

## Branding the Local: Anti-corporate Resistance in Online Consumer Reviews

### Abstract

A textual analysis of consumer evaluations on Yelp.com (n=1,972) interrogates the form and function of discursive resistance deployed by consumer reviewers. Findings reveal that consumers regularly articulate a politics of consumption at the *local* level, namely through the explicit celebration of “localism.” In promoting local consumption, anti-corporate discourses function as a form of social responsibility, resisting cultural homogenization in users’ [offline] communities and/or by redirecting economic flows away from corporate-owned business towards (ambiguously defined) “non-corporate” establishments. Ultimately, however, localism is discursively constructed and performed as a consumable aesthetic that operates no differently from the corporate “brand logic” that these very reviews contest. Read against Jodi Dean’s work on communicative capitalism, Yelp’s anti-corporate/pro-local discourse fits squarely within the depoliticizing effects of neoliberal “empowered consumption,” raising a number of questions about what larger political economic changes consumer reviews can effect.

### Keywords

consumer evaluations; communicative capitalism; branding; localism

### Introduction

Local listing websites like Yelp, Judy’s Book, Angie’s List and Urbanspoon have become popular spaces for consumers to create discourses through and about local consumption via electronic word-of-mouth. By design, the local focus of these sites prioritizes reviews of locally owned businesses and services, indirectly deflecting attention from widely available brands and chains. Consequently, these sites (at least rhetorically) serve as virtual spaces not governed by the compromised opinions of professional reviewers and advertisers, but by reviews based on the experience of ‘real’ community members.

These online local listing sites have emerged at a time when, as Piselli (2007) and others argue, communities are no longer defined spatially but socially – a shift enabled by globally networked technologies and larger socio-cultural changes to the sites of social identification under advanced capitalism. In the context of myriad international political, economic and ecological disasters, the cultural value of localism has seen a recent resurgence, perhaps most notably by the mainstreaming of the localvore movement and mass marketization of “sustainable” goods. As “living local” is promoted as “the new global” (*Faith Popcorn*, 2010), online local listing sites have capitalized upon this sentimentality by offering new ways of orienting consumer markets towards locally-based “responsible” consumption. Contemporarily, local consumption is thus a primary means by which neoliberal consumer-citizens seek to redress what are, ultimately, structural issues.

The participatory model of these consumer evaluation sites ostensibly “re-localizes” conversation around proximate physical location. While much scholarly attention has been paid to the ways in which the participatory affordances of social platforms have reordered the relationships between producers, consumers and audiences in a globally networked society (Benkler, 2006; Jenkins, 2006), these affordances are relatively undertheorized as it applies to *local*, place-based communities. Moreover, local listing sites (and consumer evaluations generally) as “social media” are comparatively understudied participatory cultures, limited largely to administrative studies that assess the effects of reviews on purchasing decisions (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Godes & Mayzlin, 2004; Liu, 2006). What is less clear, however, is how reviewers talk about their consumption experiences within a strictly *local* context, or how these sites are deployed towards a politics of the local. Through a case study of one such listing site, Yelp.com, the following textual analysis asks the following questions: How do consumers construct localism in consumer reviews? To what extent, if at all, is the review space utilized to articulate a politics of consumption? If the social web can, in fact, rearrange the

power of traditional reputation managers, then online evaluation sites are a compelling case study for understanding how such processes unfold – specifically, at a local, place-based level.

## Methods

Reviews were collected from the top 50 most reviewed business listings across three categories (Food, Health & Medical; Public Service & Government) on Yelp across three different community types (urban, suburban, rural) yielding a total of 1,972 reviews. Using the method of qualitative textual analysis (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004), reviews were coded, categorized and developed into themes using “localism” as a sensitizing construct. Codes sharing notable commonalities were collapsed into *categories*, which continued to be refined throughout the analytical process until no new codes emerged (Baptiste, 2001, p. 10). Through the method of constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), similarities and differences between reviews and data samples were assessed in the generation of themes. Constant comparison involves the systematic comparison of texts within and between their assigned categories “in order to fully understand the theoretical properties of the category” (Zhang & Wildemuth, p. 4); thus, reviews *and* themes were consistently compared and contrasted, discarded, discounted, narrowed, expanded, refined and re-thought the data through all stages of the analytical process.

## Findings

Yelp successfully subsumes localism within a “brand logic” (Arvidsson, 2007). As brands construct the “life-world” around a particular firm, reviewers discursively construct localism in a similar manner: as an experiential, consumable aesthetic that conjures a certain “feeling” of connectedness with a particular place that may or may not actually relate to one’s community of residence. As a consumable experience, localism is abstracted from a politically active state or practice; here, the ability to *reconnect* consumers to their community ultimately serves to *disconnect* consumers from politics. As experienced within the boundaries of a specific place, consumers do not actually have to engage in any practices beyond obtaining or consuming the right commodity sign. More than anything, therefore, localism on Yelp is somewhat delimited to a fashionable trend; Yelpers are often more likely to celebrate the consumption *experience* than to identify their role as active community agents.

Similarly, consumer reviews as expressions of lifestyle politics also appears in the articulations of the “local.” Despite celebrating local businesses as desirable community resources, most do not note the importance of “local” as explicitly tied to material issues of production, sourcing, and ownership; instead, localism is discursively constructed as a consumable aesthetic that re-situates the local’s political potential into consumerism’s romantic ethos of individualism, desire and consumer choice. While Yelp offers a useful resource for guiding one through responsible consumption practices, reviews tend to overwhelmingly read more like a guide for participating in the right kind of taste cultures above and beyond political possibilities. Finally, findings also raise the issue of who can claim localism for themselves, as to consume “locally” is dictated by exclusivity – by class, ethnic and other cultural designations - are oftentimes deployed in contradistinction to “real” locals.

Localism as an experiential quality, vibe or consumable “experience” undermines the construct as an active practice even as its celebration democratizes the reputation of independently owned businesses by redirecting attention from corporate chains. Functioning in service of communicative capitalism (Dean, 2010), *anti-corporate* critiques ultimately do not serve as a form of direct public pressure or viable replacement for lobbying or protest; corporate power remains uncontested. Thus, deploying localism as a brand strategy problematically minimizes localism’s role in the larger political economy by obfuscating not only the relations of production and consumption from public consciousness, but the processes necessary to effect long-term, sustainable change.

## References

- Arvidsson, A. (2006). *Brands: Meaning and value in media culture*: Routledge: New York.
- Baptiste, I. (2001). Qualitative data analysis: Common phases, strategic differences. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 2(3).
- Benkler, Y. (2006). *The Wealth of Networks*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgment of taste*. London: Routledge.
- Chevalier, J. A., & Mayzlin, D. (2006). The effect of word of mouth on sales: Online book reviews. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 43(3), 345-354.
- Duan, W., Gu, B., & Whinston, A. (2008). Do online reviews matter? An empirical investigation of panel data. *Decision Support Systems*, 45(4), 1007-1016.
- Glaser, B.G. & A. Strauss (1967). *Discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. New York: Aldine.
- Graneheim U.H. & Lundman B. (2004) Qualitative content analysis in nursing research: concepts, procedures and measures to achieve trustworthiness. *Nurse Education Today*, 24, 105–112.
- Jenkins, H. (2006). *Convergence culture: Where old and new media collide*. New York: NYU Press.
- Liu, Y. (2006). Word of mouth for movies: Its dynamics and impact on box office revenue. *Journal of Marketing*, 70(3) 74–89.