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Brands and brand management under threat in an age of fake news

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Guest editorial

Brands and brand management under threat in an age of fake news

A very large study of the fake news phenomenon on Twitter by Vosoughi *et al.* (2018) established some simple but frightening facts. Fake news spreads farther, faster, deeper and more broadly than the truth. Because fake news was almost always more novel – the truth is not usually stranger than fiction – people were always more willing to share it. Fake news also evokes different emotional reactions, than the truth. True news generally evokes what might be less intense emotions such as joy and sadness. Fake news tends to arouse the more powerful emotions of anger, surprise and disgust.

Like the dissemination of all information concerning individuals, organizations and other entities, fake news can have a significant impact on brands. Brands are both the perpetrators and the victims of fake news (Berthon and Pitt, 2018; Mills *et al.*, 2019). While there have been successful attempts at educating consumers on how to evaluate information sources (Head *et al.*, 2019), fake news presents a troubling problem for brand managers. This problem is magnified, as consumers seem to disregard the attempts of digital platform managers to notify them of illegitimacy of content (Colliander, 2019).

Customers are interacting with empathic media sources (Bakir and McStay, 2018) that produce digital content (articles, blogs, advertising, public relations releases, pictures, videos and other digital content) that is not only tailored for precise audiences but also personalized to impact the attitudes and behaviors of specific individuals. Many customers adopt or change opinions and beliefs based on the truthiness or the judging of legitimacy by feelings, rather than thought (Berthon and Pitt, 2018). This implies that customers may have attitudes toward brands that are not based on evidence but driven by their consumption of fake news about a brand, which has consequences for brand trust and attitudes (Visentin *et al.*, 2019).

Brands have always been an issue of increasing general interest, as the graph of Google searches according to Google Trends for the term "brands" from 2004 to the present in Figure 1 shows. The notion of fake news and society's interest in it is different. Searches for the term were dormant, as can be seen in the same graph, until the 2016 US Presidential Election, when they spiked significantly, only to revive again in 2017, and then decline slightly.

Academic interest in fake news, however, has accelerated rapidly in the recent past. A search for papers in peer-reviewed journals on Web of Science in which the terms "fake news" and "truthiness" appeared identified 492 papers and resulted in the construction of the trend graph in Figure 2. Whereas very few papers featuring the terms were published on these issues until 2016, this took off rapidly in 2017, a year in which 60 papers were published and increasing three-fold to 180 papers in 2018. In all, 148 papers have been published on the terms so far in 2019, but it must be remembered that these numbers include only papers published until the end of July of this year. It is very likely that the total, for the year 2019, will exceed 180 papers. Fake news and truthiness are obviously a big deal in academia.

Web of Science data on the top ten disciplines in which this work is being published are shown in Figure 3. As can be seen, the communications discipline dominates with 95 papers (around 20 per cent of the total) being published in peer-reviewed journals serving that discipline. This is followed by information science, education and political science. Business, with only six papers, would not have made the top 20 disciplines on the list. Marketing journals would have been included under this categorization, and close inspection reveals that the most cited paper in a marketing journal on fake news and brands is the relatively recent paper by Berthon and Pitt (2018), which has 21 citations on Google Scholar as of August 2019, and only 2 citations in Web of Science journals. Quite simply, fake news and brands have not been substantially explored in the marketing literature.

Using the bibliographic software VOS (*Visualization Of Similarities*) Viewer (Van Eck and Waltman, 2009), we also created a number of network maps of key terms, author networks and co-citations in all the Web of Science papers on fake news and brands. VOS Viewer is free software developed at the University of Leiden in The Netherlands to analyze bibliometric data and then to construct and view

Figure 1 Searches for brands and fake news from 2004 to August 2019

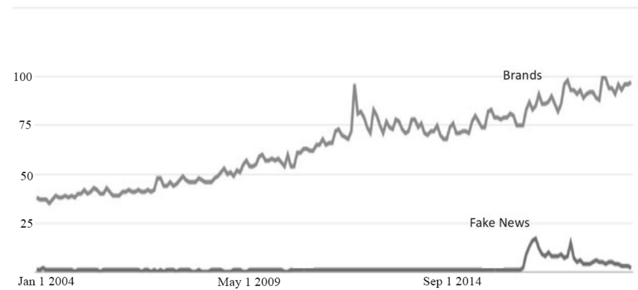
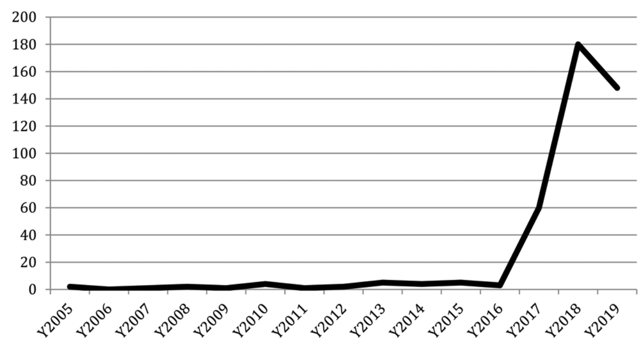


Figure 2 Number of papers per year on fake news or truthiness



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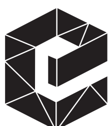

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Figure 3 Top ten academic disciplines for research on fake news

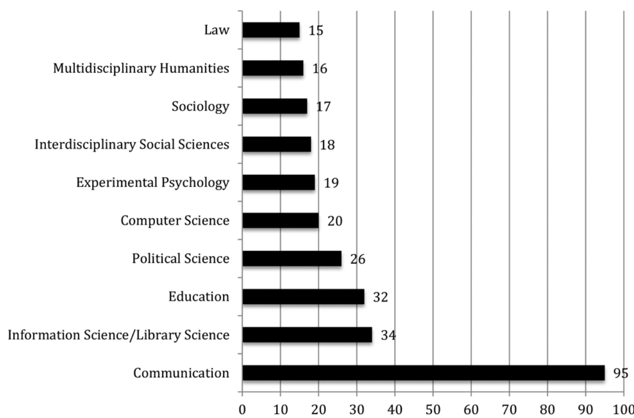
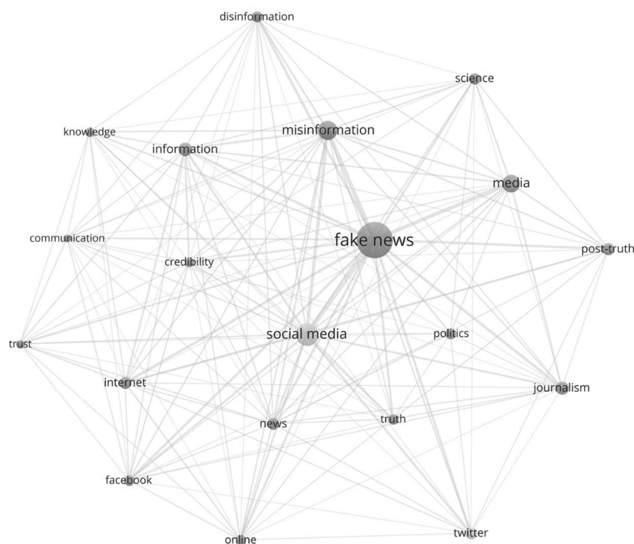


Figure 4 Most commonly occurring words in papers on fake news and brands



bibliographic maps for easier interpretation. One of the most telling maps is presented in Figure 4. It shows the extent of occurrence and co-occurrence of the most prominent keywords used in papers on fake news and brands in Web of Science journals. The size of the circles on the map represents the prominence of the keyword (number of times it appeared). "Fake news" is obviously the most prominent key term, followed by "social media" and "misinformation". It is also apparent from the figure that there are themes that are addressed in this literature: with fake news at the center, the bottom half of the map has to do with the internet, social media (such as Twitter and Facebook) and being online; and the top half of the map has to do with journalism, the media and misinformation. While used as a key search term, "brands" does not even appear among the most commonly used words on the map. Once more, marketing and brand management are conspicuous in their absence in the literature on fake news and brands.

Help is at hand. We are confident that the exciting and challenging papers presented in this special issue of *JPBM* will redress the dearth of good brand management and marketing papers on brands and fake news. We have three broad types of papers, including conceptual perspectives on fake news, brand stakeholder influences and managerial responses to fake news.

We start with three conceptual papers that come from different theoretical perspectives. Drawing from semiotics theory, Berthon *et al.* (2020) create a typology of fake news that they test using climate change news items and then develop four types of branding communications: real, fake, empty and ironic. Then, Ferreira *et al.* (2020) investigate the role of power structures to develop a fake news typology based on the factualness and the source of the content, which they illustrate using four examples. Mills and Robson (2020) add practical brand management strategies to respond to fake news coming from insights into narratives and storytelling that focus on authenticity and emotional engagement.

Following these, we have four papers that investigate a variety of stakeholder responses to fake news about brands. From a denialism perspective, De Regt *et al.* (2020) show how fake and pseudo facts about health and beauty propagate in both traditional and digital media using three case studies. For a different perspective on fake news propagation, Weidner *et al.* (2020) use the complementary lenses of the schemer's schema and confirmatory bias to understand consumers' willingness to share fake news. Next, from a persuasion knowledge perspective, Chen and Cheng (2020) examine how fake news about brands is processed by consumers and can result in changes in brand trust. Then, Lee *et al.* (2020) explore employee's perceptions of their employers' brand communications, specifically focusing on brand slogans. Turning to non-profits and fake news, Vafeiadis *et al.* (2020) conduct an experiment that shows that individuals' level of involvement in a fake news crisis needs to be considered carefully before managers respond.

The special issue concludes with three papers that look more deeply into the impact of fake news on brands and their management. Reporting the evidence from a large sample, Paschen (2020) compares fake and real news, and finds that, compared to real news, fake news is significantly more negative, both in terms of displaying negative emotions and a lack of positive emotions. Then Peterson (2020) digs into the brand managerial implications of the rise of fake news and different approaches to respond to it more effectively to minimize brand damage and risk. Finally, Flostrand *et al.* (2020) report the results of a three round Delphi study of the perspective of a panel of brand management experts from industry and academia on fake news and brands. Developed at the RAND Corporation in the late 1950s and 1960s, as a way of forecasting future scenarios in the absence of hard data, the Delphi technique provides a useful mechanism to predict the future outcomes of broad phenomena, society and business practice.

As a closing note, we would like to give a special thank you to Professor Cleopatra Velouitsou, a co-editor in chief of *JPBM*, for her thoughtful advice and comments throughout this special issue's conceptualization, review process and production. We would also like to thank the many reviewers

for their time and effort in providing insightful and inspiring feedback to the authors, and that is not fake news!

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Further reading

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True, fake and alternative: a topology of news and its implications for brands

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Abstract

Purpose – Berthon and Pitt (2018) recently highlighted the symbiotic relationship between fake news and brands. This paper aims to draw on semiotics to refine the fake/real news dichotomy to a fourfold typology.

Design/methodology/approach – First, the authors turn to semiotics and review Greimas' (1966) semiotic square. Second, they use this framework to refine the fake/real news dichotomy into a four-fold typology. Third, they illustrate each type with a news report on the topic of climate change. Fourth, they apply this framework to reveal four types of brand: real, fake, empty and ironic.

Findings – Given that brand communications are heterogeneous, the authors suggest that the typology can be reconceptualized as dimensions and brands communications decoded accordingly. They conclude by exploring further opportunities offered by the semiotic square for interpretive investigation.

Originality/value – The value of the paper lies in the novel use of the semiotic square to shed light on both news and brand communications.

Keywords Semiotics, Brand communication, New media, Fake news, Semiotic square

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

Recently, Berthon and Pitt (2018) highlighted the symbiotic relationship between fake news and brands. Brands both finance and enable fake news by paying to support the platforms hosting these stories. They also legitimize fake news by co-presence, for example advertising adjacent to a fake story. The effect also runs the other way: on the one hand, brands can become the target of fake news, and on the other hand, brands can become contaminated by association with fake news.

However, in an era of fake news, it is instrumental to reflect on marketing's role in legitimizing dubious "truth" claims through brand communications. Indeed, questionable brand claims are not new. For more than a century, marketers have striven to turn citizens into consumers (Arens and Sheldon, 1932): marketing was the demand-side solution to absorb the increased supply enabled by mass production (Bartels, 1976). In doing so marketers became proponents and propagators of a postmodern world view; one in which reality gives way to hyperreality, unity to fragmentation and utility to symbolism (Venkatesh, 1999). Hyperreality is where objective reality is replaced with an intersubjective, linguistically created world: there is no objective truth. Fragmentation is where wholes are deconstructed into dis-connected parts: order is replaced with chaos (things no longer need to make logical sense). Symbolism is where signs becomes detached from their objective referents and exist only in relation to other signifiers. Thus, the use of something is no longer in its utility in the objective world but in its communicative power: image becomes detached from reality, signifier from signified. Thus, through appeals to magic thinking and the emotions, marketing legitimized ideas of truth being subjective, contradictory values and behaviors being normal and words (and other symbols) speaking louder than actions.

Thus, marketing has helped blur the line between true and false, and helped usher in an era of fake news (Berthon and Pitt, 2018 for a full discussion). However, to see marketing's shadow-side is only a first step. The next step, to borrow a Jungian metaphor, is to reintegrate shadow and ego into a greater whole (Jung, 1960). In this paper, we attempt to move toward reintegration through exploring the relationship between truth and falsity in brand communications. Specifically, we suggest the need to move

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beyond binaries to see a more complex situation. For much of brand communication is neither true nor false, yet we have no clear vocabulary in which to classify these types of communications. To remedy this, we turn to semiotics (the discipline of signs, their use and interpretation) and specially the semiotic square.

Our article is set out as follows. After providing theoretical background to the topic of this special issue, we turn to semiotics and review Greimas' (1966) semiotic square. Second, we use this framework to refine the fake/real news dichotomy into a fourfold typology. Third, we apply the typology to brand communications and reveal four types of them: real, fake, empty and ironic. Finally, we conclude by exploring further opportunities offered by the semiotic square for interpretive investigation.

Fake news and brand credibility

While the phrase "fake news" has become more commonplace in current discourse, and varying degrees of truth or falsities have been conveyed in brand communications, there is not a significant body of research that focuses on formally identifying the different types of information shared through brand messaging. Majority of the literature on fake news resides in journalism, media and communication studies (Balmas, 2012) as well as computing and information technology (Rubin *et al.*, 2015, 2016). The topic is gaining steam in disciplines such as law and policymaking (Klein and Wueller, 2017).

We propose that the concept of fake news is also relevant in a marketing and brand management context, as brand communications convey information at varying degrees of truthfulness (i.e. heterogeneous). The truthfulness of the message and its consistency overtime foster brand trust/credibility (Schallehn *et al.*, 2014). Brand authenticity and credibility are currently considered determinants of purchase intention (Wang and Yang, 2011) not only for the main offering, but even for its extensions (Aaker and Keller, 1990). Studying brand communications using the proposed typology will not only add to the brand personality literature but also contribute to marketers' understanding of brand messaging.

Before we move on to discuss our typology and its representation in today's brands, we explain the semiotic square as a structural tool with which we identify our types. Then we state the four types briefly and continue to exemplify each with various communications from contemporary brands.

The semiotic square

The "language turn" in philosophy began about a century and half ago (Blonsky, 1985), as interest in the relationship between the world and how it is represented flourished. For it became apparent that we have no unmediated access to the objective world and that the tools, such as language and other signs, that we use to understand the world play a role in what we see and how we interpret what we see. Semiotics, the discipline which seeks to explore how we use and interpret signs, lies at the heart of epistemology or theory of knowledge.

It is perhaps ironic that semiotics, the very discipline that was used by postmodern deconstructionist to undermine notions of truth and objectivity, can in fact help reinstate these terms. One such tool, the semiotic square, was developed by Algirdas Greimas, the French-Lithuanian linguist. Greimas (1983) considered the semiotic square to be the elementary structure of meaning. The square is a way of articulating semantic structure of a seme (a primary unit of meaning) in terms of binary opposites or alternatives, and contains three types of relationship: opposition, complementarity and contradiction (Lenoir, 1994).

The key insight Greimas is alluding to, is that the meaning of a term does not exist in isolation or in some one-to-one correspondence with objective "things." Rather meaning is a matrix in which every element in a system is defined by its differences and similarities to other elements. Many notable authors have used the semiotic square to explore issues as diverse as the political unconscious (Jameson, 1981) and cyborgs (Haraway, 1992).

For our purposes, we use the semiotic square to explore the seme of "truth" and bring a fine-tuned multidimensionality to our understanding of alternative types of news. The first stage, of opposition, truth generates "false." The second stage is to generate the complements of truth and false, producing "not-true" and "not-false." These four terms are then arranged in a square, such that opposite terms (true and false, not-true and not false) lie on the horizontal axes, complementary terms (true and not-false, false and not-true) lie on the vertical axes and contradictory terms (true and not-true, false and not-false) lie on the diagonals. The square for the truth seme is shown in Figure 1.

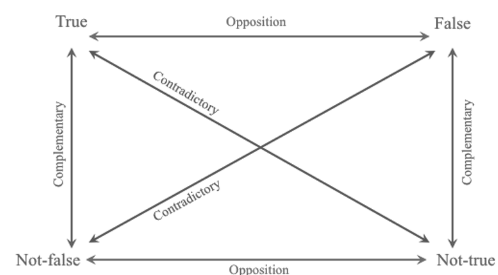
The analytic potential of the square is nicely summarized by Katilius-Boydstun (1990, p. 23) below:

> The square is a map of logical possibilities. As such, it can be used as a heuristic device, and in fact, attempting to fill it in stimulates the imagination. [...] playing with the possibilities of the square is authorized since the theory of the square allows us to see all thinking as a game, with the logical relations as the rules and concepts current in a given language and culture as the pieces.

Following Katilius-Boydstun (1990), we can explore and map various types of news onto the semiotic square. Real news falls into the true category if it has been factually verified.

Fake news, in contrast is manifestly false, making truth claims that are disingenuous and designed to mislead. While at times it may be a legal grey area (Klein and Wueller, 2017, p. 1), the concept encompasses many forms

Figure 1 Semiotic square for the "Truth" seme



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of communications such as "rumors, counterknowledge, misinformation, post-truths, alternative facts". Given the heterogeneity in this variety identifying the determinants of what makes news fake is an ongoing challenge for linguistic analyst and programmers. One recent study (Rubin *et al.*, 2015) used NLP techniques to separate the task of fake news detection into three: serious fabrications, large-scale hoaxes and humorous fakes.

In the not-false category we have what may be termed "empty news" which purports to contain new information but in fact does not; thus it is not falsifiable. The ambiguity in its premise makes empty news a nuisance or distraction most times. Internet law scholars are working toward catching up with the changes internet brought to journalism; and identifying the finer distinctions between fake and empty news (Klein and Wueller, 2017).

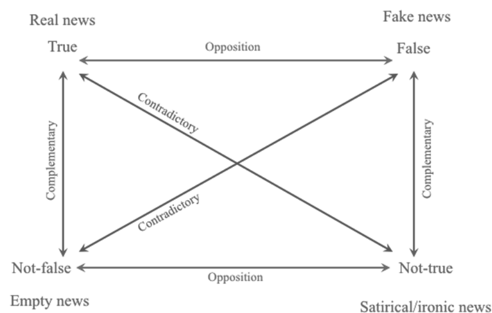
The not-true category contains ironic or satirical news. Here false news (not-true news) is presented as real but within a signaling context whereby the reader is in on the joke. Using satire is an open admission that the contents of the news are not true and not intended to be true in the first place. Rubin *et al.* (2016) caution against the occasionally deceptive nature of satirical news. Their study using an algorithm, suggests that there are three markers (absurdity, grammar and punctuation) distinguishing satirical news from fake news. In media, rich communications of the kinesic cues contribute to the process of distinguishing satirical news from fake news Figure 2.

Next we use this typology to categorize brand communications, wherein information of all four characteristics (i.e. true, false, not-true, not false) is contained. The examples listed for each type serve to embody the conceptual foundations derived from the semiotic square.

Brand communications: real, fake, empty and ironic

In applying our typology of type of news to brands, we make two refinements. First, we move to brand communications rather and then brands in and of themselves. For at any one time and through time brands have multiple, heterogeneous and changing brand communications. Any one act of communication can range from real to ironic. Second, in our survey of news communications, the notion of intention – i. e. the motivation behind the act of communication, be that to accurately inform or deceptively misinform became apparent and are incorporated into the discussion of brand communications.

Figure 2 Semiotic square mapping of news types



Real brand communications

Real brand communications, like real news, are brand statements that can be independently verified and are proven to be accurate. Functional brands tend to be more real or authentic in their communications than abstract or enacted brands (Berthon *et al.*, 2003). The latter are more concerned with image than what the product actually does. This is because the consumer can more easily test the claims made by functional brands. So for example, Walmart's Equate range of branded products offers identical, or near identical, ingredients and performance to premium brands at a greatly reduced price. Equate ibuprofen and Advil are chemically identical, yet the former is half the price of the latter. Other brands, those tend to use factual brand communications range from the penetrating oil brand WD40 to Tesla Motors who frequently tout easily verifiable performance figures of their electric vehicles. Ronseal's slogan "It does exactly what it says on the tin" is a direct promise to deliver the benefit promoted. Molson Beer uses the tagline "I am Canadian" to indicate the company's origins. These brand communications are to the point and verifiable and therefore would be considered real brand communications.

Fake brand communications

Fake brand communications, like fake news, are brand statements purposely designed to obfuscate or mislead the consumer. These are more common than many people realize. Brand statements such as Rockstar's "scientifically formulated" may sound impressive, but are not based on factual evidence, and are in no way verifiable. Other statements designed to obfuscate include "Helps to [. . .]" (reduce wrinkles, weight, worry etc.), "Part of a healthy [. . .] (lifestyle, diet, routine etc.) and "Made with 100 per cent [. . .]" (apple juice, coffee beans, cotton etc.). The reduction claims are typically nullified with a disclaimer, such as "This statement has not been verified by the Food and Drug Administration." The healthy "X" is never defined and thus cannot be evaluated, and the 100 per cent is a statement of ingredient, not the ingredient's percentage of the overall product.

While much brand communication is disingenuous, there are much more egregious examples of fake brand communication. The VW group's (VW, Audi, Porsche, etc.) installation of cheating software on their diesel engines allowed them to make fake claims about the cleanliness of their engines and dramatically overstate their fuel consumption figures. Both VW and Audi used the taglines "Clean Diesel" and "Smokeless" in their brand communications [. . .] all of which turned out to be fake. Volkswagen is not the only car brand to falsify information in their brand communications. Hyundai and Kia also had to settle false claims in court in the early 2000s because they "over-advertised their cars' horsepower" measurements (Hellpern, 2016). Other brands like Airborne feature claims of boosting your immune system in various ways that have not been validated, on their packaging. Cosmetics companies like Olay use retouched photographs to showcase the benefits of

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their products and consider it routine practice. However, the falsity of the information is not clear to all audiences. Therefore, these would be considered fake brand communications.

Empty brand communications

Empty brand communications, like empty news, tend to be ambiguous and often sensationalist without substance. For example, Geico often uses phrases such as "Could save you Xper cent on your insurance." Words like "could" and "might" intimate the existence of a possibility, without stating the precise probability. Sentences ending in an interrogation point or "?" perform a similar function. For example, the Mini tagline "Is it love?" Verizon Mobile's past tagline "Can you hear me now?" and Yahoo!'s slogan "Do you Yahoo!?" can be easily answered with a "no" following Betteridge's law[1] (Betteridge, 2009). Therefore, would be considered ambitious and/or empty messaging. In fact, much brand communication is empty, in the sense that it has little or nothing to do with the product or service being offered: the brand statements simply cannot be verified in relation to the actual offering.

Ironic brand communications

Ironic brand communications, like ironic news, makes its point by parodying traditional brand communications. An excellent example of this strategy is Kotex's use of irony in their brand communications for feminine hygiene products. Traditional brand adverts, where the topic of menstruation is treated obliquely and through inference (for example, blue liquid is poured on pantiliner), are subverted and lampooned (Gastaldo, 2010). Meow Mix uses a self-reflexive reference to its own brand name when they claim "Tastes so good cats ask for it by name." IBM's corporate slogan "I think, therefore IBM" and using a pun to indicate the intentional decoupling of text and subtext. More recently in 2018, IHOP launched a campaign changing their name to IHOb to emphasize their burger line. While the information was fake news, the audience was in on the joke according to Adweek (Zanger, 2018); therefore, this can be classified as intendedly ironic.

Ironic brand communications come in two forms. The first is intended irony which we explored above; the second is unintended irony whereby the irony comes with a change of context: be this in space and or time. For example, brand communications promoting the benefits of asbestos and cigarettes become highly ironic when viewed in retrospect (Warwick, 2018, for examples). Similarly, seemingly innocuous brand names or phrases can mean very different things in different countries. For example, Braniff International translated its "Fly in leather" slogan promoting its leather plane seats, as "Vuela en Cuero." This worked in some Spanish speaking countries but means "Fly naked" in Mexico. The tension between what is meant and what actually is, can also be found in Apple's long-time slogan of "Think Different" when their majority market share in the smartphone market in the past decade suggests otherwise. Disney's slogan "The happiest place on earth" became ironic when the impacts of emotional labor on their employees were recounted (Reyers and Matusitz, 2012).

Next, we address the theoretical contributions to brand authenticity literature, as well as the scant literature on fake news, proposing directions for future research. Before our concluding remarks, we discuss the managerial implications of further exploration into this stream of research.

Theoretical contributions and managerial implications

The concept of "fake news" has been discussed, mostly, in terms of its ethics and legality in past literature. Linguistically, the studies in information sciences focused on AI algorithms to detect and differentiate between fake and genuine news (Hardalov *et al.*, 2016). We propose a structural lens to describe and identify alternative types of news one may encounter on news media in this age. This study would not only contribute to the brand management literature but with further investigation may also provide insights into the textual determinants adding to the information technology literature stream.

The fourfold typology derived from the semiotic square for the seme "truth" also provides a foundational framework that can help us understand brand communications from a structural lens. The typology could be explored and tested further to understand the impact of these different types on brand authenticity, credibility and value. Therefore, further research may, for instance, consist of field or controlled experiments testing the impact of various different types of brand communications on brand value and its various indicators. Complementarily, investigation into targeting and positioning practices for each type of communication may contribute to a better understanding of the determinants of purchase intention or behavior. The outcomes of such studies into our typology would also inform managerial decisions.

Conclusions

In this paper, we introduce Greimas' (1983) semiotic square and use it to unpack the fake/real news dichotomy. The resulting four type of news: real, fake, empty and ironic are then applied to brand communications. We conclude by stressing the dynamic nature of brand communications and explore further interpretive opportunities offered by the semiotic square.

As mentioned, brand communications are heterogeneous and temporally dynamic. The same brand can communicate, real, fake empty and ironic information over different channels and over time. However, generally as brands become more enacted and more abstract (Berthon *et al.*, 2003), that is more removed from their physical embodiment, there is a tendency for brand communications to become less real and authentic. Simply as brand communications become less functional and more aesthetic, the latitude from less than truthful claims increases. An excellent example of this is Dove, which moved from a functional soap brand (cleans and moisturizes) to a

social statement ("real beauty") while at the same time being caught digitally manipulating the very images that they portrayed as being "real" (Dye, 2009).

Finally, we return to the semiotic square and the further opportunities it affords for interpretive exploration. Greimas' (1983) points out that having exploded a binary notion (A, B) into a full semiotic quaternity (A, B, A', B'), each dyad in the model can be used for further exploration. So in our case, true, false, not true and not false yields four further combinations: both true and false, which can be thought of as paradoxical brand communication; both not-true and not false which can be interpreted as indeterminate brand communication; true and not-false yielding verified brand communication (such as endorsed by the FDA); and false and not-true producing counterfeit brand communications.

The rise in fake news and the role that brands have played in funding and propagating it ans have made citizens increasingly skeptical of brand communications. The semiotic square offers interpretive insight into these communicative acts.

Note

1 Betteridge's law states that a headline that ends in a question mark can be answered with "no".

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The truth (as I see it): philosophical considerations influencing a typology of fake news

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of the philosophical considerations of fake news and provide an alternative view to current conceptualizations of its binary nature. Through an evaluation of existing research, a typology of fake news is presented that considers the possibility that the propagation of fake news about a brand, may be stemming from the brand itself, a previously unexplored field in the literature.

Design/methodology/approach – This is a conceptual paper based on extensive literature review on the fields of fake news and knowledge creation, resulting in the creation of a synthesized typology.

Findings – The role of power structures greatly influences the ability for a brand to respond to fake news. Externally constructed disinformation is seemingly more difficult for a brand to address, as a result of having limited control over the message. Internally constructed information, while stemming from the brand itself provides the brand with more control, but a greater public distrust as the source of the fake news seems to confirm the disinformation.

Practical implications – This paper presents a typology that contrasts the source of the construction of disinformation and the extent to which the facts have been fabricated. Furthermore, this paper provides future researchers with an alternate understanding of the conceptualization of fake news.

Originality/value – This paper is the first of its kind to establish a typology of fake news on the basis of the source of construction of disinformation. The source plays an important role when assessing the associated brand risks and developing an approach to combat potential negative implications.

Keywords Marketing communications, Fake news

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

> How sweet was information in the days of truth! How sweet was science in the days of the real! How sweet was objectivity in the time of the object! (Baudrillard, 1990, p. 89).

Information falsification is not new. Disinformation, misinformation and propaganda have been human communication traits since at least 44 BC in Ancient Rome, when Octavian, a shrewd propagandist, strived to secure his fate as the first emperor of Rome by waging a disinformation war against the personal brand of Mark Antony (Ireton and Posetti, 2018; Kaminska, 2017). Using what can be described as archaic-style tweets, Octavian sought to smear his opponent's reputation by using short, sharp slogans written on coins, depicting Antony as a womanizer and a drunk. Although the Roman republicans saw the fraudulent rhetoric for what it was – *fake news* – the fabricated narrative helped him to defeat his opponent. Millennia later the term fake news likely still conjures up images of finger-wagging politicians who are intent on convincing their audience of their representation of the truth by refuting and declaring opposing information as inherently unfounded.

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary (2017), fake news is frequently used to describe a political story seen as damaging to a person, entity or agency. It is, however, by no means restricted to the political realm and seemingly has currency in terms of general news too. It mostly refers to false or counterfeit material reported in a newspaper, newscast or periodical (Merriam-Webster, 2017). Operationally defined, Berthon and Pitt (2018) simply suggest that it encompasses all forms of *false information*. In recent times, literature across various disciplines including brand management (Berthon *et al.*, 2018; Shocker *et al.*, 1994), communication and information (Tandoc, Ling, Westlund, Duffy, Goh, and Wei, 2018), media studies (Ross and Rivers, 2018; Meddaugh, 2010), health sciences (Kmietowicz, 2013) and psychology (Pennycook *et al.*, 2018) have raised clear calls for conceptual clarity regarding the nature of 'truth' in information. There currently exists no universally accepted theory or definition of truth (Stahl, 2006) and, as Sahlins (1976) argues, every theory strikes a bargain with

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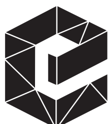

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reality. We have to, however, refer to our everyday understanding of truth if we are to work with information.

As consumers, both of information and in the literal sense, different sources and levels of knowledge contribute to our understanding and evaluation of information (Ghodeswar, 2008). Literature suggests that the recent scourge of false information in the society at large is a result of a number of factors. First, technology-enabled communication has scaled its proliferation exponentially (Kumar and Shah, 2018; Berthon and Pitt, 2018; Vosoughi *et al.*, 2018); second, the positive feedback loops created by fake news tend to fuel the continual spread of disinformation (Berthon and Pitt, 2018); and finally, falsehoods diffuse faster than the truth as humans are more likely to share it (Vosoughi *et al.*, 2018). The potential for false information to go viral on social platforms creates a number of problems for brands, who seemingly need to put out proverbial fires that may not necessarily exist.

Research that seeks to define fake news and examine its implications for brands appears to remain in its infancy, with existing research examining the source of fake news as being external to the firm (see for example: Tandoc *et al.*, 2018). These external sources of disinformation relate to any individual with access to the internet, as online platforms have provided everyday consumers with the ability to reach a mass audience (Tandoc *et al.*, 2018). The 'loudspeaker effect' of social media has created platforms in which the emptiest vessels seemingly often make the most noise. The current online ecosystem, a key source of information, is particularly fertile ground for sowing dis- and misinformation (Shao *et al.*, 2018). The proverb that "a lie gets halfway around the world before the truth has a chance to get its pants on" (Fairbanks *et al.*, 2018, p. 1) has never been truer, with the light speed of virality on social networks. While brands may be helpless victims of fake news stemming from external sources, recent events have provided evidence that brands may sometimes be the purveyors of fake news as opposed to innocent bystanders (Berthon *et al.*, 2018).

Berthon and Pitt (2018) discuss a number of ways in which brands are implicated in fake news. First, brands can be the target of fake news, falling victim to baseless claims. Second, they can lend validity to fake news stories by appearing alongside them through the use of programmatic advertising. Third, in some instances, brands may fund fake news by virtue of seeking greater reach and associate themselves with newsworthy stories regardless of whether these stories have been validated or not. Associations with false content could ultimately place the brand at great risk (Fournier and Srinivasan, 2018). Several global brands including L'Oreal, Nike and Walmart have removed online advertisements after discovering that they were featured alongside fake news content (Wardle, 2018). Why then, in recent years, has there been an ever-increasing number of brands that willingly create and disseminate false information about themselves? According to the literature, the mere association with disinformation could potentially result in negative financial consequences (Berthon *et al.*, 2018), possible boycotting of the brand (Berthon and Pitt, 2018) and reduced perceptions of brand value (Levi, 2018).

Research examining fake news and the spread of false information has typically focused on the nature of the content disseminated (Tandoc *et al.*, 2018), with others focusing on the intention behind the dissemination (Verstraete *et al.*, 2017). The phenomenon where firms willingly construct or propagate disinformation about their own brand has of yet received very little attention in brand management literature, despite this being a relatively common occurrence in industry. As such, the objective of this paper is threefold. First, the nature of truth and disinformation is explored from a philosophical viewpoint, with the purpose of explicating fake news from a poststructuralist and postmodernist vantage point. Second, the research seeks to differentiate between the stance of the actors involved in the construction of false information: is it constructed by an external source, thus, from outside the firm or brand (i.e. externally constructed brand disinformation) or internally constructed by the firm or brand itself (i.e. internally constructed brand disinformation). Finally, based on the nature of factual reality in the content disseminated, as well as the stance of the source involved in the construction of the false information, a typology of brand disinformation, commonly referred to as fake news, is developed.

Philosophical considerations on truth and disinformation

To establish a typology of brand disinformation, one needs to come to a deeper understanding of the binary that accepted notions of 'fakeness' derive from. Any understanding of an event, representation or entity as constructed and somehow 'unreal' is simultaneously embedded in perceptions of the other side of this dichotomy – 'reality'. This is, as French cultural theorist Baudrillard (1983) highlights, where definitions of both sides of the binary are troubled, as 'reality' and its implications of 'truth' and 'objectivity' cannot be taken for granted. In the novel, *Atonement*, the author describes his protagonists' comprehension of transforming events that unfold around her, events that she would later subjectively interpret and rewrite, as that "the truth instructed her eyes" (McEwan, 2002, p. 169). Baudrillard (1983, p. 1) maintains a similar narrative by arguing that "the territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it. Henceforth, it is the map that precedes the territory".

Where representation is understood as a depiction of a corresponding reality, what would arguably be conceived of as a (possibly) impossible 'truthful' news portrayal of events, simulations represent what is not present to begin with. As Baudrillard (1983, p. 3) points out, however, simulations have always existed in the form of, among others, religious icons and "the simulacrum of divinity". Baudrillard points to the "precession of simulacra" – a form, function, and experience of contemporary culture as wholly simulated, bearing no connection to 'the real', a "hyperreality" (Baudrillard, 1983, p. 1). Within hyperreality, the lines between fiction and nonfiction seemingly disappear and what was originally seen as being authentic is now spurious (Brennen and del Cerna, 2010). This critiques contemporary cultural conditions and productions where "it is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology), but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle" (Baudrillard, 1983, p. 5). In the production and experience of contemporary news coverage, and in opposition to an understanding of the increasing prevalence of fake news as