*Original Paper*

# A Study on Contextual Negative Adaptation of Online Rumors from a Pragmatic Perspective

Chen Meisong[1]

[1] School of Liberal Arts/Centre for Singapore Studies, Nanjing University of Information Science & Technology, China

***Abstract***

*Based on the pragmatic theory of Linguistic Adaptation, this study focuses on the phenomenon of contextual "negative adaptation" in the dissemination of online rumors. By analyzing the strategic exploitation of contextual factors by rumor makers, it reveals how they proactively set pragmatic traps to achieve misleading propagation. The research finds that the widespread dissemination of online rumors stems from the precise negative adaptation to the channel of transmission and to the three dimensions of the communicative context: the physical world, the social world, and the mental world. Specifically, rumor makers create a false sense of urgency through spatiotemporal proximization, graft onto belief systems and social discourses to incite collective emotions, and systematically adapt to the multi-layered needs and motivations of the host. This study may deepen the understanding of the intrinsic pragmatic mechanisms underlying online rumor propagation and provide theoretical support from a pragmatic perspective for identifying their pragmatic traps and constructing effective prevention and control systems.*

***Key words***

*Online Rumors, Context, theory of Linguistic Adaptation, Negative Adaptation*

## 1. Introduction

The proliferation and spread of online rumors have become a significant social problem in the information age, posing severe challenges to public order, social trust, and individual cognition. Understanding their propagation mechanisms, particularly how they gain acceptance and spread widely within the complex online environment, is crucial for effective identification and countermeasures. From a pragmatic perspective, successful linguistic communication relies on language users dynamic selection of linguistic forms and strategies based on contextual factors to achieve mutual adaptation between the linguistic environment and structural choices, which is the core meaning of "adaptation" (Verschueren, 1999). Chen (2020, p. 51) further proposed the concept of "negative adaptation", revealing a more concealed and cautionary aspect of communication. It is believed that specific language users (e.g., potential rumor makers) may not passively adapt to context but actively exploit relevant contextual factors to meticulously set "pragmatic traps" for deception or misguidance. This concept provides an insightful theoretical lens for analyzing the deceptive propagation of online rumors.

This study adopts the notion of negative adaptation to elucidate the key contextual drivers that enable online rumors to overcome constraints, achieve illicit dissemination, and effectively mislead the public. There are two central issues to be addressed. The study starts with the discussion of the profound dependence of online rumor propagation on the online context, revealing the dual role of the internet as both a constraint on propagation and a strategic resource exploited by rumor creators. This is followed by the analysis of the key contextual factors and their operational mechanisms upon which online rumor creators rely to implement negative adaptation for misleading purposes. It is hoped that the study could deepen the understanding of the intrinsic pragmatic logic of online rumor propagation and provide theoretical foundations for identifying deceptive strategies and constructing more effective prevention and control systems.

## 2. Theoretical Foundation

Context refers to the environment of verbal communication, encompassing everything related to the processes of language production and comprehension. As a crucial factor in the communication process, context determines the production and interpretation of specific verbal and non-verbal meaning, and verbal expressions devoid of context generate no meaning (Goodwin & Duranti, 1992, p. 15). The pragmatic view of context transcends the limitations of traditional linguistic context, adopting a broader and more dynamic focus on the communicative context. As one of the influential theories about communicative context, the theory of Linguistic Adaptation proposes that constructing a unified pragmatic theory requires consideration of four dimensions, contextual correlates of adaptability, structural objects of adaptability, the dynamics of adaptability, and the salience of the adaptation processes (Verschueren, 1999, p. 67).
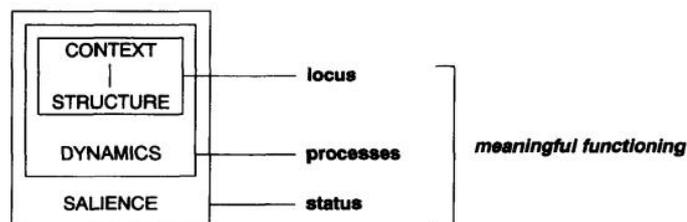
**Figure 1. the Structure of a Pragmatic Theory (Verschueren, 1999, p. 67)**

This figure indicates that language use is a process where language users continuously select linguistic means according to the needs of the communicative context to achieve communicative intentions. These choices, made with varying degrees of consciousness, occur not only at the level of linguistic structure but also in language strategies, and involve both the speaker and the hearer. Linguistic Adaptation Theory adopts a pragmatic-functional perspective to study the use of language at all levels, viewing language as a communicative adaptation tool. It posits that language use must adapt to contextual factors such as the physical world, the social world, the mental world, and communicative goals, proposing specific analytical dimensions. This theory possesses a relatively complete system, a solid philosophical foundation, and novel theoretical insights, offering significant enlightenment both in theory and in application (He et al., 2007, p. 65).

Critical Pragmatics further emphasizes that the analysis of language use (especially concerning power, deception, etc.) should focus on the language user rather than the discourse in isolation (Mey, 1993). To facilitate fast dissemination of online rumors, the makers, with a certain degree of awareness, dynamically adapt to a series of contextual factors and make "appropriate" choices regarding representational content and pragmatic-linguistic forms. This strategic adaptation, often involving tactics designed to exploit audience vulnerabilities or biases, a process essentially constituting negative adaptation, serves to enhance persuasiveness, capture attention, increase acceptance, and thus ultimately drive widespread sharing. Based on the aforementioned perspectives, in order to deeply analyze how online rumor creators strategically implement negative adaptation to facilitate rumor propagation, this paper first constructs a contextual composition model for such operations (see Figure 2), and then explores how this strategy drives the widespread dissemination of rumors.
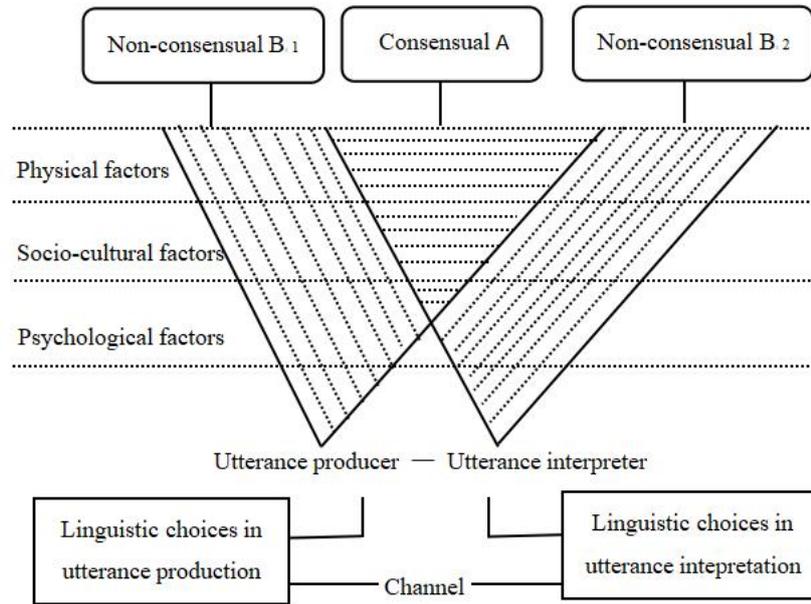
**Figure 2. Schematic Diagram of Contextual Factors Relevant to Online Rumor Dissemination**

As is shown in Figure 2, the contextual factors primarily include three aspects, the physical world, the social world, and the mental world. Specific components and their adaptation will be discussed in detail below; the utterer refers to the online rumor creator, typically an individual host; the interpreter refers to the online rumor receiver/victim and disseminator, typically a group host. Based on communicators' cognition and invocation of contextual factors, we distinguish the contextual factors currently relevant to the speaker, hearer, and both speaker and hearer into three parts. The first is Consensus Area A which contains context factors activated by both speaker and hearer. The larger this area, the richer the shared context content between the interlocutors. The rumor creator can manipulate more contextual factors, making it easier to achieve superficial consensus with the host. This increases the rumor's credibility and facilitates wider dissemination. The second part is Unidentified Area B1 which contains context factors activated only by the speaker (but not by the hearer). The larger this area, the more implicit contextual background the speaker possesses, unknown to the hearer. On one hand, this may hinder the hearer's understanding; on the other hand, it increases the concealment and deceptiveness of the speaker's (rumor creator's) motives and strategic "traps". The third is Unidentified Area B2 which contains context factors activated only by the hearer (but not by the speaker). The larger this area, the poorer the rumor creator's cognition of the host's psychological, cultural, and social rights and obligations. Relatively speaking, negative adaptation is more difficult to achieve. When Area A is constant, the relative sizes of the three areas indicate different degrees of contextual adaptation by the rumor creator.

The generation and dissemination of online rumors are influenced by factors within the online environment, constituting a contextualized, dynamic process of meme evolution. Based on the understanding of pragmatic context and the analysis of the specific composition of online rumor

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context, we argue that the network context of rumor dissemination has unique characteristics. In terms of communicator relationships, rumor generators and potential hosts are often complete strangers, requiring the former to actively construct and manage the relationship. For the communicative purpose, an online rumor is an act of deception by nature, violating the maxim of quality (truthfulness) under Grice's Cooperative Principle (Grice, 1975) and the rumor maker's communicative aim is to achieve personal gain by transmitting false information. What's more, the peculiarity of communication channel constitutes the fundamental difference between online and traditional rumors, with the former utilizing world wide web facilitated platforms in stead of face to face word-of-mouth transmission.

Language use often involves ethical or moral dimensions. Chen (2017) proposed Ethical Pragmatics as an applied branch of pragmatics, focusing from an ethical perspective on the moral issues involved in language use. On one hand, the moral order governing interactions between people, between people and society, and between people and nature within a specific society (involving rights and obligations, standards of morality, propriety, and civility) is reflected in everyday language use, influencing and constraining the expression and comprehension of meaning. On the other hand, communicators also construct, highlight, ignore, challenge, or adjust the moral order through specific discourse content and methods.

The following sections will discuss the dialectical relationship between the online context and rumor dissemination, and conduct a critical pragmatic analysis of the contextual negative adaptation enabling the misleading propagation of online rumors, focusing on the three dimensions of the physical world, social world, and mental world, combined with channel characteristics.

## 3. The Dialectical Relationship Between Online Context and Rumor Meme Dissemination

The online rumor meme and its online context form a dialectical relationship of interdependence, and constraint versus exploitaton. In other words, the online context exerts significant constraining force on rumor dissemination; simultaneously, if rumors effectively adapt to and exploit online contextual factors, they can achieve maximum speed and breadth of dissemination.

On one hand, context exerts a certain constraining force on verbal communication. Some even argue that language users are "slaves to the linguistic environment" (Qian, 2002, p. 81). Verbal communication involves not only utterances and texts. It is also closely linked to broad contextual factors like the social attributes, cultural background, and thinking habits of the communicators. The online context is the habitat where online rumors survive and develop, satisfying their multiple needs. Moreover, while rumor meme dissemination in the online environment breaks through spatiotemporal limitations, rumor creators and hosts are often complete strangers, with a vast social distance. Once generated, an online rumor meme must gain the host's trust and infect their mind within a short period. After all, online rumors are false information; as the old sayings go, "long nights breed many dreams" and "you can't wrap fire in paper". Given time, hosts will inevitably become suspicious, seek verification, and the rumor will lose its footing.

On the other hand, online rumor makers strategically exploit the online context. Successful communication is never passive submission to context (He, 2011) but involves actively mobilizing contextual resources. The necessary reconstruction of contextual factors in dynamic communication reflects the agency of the communicator (Goodwin & Duranti, 1992, pp. 4-6). Critical Pragmatics emphasizes that the object of critical study should be the language user, not the discourse itself, highlighting the importance of motivation and initiative (Chen, 2020, p. 22). Online rumor makers fully exploit the spatiotemporal characteristics of the network, process representational content important to the host, employ multiple strategies, such as providing deceptive evidentials, constructing false authoritative identities, false relational management, speech act strategies, and proactively adapt to the physical environment, socio-cultural factors, and host psychological orientation within the online context, thereby promoting widespread dissemination and achieving misguidance.

## 4. Contextual Negative Adaptation of Online Rumor Memes

*4.1 Negative Adaptation to the Dissemination Channel*

The uniqueness of online rumor dissemination lies in channel characteristics such as convenience, anonymity, and the irrational behavior of mainstream media, which rumor makers actively exploit to implement negative adaptation.

4.1.1 Convenience

The unique channel of online media has brought unprecedented convenience to the rapid dissemination of information. Compared to traditional oral or written information transmission, online information dissemination exhibits significant convenience, mainly manifested in free dissemination space, diversified dissemination channels, and dissemination methods.

Traditional word-of-mouth information transmission is often sporadic, while the internet has transformed information production modes, overcoming limitations of time, space, and cost. It offers diversified rumor sources and enables rapid, web-like dissemination from all netizens to all netizens. Leveraging the powerful force brought by online convenience, the number of hosts involved in online rumors far exceeds the coverage capacity of traditional media. Secondly, the internet provides diversified dissemination channels for rumors, primarily including online forums, virtual communities, instant messaging tools (e.g., Weibo, WeChat, blogs, QQ), and email. These channels share common features, enabling real-time communication, fast information transmission speed, and wide-reaching impact. Furthermore, these different channels are closely interconnected as online rumors often circulate simultaneously across multiple channels, significantly expanding their reach. What's more, the internet provides not only textual space for rumors but also allows dissemination via audio, video, images, hyperlinks, etc. (Chen, 2025). This makes false information more easily deceptive than in traditional modes. Thus, the convenience of the internet provides technical support and practical possibility for the large-scale, wide-ranging dissemination of online rumors.

4.1.2 Anonymity

The convenience of the internet is accompanied by identity anonymity and potential deception.

The online world is a space virtually created by high technology. Online communicators generally do not face real communication partners. Although online behavior management is increasingly stringent, requiring real-name authentication on most platforms, the authentication process is not foolproof. Identity theft and account theft occur, along with repeated account creation. Moreover, when constructing various pragmatic identities through account naming on platforms like WeChat, QQ, and Weibo, no strict regulations are followed, resulting in high uncertainty. For instance, the same QQ user can simultaneously construct and possess different pragmatic identities. A single QQ user can also have more than one QQ account and converse with different counterparts. For reasons such as self-protection or experiencing the novelty of role reversal, communicators often obscure their gender, age, and other external attributes in their virtual names, making them highly ambiguous. This dynamic construction of online identity often significantly blurs the users' intentions. The internet, as a virtual space for identity construction, lacks many constraints present in real-world communication. Thus, communicators construct identities based on their own needs, and virtual identity construction can also become a tool for rumor makers (Chen, 2020, p. 17; Chen & Chen, 2020). Malicious online communicators exploit this virtuality and ambiguity of online identity construction to carry out serious online fraud, such as emotional deception and financial scams. In such cases, the online medium clearly becomes a tool for deception and fraud.

4.1.3 Irrational Behavior of Mainstream Media

The internet, as a public space lacking necessary review norms, provides opportunities for the spread of negative memes (Chen, 2017). Lewin's (1947) Gatekeeper Theory emphasizes the importance of information filtering. However, social media has become a high-risk area for rumor propagation (Smith & Bastian, 2022; Gao et al., 2023).

Some mainstream media sometimes lose rationality, becoming powerful relay stations for rumors (Kapferer, 2008: 69), or even the original source of rumors, exacerbating negative social effects. For example, the WeChat public account operated by an influential news agency, published an article titled "National Central Cities Finally Determined, 11 Cities Successfully Shortlisted, Xiamen Dark Horse Breaks into the List!" claiming "The competition for National Central Cities has finally settled, with 11 cities winning the title" (Note 1). The WeChat public account "China Economist" reposted the article, changing the title to "Breaking: Nation Determines 4 Global Cities and 11 Central Cities, Hangzhou, Chengdu, Xiamen, Nanjing, Wuhan, etc. Selected". The revised title, in a very affirmative tone, further stated that the nation had determined 4 global cities. Numerous online news media and new media accounts, including mainstream outlets like Phoenix Net, Tencent Net, and even China Newsweek, reposted or partially cited this news. Similarly, the CCTV News Broadcast announced the establishment of the Xiong'an New Area in Hebei as a national-level new area to promote Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei integration. Very soon, Guancha.cn published a column by Ma Ping: "Ma Ping:

Xiong'an New Area Established, Will There Be a Hebei Tsinghua University?" (Note 2 & 3), speculating that "Tsinghua University might become the first model unit relocated to Xiong'an New Area". Mainstream online media like Sina, NetEase, and China.com quickly reposted or cited it. After multiple transmissions, the title was changed to "Media: Hebei Xiong'an New Area Established, Tsinghua University Going to Hebei". Even more alarmly, official media and mainstream voices can become primary generators and disseminators of rumors. In the rumors surrounding the "Malaysia Airlines Flight Disappearance", mainstream media from several countries were among the first or main spreaders (Note 4), whose full assistance or even origination undoubtedly fueled the flames of the rumor.

*4.2 Negative Adaptation to the Communicative Context*

4.2.1 Negative Adaptation to the Physical World

The physical environment typically includes time and space, communicator location, body language, physiological characteristics, etc, which are often highly virtualized in computer-mediated communication. Online rumors achieve negative adaptation to the physical world mainly through strategies of spatiotemporal proximization.

Events happening here and now are most interesting and important to the audience (Allport & Postman, 1947, p. 58). Rumor makers exploit the spatiotemporal ambiguity of the online context, employing the method of depolarization to alter time and space and tell "true lies". Proximization refers to the discourse strategy of negatively presenting events/states located elsewhere to the current communicator (Cap, 2014, p. 17). Rumor creators "proximize" false information, bringing it closer to the current host to enhance relevance and importance, create focal points, and promote dissemination. This is mainly manifested in two directions, spatial proximization and temporal proximization.

The first is spatial Proximization (from remote to proximate). The geographical convergence of online rumors, progressing from global to national, and from distant to local spheres, manifests in two primary typologies: completely fabricated narratives and distorted reassignment narratives. The former includes claims like "Syrian men's soccer team beat China's, and to celebrate the victory, all Syrian factions ceased fire for 48 hours". The truth was that the US had announced a pause in negotiations with Russia regarding a Syrian ceasefire; the rumor had no reliable source. Similarly, the image-based rumor about "Rio Olympics athletes exposing themselves due to wearing Chinese-made clothes" was also photoshopped by netizens. Some online rumors are simply processed versions of events that happened abroad, replacing locations with domestic ones. For instance, a video circulated online titled "High-rise Fire at Shanghai Beichen Fujin Huating" actually depicted an event in Sharjah, UAE, a typical case of distorted reassignment narratives. Proximization from other domestic locations to the local area is even more common. The common feature of these rumors is highlighting the urgency of the event, generating more discussion and dissemination locally.

Temporal proximization operates through the deliberate repackaging of historical incidents or recurring rumors with current timestamps, fabricating an artificial sense of urgency. This mechanism manifests in

two primary forms: the recycling of past tragedies as breaking news, as exemplified by claims like "Child trapped in escalator dies despite rescue efforts" which resurrects years-old accident, and the seasonal revival of disinformation synchronized with cultural cycles, as seen in the perennial "crayfish toxicity" rumors resurfacing annually with the arrival of harvest season. Both strategies exploit temporal distortion to simulate imminent threats. Some cases combine both temporal and spatial proximization. A typical example is the rumor "Mount Emei, Sichuan Cable Car Broke, Countless Deaths, Rivers of Blood". In reality, the video used as evidence was an accident on a suspension bridge in Vietnam three years prior. After simple editing, it was presented as a "recent" cable car accident occurring in famous domestic scenic spots like Zhangjiajie, Jiuzhaigou, and Mount Emei.

Effective spatiotemporal negative adaptation transforms events happening elsewhere and/or in the past into "real events" happening here and/or now, enhancing the relevance and importance of online rumors, thereby enabling rapid, large-scale dissemination.

### 4.2.2 Negative Adaptation to the Social World

Cultures inherited across generations, shared group perspectives, attitudes, behaviors, and traditions are important factors in the social world (Verschueren, 1999, p. 92), which largely constrain linguistic choices and play a pivotal pragmatic role. The negative adaptation of online rumors to the social world is primarily manifested in the traditional belief systems and societal development.

### 4.2.2.1 Related to Traditional Belief Systems

Beliefs are ideas about how the world operates. China's two thousand years of feudal society laid a solid foundation for theism, encompassing both systematic religious influences and ignorant superstitious ideas. Online rumor makers adapt to the belief in and worship of deities and supernatural forces held by theists, implanting false content to activate the public's imagination. Religious thought in online rumors is mainly reflected in Buddhist concepts encouraging people to do good, urging hosts to help people in distress. Some Buddhist sayings are deeply rooted and common in online rumors concerning finding missing persons/lost items or food safety. For instance, a rumor recounts the "scientific fact" that mushrooms and eggplants cannot be eaten together, substantiated with fatal cases, then continues with "Please move your fingers, don't worry about using some data. Saving a life is more meritorious than building a seven-level pagoda! It is also accumulating virtue and boundless merit!". It adapted to the Buddhist doctrine of "accumulating merit and virtue" (积善行德, jīshànchéngdé) among the public, urging them to spread the word through forwarding to fulfill the altruistic good deed of "saving a life".

The exploitation of feudal superstition, encompassing beliefs in astrology, geomancy, and supernatural forces, constitutes a potent vector for rumor dissemination. This mechanism operates by parasitizing culturally embedded cosmologies, as manifested in rumors like the fabricated "Dragon Infant" imagery claiming divine protection for those who repost it, where pseudo-sacred iconography (scales, horns, and coiled tails) synergizes with prosperity incentives to trigger viral sharing. Simultaneously, more coercive variants emerge through curses framed as "feng shui secrets", exemplified by threats of

spectral hauntings for non-compliance, a tactic that weaponizes traditional taboos by systematically listing thirty-odd prohibitions while invoking the authority of "masters" and "arcane truths". Such narratives strategically activate dual psychological levers as the "Dragon Infant" rumor taps into auspiciousness-seeking behaviors through promised family safety and wealth, whereas the curse-laden feng shui text weaponizes survival anxieties via moral intimidation. Both ultimately achieve disproportionate propagation by collapsing the boundary between folk belief and digital threat ecology.

4.2.2.2 Related to Societal Development

The negative impacts of rapid economic development and their social repercussions are reflected in online rumors, mainly concerning major food safety issues and construction quality, among others.

Firstly, the "hardest hit areas" of online rumors adapt to real-world major food safety problems. In the wave of rapid economic development, some businesses pursued short-term economic benefits while neglecting long-term economic and social gains, leading to frequent food safety incidents. Sohu.com published an article inventorying food safety incidents involving duck eggs, rice, cooking oil, lean meat powder, milk powder, chocolate, etc. These problems persistently exist among the populace, affecting everyone's life and even the health and safety of the next generation, causing strong negative social reactions. This becomes the social background for numerous rumors and is a major factor making food safety a primary target area for online rumors.

Secondly, the common occurrence of substandard products and poor-quality projects provides prototypes for rumor makers. Online rumors often reflect unverified information about accidents caused by quality issues. Safehoo (Note 5), a large vertical portal focused on production safety and emergency management, lists numerous collapse accidents in recent years involving construction sites, bridges, cable cars, buildings, etc. Investigations show causes include illegal operations, lack of timely safety risk assessments, forged assessment documents, etc., resulting in significant loss of life and property, extremely negative social discourse impact, and simultaneously becoming topics for online rumors.

4.2.3 Negative Adaptation to the Mental World

Hearers selectively receive information based on their preferences (Sunstein, 2014, p. 51), and speakers' linguistic choices must adapt to their evaluation and judgment of the hearer's mental world (He & Zhang, 2004). Based on Humanistic Psychology, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory proposes that human motivation is governed by various levels of needs such as physiological needs, safety needs, love and belonging (Social needs), esteem, and self-actualization, arranged from lower to higher levels (Maslow, 1999). The generation and dissemination of online rumors precisely involve false adaptation to these multi-layered motivational needs of the public.

4.2.3.1 Negative Adaptation to Lower-Level Needs

Physiological and Safety needs constitute the basic needs in Maslow's hierarchy. It should be noted that basic needs in contemporary China are no longer confined to lack of food and clothing but involve demands for quality. Physiological needs related to food, clothing, shelter, and transportation have

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merged with safety needs, blurring the original boundary. People's sense of insecurity and anxiety/fear concerning food, housing, transportation, health, property, work, personal safety, and resources promotes rumor generation and spread (Prasad, 1935; DiFonzo & Bordia, 2004).

Food is the fundamental material guarantee for human survival and development, and safety is its basic requirement. As rumors concerning food safety directly target the the public's safety anxiety, any representational content in online rumors related to "eating" sparks heated discussion. Food safety rumors cover fruits and vegetables, beverages, meat, cooking oil, and multiple categories. Whether agricultural products or industrial food, all are plagued by rumors. These rumors about livelihood-related foods often spread widely during their peak seasons. For instance, watermelon, a delicious and affordable summer staple, has been entangled in "injection" rumors during peak sales periods in recent years. The dissemination times of the online rumor "injected watermelon causes poisoning" (example 1) consistently occur around summer, coinciding with the watermelon season. Similar rumors affect strawberries, grapes, and other agricultural products, severely impacting host consumption judgment and behavior, causing massive sales stagnation and significant economic and psychological damage to farmers.

Example 1:

a. "As long as there are yellowish-white veins in the pulp, it means this watermelon has been injected". (July)

b. "Never eat this kind of watermelon, already caused 12 poisonings..." (April)

c. "Watermelon poisoning incident, tell your family, never eat 'injected' watermelon!" (June)

d. "These fruits have been tampered with, don't buy them for children to eat!" (October)

Rumors threatening life are undoubtedly the most critical. Among the most significant category of personal safety-related online rumors, cases concerning children are particularly prominent. Such rumors mainly involve criminal gangs committing "trafficking" through deception, home invasion, or street snatching; "malicious harm incidents" related to children's organs "being harvested" and sexual assault (including child disappearances). There are also many cases about "accidents" causing injury or death due to elevator "malfunctions" or improper use, or pool electric leaks or parental negligence.

Many science-popularizing online rumors also gag people's concerns for personal safety, using life-and-death "knowledge" to alarm the audience about this "information", among which rumors about "cancer-causing" and "cancer-curing" are particularly prominent. Referring to the series of cancer-related rumors released by *Health Times (Beijing)* (note 6) and many other cancer-related rumors, we find that these cancer-related rumors exhibit some interconnected core characteristics in terms of content strategy and propagation effect, which together form the foundation of their propagative power and harmful impact. First, they deliberately manufacture a sense of universal panic by claiming cancer is highly prevalent among specific groups (e.g., exaggerating its occurrence among "young people") and in specific regions, thereby creating an atmosphere of "impending danger for everyone". Then, the rumors strategically anchor the source of risk in everyday life, linking the alleged

cancer risk to daily habits the public heavily relies on (like using microwave ovens) and commonly consumed foods such as soy milk, pointed tomatoes, cooking with heated vegetable oil, strawberries accused of excessive acetochlor, or beer containing carbendazim. This exploits people's inherent concerns about food safety and health to generate specific and widespread fear. To further dismantle the audience's psychological defenses and hinder scientific treatment, the rumors vigorously promote a narrative of incurable despair, propagating the pessimistic notion that "cancer equals a death sentence" to induce patients and their families to abandon hope and conventional treatment. Finally, having successfully sown panic and despair, the rumors often proceed to peddle false preventions or solutions, advocating unproven "miracle cancer preventions" or "treatments" like drinking wheatgrass juice. This exploits the psychology of people seeking a "lifeline" amidst panic, serving purposes such as commercial promotion, traffic harvesting, or other agendas. This step-by-step strategy makes such rumors highly deceptive and destructive.

Example 2:

a. "Hubei Lichuan Super Major Traffic Accident: 14 Dead, 10 Seriously Injured (Photos)"

b. "Fuzhou Third Ring Road: Nine-Car Pileup and Fire"

c. "Milk Tea Sister and Liu Qiangdong Breakup Fee Reaches 30 Million"

d. "Three children stolen in Fengdu County, two more lost in Kaixian County. This time their gang sent over a hundred people specifically to steal children over seven years old, probably for human organs"

Rumors gain wider dissemination precisely by being attention-grabbing. Many viral online myths exhibit striking sensationalism in their messaging, emphasizing quantity, danger, and extremes to generate shock value. In rumors about personal safety and major accident, it's common to see examples that "let numbers do the talking", manipulating victim counts (e.g., a), disaster severity (e.g., b), monetary sums (e.g., c), or criminal statistics (e.g., d) to create an illusion of overwhelming scale. In science-related rumors impacting daily life, exaggerated consequences dominate narratives. Claims like "Keeping phones near pillows causes infertility, premature aging, and cancer through radiation" typify this strategy, routinely deploying alarmist lexicon such as "toxic" "cancer-causing" "lethal" "urgent" and "shocking" to stress catastrophic outcomes, thereby overwhelming public judgment. Other rumors amplify events to hyperbolic extremes, persistently using superlatives like "the most" such as "Chengdu faces its worst smog in 2,000 years" and "Hubei's coldest weather since 1992 forecast for Jan 23-26".

4.2.3.2 Negative Adaptation to Mid-Level Needs

People's behavior is driven by emotional needs. The third level about social needs typically includes love, acceptance, and belonging; At the fourth level, Esteem needs are the main driver, encompassing gaining appreciation, recognition, and respect from others, as well as self-respect and personal worth. Social needs (level 3) and esteem needs (level 4) are termed psychological needs in Maslow's theory, belonging to mid-level needs. Online rumor memes often adapt to the public's need for emotional belonging and esteem.

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The public's need for emotional belonging is manifested in the herd mentality within online rumor dissemination and the group discussions it drives. After survival and safety are secured, people seek a sense of belonging, relationships or groups where they feel secure and accepted, and desire affirmation and importance within them. At this stage, belonging becomes one of the most important emotional needs. As Sunstein noted (Sunstein, 2014, p. 6), we tend to believe what others believe and do. If most people we know believe a rumor, we easily follow suit . This is the social cascades effect in rumor spread. When people lack information about a rumor, or are even completely ignorant, they are more susceptible to believing it. The internet facilitates this social conformity psychology. Netizens can follow each other and access each other's self-media platforms, freely exchanging and discussing. In discussing online rumors, hosts strengthen communication with family, friends, neighbors, colleagues, classmates, and even strangers, fulfilling social interaction and connection, while the rumor spreads wider and wider.

Esteem needs are also aptly satisfied in online rumors. Generally, under the same contextual conditions, indirect speech acts are more polite than direct ones. However, in online rumors primarily involving requests and suggestions, expressions are often very direct. Take the common "forwarding" request as an example:

Example 3:

a. "For the safety of relatives, friends, and all people known and unknown, please move your fingers, don't worry about using some data. Saving a life is more meritorious than building a seven-level pagoda! It is also accumulating virtue and boundless merit!... Forwarded from a friend!"

b. "If we have a conscience, let's cheer for Dr. Li Qian. If you think Li Qian is a true doctor, forward this! If you think Li Qian is China's most beautiful doctor, forward this! Every time you forward this, you awaken a nation! China needs doctors like this."

c. "To celebrate the merger, WeChat users get 10 RMB for each forward of this message. Forward immediately!"

d. "Send to the people you care about immediately upon receiving. Prevention is always better than cure."

e. "Urgent notice released by the Ministry of Public Security at 6:00 pm. Spread the word fast!"

Judging by politeness level, sentence a states the reason explicitly ("For the safety...") and uses the marked polite expression "please" , making it relatively the most polite. Sentence b contains three forwarding requests. The first two are made under specific premises ("If we have a conscience..." and "If you think Li Qian is..."). The third request ("Every time you forward...") is also relatively polite. Sentences c, d, and e use urging expressions like "immediately" and "fast", generally highly imposing and impolite speech acts. However, considering the content, these sentences seem to involve the hearer's financial interest (c) and life safety (d). The urging here emphasizes the urgency of the situation and reflects the speaker's high concern for the hearer, subjectively making it a very polite speech act. In other words, based on different surface motivations, such as emotional care (d),

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economic benefit (c), moral sentiment (b), situational urgency (e), online rumor makers typically adapt to the public's face needs, making them feel respected by the speaker. Of course, there are exceptions, such as the extremely impolite utterances like "failure to forward invites a curse" in superstitious rumors. This highly impolite speech act primarily adapts to the existing cognition of superstitious hosts and is not widespread or representative. Therefore, overall, cyber rumor makers adapt to the hosts' esteem needs, thereby gaining their trust, leading to their acceptance and dissemination of rumors.

4.2.3.3 Negative Adaptation to Higher-Level Needs

The fifth level, Self-Actualization needs, sits at the pinnacle of Maslow's hierarchy. It is the individual's desire to reach their potential limits, belonging to higher-level needs. In cyber rumors, it is primarily manifested in the discursive expression and construction of moral order and the appeal for fairness and justice.

Cyber rumors often exploit prevailing moral values by fabricating unconventional "events" that deliberately violate or challenge ethical norms, thereby provoking visceral public reactions to maximize dissemination. As netizens candidly observe, the more bizarre the rumor, the more readily it is believed. Consider China's deep-rooted belief in class-matching marriages as the socially endorsed norm. Rumors subverting this paradigm garner explosive attention, such as the viral long-form article "21-Year-Old College Student Marries 55-Year-Old Divorced Woman: Bride Revealed as His Classmate's Mother" (Note 7). This fabricated tale chronicled their "acquaintance" "romance" and "union", weaponizing shocking elements: a 34-year age gap and taboo familial connection (bride being the groom's classmate's mother). Such engineered violations of marital conventions and values generate controversy through loaded descriptors like "awkward" and "inconceivable". The rumor achieved cross-border circulation with Vietnamese translations, sparking polarized reactions, from curiosity to vitriolic condemnation, while Chinese portals (China.com, Sina, Future Net, People's Jiangxi Channel, Zhongguancun Online, Sohu) amplified its reach. Its recurring virality stems from calculated ethical transgression: the "novelty" of moral breach as click-generating mechanics.

The generation and dissemination of online rumors also exploit numerous other elements of traditional Chinese morality, such as bringing honor to ancestors, benevolence, righteousness, loyalty, filial piety, collectivism, altruism, fairness, and justice. Whether gaining public approval or criticism on ethical and moral grounds, it helps the diffusion and interpersonal impact of these rumors.


## 5. Conclusion

This paper has provided an in-depth analysis of the key driving force enabling the widespread dissemination and misleading impact of online rumors, the strategic negative adaptation to the online context. The research reveals that online rumor propagation is profoundly constrained by its inherent online contextual limitations. However, rumor creators are far from passively bound; they exhibit a high degree of agency, actively exploiting and even reconstructing specific contextual factors to set pragmatic traps. This study has elucidated how rumor makers precisely manipulate channel

characteristics such as convenience, anonymity, and the irrational behavior of mainstream media to overcome dissemination barriers. The framework further delineates the mechanisms of negative adaptation operating across the communicative context's three constitutive dimensions. Within the physical world, this manifests through spatiotemporal proximization strategies that deliberately falsify event coordinates to manufacture an artificial sense of localized immediacy. In the social sphere, adaptation occurs by grafting rumors onto established belief systems while co-opting critical nodes within societal discourse, a dual process that systematically amplifies resonance with collective emotions. At the mental dimension, exploitation targets the public's psychological motivations spanning survival anxieties, social belonging needs, and moral preservation imperatives, which is operationalized through sensentional expressions, herd behavior dynamics, and strategic facework that collectively enhance persuasiveness and accelerate dissemination velocity.

These findings not only confirm the central role of contextual factors in online rumor dissemination but also highlight the operational logic of negative adaptation as an active, strategic deceptive behavior. This may deepen the explanatory power of pragmatic theory regarding online communication phenomena. At the same time, it may be helpful for understanding the propagation mechanisms of online rumors, identifying their pragmatic traps, and consequently, for the effective governance of online rumors, the enhancement of public media literacy, and the construction of a cleaner cyberspace.

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**Notes**

Note 1. https://www.szhgh.com/Article/news/politics/2017-12-23/156825.html

Note 2. https://www.guancha.cn/MaPing/2017_04_01_401759.shtml

Note 3. https://news.cctv.com/2017/04/14/ARTIyZTeZH3xXggWcZ6E6sBC170414.shtml

Note 4. http://media.people.com.cn/n/2014/0318/c120837-24660875.html

Note 5. https://www.safehoo.com/

Note 6. http://jiankang.163.com/16/0411/12/BKCCVHSF00380030.html

Note 7. https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MjM5NzI3NDg4MA==&mid=2658480241&idx=4&sn=97
4c271b37dde2fd4193504c8b595fcd&chksm=bd5de41e8a2a6d083bf981d00b13d9a5d3faaf591b2ce149
a1a7ceb3df618bf651438ed8c6ce&scene=27