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Insights into brand authenticity and customer engagement in a restaurant setting: a text mining approach

Abstract:

The aim of this study is to analyze the dimensions of customer engagement, brand authenticity and other related constructs (need for uniqueness and brand love) in customers' online reviews through text-mining and sentiment analysis trends. This study focuses on Yelp.com comments and use a random sample of 3,877 reviews of restaurants, in ten cities in the USA. A customer engagement and authenticity dictionaries are created, based on previously validated scales and extended using WordNet 2.1. Findings reveal that cognitive processing is the strongest dimension of consumer engagement. Results further indicate that brand love presents lower polarity value compared to brand authenticity, which means that consumer tend to value more the perception of authenticity than the love relationship with the brand to become more engaged.

Keywords: brand authenticity, customer engagement, user-generated content

Track: Services Marketing

1. Introduction

According to Grayson and Martinec (2004), authenticity has been considered by several scholars as a very important attribute of contemporary life and this is why it has been studied in different fields of research. This concept has been studied in fields like philosophy, sociology, anthropology or psychology, among others (Fritz, Schoenmueller, & Bruhn, 2017). Within marketing research, it is difficult to find a unique definition of the authenticity concept. However, a common understanding is that it is associated with sincerity, innocence and originality (Fine, 2003) and also with being real and genuine (Gilmore & Pine, 2007).

Based on the importance of the concept, and according to Fritz et al. (2017), it would be interesting to have further insights about authenticity, namely, in the service industry. Therefore, the current study aims to analyze the dimensions of customer engagement, brand authenticity and other related constructs like need for uniqueness and brand love in consumers' sentiments towards restaurant reviews on Yelp.com through (i) a global sentiment analysis using positive, neutral and negative sentiments and (ii) a topic-sentiment analysis to capture latent topics in online reviews. Thus, this study uses a mixed approach (bottom-up and top-down) by employing dictionaries (for engagement and authenticity) that comprise words tested with success in previous engagement and authenticity studies, to ensure that only the most relevant terms are selected. Therefore, the main aim is to give insights into the dimensions of customer engagement, brand authenticity and related constructs (need for uniqueness and brand love) in customers' online reviews through text-mining and sentiment analysis trends.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Brand authenticity, brand love and need for uniqueness

Brand authenticity can be defined "as the perceived consistency of a brand's behavior that reflects its core values and norms, according to which it is perceived as being true to itself, not undermining its brand essence or substantive nature, whereby the perceptual process involves two types of authenticity (i.e. indexical and iconic authenticity)" (Fritz et al., 2017, p. 327). Different researchers have considered different dimensions of the construct. For example, according to some authors, brand authenticity has four dimensions: continuity, originality, reliability and naturalness (Bruhn, Schoenmüller, Schäfer, & Heinrich, 2012). Other researchers refer to three factors like quality commitment, sincerity and heritage (Napoli, Dickinson, Beverland, & Farrelly, 2014). Another research defines the construct as a combination of the following dimensions: continuity, credibility, integrity and symbolism (Morhart, Malär, Guèvremont, Girardin, & Grohmann, 2015).

Considering the drivers and outcomes of brand authenticity, several studies with different conceptual models have also been developed. Some authors study private labels perceived authenticity and investigate iconic, indexical cues and brand schematicity as antecedents and brand attitude and willingness to buy as outcomes (Carsana & Jolibert, 2018). Moreover, Fritz, Schoenmueller and Bruhn (2017) state that brand authenticity can be influenced by different variables like brand heritage, brand nostalgia, brand commercialization, brand clarity, brand's social commitment, brand legitimacy, actual self-congruence and employee's passion. These authors also argue that brand authenticity has a positive effect on brand relationship quality which, in turn, positively influences consumer purchase intention, price premium and forgiveness. Brand involvement, as a moderator, has also been analyzed. Another model with four antecedents of brand authenticity (uniqueness, scarcity, longevity and longitudinal consistency) was proposed and demonstrated a positive impact of the antecedents on brand authenticity and of brand authenticity on the outcomes expected quality and trust (Moulard, Raggio, & Folse, 2016). In addition, another study demonstrates that "...authenticity cues of quality commitment, heritage and sincerity have differential effects on a brand's position along the authenticity continuum and consequently, authenticity strategies" (Napoli, Dickinson-Delaporte, & Beverland, 2016, p. 1201) .

In the hospitality and tourism literature, authenticity has also been widely discussed and the concept operationalized in different ways. One example is the long-term study developed in Eastern Indonesia which examines the impact of authenticity based on three perspectives: government, tourists and villages (Cole, 2007). Another example is the study that highlights the interplay of hospitality, heritage and social memory with authenticity (Catrina, 2016). Moreover, based on data collected in two tourist attractions, some authors focus on the cues that lead to the assessment of indexical authenticity and iconic authenticity (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). In what concerns seaside resorts, some authors state the differences in terms of the quest for authenticity among tourists and suggest that the attitude towards authenticity could be used as a psychographic segmentation variable (Sedmak & Mihalič, 2008). The construct of authenticity has also been studied in the case of ethnic restaurants. The authors analyze the relationship between consumers' authenticity perception and brand equity and, consequently, the impact of brand equity on consumers' brand choice intentions. The main finding is that "...authenticity perception is a critical determinant of brand equity and that brand equity has a significant impact on consumers' brand choice intention" (Lu, Gursoy, & Lu, 2015, p. 36).

Finally, Manthiou, Kang, Hyun and Fu (2018) develop their research in a hotel setting and conclude that brand authenticity is a very important determinant of impression in memory, lifestyle-congruence and brand love.

In the current study, brand love and need for uniqueness are also analyzed, together with brand authenticity. Brand love is regarded as “the degree of passionate emotional attachment a satisfied consumer has for a particular trade name” (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006, p. 81). As Batra et al. (2012) suggest, brand love comprises core elements like passion-driven behaviors, self-brand integration, anticipated separation distress, positive emotional connection, long-term relationship, positive attitude valence and attitude certainty and confidence (strength). Other authors state that self-expressiveness of the brand and trust are positively related to brand love (Karjaluoto, Munnukka, & Kiuru, 2016).

Another concept related to authenticity is uniqueness. Consumers’ need for uniqueness is considered a positive search for abnormality relative to others (Snyder & Fromkin, 1977). The current study employs the need for uniqueness that can mean the “...individuals' pursuit of differentness relative to others that is achieved through the acquisition, utilization, and disposition of consumer goods for the purpose of developing and enhancing one's personal and social identity” (Tian & McKenzie, 2001, p. 172).

2.2 Customer engagement

The concept of engagement has been used in several fields like political science, sociology, psychology and organizational behavior. Within the marketing and service literature, the terms “consumer engagement”, “customer engagement” and “brand engagement” have emerged, mainly, after 2005 (Brodie, Hollebeek, Jurić, & Ilić, 2011).

According to various authors, customer engagement is related to the attitudes and behaviors that go beyond purchase (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; van Doorn et al., 2010). Several definitions for customer engagement have been developed in the marketing field, over time. On the one hand, it is presented as a psychological process which drives customer loyalty (Bowden, 2009). On the other hand, it is considered “...the psychological state that occurs by virtue of interactive, co-creative customer experiences with a focal agent/object (e.g., a brand) in focal service relationships” (Brodie et al., 2011, p. 260). A comprehensive definition identifying the existence of cognitive, emotional and behavioral dimensions, in customer engagement, is also presented in literature (Hollebeek, 2011). Other authors argue that the construct is composed not only by cognitive, emotional and behavioral elements but also by social dimensions (Vivek, Beatty, & Morgan, 2012). Other perspective highlights the behavioral aspects of the customer-to-firm relationship and presents the concept of customer

engagement behaviors (CEBs) (van Doorn et al., 2010). CEBs include different behaviors like, for instance, word-of-mouth activity, recommendations, blogging, writing reviews, helping other customers or even engaging in legal action.

The development of digital and social media highlighted the importance of customer engagement in these new contexts. Brodie, Ilic, Juric and Hollebeek (2013) state that despite the existing studies about the topic, there is a lack of research about consumer engagement in online brand communities. Therefore, the authors develop an exploratory analysis and conclude that the consumer engagement process involves several sub-processes that reflect consumers' interactive experience in these online communities and value co-creation among participants. Hollebeek, Glynn and Brodie (2014) also address this topic, focusing on the development of a consumer brand engagement scale in the specific social media context.

Several researchers have analyzed the consequences of consumer/customer experience which include trust, satisfaction, commitment, emotional connection/attachment, empowerment, consumer value and loyalty (Brodie, Ilic, Juric, & Hollebeek, 2013). In the concrete case of loyalty, it is important to highlight the studies of Bowden (2009), Vivek, Beatty and Morgan (2012), Hollebeek (2011) and Brodie, Ilic, Juric and Hollebeek (2013).

3. Methodology

Text-mining analysis is a type of technique that analyses and processes a large amount of unstructured text to extract relevant data that can be translated into actionable knowledge (Fan, Wallace, Rich, & Zhang, 2006). This allows us to extract the content of a text - such as reviews - and to classify it into positive or negative judgement in accordance with its polarity (Casaló, Flavián, Guinalú, & Ekinici, 2015), as well as gain insights into consumers' overall attitudes, opinions and emotions (Költringer & Dickinger, 2015).

In this study we opt to use the MeaningCloud text mining tool. This text mining tool provides to researchers and practitioners the identification of text sentimental polarity, identification of the target of the sentiment, text theme and classification, text clustering, among others. In fact, recent research has used this text mining tool to perform their studies (Bilro, Loureiro, & Guerreiro, 2018; Martínez et al., 2016; Segura-Bedmar, Martínez, Revert, & Moreno-Schneider, 2015). MeaningCloud uses Natural Language Processing techniques (NLP) to discover the relationship between sentiments and entities that appear in the text. It also enables researchers to define themselves the polarity of entities and concepts they are studying, which makes this tool suitable for any kind of research (Manning et al., 2014; Mostafa, 2013). The polarities of sentiments vary from P+ (very positive) to N+ (very negative).

3.1 Sample and Procedure

Yelp is chosen as the social networking platform to retrieve consumers' reviews and business information following several studies (Bilro et al., 2018; Hicks et al., 2012; Parikh, Behnke, Vorvoreanu, Almanza, & Nelson, 2014). Yelp is a review-centric geosocial network that offers information about venues and users, through users reviews and local business information. Each user can generate his/her own content and write reviews, interact with other users, report locations and search for venues of interest (Yelp, 2017). In Yelp, restaurants exhibit a large number of reviews which reveals a significant source of information. In this sense, we focus our research on restaurants, in line with distinguished research focusing on online reviews of hospitality and restaurants (Bilgihan, Seo, & Choi, 2017; Romero, 2017; Šerić & Praničević, 2018). This study managed to collect randomly 3,877 reviews in YELP about customers of restaurants in the United States of America.

3.2 Text-mining and created dictionaries

Text-mining usually uses Natural Language Processing (NLP) technique to extract meaningful information that can be translated into actionable knowledge (Fan et al., 2006; Mostafa, 2013). Nevertheless, to conduct a suitable analysis in a specific field, text mining should use a literature-based dictionary of terms to guide the analysis (Kaur & Chopra, 2016; Mostafa, 2013; Tang & Guo, 2015). To do so, we create our own dictionaries.

The creation of our dictionaries is built based on previous literature. Customer engagement is measured through cognitive processing, affection and activation following Hollebeek et al. (2014). Brand authenticity, need for uniqueness and brand love is measured following Manthiou, Kang, Hyun, & Fu (2018). As a result, a thesaurus of 198 synonyms was uploaded to the MeaningCloud tool. This process results in an aggregate dictionary that combines the already available NLP technique with our Authenticity dictionary.

4. Results

A sentiment analysis is performed on the 3,877 online reviews. This procedure is divided into two sequential parts since each review could hold more than one relevant topic: (1) a global sentiment analysis and (2) a topic-sentiment analysis. The text-mining tool assigned a sentiment polarity classification (i.e., None, N+, N, Neu, P and P+) for each topic. In order to perform statistical analysis, the letter scale is converted into a numerical scale from 0 (None) to 5 (P+). Results from the global sentiment analysis reveal that most users' recommendations are positive (see Table 1). 79.91% of the reviews reveal positive sentiments, 10.14% of the reviews reveal negative sentiments and only 0.70% of the reviews have very negative

sentiments. The results also show that the confidence in polarity classification is 91.34 (ranging from 0-100), with a standard deviation of 6.41.

Global Sentiment Polarity	Sum	%	P-N %
5	578	14.91%	79.91%
4	2520	65.00%	
3	375	9.67%	9.67%
2	366	9.44%	10.14%
1	27	0.70%	
0	11	0.28%	0.28%
Total	3,877	100.00%	100.00%

Table 1. Global sentiment analysis polarity.

After conducting the general sentiment analysis, we carry out the topic-sentiment analysis. In this procedure, the sentiment scores are classified using the Authenticity and Engagement dictionaries. From the procedure of the topic sentiment analysis, 61,102 topics were identified, of which 8,011 were directly linked to the constructs of our study (see table 2).

Constructs	Count
Activation	2,105
Affection	2,186
Brand Authenticity	960
Brand Love	993
Cognitive Processing	1,491
Need for Uniqueness	276
Total	8,011

Table 2. Topic-sentiment analysis identification based on the Authenticity and Engagement dictionaries.

Table 3 shows the mean polarity of each topic. The topic with the highest positive sentiment is cognitive processing (\bar{x} =4.68; SD=0.94), which is related to the individual's level of perceived instrumental and experiential value (Brodie et al., 2013). On the other hand, brand love exhibits the lowest mean score (\bar{x} =3.27; SD=1.88). This is very close to the neutral point, which may express a neutral feeling when it comes to level of passion-driven behaviours or reflecting strong desires to use it (Batra, Ahuvia, & Bagozzi, 2012). Affection exhibits a higher mean score compared to activation, therefore, the consumers' degree of positive affective-relation with a brand is higher.

Constructs	Mean	Standard Deviation	Var
Cognitive Processing	4.68	0.94	0.88
Affection	3.90	1.56	2.44

Activation	3.82	0.96	0.93
Brand Authenticity	3.81	1.96	3.84
Need for Uniqueness	3.80	1.56	2.44
Brand Love	3.27	1.88	3.53
Total	3.88	1.48	2.34

Table 3. Mean polarity and standard deviation of each topic

5. Conclusions and implications

In this research, we are able to highlight five main conclusions based on our results. First, the cognitive processing emerges as the strongest dimension from the topic-sentiment analysis, which reinforces the findings from previous literature (Brodie et al., 2013; Hollebeek et al., 2014), and might be connected to consumer's awareness of the importance of his reviews as recommendation for others.

Second, the affection dimension also receives positive sentiment, which means that there is customer related affect towards the brand.

Third, the activation dimension also presents positive sentiment value, which may be understood as customer likability to offer help and be useful for other consumers.

Fourth, the brand authenticity and need for uniqueness presents similar values, which may be understood as similar positive customer sentiments towards these two constructs.

Fifth, the brand love presents lower polarity value compared to brand authenticity, which can be seen as the consumer weighting more the authenticity of the brand even if consumers nourish some love for that brand.

5.1 Theoretical and managerial implications

This study adds to the literature as it gives insights about customers' sentiments towards important marketing constructs, namely, brand authenticity and customer engagement. Moreover, managers of this type of business (service context) should focus on creating on customers the fulfilment of the need for uniqueness and authenticity, creating a value offer that conveys originality, reliability and naturalness in the provided service.

5.2 Limitations and further research

The limitations of the current study could be avenues for further research. Firstly, although the text-mining analysis performed is useful to understand customers' sentiments towards the constructs, we cannot take conclusions about the relationships among the different constructs. Therefore, future researchers could apply a different methodological approach to study the association between the analysed constructs, namely, brand authenticity and customer engagement. Besides using a different methodology, a longitudinal approach could also be applied and an analysis across different markets would also be important for future research.

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