



Insight into consumer experience on UK train transportation services

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ABSTRACT

Customers' experiences are significant in a rapidly changing service context, and this is shaped by the quality of service provided. With social media changing the way consumers engage with service providers, experiences are shared online. This study carried out three analyses of brand-related conversations on Twitter with the aim of exploring consumers' attitudes to and experiences of train operating companies. Firstly, Python was used for the tweet mining and sentiment analysis (n = 1,914,494 tweets) to investigate the polarity between the opinions of commuters. Secondly, tweets were thematically analysed and grouped to understand how consumers experience the service quality. Lastly, content analysis of the tweets was carried out to identify the variations in service quality. Results indicated that there is overall positive customer experience, however, there are variations in service quality dimension across the different train groups, highlight the need to improve service quality at different touchpoints, especially the tangible features of the trains and presence of responsive and emphatic staff. This study further broadens the context of customer experience through eWOM on social media for service brands, contribute towards related literature on sentiment analysis and service brands, providing significant theoretical and practical implications for researchers and managers.

1. Introduction

Providing an enhanced consumer experience is an important management objective (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016), and is crucial for achieving profitability, especially in a highly competitive environment (Chowdhary and Prakash, 2007; Hernon and Nitecki, 2001). When companies try to set themselves apart from their competition, it is paramount they understand the importance of providing a quality service that will enhance their customers' experiences. Despite the importance of service quality, however, there is uncertainty regarding what this term encapsulates. Service quality is thought to be multi-dimensional as it varies from individual to individual (Korda and Boris, 2010; Brady and Cronin, 2001), and each customer may have a different perception about what quality service looks like. Irrespective of this ambiguity, organisations need to find ways to measure and evaluate their service quality.

If they experience poor service quality, consumers are able to share their experiences via social media. An example of this was when a United Airlines passenger was dragged from an overbooked flight. The event was recorded on mobile phones, shared on Twitter, and spread rapidly online. This electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) caused huge damage to the airline brand, there were customer breaking their loyalty

cards and vowing not to fly with them, asking others to boycott the airline. Their stock was off about 4%, knocking off close to \$1 billion off the company's market value, though later recovered but its market value was still off by \$250 million (Kottasova, 2017), highlighting the impact of negative eWOM. Nearly one in five posts on Twitter (known as tweets) include a specific brand name, and express positive or negative feelings about a specific brand. The number of monthly active Twitter users is 310 million, and the number of tweets sent per day is 500 million. This means that an average of 100 million tweets mention brands every day (Internet Live Stats, 2018).

This study investigated how social media can be used to measure customer experiences in the context of the United Kingdom train system. The number of train journeys has been increasing as more and more people use trains to travel to work and across the country. The number of rail passenger journeys in the United Kingdom (UK) has more than doubled in the past 20 years, with an average growth of 4% each year (Peluffo, 2017). Train travel is often considered to be more convenient than air travel as there are no queues or security checks, passengers can take an unlimited amount of luggage, and train stations are often in city centres, making them easier to access.

Thanks to social media, commuters can now tweet about their experiences and express their complaints about and compliments to

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companies, while companies can use social media to contact consumers. Companies can initiate conversations on social media by making announcements and can provide updates to customers. These brand-related conversations on social media are part of eWOM (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004), which has been found to have an impact on brands and consumers (Erkan and Evans, 2016; Wang et al., 2012; Raassens and Haans, 2017). eWOM is therefore an important topic to consider with regards to service quality and customer experience.

Theoretically, this study uses the Service Quality (SERVQUAL) model to explore brand-related conversations on Twitter following the service research priorities raised by Ostrom et al. (2015) with the aim of exploring consumers' attitudes to and experiences of train operating companies (TOCs). We carried out three different studies to achieve this aim. The theoretical underpinning has guided the process and the development of the research questions. We carried out the first study to understand the commuters' overall evaluation of the service quality from a sentiment point of view. Tweets relating to 27 TOCs were analysed to investigate their sentiments and polarity between the opinions of commuters. To have a qualitative understanding of these opinions beyond just sentiments, Study 2 adopted the five dimensions of SERVQUAL to analyse tweets thematically and grouped them to understand how consumers experience the service quality of these companies. Lastly, Study 3 qualitatively explored the themes generated in Study 2 by carrying out a content analysis to identify the variations in the TOCs service quality.

Our findings reveal sentiment differences in service quality experiences across various train routes and in the context of competition and alternatives available for commuters on train transportation, there is need to improve service quality at different touchpoints, especially the tangible features of the train and presence of emphatics staff. Building on previous works (Deb and Ahmed, 2018; Loo et al., 2010; He et al., 2018), this study further broadens the context of big data in customer experience through eWOM on social media for transportation service providers, contribute towards related literature on sentiment analysis and TOCs in the UK and providing significant theoretical and practical implications for researchers and managers.

2. Literature review

2.1. The railway system in the United Kingdom

The railway system in the UK is the oldest in the world. Railways began in 1825 when British engineer George Stephenson designed the first steam-powered locomotive, The Rocket, in 1825. Steam locomotives helped make Britain one of the most powerful nations in the world (Hoskins, 2010). Even though the industry model changed in the mid-1990s following privatisation, the British attachment to rail travel is clear, and it has the 17th largest and the densest rail network in the world (Smith, 2016).

The ownership model of the rail industry has two operating companies: the freight operating companies (FOCs), who compete for freight contracts, and passenger services that are mostly specified by the government and delivered by train operating companies (TOCs). Although the majority of passenger services in the UK are run by TOCs after they bid for seven to eight-year contracts, there are also open-access operators (OAOs) who have identified an opportunity to run a service that is not currently being provided by the main TOCs, and operate services purely on a commercial basis (i.e. not under a franchise or a concession agreement). Network Rail manages the rail infrastructure, while the Office of Rail and Road (ORR) regulate both TOCs and OAOs in turn (Rail Delivery Group, 2016)

The rail network has witnessed unprecedented growth which is due to an increasing population, long-term demographic shifts, economic growth and suburbanization as a combination of rising house prices and steadily increasing prosperity has led to longer commuting distances (Smith, 2017). Passenger traffic has doubled, and is growing faster than

in all other European countries (Knox, 2013). Since 2004, the number of passenger journeys on the UK rail network has increased by 57%, which is higher than the European Union average of 23%. Train journeys across the UK rose by almost 4% overall, increasing by 60 million to nearly 1.7 billion in the last financial year (Shaw, 2015). The system is undergoing one of the biggest investment programmes in its history to provide much-needed extra capacity, more services, and better journeys (Rail Delivery Group, 2016).

The contribution of the UK rail sector to the UK economy is huge. Rail passenger and freight operators in the UK and their supply chains employ up to 216,000 people, contributing around £10.1bn to the UK economy each year. The rail sector plays an important role in providing employment across the UK, both directly in the industry (through employment by TOCs, FOCs, and Network Rail) and indirectly through the supply chain (Rail Delivery Group, 2016). In addition to its economic contribution, the rail sector also provides environmental and social benefits to the UK by increasing journey quality, improving accessibility and air quality, and reducing the number of road accidents (Rail Delivery Group, 2016). The rail sector creates a more productive economy by alleviating congestion in the road network and facilitating the development of clusters of economic activity.

Knox (2013), however, noted that although much has improved since British Rail was privatised in 1993, the railways are still far from perfect. In 2014, London had a much higher number of passengers travelling in and out of the city centre compared to any other city with 563,000 arrivals during morning peak travel times on a typical weekday, whereas Birmingham, Britain's second busiest city, had only 39,000. In addition to this congestion, the public are unhappy with the constant price hikes (Cox, 2014; Morris, 2016). The Trades Union Congress (TUC, 2014) also reported that British commuters spent over three times more of their salary on rail fares than most European passengers, even though poor customer service and delays have been documented. In addition, Walford (2012) reported that the UK's railways "are the most expensive, least comfortable and the least efficient in Europe". Commuters in the north of England, in London, and in the South East are facing delays and disruption to their services due to ongoing strike action by union members, who are involved in a long-running dispute over the role of guards and driver-only operations (Topham, 2018).

As illustrated in Fig. 1, the UK rail network is divided into three sectors: Long Distance, London and South East, and Regional (Peluffo, 2017). Commuters using different sectors will have different experiences on their journey, therefore, this study aimed to provide empirical evidence for understanding consumers' experiences with the TOCs in the UK.

2.2. Train service quality

Customers are using the TOCs with an expectation of quality service. Traditionally, service quality refers to the customer's overall evaluation of the service firm's attributes by comparing their expectations with the firm's actual performance (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Service quality has been known to enhance the profitability of a company, especially in a highly competitive environment (Chowdhary and Prakash, 2007). Therefore, TOC must be aware of the quality of the services they are offering and make efforts to improve their services.

Exploring customer satisfaction via various service quality studies has become a key tool in formulating market strategies, as delivering high perceived overall service quality is essential for companies that intend to distinguish themselves from their competitors and sustain their competitive advantages (Stamenkov and Dika, 2015; Chowdhary and Prakash, 2007; Wang et al., 2003). To retain and satisfy customers, service organisations need to examine systematically the services they provide from a customer viewpoint and enrich the design of their services and the environment in which their services are delivered (Awad, 2012).

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