

Chapter 9

What Do Twitter Users Think of Top Fast Food Brands?

Exploring Public Opinion Using a Sentiment Analysis Approach

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ABSTRACT

This research study explores how some of the largest American fast-food brands are perceived globally through the analysis of 10,002 tweets to identify insights and build knowledge around the industry. With this exploratory research, the thesis aims to ultimately provide recommendations in the digital scope that could improve the public opinion of negatively perceived brands. The methodology in this research consists of a data-driven process in which three different analyses are carried out: sentiment analysis, textual analysis, and a content analysis of each brand. By collecting data from user-generated content on Twitter, the sentiment of each tweet has been classified with an algorithm developed and trained specifically for this research. According to Krippendorff's alpha value, the results have a tentative conclusive reliability, indicating that McDonald's and Starbucks have the highest percentage of negatively classified tweets. To improve their negative perception online, it has been recommended that they showcase different types of content on their digital platforms.

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INTRODUCTION

With the occurrence of globalization over the past decades, American fast-food brands have expanded their presence into various markets across the globe at a mass scale. As a result, the reputation of these brands has also surfaced at a global scale. Currently, it is suspected that they face the issue of having a negative reputation due to various factors including health concerns and Americanization of foreign cultures. Since global communication and marketing activities have transitioned into the digital space, this thesis aims to identify the American fast-food brands' perceptions online to propose digital strategies to improve the public opinion of negatively perceived fast-food brands. Therefore, the main objectives of the thesis are the following: (i) To explore the global perception of American fast-food brands in the digital space and (ii) To determine which digital marketing approaches negatively perceived brands could take to improve their public opinion.

To successfully answer the main research question, previous sub-questions will be answered as well. This research has the objectives of exploring the global American fast-food market and current perceptions of American fast-food brands as well as the main digital strategies implemented within the fast-food industry. Therefore, the mentioned objectives pose 2 additional research objectives: (i) To contextualize the market of American fast-food among some of the world's largest brands by (such as the market size, revenues, competition, and products offered) as well as the industry's current reputation. (ii) To identify which digital strategies are currently being implemented in the industry in terms of social media usage and advertising spending.

In order to answer these questions, this research takes a unique approach in which machine learning is implemented. With the use of machine learning through an algorithm training process, user generated content can be analyzed. Since much fast-food research has not applied this method of analysis, this research covers a methodological gap within the industry.

The chosen methodology for this thesis is a sentiment analysis accompanied by case studies, focusing on 5 of the largest American fast-food brands: McDonald's, Burger King, Starbucks, KFC, and Taco Bell. Tweets that feature these brands will be downloaded from Twitter and put into a sentiment analysis software, which will then allow the results to be analyzed in terms of each brand being allocated a positive, neutral, or negative sentiment. In terms of the case studies, the brands' content will be analyzed to determine opportunities for improvement.

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