

THE MARKETING OF SCIENCE: A CASE STUDY OF THE IMPACT OF MISINFORMATION ON PERCEPTIONS OF SCIENTIFIC ACCOMPLISHMENT

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[dx.doi.org/10.18374/IJBS-23-1.2](https://doi.org/10.18374/IJBS-23-1.2)

ABSTRACT

Scientific ideas and traditional products can be marketed in similar ways and neither is immune to the effects of misinformation. As highlighted in a short case study, this article attracts attention to the misinformation surrounding the scientific pursuit of the origin of life and the distribution channels that have contributed to the spread of such misinformation. Specifically, this article looks at perceptions of scientific accomplishment in the area of abiogenesis. It discusses how perceptions of scientific accomplishment may be created and altered through both intended and unintended distribution channels. Over 70% of participants in this study appear to hold false perceptions about scientific accomplishment in abiogenesis. Such false perceptions may be impacted by misinformation. Marketing educators may use this study to introduce the concept of ideas as products and also discuss the impact of misinformation in both intended and unintended distribution channels.

Keywords: Marketing of Ideas, Misinformation, Science, Case Study

1. INTRODUCTION

For decades, the debate of whether marketing rises to the esteemed pinnacle of a science seethed. Perhaps the vigor of such debates has since waned, but an interesting idea arose out of the discussion. In a 1983 special issue of the Journal of Marketing, Peter and Olson (1983) ask the arguably more compelling question, “Is science marketing?” They pose that the output of science is ideas that are marketed in a similar fashion to products.

Marketed ideas are spread through traditional channels such as newspapers and more modern channels such as social media, which allow for ideas to be virally shared. However, all such marketing channels have also allowed misinformation to spread. Due to the ease with which one may adapt or create a message and the speed at which such information may be shared and well received, misinformation has become an epidemic. In 2018, the word “misinformation” was dictionary.com’s word of the year (Diaz, 2018). The term has been written about in relation to topics such as science (West and Bergstrom, 2021), politics (Jerit and Zhao, 2020), public health (Swire-Thompson and Lazer, 2019), and marketing (Di Domenico et al., 2021). Through a short case study, this article draws attention to the misinformation surrounding the scientific pursuit of the origin of life. Specifically, this article looks at perceptions of scientific accomplishment in the area of abiogenesis, and how perceptions are influenced.

Abiogenesis may be defined as, “the origin of life from nonliving matter (Merriam-Webster).” A 2020 report states, “In spite of recent rapid development of biology, chemistry, Earth science and astronomy, the origin of life (abiogenesis) is still a great mystery in science (Totani, 2020).” Although abiogenesis remains a scientific mystery, the study presented here provides evidence that some people perceive this “great mystery” as solved, at least in part. A major focus of this paper is to demonstrate the severe misunderstanding in what people believe science has accomplished in the area of abiogenesis. Misinformation in market distribution channels is evaluated as a reason for such gross confusion. In addition, this paper discusses how perceptions of scientific accomplishment may be created and altered through both intended and unintended distribution channels.