

Press release

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ESMT Berlin study shows how startups can communicate to win over silent audiences online

A new study reveals how entrepreneurs can win support for their ideas from audiences who never speak up. The research shows that the way entrepreneurs engage with a few vocal participants in online discussions can crucially shape how the larger, silent audience perceives and supports their ideas.

The study "[Mobilizing the silent majority: Discourse broadening and audience support for entrepreneurial innovations](#)," by [Jamie Song](#), assistant professor of strategy at ESMT Berlin, has been published in the peer-reviewed *Strategic Management Journal*.

Song analyzes how entrepreneurs can broaden their public replies to vocal commenters online to win support from the silent majority. She introduces the concept of "discourse broadening," which describes the extent to which such replies move beyond brief exchanges and include a wider range of topics and perspectives. The concept extends existing theories of entrepreneurial communication by revealing an indirect pathway of influence: entrepreneurs shape silent observers not through direct persuasion but by how inclusively they conduct public conversations.

In her quantitative analysis of 9,746 product launches by 8,489 entrepreneurial teams on Product Hunt, a platform for showcasing new ventures, Song discovered that this concept can substantially increase the likelihood of attracting support from the silent majority. Most audiences in public forums remain silent observers who rarely comment but still form opinions and decide whether an idea deserves attention or support. These silent audiences are decisive because their collective reactions ultimately determine the visibility and legitimacy of entrepreneurial ideas online.

"Entrepreneurs often assume that their success depends on convincing the people they talk to most directly," says Jamie Song. "But the real challenge is to mobilize those who remain silent. How you interact with a few people in the room can change how everyone else sees your idea."

Yet the relationship is not linear. Audience support rises with broader discussion, but only up to a point. Minimal broadening leaves reach constrained, whereas excessive broadening blurs the message and creates uncertainty. What works best according to Song varies with the degree to which outspoken commenters reflect the broader audience profile.

For founders and venture communicators, the study translates into clear guidance for day-to-day practice. Successful online engagement is not only about answering questions but about deliberately widening the lens of the conversation so that different types of observers can find a reason to care, while the core message remains easy to grasp. In practice, this means acknowledging the immediate commenter's point, then adding one or two adjacent perspectives that speak to other stakeholder concerns, such as usability, outcomes, or societal relevance.

When audiences are broad and diverse, this calibrated broadening is especially effective because it creates multiple entry points without fragmenting the main story.

The findings shed light on how influence flows through discursively mediated pathways, where entrepreneurs indirectly shape silent audiences by managing their visible conversations with vocal ones. The research underscores a new dimension of audience heterogeneity and highlights the strategic importance of conversational management in digital entrepreneurship.

About ESMT Berlin

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