

Rumor, denial messages and consumer behavioral intention: An experimental study of Ajinomoto Umami seasoning use in Abidjan Cote d'Ivoire

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**Abstract:** This experimental study was carried out by semi-structured interviews, based on a case of the rumors about Ajinomoto seasoning in Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire, West Africa. It reports that guiding messages are the most effective strategy to influence consumer behavioral intention. The study found that the no-response strategy of ignoring rumors initially pursued by Ajinomoto exacerbated the decline in company sales performance. This study thus recommends that managers, in combating rumors, should be active and adopt strategies that involve consumers and the public passing on rebuttals of such rumors.

**Keywords:** Ajinomoto Umami seasoning, Ajinomoto West Africa, Commercial rumor, Consumer behavioral intention, Cote d'Ivoire, Quasi-experimental qualitative study, Rumor denial messages, Triangulation.

## Introduction

### Research background

Companies are increasingly becoming vulnerable to the phenomenon of rumors resulting in customer defections, declining brand perceptions, additional expenses for communication, and even withdrawal of products from the market (Nga-Nkouma, 2009). For example, in 2008 a rumor alleged that Steve Jobs, the CEO of Apple, had been hit by a heart attack. Although the rumor was found to be false, the rapid transmission of the information caused the company to lose US\$9 billion in market value (Dubois & Rucker, 2011). In 1994, in a similar incident, rumors alleged that the logo of Procter and Gamble (P&G) is related to Satan and therefore buying P&G products was supporting the worship of Satan. Investigations revealed that the rumors were spread by competitors and the company, in a court battle, received US\$19 million in damages (Glenn, 2008).

This phenomenon has become more pronounced with the development of new information technologies and especially with the advent of social media that provides a framework conducive to the rapid spread of rumors. Recently, rumors on social media alleged that an H&H product, *Lausanne Jack n Jill biscuits*, was toxic and harmful. The rumors severely tarnished the company image among consumers in the West African market and forced the company to spend considerable amounts of money on a denial campaign (Gyasi, 2017).

One of the long-running examples of damaging effects of rumors on a Company is the case of the Japanese food manufacturing and amino acid world leader Ajinomoto Group. Indeed, just ten years after its creation, Ajinomoto began facing rumors and allegations that its core product MSG was harmful. For instance, in 1968, one rumor alleged that MSG caused Chinese Restaurant Syndrome (CRS). The origin of this allegation was a letter published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* in which an author complained that he suffered from numbness, weakness, and palpitations after consuming food in a Chinese restaurant that used MSG (Wang & Adhikari, 2018).

Obviously any company is a likely target of rumors and thus managers must be armed with relevant strategies to prevent and combat this phenomenon. Research has identified several strategies for combating corporate rumors (Koller, 1992; Dubois et al., 2011; Difonzi et al., 1994). Among these strategies the one most widely used by

companies is the outright denial (Dubois et al., 2011). For example, concerning the rumor about the toxicity of its biscuits, H&H reacted by denial and stated the following:

'The management of H&H would like the general public to know that the Lausanne Jack 'n Jill biscuit, among others, is one of the finest products produced in Thailand by Universal Robina Corporation (URC) and the product has gone through the entire necessary testing requirements and has been registered with all the necessary authorities in Ghana under FDA registration number FDA/BK 15-111'(Gyasi, 2017).

In support, Bordia, et. al.(2005)add that the effectiveness of a rumor denial message depends on personal relevance, reliability of the source, and quality of the message.

### Significance of this research

There are many studies on commercial rumors, on their effects on companies, and on products or brands. However, there is relatively little interest on the relative effectiveness of the different strategies for combating rumors (Kimmel & Audrain-Ponte via, 2010). This study, in focusing on the relative effectiveness of various rumor denial messages in customer behavioral intentions, aims to contribute to the academic discussion on the topic and hopes that the findings would be useful to companies in combating such rumors.

### Research questions

The expected outcomes of denying rumors are to influence consumer behavioral intention to reduce the defections of consumers and to help in bringing back those who have already defected. Studying the impact of rumor denial message on consumer behavioral intention can help to identify messages that are effective. This study uses the case of Ajinomoto Seasoning in Cote d'Ivoire and aims to answer the following questions:

- Which types of rumors existed about Ajinomoto Umami seasoning in the Cote d'Ivoire market?
- What strategies Ajinomoto adopted to manage these rumors?
- What were the effects of denial messages on the behavioral intentions of Ajinomoto consumers?
- Which type of denial message is the most effective to combat commercial rumors about Ajinomoto seasoning?

### Literature review

#### Defining rumors

'Rumor is a specific proposition for belief, passed along from person to person, usually by word of mouth, without secure standards of evidence being presented' (Kimmel & Pontevia, 2010). It is also defined as unverified information transmitted from a person to others primarily to create belief. Rumors are thus a kind of untrustworthy allegation because they are not accompanied by supportive evidence (Difonzo, et al., 1994). Clearly, authors differ in defining the concept (Difonzo et al. 1994; Buckner, 1965; Bordia & DiFonzo, 2004), and a variety of approaches for their management exist that include sociological, psychological, communicational, legal, marketing, and crisis management (Nga-Nkouma, 2016).

In studying rumor, this paper followed the approach adopted in the discipline of business where it is called commercial rumor and focuses on relations among companies, their competitors and customers. Commercial rumors 'are public communications, usually embellished by allegations or attributions based on circumstantial, unverified evidence that reflect consumers' assumptions or suspicions about the marketplace' (Kimmel & Pontevia, 2010).

#### Negative effects of rumors on businesses

The fact that rumors have adverse effects on consumer behavior has been discussed by many researchers (Nga-Nkouma, 2009; Difonzo et. al. 1994; Kimmel, & Audrain-Pontevia, 2010). 'Rumors can drain productivity, reduce profits, create stress in the workplace, or sully a company's image. Some rumors tear at a company's credibility, with both personnel and customers. Others have catapulted firms into financial disaster' (Koller, 1992).

## Rumor combating strategies

The current literature proposes a range of strategies to manage rumors. Kimmel (2004) proposed that managers should include rumor management as a day to day business operation rather than

facing them when a crisis hits and suggested four strategies to save a company from their harmful effects. The strategies are: first, engage in credible public relations (PR) efforts; second, maintain constant vigilance assuming that rumors are the norm rather than the exception; third, designate rumor monitoring and control officers; and fourth, develop a rumor crisis management plan.

Dubois et. al. (2011) go one step further and highlight three commercial rumor combating strategies: First is the denial strategy, which consists of the refutation of the rumors by the targeted company. In this strategy, the company names the specific rumor and discredits its usefulness and the credibility of its source through advertising campaigns, press conferences and highly publicized events. This technique aims to make people disregard those who still interested to pass the rumor along (Akande & Odewale, 1994). In other words, after making the rumor obsolete, those who continue to spread them are considered ridiculous and are ignored. The second strategy re-associates the target of the rumor with the positive features of the company. For example, a restaurant that is rumored to use worm meatre-associates this rumor with positive information by suggesting that it is a delicacy used, for example, in French cuisine. It is positive because French cuisine has positive connotation in peoples' minds. The third strategy questions the level of confidence consumers have about the rumor. The logic behind this strategy is that simply asking consumers whether or not they could be confident of the rumor based on what they heard could have strong mitigating impact on the rumor itself(Dubois et. al.,2011).

In addition, Koller (1992) suggested a 'no response strategy' consisting of doing nothing to combat the rumors. The assumption behind this strategy is that some rumors die away over time and do little realdamage. Therefore, by ignoring them, the company avoids repeating the rumors. Difonzo et. al. (1994)referred to this strategy as the weakest one for neutralizing rumors.

Rumor denialsare statements refuting a rumor. This is a commonly used approach to refute a false rumor. According to Bordiaet. al. (2005),it is proficient at diminishing people's trust in the rumors. For rumor denial messages, however, to be effective they should be based on truth, be internally consistent, be announced by an appropriate spokesperson, be formulated in understandable form, must not repeat the rumor, and should use a town meeting format to refute it (Difonzo et. al., 1994).In support, Bordia et al. (2005) argue that the effectiveness of a rumor denial messages depends on its personal relevance to consumers, the degree of reliability of its source, and its own level of quality.

## Consumer behavioral intention

Consumer behavior 'is the study of the processes involved when individuals or groups select, purchase, use or dispose of products, services, ideas or experiences to satisfy needs and desires' (Solomon, et al., 2006). 'It refers to all the thought, feelings, and actions that an individual has or takes before or while buying any product, service or idea' (Khaniwale, 2015).Due to the critical roles that consumers play in the marketplace, interest in the study of consumer behavior has been growing in the Marketing literature (Solomon et. al., 2006).Most consumer behavior theories argue that the best way to predict consumer behavior is to understand consumer intentions (Fishbein&Ajzen, 1975).

Consumer behavioral intention refers to the probability that consumer will perform some behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Theories of consumer behavior intentions emphasizes the level of seriousness, determination and planning that consumers demonstrate in performing actual behavior (Mamman et.al. 2016).Turhan&Özbek(2012) take these claims further and argue that satisfied customers demonstrate three consumer behavioral intention outcomes that include willingness to buy, willingness to pay more, and willingness to recommend. Based on the scholarly observations reviewed above, this study focuses on three consumer behavioral intention outcomes including willingness to buy the rumored product (WILLBUY), willingness to recommend the rumored product (WILLRECOM), and willingness to transmit rumor denial message (WILLTRANS).

### Willingness to buy

Jahangir et. al. (2009) defined consumer willingness to buy as the behavioral intention of customers to pay for a product. Phau et. al. (2009) explains the fact that willingness to purchase and purchase intention are used as a substitute in marketing research to predict actual consumer behavior. Ahasanul, et. al. (2015), based on their review of relevant literature, claim that there exists a strong correlation between consumer willingness to buy and consumer actual buying behavior. Therefore, studying willingness to buy became one of the main methods accepted by marketing managers to help them understand actual consumer behavior. Soodan and Pandey (2015), in their study, identified the significant role that beliefs play in forecasting consumers buying behavior. According to their study, the consumer intention to buy depends on their beliefs regarding the quality, the delivery, the price, and the availability of the product which they intend to buy. The positive belief from consumers about a product leads to constructive willingness to buy, and negative beliefs affect negatively their willingness to buy.

Kosfeld (2005) showed that rumors could affect beliefs of the consumers and had a direct impact on market outcomes. In other words, if the consumer is exposed to negative rumors and forms anxieties and negative beliefs toward a product, this would damage the product image and further negatively influence their willingness to buy. A denial message that is intended to reduce the anxieties and the negative beliefs associated with rumors may positively change a consumer's behavioral intention toward a rumored product.

### Willingness to recommend the product

According to Bendle, et. al. (2016) willingness to recommend is the proportion of surveyed customers who point out that they would recommend a product to their friends. The percentage of customers who are willing to recommend a company is an excellent metric of strong business performance and growth (Korneta, 2014). In this research, the consideration of willingness to recommend aims to assess how much consumers have been convinced by a rumor denial message about a product, to the point of recommending it to friends and relatives, by assuming that these consumers had previously used the product but had stopped consuming it because of rumors.

### Willingness to transmit denial message

In the way that consumers transmit false rumors about products or companies by word-of-mouth (WOM); in the same way, they also transmit favorable knowledge and product information messages. In WOM conversation, the fact that the source has no commercial interest makes the communication process and the content more credible than company generated information (López & Sicilia, 2014). According to Bansal and Bansal (2018) 'Word-of-mouth marketing has always been an important ingredient of the promotional strategies of the marketers and has been considered as a non-biased and most trusted form of promotion'. Just like companies expect the information and knowledge about their products to reach larger audience through WOM, the expected outcomes of rumor denial messages is also to reach the larger audience. Therefore, the transmission of the rumor denial message by consumers through a WOM is a performance indicator for the company that denied the rumors.

### Conceptual framework

This study used the counter rumor messages identified on social media by Goh et. al. (2017) to assess the effects of rumor denial messages on consumer's behavioral intention. Using the grounded theory approach by analyzing counter rumor messages on social media, the above study identified different types of messages that are used to counter rumor on social media. These counter-rumor message types include:

- An outright refutation message provides evidence to refute the rumor;
- A guide message goes beyond providing evidence of a false rumor and calls the audience to action to stop rumor dissemination;
- A sarcastic message ridicules those that support the rumor and pours scorn on those that believed in it;
- An interrogatory message that raises critical questions about the rumor in order to show the limits of the argument that supports the rumor.

The following figure shows the proposed theoretical framework linking these types of rumor denial messages with

the outcomes of the behavioral intentions of consumers who have been exposed to rumors about Ajinomoto.

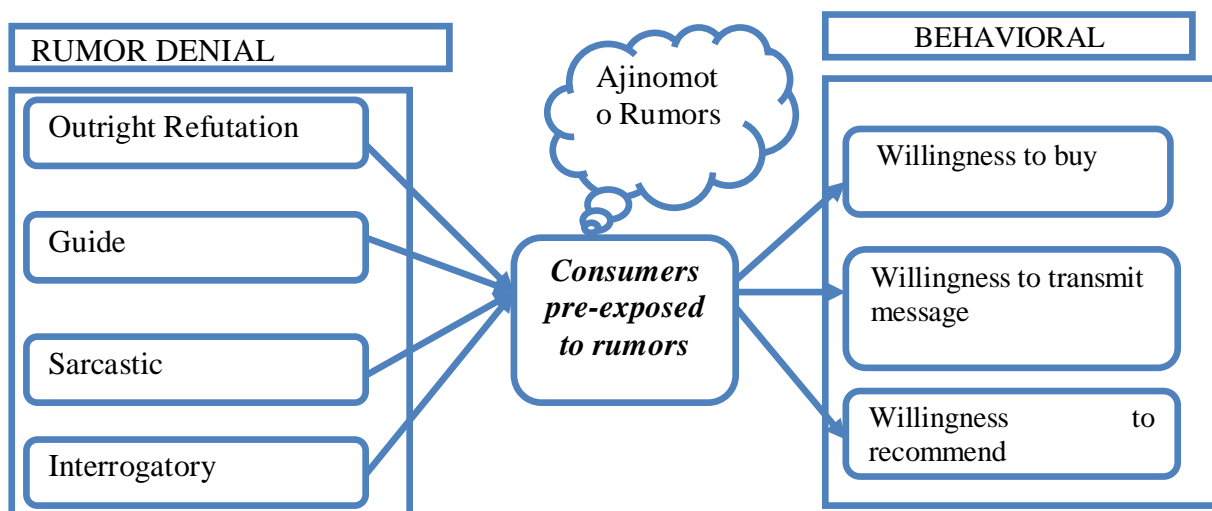


Figure 1: Theoretical Framework

### Research Methods

To understand the effect of rumor denial messages on consumer behavioral intention, this study adopted an experimental approach. Bryman and Bell (2011) explain that experimental research is frequently used because it generates considerable confidence in the robustness and trustworthiness of causal findings. Gay (1992) states that the experimental method represents the most logical approach and the only research approach that can truly assess cause-and-effect relationships.

There are two different types of experimental designs, the laboratory experiment and the field experiment. The laboratory experiment (Milgram, 1963) takes place in a laboratory or in a contrived setting, whereas the field experiment that was used in this research occurs in such real-life settings as workplaces or retail spaces (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Christensen, 2004). A field experiment has to be in an everyday life situation, often the exact same setting where the findings from the experiment will be deployed (Gerber & Green, 2012). Therefore, the field experiment appears to be the most suitable experiment design for the business researcher, since it happens in the real business place where the finding can be used.

### Research site: Ajinomoto Umami Seasoning in Cote d'Ivoire

In 1991, the Ajinomoto group established West African Seasoning Company Limited (WASCO) a subsidiary of Ajinomoto Co., Inc. in Nigeria, specializing in the packaging and sale of Ajinomoto seasonings in West African Countries. In 1995, WASCO opened a representative sales office in Cote d'Ivoire (Ajinomoto Co. 2013). The company was successful in Cote d'Ivoire, and sales went up to 300 tons monthly by 2009, and therefore decided to open a subsidiary in Cote d'Ivoire (AAO Sales report, 2017). In January 2012, Ajinomoto Co. established Ajinomoto Afrique de l'Ouest SA (AAO) in Côte d'Ivoire and began selling Ajinomoto seasonings in Cote d'Ivoire and surrounding countries.

The Cote d'Ivoire, known in English as the Ivory Coast, is a democratic republic located in Western Africa on the North Atlantic Ocean bordering Ghana and Liberia. With its administrative capital in Abidjan, the country achieved its independence from France in 1960 and has not always been politically stable. It has a growing population and the economy is experiencing one of the highest growth rates in the world. The country is dependent predominantly on agriculture and is the largest producer and exporter of cocoa beans in the world (CIA, 2020).

According to an AAO marketing staff, the commercial rumors about Ajinomoto Umami Seasonings started from the mid-2000s when the company made known its intention to establish a factory in Côte d'Ivoire. From then onwards, several rumors have been spread in Cote d'Ivoire and the surrounding countries. These rumors significantly damaged the image of Ajinomoto Umami seasoning and negatively affected the company's sales performance (please see below). After doing nothing initially about the rumors, in 2016, AAO finally started denying these rumors. AAO provides an excellent opportunity to understand the effect of rumors on a company when it ignores them and what happens when it adopts an active strategy to combat them.

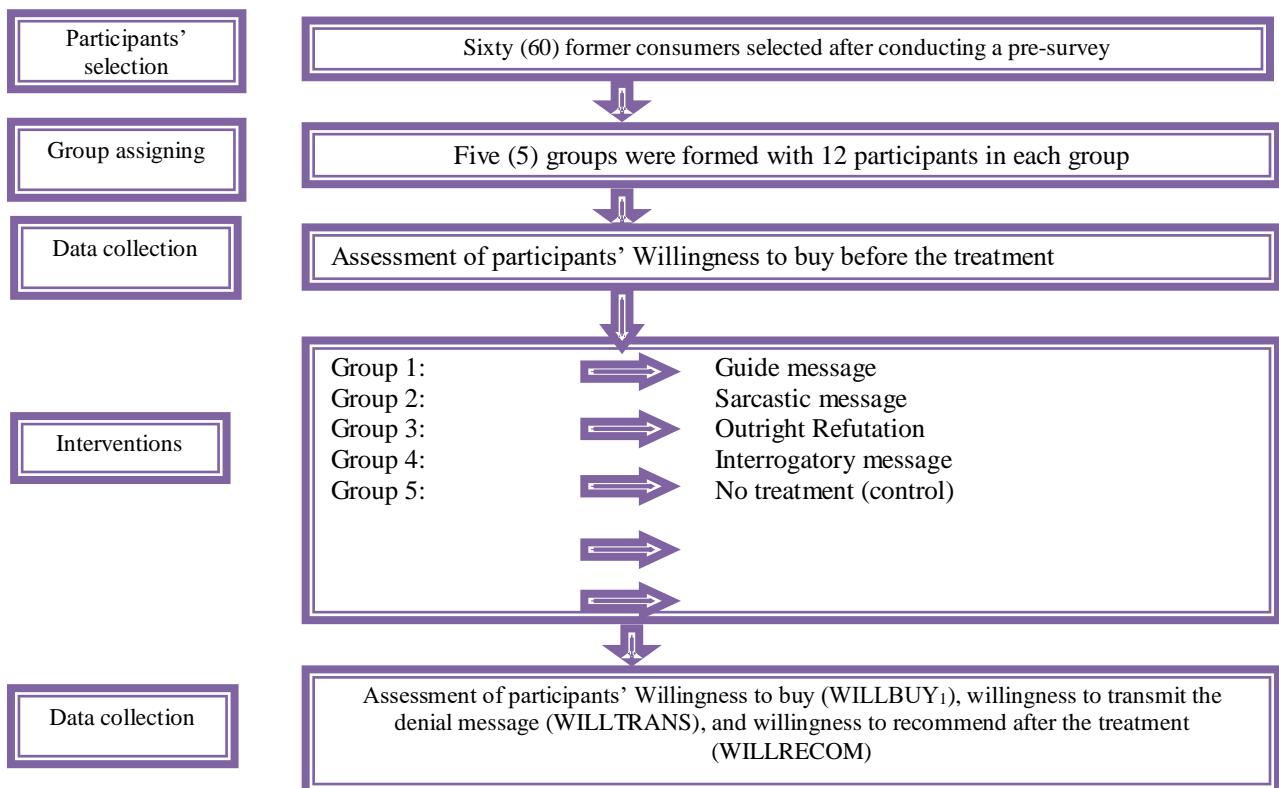
**Design of the Experiment**

The research followed several systematic steps, including selection of participants, assigning participants in groups, experimental intervention or treatments, and data collection.

**Experimental participants**

With the research questions in mind, the study targeted those who had previously been exposed to rumors about Ajinomoto seasoning and later stopped consuming the product because of these rumors. The researchers carried out a preliminary survey to identify potential targets for the experiment. This survey was conducted by a professional surveyor in the commune of Yopougon because it is the largest municipality of Côte d'Ivoire and represents all the Ivorian populations in their ethnic diversity.

The survey involved a total of 82 people, 20 men and 62 women. Sixty (60) of the total participants were selected according to specific criteria supporting the objectives of the study. These criteria include having consumed the product, having heard rumors about the product, having stopped consuming the product because of these rumors, and being available to participate in an information meeting about the product. In order to avoid introducing any bias in the participants' responses or attitudes they were kept in the dark about the fact that they were participating in an experiment.



**Figure 2: Experimental research design**

### Group assignment

Five groups were formed. Four were given the treatments and one was a control group. This study used a control group to check that the post-treatment outcome is really caused by the intervention and not by any other factors (Dehue, 2005). The members of each group were assigned based on the proximity of their home or working place. In this experiment, group means participants who have received the same intervention since, for logistical reasons, gathering the participants in the same place each time was not possible.

### The experimental interventions or treatments

The experimental interventions or treatments consisted of communicating the denial messages to the participants. All the messages were drafted based on Goh et.al. (2017) by the first author and approved by the company. The message types communicated to each participant group were selected randomly as follows:

**Table 1: Experimental interventions**

Groups	Treatments/interventions	Location in Yopougon town
Group 1:	Guide message	Bel-air
Group 2:	Sarcastic message	Nouveaux bureau
Group 3:	Outright Refutation	Koweit
Group 4:	Interrogatory message	Wassakara
Group 5:	No treatment (control)	Mix location

The language of data collection was French since it is the national and official language in Cote d'Ivoire.

### Characteristics of the denial messages contents

Each type of message contains a brief presentation of the product and information about the origin of the product as the following:

'A Japanese researcher named Dr. Ikeda discovered the product. This researcher investigated what is called the 5<sup>th</sup> taste after sweet, salty, bitter, and sourness. For example, if you eat a fresh tomato, you will realize a taste that is different from these four tastes mentioned above, this taste is called Umami. Dr. Ikeda has found a way to make this taste from the amino acid called monosodium glutamate (MSG). This compound is naturally present in many foods such as meat, mushrooms, etc. Glutamate is the amino acid found mostly in breast milk'.

#### Outright refutation message:

"MSG is certainly one of the most studied food additives in history around the world. The truth is that over the years, many studies have demonstrated the safety of MSG (IFIC, 1994). As a result, major regulators have publicly confirmed this point. The Japanese Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, which regulates food safety in Japan, formally approved MSG as a safe additive in 1948 (MHW, 1948). Ten years later, the US Food and Drug Administration also stated that the MSG was healthy (Singh, 2005). In addition, starting in 1970, a Joint WHO/FAO Committee of Experts on Food Additives (JECFA), formed by the World Health Organization and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, published a series of statement about the safety of MSG in infants, leading to the conclusion in 1987 that there was no need to limit the consumption of MSG in children, regardless of age (WHO, 1987).

The Ajinomoto product is consumed not only in Africa and Côte d'Ivoire, but all over the world: in Europe, Asia, America, Oceania, the Middle East (Ajinomoto.com, 2019; Kouakou, 2019). In Cote d'Ivoire the product obtained the agreement of the authorities and the governmental organizations of hygiene and health before being put on the market (Kouakou, 2019). You should know that all that is said about this product is only rumor and is not based on any study or evidence".

Guide message:

In addition to the above outright refutation message, the guide message includes a call for action as following:

‘We invite you to denounce all those who spread false information about the product. We want you from now on to become ambassadors of the product by refusing to participate in the propagation of these rumors and by transmitting the true information you just received today’.

Sarcastic message:

‘As you might know, in Cote d’Ivoire, anyone gets up and spreads any information and people believe in it. A French journalist even wrote that in Côte d’Ivoire we need a special ministry to twist rumors. So many rumors are spread every day. Today it says this, tomorrow is that, and many things are said without providing any proof. It is ridiculous what is said about Ajinomoto. It does not make any sense at all. People are talking rubbish; they have no proof that Ajinomoto is dangerous’.

Interrogatory message:

‘Do you believe in the hearsay around the product? Have you checked if they are true? How much do you believe in them? Do you have any evidence of its harmfulness? Have you experienced yourself or a member of your family, or an acquaintance, the negative effects related to the consumption of Ajinomoto? Do you think that if the Ajinomoto was harmful, could it have existed since 1909, be consumed everywhere in the world, and have the approval from mainstream government and international organizations’ (Ajinomoto, 2017)?

**Data collection**

This research used a quasi-experimental qualitative approach. According to Ryals and Wilson (2005), the quasi-experimental qualitative approach is used in circumstances where the researcher wishes to get insight into the impact of a specific management approach without making a prior assumption of what that impact might be. In this approach, participants and control groups are assigned as in the classical experiment approach. However, the post-test measurement are carried out qualitatively, typically through interviews or focus group discussion, and not quantitatively.

Additionally, data came from the preliminary survey and telephone interviews prior and post intervention. The type of interview used was semi-structural interviews with the following questions:

- What do you think about the message you received last week?
- Have you transmitted or intended to transmit the information you received? Why?
- Did you buy or willing to buy Ajinomoto seasoning from now? Why?
- Did you recommend or intend to recommend Ajinomoto seasoning from now? Why?
- Do you have any other comments?

A few unstructured interviews were also conducted with some of the marketing staff of the Company. The language used for all interviews and transcripts were French.

**Data analysis method**

All collected data have been analyzed using descriptive statistics and the narrative analysis approach. Bryman and Bell (2011) described narrative analysis as particularly useful in situations when the researcher is attempting to understand the complex processes whereby people make sense of their organizational reality.

**Research findings**

**Rumors about Ajinomoto Umami Seasoning**

Interviews with the company’s marketing staff and consumer surveys revealed that Ajinomoto seasoning has been



targeted by a multitude of rumors that are different from the usually known allegations about MSG as shown in the following table:

**Table 2: Rumors on Ajinomoto Seasoning in Cote d'Ivoire**

Rumors	Percentage
The product is used to wash dead bodies and cut the umbilical cord of babies	7%
The product is hair lice killer	10%
The product is used to whiten pots and clothes	63%
It is a toxic product that perforates the intestines	12%
The product is the cause of diseases such as nausea, diabetes, hypertension and kidney disease, diarrhea, cancer, men sexual impotence, etc.	62%

The table above shows that the two most persistent rumors among consumers in Cote d'Ivoire are 'the product is used to whiten pots and clothes' (63%) and 'the product is the cause of several diseases' (62%). Further, common expressions by the participants were that the product

'is not consumable', 'it is used to whiten pots', 'it is used to soak towels', 'it is used to

Whiten jewels';

'I have heard that it is used in whitening pots and clothes, so I tell myself something that can whiten the pots and clothes what will be its effect in my body. So, I stopped using it in my sauces' (Odette, from Yopougon Belair, 2019/03/12);

'According to people, all the common diseases that arise nowadays such as hypertension, diabetes, kidney failure and even male impotence come from the consumption of this product. For that reason, I do not use it anymore, and I even stopped eating in restaurants because I also heard that women use it in their restaurant to improve the taste of their meals' (Valdo, from Wassakara, 2019/03/15).

In general, whatever the form these rumors take, they express consumer concerns about the potential dangers of the product on their health.

**Reasons for Consumers' beliefs in the rumors**

57% of the participants said they believed the rumors. The remaining 43% said they did not have an opinion on the veracity or falseness of the information they received. However, they stopped using the product as a precaution:

'Otherwise, I used to consume the product before without problem, but when the information began to circulate on the danger of the product, I did not know what to believe. But as we never know, for the sake of precaution I stopped consuming it because, prevention is better than cure' (Akissi, from Bel-air, 2019/03/12).

Those who believe in the rumors, gave several reasons for their beliefs. The common expressions to explain the reasons for their beliefs are as follows:

'There is no smoke without fire'

Just as smoke indicates presence of fire there is no effect without a cause whatever is done to hide it. According to study participants, the rumors cannot emerge alone without any wrongdoing. So, if the rumors have emerged and persisted, it is because there is something wrong with the product. The failure of the company to communicate about the quality of the product opened the door for and continuance of the rumors.

### The company did not deny the rumors

For some participants the fact that the company never denied publicly the rumors indicates that they are somehow real:

‘It has been a long time since this information started circulating, so if they were false the company would have denied them from the start’ (Koffi, from Nouveau-bureau, 2019/03/13).

### The company does not use the normal distribution channel as its competitors

Some participants claimed that the fact that the company was not using the distribution channel used by competitors in Cote d’Ivoire which shows that it is hiding something from consumers:

‘In Cote d’Ivoire, normal goods follow the distribution channel that goes from wholesalers to retailers before reaching consumers. We can find every consumable product in all the neighborhood stores, then why Ajinomoto is not available in such stores? Why is it sold directly to the consumer by salespersons through the traditional markets?’ (Badje, from Yopougon-Koweit, 2019/03/14).

Similar concerns were raised during the interviews by a 41-year-old male participant in the “Yopougon-Koweit”. He and few others informed us that the fact that Ajinomoto does not follow the standard channel for the distribution of consumer daily goods in Cote d’Ivoire tarnishes the credibility of Ajinomoto seasoning. Indeed, Ajinomoto's distribution strategy is to sell directly in the traditional local markets through the deployment of several teams, about seven of them, scattered throughout Cote d’Ivoire. This strategic choice is one of the factors that has contributed to the birth and spread of rumors tarnishing the image of its flagship product.

### I have never seen the Company advertising’

According to some interviewees, one reason for believing in the rumors is that the company does not advertise its products on TV as its competitors do. For these people, because the company does not advertise on TV, this indicates that something is wrong with the company. Indeed, the seasoning market in Cote d’Ivoire is so competitive that to win market share such companies as Nestle with its brand Maggi, Siprochim with Aromate, Eurolait with Maxigout, GB Foods with Jumbo, and Patisen with Adja bombard consumers with advertisements every day. Ajinomoto Afrique de l’Ouest, meanwhile, shines by its absence in terms of television advertising. This situation actually, has reinforced the belief in rumors as informed by one consumer:

‘I see on TV, advertisements of Maggi, Jumbo, Maxi gout, and other seasonings but I have never seen an advertisement of Ajinomoto, so I tell myself that there is something wrong and that's why they do not advertise’ (Djolou, from Nouveau-bureau, 2019/03/13).

The companies in the seasoning industry, similar to others selling products for everyday use, engage in advertising to gain market share. Unlike its competitors, Ajinomoto does not seem to appreciate this reality.

## **The company strategies for combating rumors**

### The company’s initial strategy: ‘no response strategy’

The company adopted ‘no response strategy’ against the initial outbreak of rumors in Cote d’Ivoire consisting of doing virtually nothing to combat the rumors. By doing so, the company expected that the rumors would go away over time and that it would do little actual harm. As a result of this strategy, even as far back as 2014, the company refrained from taking any action when the daily newspaper “Le Democrates” branded Ajinomoto ‘a silent killer’. Indeed, the article clearly denigrated the company without providing any evidence of its allegations. To make the matters worse, the article promoted competitor Nestle as being the leader in seasoning in Africa

And accused Ajinomoto of engaging in unfair competition with Nestle. An excerpt from the article is shown below:

“Ajinomoto’s product known as ‘white maggi’ is actually of Asian origin and was intended to lead a fierce competition to Nestlé’s No. 1 seasoning in Côte d’Ivoire, even in the sub-regions. Ajinomoto established its factory in Cote d’Ivoire to take advantage of low income of households which resulted from the 2000 military crisis. This Asian seasoning is a real silent killer according to carefully conducted investigations. However, in our next publication, we will give you the harmful properties of the ‘white maggi’ on the human body, the diseases it causes, and for what purpose it is precisely used” (Gottha, 2014).

The denunciation of this article and filing of legal complaints against its sponsor would have been an opportunity to restore the image of the company, and even better, to gain in public relations. Because this was not done, currently, in contrast to the expectations of the company, these rumors have been embedded in the minds of consumers in Cote d’Ivoire and have become more complex to remove.

Impacts of Rumors on AAO Sales

The impact of this strategic choice has been catastrophic on the company's performance, especially on its sales, as shown in the following chart.



**Figure 3: Ajinomoto Afrique de l'Ouest sales from 2000-2017**

**Source:**AAO Sales report, 2017 [2]

The analysis of the sales trend graph from 2000 to 2017 shows that in 2009, the year the company announced its intention to establish a factory in Cote d’Ivoire, which triggered the spread of the rumors, the sales drastically fell from triple to simple (3:1). This fall continued to reach its lowest level in 2014, the year when the daily newspaper "Le démocrate" published its article to denigrate the company.

The Company’s new strategy: “denial strategy”

Since 2017, the company began using its strategy of denying the rumors through its Marketing and Public Relation department. The main activity used to deny these rumors is known as the “Factory Tour”. It is organized twice a month and takes place on Fridays. It consists of inviting the public, mainly women, to the company’s factory so that they visit the packaging process for Ajinomoto seasoning. It comprises four phases:

At the discussion phase, a member of the Marketing and Public Relations department presents the company as a whole to the visitors who are asked to list the so-called "hearsays" about Ajinomoto seasoning. Once these “hearsays" are listed, the manager presents the production process of the product from its origin to the finishing stage before proceeding to the denial of the rumors around the product.

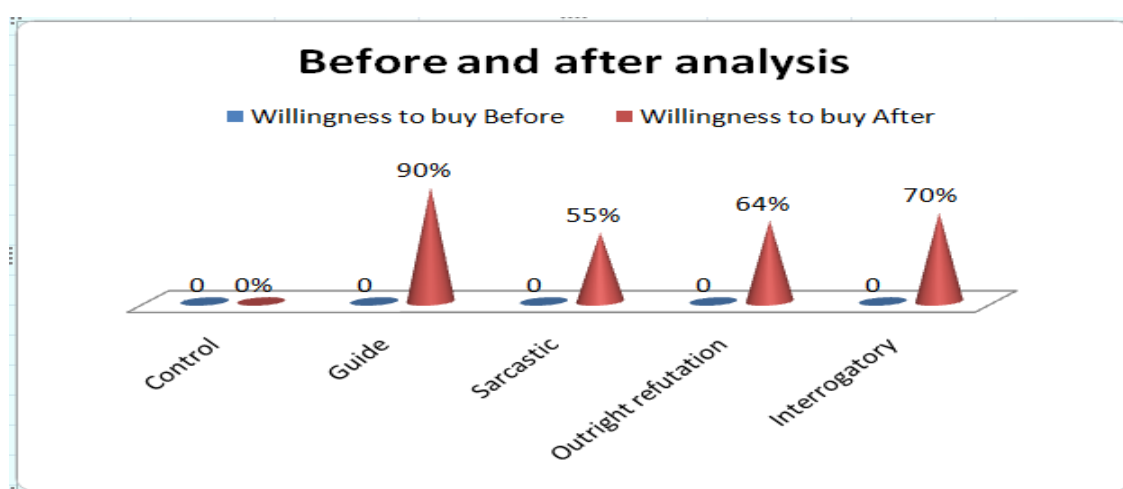
The visit phase consists of showing the factory to the participants by a guide who explains to them the packaging process and the hygienic and safety measures that are practiced to ensure the quality of the product.

The question and answers (Q&A) phase encourages participants to ask any questions or raise any concerns about the product, the company, or the factory.

During the tasting phase each participant is provided with a meal with two sauces, one with Ajinomoto seasoning and the other without seasoning. Then, after the meal, participants are asked to give their opinion on the product and their willingness to buy.

Effects of denial messages on consumer’s willingness to buy rumored seasoning of Ajinomoto

The following graph presents the results of participant reaction in the experiment before and after the provision of the denial messages:



**Figure 4 : Before and after analysis of consumer willingness to buy**

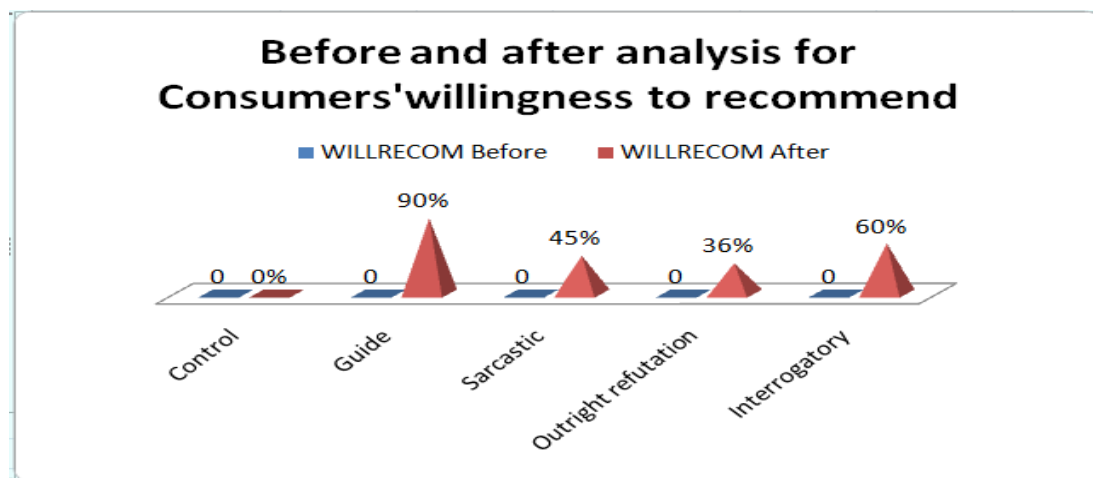
Before receiving the denial message, none of the participants had expressed a willingness to buy the product. The explanation behind this is the fact that the study focused only on those participants who had stopped the consumption of the product because of the rumors.

The percentage of the control group who were not provided with the denial messages did not change in the post-treatment assessment. This means that no other factors could have influenced the participants. The post-treatment evaluation shows that, in contrast, all message types have a positive effect on consumers' willingness to buy the product. For instance, 90% of participants who received the guide message expressed their willingness to buy the product, 70% of those who received the interrogatory message expressed their willingness to buy it, as did 64% of those who received the outright refutation message and 55% of those who received the sarcastic message.

Most of the participants who reported changes in their buying intention toward the product justified their change by the fact that they had nothing against the product before; it was the lack of any information contradicting the rumors that led them to stop buying it. Therefore, the denial message relieved their fears and makes them more confident about buying the product.

Effects of denial messages on consumer's willingness to recommend a product

The graph below presents the results of the experiment:

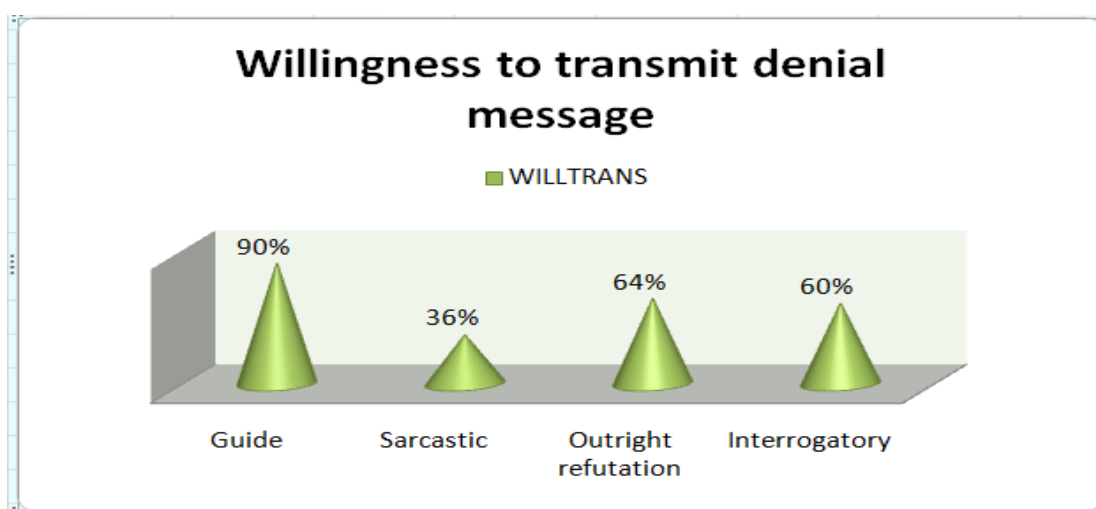


**Figure 5: Before and after analysis of consumer willingness to recommend**

Figure 5 shows that the willingness to recommend the product was zero per cent for all the groups before receiving the treatment. The control group remained at zero per cent at the post-treatment evaluation. For the other groups, the post-treatment evaluation shows that, in contrast, all messages types have a positive effect on consumer willingness to recommend the product. The results show that 90% of those who received the guide message, 60% of those who received interrogatory message, 36% of those who received the outright refutation message and 45% of those who received the sarcastic message expressed their willingness to recommend the product.

How likely that the denial messages would be transmitted by consumers

The willingness to transmit the denial message was assessed only on the post-treatment evaluation phase and the graph below shows the results:



**Figure 6: Analysis of consumer willingness to transmit denial message**

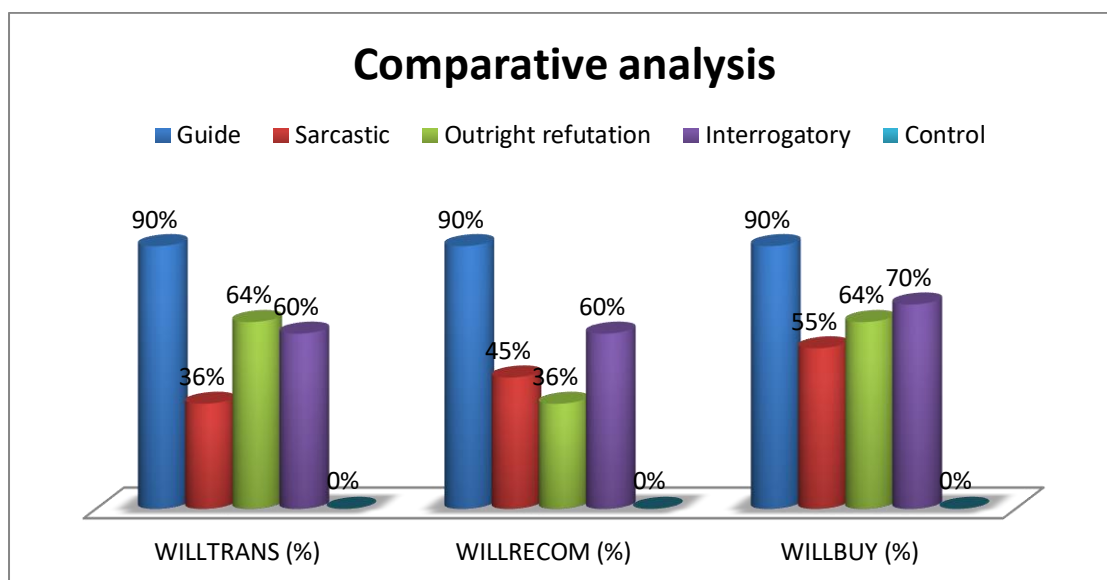
Figure 6 shows that the guide message is the most likely denial message to be transmitted. Ninety per cent of those who received the guide message, 64% of those who received the outright refutation message, 60% of those who received the interrogatory message and 36% of those who received the sarcastic message expressed their willingness to transmit the denial messages.

The most effective denial message for combating commercial rumors

The comparative analysis of the different denial messages types shows the following results:

**Table 3: Comparative analysis of denial messages**

	WILLTRANS (%)	WILLRECOM (%)	WILLBUY (%)
Guide	90	90	90
Sarcastic	36	45	55
Outright refutation	64	36	64
Interrogatory	60	60	70
Control	0	0	0



**Figure 7: Comparative analysis of denial messages**

The guide message appears to be the most effective message for combating rumors in many ways. Whether it is for the willingness to buy or for the willingness to recommend the product or to transmit the denial message, the guide message has a higher score with 90% of the participants. The reason is that in this type of message the participants feel that the company involves them in the fight against the rumors. After demonstrating that the rumors are false, sharing the real information with them, the participants perceive that the company is a victim of these rumors. Therefore, they feel supportive and are willing to defend the company. Indeed, during the post-treatment interviews, the most common expression from the participants was "we will help you fight these rumors".

The interrogatory message comes in the second position in terms of effectiveness; it is expressed by 70% of the participants in terms of willingness to buy, and 60% in terms of willingness to recommend the product and to transmit the denial message. This is because it calls on the participants for critical thinking towards the rumors. From this mental exercise, it appears that the participants feel that they have judged the rumors too quickly based

on hearsays they received. The least effective denial messages are the sarcastic message as expressed by 55% of the participants in terms of willingness to buy, 45% in terms of willingness to recommend the product, and 36% for the willingness to transmit the denial message. Moreover, most of the

Participants who received the sarcastic message said that they were not convinced and that they still had doubts about the harmlessness of the product.

## **Discussion**

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the effects of denial messages on such consumer behavioral intentions as their willingness to buy, willingness to recommend the product, and their willingness to transmit the denial message. First and foremost, the research reviewed the different types of rumors around the product, and the strategies of “Ajinomoto Afrique de l’Ouest” to respond to these rumors. The research analyzed the effects of denial messages on Ajinomoto consumers’ willingness to buy, to recommend the product, share the message, and finally to assess the most effective message to rebut the rumors around Ajinomoto seasoning in the Cote d’Ivoire.

The findings show that there are five main types of rumors about Ajinomoto seasoning in the Cote d’Ivoire and that the no-response strategy initially adopted by the company to manage these rumors has been detrimental. The alternative strategy consisting of denying the rumors adopted later, as the findings of this study show, was highly effective. Moreover, the experiment shows that, in general, denial messages have a significant influence on consumers’ behavioral intentions and that the most effective message is the guide message followed by the interrogatory message. All the research findings are further discussed below.

### **Rumors emerge and spread out of ambiguity and uncertainty**

This study confirms the fact that most rumors emerge because of the ambiguous and uncertain situation that leads to consumer personal anxiety, as shown by Allport and Postman (1947), and Kimmel and Audrain-Ponte (2010). This study shows that the fact that the company did not communicate and advertise its product created an ambiguous and uncertain situation in which rumors about Ajinomoto seasoning could emerge, spread and continue. The rumors identified in this research expressed consumers’ health-conscious concerns. Also, the lack of communication by the company to reassure consumers on the safety of the product opened the door for the spread of rumors.

In the food industry where unsafe products threaten the very existence of the lives of consumers (Ling, 2018), lack of communication by companies to reassure consumers about safety of their products opens the door for potential rumors. Therefore, managers must develop effective promotion and communication methods to reduce ambiguity and uncertainty so that they prevent their business from generating rumors.

### **Advertisement can reduce belief in rumors**

This study shows the fact that the company does not advertise, especially not on TV has strengthened consumer beliefs in the rumors about its product. This shows that companies should advertise not only to increase sales but also to prevent consumers from generating rumors because of lack of information about company products. This finding confirms the results of Danbury et al. (2013) that advertising helps in building and preserving trust in a brand. It also confirms the finding of Aberdeen, et al. (2016) that brand awareness affects customer perception, especially perceived quality. As one of the objectives of advertising is to create awareness (Sawant, 2012), advertising turns out to be an effective means to reduce consumer belief in rumors. The results of this study and others reviewed here suggest that managers should view advertising not only as a means to increase sales but also to preserve its brand image and as a means to prevent rumors from arising.

### **Distribution channels can affect the prevalence of market rumors**

An interesting finding of this research is the impact of distribution strategy on brand image and spread of rumors. Although the use of a direct distribution strategy as is usually adopted for premium and luxurious products is understandable, it was misplaced for Ajinomoto’s mass produced common goods in the Cote d’Ivoire. Moreover, this study shows that a distribution strategy that goes against market norms has the potential to generate suspicion in the minds of consumers. It has been found that the Ivorian market norms for mass produced daily goods

require indirect distribution strategies through wholesalers and retailers. This strategy not only ensures the availability of the product in retail shops but also earns trust and confidence from consumers. It is advisable that, to avoid any mistrust from consumers, managers consider the current market norms in developing their distribution strategy.

### **Rumor management as part of a company's daily management system**

This research shows that the company's lack of a pre-defined strategy for dealing with rumors led to groping when trying to combat rumors. This confirms the recommendations of Kimmel (2004) that companies should view rumor management as a day to day operation and to have well established control and prevention strategies to manage the negative effects of rumors. Marketers of companies especially that are exposed to potentially high safety risk perceptions should include rumor management as an integral part of their marketing activity should designate rumor monitoring and control officers who will identify the potential risks of rumors and deal with rumors whenever they appear as part of the company rumor management plan.

### **Effective strategy for combating rumors**

The results show that the 'no response strategy' adopted initially by the Ajinomoto did not work since sales went from bad to worse from the time rumors began to spread. Moreover, the results show that a delay in denying a rumor in the early stage reinforces consumers' beliefs in it, making it more difficult to combat. The experimental approach carried out in this research shows that the denial strategy has considerable impact on consumer behavioral intentions.

The results of this research confirm the findings of Difonzo, et al. (1994) who claimed that a 'no response strategy' is the weakest one for combating rumors. The findings of this study also support those of Akande and Odewale (1994) who found that denial strategy is the most effective and most aggressive one to fight rumors. It can thus be suggested that managers should first consider denial as a strategy for fighting market rumors and adjust the form of the denial strategy according to the types of cases they face.

### **Message type is essential for the effectiveness of rumor denial**

This study shows that the denial strategy appears to be effective in general and the selection of the type of denial message is even more important in combating rumors. These results thus confirm the findings of Bordia et al. (2005) who found that the effectiveness of a denial message depends on the extent to which these reduce anxieties associated with the rumors. This study shows that the guide message appears to be the most effective in influencing consumer behavioral intention, followed by the interrogatory message. The managerial implication is that

Managers should not just be content to deny rumors about their products; they should go further and involve consumers and the public in combating rumors.

### **Research limitations**

This research, like any other study, has its limitations. The most important limitation is that the study focused only on the characteristics of the denial message. There are other factors that should be taken into account in dealing with rumors. For example, the source of the message and how trustworthy is the person who delivers it may influence the extent to which consumers believe in it. Caution must also be applied in interpreting the findings of this study because it was carried out only in the four quarters of the Yopougon district in Abidjan and with a limited number of participants.

### **Conclusion**

The negative effects of commercial rumors on products, brands and companies have been documented not only in this research but in the existing literature as well. This study showed that the uncertainty and ambiguity around Ajinomoto seasoning due to the lack of communication from the company and a consequent lack of knowledge on the part of consumers contributed to the emergence and spread of rumors about the product. Moreover, if as



in this study the denial approach has been found to be an effective strategy against rumors in general, the type of message to convey in denial is also important for its effectiveness. Indeed, in this study, the guide message that consists in presenting evidence on the false rumors and then inviting consumers to take action against the transmission of these rumors appears to be the most effective approach, while the sarcastic message consisting of ridiculing those who believe in the rumors has been found to be the least effective.

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