

Hidden in Plain Sight: Consumer Responses to Pseudo-Secrets in Marketing

Dafna Goor

London Business School

Anat Keinan

Boston University

Nir Halevy

Stanford Graduate School of Business

Michael Norton

Harvard Business School

Cite as:

Goor Dafna, Keinan Anat, Halevy Nir, Norton Michael (2025), Hidden in Plain Sight: Consumer Responses to Pseudo-Secrets in Marketing. *Proceedings of the European Marketing Academy*, 54th, (126248)

Paper from the 54th Annual EMAC Conference, Madrid, Spain, May 25-30, 2025



Hidden in Plain Sight: Consumer Responses to Pseudo-Secrets in Marketing

Abstract

This research conceptualizes the phenomenon of “pseudo-secrets” in marketing and examines its appeal and impact on real consumer behavior in the marketplace. Restaurants ranging from Michelin-starred to fast-food chains offer secret menus, and hidden stores and “speakeasy” bars feature camouflaged entrances and secret passcodes. Paradoxically, many of these hidden places and products are famous for being secret. We argue that beyond their economic or informational value, pseudo-secrets hold symbolic value, making consumers feel socially central. Our findings show that pseudo-secrets increase word-of-mouth about the brand, mediated by consumers’ sense of social centrality—the feeling of being connected and focal within their network—and this effect diminishes when the symbolic value is low. In four field experiments and lab experiments, we demonstrate how marketers can design pseudo-secrets across various products and contexts.

Keywords: Secrets, Feelings of Centrality, Symbolic Consumption.

Track: Consumer Behavior