The Evolution of New Product Rumors in Online Customer Communities: Social Identity Or Social Impact?

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This study examines how new product rumors spread and change over time and between groups of consumers. Two theories of intergroup communication are examined. Social Identity Theory suggests that the process will be governed by a competitive intergroup dynamic which will lead to new product rumors diverging between rival consumer groups. Dynamic Social Impact Theory, on the other hand, emphasizes the role of reciprocal influence between individuals over time. Based on this perspective, similar product rumors should develop and diffuse between rival consumer groups. The results of the study provide a theoretical foundation for understanding how new product rumors spread.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Prior studies of consumer word of mouth behavior have focused on released products. This research indicates that word of mouth serves as a complement to other sources of information such as advertising and expert reviews. However, consumers also engage in word of mouth about unconfirmed, unannounced, and unreleased products. Such rumors develop and spread in the absence of the kind of outside information present in the contexts previously studied in the word of mouth literature.

Research on rumors in the social psychology literature has found that the emergence and diffusion of rumors depends on the social context and the groups involved. These results suggest that new product rumors may spread and change depending on the social context in which they exist and the interests of those spreading the rumors. Therefore, two theories of group formation and intergroup communication are considered.

Social Identity Theory is the perspective adopted by the brand community literature. Social Identity Theory contends that intergroup dynamics are naturally competitive due to attempts by group members to maintain and enhance their relevant social identities through intergroup comparisons. As a result, consumer groups formed around competing products will tend to develop and spread rumors that reflect positively on their favored product and negatively on competing products. Over time, this will lead to a polarized environment with rival consumer groups either discussing completely different rumored products or discussing the same product but in different terms. This polarization should be most pronounced among the most frequent participants since they will hold the strongest social identities.

On the other hand, if social identities are not as influential as the brand community literature suggests, Dynamic Social Impact Theory may be more instrumental in understanding the diffusion of new product rumors. Dynamic Social Impact Theory lacks the competitive intergroup dynamic suggested by Social Identity Theory. Instead, it suggests that the spread of new product rumors between groups will follow an iterative and assimilative process. Therefore, new product rumors should diffuse between consumer groups formed around competing products. As a result, new product rumors discussed in rival groups will become more similar over time. Furthermore, this convergence should occur more rapidly among frequent participants in each group since they are subject to the highest levels of social impact.

To test these competing theories, actual word of mouth communications regarding a rumored product were gathered from three online forums. Two forums were dedicated to the products of two dedicated, identified users will refrain from spreading rumors about unreleased products. Such rumors develop and spread in the process of results holds even for members who are dedicated to one forum and refrain from participating in the rival forum. In addition, there is a lag in the convergence process with similarity between contemporaneous messages being greatest for later time periods in the two rival forums. This lag is consistent with a diffusion process.

This pattern of findings supports the predictions made by Dynamic Social Impact Theory. The results show that members of competing groups are willing to spread rumors about competing products. Furthermore, they are willing to spread rumors which are similar to those from opposing groups. Finally, even members dedicated to one group are willing to adopt and spread such rumors.

Overall, these results call into question the assumption that dedicated, identified users will refrain from spreading rumors about rival products. Our results strongly suggest that, at least in some circumstances, they are willing to do so. We should emphasize that these results do not indicate that social identities were not present. On the contrary, some participants showed clear evidence of the in-group bias associated with social identity when selecting where to post. However, these same members did not act to protect their social identification when deciding what to post. This may be a result of either conflicting identities among group members or an indication that the frequent participants in the opposing consumer community are considering purchasing the rival product. Future research should explore these potential explanations.

References


