently researched. In addition, it is possible that research on the subject will provide valuable information about the importance of preventing trade rumor problems before they grow and what can be done to manage the rumors.

As in any research, it is inevitable to encounter some difficulties and limitations in research to be carried out on the subject. First of all, in an experimental research to be carried out on the subject, besides the difficulty of developing an experimental manipulation tool and providing random sampling; the type of determined communication channel would prevents generalization of findings (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, etc.). Similarly, the fact that the research topic context or industry needs to be determined in terms of a particular good, service, business, charitable organization, or political leader will limit the generalizability of the effects of rumors. In short, it is seen that it is not possible to reach a general conclusion with a single experimental research. However, it is also known that this is a situation that is encountered in every scientific research. In addition, it is difficult to reveal cause-effect relationships in a research that will be carried out with a survey, content analysis or netnographic method. But these kinds of researches have a potential to provide more in-depth understanding on the subject. As a result, it is possible that research to be carried out in different methods, theoretical perspectives and contexts in this field will contribute to a more holistic understanding of the subject.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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