Country-based comparison of accommodation brands in social media: An fsQCA approach

Alexandru Capatina[a,*], Adrian Micu[a], Angela Eliza Micu[b], Rym Bouzaabia[c], Olfa Bouzaabia[d]

[a] Dunarea de Jos University of Galati, Romania
[b] Ovidius University of Constanta, Romania
[c] University of Sousse, Tunisia
[d] University of Gabes, Tunisia

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ABSTRACT

Social media play a crucial role in the tourism industry. Tourists engage with social networking sites to make informed decisions about their travels and share their experiences of accommodation brands with friends. This research explores causal configurations of factors that enable accommodation brands to succeed in online social networks. In this study, the ranking of 20 accommodation brands on a social network (Facebook) was employed as an outcome of social mentions, which comprised four elements: strength, sentiment, passion, and reach. This paper thus presents a cross-country comparison of relationships between social mentions and the ranking of the top accommodation brands in Romania and Tunisia in terms of number of Facebook fans. The data were gathered from Socialbakers and Social Mention, two important tools in social media marketing analytics that use sophisticated tracking instruments to deliver statistics related to the top 10 accommodation brands in Romania and Tunisia. The study provides keen insight into the causal configurations that link social mention variables to the ranking of accommodation brands on Facebook. Fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA) confirmed that social mention variables (strength, sentiment, passion, and reach) are key factors for achieving a higher ranking on Facebook in terms of the ability to attract fans. The study contributes by showing that social mentions have a significant positive effect on accommodation brands' ranking, especially in terms of online branding strategies.

1. Introduction

Certain industries are characterized by complex offerings that drive functional, symbolic, and experiential benefits. In many of these industries, the brand represents the main relational resource for maintaining a competitive advantage (Codeluppi, 2000; Fournier, 1998). This is particularly true of the highly competitive tourism industry. Intense competition between hotels with similar characteristics makes the brand a key differentiating factor (Fesenmaier, 2007; Pike, 2005).

Hotel managers must measure the effectiveness of their brand to remain competitive in the marketplace (Blain, Levy, & Ritchie, 2005). Hotel managers should therefore always interact with tourists because living a positive experience on the site could be shared with circles of friends (Holzner, 2009). By using social networking sites such as Facebook, hotels can create international social networks in which customers become fans and information sharers (Hsu, 2012). Moreover, hotels can interact with customers through websites and share information, modify services, or refine the brand (McCarthy, Stock, & Verma, 2010).

With the emergence of social media, customers are no longer passive recipients of information. Instead, they actively use and distribute information via social media (Ryan & Jones, 2009). Tourists engage with social networking sites to make informed decisions about their travels and share their experiences of accommodation brands with friends. This participatory culture is a feature of social media that can now determine a firm's reputation, sales, and even survival (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011). Hoteliers should therefore embrace the new ways people communicate and ready themselves for changes in consumer behavior and expectations that lie just beyond the horizon. By staying abreast of social media marketing trends and establishing a dynamic online presence, hotel companies can quickly adapt to disruption and achieve an early adopter advantage when attracting business from tech-savvy millennials (Quach, 2017; Scott & Orlikowski, 2012).

Accordingly, analysis of social media is extremely important because individuals use social media to participate in discussions that can inform and influence consumers about brands or organizations

(Callarisa, Sánchez García, Cardiff, & Roshchina, 2012). Being able to interact directly with customers in real time creates a sense of loyalty among customers (Park & Oh, 2012). In addition, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) is a powerful way of sharing information via social networking among consumers in general and tourists in particular. According to Casaló, Flavián, and Guinalíu (2010), eWOM exerts a powerful influence on whether or not customers select a brand. It acts as a reliable information source to assess risk and reduce uncertainty about purchase decisions (Murray, 1991).

Despite growing interest in social media in tourism, scholars' attention and academic studies that have focused on the topic are scarce (Park & Oh, 2012). To address this paucity of research, this study presents a cross-country comparison of relationships between social media and the ranking of the top accommodation brands in Romania and Tunisia, according to number of Facebook fans.

Tunisia and Romania have different economic and cultural backgrounds. On January 1, 2007, Romania completed its accession to the European Union. Romania has successfully traversed the recent period of crisis, unlike Tunisia, which is struggling to overcome an economic crisis that began after the revolution (Bouzaabia, Bouzaabia, & Capatina, 2013). In Sousse, Tunisia, an attack occurred at the seaside resort of Port el Kantaoui on June 26, 2015. The Tunisian government considers this attack a major blow to tourism, as was the attack on the Bardo Museum, which in April 2015 had already caused a 25.7% fall in the number of tourists. The tourism sector, which accounts for approximately 7% of Tunisia's GDP, is considered a strategic sector. The Ministry of Tourism estimated that the economic impact of this attack on the Tunisian economy could exceed 450 million euros in 2015. This study is therefore important for Tunisia, among other countries, because it reveals the ranking of Tunisian hotels according to number of Facebook fans and compares Tunisia to a similar country, namely Romania, which was able to overcome its own economic crisis.

Accordingly, this study takes the first step toward enriching our understanding of the causal configurations that link social mention variables to rankings of accommodation brands on Facebook. The results show that the causal recipes that produce the outcome in Romania differ from the causal recipes for Tunisia. Whereas strength and reach were the most influential causal conditions for the outcome in the Romanian sample, strength and sentiment were the most influential causal conditions for the outcome in the Tunisian sample.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: Section 2 offers a literature review on social media's impact on accommodation brands and presents the research propositions. Section 3 highlights the fsQCA method's applicability to the research framework. Section 4 presents the results based on the fsQCA software outputs. Section 5 discusses these results and offers conclusions, which cover managerial implications, limitations of the study, and suggestions for future research.

2. Theoretical background and development of research propositions

Universal McCann (2008) defines social media as online applications, platforms, and media that facilitate interaction, collaboration, and content sharing. In contrast, Liburd (2012) defines social media as the principles and practices of facilitating information sharing and social interaction by users who generate, alter, and upload web-based content. Weinberg (2009) reports that social media empower individuals to promote their websites, products, or services through online social channels and communicate with and tap into a community that may be larger than the one available via traditional advertising channels.

Social media themselves represent a genuine social phenomenon that companies should fathom and master. Social media refer to different online platforms such as blogs, forums, and social networks (Facebook, LinkedIn, etc.) that constantly evolve, allowing users to be both sharers and targets of messages, while facilitating sharing and

viral potential. Brands thus have a unique opportunity to create a fruitful innovative interaction model thanks to platforms like Twitter and Facebook, which allow brands to strengthen communication channels and make customers feel they are the center of attention.

Social media, particularly social networks, allow brands to master their e-reputations. One of the fundamental values of social networks is the possibility of attracting active fans, who, thanks to eWOM, act as ambassadors and fervent defenders of the brand. Social media thus provide an eWOM-based communication channel. Because social media offer consumers sites that allow them to share experiences and opinions, social media are considered influencers of consumer decisions (Hamouda & Tabbane, 2014; Trusov, Bucklin, & Pauwels, 2009). Finally, social media offer brands the possibility of implementing their communication strategies through mobile applications, Facebook games, competitions, and so forth. Doing so lends value to the company's objectives by creating sympathy capital and ensuring quick, well-targeted information sharing (Anderson, 2012).

Today, especially in certain countries, we are witnessing a new phenomenon that can be interpreted as an emerging trend: Facebook and Twitter are being increasingly used in travel and tourism (Milano, Baggio, & Piattelli, 2011). "Facebook is the largest social platform of the social networks, with worldwide usage approaching 700 million users as of June 2011. This represents nearly 10% of the total world population. Facebook has the largest audience of any social networks and is certainly worth including as a key part of your social media strategy" (Patel & Patel, 2014, p. 346). Facebook's immense popularity has revolutionized marketing practices such as advertising and promotion (Hanna, Rohm, & Crittenden, 2011).

Many countries consider social media such as Facebook important tools to promote their tourism industries (Zeng, 2013), reach people, and gauge the market's reaction to their offering (Leung, Law, van Hoof, & Buhalis, 2013). Accordingly, more and more tourism businesses are using social networking sites to achieve better positions while competing for tourists' approval because online travel communities such as TripAdvisor and TravBuddy influence millions of travel decisions based on previous travelers' comments (Casaló et al., 2010).

Social media in general and Facebook in particular allow hotel managers to forge a direct link with customers, engage with customers, and obtain feedback about the services on offer (Anderson, 2012). Similarly, Facebook represents an opportunity for hotels to convert a satisfied customer into a loyal one. Nowadays, online consumer reviews constitute a growing phenomenon that influences consumers' choices and purchasing behavior (Casaló, Flavián, Guinalíu, & Ekinci, 2015; Noone, McGuire, & Rohlfs, 2011; Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014). Studies have shown that consumers' online discussions about positive product or brand experiences can generate empathy and positive feelings among readers (Bickart & Schindler, 2001). In fact, consumers can actively use different platforms like consumer review sites, blogs and social networking sites, among others, to create online content and share experiences of accommodation brands with friends (Ayeh, Leung, Au, & Law, 2012). This exchange of information and experiences between consumers positively affects perceptions of the value of a product and the likelihood of recommending the product (Gruen, Osmonbekov, & Czaplewski, 2006) because an opinion or recommendation from an acquaintance or friend has a huge impact on tourists' travel decisions (Sigala, 2007). Social media allow for real-time recording and sharing of tourist experiences (Munar, 2010), increasingly enabling tourists to influence others by sharing opinions and experiences (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014; Živković, Gajić, & Brdar, 2014).

Xiang and Gretzel (2010) highlighted the increasing importance of social media for travelers looking for online travel products. So social media sites containing user-generated comments and reviews can affect the ranking of accommodation brands. Social media can be used to stream traffic to organizational websites. For example, blogs, now found on many sites, may be synced through web feeds (Al-Badi, Al Majeeni, Mayhew, & Al-Rashdi, 2011).