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Dark Branding: A Proposed Conceptualization

This paper aims to incorporate dark branding into the dark marketing spectrum. The study's research question is: How do fake reviews in news media and the recency of non-existent hospitality establishment reviews influence the behavioural intentions of the viewer? The findings of a qualitative study on the place of interest, namely, a (non-existent) restaurant with fake reviews in news stories, were used as a background analysis. A purposive sampling technique and thematic analysis approach were adopted. Dark branding is conceptualised as a form of branding involving questionable ethical practices such as fake online reviews and forms a basis for consumer activism within the dark marketing spectrum. The approach of using emotional marketing, for example, selling mood/comfort instead of tangible products such as food, the novelty of service delivery, servicescape, and signature storytelling, are attributes of dark branding. Adopting an exploratory research method, this study is a first step towards defining the problem statement as a deceptive technique in information technology used by content creators to promote brands, and it is suggested that dark branding in tourism is a dimension of dark marketing.

Keywords: Online fake reviews, news story, review recency, dark branding, culinary experiencescape.

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Introduction

Dark branding has been discussed from various research perspectives, at least from the perspective of dark marketing (Gibbons, 2018). Notably, dark marketing seems to be commonly associated with dark patterns, manipulative practices, integration with technology, and collaborations with influencers (Yoo & Gretzel, 2009; Guler, 2021). On a separate but related note, cause-related marketing is another marketing tool that uses an emotional approach to appeal to consumers. To some extent, the use of cause-related marketing in the context of culinary experiencescape is likely to be associated with dark branding. An emotional approach related to news stories and review recency is used to appeal to social media users. The most common news stories and review recency of the culinary experiencescape revolve around the signature story that highlights the foodscape, experiencescape, and the perceived value of visiting the restaurant.

Studies have shown that the industry players take advantage of online news sites that provide online news stories and review recency generated by social media users to manage service quality and consumer complaints (Gretzel, 2015). Notably, it has been found that the most important aspect of online reviews, for instance, when looking up the most reviewed restaurant on

TripAdvisor, is the recency of the online news story (Yoo, Sigala & Gretzel, 2016). Studies suggest that news stories and recency of culinary experiencescape reviews may enhance, validate, and promote visitor attraction (Ge & Gretzel, 2018) and affect the positioning of memorable exclusive interest in food experiencescape (Aaker, 2018). Marketing typically works to give customers what they want, aided by branding as part of the strategy (Brown, McDonagh & Shultz, 2012). In a similar vein, dark marketing aims at segmenting data to deliver tailored content to interested audiences, especially in the post-pandemic era of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) (Gibbons, 2018). The main issue identified for this study is how fake reviews in news stories and the recency of non-existent hospitality establishment reviews influence the behavioural intentions of the viewer. This paper aims to incorporate dark branding into the dark marketing spectrum. As a background analysis, the visitor experience relating to a (non-existent) restaurant with fake reviews published in news stories was examined. The first section contains a short academic debate on the nature of dark marketing and branding. Here, we summarize part of the theory, not all publications, because of some limitations of time and length. Secondly, we share some of the methodological limitations and general outcomes of the analysis of selected fake reviews in the field. In the conclusion, some ideas revolving around the future of research in dark branding are placed in the foreground. Since the sample is not statistically representative, the obtained outcomes -though interesting- should not be extrapolated to other universes or contexts.

Literature review

Dark marketing practices derived from the integration with technology and influencer content aimed at segmenting data to deliver targeted content to interested audiences have been discussed in the literature, particularly in the context of the post-pandemic era of COVID-19 (Guler, 2021; Gibbons, 2018). The travel industry and, consequently, global trade have been

severely impacted by the global pandemic, triggering a hot debate centred on new sustainable forms of tourism. British sociologist John Urry describes the intersection of a cultural matrix and landscape formation. Echoing Urry, Korstanje has observed that there is a new global sentiment of tourist phobia that has never existed before. The COVID-19 pandemic not only ground the tourism industry into an unparalleled halt but also accelerated a process of degrowth that seriously affected international flights and mass tourism. Meanwhile, virtual tourism has grown exponentially over recent years, even during the pandemic. In a world without tourists, virtual tourism occupies a central position, drawing on new destinations and giving rise to new travel behaviour (Korstanje, 2020). Shin & Xiang showed how the contextual factors affecting online review recency, namely, the context of use, the content of online reviews, and the nature of the product, were examined (Shin & Xiang, 2021). News stories and online review recency are considered a form of mobile electronic word-of-mouth (Mariani, Borghi & Gretzel, 2019).

Virtual and digital technologies present many opportunities and challenges to the tourism industry. As Marianna Sigala (2020) has put it, COVID-19 can be a transformational opportunity to adopt new and more sustainable forms of consumption. Other specialised issues within the context of COVID-19 should also be researched. The main impacts experienced by the tourism stakeholders during the three COVID-19 stages are also discussed in the study. The three distinct stages are: *response, recovery, and reset* (Sigala, 2020). COVID-19 and virtual tourism should be analysed as two interrelated issues. It has been argued that digital technology plays a leading role in creating more resilient destinations. Over the recent years, some voices have applauded the rise of virtual dark tourism as a new emerging field in tourism research. However, there are some gaps in the fields of dark tourism and online influencers. To wit, dark patterns, integration with technology, and online influencer tourism news sites are unavoidable. The present paperwork distinguishes the

concept of dark. In particular, dark branding is associated with dark patterns used in online travel and tourism news sites (Kim, Pillai, Haldorai & Ahmad, 2020; Baraniuk, 2019; Rosenberg, 2017).

In the context of dark tourism, some researchers have suggested that the territorial branding of dark sites shows two main limitations. The actual causes of the tragic event not only remain obscured, but a distorted history of the event is told to the participants. Furthermore, selling dark sites involves the commodification and commercialisation of human suffering (Korstanje 2016; Tzanelli 2016; Tzanelli & Korstanje 2016; Sather-Wagstaff 2016). Digital technology is a double-edged sword in that it could revitalise certain destinations, but it could also downgrade destinations where there is negative publicity. Studies show that industry players use online news sites and reviews generated by social media users to manage service quality and complaints (Gretzel, 2015).

Further, cause-related marketing is noted as a marketing tool that uses an emotional approach to appeal to consumers. A study has found that the recency of the online news story is regarded by the culinary tourist as the most important aspect of online reviews, for example, when looking up the most reviewed restaurant on TripAdvisor (Yoo, Sigala & Gretzel, 2016). News stories and the recency of reviews of the culinary experiencescape on online sites such as TripAdvisor are often perceived to be credible and relevant (Yoo, Sigala & Gretzel, 2016). The language structure of deceptive and truthful reviews is indicated by the credibility of the recency of reviews. Deceptive reviews, on the other hand, are difficult to distinguish based on structural properties such as the number of wordings, complexity, diversity, and self-references (Yoo & Gretzel, 2009).

As an online travel review site, TripAdvisor provides insights into trends, preferences, assessments, and opinions from the demand side (Marine-Roig, 2019). While news stories and recency of experiencescape reviews and the restaurant signature story have been well-documented,

the dark patterns used in the news stories and recency of the culinary experiencescape reviews are under-researched. The restaurant's signature story encompasses the perceived values about the food-related experiencescape revealed by the visitors on social media and travel review sites. To date, dark patterns concerning review recency of the signature story and food-related experiencescape or servicescape have been discussed but only within the context of online travel agency websites (Kim, Pillai, Haldorai & Ahmad, 2020). Dark patterns in the spectrum of dark branding are likely related to the news story and review recency about the experiential consumption, such as the experiencescape or servicescape, and rely on the signature story of branding strategies used in the co-creation in the online community (Rosenberg, 2017).

The co-creator exposes the dark pattern tactic to influence the cognitive biases that affect the exposure of the signature story used in the co-creation. Co-creation in the online community is viewed as a form of value enhancement, validation, promotion, entertainment, and personalisation (Ge & Gretzel, 2018). Thus, the signature stories in the news story and review recency about experiential consumption would drive the viewers to the rated places of interest (Gretzel, Zarezadeh, Li & Xiang, 2019). Influencing experiential consumption intentions in the online community could be considered a part of dark marketing (Bianchi, 2020). 'Dark patterns' are visual or verbal cues designed to entice consumers to make a particular decision or click on something, such as the existence of a restaurant rating in a non-existent restaurant. (Baraniuk, 2019; Rosenberg, 2017).

Dark patterns are unethical online design mechanisms used to trick consumers into taking actions they would not otherwise take and are commonly used in dark marketing. Dark marketing is closely associated with deceptive image data and phishing scams aimed at value enhancement and promotion of dark branding (Gibbons, 2018). The dark branding of a non-existent restaurant, for

example, denotes the signature story, news story, and review recency concerning the experiencescape of popular places of interest.

Fake reviews of experiencescape in news stories and review recency represent the experiences offered by the servicescape, e.g., tangible and intangible surroundings such as the atmosphere and physical environment of a themed restaurant (Blumenthal & Jensen, 2019). The experiencescape of a themed restaurant demands an immersion process and a high level of involvement of service providers and consumers (Blumenthal & Jensen, 2019). In this manner, a news story about the memorable exclusive interest in food experiencescape would emerge as a signature story (Aaker, 2018).

A signature story providing context and content of online reviews as well as the review recency. Baraniuk (2019) suggests that the content of online reviews that accelerates ratings may be designed by dark patterns. Dark patterns can steer a customer to make a particular decision, like rushing to make a booking. An example of dark patterns is found in a restaurant news story that documented a case of a non-existent restaurant that was rated highly as a place of interest that the public would like to visit (Rosenberg, 2017). This curious case of a top-ranking but non-existent restaurant with fake reviews on TripAdvisor could be considered a form of dark branding.

Dark branding is conceptualised as a form of branding involving questionable ethical practices such as fake online reviews and is a basis for consumer activism within the dark marketing sphere. Online reviews revolving around the news story and recency of culinary experiencescape reviews are derived from consumer-generated content and the use of dark marketing (Ge & Gretzel, 2018; Yoo, Sigala & Gretzel, 2016; Yoo & Gretzel, 2009). Dark marketing is designed to target online

viewers who are the most likely to be receptive to the marketing messages in the news story and the review recency (Gibbons, 2018).

Dark branding emerges as a palpable force when an existent restaurant with fake reviews on the review sites is successfully developed. Further, the fake online reviews in the dark branding suggest the unethical use of information technology by the content creator and co-creator of the co-creation (Yoo & Gretzel (2009). Restaurateurs use an emotional approach to draw customers by selling mood/comfort instead of food and focussing on the servicescape and the novelty of service delivery (Moskwa, Higgins-Desbiolles & Gifford, 2015). The construction of the storytelling within the online community, the role of emotion in servicescapes, and novelty in foodscapes are the only elements that co-rated experiencescapes but are also attributes of dark branding (Przybylski, Murayama, DeHaan & Gladwell, 2013).

It is only fairly recently that fake reviews in news stories have been discussed in the literature. In one study, a fake-review detection system to detect fake reviews in the context of hotel ratings has been proposed (Möhring, Keller, Schmidt, Gutmann & Dacko, 2021). In another study, Yoo and Gretzel (2009) compared deceptive and truthful reviews based on the total number of words used in the review, the complexity of the review, and the inclusion of positive or negative sentiments in the review. Another interesting aspect of fake reviews coincides with the xenophobic expressions on digital platforms against Asian tourists. COVID-19 has triggered a rise in racism and hostility against Chinese tourists, who are viewed as the main carriers of a lethal virus. Not only have Chinese tourists been mistreated at airports and tourist destinations, but in some countries, digital platforms have ideologically justified a set of hostile attitudes against outsiders. This issue was widely explored by Mostafanezhad, Cheer, and Sin (2020), who discussed the long-dormant

hostility against Asian tourists in Western destinations. The global pandemic has created a climate of great anxiety and panic, affecting host-guest encounters.

A study by Mostafanezhad, Cheer & Sin (2020) found that the accusations against the Asian global pandemic have not only ground the tourism industry to an unprecedented halt but have introduced new customs and travel behaviour. Upon closer look, such digital technology has advantages as well as disadvantages (like fake reviews or ethnocentrism), which this study seeks to identify.

Research Methodology

The findings of a qualitative study on the place of interest, namely a (non-existent) restaurant with fake reviews in news stories, were used as a background analysis. Fake reviews in news stories and review recency were examined through the lens of reflexive thematic analysis. A purposive sampling technique was used to examine a top-rated restaurant on TripAdvisor, which The Washington Post exposed as non-existent (Rosenberg, 2017). The reflexive thematic analysis approach adopted aimed to probe the nature and construction of social contexts by understanding themes (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Computer-aided qualitative data analysis software has not been used in this study, given the importance of deep reflection in the reflexive thematic analysis approach the role of researcher subjectivity in the qualitative paradigm, and the significance of deep reflection and interaction with knowledge (Braun & Clarke, 2019). In the same line of inquiry, the subjectivity of a coder entails the theoretical sensitivities, beliefs, and experiences that serve as filters in the thematic analysis. Hence, the results of the thematic analysis are treated as continuing revisions rather than completion (McAllum, Fox, Simpson & Unson, 2019). In particular, thematic analysis involves showing the steps taken by the researcher, starting with the application of the filter, followed by the familiarisation with the text (which includes images and video in this research context), coding, and revision to the themes generated from the analysis.

Findings and analysis

Online reviews revolving around the news story and review recency of the culinary experiencescape are derived from consumer-generated content and consumer activism. While dark branding of the culinary experiencescape is created by the fake reviews on the review sites about a non-existent restaurant, dark branding emerges as a palpable drive when the fake reviews of the non-existent restaurant successfully drive the visitation intentions. Further, the fake online reviews in the dark branding suggest the unethical use of information technology used by the content creator and co-creator. Using emotional marketing to sell mood/comfort instead of food, for instance, the novelty of service delivery, servicescapes, and signature storytelling, are regarded as attributes of dark branding.

Fake online reviews and co-creation generating the appealing signature story about consumption experiencescape stimulate the behavioural intentions of the viewer. Dimensions of fake online reviews and co-creation are attributed to (1) the fear of missing, (2) the signature storytelling about the high-demand market offering, and (3) the engagement of co-creators in the co-creation. Therefore, dark branding is conceptualised as a form of branding involving questionable ethical practices such as fake online reviews and is a basis for consumer activism within the scope of dark marketing.

Table 1. Analysis of Themes in Dark Branding

Theme	Description of Theme
Fake online reviews and co-creation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A fear of missing out induced by the emotional approach adopted in the restaurateur engagement - Consumer-generated content generates a high-demand market offering - Involvement and engagement of co-creation
News story and review recency	The appealing signature story about consumption experiencescape
Unethical practices in information technology	Dark patterns of dark branding <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Restaurateur engagement - Selling mood/comfort instead of tangible offerings such as food - Servicescapes and the novelty of service delivery - Signature story of exclusivity, "by-appointment-only" experiencescape

Discussion

Fake reviews are associated with the issue of credibility. An increasingly digitalised society opens the doors for information to be fabricated and disseminated in seconds. The global audience is hungry for mass-produced information transmitted through digital media. However, this poses challenges for digital users as it is often difficult to discern what information is real or what is not. The spread of fake news is one of the main challenges of modern technology. Another problem is information overload and the lack of time for users to absorb information. This particularly happens because of two main factors. On one hand, digital technologies and the technological revolution place millions of users online 24/7. Lay people have not only more access to digital content but also should digest further information extracted from different sources. On the other hand, lay people are overexposed to digital technology as never before. Needless to say, overexposure to mass information works like a form of censorship for the user. Moreover, the

overproduction of reviews serves as a censorship tool, considering the declining human attention span.

Fake reviews do not typically provide a clear picture of the place of interest, for example, a high-end restaurant. Fake reviews in a news story and the recency of the culinary experiencescape reviews signify long-dormant radicalised discourses orchestrated to push global audiences to seek out the current states of the experiencescape. It has been suggested that fake reviews in a news story and the recency of the culinary experiencescape reviews will be aimed at less-informed viewers in the post-pandemic days. Fake reviews in a news story and the culinary experiencescape rating or review recency will also attract viewers looking for novelty experiencescapes. These fake reviews in news stories and review recency of the culinary experiencescape could end up forming part of the restaurant branding. As a result, dark branding is a direct indication of the significance of ethics as a major trending issue in the consumption of culinary experiencescape.

Conclusions

This article defines dark branding as a deceptive technique in information technology used by content creators and suggests that dark branding in tourism is another aspect of dark marketing. Dark branding is reflective of the more positive aspect of the deceptive practice in information technology used by content producers and co-creators. The use of emotional marketing, for example, selling mood/comfort instead of food, innovation, service settings, and signature storytelling, are considered features of dark branding. To cut the long story short, this article offers some food for thought, a fairly different way of thinking about dark branding in the context of the culinary experiencescape. Dark branding is derived from dark patterns used in online fake reviews of experiencescapes, news stories, and review recency. The nature of this study is exploratory and is an initial step toward formulating the problem statement. Further in-depth research should be

undertaken to explore fake online reviews of experiencescapes, news stories, and review recency. In addition, this study can be extended to explore other types of dark patterns used by online travel agency websites.

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