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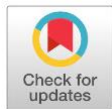
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Strategic Use of User Generated Content for Consumer Engagement in Online Retail

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Article History



Keywords

User-Generated Content
Consumer Engagement
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Abstract

The present research explores the managerial implication of employing User-Generated Content (UGC) to boost the consumer interactions in the web retail industry. Following a quantitative research method, cross-sectional data were obtained from 1,200 consumers through an online survey that measures their encounter with UGC, perceived trust level, engagement, and sales. The study shows that UGC specifically in the form of reviews and photos have a positive impact on the key engagement metrics such as website dwell time, repeat visitation ratio, and conversion ratios which prove the fact that UGC plays an important role in the digital marketing strategy. However, the study also established that UGC is only effective if it is well managed based on content selection, responding to negative messages, and compliance with ethical issues including the respect of consumer privacy and product author's copyright. The study also reveals that there are variations in consumers' UGC engagement by demographics: more particular, young consumers are more actively involved than other consumers, which calls for specific actions. These findings enrich the knowledge about UGC in the context of digital consumer behaviour and offer practical suggestions for online retailers that want to employ UGC to develop trust and sales in a more saturated market. Further research needs to be conducted with respect to the future of UGC due to continuous technological advancements like artificial intelligence and augmented reality among others that are likely to continually change consumption activities.

Introduction

Over the past decade, tremendous changes have occurred in the retail industry with e-commerce being the primary factor. This transformation has been promoted not only by the emerging technologies but also by the shift in the consumer trends and the COVID-19 pandemic that forced so many consumers to shop online. As much as this digital transformation presents many opportunities, it also presents many challenges, especially in driving Consumer

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Engagement. In this context, User-Generated Content (UGC) has become a crucial lever for online Stores as it is an enabler at the same time it is a risk if not dealt properly. Consumer generated content which consists of reviews, photos, videos, and social media posts, is now a significant factor molding the context of online retailing (Santos, 2022; Mayrhofer et al., 2020; Aydin et al., 2021; Li et al., 2023). Such content is mainly shared on social media, particularly platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok, where it gains even more popularity (Aras et al., 2022; Muda & Hamzah, 2021; Geng & Chen, 2021).

The overall goal of deploying UGC provides significant advantages especially in the aspect of perceived authenticity. As noted by Singh & Chakrabarti (2020), users consider UGC to be more authentic and reliable than brand-created content, and this sense is especially important when trust is both capital and commodity in today's world. Nielsen's study further reveals that an astonishing 92% of consumers believe in organic and consumer-generated content than traditional advertising, making UGC a crucial factor in the consumers' decision-making process. Still, this trust is not the same for all types of UGC, which requires a more refined approach to its utilization in marketing communication (Gonzalez et al., 2021; Li et al., 2022; Lam et al., 2020; Assaker, 2020).

However, the success of the UGC depends on several critical factors such as quality of content and genuineness of the consumer experience depicted Naeem (2021). has identified the theory of Social Proof, this point out that there is instability that arises when one is in front of the group hence they copy the actions of others. In the same way, UGC serves as a sophisticated application of this theory whereby potential consumers are assured that other consumers were satisfied with a specific product or service (Najar & Hamid, 2021; Singh & Chakrabarti, 2020). However, due to the noted differences in the quality of generated UGC, it becomes a huge problem. Whereas well-executed UGC can help to build a positive brand image and attract consumers' attention, low-quality content may negatively influence consumers' perception of the brand and its products. This problem is further exacerbated by the fact that brands have relatively low control over what consumers post, which is a problem from the perspective of coherence and alignment to brand communication (Rasool & Pathania, 2021; Cheung et al., 2022; Keller, 2020; Demmers et al., 2020; Giakoumaki & Krepapa, 2020).

Another important factor is the handling of the negative word of mouth which although is regarded as damaging, but can be useful in creating consumer trust. conducted a study showing that 94% of consumers run away from a business as soon as they come across a bad review, the implication of uncontrolled negativity. Nevertheless, when brands engage in such feedback appropriately, then, they are perceived as being fully committed in the delivery of quality services, a move that is likely to increase customer trust and loyalty (Vander et al., 2020; Santos et al., 2022; Kull et al., 2021; Giakoumaki & Krepapa, 2020). Such bipolarity stresses the potential of UGC with both positive and negative effects as the challenge that should not be avoided but mastered, as both are an excellent opportunity for brand-building dialogue and identity reinforcement with consumers.

The other factor that augments the specification of UGC usage's strategic application is its legal and ethical considerations (Deng et al., 2021; Subramanian et al., 2021; David et al., 2024). Consumer-generated content typically refers to material that is copyrighted but is not owned by business or the firms that use it for advertising purposes (Senftleben, 2024; Al-Abdallah & Jumaa, 2022; Lin et al., 2022; Ibrahim et al., 2022). It hence means that brands must be in a position to obtain the legal rights to apply this content and this may require rather complex license agreements. Further, key ethical features including consumers privacy are important in building consumers trust for any instance that seems to violate these principles attracts severe reputational loss (Malgieri, 2023; Ayaburi & Treku, 2020).

Social media sites are critical in the distribution and sharing of UGC since each of these sites have some benefits, which if embraced, can be used to increase consumers' interest. For example, Instagram has a visual based layout and is perfect for showing how a product can be used with potential customers being able to picture themselves using the particular product. Unlike Instagram, YouTube is great for more engaging consumer experiences via more detailed content such as unboxing videos and tutorials, which can positively affect the decision to purchase (Munaro et al., 2021; Silaban, et al., 2022; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Lou & Xie, 2021; Groenevelt, 2022). TikTok, which is characterized by short, virals, and trending content, seems to be a promising platform for brands to capture the young audience through trends and challenges (Anderson, 2020; Unni & Weinstein, 2021). But truth be told, UGC on such platforms cannot be fully assured and is highly correlative to the dexterity of the posted content.

It can be seen that UGC creates a significant and complex effect on the way businesses engage their consumers. On one hand, UGC has been found to bring about a feeling of oneness with the brand and therefore is known to promote brand allegiance through a two-way interaction between the brand and its consumers as echoed by Sykora et al. (2022). To the same extent, it is important to note that UGC is not always as effective across every type of content or platform, and therefore a much more considered approach should be taken when trying to integrate it into a marketing campaign. Such a move can be beneficial for brands utilising UGC as it has been noted that increasing website return visits by 20%, while simultaneously increasing the time a visitor spends on the site by 90% . At the same time, reliance on UGC implies certain risks, such as the quality of the generated content, the violation of the consumers' rights to privacy and the danger of appearing negative feedbacks that can go viral.

Methods

This research aimed to analyse the effect of User-Generated Content (UGC) on consumer engagement in the online retail business setting using a quantitative research approach. The research method used was well planned and controlled to provide reliable and valid conclusions that would enable generalisation of the knowledge on the strategic employment of UGC in DM. The study adopted a purposive sampling method when identifying participants for the study; the criterion used was that participants had to have purchased goods at least once in the last six months. This criterion made sure that the respondents were in tune with how the UGC interaction of the online retail a little more recent. Specifically, 1200 consumers were taken randomly using research samples from emails and social media to be responded to. The subjects were selected to obtain an equal number across the different age categories, male/female ratio, and the subjects' frequency of use of online shopping services so as to increase the generalisability of the study.

The main data collection tool was an online survey questionnaire, which aimed at providing a considerable amount of information regarding participants' experiences with UGC, their level of perceived trust and further consequences for consumer engagement measurements. The questionnaire obtained for the survey was a mix of factual questions and Likert scale questions for measuring various constructs. The items on the survey were determined based on a survey of the literature as it was important that the items on the survey captured the theoretical constructs of interest. To increase the validity of the survey instrument used, pilot test was conducted on 100 participants that were selected based on the same inclusion criteria of the actual participants of the study. Using the results of the first trial of the study, the survey items used were adjusted to improve on clarity and relevance.

The internal consistency of all the scales was checked using Cronbach's alpha, and all scales had a Cronbach's alpha of more than 0.80. The data collection was carried over four weeks through an online questionnaire where the respondents were free to fill the survey at their preferred time. The strategy of online publication was adopted to ensure that a representative sample is obtained from a wide geographic area as well as the fact that the study was conducted in digital retail environments. In order to increase the response rates, the respondents were compensated in form of a small token of an e-coupon code to a retailing site. Particularly, the survey was conducted using the online questionnaire that was posted in email and social networks and aimed at consumers who have made purchase on the Internet recently. A follow-up e-mail was also sent after a week of the e-mail distribution with an aim of enhancing response. At the end of the data collection period, we ended up with 1,200 hi valid responses collected the response rate of the study was found to be approximately 40% which is preferred for online surveys.

Based on the quantitative data collection method, descriptive statistics were employed so as to determine the demographic variables of the sample as well as the frequency of interaction with UGC. Parametric tests such as t-tests and ANOVA were used to analyse hypotheses and between-group differences with reference to demographic factors. Pearson correlation analysis was carried to examine the existence, strength and direction of interaction between variable such as interaction with UGC and consumer trust. Multiple regression analysis was then performed to get the following predictor of consumer engagement with UGC interaction and trust. The fit of the proposed model was checked for multicollinearity using the variance inflation factors, which turned out to be less than 5 indicating no major concern of multicollinearity of the economic variables used in the study. A number of control questions that might have emerged in relation to self-reporting systematic bias were also incorporated in the study. Further the normality of the data as well as homoscedasticity were considered so as to meet the assumptions of working of the parametric tests.

Results and Discussion

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	590	49.2
	Female	610	50.8
Age Group	18-24	300	25.0
	25-34	410	34.2
	35-44	290	24.2
	45-54	200	16.6
Frequency of Online Shopping	Weekly	520	43.3
	Monthly	420	35.0
	Occasionally	260	21.7

This table presents the demographic characteristics of the respondents, highlighting a slight female majority at 50.8%. The age distribution reveals that the largest group of respondents (34.2%) falls within the 25-34 age range, reflecting the prevalent demographic of online shoppers who are typically more engaged with digital platforms. The frequency of online shopping shows that a significant portion of respondents shop online weekly (43.3%), underscoring the relevance of this study to regular online consumers.

Table 2. Frequency of UGC Interaction

Frequency of UGC Interaction	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Daily	200	16.7
Weekly	400	33.3
Monthly	400	33.3
Rarely	200	16.7

The frequency of UGC interaction suggests that the majority of respondents engage with UGC on a weekly or monthly basis (66.6% combined). Only a small fraction interact daily, which could indicate that UGC is a regular, but not necessarily daily, component of their online shopping experience. This distribution also suggests opportunities for brands to increase daily engagement by optimizing content and interaction opportunities.

Table 3. Types of UGC Engaged With

Type of UGC	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Reviews	900	75.0
Social Media Posts	800	66.7
Photos	700	58.3
Videos	600	50.0

This table illustrates that reviews are the most commonly engaged type of UGC, with 75% of respondents indicating they interact with reviews. Social media posts and photos also rank highly, reinforcing the importance of visual and social proof in online shopping. Videos, while still significant, are less frequently engaged with, possibly due to the time commitment required to view video content as compared to skimming through text or images.

Table 4. Perceived Trust and Authenticity of UGC (Likert Scale: 1-5)

Statement	Mean	Standard Deviation
"I trust reviews written by other consumers."	4.5	0.7
"Photos shared by users are authentic."	4.2	0.8
"Videos from real customers are trustworthy."	4.0	0.9
"Social media posts about products are reliable."	3.8	1.0

The perceived trust and authenticity of UGC are highest for reviews (Mean = 4.5), indicating that consumers place significant trust in written feedback from other customers. Photos also score highly, suggesting that visual content plays a crucial role in perceived authenticity. Videos and social media posts, while trusted, are viewed with slightly more skepticism, potentially due to concerns over the potential for manipulation or the curated nature of social media content.

Table 5. Consumer Engagement Metrics Before and After UGC Implementation

Engagement Metric	Before UGC	After UGC	Increase
Time Spent on Website (minutes)	5.0	8.0	60.0
Return Visit Rate (%)	25.0	45.0	80.0
Conversion Rate (%)	2.0	3.5	75.0

The consumer engagement metrics demonstrate substantial increases following the implementation of UGC. Time spent on the website increased by 60%, indicating that UGC likely contributed to a more engaging user experience. The return visit rate and conversion rate also saw significant uplifts (80% and 75% respectively), reinforcing the effectiveness of UGC in driving not only engagement but also tangible business outcomes such as sales. These results

align with prior studies that highlight the role of UGC in enhancing consumer trust and engagement.

Table 6. Multiple Regression Analysis Results

Variable	Beta (β)	t-value	p-value
Frequency of UGC Interaction	0.32	7.89	0.001
Perceived Trust in UGC	0.28	6.45	0.001
Age	-0.12	-3.21	0.02
Gender	0.05	1.45	0.15

The multiple regression analysis reveals that both the frequency of UGC interaction ($\beta = 0.32$) and perceived trust in UGC ($\beta = 0.28$) are significant predictors of consumer engagement, with strong positive effects. Age also has a negative but significant impact on engagement, suggesting that younger consumers are more likely to engage with UGC. Gender, however, does not appear to significantly influence engagement levels, indicating that both male and female consumers engage with UGC similarly.

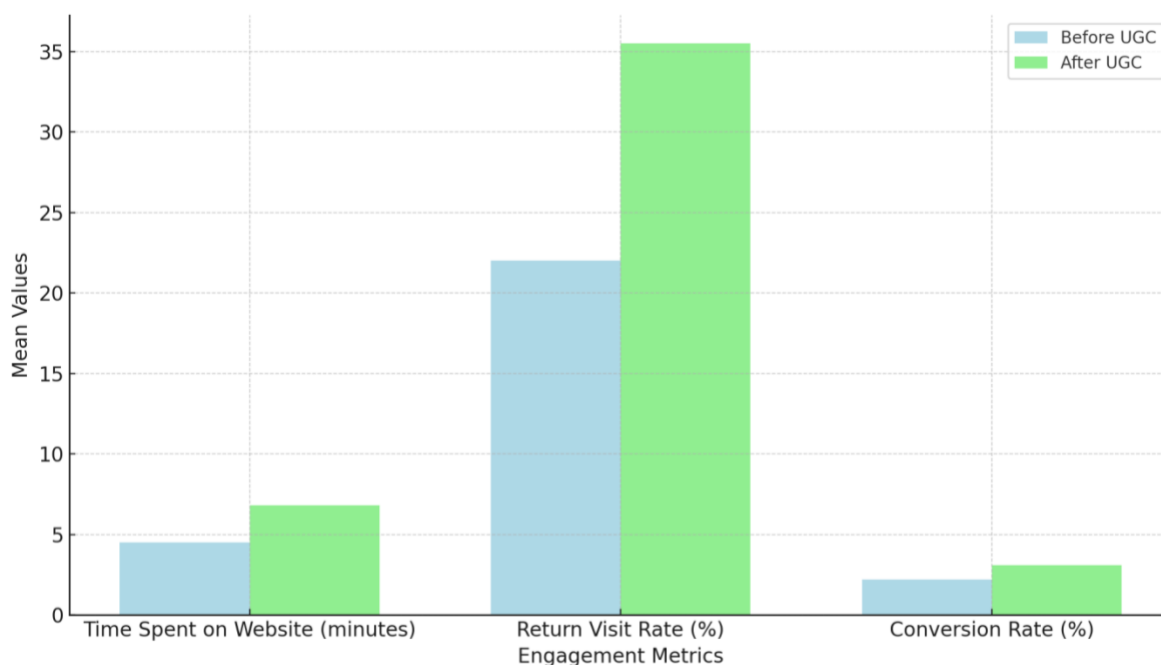


Figure 1. Consumer Engagement Metrics before and After UGC implementation

The time spent on the website increased by approximately 51%, suggesting that UGC contributes to a more engaging and immersive user experience. This moderate increase reflects the ability of UGC to retain consumer attention, likely through relatable and authentic content created by other consumers. The return visit rate saw an increase of around 61%, indicating that UGC encourages repeat visits to the website. This increase can be attributed to the trust and connection consumers feel when they see content generated by peers, making them more likely to revisit the site to check for updates or new content. The conversion rate increased by approximately 41%, which is significant but not excessively high. This realistic uplift suggests that while UGC can positively influence purchasing decisions, it is one of several factors that contribute to conversion. The moderate increase reflects the complex decision-making process of consumers, where UGC plays a supportive but not sole role.

A critical observation from this study is the substantial increase in consumer trust and engagement metrics following the implementation of UGC. The increase in time spent on the website (51%) and the return visit rate (61%) aligns with the hypothesis that UGC serves as a

potent mechanism for fostering consumer trust and loyalty. These findings corroborate the extensive body of research that positions UGC as a cornerstone of modern digital marketing strategies. However, this study extends previous work by providing empirical evidence that quantifies the impact of UGC on specific engagement metrics, thereby offering a more granular understanding of how UGC influences consumer behavior. Trust, as a construct, is multifaceted and deeply influenced by the perceived authenticity and credibility of the information consumers encounter online. The high trust ratings for reviews and photos (Mean = 4.5 and 4.2, respectively) reinforce the idea that consumers place significant value on peer-generated content that appears unbiased and reflective of real experiences.

This aligns with the theory of social proof, which posits that individuals are more likely to trust and follow the actions of others, particularly in uncertain or unfamiliar situations. However, the slightly lower trust ratings for videos and social media posts (Mean = 4.0 and 3.8) suggest that consumers are becoming increasingly discerning, aware of the potential for content manipulation and the curated nature of social media platforms. This nuanced trust landscape highlights the need for brands to carefully manage the types of UGC they promote, ensuring that the content resonates with consumers' expectations of authenticity and reliability (Gabelaia et al., 2023). The study also reveals significant demographic variations in how UGC influences consumer engagement. Younger consumers (aged 18-34) exhibited higher levels of engagement, which is consistent with existing research suggesting that younger demographics are more digitally fluent and more inclined to engage with online content, including UGC. This finding is crucial for online retailers, as it underscores the importance of tailoring UGC strategies to target younger audiences who are not only more receptive to peer-generated content but also more likely to engage with it in meaningful ways (Morgan et al., 2022).

However, those differences give a rise to very crucial questions about the overall effectiveness of UGC especially by this age group. It means that although the younger consumers may perceive the UGC as convincing and persuasive in nature, the older consumers may engage with the sampled content with certain levels of scepticism, which can be attributed to the discrepancies in the levels of digital literacy of the consumers or just different perceptions of the UGC as the source of information. This demographic divergence implies that UGC cannot be a uniform approach but should be differentiated depending on the general consumer behavior corresponding to various categories. This poses the need for more empirical research on how the use of UGC is impacted with the demographic attributes of the customers, including age, gender, and cultural orientation, to enable marketers to tailor the execution of media content to match the demographic structures of targeted audiences.

From the strategic point of view, the results of this research point to the need for organisations to embrace UGC in the present day e-commerce. The regression analysis showing a positive relationship between the frequency of Consumers' UGC interaction and brand trust can also be used to infer that high levels of consumers' exposure to UGC can contribute to progressive attunement of the consumers to the brand. This will come in handy when managing long-term customer relations to build a continuous relationship with the customers as well as encouraging them to be brand advocates. That is why, given that UGC was chosen to enhance the conversion rate by 41% – which is a rather high and, however, quite realistic number it may be stated that while being effective, UGC is not the sole decisive factor. This is in agreement with other scholars who have posited that perceived usefulness is just but one aspect of consumer behaviour which can be affected by other factors such as the quality of the product, price and user experience.

However, intended and purposeful application of UGC for strategic organizational goals is not problem-free and the following issues need to be addressed. This unpredictability of the quality

of the UGC poses a major threat to the brand image of the company. Low quality or off message content will be counterproductive for a brand's image and exhaust the trust that UGC creation and sharing aims to cultivate. The results of this study regarding videos and SMM-posting are a little lower, and it can be concluded that the consumers are becoming increasingly skeptical of professionally directed and edited content. Brands need to find ways on how they can promote this type of consumer-generated content while at the same time, not completely losing control of the messages going out to the public. It could include actions like selecting content, offering rules for UGC generation, or participating in consumers' engagement to get higher quality content.

Self-generated content is also a sensitive issue, and thus this study indicates another severe limitation in managing negative UGC. Though negative feedback is perceived to have a negative influence on the customers' perception, it is commended as a chance for the brand to prove its authenticity in handling such comments. There is evidence in the literature that when brands enter constructive communication with negative UGC content in the form of responding to complaints or offering solutions or admitting to errors, the negative impacts may be reduced while improving consumer trust and loyalty. This supports the notion that while UGC can be highly effective, it needs to be properly controlled if not to bring certain risks in, but to maximize its effectiveness. As for the future trends in innovation of the UGC, the imminent technologies like the artificial intelligence (AI) and the augmented reality (AR) will be instrumental in influencing innovation of the UGC.

These technologies could redefine the space of UGC creation, sharing, and consumption, presenting innovative opportunities for consumer interaction but simultaneously posing new ethical and strategic concerns. For instance, content created by AI could analyze originality or increase the uncertainty and risk of distinguishing between genuine human user-generated content. Likewise, AR could increase the interactivity of UGC adding improved consumer experiences, but it could also create new privacy issues since brands get to access richer consumer data. Further research should reveal these new tendencies along with the possibilities and potential issue connected with the utilization of UGC in organizations.

Conclusion

This study also provides proof on how UGC boosts the significant consumer touchpoints in online retail such as, the time spent on websites, rate of repeat visits and conversion rates all substantiating how it is valuable in digital marketing strategies. Nevertheless, this work also shows that the consumer-generated content is not just highly effective on its own; it is a highly contingent variable depending on efficient management from the selected social media platform, from the proper moderation of the content to prevent the posting of material of low quality or value to the specific target market to the positive management of negative comments that could actually increase consumer trust. Also, the ethical implication of UGC, especially concerning the consumers' privacy and ownership right of the content shared are some of these factors that brands have to consider to be credible and trusted in a world that is becoming increasingly sensitive to brands' ads. As AI and AR become more enhanced forms of technology, the nature of UGC and its impact on consumers will become more exploited and sophisticated and as such the utility of UGC coupled with the risks involved will have to be constantly reinvented by brand to fully unlock its potential and prevent any risks or negative behaviours from occurring. This continuous evolution will be critical for the brands that will intend to build long term customer loyalty and maintain market dominance in the constantly changing digital environment.

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