BACHELOR THESIS

KEYWORDS

- Difference-in-differences (DiD)
- False and misleading claims
- Brand activism and slacktivism
- Social media authenticity
- Brand perception
- YouGov BrandIndex

TOPIC: HOW DO MISLEADING OR INAUTHENTIC CLAIMS ON SOCIAL MEDIA IMPACT BRANDS?

False claims, misleading advertising, and superficial brand activism on social media have become increasingly prevalent and can significantly impact consumer trust and brand perception. This bachelor thesis aims to empirically investigate these relationships using YouGov BrandIndex data and difference-in-differences methodology. By exploiting the timing of viral incidents (e.g., greenwashing claims) as natural experiments, we can identify their effect on brand perception.

The thesis will contribute to our understanding of how misleading claims may affect brand perception and consumer behavior in the digital age. Students will gain experience with causal inference methods and working with real-world brand tracking data.

Research Objectievs:

1. Identify and document significant cases of:

   o False or misleading brand claims

   o Exposed greenwashing campaigns

   o Criticized social justice initiatives (e.g., rainbow-washing)

   o Successful authentic brand activism

   o Long-term committed corporate responsibility initiatives

2. Measure the impact of these incidents on multiple YouGov BrandIndex metrics

3. Implement difference-in-differences analysis to establish causal relationships

Methodology:

1. Data Collection:

   o YouGov BrandIndex: Daily brand perception metrics

   o Social media engagement data through:

     ▪ Web Archive data

     ▪ News media coverage

   o Documentation of misleading claim incidents

2. Empirical Strategy:

   o Difference-in-differences analysis

   o Event study approach

o Graphical analysis of treatment effects

Prerequisites:

- Interest in empirical research and digital marketing
- Basic knowledge of statistics
- Willingness to use R (or Python) for analysis, with support from the supervisor

LITERATURE & LINKS

Academic Literature

- Allcott, H., & Gentzkow, M. (2017). Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election. Journal of Economic Perspectives, 31(2), 211-36.
- Vredenburg, J., Kapitan, S., Spry, A., & Kemper, J. A. (2020). Brands Taking a Stand: Authentic Brand Activism or Woke Washing? Journal of Public Policy & Marketing, 39(4), 444-460.
- Visentin, M., Pizzi, G., & Pichierri, M. (2019). Fake News, Real Problems for Brands: The Impact of Content Truthfulness and Source Credibility on consumers' Behavioral Intentions toward the Advertised Brands. Journal of Interactive Marketing, 45(1), 99-112.
- Wu, Y., & Geylani, T. (2020). Regulating Deceptive Advertising: False Claims and Skeptical Consumers. Marketing Science 39(4):788-806.
- Sobande, F. (2019). Woke-washing: 'Intersectional' Femvertising and Branding 'Woke' Bravery. European Journal of Marketing, 54(11), 2723-2745.

Relevant Case Studies of Brand Controversies & Misleading Claims:

This is not an exhaustive list, and I am open to other relevant cases

- **Cambridge Analytica Scandal (2018)** done
- **H&M's "Conscious Collection" Greenwashing (2021)** done
- **Shein's Fake Factory Influencer Tour (2023)** done
- **"Help" Messages in Shein Labels (2021)** done
- **Pepsi's Kendall Jenner Protest Ad (2017)**

Pepsi released an ad featuring Kendall Jenner that depicted her solving a social justice protest by handing a police officer a can of Pepsi. The ad was slammed for trivializing serious social issues and exploiting activism for commercial gain.

- **Meta's Fact-Checking Controversy (2024)**

Meta announced it would stop fact-checking political content, raising concerns about the spread of misinformation on Facebook and Instagram, especially during election periods.

- **Elon Musk's Twitter/X Takeover (2022-2023)**

After purchasing Twitter (rebranded to X), Elon Musk implemented a series of controversial changes, including firing key staff, reinstating banned accounts, and introducing paid verification. These moves led to accusations that the platform was becoming a hub for misinformation and hate speech, damaging both the platform's reputation and Musk's personal brand.

- **Volkswagen's "Clean Diesel" Scandal (2015)**

Volkswagen promoted its diesel cars as environmentally friendly, but it was later revealed the company had manipulated emissions tests. The scandal caused significant damage to the brand's reputation.

- **Balenciaga's Disturbing Ad Campaign (2022)**

Balenciaga faced backlash for an ad campaign featuring children holding BDSM-themed teddy bears. The brand apologized, but the controversy sparked debates about responsible marketing.

- **Urban Outfitters' Mental Health Merch (2014)**

Urban Outfitters released a crop top with the word "Depression" printed on it. The product was criticized for making light of mental health struggles and profiting off serious issues.

- **Dove's "Real Beauty" Photoshop Backlash (2013)**

Dove's "Real Beauty" campaign was praised for promoting body positivity, but it faced backlash when photos from the campaign were found to be heavily retouched, raising questions about the brand's authenticity.

SUPERVISORS

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HOW TO APPLY

You can apply for this topic by filling in the **application form** (available here) and sending it to Alicja Grzadziel (alicja.grzadziel@wu.ac.at).