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A Practical Fusion of Qualitative and Social Data

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To facilitate this ongoing dialogue, ESOMAR creates and manages a comprehensive programme of industry specific and thematic events, publications and communications, as well as actively advocating self-regulation and the worldwide code of practice.

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Introduction

Think about your average day. How often do look at your phone? Are you checking what your friends are up to? Maybe you "like" something? Comment on something? Maybe you post something yourself? You opened Instagram. Now how about Facebook? Twitter? LinkedIn? YouTube? How often do you Google something? Or do you go straight to Amazon? What if you want to know something specific? Do you turn to TripAdvisor? MoneySavingExpert? Mumsnet? Reddit?

As we become more and more reliant on the web, the way we interact online becomes increasingly telling of who we are, what we think and how we act. With so much knowledge to be gleaned, it seems an obvious space for brands to be exploring. Why ask people what they think about a campaign, product or service when there are thousands of opinions already posted, unprompted, online? Analysing this data can allow researchers to:

- Explore in-the-moment experiences, without relying on respondent recall or post-rationalised responses;
- Hear authentic consumer voices and the natural language people use to talk about a specific subject;
- Access data quickly;
- Identify the previously unknown.

Of course, it is all very well knowing this data exists; what is more challenging is knowing where to gather it and how to analyse it. We have pulled together this guide to help you do just that. Whilst every project is different, we will go through the typical steps you might go through to get started and make use of social data. By social data we are not just talking about conversations on social media. Whilst this is a rich source of opinions and information, we can also draw data from sources such as Reddit, forums and even online reviews and search data. In this guide, we will mostly be talking about how to set up a search on a social listening tool and analyse the data that comes out, but we will also touch on how to get the most out of tools, such as Google Trends, that are free for the public to use.

Step 1: Defining the brief

Before gathering data or starting to analyse it, you need to be clear about what you want to find out and how you are going to use the insight. These things can differ widely from project-to-project, but common project types where an analysis of social data might be useful include:

- Understanding reactions to an event (e.g. a product or campaign launch);
- Understanding the customer experience (e.g. shopping for a car, or eating at a specific restaurant);
- Identifying category trends;
- Exploring what competitors are doing, and what consumers are saying about them;
- Exploring attitudes and opinions on specific topics (e.g. plastic in the ocean).

Once you have identified a suitable brief, think about what you need to find out. Identifying these questions now will help you focus your analysis later. If you were interested in the way people purchase cars, your key questions could include:

- **Where** do people look when searching for a new car?
- What **criteria** do people use to narrow down their car search?
- What common **issues** do people come up against when trying to buy a car?

At this stage, you will also need to think about what the insight will be used for. This is important, as it allows you to focus on creating useful recommendations. Common examples include using consumer feedback to:

- Improve future campaigns or events;
- Make changes to products;
- Improve the customer experience and reduce issues;
- Segment target audiences;
- Create consumer-centred marketing materials, or increase engagement with your social media feeds;
- Ensure your brand stays ahead of competitors.

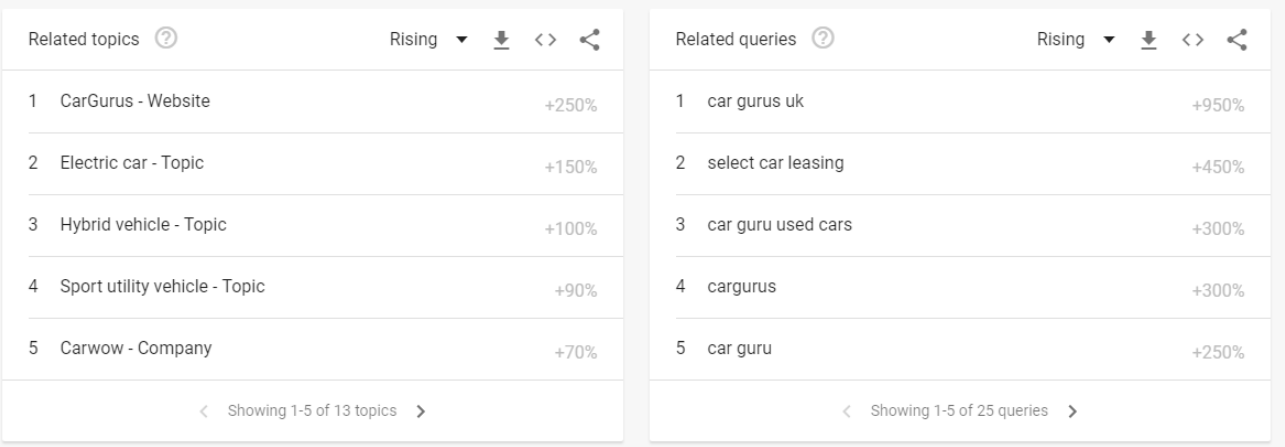
Thinking about the car-buying example, you might be doing the research in order to come up with a list of ways for a car seller to improve their customer experience and help customers find the car they want. This means your recommendations might be centred on clearly providing the information car buyers need, and preventing or solving customer issues.

Stage 2: Defining search terms

Once you have defined what questions you want to answer, it is time to work out what information to search for to enable your social listening tool to provide relevant online conversations. Most social listening tools act like giant search engines, where you plug in keywords and get a list of online comments containing these keywords back. Free to use tools, such as Google Trends or answerthepublic.com, offer a useful place to start defining your keywords. These tools show you which questions consumers in a specific market most commonly input into search engines around a given subject. Search data can also be useful in itself for allowing you to identify consumer information needs and emerging trends.

Thinking about the car-buying example, looking at search data around buying a car could tell you the sorts of criteria that people most commonly look for (e.g. large boots or cheapest insurance), as well as the key manufacturers and dealerships and/or sellers they research. This can also help brands identify the key competitors people are looking for.

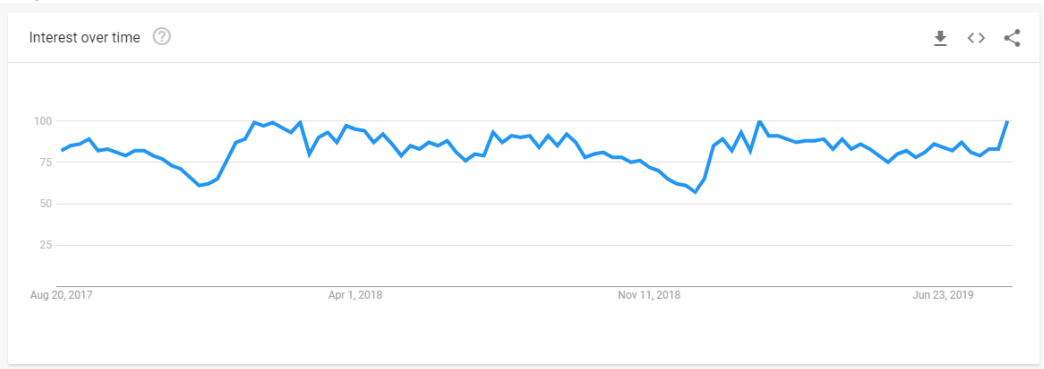
Figure 1



This Google Trends information shows trending "Related topics" and "Related queries" for the search term "used car". This quickly reveals the key used car retailers (CarGurus, Carwow) and used car types (electric/hybrid/SUV) consumers are currently searching for.

With search data knowledge, we can relive user experience. By following up and recreating common Google searches, we can understand the information people are exposed to. This can be especially useful for brands trying to maximise their search engine presence and identify gaps to be addressed through paid activity or content marketing. Google Trends can also help us to identify patterns in behaviour, by plotting out the number of times a topic or keyword has been searched for on Google. By allowing you to select the time-frame as well as the country, you can immediately identify any peaks or troughs around the search. This works especially well for understanding competitor activity, as searches for multiple brands can be compared and contrasted over time. Looking at peaks in searches can also help brands to plan content – e.g. when are people most likely to start looking for holidays?

Figure 2



This Google Trends search volume chart for the term "used car" shows that searches are relatively consistent over time, with noticeable drops in searches around Christmas over 2017-2019. This could help to guide marketers on when (or when not) to launch new campaigns.

Search data also helps us to understand natural language used by consumers. Combined with knowledge of consumers' key information needs, we can start to build social listening searches that are tailored to people's priorities and the language they use. Spending some time familiarising yourself with how people talk about your subject on native platforms, such as Twitter or forums, can also help you get the right language for your social listening search – not just a long list of potential keywords. If we were building a social listening search around car purchases, we might base our social listening search terms on search data around key competitors, manufacturers and dealerships, in order to discover in more detail what people are saying about these things online. We might also look at how people talk about purchasing an item – the language used could cover "got", "purchased", "bought", "buying", etc.

Doing desk research around your subject could help you identify relevant hashtags to include in your search. Finally, you can add to your social listening search terms with your own pre-existing knowledge of the category, and any specific areas of interest for your research.

Stage 3: Create your query

Now you have all the information you need to create your search query on your social listening tool. This will be used to gather the online conversations that you will analyse. As a general rule of thumb, queries should be kept specific rather than general – focusing on "cars" alone is likely to return lots of irrelevant data. Focusing the search on buying a new car, or looking at specific dealerships, will return more relevant data. Using your search data and own knowledge, identify keywords, phrases and hashtags to create your main search query. If you can, try sense checking this list with a colleague.

At this stage, consider which data sources you want to pull from. If you are interested in detailed discussions of customer experiences, you might want to focus primarily on forum data. If you want to canvas a wide range of customer opinions on a new product launch, a shorter form, an up-to-date data source like Twitter may be more useful. If you are looking for discussions of the positives and negatives of different products or brands, you could consider pulling data from online reviews.

Stage 4: Cleaning the data

Social listening can produce vast data-sets, but often a proportion of this will be irrelevant. The first step once you have collected your data is to clean it. At this point in time, machine-based data analysis is not always the best way to determine what data is valid or not – a human assessment is needed. This necessitates reviewing the comments, conversations and images you have gathered and keeping only those that are relevant to the initial questions and objectives you are trying to answer.

Clean through the data until you have a sample big enough to qualitatively analyse: this could be anywhere between 100 and 1,000 posts. If you are analysing different segments (e.g. how people search for premium cars, versus those searching for volume brands), ensure you have sufficient data from people in each of these groups before starting analysis.

Stage 5: Textual analysis

Once you have cleaned your data-set you can begin to analyse it. Whilst many social listening platforms house their own sophisticated dashboards with graphs, word clouds and sentiment trackers, etc., they fall short when adding context and interpretation to these metrics. This rich analysis comes from human interpretation of the data, without which it is very hard to decipher any meaningful insights, takeaways or learnings.

To gain better insights from the data, we recommend using a systematic content analysis approach. There are two principle forms of reasoning that are important to consider here: deductive reasoning, which refers to arriving at a specific conclusion based on preconceived notions, generalisations and hypotheses; and inductive reasoning, in which you draw generalised conclusions from patterns identified during your analysis.

Using the inductive approach, we are "going in blind" into the data-set, and finding the story in the data as opposed to using it to prove or disprove pre-existing notions. This method lets the data dictate where the focal areas of interest are, without potentially skewing the results or limiting the breadth of the findings. You can use inductive analysis to build a code-frame, which adds structure to your data and helps you to establish a clear narrative. When building a code-frame,

you may find it useful to think about these main questions: what, why (how), where and when. For a car-buying journey, this may include the following questions:

- What is the data about? What key topic(s) are they referencing? (e.g. car purchase drivers, brands or purchase channels);
- Why are they talking about it? What was their intention? (e.g. to complain, inform, persuade or ask for advice);
- Where did the interaction occur? Where (or who) did they turn to for help / their needs? (e.g. are they asking experts on a car specific forum? Turning to friends on a social media platform?);
- When did the interaction occur? At what stage of the buying journey were they? (e.g. browsing, consideration, choice, purchase).

Here is a fictionalised post from a car forum:

I am desperately looking for a new Ford Fiesta, and I'm newly set on the Interstellar Purple! Every one I've tried to buy so far has copped out with owners either falsifying facts or withdrawing sale upon deposit. It's like they know it's rare and want to see me suffer. So, alas, defeated and exhausted I turn to the Ford forum... the experts! I would love a hand in finding one (I've been through all the ones on Motors.com so those aren't really great). I'm really just interested if anyone's selling one, or knows someone selling one they could put me in touch with!

By analysing this post in a structured way, you might end up with the following codes:

- Key topics: Issues at purchase (this could be divided into sub-codes such as “Withdrawn from sale”);
- Brand type: volume brand;
- Purchase channels: Motors.com;
- Intention: complain and/or seek advice;
- Location: car forum;
- Journey stage: choice.

Applying this approach to all of your posts will allow you to structure your thinking and identify themes to start answering your initial questions – e.g. around the common issues that people are encountering at different stages of their journey. By coding your data, you will also be able to quantify key topics within your data, measuring their relative volume (i.e. number of mentions). If the data you have collected contains images, these can be coded in a similar way, in order to allow you to analyse them more easily. Think about things like who or what is in the images, what the broader background and/or context is and the sentiment and intention.

If your aim is to advise marketing strategy, you might also think about common colours and scenarios in consumer generated images that could be replicated in brand marketing collateral, to help campaign materials feel as authentic as possible.

Stage 6: Implications

Once you have analysed your data and generated themes and insights that shed light on your key questions, the final stage is to consider the implications. Thinking about your initial objectives, what actions do your insights suggest? If, for example, in the car-buying journey, we found that many conversations referenced hard selling dealers as a barrier to buying a car, we might recommend the car seller retrain staff in less aggressive sales approaches.

Conclusion

Whilst each project will differ in the sorts of data gathered, these are steps should act as a rough guide that any researcher can implement to help them structure and analyse social data across projects. We hope you are able to see how easy it is to gather social data and conduct basic social data analysis, using existing qualitative analysis techniques, as well as the types of insights you can generate from freely available tools, such as Google Trends and answerthepublic.com.

For those looking for a more advanced approach, we recommend exploring data science, text analytics and machine learning-based analysis, to elevate your insights further.

Thanks for reading!

About the authors

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