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 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

The current issue and full text archive of this journal is available on Emerald Insight at: https://www.emerald.com/insight/1061-0421.htm
Help is at hand. We are confident that the exciting and challenging papers presented in this special issue of *JPPBM* 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 Veloutsou, a co-editor in chief of *JPPBM*, 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.
Guest editorial
Kirk Plangger and Leyland Pitt

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

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References


Further reading