

From Hashtags to Products: The Role of User-Generated Content in Brand Storytelling and New Product Development in the Food and Beverage Sector

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Abstract

This article examines the changing role of User-Generated Content (UGC) in brand storytelling and innovation in both global and Indian contexts. The article draws on case-based insights into the ways in which consumer stories expand brand identity, how memes, hashtags and viral challenges help develop trust and engagement with brands. The article identifies two specific roles of UGC where in first, as a cultural storytelling platform to embed brands into any consumer's everyday experience with the brand, and second, as a mechanism to stimulate innovation by drawing on consumer ideas, experiential feedback loops and festival-based product adaptations. Using examples from global brands including Coca-Cola's "Share a Coke" campaign and Starbucks' TikTok inspired menu hacks alongside examples from India including Paper Boat's nostalgia-led campaigns and Chumbak's consumer-led design initiatives to demonstrate the versatility of UGC content across markets. The article also identifies three new theoretical extensions of cultural context sensitivity, algorithmic mediation and identity signalling, to extend traditional theoretical lenses of consumer engagement co-creation and innovation diffusion. Finally, the virtue of UGC is further complicated by the introduction of ethical concerns about intellectual property, fake reviews and cultural misalignment, making policy implications necessary. By re-framing UGC as a trust-building and innovation stimulus, this article builds a conceptual framework and direction for future empirical research to examine its implications for emerging and global markets.

Keywords: Brand Storytelling, Co-creation, Cultural Context Sensitivity, Innovation, User-Generated Content (UGC).

Introduction

User-Generated Content (UGC) has been displacing its status as a peripheral consequence of an online interaction to becoming the core way in which brands establish meaning, credibility, and innovation in the modern markets. In comparison to communications created by firms, UGC is legitimized by peer-to-peer communication, lived experience, and situational authenticity and thus a pivotal contributor of consumer trust and narrative resonance. Consumers do not just react to brand messages through reviews, images, videos, memes and short form storytelling, but rather they become engaged in the process of brand storytelling and create them in the process of daily cultural activities. Simultaneously, such consumer manifestations bring a helpful amount of usage data, preferences and unmet needs that enable companies to incorporate UGC in preliminary ideation and cyclical product creation workflows. Consequently, UGC can be found at the

crossroads of brand storytelling and innovation, which supports authenticity, enhances engagement, and - at the same time - drives new product development decisions. This two-sided role leaves UGC to not only be a source of communication but a strategic contribution to the creation of value in both global and culturally diverse markets (1).

The increased importance of UGC as a factor is more than simply an abundance of content, it becomes an important lever for developing consumer trust, deepening brand storytelling, and driving product innovation. Consumers often consider content produced by peers more trustworthy than highly polished, brand generated campaigns, largely because it demonstrates the raw experience, context, and emotion of individual involvements (2). In addition to trust, UGC enables brands to tell stories that co-create narratives with their audience that situates the brand within lived

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moments as opposed to simply promoting tailored messages. At the same time, UGC captures customer feedback on usage, preferences, problems and the like which becomes an important piece of information in New Product Development (NPD) (3). In rapidly changing markets, this capacity to listen, iterate, and innovate will give brands an upper hand.

A case-based approach helps provide clarity to these dynamics, especially when considering both a global and Indian lens. Globally, brands like Starbucks, Coca-Cola, and Lays have used UGC campaigns (for example, Coca-Cola's "Share a Coke," Lays "Do Us a Flavour," and Starbucks' user-designed cup competitions) to increase brand visibility and to foster innovation through crowdsourcing and co-creation. These campaigns serve as examples of how global brands are applying UGC to drive participation, develop brand narratives, and in some cases, turn user submissions into branded goods (4). The UGC landscape in India is just as rich, albeit shaped in distinct ways by local culture, language diversity, regional platforms, and consumer expectations. UGC driven campaigns have been adopted by brands like Amul, Zomato, Swiggy and Paper Boat by sharing UGC elements in their social media posts, user reviews and campaigns to tell brand stories that are culturally relevant and often humorous, nostalgic, or regional. In the case of Amul, their topical ads often share the expression of public sentiment and popular culture through social media channels aiming to create a sense in which the brand voice is both derived from public expression and intimately engaged with its own consumers. Similarly, brands like Zomato or Swiggy encourage UGC in the form of user reviews, images, and stories as part of their brand identity, often in a very visible way (5).

The UGC strategy can also enhance co-creation between consumers and brands. Co-creation involves mutual value creation, with UGC being the channel through which consumers can provide creative input into a brand's identity (6, 7). Another perspective went one step further than others and present empirical evidence that UGC assists with ideation in product development, particularly by monitoring and responding to consumer generated content (8). A systematic review shows UGC is increasingly utilized in the front-end stages of NPD, however structured

processes to leverage UGC at later stages (prototype refinement, testing, commercialization) are less developed (9).

The evolving characteristics of digital platforms significantly influence the nature, scope, and impact of UGC. Interaction quality (how UGC enables responses, comments, multimedia) serves as a moderator on the resource (10). The ease of feedback and discussion on digital platforms, such as Instagram, YouTube, and newcomer short-video platforms are conducive to quicker insights, improved user feedback loops, and improved product idea generation (8). Furthermore, new platforms in non-Western markets vary widely apprehended, for example, local platform traffic or usage, language diversity, cultural expectations in what UGC is generated and appreciated (3). Platform algorithms, and affordances (e.g., content surfacing) determine whether UGC becomes relevant to branding, or 'just disappears' (6).

While there is clear promise for UGC, there is a remarkable lack of studies in emerging markets, particularly in India aiming to study structured use of UGC in organizations along the full NPD pipeline. An explicit distinction stipulated that ideation through UGC is a well-studied area, but there is little empirical research where brands in emerging markets systematically use UGC in the prototyping, testing, and market launch phases of NPD (3). Evidence support for UGC in product development, but mostly in non-Indian contexts (8). Existing literature on the role of UGC in product development is mostly based on non-Indian settings and peer-reviewed literature showing UGC-driven product introduction, such as flavour innovation, packaging design, or product form development, is limited to India. Furthermore, although the outcomes of trust and engagement relating to UGC are commonly assessed, a lack of focus has been made towards the contextual circumstances within which UGC leads to trust-building within culturally diverse markets, such as the participation processes in the territories of tier-2 and tier-3. Moreover, moderation, validation, and content curation processes in enhancing or degrading perceived authenticity are under understood, and India-specific, longitudinal and mixed-methods research tracing the entire pathway of consumer contribution to product production is wanted.

As a result, the paper aims to determine the role of user-generated content in brand storytelling by establishing trust in the global and Indian contexts as well as how UGC can influence the process of new product development. It also seeks to determine how advertisers struggle to comprehend and control UGC in the context of varying cultural, regulatory and ethics. Lastly, the paper guides a conceptual framework of prospective studies that visualizes the critical forces, mediators, and consequences of UGC activity that can provide guidance to companies functioning in the world of diversified cultures and digitally shrinking ecosystems. This paper is intended to bridge theory and practice, offering a case-based window and therefore a conceptual framework for researchers and practitioners alike. Comparing global and local (Indian) cases, it has the aim of establishing what is generalizable and what needs be localized. It is expected that a comparison of global and local (Indian) cases will further enhance UGC, not just in driving brand awareness, but driven by product innovation and sustainable consumer-brand relationships. Accordingly, the paper adopts a conceptual research design supported by illustrative brand cases, with the primary contribution lying in framework development rather than empirical generalization.

Methodology

It is not a qualitative case study on its own since this paper is placed as a conceptual, case-informed analysis (11). The first one is theory development, that is, to compile the available literature and observable practices in the industry into a coherent conceptual framework that explains the value of user-generated content (UGC) in brand storytelling and in developing new products. The brand cases presented in the paper are not thus the empirical evidence dedicated to testing the hypothesis, but illustrative analytical examples employed to support, explain and put into context conceptual arguments (12). This methodology is consistent with past traditions of theory-building studies, in which secondary case data is used to make analytical generalizations instead of statistical ones.

This analysis uses a method that involves selectively filtered secondary information, such as published case study material, brand campaign

reports, industry reports, and brand communications published online, such as social media discussions, consumer stories, and platform-mediated brand communications. A theory-driven thematic synthesis was used to analyse data, an iterative coding process and pattern identification across cases were used to identify recurring themes concerning engagement dynamics, formation of trust, co-creation, and innovation feedback (13). Interpretation of these themes was based on given theoretical constructs in order to have analytical consistency and conceptual rigour. Instead of being used as the empirical data that can be utilized to draw a causal conclusion, the cases offer systematic analytical foundations to the creation of the coherent conceptual framework where the UGC mechanisms are connected to the brand storytelling effect and the processes of the new product development.

Results

Paper Boat, an Indian beverage start-up, cued in more than a drink brand, but rather a cultural storyteller. The campaign required consumers to share stories of significance linked to traditional flavours like Aam Panna, Jaljeera or Rasam. Through social media posts and hashtags, consumers collaboratively developed a repository of childhood summers, school outings, and family meals linked to these traditional flavours. Different from beverage advertising that tended to be oriented around functionality or low-price, Paper Boat appropriated cultural memory as a protentional for brand development. This case of UGC illustrates the capacity of brands in emerging material contexts, to transform the lived experiences of consumers into significant storytelling mechanisms and constructs of emotional attachment with brands over longer periods.

Chumbak, a lifestyle and gifting brand, activated participatory culture by inviting consumers to provide input on product aesthetic directly. The brand would use social media to invite consumer to enter contests, provide polls and open posts to solicit ideas to influence motifs, slogans and color combinations. Frequently, the winning designs would be incorporated into upcoming products - often with visible acknowledgement and ownership by the customers. The UGC approach to

co-creation closed the gap to participation between brand and consumers while establishing community ownership. The UGC influenced design development offered a stark contrast to the hierarchical and top-down design strategies of other brands. This highlights the active role of UGC is decentralizing decisions and recruiting consumers to influence the development of brand identity itself.

Raw Pressery entered into the highly competitive beverage market by constructing authenticity through micro-influencers and consumer UGC. Fitness trainers and everyday customers shared photos and video links, such as drinking juice cleanses, morning and cleanse rituals as part of health and wellness journey, all featuring Raw Pressery. The company's UGC differed from celebrity influenced UGC, the peer-generated narrative was relatable, and the user pretense of trust and authenticity became persuasive storylines. Raw Pressery responded to a consumer in the cities uptake of health awareness and positioned itself as the daily ritual, not the occasional luxury. This account illustrates that niche brands could create a loyalty cycle through UGC and brand engagement in aspirational

lifestyle segments and themes without an extensive advertising budget.

Blue Tokai used UGC to popularize specialty coffee culture in India, transforming coffee from the Instant format with its volume and tradition in the Indian context, to specialty brewed coffee. Users of Blue Tokai, customers, were initiated and provided with encouragement to post their brewing rituals, experiences at coffee shops, and latte art, all tagging the brand on Instagram. The brand sound amplified the consumer posts sharing and reposting consumers to their network and audience. Over time, the UGC storytelling developed roots, and began to normalize artisanal coffee market as more of a lifestyle choice than a singular purchase by urban millennials. A unique attribute to this example, was how UGC enabled the authority of the coffee product, providing a cultural framework of coffees. Shifting the discourse of coffee from a hydraulic drink to a ritualistic experience of sophistication as an identity. Blue Tokai positioned itself as destination to not just a product, but a movement through consumer practice of UGC. The characteristics of selected brand cases and their UGC mechanisms are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Local Brand Cases and Deeper Insights from UGC

Brand	UGC Mechanism	Unique Finding / Insight	Theoretical Link
Paper Boat	Storytelling via consumer memories	UGC transforms cultural nostalgia into emotional brand equity	Participatory culture and cultural context sensitivity
Chumbak	Design contests and crowdsourced polls	Consumers gain ownership in aesthetics, fostering creative identity communities	Brand co-creation and consumer engagement
Raw Pressery	Micro-influencer UGC on health routines	Peer UGC builds trust in wellness narratives stronger than celebrity endorsements	Social proof and trust-building
Blue Tokai Coffee	Showcasing consumer brewing rituals	UGC created a new cultural category around artisanal coffee consumption	Diffusion of innovation and identity signalling

Discussion

The discussion interprets the case illustrations as contextual lenses to refine and elaborate the proposed conceptual framework, rather than as independent empirical findings. The case-based insights are largely viewed in the prism of the consumer engagement theory and the brand co-creation since the two offer the central explanatory category of how user-generated content functions as a communicative and value-creating activity. The other theoretical perspectives are viewed as supportive and contextual, assists in explaining particular behavioural, technological and cultural circumstances, in which UGC proves to be effective. The theory of consumer engagement is the most important in the conceptualisation of UGC as an interactive process and not a passive consumption

of content. The interactions of engagement have often been conceptualized to entail cognitive, affective, and behavioural aspects of brand engagements (14). The evidence presented in the case also implies that UGC not only expands the scope of dyadic brand-consumer interactions but also makes the process distributed and collective, i.e., at the same time, consumers, peers, and influencers collaborate in the processes of content production and distribution. The example of campaigns like the topical advertising and meme-based interactions show that the engagement is enhanced when consumers re-write and spread brand narratives within their social circles, thus allowing engagement to prevail through peer-to-peer visibility and not direct brand communication.

In support of this view, brand co-creation theory can be considered as the second major theory used in the interpretation of the findings. Co-creation puts consumers as active participants to value creation and not as passive receivers of brand meaning (12). The evidence presented in the case highlights that UGC can be used to co-create not only the symbolic storytelling level but also on a more real-life level of providing contributions like design ideas, product suggestions and involvement in the campaign. Participatory culture extends this logic by acknowledging consumers as cultural producers by incorporating brand meanings into daily language and common social activities (14). Combined, these elements interact to describe the way that UGC helps a brand to develop by having a constant two-way communication with communities of consumers, and not solely through top-down communications.

Under this overarching framework, social proof and trust-building models are the second line of influence, which provides an explanation of the credibility and influence building in UGC settings. There is social evidence that people base their decisions in uncertain conditions based on the behaviour of others in the presence of the individual (15), trust models are based on the importance of recurrent cues of peers in influencing the perceived credibility during online interaction (16). The cases prove the reviews, peer endorsements and involvement of influencers have the best impact to build trust as they signal collective validation. Nevertheless, the results also show that the process of trust formation is being increasingly influenced by the mediation of algorithms, with platform algorithms that determine which content is getting traffic without considering its inherent quality. This implies that social proof in the UGC situations is not entirely organic but is filtered using technological systems which moderate the credibility indicators.

The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and the diffusion of innovation theory are handled as the supportive worldviews which assist in the explication of the circumstances under which consumers embrace and participate in the UGC-enabled platforms (17). The concept of perceived usefulness and the simplicity of use remain to influence the participation in platforms, with the diffusion theory describing the ways in which UGC practices are distributed among communities (18).

Nonetheless, in the case facts, the UGC participation is not necessarily motivated by functional utility. The involvement is often a kind of identity signalling, but shoppers engage in UGC to indicate a sense of belonging, lifestyle identification or aspirational identity. Identity signalling is thus portrayed as a motivational aspect that supplements and not overrides technology acceptance and diffusion explanations. Lastly, the results provide the importance of cultural context sensitivity as the integrative construct which cuts across all theoretical perspectives. Current frames are mostly influenced by Western conditions and fail to explain the influence of cultural norms and language diversity, humour and collectivist orientation on UGC practices in a comprehensive way (19). The cases show that content resonance is very different between socio-cultural groups and this means that engagement, trust, and co-creation is mediated by culturally embedded meanings. By adding the cultural context sensitivity, the explanatory power of engagement and co-creation theories can be improved through considering UGC participation and interpretation differences in culturally differentiated markets, especially in emerging economies.

The UGC strategy also acts as an active extension of brand identity by embedding consumer experiences within brand discourse. When consumers share their personal narratives usually through the form of stories, reviews, or testimonials, brands receive cultural legitimacy that top-down marketing simply cannot generate. The same narrative extension can be seen in Paper Boat where consumers' narratives of nostalgia became embedded in the intellectual framing of the brand (20). Similarly, studies on consumer-generated design ideas exhibit how brand identity is extended beyond the remit of the corporation where the corporation's narrative is framed, and partly co-authored, by consumer narratives (21). The UGC enables brands to reach beyond functional positioning, becoming interwoven in consumer emotional lives and cultural narratives (13).

Digital culture provides the context for memes, hashtags, and viral challenges to emerge as a vital form of UGC that can build brand trust and engagement. Memes are often humorous blue collar cultural shorthand that bond community

and reinforce brand relativity (22). Hashtags create organization of narrative in one place, surrounding collective conversation, around a product, e.g. Zomato's witty campaign hashtags create relatability and humour while creating voices for consumers. Viral challenges, such as those on TikTok or the Instagram Reels feature, create interactivity for consumers, who provide active performance and display their association with brands, as brand engagement becomes social capital (23). Memes, hashtags, and viral challenges illustrate participatory culture, whereby consumers are active participants instead of passive recipients in building trust networks around brands (18).

With the explosion of platforms, UGC strategies must incorporate cross-platform content. Instagram Reels create the path for visual storytelling and instant entertainment with highly shareable content popularized exclusively through

this platform. YouTube reviews typically carry longer, more detailed narratives that weave credibility and trust based on expertise (24). Twitter trends capture participation in real time and enable brands to align with conversations already taking place in culture and the immediacy of cultural conversations. Brands that effectively knit together these platforms, such as Blue Tokai Coffee using their Instagram UGC and customers reviewing products via YouTube, produce layers of narratives catering to a variety of preferences. Cross-platform strategies also demonstrate that the UGC is not universal, but highly specific to the platform and there for UGC requires a deliberate strategy to balance entertainment factors, while simultaneously providing authenticity, and credibility (25). The key user-generated content mechanisms, corresponding storytelling modes, and their associated brand impacts discussed in this section are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: User Generated Content Mechanism for Brand Impact

Storytelling Mode	UGC Mechanism	Unique Brand Impact	Theoretical Link
Consumer Narratives	Reviews, testimonials, nostalgic stories	Extends brand identity by embedding consumer experiences	Consumer engagement & co-creation
Memes & Hashtags	Viral memes, hashtag campaigns (#Foodie, etc.)	Build trust and relatability via humor, community participation	Social proof & participatory culture
Viral Challenges	TikTok/Instagram Reels brand-linked challenges	Transform brand association into social performance & peer bonding	Diffusion of innovation & identity signalling
Cross-Platform Reviews	Instagram Reels (short), YouTube (long-form), Twitter (trends)	Provides layered credibility entertainment + expertise + immediacy	Technology acceptance & cultural context sensitivity

The UGC is increasingly used as a crowdsourcing tool in product ideation, flavour innovations, and packaging design. Global examples such as Lays "Do Us a Flavour" highlight how collaboratively developing product ideas from consumer submissions can lead to product launches (26). In the Indian context, brands such as Chumbak have employed similar approaches, announcing designs using consumer-generated motifs and packaging (21). Crowdsourcing UGC has two particular advantages: (a) it reduces exploratory research costs by outsourcing creativity to consumers, and (b) it builds on a community of invested customers who participate in owning the eventual product. Co-creation therefore shifts consumers from passive customers to active agents in the innovation process (13).

Despite the fact that previous studies have primarily attributed the concept of user-generated content (UGC) to the ideation phase of new product

development (NPD), it is emerging that its impact has significant effect in the prototyping, testing, and commercialization process in a systematic manner where the concept has been interpreted (9). In prototyping, consumer reviews, usability demonstrations and comparative stories that are found on online platforms are informal validation mechanisms that expose design constraints, usability issues and contextual inconsistencies that otherwise might not be revealed by internal testing alone (8). During the testing stage, UGC devices like unboxing videos, experiential reviews and instructional variations offer a naturalistic, large-scale feedback on perceived quality, performance, and value, which can be refined iteratively and better fit the market (27). Early adopters and influencer-created UGC serves as social evidence at the moment of commercialization that minimizes the perceived risk, validates product launches, and spurred diffusion, and at the same time provides

feedback on future product enhancements or expansions (28). All these views make UGC not a hypothetical or confined input but a sustained interpretive resource that enables various steps in the NPD process in an iterative cycle of innovation (29).

The UGC when adapted by Indian brands through culturally rhythmical occasions is perhaps the most significant adaptation. Seasonal and festive launches for brands such as Amul and others routinely emerge from consumer buzz about Diwali, Holi, or Raksha Bandhan. From content such as memes, recipe shares, and consumer demand narratives, UGC supplies Amul signals about what limited-edition flavours or other variations to release (17). Paper Boat has also launched nostalgia-associated festive flavours like Thandai during Holi, based on emergent connections consumers seem to publicly acknowledge online. The UGC strategy therefore serves as a source of product innovation, as well as a cultural marker to help brands to align with socio-cultural rituals as related to brand relevance, particularly in culturally divergent markets. Additionally, festival-based adaptations also demonstrate how UGC in India is different from Western pipeline experiences in that it is not just about establishing novelty, but being able to embed the brand into practices already meaningful to consumers.

This is one of the most enduring ethical problems with user-generated content (UGC), which is the lack of clarity on the ownership of intellectual property (IP). The line between voluntary contribution and extracting value uncompensated is blurred as brands are more and more relying on consumer generated ideas to provide the product features, its packaging, flavours, or even its campaign ideas (22). In terms of management, this requires that clear participation structures come into being, which delineates ownership, the rights of use and the recognition systems. In developing markets, where the level of awareness regarding IP rights and enforcement may be rather low, ethical clarity is a key part of maintaining consumer confidence, as well as long-term involvement instead of a necessary protection under the law.

The viability of UGC as a trust-building tool is becoming compromised due to the spread of fake reviews, sponsored endorsements that are undisclosed and the amplified, but low-credibility

content engineered by algorithms (28). To managers, this is a strategic dilemma because, on the one hand, UGC increases authenticity, whereas improper governance destroys the credibility of brands, and it can even lead to the wrong conclusion by consumers. Good managerial solutions are to invest in hybrid moderation systems, which involve a combination of automated detection and human moderation, enforce influencer disclosure standards, and publicly responding to deceptive or fake content. Brand equity and adoption performance in emerging markets, where the consumer tends to be highly dependent on peer validation to minimize purchase risk, has a direct relationship concerning UGC credibility (29).

UGC activities are culturally and socially entrenched, and global strategies are especially risky in new markets with linguistic diversity, consumption based on festivals and collectivist attitudes (26). Successful content on an international digital web can fail or be met with backlash in case of misunderstanding and oversimplification of cultural meanings. To managers, UGC should, therefore, not be assessed based on its level of engagement alone but also on the basis of symbolic resonance and cultural appropriateness. The framework of decentralised content management, local curation units, and culturally-aware campaign construction can be viewed as essential management skills in utilizing UGC without offending the different consumer groups.

In addition to personal ethical issues, the management of UGC must be a combined administrative method which should coordinate the moderation activity with the brand values and long-term strategy. A lack of moderation may subject brands to reputational risk, whereas over-restraint might harm the participatory ethos of UGC, which is the most valuable aspect of it in the first place (30). Managers working in emerging markets should balance between transparency and control through setting of clear content policies, escalation policies and accountability policies. These governance mechanisms complement UGC into a reputational risk that is not managed to become a strategically controlled resource leading to sustainable consumer-brand relations.

Collectively, these ethical and managerial issues help bring home why a comprehensive UGC

approach is necessary in the integration of IP transparency, credibility oversight, cultural sensitivity, and moderation governance. To managers operating in the areas of emerging markets, UGC cannot be regarded as a marketing tactic to be used ad hoc, but as a strategic asset that has to be carefully managed and ethically under the care of managers. Companies that actively integrate those values in their UGC strategies are more likely to transform participatory risks in long-term competitive assets, enhance consumer confidence, and remain innovative in digitally changing marketplaces.

The overall idea introduced in Figure 1 makes User-Generated Content (UGC) a key structuring element in the relationship between platform infrastructure, consumer incentives, and cultural contexts and brand-level results in storytelling and new product development. The framework views UGC as a dynamic resource instead of a by-product of digital interaction and displays it in terms of clearly defined inputs, the mediating processes, and contextual boundaries. This organization allows a more analytical division of that which produces UGC, the mechanism through which it is produced, and the products it produces to enhance the theoretical consistency and practical relevance.

The three constructs at the input level are determined in the framework. Platform dynamics are the trends of algorithmic visibility, content formats, and interaction affordances according to which UGC is produced and distributed in the digital space (16). The consumer motivations reflect the identity signalling, perceived usefulness, and social capital accrued that influence contribution to UGC creation beyond functional factors (13). Cultural environments are socio-cultural situations like festivals, rituals, language and collective memory that shape the meaning, tone, and resonance of consumer-generated expressions especially in the new market (17). All these contributions provide the definition of the boundary conditions of the framework, recognizing the fact that the effectiveness of UGC depends on the technological and cultural settings instead of being universal.

UGC works at the process level with three interconnected processes that transform the inputs into brand results. First, brand narrative construction is a process where the consumer

stories, reviews, and symbolic expressions are added to the brand story-telling continuum to enhance brand identity, that is, beyond the firm-controlled communication (14). Second, peer validation, recurring exposure, and perceived authenticity of UGC are the two elements that create trust formation and social proof to strengthen credibility in doubtful consumption contexts (13). Third, innovation feedback incorporation embraces the purpose of UGC as a form of informal continuous input into new product development (NPD) process ideation, refinement and adaptation (30). These processes cannot be characterized as linear but rather reinforcing, and the idea of digital engagement is iterative.

The framework also outlines the important mediating and moderating factors that determine these processes. Depending on the implementation of an algorithmic mediation, the decision of what gets shown and how much it gets shown is made, thus the process of establishing the legitimacy of specific narratives irrespective of quality (16). The interpretation of authenticity and trust is mediated by cultural sensitivity between the consumer groups of different segments, especially in non-Western societies (31). The role of identity signalling as a psychological mediator is to transform the motivations of consumers into expressive involvement to reinforce the results of storytelling and engagement (32). On the other hand, the elements of fake reviews, intellectual property uncertainties, and inconsistent influencer content are risk factors that are seen as limiting boundary features that undermine authenticity and trust when left uncontrolled (33). The four outcomes that the framework recognizes at the output level are improved brand awareness, increased consumer engagement, greater effectiveness of NPD, and the maintenance of community co-creation. Notably, those are conceptualized in a recursive way, and thus they feed back to the system, producing more UGC and strengthening over time the consumer-brand relationships. Such a feedback loop makes the framework unique among the frameworks that are not based on the dynamic engagement and thus are consistent with co-creation and innovation views (34).

According to this structure, the framework moves forward six propositions which are graphically

represented in Figure 1. P1: It is suggested that the quality and visibility of UGC are positively affected by platform dynamics, motivations by consumers and cultural environments. P2 indicates that UGC has an indirect relationship with consumer engagement mediated by brand storytelling. According to P3, UGC-based innovation feedback has a positive impact on NPD results. P4 states that there is a mediating effect of the relationship between UGC visibility and perceived authenticity

using algorithmic mediation. P5 suggests that cultural sensitivity enhances the development of trust in different markets. P6 postulates that when the authenticity is high, the relationship between trust and long-term brand equity is positive and moderated, whereas, ethical risks undermine these relationships. These propositions, collectively, give us analytically different but interrelated directions which can be tested in future studies empirically.

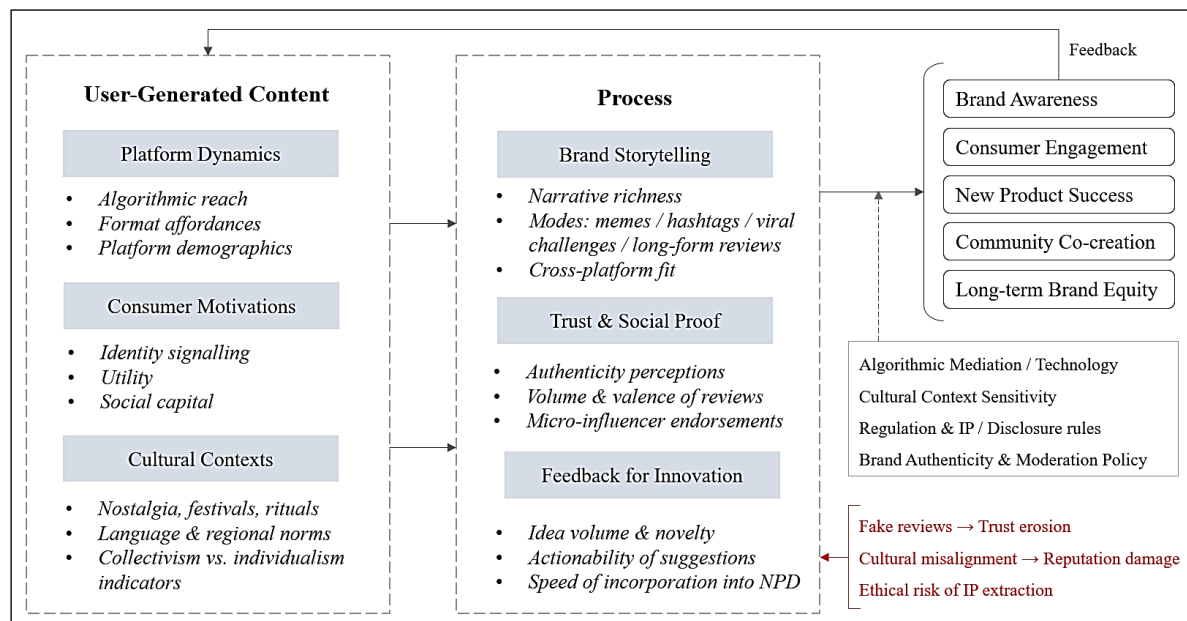


Figure 1: New Product Development Driven by User-Generated Content

Conclusion

The analysis of both local and global brand cases shows that UGC acts not only as an additional marketing tactic but essentially as a primary means through which brands and consumers co-construct identity, trust, and innovation. The cases, from Paper Boat's nostalgia-influenced storytelling approach to Chumbak's design crowdsourcing and Blue Tokai's artisanal storytelling offer insights into how UGC assists in both visibility and embeds itself into cultural practices and consumption rituals. The global cases of Lays crowdsourced flavours and Starbucks' embrace of TikTok menu hacks to name two also position UGC as not just an additional marketing tactic, but rather, as a means for brands to co-construct product pipelines and be anchored in consumer-based creativity.

UGC's dual role as a story-telling device and an innovator further signals its strategic relevance to brands. The story-telling of UGC through memes,

simple hashtags, and viral challenges provides community-building and trust and engagement. Crowdsourced feedback loops, and adaptations driven by festivals or other events also demonstrate UGC's ability to accelerate innovation cycles but additionally align product with culturally relevant practices. These analyses demonstrate that UGC is not a tangential activity, nor some opportunistic add-on, but instead, the primary means of brand-building in digital economies.

At the same time, the framework developed here, also signals gaps in the current body of work, that scholarly attention is needed. Engagement or consumer involvement theories or models, social proof or social influence theories, and more recent co-creation theories must be investigated by integrating new constructs, including cultural context sensitivity, identity signalling and algorithmic mediation, particularly in emerging market contexts where practices may diverge from assumptions modelled on Western contexts.

Further empirical research is required, ranging from longitudinal research of UGC as an innovation-related construct in new product development, to experimental studies that examine online platforms as influencer amplifiers. Both addressing what the framework presented here for theory, would enrich the body of research, while also providing less academic insight and direction for brands and policymakers who are attempting to make sense of the increasingly complex landscape layered with consumer participation.

The propositions and conceptual framework in this paper are a clear guide to the research in the future. Empirical research studies that are going to be done in the future can test P1 at the input level by looking at the relationship between platform dynamics, consumer motivations, and cultural environments with regard to the quality and visibility of UGC in global and emerging markets. On the process level, the mediating effects of brand storytelling and trust formation defined in P2 and P5 could be further studied by employing longitudinal or mixed-method designs, to uncover how the consumer narratives are changeable over the time. Continuing on P3, the next round of research ought to investigate the role of UGC in informing prototyping, testing and commercialization decisions in the NPD process which are no longer ideation-focused models. Lastly, P4 and P6 can be used to test the hypothesis of the intermediary effect of algorithmic mediation, authenticity, and ethical risks, as well as how UGC, trust, and brand outcomes are related. Collectively, these guidelines make the framework a basis of cumulative and empirically testable UGC studies.

Abbreviations

IP: Intellectual Property, MIS: Management Information System, NPD: New Product Development, SSRN: Social Science Research Network, TAM: Technology Acceptance Model, UGC: User-Generated Content.

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Author Contributions

All authors contributed substantially to the conceptual framework, case selection, literature review, analysis, and writing of the manuscript. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript for submission.

Conflict of Interest

The authors have no known financial, personal, or institutional interest that may have influenced the interpretation or presentation of this work. The authors prepared the manuscript independently, with no unintended external bias.

Declaration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) Assistance

AI tools have only been used for language refinement, formatting, and clarity during manuscript preparation. There was no AI system involved in the development or analysis of this article, including the ideas presented and arguments made.

Ethics Approval

This study is based solely on publicly available secondary information collected through official brand websites, corporate literature, and verified news sites and represents one of five case studies. Therefore, there were no human participants and formal ethics approval was not required.

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