



Towards state-of-the-art on social marketing research in User-Generated Content (UGC) and Influencers

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Towards state-of-the-art on social marketing research in User-Generated Content (UGC) and Influencers

Abstract

Purpose – This study examines the research that has been conducted on user-generated advertising content in the social marketing strategies of commercial brands to understand the phenomenon, explore academic interest in the topic, and identify areas of limited thematic coverage.

Design/methodology/approach – A systematic review of existing scientific literature in the Web of Science (WoS) and Scopus was carried out using the PRISMA protocol. A co-occurrence matrix was used to review emerging topics on UGC and influencer marketing, allowing the identification of articles (n=59) related to the objective of this research.

Findings - Most research has analyzed UGC in images or text, but only very few have addressed videos and other digital formats (such as reels, image carousels, or podcasts), although there is sufficient work focused on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. There was no evidence of work exploring the effects, repercussions, and possible dangers of uncontrolled brand exposure through Unofficial Brand Ambassadors.

Originality – The literature review has allowed finding important areas of future research that the scientific community has not sufficiently addressed. Likewise, this work shows structurally several classifications of UGC, which will facilitate future research to deepen and broaden these categories.

Keywords Social Media, Marketing, Advertising, Branded content

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Brands take advantage of their owned media in social networks to increase their notoriety and positioning and create community and a sense of belonging in their corporate audiences to generate engagement, more significant social capital, and become lovemarks. Today, brands must have a community of followers in the digital environment, not only for advertising captive niches but also for the visibility and reach of their communication campaigns, consumer loyalty, and purchase intent.

Advertising discourse has changed from being focused on the qualities of the product or service to narratives more focused on emotion and user experience. At the same time, digital platforms take advantage of the possibilities of interaction with audiences and User-Generated Content (UGC) to co-create the brand discourse within digital communities. Thus, through social marketing strategies and challenges, brands provide their target audiences with a symbolic representation of the brand, making them official brand ambassadors (Brooks *et al.*, 2022).

This study aims to examine the research that has been conducted on user-generated content in the social marketing strategies of commercial brands to understand the phenomenon, explore academic interest in the topic, and identify areas of limited thematic coverage. The purpose is to define different categories of UGC based on the theoretical outputs of the most recent academic literature and to identify the strengths and threats posed by uncontrolled brand exposure by organizations such as Unofficial Brand Ambassadors.

In this regard, the following Research Questions (RQ) arise: How have UGC and content marketing through influencers and Unofficial Brand Ambassadors been approached in the academic literature (RQ1); What are the main motivations that users have when deciding to promote a product or service (RQ2) and; What have been the most common theoretical and methodological approaches in the academic literature (RQ3).

The importance of this study lies in the need to understand how the UGC phenomenon has been addressed in the academic literature, as well as to differentiate the different typologies of UGC in light of identifying areas that have not been sufficiently addressed and, above all, to reflect on the risks and benefits of content creation on brands in the digital ecosystem.

Method

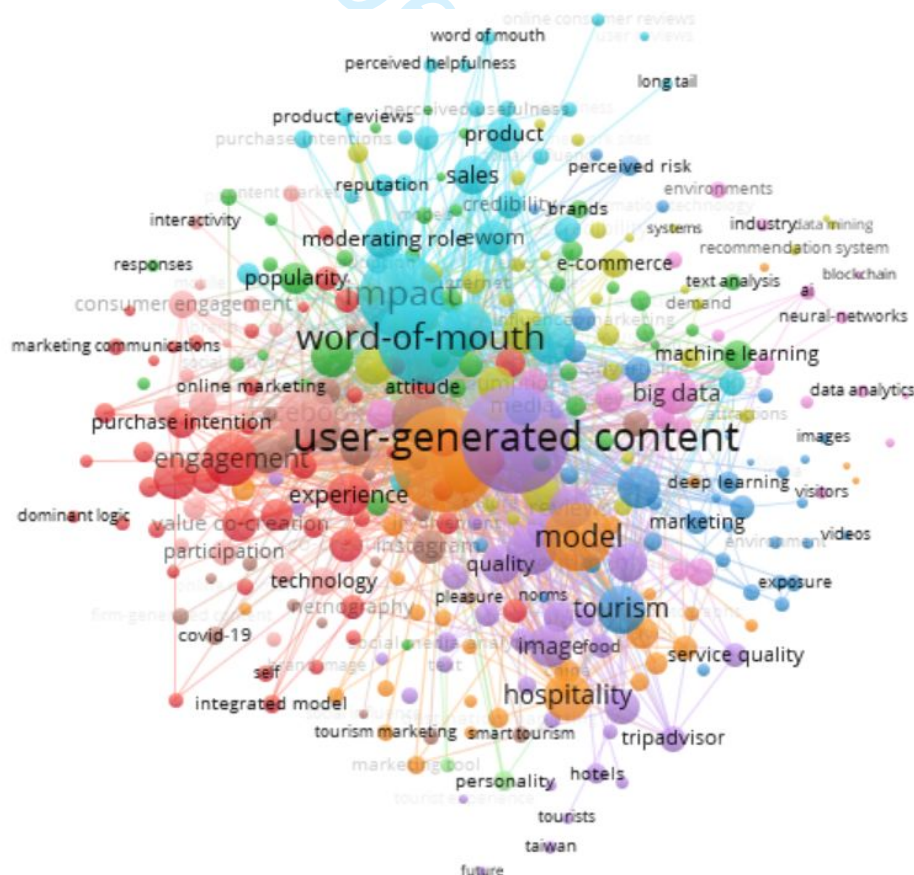
To conduct the systematic literature review, we have based on the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) statement (Moher *et al.*, 2009; Page *et al.*, 2021), one of the most widely used protocols in this type of studies.

The keywords used for the search were: «user-generated content» [AND] «marketing», selecting the «Topic» option that includes the search for these criteria in the title, abstract, and keywords. The Boolean operator [AND] was used since both concepts are necessary to yield results on the marketing use of user-generated content by brands. This research was carried out in Scopus and Web of Science (WoS), two of the most important international scientific databases.

Once the operation had been performed, the emerging documents were limited to only articles published in journals in the Social Sciences category. With these criteria, we initially obtained 892 articles in Scopus and 737 in Web of Science, for a total of 1629 articles.

The search results were saved in a plain text file (.txt) for export to the VOSviewer software, which allowed the identification of keyword co-occurrence terms to determine whether other terms have not been inspected that are closely related to the subject matter (Figure 1).

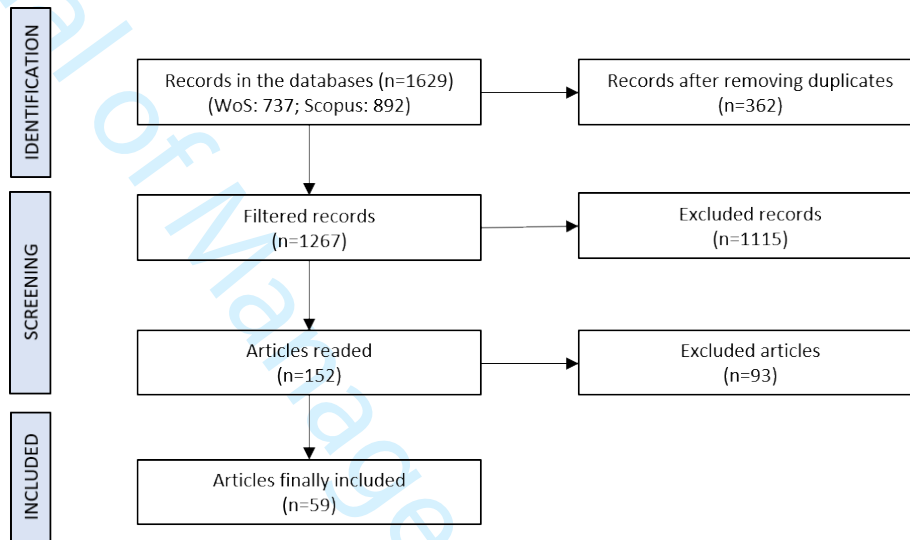
Figure 1. Matrix of co-occurrences of keywords related to the topic



The total number of records was imported into the web-based systematic review management tool, Rayyan, which allowed screening for duplicates. After filtering for duplicates, 1267 were selected and

manually examined one by one by title reading to discard those that did not have a direct link to the topic, thus excluding 1115 records. This resulted in the final number of 152 articles that met the requirements. Finally, after reading the abstracts of these 152 documents, 93 records were discarded because they were commentaries, editorials, book reviews, and unrelated studies, leaving 59 articles as the effective sample. Figure 2 shows the search and filtering process followed according to the PRISMA model (Moher *et al.*, 2009).

Figure 2. Search and filtering process following the PRISMA model



User-generated content (UGC) marketing

User-generated content (UGC) is a relatively new term that has gained particular relevance thanks to the possibilities of content creation and discussion in forums and social networks by audiences (Christodoulides *et al.*, 2011). According to Chistrodoulides *et al.* (2012), UGC is characterized because: 1) it is available in some publicly accessible environment, such as the Internet; 2) it reflects some degree of creative effort and; 3) it is created by practices and routines that are free and external to brands. Thus, the adaptation and appropriation of advertising messages and narratives by non-professionals is how UGC is generated (Castillo-Abdul *et al.*, 2022).

Although the term user-generated content is a neologism, its practice is not, since as early as 1995, the academic literature differentiated between commercially published materials and those produced by the audiences under names such as Word-of-Mouth (WoM), co-creation or appropriation of the brand message. (Cheong and Morrison, 2008; Hung and Li, 2007). However, the rise and popularization of ICT and social networks have made this type of content more visible and influential, as there has been a change in the communication model from being unidirectional (from one to many) based on conventional media, to a multidirectional and interactive one (from many to many), based on online platforms (Hoffman and Novak, 1996).

Berthon *et al.* (2008) argued that there are three primary motivations for users to generate advertising content: 1) "intrinsic enjoyment" in which the stimulus follows the purpose of self-expression; 2) "self-promotion" in which consumers use the promotion of a brand to promote themselves in their communities and; 3) "change perceptions" in which the objective is to make other consumers see the brand differently. Along the same lines, Daugherty *et al.* (2008) explained five motivations that consumers may have to create content for brands: 1) "utilitarian function" (e.g., to generate UGC for monetary incentives); 2) "knowledge function" (e.g., to produce UGC to understand how the product works); 3) "value-expressive function" (e.g., to produce UGC as a form of self-expression); 4) "ego-defensive

function" (e.g., to create content to feel part of a group) and; 5) "social function" (e.g., to create content to interact with a community).

According to the aforementioned, there are two general motivations for user-generated content marketing: the one carried out by users for personal motivation, i.e., in which there is no exchange or incentive beyond the interaction in social networks (Bonilla-del-Río *et al.*, 2022), and the one based on economic incentive, either for promotional content and advertising or for exchange of products and services (Table 1). The first category includes the general public, especially younger generations, such as millennials or centennials, while the second category usually includes influencer marketing. (Castillo *et al.*, 2020; Castillo *et al.*, 2021).

Table 1. Motivations for UGC marketing

Category	Motivation	Description
Personal motivations (intrinsic)	Intrinsic enjoyment or value-expressive function	Linked to free expression. Generally found in comments, opinions, and brand challenges.
	Self-promotion, ego-defensive function, or social function	Related to the user's self-promotion or their own need to feel part of a community.
	Change perceptions, altruism, or Knowledge function	Present in video tutorials, unboxing videos, or digital activism to promote lifestyles or changes in consumer habits.
Economic motivations (extrinsic)	Utilitarian function	Featured in influencer marketing or digital content creation as an economic exchange.

Source: Own elaboration based on categorizations of Berthon *et al.* (2008), Daugherty *et al.* (2008), Castillo *et al.* (2020), Castillo *et al.* (2021), and Bonilla-del-Río *et al.* (2022).

However, users do not usually develop UGC for personal motivations without a pre-existing brand strategy (Ma and Gu, 2022) that encourages social interaction. Not surprisingly, marketing and advertising agencies are increasingly investing in developing campaigns with narratives leading to co-creation and ad appropriation by users. According to Poch and Brett (2015), extrinsic rewards (economic incentives) lead to more positive intentions to create user-generated content than intrinsic motivations. However, they observed an altruism effect that reveals that consumers with a high degree of altruism are more likely to create positive content, such as tutorials and recommendations for their community of followers.

In the same vein, Asmussen *et al.* (2013) and van Doorn *et al.* (2010) found a positive correlation between engagement and intrinsic (personal) motivations for creating user-generated content, with content stimulation through the provision of branded content being a determinant of this. (Kang, 2018; Wirtz *et al.*, 2013).

On the effects of UGC on brands, Nagoya, Bernarto, and Antonio (2021) and Radovic and Ljajic (2021) argue that brand-generated content and UGC positively affect organizations' values and intangible assets. Diwanji and Cortese (2020) found that brand-generated content, rather than user-generated content, strongly influenced companies' attitudes towards their stakeholders, while Irelli and Chaerudin (2020) confirmed that consumers' perceptions of user-generated content have a positive impact on purchase intention.

For their part, Goh, Heng, and Lin (2013) demonstrated that participation in brand communities on social networks leads to a positive increase in purchase behavior and that UGC affects consumer purchase decision behavior through embedded information and persuasion, as natural prescribers enjoy greater credibility than corporate ones.

Influencers-content marketing

The Social Media Influencer is a person with a large community of followers who value the information offered by him/her and with whom he/she shares common interests and concerns (Castillo-Abdul *et al.*, 2020). Influencers are online content creators with high power of engagement, opinion, trend, likes, and fashion, competing for conventional media audiences' attention (Elorriaga & Monge, 2018). The possibilities can range from purely informative messages, including recommendations or practical advice,

to accounts of experiences, lifestyles, or opinions. The aim is to establish a connection and give the public what they want (Martínez-Sanz and González Fernández, 2018).

Influencers differ from conventional celebrities, as their popularity is built through their followers on social networks. Thus, the primary users of these platforms - millennials and centennials - see influencers as people who resemble themselves (Allsop *et al.*, 2007; Mangold & Smith, 2012) through an "online celebrity subculture" (Hamilton, 2010; Johnstone & Lindh, 2022, p. 4).

Cultural elements endemic to social media platforms, such as influencer marketing and UGC, can significantly enhance the visibility of certain campaigns (Ashley and Tuten, 2015), but engagement should also be carefully considered when evaluating their effectiveness. Influencers are micro-celebrities with many followers, either the general public or among a specific segment (micro-influencers). Previous research shows that influencer marketing and shareable content can improve audience engagement and campaign reach (Coates *et al.*, 2019; Kostygina *et al.*, 2020).

Younger generations are fond of digital media and choose to use it as their primary source of information driven by six principal reasons: search autonomy, virtual storage, instant gratification, visual inspiration, accessible information, and authenticity, and they prefer to get information from bloggers and influencers rather than from conventional media, as they feel they are more similar to them and, consequently, consider them more trustworthy (Jones & Kang, 2019).

Most of the academic literature has focused on the effect of celebrity campaigns on mainstream media, explaining that these public personalities have an enormous influence on audiences' attitudes, behaviors, and decision-making (e.g., Hoffman and Tan, 2013, 2015). Celebrity endorsements can enhance a brand's value and product desirability, conferring social capital (Ohanian, 1990; Till and Shimp, 1998). More recent neuroscience research has shown that brain regions that create positive associations are activated by seeing or hearing celebrity endorsements (Klucharev *et al.*, 2008; Sung *et al.*, 2018).

Trust is a factor that impacts eWom (electronic Word-of-Mouth) in social networks. The higher the level of familiarity of the audience with these influencers, the greater the likelihood that they will be involved in the search, broadcast, and transmission of opinions about products (Shu-Chuan & Yoojung, 2011), so consequently, the advertising message will have a more significant impact, reach and effectiveness (Shu-Chuan & Yoojung, 2011).

Unlike celebrities in mainstream media, in influencer marketing, brand endorsement information is often implicit, and sponsors tend to use different tactics than those employed by advertisers on traditional media platforms to maximize impact and trust with their followers. For example, influencers may use «digital native» advertising strategies similar to product placement, such as posting selfies with a product, using product-branded backgrounds (Ashley and Tuten, 2015; Campbell *et al.*, 2014), but also doing product experience reviews (called "haul"), unboxing sessions or virtual tours.

This leadership of certain young people encourages many commercial brands to find in the profiles of these opinion leaders the ideal space to non-intrusively penetrate the imaginary of their target customers and adhere to the credibility and trust conveyed by the prescriber. In this sense, the business model of platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Twitch, or Facebook, on which Social Media Influencers upload their productions, is based on the attention economy, mainly because accessing their content is free for the user, but it is the attention of these users that are marketed and monetized to brands based on the traffic generated to that content (Brooks *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, consumers are exposed to social media marketing through paid media, owned media, user-generated content (UGC) for personal motivations, and influencer marketing (Table 2).

Table 2. Types of brand message exposure on social networks

Exposure	Description
Paid media	Brand paid advertising (e.g., displays and social ads, native advertising, branded content)

Owned media	The brand's digital accounts.
User-generated content (UGC) for personal motivations	Intrinsic enjoyment or value-expressive function; Self-promotion, ego-defensive function or social function; change perceptions, altruism or Knowledge function
User-generated content (UGC) for economic motivations	Utilitarian function (e.g., influencer marketing)

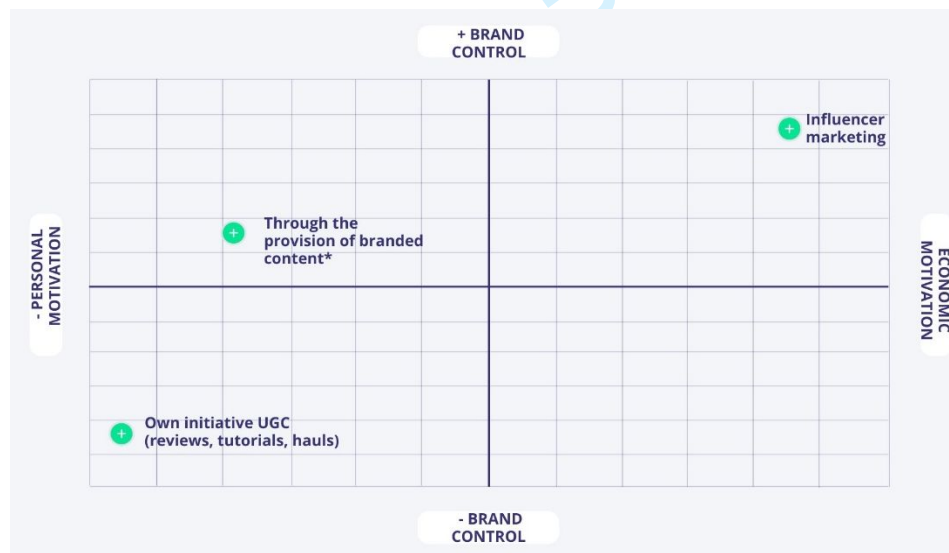
Conclusions and discussions

Marketing cannot be understood today without digital strategies, as the media usage habits of audiences are exponentially focusing on social networks. In this ecosystem, not only the advertising platform has changed, but also the narratives, from one centered on conventional media almost exclusively for paid advertising to others more social and interactive, focused on the user.

In the attention economy, brands find themselves in a sea of ads and oversaturated advertising spaces competing for audience awareness, message credibility, and engagement. In this sense, the most effective strategies to approach the audiences are non-invasive and user-generated, with a more natural message focused on the storytelling of opinions and experiences. Consequently, UGC becomes an ideal strategy, combining the naturalness of a user's exposure with media exposure to a group of followers on social networks who trust the content creator.

The research reviewed suggests that there are essentially two types of UGC: those generated by personal and economic motivations. Regarding the latter, the most common strategy is influencer marketing, in which organizations look for those profiles of prescribers with an extensive audience reach within a specific segment and make economic agreements or exchanges for the exposure of brand products or services. At the same time, the former can adopt the brand messages and exposure of their products on their initiative or by some strategy of brand content provision (for example, an invitation to a brand event, sending a sample of a product, or the generation of a Challenge in a social network) (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Differences in advertiser control between Brand Ambassadors and Unofficial Brand Ambassadors



*, e.g., Invitations to branded events, sending of product samples, open days at the organization, sending of promotional material, or challenges promoted by the brand.

In the literature review, there was no evidence of works exploring the effects, repercussions, and possible dangers of uncontrolled brand exposure through Unofficial Brand Ambassadors. It should be understood that advertisers can control many aspects of Brand Ambassadors before hiring their services, such as their profile, the target customer base of their followers, and the content and exposure of messages about the

1
2
3 brand. However, they cannot do so with Unofficial Brand Ambassadors since they generate messages on
4 their initiative or by providing branded content, of which they can make a free interpretation not tied to
5 contractual terms. However, as an exercise in academic introspection, some of the risks of uncontrolled
6 brand exposure could be:

- 7
- 8 1. Errors, bias, or misinformation when discussing a product or service's features and benefits or
9 risks.
- 10 2. Exaggeration or attenuation of benefits or risks of using a product or service.
- 11 3. Disclosure of use of the product or service for purposes for which it was not designed.
- 12 4. Inaccuracies or misinformation when explaining the manufacturing processes of the products or
13 services.
- 14 5. Damage to brand reputation due to communication crises generated by influencers or Unofficial
15 Brand Ambassadors.
- 16 6. Confusion in the brand awareness towards a different target than the one intended for the
17 product or service.
- 18 7. Cognitive association in the minds of the brand's audiences with the influencer or the Unofficial
19 Brand Ambassador.
- 20
- 21

22 As a theoretical implication, this research has addressed the different typologies of UGC and how these
23 depend on two fundamental aspects: the control of content by brands and the motivations of users to
24 create and disseminate this content through social networks. In this sense, a specific typology of UGC
25 emerges that has not had enough treatment in the scientific literature, such as the Unofficial Brand
26 Ambassadors, people who, without having any relationship or contractual link with the organization,
27 decide - for different personal motivations - to make reviews or references to the brand or its products
28 and services, which can become an opportunity for free advertising. However, it also means some threats
29 and dangers.

30
31 Most of the research reviewed has studied UGC in the form of images or text, but only very few have
32 addressed videos and other digital formats (such as reels, image carousels, podcasts, etc.), although it
33 should be noted that there is sufficient work focused on social networks such as Twitter, Facebook, and
34 YouTube. In this sense, it would be worth exploring in the future the UGC done by Unofficial Brand
35 Ambassadors in emerging social networks such as TikTok or Twitch through the provision of branded
36 content such as challenges or participation in branded events. This would help to understand which
37 advertisers' strategies are more favorable for projecting brand values when controlling the message and
38 prescribers are decentralized.

39
40 As practical implications for brand and marketing managers, this work shows that many recent researches
41 point out that Unofficial Brand Ambassadors tend to reuse branded content generated by brands in their
42 owned media. In this way, creating clear, concise, and precise narratives that allow a rediffusion of
43 branded content as close as possible to the official discourse becomes increasingly relevant.

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