

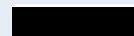
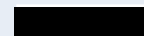
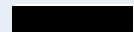


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Title

“User-Generated Content Strategies for Building Brand-Consumer Relationships”

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Abstract

Title

User-Generated Content Strategies for Building Brand-Consumer Relationships

Keywords

User-generated content, brand-consumer relationship, brand communication strategies, online community, viral marketing, online word-of-mouth

Summary

This paper investigates the nature and meaning of user-generated content and brand-consumer relationships to derive strategies for building and strengthening the latter. Strong and long-term brand-consumer relationships have proven to deliver economic advantages and beneficial outcome for the company and are determined by different factors such as brand engagement, functionality and trust, identification, and personality.

In recent years the technological advancement has changed the online environment by providing consumers with the possibilities to distribute their own content and interact with other consumers on a variety of platforms. From a brand's perspective, the emergence of user-generated content that is brand-related has caused a shift in the traditional brand-consumer relationship approach and accordingly in brand communication. In order for the brand to successfully establish a loyal and long-term relationship nowadays one needs to understand the motivations of consumers for creating and considering brand-related user-generated content, as well as examining the changes within the traditional relationship construct and its relevant factors. The company should recognize that user-generated content can be seen as an efficient and effective brand communication tool and implement corresponding strategies to enhance brand-consumer relationships.

This paper therefore provides a conceptual framework, which proposes different user-generated content strategies based on predetermined objectives, and gives advice on performance and control procedures to evaluate the success of the strategies. These strategies are composed for practical appliance and represent a basis for further research.

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III List of Abbreviations

CE	Chief Executive
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
UGC	User-generated content
WOM	Word-of-mouth
eWOM	Electronic word-of-mouth

1 Introduction

1.1 Objective

A brand is no longer what we tell the consumer it is. It's what consumers tell each other it is.

- Scott Cook, Intuit Co-founder

The emergence of internet-based applications has opened the doors for consumers to share their information, opinions, and experiences, which are summarized under the term user-generated content (UGC), with a global audience online. As more and more consumers engage in the usage of these applications, a rise of consumer-to-consumer interactions has occurred.

In the context of brand communication, these sources of UGC are regarded by consumers as being more influential when making purchase decisions than conventional marketing methods such as advertising, causing a shift of the locus of control in marketing communication away from marketers to consumers.¹

Over the last decades companies have focused on establishing strong relationships to their customers, as they have proven to result in economic advantages for them, therefore being regarded as the “most reliable sources of future revenues and profits for companies.”² By applying a one-sided communication, the brand conveyed what it was supposed to express and be identified with. The brand provided the reasons for consumers to engage in a long-lasting relationship with the latter.

UGC has gained the power to change the society and the business world, in which these “traditional marketing activities are substituted by trusted word of content contributors on the internet.”³

The new marketing communication reality is not “market to”, but rather “market with” consumers.⁴ Practitioners believe that the internet-based applications and UGC favors relationship and community building as well as it promotes active engagement of consumers. Therefore it can serve as an efficient toolset for marketing communication

¹ (Shapiro and associates 2008)

² (Lemon et al. 2001, p.21)

³ (Wang and Li 2014, p.241)

⁴ (Cova and White 2012, p.79)

to collaborate with consumers, presenting a key playing field for brands.⁵ That is why businesses are summoned to consider integrating UGC strategies to build brand–consumer relationships.

As current research literature lacks recommendations of conduct, the main challenge for businesses is to use the empowerment of consumers to their own advantage by integrating UGC into their brand communication in a way that effective actions for stimulating the connection between brands and consumers are identified and applied. Based on theoretical research and practical observations, this thesis aims at proposing strategies with correspondent actions for businesses and providing managers with insights on how to allocate resources across application types to establish brand–consumer relationships through UGC.

1.2 Way of Investigation

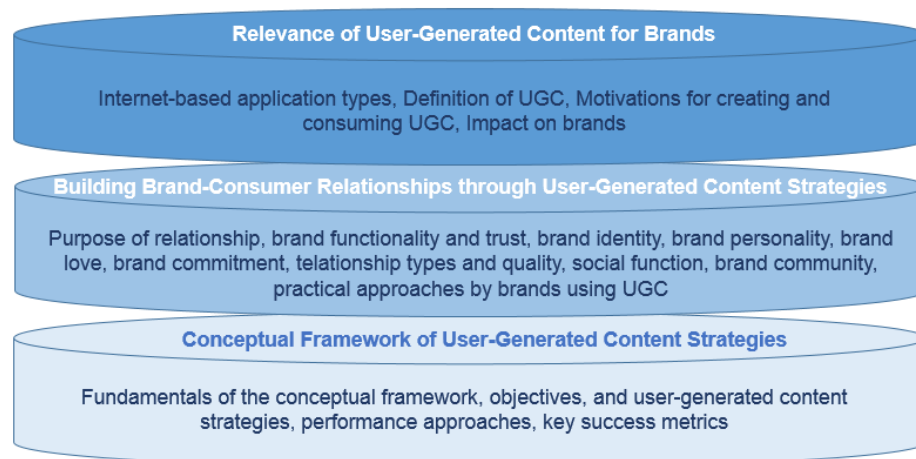


Figure 1 Flowchart of the Way of Investigation

To reach the objective, the present work is divided into five chapters. After the introduction, chapter 2.1 will guide through new developments in the web environment, explaining the occurrence and meaning of user-generated content based on theoretical findings and deriving a definition for brand-related UGC. Motivations for the creation and consumption of UGC will be demonstrated in chapter 2.2, to understand consumers' engagement in UGC and its fast-growing distribution. The last part of the chapter will put UGC in form of electronic word-of-mouth in a brand-related context

⁵ (Cova and Cova 2002, p.77; Horrigan 2008)

with a practical example to understand its impact on brands and their relationships to consumers.

In chapter 3.1 the fundamentals of brand-consumer relationship will be explored on the basis of psychological and behavioral-oriented theories as well as marketing, and brand management. It highlights concepts which identify the key criteria for establishing a strong relationship. In chapter 3.2 the brand-consumer relationship will be placed into the context of the interactive online environment, where changes to the traditional approach will be shown by means of an extended construct of the latter. The chapter highlights the importance of online brand communities for building strong and loyalty-induced brand-relationships. The last part of this chapter will show the enhancement of brand-consumer relationship through UGC on the basis of practical approaches.

Based on the theoretical findings with identified key criteria as well as the examination of best practice examples, a framework will be conducted with UGC strategies and corresponding action recommendations in order to build strong brand-consumer relationships in chapter 4.

Finally, chapter five concludes with a summary and final implications for management as well as further research, providing a critical acclaim as well as an outlook for the future.

2 Relevance of User-Generated Content for Brands

2.1 General Aspects of User-Generated Content

Through the emergence of Web 2.0 internet users were endowed with new application possibilities online. Understood as the second generation of World Wide Web, the term Web 2.0 has been officially established by O'Reilly, created with the intention to offer community-driven web services on a platform basis, fostering interactivity and social connectivity.⁶ Such web services or vehicles of Web 2.0 can be classified based on application types into five categories:⁷

1. *Blogs*: Short for web logs, they serve as an online journal.⁸

⁶ (Mast et al. 2005, O'Reilly 2005)

⁷ (Ceylan and Scupin 2013, p.23)

⁸ (Constantinides & Fountain 2008, p.233)

2. *Social Networks*: Allow users to build their own personal website which is accessible to other users for communicating and exchanging content. An example is Facebook.⁹

3. *Video portals*: Enable users to upload, share, and watch videos. The most known and popular is Youtube.

4. *Forums*: Websites where users exchange ideas and information regarding certain topics and interests.

5. *Wikis*: Information systems which serve as knowledge platforms, like Wikipedia.¹⁰

These application types fall under the umbrella term Social Media.¹¹ The terms Web 2.0 and Social Media are often used synonymously, while some observers distinguish the terms by referring the technological conversion ability to Web 2.0 and the social aspects to Social Media. Kaplan and Haenlein define Social Media as “a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content.”¹² In other words, Social Media, on the basis of Web 2.0, has enabled consumers to communicate and collaborate with others. Therefore Social Media can be seen as the breeding grounds for user-generated content, making the user a substantial part as a content contributor and consumer.¹³

Given the premature stage of research, a generally accepted definition for UGC has not been manifested yet. Literature and practitioners offer a wide range of terms, such as user created content (UCC)¹⁴ introduced by the OECD or consumer generated media (CGM)¹⁵ used by Nielsen BuzzMetrics. UGC itself is generally applied to describe different forms of media content which is produced by end-users, publicly available to an undetermined audience and created without a direct profit orientation. Correspondingly, the OECD presents three basic requirements, of which their fulfillment legitimates consumer-generated content as such: First, the content must be made publicly available over the internet. Second, this content has to reflect a certain amount of creative effort, meaning mere duplications of existing content, for example posting an article of another blog without amendments, are not qualified. And last, it has to be created outside of professional routines and practices.¹⁶

⁹ (Constantinides and Fountain 2008, p.233)

¹⁰ (Komus and Wauch 2011, p.110)

¹¹ (Arnhold 2008, p.5)

¹² (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010, p.63)

¹³ (Constantinides and Fountain 2008, p.233)

¹⁴ (OECD 2007)

¹⁵ (Nielsen BuzzMetrics 2009)

¹⁶ (OECD 2007, p.9).

Through the technological advancement the usage of applications is getting much easier, the variety of content consumption and contribution possibilities is increasing, causing the rapid growth of Social Media.¹⁷ Several studies show that users are more and more active in Social Media, making it a major source of information for consumers and hence, especially in the context of brands and marketing communication, an indicator for the increasing importance of brand related user-generated content.

Globally, 91 percent of internet users between the ages 16 and 64 have at least one Social Media account. The trend is going towards multi-networking, meaning being active on multiple Social Media platforms. The average internet user applies five different Social Media platforms.¹⁸

The usage of Social Media has grown 12 percent in one year, having 2.08 billion active social media accounts worldwide in January 2015.¹⁹ The average Social Media user spends around two and a half hours per day on social networking sites.²⁰

That these statistical evaluations support the assumption, that the rapid growth of Social Media channels and UGC impacts brands, is substantiated by further studies.

Marketo reveals, that out of 2,200 consumers in the U.S, U.K., France, Germany and Australia, 63 percent expect from brands to deliver tailored ads that are relevant for them personally and individually instead of glutting them with “one size fits all” advertisement.²¹

Also, brand-related interactions and exposure to marketing campaigns increasingly take place within Social Media. In 2013, 98 percent of the 100 leading brands in the U.S. have adopted Facebook and Twitter for social media activities, and more than 70 percent also use Google Plus, Pinterest, and Instagram as their brand communication channels.²²

Therefore, marketers have to notice that much UGC across various Social Media channels is brand-related and has the ability to shape consumers’ perception of brands.²³

As UGC can relate to any kind of content produced by individuals, only brand-related UGC is of relevance within the context of building brand-consumer relationships. Arnhold states that “brand-related UGC is understood as a user’s personal

¹⁷ (Constantinides and Fountain 2008, p.234)

¹⁸ (GlobalWebIndex Q1-Q2 2014)

¹⁹ (We Are Social, 2015)

²⁰ (GlobalWebIndex, 2015)

²¹ (Marketo 2015)

²² (Statista 2015)

²³ (Smith et al. 2012, p.102)

interpretation of brand meaning which is visualized in a certain way.”²⁴ Therefore, the messages users distribute about brands can be in any form and within any application type, they can relate to the brand’s activities or personality including product, firm or service, addressing its functional or symbolic benefits positively or negatively. In order to elaborate an adequate definition for brand-related UGC, the general principles of UGC are taken into account. In the context of this work, brand-related UGC is referred to as the voluntary creation of personal brand meaning, distributed publically via internet-based applications by non-marketers outside of professional branding routines.

2.2 Motivation for Creating and Consuming User-Generated Content

Besides the technological advancement as a driving factor, Social Media channels can only exist, grow and gain influence through the users’ willingness to actively engage in generating content.²⁵

The question is what drives consumers to contribute to Social Media applications. Understanding the motivation of consumers for creating and consuming user-generated content is an inevitable aspect, especially for brand managers when being confronted with brand-related UGC or when trying to stimulate UGC benevolently for the brand.²⁶

Existing literature and research often refer to intrinsic factors as motivational drivers for UGC.

Stöckl et al. developed a model based on six motivational factors for the creation and consumption of UGC: External economic incentives (monetary and signaling incentives), personal documentation (self-presentation and recording of experiences), enjoyment (fun and entertainment), passing time (diversion), information dissemination (presenting and sharing information) and contact (communication with others).²⁷

The researchers found out that the factors enjoyment, information dissemination, desire for contact and personal documentation provided the most relevant motivations. Appendix A provides a detailed summary of the results.

²⁴ (Arnhold, 2010, p.32)

²⁵ (Sassenberg and Scholl 2011, p.49)

²⁶ (Arnhold 2010, p.99)

²⁷ (Stöckl et al. 2008, pp.279 et sequ.)

All these constructs comprise intrinsic motivations, meaning “the activity itself becomes part of the desired satisfaction”.²⁸ Consumers create UGC, because they enjoy it and have fun, they like sharing information, want to communicate and keep in touch with others and like sharing their personal information and experiences.²⁹

However, extrinsic motivations such as profitability, receiving payment or compensation or new job opportunities only play a secondary role.³⁰

But non-creation does not imply non-usage of UGC. Daugherty et al. discovered a significant difference between UGC creation and consumption behavior by reason of the application type. While UGC creators, who strive for self-expression, rather utilize UGC vehicles which provide them with a voice (e.g., blogs, forums, personal web sites), UGC consumers are more likely to watch videos, view pictures, listen to audio, and visit wiki sites.³¹

Burton concentrated on the motivations of UGC consumption in the context of reading product recommendations from other users and identified three motives: Trusted product opinion, average/ non expert product opinion, and unique product experience.³²

Consumers believe in gaining empowerment by acquiring information from a trusted source. They believe in the opinions of particular writers whom they trust and even build a relationship with them by becoming member of the community or web site to message their trusted source directly. Trust is a feeling of security, believing that the counterpart will act only with favorable and positive motivation and intentions.³³ If trust was defined based on a behavioral intent, it is the “willingness to rely on an exchange partner in whom one has confidence.”³⁴ Consumers rather trust other consumers, because they believe that company’s design a brand in a way that they only benefit them, while they do not see an advantage for others in distributing their recommendations. Furthermore, consumers prefer non-expert opinion. A review from “the man on the street” endows it with authenticity and credibility while expert opinions are seen as manipulated in favor of the company selling the product or service.

²⁸ (Arnhold 2008, p.97)

²⁹ (Stöckl et al. 2008, pp.279-280)

³⁰ (Stöckl et al. 2008, p.279)

³¹ (Daugherty et al. 2008, p. 22)

³² (Burton and Khammash. 2010, pp.231 et sequ.)

³³ (Delgado-Ballester and Munuera-Alemán, 2001, p. 1242)

³⁴ (Moorman et al. 1992, p.82)

Finally, they seek for unique product experiences which might not have been revealed through other mediums or channels.³⁵

Also the sole passive involvement in UGC, such as reading opinions and recommendation, gives consumers the feeling of belonging to a virtual community with shared interest and of being socially involved. Hence, the social dimension also plays a crucial role for the consumers of UGC.³⁶

In terms of UGC creation, Berthon et al. identified three main factors for consumers' contribution on the web in the context of ads created by consumer with regards to brands.³⁷ First, intrinsic enjoyment refers to the individual who creates for the sake of creations. The creation is often targeted at brands which they are passionate about or highly involved with. Within the dimension of self-promotion the creator uses the ad to bring himself to the awareness of a specific group of people. With using high-profile and well-known brands they intend to highlight their own creativity. Lastly, change perceptions correspond to contributors who strive for a specific effect on a target audience, to influence and change people's way of thinking. Their creation is either dedicated to brands they seek to promote or is made in the effort to scold disreputable brands for their actions.³⁸ Appendix B based on Berthon et al.³⁹ provides a graphic which gives further details on the types of advertising related UGC in connection with brands based on the creator's motivations.

As shown by several studies, motivations for engaging in UGC are versatile, yet, certain motivations can be seen as prevalent.

The salient reasons for individuals to consume brand-related UGC is because they tend to rely more on statements made by other consumers than brands themselves, as they believe that companies act in favor of their brand. Furthermore they hope for new and additional experiences with the respective product of the brand, which the brand itself has not revealed.

On the other hand, the predominant reason for brand-related UGC creators is their self-promotion, as well as functioning as advocates for the brand which they have a strong connection to. These motivations bring out brand engagement.⁴⁰ Defined by as the level of a consumer's "cognitive, emotional and behavioral investment in specific

³⁵ (Burton et al. 2012, p.60)

³⁶ (Burton et al. 2012, p.61)

³⁷ (Berthon et al. 2008, p.10),

³⁸ (Berthon et al., 2008, pp. 21-23)

³⁹ (Berthon et al. 2008, p.22)

⁴⁰ (Smith et al. 2012, p.102)

brand interactions”⁴¹, brand engagement is essential in the context of building brand-consumer relationships. It is the process of delivering branded communications and experiences that add value to the lives of consumers. Keller sums up the value of brands by stating that “brands take on unique, personal meaning to consumers that facilitate their day-to-day activities and enrich their lives.”⁴² As further elaborated in the course of this work, values are significant determinants in fostering relationships between brands and consumers as well as enhancing customer loyalty.⁴³ Hence, consumers are motivated by the notion that their engagement in brand-related UCG will add value to their lives.

2.3 Impact of Consumer Empowerment through User-Generated Content on Brands

Web 2.0 has evoked fundamental changes in communication and interaction possibilities for consumers. While before the web environment was dominated by providers, public institutions, and companies which dictated content on the web, the technological advancement empowered consumers with the same possibilities.

Through the new interactive nature of the internet consumers spend more and more time on Social Media platforms, there is an ever increasing share of interaction with opinion-forming content, which evokes the power to influence existing brands and finally consumers’ purchase decision.⁴⁴ Consumers are able to initiate and influence brand-related processes and information flows by sharing their brand messages and content on rich interactive platforms and in online communities with an unlimited number of users in a global audience.⁴⁵ Through the growing power of customers and the customer-centric direction, a shift from a traditional one-way communication with the company being the sender and the consumer being the receiver, to a multi-dimensional two-way peer-to-peer communication with users performing also as producers and senders, has taken place.⁴⁶ This change has led to an equalization of marketing information from companies and consumers.⁴⁷ Hence, the control over brands has shifted from producers to consumers accordingly. What a brand expresses and what is identified with a brand is determined by consumers themselves.⁴⁸

⁴¹ (Hollebeek 2011b, p.555)

⁴² (Keller 1998, p. 9)

⁴³ (Bowden, 2009)

⁴⁴ (Kane et al. 2009, Muniz and Schau 2007; OECD 2007)

⁴⁵ (Lyons and Henderson 2005, p.319; Mast et al. 2005, Vila and Ribeiro-Soriano 2014)

⁴⁶ (Bernoff and Li 2008; Berthon et al. 2008; Walsh et al. 2008)

⁴⁷ (Oetting 2006, p.259)

⁴⁸ (Ceylan and Scupin 2013)

Compelling evidence of the impact of such developments is the spread and effect of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). The effect of word-of-mouth (WOM) on consumer behavior and sales has been recognized for decades.⁴⁹

Arndt defines WOM as “oral, person-to-person communication between a receiver and a communicator whom the receiver perceives as non-commercial, regarding a brand, a product or a service.”⁵⁰ WOM is not restricted to oral communication when placing it into the internet environment. Accordingly, Henning-Thurau et al. define eWOM communication as “any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the internet.”⁵¹ WOM is considered as a credible distribution method for information.⁵² Thanks to the internet, fast and easy distribution of information and opinions is possible, therefore increasing the likelihood of consumers to account eWOM in their decision making process.⁵³

An example for eWOM from real-life experience demonstrates the empowerment of consumers. Zalando, a multinational online-retailer that specializes in shoes, clothing, and other fashion lifestyle clothes, was confronted with criticism on their own social media site on Facebook, which has a total of 3.1 Million followers.⁵⁴

A customer distributed her opinion on the product presentation of a pair of jeans, claiming the model on the photo was too skinny and that this was not the right way to present these jeans. The comment gained over 32.000 likes, 780 comments, and 567 shares until today, approximately two weeks after the criticism was published.⁵⁵ Other users supported the opinion by comments such as Zalando sending wrong messages with too skinny models presenting their clothes. Some commentators even said they would not purchase at Zalando anymore for that reason.

Zalando’s response to this issue was: Reshooting all advertisements, imposing a corporate-wide ban on such pictures for the future, screening the entire web shop for similar pictures and replacing them accordingly, and lastly, releasing new videos showing “real” or “normal” women in their fashion articles. A collection of consumers’ and Zalando’s comments is shown in Appendix C.

⁴⁹ (Arndt, 1967; Dichter, 1966; Whyte 1954)

⁵⁰ (Arndt 1967, p.5)

⁵¹ (Henning-Thurau et al. 2004, p.39)

⁵² (Gilly et al. 1998)

⁵³ (Liu 2006)

⁵⁴ (Facebook Zalando 2015)

⁵⁵ (Facebook Zalando 2015)

This example underpins the influence customers have on brands and companies. One comment can lead to complete changes in the perception of the brand. From the consumer's perspective, the perception of a brand is shaped by functional and emotional associations towards the brand, which influences the perceived value of the respective product or service.⁵⁶

The constant availability of information and the resulting information overload, has changed attitudes in a way that consumers have become more savvy and skeptical, making them turn away from traditional brand communication towards third parties they trust for brand information, which influences brand associations and hence, the perceived value.

The impact of brand-related UGC is reflected in the reconceptualization of marketing communication.

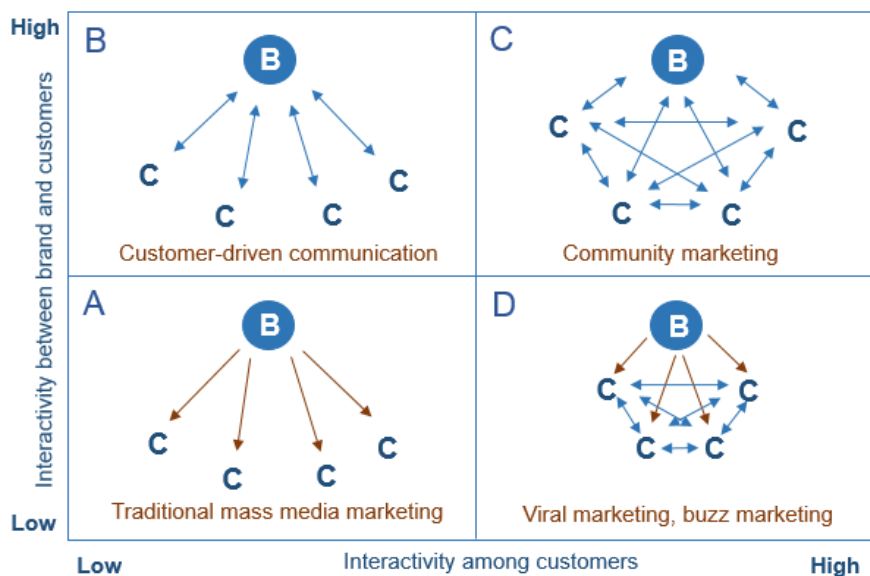


Figure 2 Development of Marketing Communication Types

Source: Author's own graphic based on Arnhold 2010, p.54, adapted from Schlögel 2009

In the graphic above quadrant A shows the traditional communication via mass media, while quadrant B reflects the concept of relationship marketing, which has a customer-centric approach, aiming at addressing customers individually.⁵⁷ The new marketing reality is displayed in quadrants C and D. Here, based on the principles of relationship marketing, interactive marketing takes a step forward by considering the latest shifts in the branding environment, which comprises the overload of information, diversification of communication channels, changing media consumption, and

⁵⁶ (Kapferer 2004, p.10; Keller 1998, p.93)

⁵⁷ (Schlögel et al. 2008, p.440)

empowerment of consumers.⁵⁸ The company with its brand is seen as a member of communication networks, which makes them less powerful in the control of actions around and regarding their brand.

To actively counteract these developments and limit the loss of control, interactive marketing puts its emphasis on dialogue and sees its objective in involving consumers and motivating them to interact and communicate with the respective company of the brand.⁵⁹

3 Building Brand-Consumer Relationships through User-Generated Content Strategies

3.1 Fundamentals of Brand-Consumer Relationships

Marketers take special interest in developing deep and long-lasting relationships between brands and consumers which they believe, result in economic advantages and substantial effects on relevant market-oriented outcomes. Research suggests many forms of relationships which can vary along numerous dimensions, from being merely transactional or habitual, to highly emotional with an even obsessive character, making it fairly challenging to find the right way to establish a strong and long-lasting bond between consumers and their brands.

Within the framework of this work, the description of a brand-consumer relationship is derived from psychological and behavioral-oriented research, marketing, and brand management, summarizing the constitutive components for a brand-consumer relationship as follows:

Brand-consumer relationships are, with regards to content, interrelated and subjectively perceived social interactions, which consist of affective and cognitive bonding motives on the side of consumers, who gain satisfaction through functional and symbolic benefits of the brands.⁶⁰ In other words, the relationship is determined by reciprocal behavior of both parties, being viewed and valued by consumers individually, depending on the fulfillment of their expectations. Based on the aforementioned, consumers enter into relationships because they serve a purpose. Consumers buy brands for the benefits they provide. The attributes of a product or

⁵⁸ (Schögel et al. 2008, p.342)

⁵⁹ (Stanoevska-Slabeva 2008, p.223)

⁶⁰ (Burmam and Wenske 2008, p.311)

service are associated with benefits, and even with the underlying personal value. Correspondingly, Ambler suggests that consumers are seeking in brands the fulfillment of the promise of the bundles of attributes they buy, providing them with satisfaction.⁶¹ These attributes which compose a brand “may be real or illusory, rational or emotional, tangible or invisible.”⁶² Therefore, the nature of a purpose can vary. Appendix D displays a sample of different purposes that the consumers’ relationship with a brand can serve, as composed by Fournier.⁶³

Irrespective of the purpose of the relationship, they are of great significance to the person engaging them.⁶⁴ With the attempt of categorizing the purposes, it can be assumed that brands provide both utilitarian and symbolic benefits and values.

From the utilitarian perspective, brands provide consumers with information, therefore giving orientation in choosing and evaluating a given product or service, assisting them in their decision-making process. By letting consumers easily recognize a product or service accompanied by indicating a certain level of quality, they lower search costs as well as the risk of making the wrong purchase decision, and save time and energy through repurchasing and loyalty.⁶⁵ To fulfill these benefits, a brand needs to be perceived as trustworthy and having expertise.⁶⁶ In this context research suggests brand trust as a central relational concept.⁶⁷ Trust is described as the willingness of one party to believe in, rely on or expect another party to deliver a particular service or perform a certain action.⁶⁸ Hence, if brands are able to meet consumers’ expectations, they become trusted, resulting in a strong relationship and high customer loyalty.⁶⁹ Wünschmann and Müller underpin the correlation between brand trust and brand loyalty with their study, assessing that brand trust is influenced by trust willingness and trust worthiness.⁷⁰ Trust willingness refers to consumers’ characteristics such as personality, age, involvement, consumption, and preference, whereas trust worthiness corresponds to the brands’ characteristics like information, reputation, guarantee, usability, identification, and personality. When managing those two factors successfully, the brand is perceived as trustworthy and having expertise.

⁶¹ (Ambler 1992)

⁶² (Wood 2000, p.664)

⁶³ (Fournier 2009, p.5)

⁶⁴ (Fournier 1998, p.361)

⁶⁵ (Kapferer, 2008; Keller 2008)

⁶⁶ (Dennhardt 2012; Harridge 2003, p.749)

⁶⁷ (Hess 1995)

⁶⁸ (Almol Akin, 2005 p.1; Paliszkiwicz and Klepacki 2013, p.1288; Delgado-Ballester and Munuera-Alemán 2001, p. 1242)

⁶⁹ (Reichheld and Scheffer, 2000, p. 107)

⁷⁰ (Wünschmann and Müller 2006, p.230)

From a symbolic perspective, brand identification serves as a crucial relational concept to determine the strength of a brand-consumer relationship. Several researchers suggest that consumers choose brands they can identify with and use them for the purpose of creating their self-image and demonstrating their surroundings who they are and what they want to stand for.⁷¹ In relation to this, “brands must be perceived as authentic and sympathetic by consumers.”⁷²

Relationships develop in the minds of consumers, where they have a perception of the brand’s personality, forming a perception of the attitude that a brand has toward them and in return, build an attitude towards the brand.⁷³ Following the assumption that individuals provide brands with the capability of developing an attitude, furthermore ascribing characteristics like authenticity and sympathy to them, Blackston, among other researchers, has adopted the theory of consumers personalizing and humanizing brands.⁷⁴ Literature has furthermore shown, that consumers easily assign personality qualities to brand items.⁷⁵ In the context of identifying the relation between human personality and brand personality, Aaker defines the latter as “the set of human characteristics associated with a brand.”⁷⁶ As mentioned above, consumers use brands for the purpose of creating their self-image and choose brands to demonstrate their identity, so the purpose of a brand personality which comprises both innate and longed traits, might function as a strengthener of their own personality.⁷⁷ Hence, if the brand personality has a symbolic meaning for consumers, they “increase consumer preference and usage, evoke emotions in consumers, and increase levels of trust and loyalty.”⁷⁸

In line with the idea that people tend to personify brands, Fournier conceptualizes the strength and quality of brand-consumer relationships, which is shaped by the meaningful actions between both parties, and delivers the brand relationship quality model. It reveals six possible dimensions which contribute to a stable and durable consumer-brand relationship: Love and passion, self-connection, interdependence, commitment, intimacy, and brand partner quality.⁷⁹ Love and passion is seen as the core of a strong brand relationship, referring to infatuation, selfish, and even obsessive

⁷¹ (Ahuvia, 2005; Aaker, Fournier, and Basel 2004; Belk, 1988; Escalas and Bettman 2005; Fournier 1998)

⁷² (Dennhardt 2012, Holt 2002)

⁷³ (Blackston 1993; Keller 2013, p.36)

⁷⁴ (De Chernatony and McDonald 2003; Fournier, 1998)

⁷⁵ (Plummer 2000, p.80)

⁷⁶ (Aaker 1997, p.347)

⁷⁷ (Aaker 1997, p.355)

⁷⁸ (Aaker 1997, p.355)

⁷⁹ (Fournier 1998, p.363)

dependence. The endurance and depth of a relationship determined by love and passion is much greater than in sole brand preference. Self-connection corresponds to “the degree to which the brand delivers on important identity concerns, tasks, or themes.”⁸⁰ Interdependence involves frequent interaction which the consumer purposefully intensifies to be prevalently in contact with the brand. Commitment refers to the intention of being loyal within a continuous relationship. Intimacy is based on the belief that the brand has a superior product performance in comparison to others, making it irreplaceable. Finally, brand partner quality summarizes the overall satisfaction and strength of the relationship accompanied by the evaluation of the brand’s performance in its partnership role. It comprises a felt positive orientation of the brand toward the consumer (such as making the consumer feel wanted, respected, listened to, and cared for); judgements of the brand’s overall dependability, reliability, and predictability in executing its partnership role, its compliance with rules; trust in the brand in fulfilling its promises and being accountable for its actions.

Love and passion are regarded as the core of a solid relationship. Many researchers drew their attention to the phenomenon of brand love, underpinning its relevance for strong consumer-brand relationships.⁸¹ The love for a brand modifies the impact of attitude strength on loyalty.⁸² According to Carrol and Ahuvia, consumers who are satisfied and in love with a brand, are more willing to repurchase and speak out recommendations, therefore showing their loyalty.

The different approaches demonstrate congruency in antecedents as well as consequences with loyalty being the central one. To connect the factors that bind consumers to brands and establish the relationship with the consequences that follow, Albert and Merunka constructed a conceptual model.⁸³ Findings from testing the model underpin the correlation between love antecedents and consequences, where the results can be seen in the graphic below.

⁸⁰ (Fournier, 1998, p.364)

⁸¹ (Ahuvia 2005; Albert & Merunka 2013; Batra et al. 2012)

⁸² (Batra et al., 2012)

⁸³ (Albert and Merunka 2013, p.236)

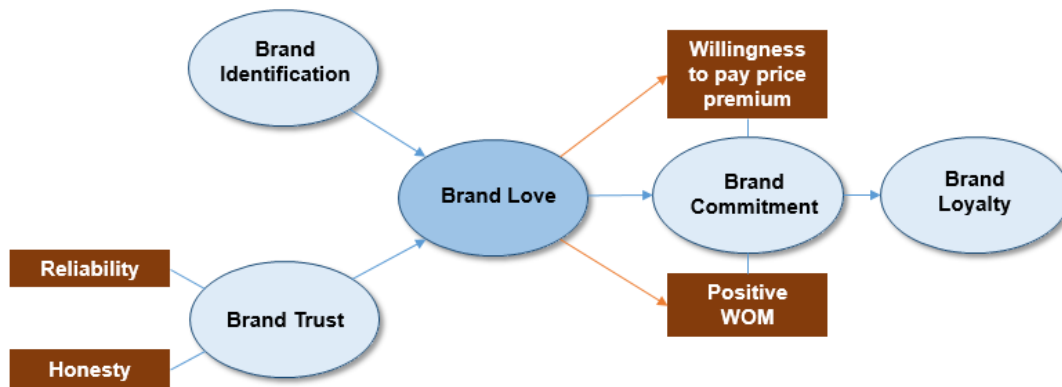


Figure 3 Conceptual Model for a strong Brand-Consumer Relationship

Source: Author's own graphic based on Albert and Merunka 2013, p.263

Brand identification as well as brand trust prove to be strong antecedents of brand love. Identification was already explained as being a symbolic value for consumers in the way that brands support them in representing themselves.⁸⁴ The research showed that individuals must feel psychologically close to develop an affective bond. Trust within a brand-consumer relationship represents reliability, honesty, and altruism that consumers expect from brands.⁸⁵ Especially expertise (reliability) and fair motivations (honesty), representing both cognitive and affective elements, were regarded as important by consumers.

Brand love itself influences the attitudinal commitment, which refers to a positive attitude towards the brand and the willingness to keep a valued relationship with it.⁸⁶ Both brand love and commitment have a significant impact on positive word-of-mouth. For the acceptance of price-increases, affective reasons are more dominant. Word-of-mouth and acceptance of price increase indicate the level of brand loyalty, whereas the overall commitment shows the strength of the latter.⁸⁷

The findings indicate that loyal customers are committed to the brand and highly interested in a durable relationship with it. Brand loyalty is regarded as the preferential, attitudinal, and behavioral response such as repeat purchase over a long period of time through consumers.⁸⁸

⁸⁴ (Escalas and Bettmann, 2003)

⁸⁵ (Hess, 1995)

⁸⁶ (Chaudhuri and Hoolbrook 2001; Evanschitzky et al. 2006)

⁸⁷ (Albert and Merunka 2013, p.263)

⁸⁸ (Batra et al. 2012, pp.1-16; Carroll and Ahuvia 2006, pp.79-89; Engel and Blackwell 1982, p.570; Sander and Weywara 2006, p.254)

The relationship between consumers and their brands is characterized by Eichen as “a psychological bond between both parties resulting from “interactions between brand and consumer during an extended period of time.”⁸⁹ Accordingly, relationships are seen as processes which evolve and change through interactions and over time. As such dynamic phenomena they need to be managed actively and consistently.⁹⁰

A brand becomes vital through all brand management activities, which result in the brand-consumer relationship. Grönroos states that “marketing is to establish, maintain, and enhance relationships with customers and other partners, at a profit, so that the objectives of the parties involved are met. This is achieved by a mutual exchange and fulfillment of promises.”⁹¹

In summary, relationships between consumers and brands appear in various facets, consist of numerous factors and are difficult to define. Still, researchers consistently emphasize the importance of focusing on strength and quality of the relationship as they have sizeable effects on important market-related outcomes, including repeat purchase and positive word of mouth. Both values develop through meaningful interaction between consumers and their brands. Interaction takes place by legitimizing the brand as a relationship partner having a brand personality, which among other factors such as brand-related elements play a significant role in forming a positive and long-lasting relationship between brands and their consumers.

3.2 New Aspects of Brand-Consumer Relationship in the Interactive Online Environment

Recent research indicates the importance of another function, which extends the traditional brand-consumer relationship and influences its nature. Meant by this is the social function which a brand encompasses and which fosters relationship building as well as social ties and integration.⁹² Hence, entering into a relationship with brands serves as a basis for consumers to establish new social connections with others and form a sense of community.⁹³ Accordingly, Miller states that “relationships to brands certainly matter, but they are important because of the way they express and mediate

⁸⁹ (Eichen 2010, p.27)

⁹⁰ (Fournier 2009, pp.15-16)

⁹¹ (Grönroos 1990a, p.138)

⁹² (Cova 1997; Muniz and O’Guinn 2001; Schau, et al. 2009)

⁹³ (Cova and Cova 2002; McAlexander et al. 2002; Muniz and O’Guinn 2001)

the relationship to other people.”⁹⁴ Furthermore Belk states that “relationships with objects are never two-way (person-thing), but always three-way (person-thing-person).”⁹⁵

Considering the social function is essential, especially in the today’s computer-mediated environment, where new communication technologies have accelerated the establishment of communities and other platforms, causing the shift “from a brand-dictated monologue to a multi-party conversation.”⁹⁶ Chapter 2.3 has already demonstrated the impact of brand-related UCG in the form of eWOM within a community. Brand community research⁹⁷, however, illustrates the antecedents for community building. Regarding communities in general, they tend to be identified on the basis of commonality or identification among their members, like a shared devotion to a brand. A brand community, which is defined by Muniz and O’Guinn as “a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand”⁹⁸ is held together by shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility with the branded good or service at its center.⁹⁹ The brand’s function as the connector between the members validates its social nature.

Brand communities have an active interpretive function, meaning that through repeated interaction between consumers, “brand meaning is being socially negotiated” and therefore is subject to change.¹⁰⁰ Within their studies, Muniz and O’Guinn could identify three positive aspects of brand communities. First, they function as a consumer agency, giving consumers a greater voice. Second, they are regarded as an information resource for consumers, as the platform gives consumers the possibility to exchange opinions therefore showing new usage possibilities, which can result in more intense usage. And finally, wider social benefits, often affectual such as forming friendships based on their common interests or passion for a brand, are provided.¹⁰¹

McAlexander et al. adopts the traditional approach by Fournier¹⁰² and extends the model proposed by Muniz and O’Guinn by including more participants into the relationship construct as shown in the figure below. This changed the perspective of

⁹⁴ (Miller 1998, p.46)

⁹⁵ (Belk 1988, p.157)

⁹⁶ (Deighton and Kornfeld 2009; Henning-Thurau et al. 2010)

⁹⁷ (McAlexander et al. 2002; Muniz and O’Guinn 2001)

⁹⁸ (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001, p.412)

⁹⁹ (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001)

¹⁰⁰ (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001, p.414)

¹⁰¹ (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001, p.426; Valck et al. 2009, p.185)

¹⁰² (Fournier 1998)

Muniz and O’Guinn’s customer-customer-brand triad to a customer-centric one with a more complex web of relationships which forms the brand community.¹⁰³

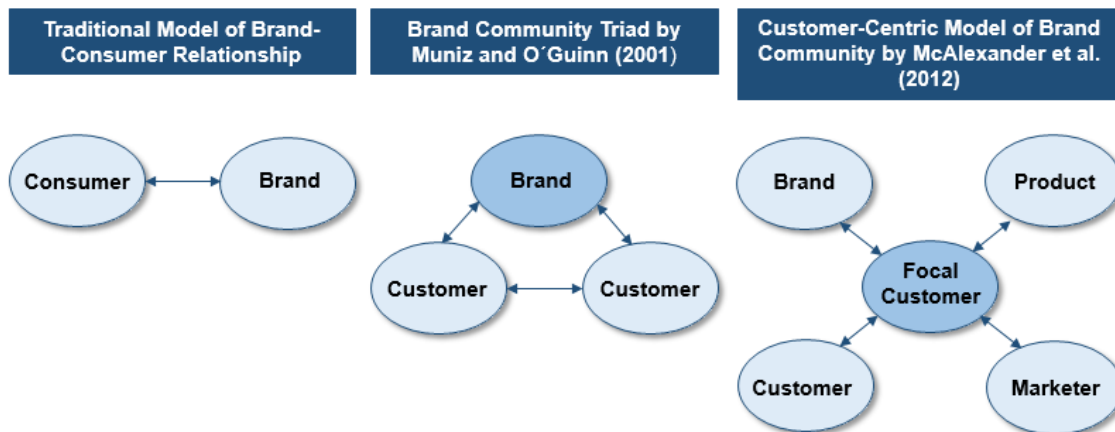


Figure 4 Development of the Relationship Construct within the Interactive Online Environment

Source: Author’s own illustration, based on McAlexander et al 2012, p.39

The customer is integrated into the community at its center. As a consequence, the focus from the brand around which experiences revolve is redirected to customer experience, which creates the meaning and value of a community. The eligibility of product and marketer being an important part of the construct is served by literature, as a brand is the “consumer’s idea of a product”¹⁰⁴ and “a brand is who a company is and what it does.”¹⁰⁵

McAlexander et al. suggest that by proactively providing measures for relationships to develop synergistically, strengthening social ties and increasing appreciation for the brand, benefits of these relationships unfold and enhance loyalty.¹⁰⁶ This is affirmed by Schau et al. who proposed that “the exchange of collectively defined and valorized resources” establishes a sense of community membership and identity and therefore creates value.¹⁰⁷

It is thus evident that brand community literature suggests that not only the identification with the brand itself, but moreover identification with the brand community, which leads to positive consequences of consumer behavior, including loyalty to the brand, is important to the individual consumer.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰³ (McAlexander et al. 2002, p.39)

¹⁰⁴ (Ogilvy 1951 cited in Esch 2007b, p.22)

¹⁰⁵ (Crosby and Johnson 2003, p.10)

¹⁰⁶ (McAlexander et al. 2012, p.51)

¹⁰⁷ (Schau et al. 2009, p.35)

¹⁰⁸ (Algesheimer 2004b; Schau et al. 2009; Veloutsou & Moutinho 2009)

As already mentioned in the previous chapter, consumers attach brands with meaning as they support them in expressing their identity as well as creating and defining their self-concept. Recent research indicates that consumers create their self-identity and present themselves to others by choosing a brand which fulfills a high congruency between brand-user associations and self-image associations.¹⁰⁹ Hence, meaning has shifted from brand associations to the associations consumers hold regarding their determined reference group, which in this context is their chosen (brand) community. Escalas and Bettmann confirmed this by finding out that consumers “may form self-brand connections to the brands used by reference groups to which they belong.”¹¹⁰ Embedding brand communities into the online environment, they are referred to as virtual communities which constitute advanced versions of common communities due to their overcoming of geographic boundaries.¹¹¹ Hagel and Armstrong define them as “groups of people with common interests and needs who come together online. Most are drawn by the opportunity to share a sense of community with like-minded strangers, regardless of where they live. But virtual communities are more than a social phenomenon. What starts off as a group drawn together by common interests ends up as a group with a critical mass of purchasing power [...]”¹¹²The power arises from network effects which virtual communities are subject to.¹¹³ Stichnoth underpins the importance of online brand communities by proving their positive influence on consumer commitment. He found out that the membership strengthened the brand-consumer relationship and positively influenced the brand image.¹¹⁴ Summing up, a brand has to elaborate on its social function by developing strong virtual brand communities and other Social Media channels which enhance direct interaction of consumers with brands directly. Especially fostering more effective brand-consumer engagement is put into focus by several researchers.¹¹⁵ A strong brand community can lead to a socially embedded brand loyalty and brand commitment.¹¹⁶

¹⁰⁹ (Escalas and Bettman 2005, p.379)

¹¹⁰ (Escalas and Bettmann 2005, p.379)

¹¹¹ (Arhold 2010, p.95)

¹¹² (Hagel and Armstrong 1997, p.143)

¹¹³ (Lihotzky 2003; Panten et al. 2001, p.133)

¹¹⁴ (Stichnoth 2008, pp.87 et seq.; p.95)

¹¹⁵ (Palmatier et al. 2006)

¹¹⁶ (Jacoby and Chestnut 1978; Keller 1998; McAlexander and Schouten 1998)

3.3 Enhancement of Brand-Consumer Relationship through User-Generated Content – Practical Approaches

Having now acknowledged relevant aspects of brand-related UGC and factors important for establishing successful brand-consumer relationships, the following examples show practical approaches by companies which successfully integrated UGC into their brand communication.

Burberry is a British clothing company that was founded in 1856. In 2006 the new CE decided to launch a user-generated content strategy as part of her goal of changing the company's aging brand. The company launched "The Art of the Trench" website in March 2009. The campaign had the objective of being innovative and addressing and engaging younger customers with the trench coat, Burberry's figurehead, as central element, representing the brand's "pillars of democratic luxury, function, and modern classic style."¹¹⁷ Burberry had recognized that street style photography had become a trend. Based on that idea they developed a stand-alone Social Media platform, limited to the trench coat, started the campaign with a well-known fashion blogger, who was by then with over 13 Million page views per month on his personal blog a pioneer in the street style area, and encouraged their customers to upload their own pictures. Besides the participation via creation, other customers could comment, "like", and share the pictures on several other Social Media. Additionally they integrated a search function by trench type, color, gender, weather, and popularity, as well as a click-through function directly to the Burberry online shop.

What Burberry did was leveraging existing customers, who personify the brand, to generate content by presenting their way of wearing Burberry to their peers and other customers instead of dictating it through traditional advertising. Thereby brand engagement was encouraged through fostering self-presentation as one motivation of UGC of consumers who presumably had a relationship with the brand as they were purchasing it. As a result Burberry triggered intrinsic enjoyment, which was proven by the fact that those consumers were not paid to present the Burberry trench coat nor got a reward from the company. By distributing the pictures, Burberry presents customers who convey brand-related UGC authenticity and credibility relating to the

¹¹⁷ (HubSpot Blogs 2015 and Business Today 2013)

aspect of non-expert opinion. By showing that the UGC creators enjoy wearing the brand they recommend, trust is fostered among consumers.

The versatility of the pictures that are displayed offers more and new ways of wearing the trench, adding value by illustrating unique brand experience. With the platform the brand Burberry creates a community of customers who share a common interest, enjoy wearing the brand and maybe also the love for fashion - without losing direct control, as it is a stand-alone website which they administer. As already mentioned above, when the customers personify the brand, authenticity and sympathy is enhanced, allowing other customers to identify with the brand.

Therefore the brand on the one hand could foster closer relationships with consumers who were already committed to the brand. On the other hand they could win new customers and establish a deeper brand-consumer relationship. The success is seen in the longevity of distribution of pictures by consumers as well as the continuous increase of ecommerce sales as by reason of this campaign.

Numbers prove the success of a campaign. In the year after the launch, Burberry's Facebook fan base grew to over a million, the largest fan count in the luxury sector at the time. E-commerce sales grew 50 per cent attributed to the web traffic from the "Art of the Trench" site and Facebook. The platform had 7.5 million views from 150 countries in the first year. Conversion rates from the "Art of the Trench" click-throughs to the Burberry website were significantly higher than those from other sources.¹¹⁸

The Digital IQ Index report "Fashion 2012" by L2, which is the global benchmark for digital performance of prestige brands, analyzing and quantifying brand's digital strength and weaknesses, as well as trends in digital, and providing insights to support brands in improving their digital competence, have recognized Burberry as "the industry leader when it comes to technological awareness", giving the brand "genius" status.¹¹⁹

Another brand being successful in integrating brand-related UGC is Coca-Cola. Coca-Cola is one of more than 500 brands belonging to the Coca-Cola Company, which was founded in 1886 and is now the largest beverage company worldwide.¹²⁰ Also in the digital environment the company is among the pioneers of successfully integrating their consumers.

¹¹⁸ (Business Today 2013)

¹¹⁹ (L2 Business Intelligence for Digital 2012)

¹²⁰ (Coca-Cola Company 2015)

In 2011 they launched the “Share a Coke” campaign in Australia, of which the objective was to strengthen the brand’s relationship to Australia’s young adults. Instead of the Coke branding on bottles and cans they printed them with the 150 most popular Australian first names. The purpose was to encourage consumers to digitally share their coke via Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, and other Social Media sites, implying that it was more about giving a coke to someone else rather than keeping it to oneself. To kick off the campaign successfully they sought for opinion leaders and influencers to get them lead the conversation and convince others to experience “Share a Coke” themselves. The campaign was such a success that it spread across more than 70 countries until today and is still running after four years.

Their ability to engage consumers contributed significantly to the prosperity of the campaign. Consumers took the idea and made it their own by voluntarily creating messages and content with the Coca-Cola brand and posting it via different internet-based applications. Therefore intrinsic enjoyment was initiated as well as self-promotion. Consumers also evoked a change of perspective in a way that they were showing to others that the brand helps them to connect with others and create a positive experience. By posting the stories of consumers with the personalized bottle or can, they were able to transfer authenticity and credibility. As each situation was individual, consumers enjoyed a new and unique product experience. The brand effectively implemented its social function by connecting people with each other creating dialogue. Brand personality was transferred twofold. Each contributing consumer personified the brand, therefore enhancing identification. As the brand evokes each individual to become a personality of the brand, consumers feel wanted, respected, listened to, and cared for, which creates love and passion. As discussed in chapter 3.2, these factors are central in building strong relationships to consumers. The brand managed to enhance its symbolic meaning for consumers. Therefore Coca-Cola was able to create a unique customer experience within its brand community, fostering interactions between its members and interdependence with the brand itself, which led them to a more than 2% increase of sales after more than ten years of steady declines.¹²¹ The following table sums up how the presented brands Burberry and Coca-Cola utilized brand-related UGC in their effort to enhance the relevant factors for building strong relationships with consumers.

¹²¹ (Adweek 2014 and Coca-Cola Company 2014)

	Burberry	Coca-Cola
Brand Engagement	Encouraged consumers to send in their pictures wearing the Burberry trench coat; delivered possibilities for customers to share, like, comment the picture and retrieve further specific information	Encourage consumers to distribute their individual Coca-Cola story on several platforms
Functionality	Identified personas who show their trust willingness through distributing their pictures and demonstrate the brand's trust worthiness to other consumers	Engagement of opinion leaders to enhance authenticity, credibility, and trust
Identification	Burberry costumers serve as reference group for other costumers	Identification through individual names of cans and bottles and respective consumers distributing their messages with the latter
Personality	Brand personality is transferred though customers wearing Burberry	Instead of the name "Coke" let people's individual names and the person behind the name transfer the brand personality
Social Competence	Connecting Burberry customers with each other through the web site and other Social Media channels	Connecting Coca-Cola consumers through the branded cans and bottles and via several Social Media channels

Table 1 Practical Appliance of Relevant Factors for Strong Brand Consumer Relationships

Source: Author's own illustration, based on findings in chapter 3

Furthermore both studies demonstrate that UGC strategies have to be developed comprehensively. They have to fit to the company's strategy and values. Also the company has to clarify the objective and target audience and decide which channels to operate to not lose track during implementation. In this context knowing one must know where to leverage, what is relevant, and foster targeted communication where it is relevant. As communicators they have to identify what they are able to control and which content the target group receives in order to prepare measures to counteract. In this context they have to be able to manage many voices, to avoid negative voices, and to create a collective voice.

4 Conceptual Framework of User-Generated Content Strategies for Building Brand-Consumer Relationships

4.1 Fundamentals of the Conceptual Framework and the User-Generated Content Strategies

The investigative results of the previous chapter provide the basis for developing a strategic construct with comprehensive guidelines.

The overall objective is to create intense, active, and loyal relationships between brands and consumers in alignment with the company’s strategy and values. Brand-related UGC is the key component of the strategies to support the company in reaching the superior objective. Measures have to be developed accordingly and after performances, a thorough analysis and evaluation for developing further targeted, effective and efficient implementation has to be executed. Both measures should be supported by key success metrics, which serve as control tools. The following framework provides the objectives with the applicable UGC strategies and the key success metrics for the strategy evaluation, embedded in the company’s overall vision.

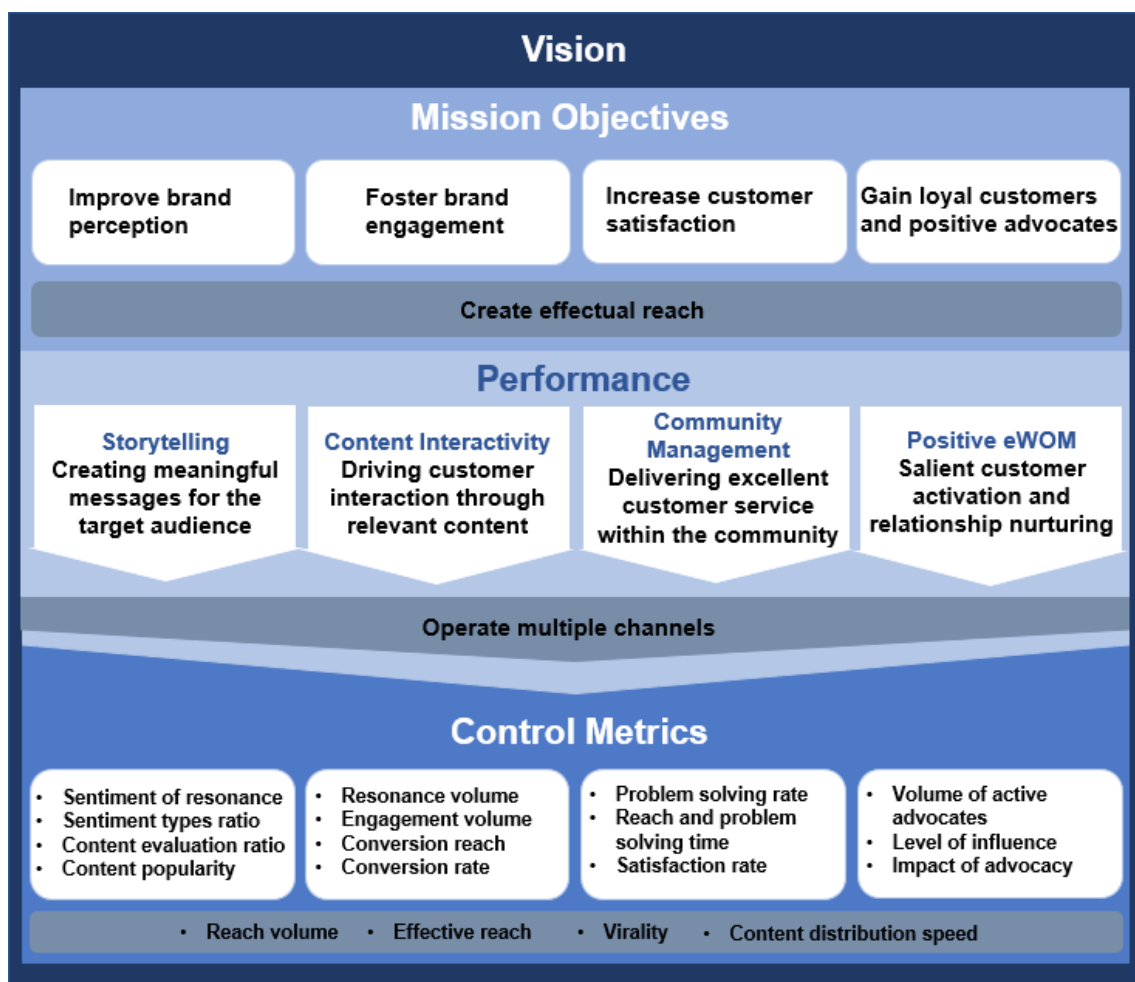


Figure 5 Conceptual Framework of User-Generated Content Strategies

Source: Author’s own illustration, based on findings in chapter 2 and 3

Strategy 1: Improve brand perception by creating meaningful messages for the target audience.

Focusing on brand perception is essential, as it influences the perceived value of the brand for the consumer. The consumer holds both functional and emotional associations towards the brand, which he should regard as beneficial. Therefore the brand has to create messages which emphasize on both utilitarian and symbolic benefits, delivering reasons for the value the brand adds to the consumer's life. Here the starting point is to feed the target audience with content that is meaningful to them, establishing contact between consumer and brand and involving the consumer and his attention intensively with the brand in the way that it occupies place and time in their minds. By promoting the brand's attributes and benefits, the brand promise to consumers can be reinforced.

Strategy 2: Foster brand engagement by driving customer interaction through relevant content.

Defined as the level of a consumer's "cognitive, emotional, and behavioral investment in specific brand interactions"¹²², brand engagement has proven to enhance customer loyalty.¹²³ By having created meaningful messages through the first strategy, it is now important that the relevant content is distributed in a way which integrates the consumer into the communication and initiates his desire of contributing. Providing him with the opportunity of being part of the conversation, the consumer is able to add value to brand experiences, therefore co-shaping the brand's communication. Brands which leave room for customer interactions within the sphere of its relevant content can help steer the conversation rather than react to it.

Strategy 3: Increase customer satisfaction by delivering excellent customer service within the community.

Customer satisfaction is essential regarding the quality and benefits of the respective product or service, but also in terms of the brand partner quality. An established community provides the consumer with a platform where he can share his opinions and concerns. Through customer service the brand enters into a dialogue with the

¹²² (Hollebeek 2011b, p.555)

¹²³ (see chapter 2.2)

consumer, addressing him individually and providing him with a solution. Customer service is inevitable for the brand to identify the weaknesses of the product or service and for maintaining a relationship with the consumer based on mutual respect.

Strategy 4: Gain loyal customers and positive advocates through salient customer activation and relationship nurturing.

In adaption to the third strategy, the fourth builds upon the premise of maintaining relationships with consumers within the community. These being referred to as sets of social relationship, they are considered as “sources of emotional support, social companionship and supportive resources as they are believed to be the heart of communication.”¹²⁴ In order to maintain these relationships, the brand has to find out the reasons for individuals to participate within a community and identify those customers especially relevant for the community and the brand. Relevant to the community are those who have a strong influence on consumers. Relevant to the brands are those consumers who act voluntarily in favor of the brand. Activating the latter, they support the brand as advocates. Therefore nurturing the relationship with these consumers as well as other consumers, gaining loyal customers and more positive advocates is approached multilaterally by means of consolidating plenty of voices to a collective voice.

Strategy 5: Operate multiple channels to increase reach.

The landscape of UGC distribution and consumption is enlarged by a multitude of channels. Consumers are able to individually depict those channels most feasible for them, meaning that they can control their recipient horizon to a certain degree. The brand wants to address as many consumers as possible, as targeted as possible. Therefore it has to operate multiple channels to identify those most relevant for the brand and at the same time those most relevant for its target audience. With a multi-channel approach the brand has the scope to spread the same content simultaneously, but also to spread different content customized to a distinct audience group, to increase reach bilaterally. All four previous strategies are embedded in this strategy, as each can be executed within a multi-channel approach.

¹²⁴ (Fischer et al. 1996, p.179)

4.2 Approaches for the Performance of User-Generated Content Strategies

Strategy 1: Storytelling - Creating meaningful messages for the target audience.

In today's online environment in which the consumer is confronted by an overload of information, the attention span for and the degree of recognition of a brand diminishes. Therefore it is of utmost importance to create messages which make the brand relevant and appealing for its target audience. The consumer is more attentive the more he is involved and the more he can relate to an incident by drawing concordant associations towards it. If those components are considered into the branded messages, they will become meaningful for the consumer and therefore relevant and lasting. The best way to intensively involve consumers intensively is by telling a story. Human memory is based on stories, meaning that information is registered, stored, and retrieved in form of stories, which hold many indices such as touch points of the individual's life, which, when triggered, causes implicit and explicit awareness and emotional connection in the consumer's mind.¹²⁵ Brand-related user generated content transformed into a story is the ideal instrument to establish a variety of touch points which connect consumers with a brand. Here, two approaches can be applied. The first is, integrating already distributed positive brand experiences by consumers, gathered from different channels, evaluated and selected, upon which a story that includes information on the brand, its utilitarian and symbolic benefits, and the persona of its target audience, is told in a way that draws the consumer in emotionally. The more indices (touch points) are integrated into the story, the more comparisons with own experiences can be drawn, therefore increasing the relevance for the consumer.

The second approach goes further by distributing a story which was entirely composed by consumers. Through distributing the story on various channels, other consumers are demonstrated that the campaign is created by people just like them, enhancing their trust and level of identification, which strengthens the emotional connection towards the brand.

These stories can be released in various forms, for example via traditional advertisement, videos on video portals where consumers can comment, with a corporate blog where the brand can distribute content on a regular basis.

¹²⁵ (Schank 1999, p.12; Woodside 2010, p.532)

Strategy 2: Content Interactivity - Driving customer interaction through relevant content.

In line with the last part of the previous strategy, the brand has to develop campaigns which appeal to the consumer and trigger his motivations for creating UGC on behalf of the brand. By letting the consumer develop the entire story for the brand, consumers feel more as being a part, and through their input content evolves, which is relevant to them. Here the brand only gives a frame in which the story is placed and has to take particular care of the development of the story to ensure it still goes in line with the pre-defined objective. By letting the consumers be co-creators, the brand touches the motivations of enjoyment, contact to other people, self-promotion, and changing perspectives. Consumers feel rewarded for their input, hence campaigns have to offer incentives, which not necessarily have to be monetary. These campaigns always have to fit to the defined target audience and address relevant topics for them which can be attributed back to the brand. Furthermore the brand has to promote the campaign via various channels with a variety of participation possibilities, if it is for creating, sharing, commenting, or “liking”. Thus the brand offers different interaction types for the consumers. If the brand is able to create campaigns which bring out motivations for contribution and connecting it favorably to the brand, they will drive customer interaction and brand engagement, and finally web traffic.

Strategy 3: Community Management - Delivering excellent customer service within the community.

Through the new online environment borders between marketing and advertisement, public relations, and customer service become blurred. The brand has to find new ways of doing marketing through both PR and customer service. First of all the brand has to provide a platform where the consumer can distribute his opinions and concerns. The brand has to define in advance what kind of purpose the platform serves, which channel to choose, and develop in advance scenarios which can occur and pre-define measures which will be taken. By establishing a brand community, the brand can publish brand-related content, on which consumers can react. Furthermore, brands should leave room for consumers to publish their own messages and enter into discussions with other consumers. If concerns or critiques are distributed, brands should respond promptly and enter into a dialogue with the respective consumers. The

consumers should be addressed individually. By this the brand will establish a two-way mutual relationship to consumers, in which they feel valued for their input. Offering suitable solutions will show the brand's capability of delivering excellent customer service. As this is all published publically within the community, other consumers will see the effort the company makes and the appreciation for the brand's customers. Dialogue and solution offering as the central actions of executing customer service will enhance the brand's social skills and increase customer satisfaction.

Strategy 4: Positive eWom - Salient customer activation and relationship nurturing.

Within communities the brand can assign categories to consumers. Derived from the motivational sources for consuming and producing brand-related UGC, they can be divided into the listeners, advocates, detractors and opinion leaders. The brand has to identify these consumer types based on their audiences' communication habits as well as attitudes and demographic characteristics. Of utmost importance in this context are the advocates and opinion leaders summarized as salient customers, who can support the brand in their communication to convince consumers of the brand. They foster authenticity, credibility, and trust. Brand advocates are those customers who are highly satisfied with the brand and who are mostly loyal, passionate and engaged. They distribute recommendations to other consumers such as listeners and defend the brand from detractors without being paid or receiving an incentive. One can say, that these customers love their brand, as they show high commitment. The brand has to nurture its relationship to its advocates in a way that it continuously creates unique experiences with the brand, delivering consistent quality of the product or service, and not only fulfill his needs, but also provides some insightful elements to excite the advocate. One should seek for the advice of the advocate in terms of brand value creation, so he feels integrated into the process and therefore valued by the brand. By this the advocate will not only enjoy his experience, but also actively promote it. The brand has to identify his advocates and maintain the relationship with them on a continuous basis to build a group of supporters who spread positive eWom on behalf of the brand.¹²⁶

¹²⁶ (Rusticus 2006, p.48)

The difference towards opinion leaders is that advocates are already convinced of the brand, whereas opinion leaders are more neutral and are driven by self-expression. They are called opinion leaders, because they are regarded as trusted experts, who seek for information about different brands and their offerings. Their opinion is highly influential on their peers, who seek for their information on a wide range of topics. Their followers are more likely to read about a brand, its company or product when it has been forwarded by them.¹²⁷ Examples of such opinion leaders are bloggers who have a large crowd of listeners. As opinion leaders build a perception independent from the brand, the brand has first identify opinion leaders in general as well as how they are perceived. The brand has to evaluate if the opinion leader fits to the brand and investigate its target group to decide if they match with the own target group. After having selected suitable opinion leaders, the brand has to initiate contact. In contrast to brand advocates opinion leaders expect payment or an incentive. In return the opinion leader will spread positive eWom in form of product presentation and recommendation. The brand has to develop a relationship with the opinion leader in order to turn him into a brand advocate, so he will voluntarily praise the brand's benefits in the future.

Regardless of the category, consumers are part of a community, which makes them perceive each participant as "one of them". As noticed in chapter 2.3, consumers relate to the community as their reference groups, making it essential for the brand to communicate with all participants (as acknowledged in strategy 3). Within the group there will always be detractors. When the brand has established relationships with the other consumers, brand detractors and their opinions will have less impact on them and finally the brand.

Strategy 5: Operate multiple channels to increase.

All previous strategies have indicated that it is advisable to implement them across multiple channels. The variety of channels was demonstrated in chapter 2.1. This has the advantage that more consumers are reached. Here the brand has to consider the differences between existing channels in order to choose the ones most appropriate for reaching their goal. The level of control also differs across channels, which the brand has to keep in mind. Contingent on the objective and type of performance (e.g.

¹²⁷ (Cakim 2006, p.118; Conn 2004)

release a campaign, generate a blog post, publish a video), the brand has to evaluate the possible channels and combine them to the extent that the best possible reach within the limits of sufficient control possibilities is obtained.

4.3 Evaluation of the User-Generated Content Strategies through Appliance of Key Success Metrics

Each strategy can be applied with different performance measures on diverse channels. To evaluate what kind of measures operate successfully, key success metrics need to be defined. Suitable key success metrics for each UGC strategy are presented in the following.

Strategy 1: Storytelling - Creating meaningful messages for the target audience.

Sentiment of resonance	Consumer responses on a brand-related topic are categorized into types, namely positive, neutral, and negative. Each sentiment type is counted and compared.
Sentiment types ratio	Each sentiment type is put into relation of the overall responses to evaluate its share and detect user preferences.
Content evaluation ratio	Based on the previous two metrics, the resonance of one particular content is compared to other content to evaluate what topic resonates best with the target audience and identifying trends.
Content popularity	Acceptance and excitement of consumers regarding one specific topic is evaluated.

Strategy 2: Content Interactivity - Driving customer interaction through relevant content.

Resonance volume	Quantitative indicator, detecting the amount of overall consumers' interaction regarding a specific content.
Engagement volume	The number of consumers actively participating in brand campaigns.
Conversion reach	Amount of overall potential users compared to number of users actually interacting to evaluate how appealing the campaign was.
Conversion rate	The number of users who change from prospective consumer to actual buyer.

Strategy 3: Community Management - Delivering excellent customer service within the community.

Problem solving rate	Measures the likelihood of a customer problem being solved to detect interrelations between problems and solving possibilities.
Reaction and problem solving time	Average time for the brand to take action and average time for solving a problem to find out where and how to improve.
Satisfaction rate	Measures to what degree a consumer was satisfied with the offered solution.

Strategy 4: Positive eWOM - Salient customer activation and relationship nurturing.

Volume of active advocates	The number of users who distribute content in favor of the brand. When compared, to see if the brand was successful in gaining more advocates.
Level of influence	Evaluates the influence one specific user has on others. This metric can be applied to evaluate different types of users, such as brand advocates, opinion leaders, or detractors, based on the number of users listening to and following the given advice.
Impact of advocacy	This metric evaluates based on other users' reaction how the content by the advocate resonates with the rest of the audience (positive, neutral, negative).

Strategy 5: Operate multiple channels to increase.

Reach volume	Estimation of the potential audience size.
Effective reach	Number of users who are actually participate. Reach volume and effective reach should be compared as a further step.
Virality	Expresses how fast and to what extent customer interactions take place (how many messages have been created with regard to a specific topic)
Content distribution speed	Expresses how fast and to what extent specific content is spread. This will show the relevance and impact the topic had on users.

These key success metrics are regarded as proposals in order to support the brand in reaching its objectives and improve its performance by delivering significant, constant, and valuable results. Especially for a brand which is new in the field of online brand communication with user-generated content, can step by step improve in this field with applying the key success metrics. They can be complemented or substituted by other key success metrics which are most appropriate for the company's strategic implementation.

5 Conclusion

5.1 Summary

The thesis gives a profound understanding of the meaning of user-generated content, the fundamentals of a brand-consumer relationship, and the effect brand-related user-generated content has on the construct of a traditional brand-consumer relationship approach. Both aspects are complex and have to be examined comprehensively. To establish and maintain a deep and long-lasting relationship with consumers, the company has to be aware of consumer's motivations for creating and consuming brand-related UGC, the influential factors on brand-consumer relationships, and the changes in the traditional approach as well as in brand communication.

Consumers' predominant motivations for creating their own brand-related messages are intrinsic enjoyment, self-promotion, and changing perspectives. Whereas the motivations of those consuming UGC originate from their desire for information from people who are just like them, whom they therefore trust, and who might reveal a unique experience to them. Also consumers participate, because they feel like they belong. The relationship between brands and consumers on the other hand is influenced by both functional and symbolic aspects. Brands become humanized and fulfill a partnership role. They are furnished with a personality consumers can identify with. Furthermore brand love with trust and identification as its antecedents have been proven to have a strong influence on commitment and finally consumers' willingness to act on behalf of the brand and become loyal within the relationship. In line with the new online environment and the emergence of communities, brands serve another function, which is its social competence. The shift from identification with the brand towards the identification with a reference group can be balanced, if the brand has social skills and is able to listen to its consumers and connect them with each other. During thorough literature review, factors which seem to be significant for brand-consumer relationships have been compiled, namely brand engagement, functionality and trust, identification, personality, and social competence. With UGC being substantiated as highly influential on consumers and brands, practical approaches of brands are demonstrated, which touch all criteria successfully. They furthermore demonstrate that strategies with UGC as its centric tool have to be developed comprehensively and in alignment with the company's strategy and objectives.

Therefore the conceptual framework in chapter 4 provides a guideline of the overall strategic execution, as well as different UGC strategies tailored to a specific objective, with performance recommendations and suitable key success metrics. The essence of this thesis is to understand that UGC can be integrated and applied on behalf of the brand to communicate and transfer the key criteria, which strengthen the brand-consumer relationship and induce loyalty and longevity.

5.2 Critical Acclaim

This paper presents applicable user-generated content strategies for building brand-consumer relationship based on a profound literature review.

Accordingly it has to be acknowledged, that these approaches are derived from theoretical knowledge and solely compared to practical approaches, not covering the entire scope of this topic area. The proposed strategies cannot be declared as generally valid, as not all aspects of the brand's environment, such as its respective product category, market size and structure, geographic expansion orientation, competitive environment, etc., are taken into account, meaning that strategic implementation must be approached differently when for example operating on several markets internationally with different cultural backgrounds. Especially with regards to the online environment, not all countries have the same accessibility to the internet. Furthermore, this work concentrates on the positive outcomes of UGC strategies. Due to the fact that in this context control is a very sensitive aspect, one has to be thoroughly prepared for unexpected developments within the performance sphere. Via internet user messages can spread very quickly and widely, brands can therefore lose its control over their content easily, which has, especially with regards to negative resonance of users, a serious impact on brands and which can hardly be compensated. Therefore, the presented conceptual framework can be used as a starting base, which can be further developed and adjusted individually.

5.3 Outlook

Thanks to the internet consumers are more and more enlightened, able to seek for information, making them savvy, scrutinizing, and critical. Overloaded with information, consumers look for possibilities to choose their own sources and mask out those irrelevant to them. Content distribution and exchange has never been as fast and

temporary as today, existent in such large quantities, that it is more challenging for brands to find its space in the market and successfully defend its position on a long-term basis. Therefore, companies have to acknowledge the empowerment of consumers and have to find ways of exploiting it to their own advantage. Brand-consumer relationships require consistent management, as they serve as a cornerstone for brand's in the today's environment. Therefore they should have a distinct role in the company's overall strategy in order to reach defined objectives. Integrating consumers into the brand communication by applying UGC strategies is mandatory, still they have to be developed comprehensively and in line with the corporate strategy.

This topic area is highly relevant, as it is embedded into the current brand environment. The conceptualized framework serves as a guideline for companies who need to build their brand-consumer relations within the new communication reality

If done successfully, the brand will be rewarded with loyal customers, who intend to engage in durable relationships.

This work illustrated the multidimensional nature of brand-consumer relationships, therefore indicating further investigation into individual dimensions, such as trust, relationship types or consumers' brand value. Also the motivational factors for creating and consuming UGC are very complex and demand further research and insights.

As brand love has proven to be highly relevant for the consumers' commitment, which is shown through positive word-of-mouth and brand advocacy, it should be given particular attention within the strategic development of building brand-consumer relationships.

IV Glossary

Blogger	A person who keeps and updates a blog.
Brand Associations	The linkage between a particular brand and its product category and summarized, constituting as the brand image
Click-through	Click on a specific link by a user who views a website, advertisement, etc.
Follower	Someone who supports and is guided by another person or by a group, brand, etc.: a person who likes and admires (someone or something) very much
Google Plus	A social networking site from the company Google Inc.
Influencer	A person who has a strong presence and influence on social networking sites and on the internet (such as an opinion leader)
Instagram	An application which allows to share pictures on the internet
Like	The "Like" button is a feature that allows users to show their support for specific comments, pictures, wall posts, statuses, or fan pages
Network effects	The state when a product's value to the user increases as the number of users of the product grows
Persona	A person that reflects and stands for the determined target audience
Pinterest	A social networking site on which users can put pictures and descriptions on virtual bulletin boards
Reference Group	A group to which an individual or another group is compared
Relationship Marketing	An aspect of customer relationship management, which focuses on building long-lasting relationships with customers
Twitter	An online social networking site which allows users to send and read short messages called "tweets"
Web traffic	The amount of visitors and visits a website receives

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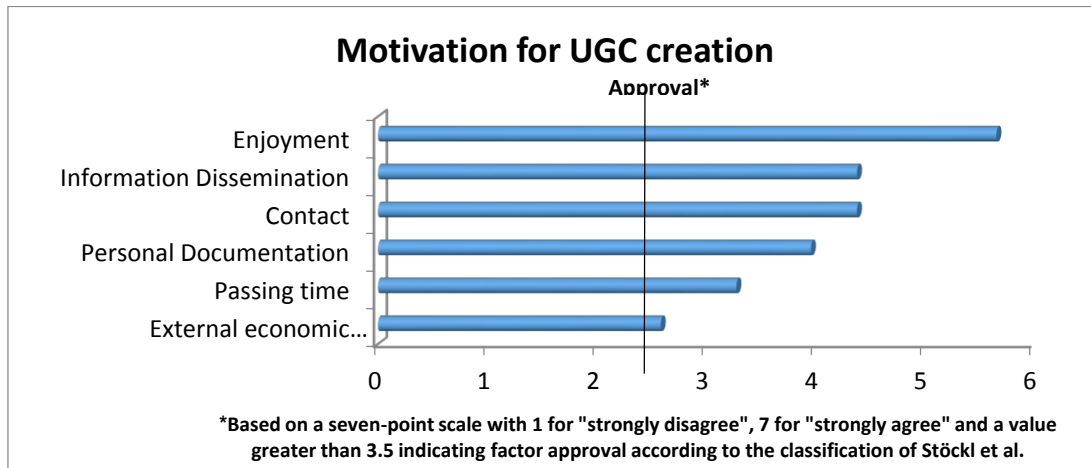
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VI Appendix

Appendix A: Results of factor analysis for Motivations producing UGC



Source: (Author's own illustration based on Stöckl et al. 2008, pp. 279 et seqq.)

	Factor Loadings	Means	SD
<i>Factor 1: External economic incentives</i>			
		2.58	
because it is very profitable for me.	0.760	2.04	1.66
because I am paid for it.	0.757	1.55	1.43
because I receive some form of compensation.	0.748	1.80	1.56
to open up new job opportunities.	0.709	2.89	2.10
to enhance my reputation.	0.664	3.40	2.03
<i>Factor 2: Personal documentation</i>			
		3.95	1.54
to document my life.	0.830	3.47	2.09
to provide personal information about myself.	0.790	3.29	1.97
to tell others about myself.	0.730	4.17	1.93
to archive my experiences and ideas.	0.712	4.66	1.94
to keep a record of my experiences.	0.703	4.21	1.99

<i>Factor 3: Enjoyment</i>			
		5.65	1.42
because I enjoy it.	0.862	5.75	1.53
because it is fun.	0.819	5.67	1.72
because it is entertaining.	0.746	5.52	1.60
<i>Factor 4: Passing time</i>			
		3.27	1.82
because it passes the time when bored.	0.886	3.40	2.07
when I have nothing better to do.	0.875	3.33	2.02
to occupy my time.	0.826	3.06	2.00
<i>Factor 5: Information dissemination</i>			
		4.37	1.67
to share information that may be of use to others.	0.868	4.23	2.08
to provide information.	0.821	4.38	1.95
to present information on my special interest.	0.634	4.55	1.97
<i>Factor 6: Contact</i>			
		4.37	1.70
to communicate with others.	0.786	4.52	1.90
to keep in touch with others.	0.709	4.23	1.94

Notes: Extraction method: principle component analysis; Rotation method: Varimax; Kaiser-Criterion (eigenvalue of factors > 1); exclude pairwise cases. Factor loadings below 0.4 are not displayed. Means: 1 = "strongly disagree"; 7 = "strongly agree."

Source: (Stoeckl et al. 2008, pp.279-280)

Appendix B: Motivation, Type of Ad, Brand Target, and Managerial Action

Consumer Motivation	Type of Ad Relationship to Brand Focus and Style of Ad	Type (s) of Brand Targeted	Suggested Managerial Action
Intrinsic Enjoyment	The Hobbyist Ad <i>Relationship:</i> The consumer wants to explore the brand/product. <i>Focus:</i> On content-that's interesting, insightful, creative. <i>Style:</i> not necessarily humorous, but typically informative.	Enthusiast Brands Brands which people feel passionate about or are highly involved with. e.g., Linux	Selective enablement/ encouragement • Applaud • Facilitate
Self-promotion	The Me Ad <i>Relationship:</i> The consumer wants to piggyback on the brand. <i>Focus:</i> On the creator rather than on the brand or message (don't want the brand or the message to overshadow the creator) <i>Style:</i> Often uses humor and/ or parody-but not necessarily at the expense of the brand.	High-Profile Brand Target high-profile brands and products that are in the news, on which to piggyback. Brands which dominate the media, generally ones which have positive connotations. e.g., Apple	Neutrality-"hands off" relationship • Applaud • Facilitate
Change Perception	The Activist Ad <i>Relationship:</i> The consumer wants to either promote or disrupt the brand. <i>Focus:</i> No interest in promoting the creator of the ad. <i>Style:</i> Often sharp humor/ parody-at the expense of the brand (disrupt); at the benefit of the brand (promote)	Issue Brands Brands that people view as either disingenuous or in need of support. <i>In need of support:</i> e.g., organizations such as Green Peace or Free Tibet <i>Disingenuous:</i> e.g., oil companies claiming to be environmentally friendly such as Exxon Mobile	Range depending on ad message <i>Promote:</i> • Applaud • Facilitate <i>Disrupt:</i> • Disapprove • Repel

Source: (Berthon et al. 2008, p.22)

Appendix C: Example for Impact of Brand-Related UGC



die models, die ihr zur zeit in eurer kleidung präsentiert, haben mich dazu gebracht, die kleider, die ich für diverse hochzeiten dieses jahr brauchte woanders zu kaufen. stundenlange suche auf eurer seite, konnte mich trotzdem nicht dazu bringen, dass ich mir auch nur ansatzweise vorstellen konnte wie die kleider an normalne frauen aussehen, geschweige denn, dass ich keins davon mehr schön fand, weil sie so unrealistisch präsentiert wurden...

Am 22. Juni um 12:48 • Gefällt mir • 268 • Antworten

13 vorherige Antworten anzeigen

Zalando Hallo Daniela, Vielen Dank für Dein F...

Alle Models (!) bei zalando präsentieren die Klamotten scheiße! Die sind zu dünn und die Anziehsachen sehen alle aus wie ein Sack. Alleine deshalb ist es schwer überhaupt dort zu kaufen und sich die Sachen realistisch vorzustellen..

Am 22. Juni um 06:17 • Gefällt mir • 80 • Antworten

9 vorherige Antworten anzeigen

Zalando Hallo Katharina, vielen Dank für Dei...

Antworten

Zalando ✓

Hallo liebe Juliana, wir (das sind Zalando-Kollegen aus fünf verschiedenen Teams) haben uns heute noch einmal intensiv mit euren Kommentaren auseinandergesetzt. Das Thema "skinny Models" ist natürlich nicht neu für uns und wir sind dabei hier eine sinnvolle Lösung zu finden:

1. Für heute heißt das erstmal, dass wir das Produkt bzw. die Bilder um die es konkret ging, neu shooten werden.
2. Für die Zukunft erarbeiten wir eine Lösung, damit solche Bilder gar nicht erst entstehen.
3. Zusätzlich screenen wir in den nächsten Tagen den ganzen Shop nach ähnlichen Bildern ab und sorgen dafür, dass sie neu fotografiert werden. Wer ähnliche Bilder findet, kann sie uns gerne direkt an social.media@zalando.de senden und wir prüfen sie.
4. Und last but not least – unser neuer Prototyp "Style in real Life" – mit echten Powerfrauen: <https://www.facebook.com/>

Source: (<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=840089139393836&set=o.365604620536&type=1&theater>)

Appendix D: Possible Purposes served by Relationship

A Sampling of Relational Needs and Provisions

Reach beyond my network	Raise the quality of my interactions
Establish roots	Pursue luxuries guilt-free
Preserve moments of privacy	Sustain my passions
Capture the present	Explore different parts of my identity
Get help to get stuff done	Express devotion
Cultivate interests and skills	Deepen bonds through shared ownership
Stay adventurous	Aspire to be my own keeper
Manage expectations of me	Help position myself in the larger picture
Support my unique DNA	Level out my connections
Help resolve nagging tensions about who I am	Distance me from an unwanted self
Enable important role transitions	Provide comfort through routines and rituals
Help me contribute to the „greater good“	Get special treatment from the company
Build legitimacy and overcome fear of stigma	Get more out of my brand investments
Relax within a safe haven	Get technical support and advice
Get emotional support and encouragement	Clarify values

Source: (Fournier 2009, p.5)

VII Declarations

Declaration of originality

I hereby declare that this bachelor thesis was composed by and originated entirely from me. Information derived from the published and unpublished work of others has been acknowledged in the text and references are given in the list of references.

In addition, I hereby agree that a copy of my bachelor thesis can be included in the department library. Rights of third parties are not infringed.

Hamburg,

.....
(Sarah Reichmann)