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Fake news and brand management: a Delphi study of impact, vulnerability and mitigation

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Abstract

Purpose – Fake news is presently one of the most discussed phenomena in politics, social life and the world of business. This paper aims to report the aggregated opinions of 42 brand management academics on the level of threat to, the involvement of, and the available actions of brand managers resulting from fake news.

Design/methodology/approach – A Delphi study of 42 academics with peer-reviewed publications in the brand management domain.

Findings – The study found that on some dimensions (e.g. the culpability of brand managers for incentivizing fake news by sponsoring its sources), expert opinion varied greatly. Other dimensions (e.g. whether the impact of fake news on brand management is increasing) reached a high level of consensus. The general findings indicate that fake news is an increasing phenomenon. Service brands are most at risk, but brand management generally is need of improving or implementing, fake news mitigation strategies.

Research limitations/implications – Widely diverse opinions revealed the need for conclusive research on the questions of: whether brands suffer damage from sponsoring fake news, whether fake news production is supported by advertising and whether more extensive use of internet facilitated direct interactions with the public through crowdsourcing increased vulnerability.

Practical implications – Experts agreed that practitioners must become more adept with contemporary tools such as fake news site blacklists, and much more aware of identifying and mitigating the brand vulnerabilities to fake news.

Social implications – A noteworthy breadth of expert opinion was revealed as to whether embellished or fabricated brand narratives can be read as fake news, inviting the question as to whether brands now be held to higher standards of communication integrity.

Originality/value – This paper provides a broad-shallow exploratory overview of the professional opinions of a large international panel of brand management academics on how the recent arrival of industrial fake news does, and will, impact this field.

Keywords Brand communication, Social media, Brand image, Social marketing, Brand management, Integrated marketing communications, Delphi study, Fake news, Corporate image

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

"How easy it is to make people believe a lie, and how hard it is to undo that work again!" wrote Mark Twain (2013, p. 57) in his 1906 autobiography. This statement goes to the core of how fake news not only works but also presents a significant challenge to those trying to protect themselves or their assets, from its harmful impacts. The speed of mass communication in Twain's era was limited by technology to the combination of the printing press, and the physical circulation of newspapers along with word-of-mouth. By noting his observation with such eloquence in 1906, one can take away that this resiliency property of lies is neither not new today, and nor was it then. The factor that makes the spread of false information in the present era noteworthy is the medium of the internet where mass data storage and transmission share the volume, velocity variability and veracity properties of "big data" (Vargo *et al.*, 2018).

1.1 Fake news and brands

Where Twain used the term "a lie," the statement holds true when substituting the more specific term "fake news," which Lazer *et al.* (2018) have defined as fabricated information that mimics news media content in form but not in organizational process or intent. While fake news has undoubtedly existed in varying forms throughout history, it has become increasingly insidious as media have developed over the ages.

Recently, psychologists have also given attention to fake news, and their findings have relevance to brands and how they are managed. Defining fake news as entirely fabricated and often partisan content, Pennycook *et al.* (2018) show that fluency via prior exposure is a psychological mechanism that

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provides credibility to fake news, especially in the case of fake news appearing on social media. Even a single exposure to a fake news headline on Facebook increases subsequent belief in its accuracy by viewers (e.g. "Hilary Clinton and Yoko Ono are having an affair"), unless of course the claim is entirely implausible (e.g. "the earth is a perfect square"). From a brand perspective this means that it is utterly possible that when a consumer sees (fake) news about a brand on Facebook, they will believe subsequent similar (and untrue) messages about that brand or the content with which it is associated. Related to this, in other work, Pennycook and Rand (2018) found that while individuals would need to think analytically in discerning between fake and real news, most people did not: susceptibility to fake news was driven by lazy thinking. Related to this work is research by Bronstein *et al.* (2019) that showed that analytic cognitive style may partially explain people's increased willingness to believe fake news. This was particularly true in the case of dogmatic individuals and religious fundamentalists, who were more likely to believe false (but not true) news. For brands this means that marketers cannot rely on consumers to think carefully about the claims pro- and against a brand, and in that way mitigate the effects of fake news about that brand. In many cases, customers will simply be too lazy to do careful analysis of the messages they are exposed to, and merely believe what they see or hear. Pennycook and Rand (2019), based on the results of two large experiments, suggest that social media companies could use crowdsourcing techniques (Prpić *et al.*, 2015) to differentiate between credible news providers and those less credible. Increasing public policy pressure, such as the recent Facebook-Cambridge Analytical scandal may indeed force social media companies to take these kinds of steps. Marketers and brand managers would be well advised to keep abreast of these kinds of developments.

It would be easy for marketers to contend that fake news is not really an important issue for marketing practice or for the management of key marketing assets such as brands. Most of the attention given to the fake news phenomenon relates to fake news in the political arena, at international, national and local levels, so does it or can it really have an important impact on brands? However, Berthon and Pitt (2018) have argued that fake news is important to brands and their management for two reasons. First, brands can be victims of fake news either by being targeted directly or by being associated with it proximally through algorithm-directed ad placement. Second, brands can be propagators of fake news. Brands can propagate fake news when ad placement software "follows eyeballs" (Mills *et al.*, 2019). In that sense, brands are subsidizing fake news, as Vosoughi *et al.* (2018) point out, fake news generally elicits different human emotions from the truth: the emotions of anger, fear and disgust. When the fake news on websites provoke these emotions, the websites actually garner more traffic than those that only produce the other emotions of joy and sadness, and ad placement software will select to place the ads on those fake news websites. Brand managers who do not carefully monitor this are endangering their brand's integrity (Timberg *et al.*, 2018).

One way of considering the severity of the fake news problem to brands and their management is to examine the potential impact on the tasks that brands fulfill for customers. According to Berthon *et al.* (1999), for customers, brands fulfill a primary purpose of reduction. First, they reduce search costs by helping buyers identify specific products and assuring them of a level of quality that can extend to new products. Second, brands reduce perceived risk for buyers by giving them assurance that they are less likely to suffer the potentially serious consequences of making the wrong brand decision. For example, anyone who worked in the era of the mainframe computer will remember the phrase, "no one ever got fired for buying IBM." Third, buyers of particular brands are accorded the levels of status and prestige that are associated with those brands, and in so doing reduce the psychological risk associated by owning and using the "wrong" product.

It can be argued that fake news about a brand has the potential to negatively impact each of these three fundamental brand functions:

1. When a buyer seeks to purchase or seek information concerning their favorite brand online only to find that brand associated negatively with fake news or in proximity to the news that is not only untrue but also offensive, that buyer's search costs are raised, rather than lowered. The buyer will then have to search further, either to disconfirm the fake information they have received or for a less offensive website or indeed in some cases, for an alternative offering to their previously favorite brand.
2. Untrue information about a brand dispersed in fake news either by an unethical competitor or a malicious fake news creator can raise the perceived risk for a buyer. When their trusted brand's integrity is compromised by false information to the extent that they then expand their consideration set to include other alternatives, both the buyer and seller suffer. The former because there is a danger that by including another item in their set and purchasing that they are raising perceived risk, and the latter because this situation considerably raises the possibility of losing a sale.
3. By purchasing a brand that has been contaminated by fake news, the buyer raises rather than reduces their psychological risk. Rather than according to them status and the admiration of others, their consumption of a brand excoriated by fake news might now draw the ridicule at least, and even the animosity of others.

The profession of brand management is one of perpetual flux with technological and societal factors raising not only new market opportunities but also new challenges relating to maintaining control of their brands (Veloutsou and Guzmán, 2017). Fake news presents a prime example of such a contemporary challenge, and the choice of brand management scholars to survey derives from the reasoning that these professionals hold an advantaged perspective to identify its general scope and scale.

All have seen examples of fake news, though all may not agree on what those examples are and what consequences fake news activities have wrought. In this study, brand management scholars were asked for their insights on the various past, present and future linkages between fake news and brand management. A brand's image is a perception of a brand in the minds of the customers (Nandan, 2005) and is, therefore, outside of the direct control of the brand manager. The brand manager is, however, responsible for developing, presenting

and managing the brand identity (the projected characteristics intended to influence and enrich the brand's image).

To an increasing degree, brand image is being co-produced by customers (So *et al.*, 2018). In parallel with, but largely outside the direct influence of brand managers is the sphere of online communication between customers commonly referred to as electronic word-of-mouth or eWOM (Huete-Alcocer, 2017; Kietzmann and Canhoto, 2013; Zhuang *et al.*, 2018). The platforms facilitating eWOM are myriad, with examples including the familiar social media sites (Facebook, Google+, YouTube, Twitter and LinkedIn), customer review aggregators (TripAdvisor, MetaCritic, RottenTomatoes and Amazon), and the countless weblogs, podcasts and their respective discussion forums. In this sphere, the flow of information (true or not) is nearly frictionless (Litvin *et al.*, 2008) and frequently perceived as more trustworthy than when disseminated by traditional media (Cheung and Thadani, 2012).

Can perception, and consequently, brand image be impacted (positively or negatively) by fake news? Can it be defended against the effects of fake news? Do brand managers share in the culpability for fake news through the decisions they make? Are some brand categories more vulnerable than others? Where do threats arising from fake news sit in comparison with other contemporary brand management threats? What strategies are effective for protection from or subsequent response to, deleterious fake news events? As the answers to such questions are typically a matter of subjective opinion, this research engaged an international panel of qualified domain experts (all well-published marketing scholars at research institutions around the world, with expertise in brand management) to find where consensus exists, and what that consensus is in those cases.

2. Method

Data were collected data by means of a Delphi study using the www.qualtrics.com web-based survey services. In their seminal presentation of the technique, Linstone and Turoff (1975) describe Delphi as a method for structuring a group communication process, allowing a group of individuals to address a complex problem collectively. Delphi is a tool that addresses questions of sophisticated judgment rather than objective measurement, when a researcher has access to a community of subject matter experts (Dalkey and Helmer, 1963; Flostrand, 2017).

The value of Delphi research is not without some criticism and the context of its use matters when determining what meaningful insights it can provide (Rowe *et al.*, 1991; Ayton *et al.*, 1999; Simoens, 2006). Hasson and Keeney (2011) state:

> Delphi results do not offer indisputable fact and [...] instead, they offer a snapshot of expert opinion, for that group, at a particular time, which can be used to inform thinking, practice or theory. As such, Delphi findings should be compared with other relevant evidence in the field and verified with further research to enable findings to be tested against observed data to enhance confidence.

This defines a space for Delphi to contribute exploratory value during the early investigation of a phenomenon, which is the function for which it was designed (Helmer, 1967; Caves, 1988).

The question then naturally arises of who has a sufficient level of relevant expertise to contribute insight to a discussion of brand management in light of the preponderance of fake news. Two groups are easily identified with demonstrated professional expertise related to this topic, the working practitioners (brand managers) and the professional academics who conduct research in this field. Each of these groups has distinct characteristics from the other. Brand management practitioners spend their time largely focused on their industry, their brand(s), and on learning from their own direct experiences and the situations they have witnessed. This perspective provides them the unparalleled depth of wisdom specific to their own, if comparatively narrow, areas of direct involvement. Brand management academics work at the more general level, identifying and describing factors that influence the field in aggregate or by characteristically defined sub-classifications. Their base of knowledge includes the patterns and theoretical models applicable across these classifications, which frequently includes knowledge and theory from fields outside of brand management i.e. motivation (Murphy *et al.*, 2007; Jin *et al.*, 2012). The authors of this article believe that both of these two groups are worthy of a study to investigate their insights on brand management and fake news, but that the characteristics of each group designate that the questions brought to each group should be different. In this particular study, the brand management academics are the subject of analysis and the survey questions are designed consistent in phrasing and character to communicate most clearly with members of that group. The findings will consequently be principal of interest to the academic reader.

The subject matter expertise requirement measure of this study is a history of published articles in peer-reviewed academic journals, indexed on Thomson Reuters, on topics directly associated with brand management. From the population of academics meeting this standard, an international convenience sample of 50 potential Delphi panelists was selected. These scholars were individually invited by e-mail to participate in a web-based Delphi study relating to fake news and brands. They were informed that each round of the questionnaire would take between 10 and 15 min to complete, and that panelists who agreed to participate would be required to continue through all iterations (rounds) of the study. The instructions were that in the first round they would simply give their individually developed professional assessment on the issues addressed by 16 questions. In the subsequent rounds, they would be shown the average response scores of their fellow panelists from the previous round, and reminded of their own answers before having the opportunity to adjust them. Their identities and responses would not be anonymous to the researchers for practical reasons, but would be to their fellow panelists. The only compensation offered to respondents was the promise of a short report on the project's findings that participants' incentives were aligned with producing valid data.

Of the 50 scholars invited to participate, 47 (94 per cent) accepted and participated in the first round. Panelists scored 15 numeric questions (Appendix) on 10-point slider (analog) scales recording one decimal of precision (i.e. 0.0 to 10.0). A single sequential ranking question recorded a discrete value from 1 to 5 reflecting the ordinal rankings set by each panelist. For the second and third rounds, panelists were provided with the aggregate mean values from the previous round next to each

question and showed where they had left each slider (their own score) on the previous round. They were then invited to re-evaluate their assessment score for each question, now bearing in mind the peer mean values. In total, 42 panelists responded to the second round (84 per cent of original invitees; 89.4 per cent of first-round participants). The same 42 panelists also responded to the third and final round. Data from only these 42 panelists are reported in this study.

Of the 42 panelists who completed all three rounds of the Delphi study, the proportional composition by gender is male 57 per cent and female 43 per cent. Geographic distribution as measured by primary academic institution affiliation: North America 45.2 per cent, Europe (including UK) 33.3 per cent, Oceania 9.5 per cent, Africa 9.5 per cent and Asia 2.4 per cent.

3. Findings

3.1 Consensus maximized

The opinions of participants typically differ strongly in the first round of Delphi studies and then begin to converge as panelists' factor in the opinions of their peers. A practical technique for determining whether the participants in a Delphi study are reaching consensus (Watson, 1990; Ramaseshan and Pitt, 1990) is to calculate and compare the average standard deviations for all the scored items over the rounds. Figures 1 and 2 show that the standard deviations of panelist response values decreased across three rounds on every numeric question, and on aggregate decreased from 2.42 to 1.74 (28.1 per cent below Round 1 mean) 10-point Likert units across the three rounds. The percentage decrease of mean standard deviation was 17.6 per cent from Round 1 to Round 2, and from there a further 12.6 per cent from Round 2 to Round 3. This pattern of flattening projects that a fourth-round would not have substantially increased panel consensus any further.

Figure 1 Consensus convergence of numeric questions across three rounds

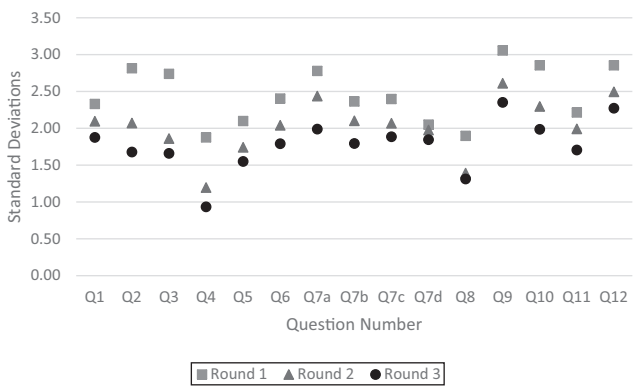
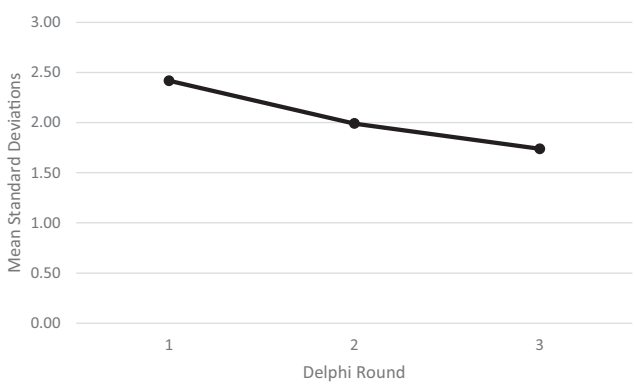


Figure 2 Aggregated consensus convergence



3.2 Consensus and panel mean values of numeric dimensions

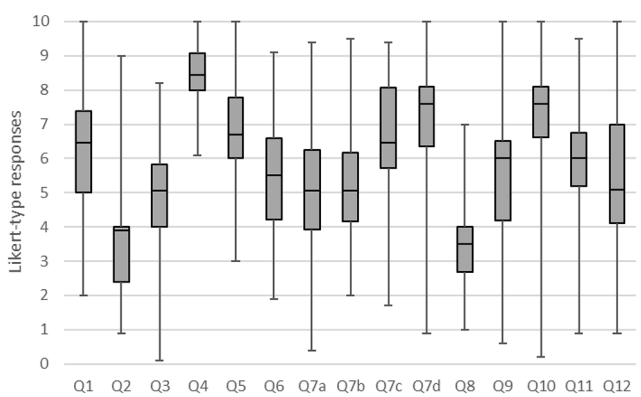
Table I presents the third round results of the numeric questions in this study, showing both the standard deviations and mean responses of the panel for each question (abbreviated for space) followed by a box and whisker plot, Figure 3 (below), for each question's distribution representing their respective 5-number summary (Min, 1st Quartile, Median, 3rd Quartile, Max).

The Likert scales each describe a dimension between the two opposing poles, thus defining the full range of potential judgments for each question. The panelists reached the highest consensus as calculated by the standard deviation on the question of the fake news phenomenon being on the increase (Q4). This question also provided the highest mean value. The second-highest level of consensus was for the panel's

Table I Summary statistics of converged responses for numeric questions

Questions (abbreviated)	Mean	SD
Q1 Is fake news a threat to brand management?	6.08	1.88
Q2 Opportunity for brand management?	3.64	1.68
Q3 Does crowdsourcing increase vulnerability?	4.79	1.66
Q4 Is the fake news phenomenon increasing?	8.41	0.93
Q5 Is the fake news phenomenon permanent?	6.75	1.55
Q6 Does fake news contaminate proximal brands?	5.38	1.79
Q7a Potential for harm to consumer staple brands?	5.04	1.99
Q7b Potential for harm to shopping good brands?	5.40	1.79
Q7c Potential for harm to specialty good brands?	6.50	1.88
Q7d Potential for harm to service brands?	7.24	1.85
Q8 Are brand managers prepared for fake news?	3.32	1.31
Q9 Do some brand managers incentivize fake news?	5.55	2.35
Q10 Is fake news site blacklisting important?	7.15	1.99
Q11 Are direct responses to fake news effective?	5.77	1.71
Q12 Are fictitious brand narratives fake news?	5.37	2.27

Figure 3 Converged response distributions for numeric questions



assessment of the general preparedness of today's brand managers for fake news attacks on their assets (Q8). On this matter, the panel largely agreed that brand managers are not well prepared for such challenges. In contrast to these high consensus questions, disagreement between panelists was most pronounced on the question of the degree to which fake news is incentivized to some degree by brand managers (Q9). Of the four questions directly addressing brand categories, service brands were identified as most vulnerable, followed by specialty goods, shopping goods, and finally, consumer staples as the least vulnerable. Consensus on these four questions was relatively constant.

3.3 Ordinal ranking of brand threats question

In addition to the numeric questions, the survey presented five scenarios of serious threats to brands that had occurred and that had been widely discussed by brand academics in recent years. It then asked panelists to ordinal rank them, relative to each other, in terms of perceived severity of harm to a brand. The aggregate panel results are presented in Figure 4: the severity of a fake news event, reaching a "viral" level of propagation, fell below that of the scenarios involving death or injury, but above executive improprieties. The numeric values are the panel means for each scenario when the individual panelist responses being coded as integer values of 1-most severe to 5-least severe. The standard deviations for each scenario were reasonably consistent with an average of 0.91 ordinal scale units.

4. Implications

In Section 3 above, this paper discussed consensus or the degree to which academics agree with each other. In this section, focus turns to the central tendency values for each question and suggest interpretations for them. Where applicable, actionable implications for practitioners are presented.

4.1 Is fake news generally a threat to brands? Is it increasing?

The replies to five questions point to an interesting view of fake news overall. Respondents largely agreed that fake news is a threat (Q1. median = 6.45) rather than an opportunity (Q2. median = 3.90). They also agree that fake news is a growing phenomenon (Q4. median = 8.45), which, in light of the previous questions, can only be interpreted as a growing problem. More specifically, they believe that fake news has become a permanent part of the brand management landscape (Q5. median = 6.70), affecting brands attached to services the most (Q7d. median = 7.60), followed by specialty goods (Q7c. median = 6.45), and then the matching values for consumer staples and shopping goods (Q7a. and b. medians = 5.05). When asked to rank the impact of fake news compared to other undesirable organizational events, the panel ranked a viral fake news story that impugns the values of the brand as less harmful than a personal info data breach, but potentially more hurtful than multiple senior executives being publicly shamed for improprieties. In other words, the impact of fake news is seen as worse than publicly shamed, real C-suite indiscretions, which points to the seriousness with which brand management should treat fake news.

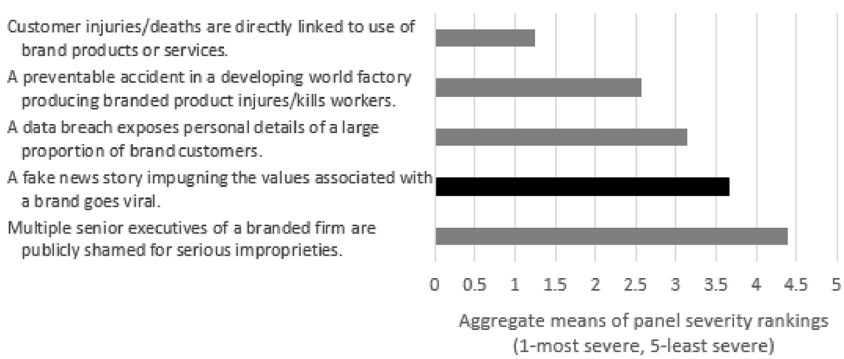
Interpreting this first set of results clearly indicates that brand managers, especially those in services, need to brace for fake news phenomena that are expected by brand academics only to grow in terms of big data's four dimensions (Gandomi and Haider, 2015):

- volume (i.e. number of fake news articles);
- velocity (i.e. how fast the fake news phenomenon grows);
- variability (i.e. the different formats in which fake news can be packaged, including text, audio, video, etc.); and
- veracity (i.e. the degree of difficulty of determining how fake the news really are).

4.2 What contributes to the growth of fake news?

Another story that evolves from the responses to the Delphi study relates to the contributing factors for the development and spread of fake news. What is noteworthy in this regard, if ironically, is that no clear points materialized. One of the questions addressed the phenomenon head-on. When asked whether inventing a fictitious narrative was a mild form of fake news, the middle response (Q12. median = 5.10) split the possible answers of "not at all" and "entirely" in half, suggesting it is such a new phenomenon that no clear agreement on the boundaries of fake news exists even though extant research has discussed the integrity of embellished brand narratives (Dahlen *et al.*, 2014; Nan, 2006). These findings align well with the discussion by Berkowitz and Schwartz (2016), in which the researchers found that the so-called "fifth estate" of individuals that share outlier viewpoints online have

Figure 4 Brand threat scenarios ordered by decreasing perceived severity



the ability to hold the "fourth estate," the press and news media, accountable. By extension, the authors argue, "fake-news organizations" in their various forms have become part of that growing fifth estate, which now also hold brand managers accountable. The heart of this argument is the hyper-reality in which we live, where news delivery fake online is very much realistic (Waisanen, 2011). As the boundary between nonfiction and fiction blurs, fake news drive "real" information to media consumers, to a point where "fake news becomes realer than real" (Berkowitz and Schwartz, 2016, p. 1). To return to our study, as mentioned above, brands can propagate fake news when ad placement software "follows eyeballs" (Mills *et al.*, 2019). The expert panel could also not conclusively agree (Q9. median = 6.00) when it came to the question as to whether a firm incentivizes the production or distribution of fake news as a phenomenon when they engage with, and financially benefit, fake news generators. This indeterminacy of collective opinion reflects an apparent dearth of formal research linking mainstream internet marketing practices with fake news, though this discussion has seen recent attention in the popular press (Subramanian, 2017). Panel experts were asked whether they believed that contamination can bring a negative stigma to a brand when advertising for it is found proximal to stories that a website reader believes are fake news. As discussed above, according to Berthon *et al.* (1999), for customers, brands fulfill a primary purpose of reduction. If fake news is presented alongside real ads, do brands still fulfill this purpose? With a Q6. median = 5.50, the experts were also split regarding the existence or degree of brand contamination by advertising association with fake news. Finally, with a middle response of Q3. median = 5.05, the experts could once again not clearly assign an increased or decreased vulnerability to fake news based on whether firms engage in crowdsourcing activities. This uncertainty regarding the potential for either an elevated risk to or protection of, bands when engaging in crowdsourcing is consequential as the use of these activities by marketers is increasing (Whitla, 2009; Kietzmann, 2017).

Overall, the results of this theme are that fake news is too recent a critical phenomenon and that marketing scholars, and almost certainly marketing practitioners, do not know enough about the origins and factors that contribute to its spread. The resulting lack of clarity presents potentially serious brand management risk due to the less than ideal general awareness of possible consequences for misguided decisions. More granularity might be required to define and manage fake news more narrowly to link specific actions to expected results.

4.3 How can fake news be combated?

Another story that unfolds from the data relates to managers' efforts to combat fake news, which the panel of scholars believes that brand managers are not particularly well prepared to handle (Q8. median = 3.50). On one hand, using a blacklist of identified fake news propagators when purchasing advertising was seen as an important step to reduce fake news vulnerability (Q10. median = 7.60). Yet, on the other hand, with a median of = 6.00 (Q11), fighting detrimental fake news with direct responses (vs. not engaging with it or responding indirectly without explicitly referencing it) was seen as neither highly effective nor ineffective.

This overall result suggests that brand managers need to better prepare for increasing instances of inaccurate and misleading news stories with the potential to impact their bands. What this upsurge calls for is a revision of organizational monitoring of traditional media outlets (such as newspapers and TV), and the need to develop or use, advanced social media management resources with which breaking news on social networks and blogs, etc., can be monitored to spot inaccurate and misleading news stories as they appear and spread. Fact-checking sites, such as Snopes, investigate whether highly public news is indeed truthful or fake. While this might help celebrities and big brands, it only does so after most of the damage is done – when the news is deemed important enough to investigate. Firms will have to develop (or outsource) similar skills, but more importantly, develop policies and free up resources to identify, assess, respond to and monitor these risks as early as possible. Of course, managers need to be aware of fake news not only related to their own brand but also regarding their competition, potential partners, and their industry as a whole. It is in the best interest of brand managers to understand fake news more clearly, to learn how, why, and by whom fake news is produced and propagated. Only with such knowledge can they be expected to design prophylactic strategies to mitigate potentially adverse future fake news events and response strategies to use quickly when they occur.

5. Limitations and future research

The population of academics with peer-reviewed publications related to brand management is vast and diverse. As a reference point, Google Scholar (http://scholar.google.com) reports that more than 200,000 articles have been published to date with titles that specifically include the term "brand management" alone. The full body of work relating to the strategic management of brands is sure to be much larger. That this study's panel reflects this vast population of brand management academics, this research deliberately captured diversity of gender, age, publication history, geography, and subfield specialization through our choice of panelists to invite. Where a typical Delphi study recruits a panel of 18 to 20 experts, this study used more than double this number in our efforts to capture the prevailing judgments of the population. Despite these steps, it is easy to imagine how our panel may still diverge from the aggregated judgment of the entire brand academic population. To explore the question of whether method bias may exist in some findings of this study, a potential follow-on study could probabilistically sample a much larger group to survey and compare results. A second research approach to capturing qualified judgment on fake news and brand management would be either a Delphi study or probability sample survey of brand managers with direct experience with the addressed dimensions of fake news.

Some potentially interesting variables that are not part of this study, but which are worthy of investigation in subsequent large sample size research include characteristics of participants' direct experience and first-hand knowledge of fake news phenomena, the polarity of the fake news as it impacts a given brand and the proposition of a typology of reaction types available to brand managers facing a fake news threat.

6. Summary

The combined technological factors of unregulated internet website content, rapidly evolving social media applications, ubiquity of smartphones and the consequent high internet participation are providing an unprecedented space for fake news that people find interesting and which seems true (at least to some) to propagate, often to millions of people, in time spans as short as minutes. Incentives to capitalize on this opportunity range greatly for fake news propagators and no effective strategy to reduce it seems forthcoming. The results can be highly detrimental to the reputations and pubic images of those individuals, groups, businesses and their brands who are either directly targeted or suffer collateral damage from highly propagated fake news stories. This paper invites the initiation of discussions connecting the reality of technologically hyper-accelerated fake news to professional brand management by conducting a broad if shallow Delphi study of 42 member panel of peer-recognized brand management experts. The results of this study and their interpretation fell into three themes.

The first theme was to consider the scale and degree of fake news impact on professional brand management. Here consensus was strong that fake news is here to stay, it is growing as a threat (but not an opportunity), and that different brand types bear varying exposure risks with service brands bearing the highest.

The second theme concerned the perceived relationships between the actions of brand managers and the production or propagation of fake news. In stark contrast to the first theme, the panel held widely diverse opinions on the questions of:

- whether brands suffer damage from sponsoring fake news;
- whether fake news production is supported by advertising;
- whether more extensive use of internet facilitated direct interactions with the public through crowdsourcing increased vulnerability; and
- whether creative embellishment of a brand's own narrative can be described as fake news.

The third theme focused on practice in brand management under the fake news threat, and whether brand managers currently are equipped to protect their brands against it. The panel was widely pessimistic that brand managers were suitably prepared for challenges arising from fake news, which illuminates a need for more research to better equip these professionals. Dynamically managed "blacklists" of web sources that are known to propagate fake news can be used to steer advertising purchases and the panel judged their use to be one effective tool for modern brand management to use. As to whether the direct response to detrimental fake news was effective, the panel was ambiguous. This result further underlines the conclusion that empirical research is needed, in this case, to identify best practices for mitigation strategy development.

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Appendix 1. Survey questions

Q1. How significant a threat is the fake news phenomenon to brand management?

0 = None; and 10 = Severe.

Q2. How big an opportunity is fake news for brand management?

0 = None; and 10 = Unprecedented.

Q3. To what degree do brands that use crowdsourcing activities (i.e. polls and discussion forums) increase their vulnerability to fake news?

0 = Not at all; and 10 = Extremely.

Q4. To what extent do you believe the fake news phenomenon is increasing?

0 = Decreasing greatly; and 10 = Increasing greatly.

Q5. To what degree is the fake news phenomenon a permanent part of the brand management landscape?

0 = A passing fad; and 10 = Eternally persistent.

Q6. To what degree does fake news contaminate brands that are proximally associated? (i.e. advertised in the same publication or website)

0 = No contamination; and 10 = Defined entirely by.

Q7. From 0 = Not at all to 10 = Severe, how potentially harmful is a fake news attack against a brand. . .

- If the brand is primarily attached to a consumer staple?
- If the brand is primarily attached to a shopping good?
- If the brand is primarily attached to a specialty good?
- If the brand is primarily attached to a service?

Q8. How well prepared are today's brand managers to respond to fake news attacks?

0 = Entirely unprepared; and 10 = Entirely prepared.

Q9. To what degree do brand managers incentivize fake news by associating with its producers/propagators? i.e. by paying for advertising on a fake news website.

0 = Not at all and; 10 = Directly.

Q10. How important is the use of a third party blacklist index (e.g. www.strikesocial.com) of identified fake news producers/propagators when purchasing web advertising?

0 = Not at all; and 10 = Critical.

Q11. How effective is defending a brand by fighting fake news attacks with direct responses? (vs not directly engaging)

0 = Not at all; and 10 = Entirely.

Q12. To what degree is inventing a fictitious narrative (i.e. "this product will make you more glamorous.") a mild form of fake news?

0 = Not at all; and 10 = Entirely.

Q13. Relative to these other threats to a brand, re-arrange the following of priority from high to low.

- A fake news story undermining the values associated with the brand goes viral.
- Customer injuries/deaths are directly linked to use of brand products or services.
- A data breach reveals personal details of large percentage of customers.
- Multiple senior executives of branded firm are publicly shamed for serious improprieties.
- A preventable accident in a developing world factory producing branded product kills and injures workers.

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