Uncovering the value of influencer marketing through social network analysis and brand positioning insights

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The rise of influencer marketing is fully realised only by a few South African companies and limited literature is available on how best to tap into its effectiveness. This highlights a distinctive opportunity in using semantic network analytics and market research insights to bridge the gap between data science, the true customer story and brand strategy execution. The results indicate that a brand message will be adopted if there is a self-brand connection which stems from engagement with authentic influencers on topics that matter, having a direct impact on the overall decision comfort and customer satisfaction.

Keywords: influence, customer engagement, decision comfort, self-brand connection, customer satisfaction, brand positioning, brand perception, influencer marketing, social network analysis.
1. Introduction

How many times a day do you look at updates on your social media platforms? The average South African spends around two hours and fifty-four minutes a day on their social media platforms (We are social Singapore, 2017).

How many times have you asked a family member or friend for advice when making a purchase decision? It has been found that 90% of customers trust a referral from their personal network, with 81% of those referrals taking place online (Biaudet, 2017). With the vast amount of social media interactions that occur daily, companies are beginning to understand that customers express their opinions online and have the ability to transform the opinions of others (Pang & Lee, 2008). As Groenewald (2018) puts it: “Brands have realised that the most success is achieved when happy customers tell their brand story. Enter the real brand ambassador.”

It took the radio 38 years to attract 50 million listeners and television 13 years to gain the attention of 50 million viewers. The Internet took only 4 years to appeal to 50 million participants, in particular, social media has become a global phenomenon of web-based applications wherein content is created by participatory communication, building communities and creating and sharing information (Akar & Topçu, 2011). There are currently 3.2 billion active social media users (Chaffey, 2018) with a 20% increase in social media users in South Africa since 2017 (World Wide Worx & Ornico, 2017).

Due to this rise in the digitisation, social media has become an integral part of the marketing strategies companies employ. Social media platforms enable customer engagement and have changed the way the marketing initiatives are approached due to the interactivity it allows. With this, the influence of social media on consumers has also increased, with 74% of consumers stating that their decisions are influenced by social media (Barker, 2017). A comprehensive overview of the origins of influence will be discussed, with emphasis on the fact that influence stems from genuine engagement, which leads to an increased likelihood to purchase.

The relationships between decision comfort, self-brand connection and customer satisfaction are then discussed and it is suggested that customer engagement is reinforced through a self-brand connection. Network analysis and the brand positioning insights are then used to explore the alignment and overlap of customers connection to the automotive brand under study.

1.1. Research Problem

The reality is that with the stringent implementation of the newly updated POPI (Protection Of Personal Information) Act, there exists a growing interest in exploring alternative methods to understanding users online behaviour. There is limited literature available concerning the use of social network analysis in a marketing context (Sharma, Ahuja & Alavi, 2018), therefore this study contributes valuable insights towards using social network analysis and exploring marketing constructs to drive an influencer marketing strategy based on gender-specific brand positioning. The findings of this study will provide methods for South African companies to align their online messaging with the voice of customer (VoC) in all regards, to ensure higher levels of engagement.
1.2. Research objectives

Two different objectives were formulated for this research paper:

1.2.1. Primary objective

This research paper investigates the importance, relevance and methods of approaching brand messaging by gender group based on the alignment of a brand positioning strategy to the true voice of the customer (VoC). The aim of this review is to highlight how influencer marketing can change customers’ perceptions and ultimately increase customer engagement if correctly initiated, through gaining a comprehensive understanding of the topics that customers discuss online and through market research. This ensures that the authentic customer story about the brand is aligned with the story that the brand would like to communicate per gender group. This article further aims to explore customers’ engagement and perception of the brand through studying customers’ decision comfort, self-brand connection and customer satisfaction.

1.2.2. Secondary objectives

- To determine how engagement with customers could be improved through influencing customers perception based on customer’s key motivational drivers; and
- To understand how companies can use semantic network analysis on Twitter data, overlapped with market research to understand the differences in topics discussed in an endeavour to leverage from existing information and align key discussion topics with the brand positioning outcomes.

1.3. Hypotheses

Hₐ₁: There is a difference in male decision comfort and female decision comfort with the Renault brand.
Hₐ₂: There is a positive relationship between decision comfort and self-brand connection of Renault customers with the brand.
Hₐ₃: There is a difference in self-brand connection between male and female Renault customers.
Hₐ₄: There is a positive relationship between decision comfort and customer satisfaction of Renault customers.
Hₐ₅: There is a positive relationship between the self-brand connection and customer satisfaction of Renault customers with the brand.

2. Literature review

The introduction covers an extensive scope of topics and therefore the authors propose a further acknowledgement of the conceptual foundation, as this paper will not allow for a comprehensive view on all topics discussed. The following topics deemed central to the literature review of this paper: The origins of influence, which stems from engagement and the customer engagement as a result of decision comfort, customer satisfaction and self-brand connection. This led to the investigation of social media and influencer marketing, influencers, brand positioning and semantic network analysis.

Understanding how to influence customers’ perceptions is an attempt at understanding how they make decisions and how these decisions can be influenced. The model developed in Figure 1, suggests that a marketing message conveyed via brand influencers should be based on the premise that there is a relationship between the level of customers’ engagement with the brand and their self-brand connection. This ultimately affects the post-purchase decision comfort and overall customer satisfaction. This
suggested that if the marketing message aligns with the story the brand aims to tell and the customer’s authentic experience, the customer's perception could be changed. This leads to an overall increase in satisfaction and most importantly, an increase in their likelihood to purchase as a result (Sharma, Ahuja & Alavi, 2018).

2.1. The origins of influence which stems from engagement

The word ‘influence’ stems from the Latin ad vertere which means influere - "to flow into, stream in, pour in," from in - "into, in, on, upon". In a social context, it is the capacity to have an effect on the character, development, or behaviour of someone or something, or the effect itself. The act or power of producing an effect without apparent exertion of force or direct exercise of command (Oxford Dictionaries, 2018).

Going back a few centuries, Aristotle, the ancient Greek philosopher, suggested that any communication intended to persuade others contains three key rhetorical elements (Rapp, 2012):

- logos’, the logic and reasoning in the message;
- ethos’, the character, credibility and trustworthiness of the communicator; and
- pathos’, the emotional dimension.
Aristotle suggests that the ability to persuade or change perception is determined by the characteristics of the source of the information, its recipient and its content. Aristotle also emphasised that above all, concentrating on those aspects that the audience finds important and is sensitive to is key. This reinforces the fact that a marketing initiative such as influencer marketing should be grounded in shared interest and shared motivations (Rapp, 2012).

Cialdini (1984), suggested that the influence process uses six principles of persuasion which include: reciprocity, commitment, social proof, liking, authority and scarcity. These principles are reliant on the psychology of people looking outside of themselves when making automatic decisions. Cialdini further states that consistency is key yet the real diver of consistency is commitment. Social psychologists believe that if humans can be encouraged to make a commitment, however small that initial commitment may be, that would result in a larger commitment potential at a later stage and along with that comes a natural tendency to behave consistently to the initial commitment. This tactic is known as the foot-in-the-door approach and was first discovered in the mid-1960s (Cialdini, 1984).

This brings us to our starting point, which is engagement. Engagement is the enabler of commitment, trust, value, brand involvement and ultimately word of mouth. Later on, this is explored in terms of virtual word-of-mouth, now known as influencer marketing (Vivek, Beatty & Morgan, 2012).

Customer Engagement can be defined as the intensity with which an individual participates and connects with a brand’s offerings or activities, which is initiated by the brand or the customer (Vivek et al., 2012). The theoretical framework of customer engagement proposed by Vivek et al., (2012) appears as Figure 2 in this article. The degree to which a customer participates with the brand is reliant on the common interest to the firm, thus it is argued that “the brand engages prospects and customers by identifying itself with their common interests” (Vivek et al., 2012:134).

![Figure 2: The theoretical framework of customer engagement](image-url)
The number one reason why corporate infrastructures have not allowed customer relationship management to prosper is due to the lack of understanding that relationship building must concentrate on why the customers want to engage and not what the company wants to sell to them. This is a result of the failure to understand that CRM (customer relationship management) means listening to learn, instead of listening to the customer to sell (Consulta, 2018). If influencers are used in the marketing framework, why should it be approached any differently?

2.2. Customer Engagement as a result of Decision Comfort, Customer Satisfaction & Self-brand connection

Before taking a further look at what influencer marketing comprises of, customers’ decision comfort, self-brand connection and customer satisfaction will be explored along with their relationship to customer engagement, to create the context within which influencers find their true meaning.

Decision comfort has been defined as ‘the sense of ease or contentment one has with a decision made’ (Parker et al., 2016:113). According to Parker et al. (2016), decision comfort has a significant impact on choice commitment, reuse intentions as well as recommendation intentions. People differ in the degree to which they actually base their decisions on reason versus feelings (Hsee et al., 2015). Research done proves that male consumer decision-making traits are different from that of females’ (Bakewell & Mitchell, 2006). This raises the question: Are women more inclined to base their decisions regarding automobile purchases on emotion and as a result experience different levels of decision comfort? It is therefore hypothesised that:

Hₐ₁: There is a difference in male decision comfort and female decision comfort with the Renault brand.

Self-brand connection, according to Escalas & Bettman (2003), is when the consumer establishes and creates his or her own identity through his or her choice in brands. This choice is based on the level of compatibility between the brand image and self-image and as a result, a specific set of brand associations are then linked to the consumer’s mental representation with the self. Research has proven that a strong self-brand connection is more likely to occur when the consumer’s personal experience with the brand closely ties to the image of the brand (Moore & Homer, 2008) and facilitates favourable consumer responses. These favourable responses could include positive brand attitudes and purchase intentions (Aaker, 1997), positive influence on consumer choice preferences, willingness to pay a price premium for the brand, as well as acceptance of word of mouth (Park & Srinivasan, 1994).

No previous literature has investigated the relationship between decision comfort and self-brand connection, however, a few inferences can be made based on the research done by Aguirre-Rodriguez, Bosnjak & Sirgy (2012) on the self-congruity evaluation theory. According to this theory, two possible impression formation routes determine the self-concept evaluation: Piecemeal processing and holistic processing (Aguirre-Rodriguez et al., 2012). Piecemeal processing involves a comparison between the consumer’s self-concept and each trait possessed by the brand personality. Holistic processing, on the other hand, entails a ‘big idea’ impression of the compatibility between the brand personality and self-concept. Decision comfort is a soft-positive emotion (Parker et al., 2016). This is of relevance as piecemeal and holistic self-congruity evaluations each entail different levels of cognitive elaboration with the latter requiring little cognitive elaboration (Anderson, 1973). This raises the question: If holistic self-congruity demands little cognitive elaboration, does it demand elements of affective or emotional elaboration to a higher degree?
Self-brand connections foster stronger, more confident, and more persistent attitudes for the chosen brand (Moore & Homer, 2008) resulting in strong feelings of affinity towards them. If this is the case, consumers who form emotional bonds (self-brand connection) with specific brands may be more inclined to feel strong positive emotions (decision comfort) after making a purchase with the brand. The following hypothesis was thus formulated:

H₂: There is a positive relationship between decision comfort and self-brand connection of Renault customers with the brand.

According to Moore & Wurster (2007), females show higher levels of self-brand connection when the brand messaging is perceived to be female-gendered. It is, therefore, necessary to determine to what extent the implication of automobile brand messaging (without a particular gender image) influences men and women’s self-brand connection respectively. As a result, the following hypothesis has emerged:

H₃: There is a difference in self-brand connection between male and female Renault customers.

We have identified that self-brand connection and decision comfort are key to influencing customers’ engagement. According to Oliver’s (1980) expectancy-disconfirmation paradigm, the core determinants of customer satisfaction judgments are based on expectations and perceptions of a certain performance. Expectations can be defined as beliefs or predictions about a product’s attributes and perceptions as the consumers’ perceptions of the most likely performance of a particular service. It is important to note that a perception is only applicable after the service has been delivered and is the process of evaluating the experience and level of quality. Perceptions are highly influenced by the customer’s emotional and cultural predisposition as well as their level of expectation (Wilson, Zeithaml, Bitner & Gremler, 2016). Oliver (1980), states that influencers of expectations include the product, brand associations, symbolic features and one’s prior experiences, communication of social referents and salespeople in terms of content, context and personal identity of the customer. Therefore, satisfaction is derived from expectations that meet, exceed or fall short relative to the perceived outcome or performance. Customer satisfaction within the context of this study will be distinguished according to category expectations. This perspective was selected due to the fact that the study investigates the relationship between decision comfort and satisfaction, which is based on a post-choice evaluation judgment (Parker et al., 2016). As a result, the above-mentioned decision will allow for the investigation of the downstream effects of decision comfort on customer satisfaction. According to Anderson, Fornell & Donald (1994), the aforementioned customer behavioural outcomes all relate directly to the behavioural outcomes of satisfied customers, indicating that there may be a relationship between decision comfort and customer satisfaction. With this information at hand, the following hypothesis was formulated:

H₄: There is a positive relationship between decision comfort and customer satisfaction of Renault customers.

Self-brand connection literature proves that consumers prefer brands that showcase the same perceived image as the consumers feel they themselves portray. Such portrayal of a brand can be perceived as positive or negative which is dependent on the consumer’s perception of self (Sirgy et al., 1982). To justify, the work done by Sirgy et al. (2003), which states that consumers actively construct themselves by choosing brands with associations relevant to an aspect of their self-concept. We have also established that a ‘consumer’s perception of self is a crucial element in developing an intention to purchase and the overall satisfaction with that purchase (Saren, 2007). We have distinguished a clear relationship between perceived self-image and self-brand connection, and a clear relationship between self-image and overall
satisfaction, which allows us to infer that there may be a relationship between self-brand connection and satisfaction, hence the following hypothesis has been formulated:

H₅: There is a positive relationship between the self-brand connection and customer satisfaction of Renault customers with the brand.

Customer engagement can be further described as a consumer’s cognitive, emotional and behavioural activity around specific brand interactions (Harrigan, Evers, Miles & Daly, 2017). When customers can relate to a brand’s story, they have a higher likelihood of purchase. This brand story refers to the cognitive dimension of customer engagement. Positive experiences shared about a brand relate to the affective dimension of customer engagement and when the customer actively engages with the brand, the self-brand connection is reinforced (Harrigan et al., 2017). Given the above-mentioned hypotheses, it can be concluded that if there is a positive relationship between decision comfort, self-brand connection and customer satisfaction, customer engagement could be reinforced. This presents a unique opportunity to determine how this plays a role in formulating a digital marketing influencer strategy for Renault that would generate the best engagement for the brand.

The marketing message formulation, would thus also be explored based on the potential differences that exist between male and female Renault owners in terms of their decision comfort and self-brand connection.

2.3. Social Media & Influencer Marketing

With an increased usage of social media as a marketing strategy comes an increase of marketing messages that users consume. Back in the 1970s, being exposed to 500 adverts a day seemed extensive, yet we are exposed to a vast amount of 5,000 adverts in this present day (Johnson, C. 2006). Brands are faced with the challenge of competing for limited consumer attention, which has led to the increase in usage of influencer marketing (Biaudet, 2017), which in essence, is a form of marketing where emphasis is no longer placed on a target market as a whole, but rather on specific individuals (Woods, 2016).

This rise in social media use has given consumers a voice and brands have realised that they no longer have full control of the message that is shared. Instead, consumers share virtual word-of-mouth, which is the core of influencer marketing (Groenewald, 2018). Influencer marketing proves to be a crucial feature in the marketing process, as consumers use the advice of others to make purchase decisions, especially when the purchase holds financial or psychological risk (Castronovo & Huang, 2012).

Influencer marketing, implemented correctly, uses the two-way communication opportunity that social media poses alongside a guided strategy to align authentic conversation with the marketing message that the brand would like to have communicated (Centaur Communications, 2017). According to PMYB influencer marketing agency, there hasn’t been much research done on the difference in gender when it comes to the way the males and female differ in how they respond to influencer marketing messages (PMYB, 2017) which is an area that this research paper aims to explore. Aligning the end message to be communicated through influencers with gender differences proves to be a viable exploration, as significant differences have been found in terms of the manner in which males and females perceive and adopt digital communication. According to a study done by Perju-Mitrana & Budaciaa (2015), women react favourably towards messages that are relevant to their interests and generate confidence, whereas men are more interested in gaining information. Men have more favourable attitudes towards messages than women when they perceive the message to be useful (Perju-Mitrana & Budaciaa, 2015).
This article aims to use the Alternative Communications Model theory developed by Castronovo & Huang, which emphasises that a coherent brand message should be formulated and communicated across all traditional and alternative channels (including word-of-mouth and influencer marketing) to achieve the desired alignment with the companies’ overarching objectives and strategy. This will be done by using the Renault brand equity research and consequent strategy to inform all other communications to be disseminated to align the brand positioning strategy with the marketing messages across all channels, which are to be measured collectively to determine the success of the marketing programs (Castronovo & Huang, 2012).

2.3.1 Influencers

Influencer Marketing has evolved from the previous celebrity endorsement to a more credible type of influencer. Influence, to its core, consists of the logic and reasoning in the message, the character, credibility and trustworthiness and an emotional dimension, as suggested by Aristotle (Rapp, 2012). This welcomed the rise of three types of influencers beyond the celebrity influencer. According to Elliott (2018), these include influencers, micro-influencers and brand influencers.

Influencers are individuals who have a large follower base online through generating content that increases reach, such as SuzelleDIY. Micro-influencers are ordinary people with a small following who have expert knowledge on certain subjects. Their knowledge is what attracts a niche market, despite having a modest follower base. Customers who chose to be part of an online community or group will also fall into this category. Brand influencers are ordinary people who are active on social media communities of brands and mostly without intent, drive the conversation. Their inert passion for the topic or brand attracts attention from others and based on their discussions or activity their influence expands (Elliot, 2018).

The influencer takes the form of a friend connecting target individuals to a brand and this influencer does not only bring their own followers but the followers’ network too. Creating trust with consumers is best done by the alignment of that consumer with someone they can relate to or already trust (Biaudet, 2017). In a South African context, there is a lack of media diversity, thus creating an increased demand for quality content on the available media platforms. Brands tend to tap into a limited pool of influencers, which decreases the authentic conversations between brands and consumers (Elliot, 2018).

The objective of an influencer marketing campaign is no longer the extent of the reach created, therefore, the level of engagement created between these brand influencers and consumers on social media is the metric by which influencer marketing campaign should be measured, according to Hart (2018). Customer engagement goes beyond the purchase and is defined as the customers’ manifestation of their behaviour towards the brand, which is a result of their key motivational drivers (Kumar, Aksoy, Donkers, Venkatesan, Wiesel & Tillmanns, 2018).

Using micro and brand influencers in an influencer marketing strategy proves to be an effective strategy as 92% of consumers’ state that they trust recommendations from friends and family over other advertising mediums (Woods, 2016:6).

2.4. Brand Positioning

Brand positioning is regarded as a key tool for brand offering and brand image. Market research such as brand positioning comprises of the cognitive perception of what drives customer satisfaction, engagement and loyalty. Previous studies emphasise the cognitive aspects of satisfaction, however, there
is a growing body of evidence that affective measures of satisfaction (which incorporate emotions) may be a better predictor of future behaviour. Satisfaction should include a combination of an evaluative (cognitive) and emotion-based (affective) response to a service encounter (Koenig-Lewis & Palmer, 2008). There exists limited literature on driving an influencer marketing strategy with market research insights on gender-specific brand positioning, which is derived from the voice of customer (VoC). This bridges the gap in driving the strategy in accordance with the customer’s story and the story that the brand would like to communicate.

Essentially, the notion of brand positioning is an offshoot of differentiation whereby the researcher attempts to explore the differentiated dimensions of positioning in terms of consumer or organisational perspectives and an influencer marketing strategy. As a result, the extent to which customers are willing to engage can significantly influence a firm’s value, especially as it affects what customers are prepared to tell others, both offline and online. The behavioural manifestations of customer engagement consist of a number of elements, including the customer referral behaviour and customer influence behaviour on other acquired and prospect customers (Kumar, et al., 2018).

Following the prodigies of cognitive psychologists, customers are emotional beings, that are able to store information as a network in their memory. Such a network is made of various associations subsequently derived from priming, repetitive words, usage imagery, and product features, which reveals the value of branded products and services perceived by consumers (Wang, 2014). The brand under study, Renault, has recently done a comprehensive brand equity study that identified their brand positioning in the automotive market. The results gave customer’ perspectives of 32 brand attributes, which was mapped according to their importance, thus identifying the key drivers of the brand. Further analysis revealed the significance of focussing the brand perceptions and key drivers per gender group. This positioning message starts at designing the brand’s offering and image to occupy a distinctive place in the target market’s mind. Accordingly, based on the perspectives of a consumer’s associative network tendency which is linked to the customer’s decision comfort and self-brand connections, this paper assumes that the network nature of brand positioning contains the structure of the inherent content (positioning attributes and key drivers) and relationships (links between brands and their positioning attributes) which is represented in the consumer’s mind.

There are many approaches and frameworks deployed by marketing researchers in the selection of key influencers or profiling a segment of the market. In this article, we address the approach that best supports our aim to best describe the content of the message and the conversation associations through semantic network analysis. For analysis purposes, these message topics are referred to as the nodes. These nodes are linked to one another through conversation associations, which are represented in a network (Gelsing, 1992). Network analysis is simply the identification of which important network users are connected to other users (Groshek, 2017).

2.5. Network Analysis: Influencer Identification & Marketing Message

According to Harvard Business Review, 75% of marketers state that identifying influencers is the most difficult step in the influencer marketing process (Sysomos, 2017). It has been found that most influencers are identified based purely on (1) their willingness to partake in the campaign, (2) based on tags or keywords that range from broad verticals such as “fashion” or “fitness” to niche demographics such as “vegan food” (Revfluence, 2017) or (3) their social score alone. In a discussion held with a representative from a well-known influencer company, the above approach is confirmed, adding that companies use their ‘gut’, historic views and established preference towards the brand as an inclusion criterion. While there is a lot of research done on best practices for identifying influential actors on social
media platforms, there is still a lot that is left unclear (Groshek, 2017). Multiple digital approaches to identify these individuals have been developed including giving individuals a ‘social score’ based on their strong bonds in their network. However, the algorithms are run at random based on links in the network according to diffusion models, with no inclusion of their personal interest, engagement or relevance that it will have in their existing network.

With this study, we contribute to the existing body of knowledge by assessing the quality of the simulations run on a semantic network analysis that can be improved by using the topic of discussions compared to the desired brand positioning, through an integrated strategic approach.

The network analysis approach was initially investigated based on the model developed by Groshek (2017), wherein influence is based on how users engage with other users on Twitter by mentioning other users and the retweet of posts. This approach was explored and later replaced by executing a semantic network, indicating influence behaviour based on certain identified topics rather than overall popularity. A semantic network can be understood as the interconnection structure that represents the topics or knowledge of the discussions. The first development of semantic networks was used to define concept types and patterns of relations for machine translation. What is common to all network analyses is the declarative graph representation of the connection and influence of topics (nodes). The implementation of the semantic network in this study displays a network graph which gives Renault a view on the thought leaders around certain topics. This creates an opportunity to identify those individuals who share authentic stories on the topics that are in unison with the brand strategy and consequent brand messaging.

2.6. Conclusion of literature review

This increased awareness of the voice of the customer (VoC), which is mostly shared internally, underlines the need for ongoing market research, to understand what customers are saying. These insights should inform brand strategies to enable firms to take on a more customer-centric approach which aligns with the current interest and topic of discussions. Engagement, which is the core of influence, occurs as a result of the intensity of the customer’s connection, decision comfort and satisfaction with the brand. The true value is uncovered in how this impacts the perception, reputation and admiration of the brand overall, moving away from an unparalleled view of the customer’s voice and the brand messaging. In the development of a marketing message, brands should co-create the message with the voice of the customer (VoC) to align the customers’ interests and topics of discussion to be disseminated in an authentic manner. We have identified a gap in this alignment as the customers’ voice is often not heard before strategies are formulated and influencers are identified without an alignment to authentic common interest and topics of discussion relevant to the marketing message to be shared. This research introduces a topic-sensitive approach for aligning brand positioning insights with the better understanding of the social network influencers identification through social network analysis (Pang & Lee, 2008).

3. Research methodology

To accomplish the objectives set out, a literature review of secondary data was first conducted in order to gain an understanding of the research problem and serves to provide a reason for the research undertaken. The methodology of this study aimed to provide data that was exceedingly reliable and could contribute to future research pertaining to similar topics. Below is an outline of the procedures that were used to collect primary data and the justification for their use. Two research methodologies were used, namely data collection through online questionnaires and Twitter data collection and analysis through semantic network analysis. The two research methodologies used outlines the research approach and
strategy, design, data sources, sampling methods, data collection methods, research criteria, data analysis and the limitations associated with each chosen methodology.

3.1. Questionnaire

3.1.1. Research design

The purpose of this study was achieved by using a quantitative exploratory research design. The chosen design was suitable to determine the relationships and differences between the constructs of the study. An exploratory research design was used as it was useful in identifying market opportunities (Babin & Zikmund, 2015). Primary data was collected using quantitative research methods, specifically surveys, in the form of online, email questionnaires. Quantitative methods were thought to be suitable, as the study aimed to conduct statistical analysis, test hypothesis and make generalizations of the results against the population. It should be noted that throughout the study, an ex-post facto design was used, as not all variables were controlled (Simon & Goes, 2013).

3.1.2. Data sources

The target population chosen for the study is Renault drivers and data was collected via two sources. The ConsultaPanel and a customer list obtained by Renault. The ConsultaPanel is an online panel consisting of 398,824 panellists, which allows for a deep dive into consumer behaviour and preferences that are credible and valid (Consulta, 2018). A non-probability sampling technique was used to conduct the research, due to the access to an extensive list of data we were granted. Furthermore, random sampling was used as each Renault customer had an equal chance of being selected to partake in the study.

3.1.3. Data collection method

An online, email questionnaire was designed to collect data from the sample consisting of Renault drivers who drive a Renault as their primary or secondary vehicle. The internet-based questionnaire focused on investigating the core constructs of the study. The usage of an online questionnaire allows for time and cost saving (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010).

Pretesting was conducted to allow the researchers to adjust the questionnaire to eliminate any errors; such as double-barrelled questions, if respondents misunderstood any questions, misinterpreted response instructions or gave the same answer to a key variable (Babin & Zikmund, 2016). Pretesting assisted the researchers to determine the suitable length of the final questionnaire.

After the questionnaire was finalised, it was rendered on the Verint workbench internet format. Clarabridge, a world-renowned text and sentiment tool, was then used to transform the unstructured (qualitative) data into structured (quantitative) data. This text and sentiment software accepts any source of text content including social media feeds and performs automated natural language processing to run classifications and sentiment analysis.

3.1.4. Questionnaire design

The questionnaire was designed using nominal, ordinal and ratio scales. The questions included both open-ended and Likert scale questions. The open-ended question was designed as it was beneficial when implementing exploratory research (Babin & Zikmind, 2016).
The questionnaire contained screening questions to ensure that all respondents are current Renault customers in order to partake in the study. Section A of the questionnaire consisted of Likert scale type questions measuring respondents’ self-brand connection, decision comfort and customer satisfaction respectively with regards to Renault. Section B consisted of a Likert scale question indicating the brand positioning of Renault in the mind of the consumers based on 14 automotive industry attributes. The last two questions in section C consisted of a ranking scale question which asks respondents to rank the social media platforms in order of which they are most likely to share content on. The last question was an open-ended question to determine what would increase decision comfort for these customers which were used for the semantic analysis.

Likert-type scales were used to assess self-brand connection, decision comfort and customer satisfaction respectively, with regards to the Renault brand. Self-brand connection was measured using 7 items from Escalas & Bettmann (2003) which had a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.81. These items were measured on an 11-point Likert scale, where 0 = not at all and 10 = extremely well. Secondly, decision comfort was measured using 5-items from Parker, et al. (2016) which had a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.86. Thirdly, customer satisfaction was measured using a 6-item scale from Oliver (1980) which had a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.81. These items were measured on an 11-point Likert scale, where 0 = strongly disagree and 10 = strongly agree. Renaults’ brand positioning was measured using a scale that consisted of 14 automotive industry attributes and had a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.78. These items were measured on an 11-point Likert scale, where 0 = do not agree at all and 10 = completely agree. All the scales used in the questionnaire were considered to be reliable scales as the Cronbach's alpha coefficient was above the acceptable cut off of 0.7 (Pallant, 2013). Face validity, which was evident for all scales, was used by the research team to assess if the questionnaire was viable (Babin & Zikmund, 2016).

3.1.5. Validity and Reliability

Validity refers to the credibility of the research findings (Bryman & Bell, 2011), whereas reliability refers to the ability of the research instruments to deliver stable, constant results time after time (Stenbacka, 2001). External validity assesses whether the findings of the study can be generalized, whereas internal validity assess the credibility of the results of the research (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

A key determinant of validity in data collection is the reliability (De Vos, et al., 2012). This concerns the degree to which variables measured actually measure what it set out to measure to the extent that if the test is repeated on other respondents, the results would remain similar (Salkind, 2012). The following was done to ensure the reliability of the study:

- A structured questionnaire was set up to ensure that all key elements of the study were collected.
- Screening questions were included at the beginning of the questionnaire to ensure that all respondents qualify for the study.
- Reliability was increased by using a combination of data collection methods.
- There was a possibility of acquiescence bias, of which respondents answered questions either positively, negatively or neutral in a constant nature (Babin & Zikmund, 2016). If the research team noticed missing values, irrational response patterns, questionnaires were considered invalid. Therefore, before the continuation of data analysis, researchers analysed the accuracy of the completed questionnaires.
- An invitation cover letter was sent out with a link to the questionnaire that explained the purpose of the study, as well as the fact that the respondent would remain anonymous and that all answers were treated as strictly confidential (See Appendix A).
The questionnaire was constructed in such a manner that it did not take long to complete (3 to 4 minutes) and was easy to understand, with relevance to the topic under exploration.

To ensure the validity of respondents’ answers, no incentives were presented.

Respondents had the opportunity to leave the questionnaire at any time, should they wish to do so.

Self-administered questionnaires eliminate errors such as interviewer bias and interviewer error (Babin & Zikmund, 2016) as respondents could not be influenced by interviewers.

3.2. Network Analysis

Our study focuses on Twitter, a typical microblogging service. The platform was chosen based on the varied uses, including daily conversations, sharing of information, and diverse topic coverage (Wayne, Jiang, Weng, Lim Yan & Li, 2011). Twitter content has been analysed by many researchers, industry-wide. Examples of such valuable reports include Sakaki et al., which detects earthquakes using twitter data; Bakshy et al., which identifies influential Twitter users useful for marketing initiatives; and Johan et al., which looks at predicting the stock market through twitter data (Wang, 2014). Twitter has emerged as one of the prominent social network services with 320 million monthly active users worldwide, therefore the research carried out primarily focused on Twitter, however, this study may be applicable to other social networks and micro-blogging services.

3.2.1. Research Approach and Strategy

First, and most importantly, social network analysis is about the relations among actors, not about relations between variables. In this study, these actors are representative of the topic themes. The topics are structured as the nodes and the edge between two nodes is the content of the Twitter mentions. Topic modelling is performed by considering the association between topics, words and documents (Zhang, Bhattacharyya, & Ram, 2016).

The network analysis strategy was carried out as follows:

- Data was collected by means of an analytical tool, Crimson Hexagon. This is a leading insights platform, which gives instant access to worldwide online conversations to enable a better understanding of customer preferences as are the topics discussed are unpacked (Crimson Hexagon, 2018).
- The Twitter retweets and mentions of Renault was analysed by the in the Clarabridge text and sentiment programme to extract the topics of discussions and the sentiment thereof.
- The data was prepared by using a combination of a matrix method to extract the topics and associations per unique user. A semantic network graph was then created in a software names Gephi, whereby the topics were quantitatively measured. The OpenOrd model was run on the network to identify the group of clusters by a direct type of interaction.

4. Findings, analysis and discussion

4.1. Questionnaire

The Statistica analysis package was used by the researchers to capture, clean, prepare and analyse the valid data from 323 respondents.

Validity and reliability of each construct were investigated through Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) for validity and Cronbach’s alpha for reliability. As a benchmark, any value above 0.60 and higher was
seen to be reliable and was not removed. Descriptive statistics were then used to calculate the composite scores in order to extract the mean and standard deviations of each construct under study. The alternative hypotheses were tested and accepted or rejected based on observed evidence. The hypotheses formulated for this study examined the relationships and differences between various constructs. Therefore, parametric tests were considered to be appropriate to test the relevant hypotheses. A confidence level of 95% and a 5% ($p<0.05$) level of significance was set in order to determine the following results. This section presents the findings obtained during the data analyses.

4.1.1. Sample Profile

The dataset consisted of a total of 323 respondents of which 138 were males (42.7%) and 185 were females (57.3%), collected over a 12 month period. Within the context of this study, customers asked to rank their most preferred social media platform for sharing information. In Figure 3, Facebook and YouTube ranked first and second respectively and Twitter came in at third place as their favourite platform to share information with peers.

As our study found that YouTube is the second most preferred platform that customers are comfortable to share information on, the increased value of using visual content for marketing purposes is highlighted. Visual content increases message association, brand awareness, and engagement (Kim, 2018). Credibility comes from this information. In a study done, Tweets with images earned up to 18 percent more clicks, 89 percent more favorites, and 150 percent more retweets (Cooper, 2013).

4.1.2. Research Hypotheses Answered

All hypotheses were tested at a 95% confidence level ($p < 0.05$). For the purpose of this study, the alternative hypotheses were examined and subsequently, accepted or rejected. To analyse the hypotheses of this study, interval data was analysed for decision comfort, self-brand connection and customer satisfaction.

Each respondent completed the questionnaire independent from others, and the sample of 323 respondents, which is more than 30 (Babin & Zikmund, 2016), ensures that the techniques used are robust against violations of normal distribution (Pallant, 2010). Therefore, justifying a parametric statistical test.
for this study, where the assumptions have been met and are not violated. Pearson product-moment correlations were used to investigate the relationships between the constructs previously hypothesised and designed for this study of the Renault brand. The effect size ($r$) from Pallant (2013) was used to determine the strength of the correlation coefficients identified below. Table 1 presents a summary of the Pearson’s product-moment correlations ($r$) between the constructs.

Table 1: Pearson correlation analyses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>Self-brand connection</th>
<th>Decision comfort</th>
<th>Customer satisfaction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-brand connection</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>0.78**</td>
<td>0.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision comfort</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>0.88**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer satisfaction</td>
<td>0.72**</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).**

The results summarised in Table 1 show a significant large positive relationship between respondents’ decision comfort and their self-brand connection ($r = 0.78$), as well as a significant large positive relationship between respondents’ decision comfort and customer satisfaction ($r = 0.88$), indicating that as respondents’ decision comfort increases, their self-brand connection and customer satisfaction increases. Hₐ₃ stating that there is a relationship between decision comfort and self-brand connection of Renault drivers with the Renault brand and Hₐ₄ stating that there’s a relationship between decision comfort and customer satisfaction of Renault drivers is therefore accepted.

A large positive correlation was found between respondents’ self-brand connection and customer satisfaction of Renault drivers, and due to a large effect size ($r = 0.72$), there is a significant relationship between self-brand connection and customer satisfaction of Renault drivers. Hₐ₅ stating that there is a relationship between self-brand connection and customer satisfaction of Renault drivers with the Renault brand is therefore accepted.

4.1.3. Differences between male and female millennial versatile runners’ decision comfort and self-brand connection

An independent sample t-test was conducted to compare the difference between male and female Renault drivers’ decision comfort with the Renault brand.

There was no significant difference between the scores of male decision comfort ($M = 71.75$, $SD = 26.72$; $p = 0.25$) and female decision comfort ($M = 70$, $SD = 29.89$; $p = 0.68$). Hₐ₁ stating that there is a difference between male and Renault customers’ decision comfort with the brand is therefore rejected. An independent sample t-test was conducted to compare the difference between male and female Renault drivers’ self-brand connection with the brand. There was no significant difference between the scores of male self-brand connection ($M = 59.3$, $SD = 30.2$; $p = 0.8$) and female self-brand connection ($M= 63.9$, $SD= 30$; $p= 0.25$). Hₐ₃ stating that there is a difference between male and female Renault drivers’ self-brand connection with the brand is therefore rejected.
4.2. Network Analysis

In this section, we identify effective topics of influence by proposing a research framework that combines the structural properties of a social network analysis and the structured information of user Twitter activities.

4.2.1. Data processing

Social media data is informally formulated (containing a lot of user-generated misspellings and abbreviations), therefore, data quality is of great importance in any analytics study as it can have a significant effect on the performance and results. The data preparation of Twitter tweets and mentions can be detailed into four main steps, namely: data collection, data cleaning, data reduction, and data conversion (Wang, 2014). The sample data was collected through Crimson Hexagon and then processed for network analysis and visualisation in Gephi. Data cleaning and reduction was applied by removing users that have a Klout score lower than 40, as our study focuses on the spread of content. A good score is classified as 40, with the Klout score ranging from 1 to 100, with 100 being the most influential (Klout, 2016).

The data was then filtered by geotagging users only in South Africa. The conversion of data was then done by extracting the multiple posts and retweets to be compatible with the analysis of the text and sentiment software, Clarabridge. Our final dataset was reduced to 1063 sources, on which we incorporated the online questionnaire verbatims. One model was generated to categorise the keywords of both methodologies, the Twitter and questionnaire comments (verbatim). From this model, the categories were refined to identify the topics of discussion.

4.2.2. Findings

In order to quantitatively measure the outcome of the network structure of customers spreading information, we examined a few network metrics. The modularity metric provides detail to the large network where all nodes interact equally or in smaller sub-segments. These connection clusters are analysed by a well-known community extraction algorithm called modularity, which is a standard quantitative measure of the quality of a partition in a network. Higher modularity values indicate communities having higher numbers of intra-community links as opposed to intercommunity links (Zhang, Bhattacharyya & Ram, 2016). The modularity of the clustering is 0.087 and the VI distance is 3. This is displayed in Figure 4 below. Figure 4 below depicts the results of the identification of three distinct modular connections in the data and a lot of smaller clusters.
The centrality metric provides a different perspective on how influential or important a node (topic) is within a network. The betweenness and degree algorithm was conducted out of the various options to measure the centrality. The degree is the number of topics that are connected to a specific node. The betweenness refers to how often a node acted as the shortest path to link to other themes. This was done to recognise the association with other themes. This provides us with insights into the greater potential of the influence of information which fulfil a vital criterion. That the message topic should spread information that is relevant and connected to other topics of discussion in a network.

By analysing the structure of the connection network and the distribution of links, Figure 5 displays the exploration of the two data methodologies that are visually displayed with the colour pink being the Twitter data and the green edges being the data collected in the first phase of brand positioning feedback.
After thorough data processing and cleaning, the above two phases of methodologies provide a graph that depicts the main themes and interaction between the conversations that customers talk about when mentioning the Renault brand. The overall network maps the dense connection between the nodes, which clusters the mentioning of topics and linking it to the overall categories. The data obtained from the information shared on the social network Twitter indicates a very broad spectrum of topics, in which very few of these themes are linked to the brand's overall themes. The size of the nodes represents the relative number of mentions of the specific theme associations and the edge width, the degree strength. The top five topics concluded are the exterior style and design, customer focus, parts availability, appeal and reviews. In describing each community, we start by looking at the influence. The main conclusions to be drawn from this is to examine how brands (such as Renault), can change customers’ perception through key influencers, by using brand strategy drivers as the desired topics of discussion and incorporate it with the current perceptions and themes on social media.

Figure 6 below displays the interaction of the specific theme, ‘customer focus’ and compares the interaction between males and females. Males are indicated in blue, and females in red. The background colours are dimmed by the purple edges.
The next figure highlights the theme, ‘exterior style and design’ and uses the same colour codes as in Figure 6.

The interaction graph is valuable to create various views and to take an in-depth approach to support knowledge building. In Figure 6 and 7, we investigate the top 2 nodes by gender group and we see in Figure 6 that females engage in topics that are more personal and customer focused. In Figure 7, the mention of the style of the vehicle is isolated to show associations to the topics of car features, colour, overall appeal, and design appeal to name a few. The males’ topics mainly include the parts availability and a strong connection to the trust and reliability. The total split between our sample groups of Twitter
mentions is 55% male and 37% females. The 8% are users that could not be classified (representatives of industry or commentators).

5. Managerial implications and Research limitations

The results of this study will provide relevant insights for automobile brands and their marketing functions, especially those planning to implement an influencer marketing strategy. The importance and relevance of this study can be justified as follows: Firstly, the voice of the customer aligned to the brand strategy and ultimately the marketing message is deemed crucial to increasing customer centricity in the automobile market. Secondly, in assessing the relationship between fans and followers, as well as engagers and brand influencers, brands are enabled to work meaningfully on social media and ensure that they know if they are just creating content to be disseminated into the market, or if they are building a community of consumers who engage with their content and carry across the desired marketing message in the digital landscape (MarkLives, 2018). Thus making it crucial to provide research that can facilitate informed decision making and strategy formation within this influencer marketing landscape. Thirdly, this research provides insight into the social and self-concept drivers of Renault customers’ buying behaviours and intentions, thus providing guidance for marketing functions in positioning and targeting strategies for similar audiences.

Based on the results, some recommendations can be suggested regarding the way in which the marketing managers of automobiles effectively communicate with consumers, specifically Renault customers. Marketing managers of automobile brands should place increasing importance on understanding the integral role that automobile brands play in consumers’ decision comfort, self-brand connection and customer satisfaction. Content should be aligned with consumer’s self-brand connection to ensure increased purchase decision comfort. Due to the positive relationship between decision comfort and customer satisfaction, marketers should aim to increase customer satisfaction by promoting the value and benefit of automobile brands specific to customers’ important motivational drivers and in doing so ensure decision comfort. Ensuring that the staff are knowledgeable about the product and deliver excellent service during the purchase as well as the post-purchase phase will increase post-purchase decision comfort, thus inducing higher levels of customer satisfaction and repeat purchases.

From the results it was evident that there is no difference between male and female Renault drivers self-brand connection, therefore marketers can target both genders through one promotional message to lower costs, provided the messaging is not gender-specific. It is, however, advised to target women through gender-specific advertising to induce a high level of self-brand connection if the strategy is to focus on gaining engagement from females specifically.

The chosen target population of Renault customers presented a limitation as the study has not be implemented to any other automotive brands, resulting in a non-comparative study. The data cleaning step presented a time-lag in the analysis of data and could be avoided in future research through using a direct plugin from a specific or chosen Twitter account. We specifically chose Twitter to base our social network analysis on, but were limited to the amount of data available. A limitation of this data set is the restriction of functionality as we were only able to extract and use the Twitter data and no other social networks’ data. A further limiting factor is that users profile information of their interests could not be extracted from the platform due to limited access which would be valuable to use as additional insights in conjunct with the topics of interest identified.
6. Recommendations for future research

With the automation of systems and the usage of artificial intelligence to learn from big data, the study could be optimised through applying machine learning on the topics customers speak and share most on social media. This will enable marketers to better understand the connections and associations of messages shared online in order to align those customers with the highest engagement value with the topics that the brand aims to communicate. This creates the desired link between brand research and the voice of the customer (VoC), to develop an integrated marketing strategy that is truly customer-centric. Leveraging from what customers are naturally prone to talk about and share creates a trusted and engaged message that delivers the bands overall key objectives in an authentic manner. This would create a selection of brand influencers in real time who are already passionate about the topics to be communicated, underlining the need for authenticity in influencer marketing. It is further recommended that future research apply deeper text mining than what was conducted in this study to gain a more accurate view of the topics discussed and a fine-tuned sentiment analysis. This study focused on Twitter, which currently has 8 million users in South Africa, however, it is not necessarily representative of the entire South African population. Therefore, data from other social platforms such as Facebook could be further included as well as a wider scope of data types, to include images and videos as this form of data dissemination is increasing in popularity. Brand to brand networks could further add value to the study undertaken as they provide a view of inter-brand relationships from the overlapping interests of consumers. This could enrich the study through providing a further view on consumer activities across automobile brand communities for various marketing purposes (Zhang et al., 2014). This study could also be implemented in various other industries.

Online and social media information is most commonly used to understand the current topics and discussions of users. This article highlights three fundamental marketing constructs which aid in the understanding the human acceptance of information. Individuals are connected to various networks and the messages they exchange occur at a rapid pace. An extremely large amount of research has addressed some of these aspects either in isolation or as combinations of methods. Further research could thus explore a simple, expressive and extensible model that allows for the direct application of analysis methods from traditional data mining to multilayer network mining.

7. Conclusion

In this study, the researchers set out to gain comprehensive insights into male and female customers’ decision comfort, self-brand connection and customer satisfaction when purchasing Renault cars as either their primary or secondary vehicle. The researchers sought to analyse the relationships and or differences among the above-mentioned variables through proving or disapproving five-set hypotheses.

The researchers’ analysis reveals that there is no difference in male and female decision comfort with the automobile brand, Reanult. In this discovery, it can be further stated that although females spend more time browsing and researching choices and tend to enjoy the shopping process more than males (Bae & Miller, 2009), such positive emotions only apply to the shopping experience itself and not on the post-purchase evaluation of the product which involves decision comfort. This can be justified with a study done by Missri (2008), where he proves that there is no difference in the level of rationality between males and females when making decisions. It was further stated that both genders are able to maximise choice in the same way showing no clear advantage for any specific gender, thus eliminating the inference that women are more inclined to base their purchasing decisions and post-purchase evaluations on emotional factors.
Furthermore, the results from $H_2$ confirm that there is a positive relationship between decision comfort and self-brand connection with the Renault brand and Renault drivers. This reaffirms speculations that consumers who form emotional bonds (self-brand connection) with the Renault brand are more inclined to feel strong positive emotions (decision comfort) after their purchase. Literature supports the notion that self-brand connection enhances post-purchase consumer responses such as positive brand attitudes, repeat purchase intentions (Aaker, 1997), willingness to pay higher prices, acceptance of brand extensions and word-of-mouth (Park & Srinivasan, 1994). Parker et al. (2016) states that decision comfort has an impact on choice commitment, reuse intentions and recommendation intentions, however, considering self-brand connection as the independent variable in the experiment, questions should be raised as to whether the above-mentioned decision comfort post-purchase intentions are not in fact caused by customer’s self-brand connection.

$H_3$ reveals that there is a no difference in self-brand connection with the Renault brand between male and female Renault drivers. There is, however, a statistically significant difference between two of the self-brand connection attributes between males and females. Females had a higher affinity towards two of the attributes namely: “I think the Renault brand could help me become the type of person I want to be” and “I consider the Renault brand to be “me” as it reflects who I consider myself to be or the way that I want to present myself to others.”

A similar experiment conducted by Moore & Hommer (2008) found that self-brand connection was significantly higher among females compared to males when comparing their attitude strength of sports brands through a clear gender image (where brands were advertised to female and male samples differently to appeal to each gender). The experiment under study, however, intended to measure self-brand connection without the influence of a particular gender image. In rejecting this hypothesis, the research proves that females’ self-brand connection is directly influenced by gender-specific marketing. Through this process of elimination, the researchers are able to classify gender-specific advertising as the determining factor in the acceptance of the experiment conducted by Moore & Hommer (2008). Furthermore, self-enhancement theory may be used to explain females’ tendency to be more affected by gender-specific marketing. Research done by Schwalbe and Staples (1991) proves that within the context of self-enhancement, women attach greater importance to reflected appraisals than men do (this describes perceptions of how others see and evaluate them). Influencer marketing should therefore be of such a nature to engage in topics that address the the way women want to be perceived by others through creating a desired feature or affiliation to a brand.

$H_4$ has been accepted which states that there is a significantly large positive relationship between decision comfort and customer satisfaction with the Renault brand and Renault customers. Through investigating the downstream effects of decision comfort and customer satisfaction, the results provide a reason to believe that decision comfort directly relates to the extent to which customers feel satisfied after buying the Renault brand.

Lastly, $H_5$ reveals that there is a relationship between self-brand connection and customer satisfaction with the Renault brand. The findings prove the relationships set-up in Figure 1, which ultimately indicates that if customers experience a self-brand connection to the brand messaging, through an engagement with authentic influencers on topics that matter to them, the marketing message will be adopted and perceptions can be changed. Self-brand connection literature proves that consumers prefer brands that showcase the same perceived image as the consumers feel they themselves portray. The net effect is that the overall decision comfort and customer satisfaction will be increased when customers feel a sense of connection to the brand.
The objective of examining how information propagates online is exhibited by a semantic network, and it is evident that there is limited literature on the use thereof. This semantic network proves to be of great value when incorporated with other methodologies such as our constructs tested in the questionnaire. The outcomes of the network showed that there is a difference between the topics customers discuss online and the topics that surface when brand research is conducted. This, however, is expected as customers provide more context and sentiment when given the opportunity to voice their opinion on certain topics. This revealed the importance of overlaying the results of the two methodologies. This overlap of information uncovers a wholeistic view of customer insights for marketing purposes. In the semantic network results, three main clusters of topics were identified. The visual display represents the themes pertaining to performance, customer focus and aesthetics. It was found that females and males associate different themes to different topics. Females are more inclined to share their thoughts about customer focus attributes such as the after sales service, the helpfulness, value, quality of the product, trust and reliability. Furthermore, females associate aesthetic features to some unrelated topics such as a fuel economy, car features and functionality. Males tend to share their thoughts on topics such as trust and reliability, and Formula 1 (sports and racing). The network analysis metrics discussed in the previous section further indicates the distance between the nodes, which provides the opportunity to identify gaps. These gaps provide a layer of hidden understanding between topics discussed. If the correct linkage between the nodes is made, the brand message can be conveyed in such a manner to follow the path of topics to influence the customers. In conclusion, the findings indicate three key themes that will have the highest impact on Renault customers’ own word-of-mouth and consequently their engagement with their communities and broader network. The brand message, which aims at changing customers’ perception, can ultimately be better informed with the gender-specific conversations gained by the semantic network. This brings us back to the definition of reality, which in essence is “the state of things as they actually exist, as opposed to an idealistic or notional idea of them” (Oxford Dictionaries, 2018). Automobile brands should place more emphasis on creating a hype around genuine conversation, building trust and creating emotional ties with customers based on the authentic topics of discussion which can be aligned with the brand strategy topics. This brings the marketing message back to customers own realities and the real conversations they create, instead of an idealistic marketing approach, wherein the voice of the customer does not exist.
References


Appendix A- Questionnaire Invitation
Dear %KEY_1%

The ConsultaPanel invites you to help two of our own project managers uncover new insights as they were selected to present at a conference.

Do you enjoy receiving and giving information to others about brands? Our two project managers received the opportunity to explore some newsworthy developments in the automotive industry. The aim is to get some insights on your perception and self-brand connection towards a specific vehicle brand.

This will take no longer than 3 minutes of your time to %[complete]URL%

Consulta is a corporate member of the South African Marketing Research Association (SAMRA). All information received is strictly confidential and will only be used for research purposes.

For more information about the project, please contact Luzelle van Niekerk (Project Director):
E-mail:luzelle.vanniekerk@consulta.co.za; Telephonically: (012) 665 6200

Thanking you in advance for being a part of this study in an endeavour to create new insights in the Marketing & Research industry.

Kind regards
The Consulta Team

Please be assured that all information shared in this, and all future interactions with us, will be treated confidentially and will be used for research and analysis purposes only.

Our mailing address is:
Highgrove Office Park | Cnr. Tegel & Olivenhoutbosch Road
Highveld Techno Park | Centurion | 0046
South Africa
I have a question.
I do not wish to receive any more communication regarding this project or from Consulta at all: %UNSUBSCRIBE%.

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