

## Letter to the Editor

# Rumoromania, Suggestion of a New Term

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Dear Editor,

**R**umors have been coexistent phenomenon along with major social and global crises since ancient times, old enough to have a dedicated Roman goddess called PHEME. In contemporary history, rumors have created problems during significant events such as world wars (2) and the Spanish Flu (3).

Rumors were generated and perpetuated during the Covid-19 pandemics with speed and accelerated rate of vast distribution thanks to the social media, which not only may affect people's mental health but also can interfere with diagnosis, efficient treatment and preventive strategies (4) such as vaccination (5). The huge burden of false information has been also critical enough for the US Federal Emergency Management Agency to elucidate facts and rumors in its website (6).

Attention to the psychology of rumor has increased during and early after the Second World War, and there has been focus on classification of rumors and psychological motivations underlying their spread. In 1944, Knapp described those rumors express the underlying hopes, fears and hostilities of groups. He mentioned that some psychoanalysts had believed that all rumors are expressive of underlying anxiety. He added that many superficial rumors exhibit wishes or aggressions motivated by fear from deep within and can be considered as defense against anxiety. Knapp had paid special attention to personal motivations behind rumors. Exhibition, as one of the main factors, is the motive of persons trying to convey the impression that they have access to information which are not accessible for ordinary people and this factor is possibly more prominent in rumor creation.

Favoring others by raising awareness regarding a danger, sharing one's own anxiety, attaining emotional support for assurance and projection of conflicts such as fears, wishes and hostility are the other potential motivations for spreading rumors based on Knapp's opinion. Knapp claimed that, in many cases, rumors are generated just for the simple purpose of entertainment. He considered that this group of rumors are motivated by the same motive of exhibitionism, and he also believed aggression to be the motive behind a lot of rumors (7).

Of course, these explanations must be modified to fit the novel tools used to create and spread rumors, and the rumors that are created through video clips and pretend reports of situations or events are more complicated than conventional rumors that consist of simple phrases.

Allport and Postman, in 1945, summarized that: Whenever a stimulus field is of potential importance to an individual, but at the same time unclear, or susceptible of divergent interpretations, a subjective structuring process is started. Although the process is complex, its essential nature can be characterized as an effort to reduce the stimulus to a simple and meaningful structure that has adaptive significance for the individual in terms of his own interests and experience (8).

Although above authors mentioned individuals' inner incentives, they ignored that the motivations behind creation of rumors could be different and heterogeneous. It seems that oversimplification of underlying mechanisms into combination of uncertainty and importance would not work for all rumors.

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Chorus, in 1952, added a factor of C to the importance and ambiguity which stands for critical sense as well as moral criticism or consciences. He believed that the conscience can inhibit transmission of rumors in responsible individuals- a parameter that seems to be more personal than importance and ambiguity (9). Rosnow, in 1991, based on the famous article by Allport in 1945, enumerated general uncertainty, credibility that indicates how much reliable is the transmitted rumor, outcome relevant involvement and personal anxiety to be involved in psychology of rumors. However, almost all of the noted factors -even personal anxiety- are defined regarding transmission of already created rumors (10).

Self enhancement has been proposed as one of the psychological motivations in perpetuation of rumors by Bordia and Difonzo alongside fact finding and relationship building and can be considered as a motivation for rumor creation, in addition to its spread (11).

Zhu and Liu, in their article in 2017, expressed that the social, psychological, personal, and other internal and external environmental factors may lead to transformation of information makers into the rumor makers. They subcategorized personal factors in the event attention, the personal discernment, and the negative mentality. They defined negative mentality as the influence of network rumor psychological causes. Their factor analyses showed that negative mentality is the main motivation in promotion of disinformation behavior. Amazingly, this report claimed that higher educational status is related with the greater possibility of rumor behavior, the phenomenon that seems to be evident in some of the rumors around the recent pandemic (12).

More recently, during the Covid-19 pandemic, the Center for Countering Digital Hate has reported the results of tracking about 812000 disinformation published in Facebook and Tweeter between February 1st and March 16th, 2021 and reported that 65% of them have been published and promoted by 12 people many of whom have financial motivations (13).

In another report, professor David G. Rand in Media Lab at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, has calculated that about 50% of users who spread disinformation in social media are unaware of the content of their posts. Approximately one third of five thousand participants of their assessment claimed that they thought that the posted content was true. Also, about 16% of users expressed they had shared disinformation while knowing that they were not true (14).

Conclusively, the personal motives for rumor creation (not predisposing factors such as ambiguity or anxiety) include self enhancement, exhibition, hostility against persons or systems, aggression and even simply entertainment. Hence some personality traits or disorders that are related with these incentives may participate in the process of rumor creation. By the way, because

almost all of the rumors about major crises are made by unknown inventors, some personality traits, like Histrionic Personality Disorder, are not suitable candidates due to their thirst to receive attention. It seems that the Passive-Aggressive Personality Disorder, as described in DSM-IV, has the greatest fit with the mental features that we expect to find in rumor makers, and might be a predisposing background in the hostile group of rumor makers (15) by the estimated prevalence of about 1.7% (16).

On the other hand, to the limited number of rumor makers who follow their financial purposes, we must add the individuals that follow some political goals by spreading anger against a person or organization in charge, a party, or a government, and thus demonstrate they are traitors or incompetent.

If we rely on the estimate that 16% of rumor spreaders who confessed that they could calm their conscience to share disinformation as the people who may exhibit rumor behavior without feeling guilty or ashamed, there would be a gap between this number and the very limited number of opportunist rumor makers mentioned above. This gap is filled with the group of rumor makers that probably express this behavior to experience pleasure due to their desire for power or self enhancement, even anonymously, and by receiving the reflection of their rumors, they respond to their compulsions, or simply they are being entertained.

Mania originated from ancient Greek  $\mu\alpha\nu\acute{\iota}\alpha$  with meaning of madness (17) and, as a suffix in medical terminology, it is defined as obsessive preoccupation with something, abnormal love for or morbid impulse toward something, or exaggerated feeling for compulsion toward obsession with something (18-20). According to the context of pleasure as the common axis behind motivations to explain the gap mentioned above for generating rumors of the gap mentioned above, we suggest the combination of rumor and mania, Rumoromania, addressing these individuals. This new term and related concept, if verified by experts, in addition to representation of a revision in the categorization of the motives behind rumor creation, may also would be of benefit to track sources of rumors during social crises.

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