Wisdom from Words

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Abstract

This talk will cover a couple recent projects using natural language processing to extract insight from textual data. One project focuses on tense and persuasion. People often share information using past (“That album was great”) or present tense (“I like that restaurant”), but might these differences shape consumer behavior, and if so, how? A multi-method investigation combining analysis of over 500,000 online reviews with experiments begins to address these questions. Specifically, we suggest that using present tense should make information more helpful and persuasive because it communicates certainty. While past tense indicates that something was true, or that a particular person had a particular experience with a product or service at a particular point in time, present tense suggests something broader. That a perspective, opinion, evaluation, or piece of information may be true more generally. Consequently, when speakers use present tense, it suggests that they are confident enough to make an assertion. This increased certainty, in turn, should make their opinion more impactful.