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Trains and Twitter: Firm generated content, consumer relationship management and message framing

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we examine the impact of Twitter content on users' train journeys and how train providers' message framing moderates these relationships. Framing regards the way in which messages are worded concerning a particular object. In many consumer markets such as train journeys, firms frame messages in both positive and negative lights to persuade individuals to make purchase decisions (take intended journeys). We thus go beyond the literature's current focus on consumer-generated content (CGC), and bring into contention the important role that marketer-generated content (MGC) plays in shaping the social media-based consumer relationship management (CRM) strategies. Specifically, we analyze commuter tweets about 14 train operators, along with the companies' Twitter feeds. The findings, obtained using sentiment analysis tools, suggest that consumer sentiments only moderately impact travel performance, as measured by operator ratings, CPM (consumer performance measure; a measure based on travel incidents) and firm financial performance. On the other hand, it appears that train operators use tweets in relation to their services particularly well, while keeping customers engaged by listening to and learning from criticism, thus confirming the moderating role of their Twitter-based message framing strategies. Train operators should look to maintain their social media use practices, ensuring they are consistently applied within an overarching CRM framework, particularly in key 'pain' areas such as delay and cancellation.

1. Introduction

Commuters are often hit with travel misery when a series of rush-hour problems strike their transport network. For example, signaling failures may see a part suspension on line 1 of the network, while line 2 may be held up at a station due to a safety alarm. Another signaling problem may lead to delays on line 3, and a faulty train at a different station may add to the problems, causing severe delays on line 4. In a situation like this, crowds of commuters could be seen queuing for buses, with scores of others choosing to join the long wait for taxis. Rail staff could be seen busily directing travelers as the queues often snake along the pavements and into the road. Commuters may also endure these miserable journeys to and from work when a dispute between rail workers and managers disrupts the whole or part of the network. Overcrowding is also a common occurrence on commuter trains, which can be a source of great inconvenience for passengers, and, in some situations, it can be potentially highly dangerous.

The rail industry is no stranger to criticism, from repeated questions around the quality and frequency of services to the regular outrage at fare increases. All providers of rail services have the responsibility to ensure that consumers have a safe and enjoyable journey: yet commuter journeys frequently attract negative sentiment, whether the issue is a train delay, overcrowding or crime. The

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severity of network-related incidents can be such that operators are frequently subject to complaints from commuters. In the past, the preferred method to deal with such complaints was to write letters and through running annual surveys, meaning that concerns could be addressed in a system away from public view. However, commuters now have an open forum to provide feedback, voice dissatisfaction with service and make complaints. They can now use Twitter to alert rail providers to the challenges and problems experienced on running services. The high variance of the information that propagates through large user communities in Twitter makes this network a significant player in service-oriented markets. Social media offers commuters a free, interactive and real-time platform for the publication of grievances, which can be viewed by millions of other users (Schroeder and Pennington-Gray, 2014; Bernoff and Li, 2008; Pan and Zhang, 2011). For instance, consumer-generated content (CGC) on social media has heightened the significance of consumer relationship management (CRM) as criticisms of companies posted online can reach a large and geographically diverse audience (Mkono and Tribe, 2016; Kietzmann and Canhoto, 2013; Hudson et al., 2016), achieve viral status and pose reputational risks to those companies (Mkono and Tribe, 2016). The platform can also be used by the providers to reduce the number of customer complaints, besides its use for other purposes such as setting targets for adding extra carriages or sharing information through Twitter about the alternative route options that may be available (Berger and Iyengar, 2013; Tirunillai and Tellis, 2012).

In this research, we examine how online buzz and attention is created for different rail operators and how that affects their relationships with customers. Specifically, we focus on how positive and negative opinions propagate via Twitter and the degree to which train providers' message frames influence consumers' travel experiences. Although a few studies have already examined the scope of marketer-generated content (MGC) along with the CGC (Godes and Mayzlin, 2009; Trusov et al. 2009; Goh et al., 2013; Christodoulides and Jevons, 2011), they, nonetheless, focus on limited textual aspects of MGC content. In this study, we address this gap and investigate the MGC by asking a number of questions: for instance, do negative consumer sentiments affect their travel experience? How do positive reviews and opinions affect their travel plans and journeys taken? What is the specific role of MGC in mediating such relationships? By understanding the interaction of user-generated and marketer-generated contents, we can show that consumer sentiment on social media tangibly influences a company's product offering. More specifically, we aim to understand the way in which train operators use Twitter to word a particular message, in order to persuade the commuters to complete their intended journeys. Our main source of data is chatter from Twitter, as previous studies have found that the chatter of a community can be used to make more informed and stable predictions (Asur and Huberman, 2010; Das and Chen, 2007; Tirunillai and Tellis, 2012). We analyze commuter tweets about the services provided by the 14 main rail providers that serve London. We gather our data by mainly looking at Twitter handles that contain references to and complaints around cancellation and delays. For example, we have explored in detail Twitter data on negative sentiments – there were, in total, 457,853 tweets using negative language in 2014. Commuters express positive sentiments as well, which we have also used in the research.

Using sentiment analysis from data obtained for 2014 and 2015, we find that a potent mix of delays, crowding and cancellations creates deeply uncomfortable situations for passengers. This results in often strong reactions on services as reflected through Twitter. We further examine the impact of user sentiments on an operator's performance rating (RATINGS), CPM (consumer travel performance measure) and financial performance. We use rail operators' star rating as our first measure of train operators' performance. CPM is a Twitter-based performance measure, incorporating incidents of delays, cancellations and overcrowding. We also measure the impact of consumer sentiments on rail operators' financial performance, and obtain relevant data from each operator's annual reports. We show a modest impact of negative sentiments on both RATINGS and CPM but there is no such effect for positive sentiments. However, we find support for the moderating role of companies' message frames on consumers' travel experiences as reflected in the stronger impact of a company's positive message frames on both RATINGS and CPM. This suggests that companies' own engagement with passengers via Twitter can be a vital component in the commuter-train provider relationship. These findings also highlight the importance of a company's Twitter-based CRM strategy. We thus see the potential of using social media as a CRM tool, and applies it in a local public transportation setting, which is an industry in which daily complaints from commuters are common. It appears that both the instantaneity of social media communications and the directionality of Twitter tweets (from marketers to consumers) make Twitter an ideal candidate for managing commuter relationships.

The arguments developed within this paper are organized as follows. The first section presents a literature review, which argues that CRM practices can be used to support a company's social media strategy. The following section introduces our data and provides information about the paper's methodology. We then examine the specific research questions and present our findings. The final section reflects on key results and suggests pathways for future research within this largely unexplored field.

2. Literature survey

2.1. Customer relationship management

Since its emergence in the mid-1990s' (van Doorn et al., 2010; Payne and Frow, 2005), CRM has attracted vast amounts of managerial and academic interest (Palmatier, 2008) and, as such, is widely recognized as an important business concept. Nevertheless, whilst numerous definitions have been offered by various academics, Ngai (2005) highlights that a universal definition continues to remain elusive. Goldenberg (2002) suggests a reason for this is that CRM carries different implications for each organization; thus an organization must define CRM contextually in order to fully understand and apply the concept. Consequently, CRM is often defined as a combination of people, processes and specific technological solutions within an organization that allows for the managing of customer relationships (Payne and Frow, 2005; van Doorn et al., 2010; Harrigan, Evers, Miles and Daly, 2017). Grunewalder (2008) proposes that CRM is not just the managing of relationships, but also involves an understanding of one's

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