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The Influence of User-Generated Content on Brand Image on Social Media

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Abstrak: *The development of social media has changed the paradigm of brand communication from a top-down approach to a more participatory model. User-generated content (UGC), which is content voluntarily generated by users, now plays a central role in shaping brand image in the digital space. This content is considered more authentic, credible, and influential than traditional advertising because it is based on real experiences and social interactions. In this context, consumers act as co-creators who are able to shape public opinion and influence brand perception collectively. However, the high dependence on UGC also presents strategic challenges, especially related to managing negative narratives and potential reputation crises. This study uses a qualitative approach with a literature study method to analyze the influence of UGC on brand image. Data were collected from various verified scientific sources in the last decade, and analyzed using qualitative content analysis techniques. The findings show that the effectiveness of UGC is greatly influenced by the authenticity, credibility, and emotional context of the message delivered. Therefore, brand communication strategies in the digital era need to transform to be more responsive, collaborative, and data-based in order to build consumer trust and create a sustainable brand image.*

Keywords: *Brand Image; Social Media; UGC*



INTRODUCTION

The development of social media has significantly changed the landscape of marketing communications and consumer behavior. In the Web 2.0 era, consumers no longer play a passive role as recipients of information, but actively create and distribute content through various platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter. This phenomenon produces user-generated content (UGC), which is content created by non-commercial users who discuss their experiences with certain products or services. According to Riki (2023), consumer trust in UGC is higher than traditional advertising because it is considered more honest, unbiased, and based on real experiences. Thus, social media is not only a digital social space, but also an arena that facilitates the process of forming public opinion about brands massively and quickly.

Furthermore, this shift reflects a shift in power from companies to consumers in shaping brand narratives. Consumers now have the ability to influence public perception and brand reputation through the personal experiences they share online. This is in line with Mere et al.'s (2024) view of consumers as co-creators of brand value in digital communities. In this context, companies can no longer rely on having full control over the brand messages they convey. Instead, they must be able to listen, respond, and build two-way relationships with consumers through active participation in digital social spaces. This shift presents new strategic challenges and opportunities for brands, especially in fostering trust and loyalty through a more dialogic and community-based approach.

The use of user-generated content (UGC) as a modern marketing tool reflects a paradigm shift from a top-down promotional approach to a more horizontal and participatory communication model. In this context, consumers are not only the target of messages, but also producers of meaning and brand representation. This strategy is in line with the concept of participatory culture proposed by Jenkins et al. (2009), where individuals actively contribute to the production and circulation of

content in the digital ecosystem. Through UGC, brands can leverage consumers' emotional and social involvement to create more relatable content, thereby strengthening brand engagement and expanding reach organically without explicit promotional intervention. However, this strategy is not without risk. Reliance on content that is not directly controlled by the company has the potential to produce negative narratives that can damage the brand image if not managed properly.

Furthermore, the effectiveness of UGC in shaping brand perception depends on the credibility, relevance, and authenticity of user-generated content. A study by Hanifah et al (2024) shows that consumers tend to trust content created by fellow users more because it is considered more objective and not motivated by commercial interests. Therefore, companies must be careful in managing their interventions on UGC so as not to reduce the authenticity of messages emerging from the consumer community. On the other hand, the emergence of influencer marketing as a hybrid form of UGC and professional endorsement also reinforces the importance of ethical selection and curation in digital marketing strategies. If not accompanied by transparency and honesty, collaboration with public figures or content creators can raise public skepticism towards brand integrity. Thus, UGC is not just a promotional tool, but a strategic field that requires sensitivity to social dynamics and consumer trust values in the digital era.

In the context of brand image formation, social media has become the main arena where collective perceptions are formed and dynamically developed. Brand image is no longer the result of one-way communication from companies to consumers, but rather the result of complex interactions between consumers, online communities, and widely distributed digital content. According to Miasi (2020), brand image is a consumer perception formed through associations attached to the brand in their memory. These associations are now increasingly formed through experiences and narratives shared by other users, especially in the form of reviews, comments, and visual



testimonials on social media. This is where the role of user-generated content becomes crucial: this content not only represents individual opinions, but also functions as a form of social legitimacy that shapes collective perceptions of the credibility and value of a brand.

This phenomenon has serious implications for brand communication strategies in the digital era. Companies are not only required to create a positive image through paid advertising or campaigns, but also to actively foster meaningful relationships with consumers so that they are encouraged to create supportive UGC. This is in line with the idea of brand co-creation, where brand value is formed collaboratively between companies and consumers (Fadilah & Meria, 2024). Failure to manage this interaction can trigger a reputation crisis, given that negative content can spread faster and have a stronger psychological impact than positive corporate promotions. Therefore, companies need to adopt a responsive, empathetic, and data-driven approach in monitoring and responding to public perception on social media. In a digitally connected world, brand image is not the exclusive property of a company, but rather the result of ongoing social dialogue in cyberspace.

The need for in-depth research on the influence of user-generated content (UGC) on brand image is becoming increasingly urgent as the dynamics of interactions on social media become increasingly complex. Not all forms of UGC have a uniform impact on brand perception; visual content, text, tone of communication, and distribution platforms have characteristics that can give rise to different influences. According to Kinanthi & Sisilia (2024), consumer perceptions of brands are greatly influenced by the emotional and social context of the messages they receive, including from fellow users. Thus, research that examines these dimensions, for example, whether UGC is positive, neutral, or negative; whether it is created spontaneously or structured, is needed to formulate a brand communication strategy based on data and a more comprehensive understanding of consumer psychology.

Furthermore, the lack of longitudinal studies is an obstacle in understanding the long-term impact of UGC on brand image. Many studies are descriptive and limited to the analysis of a particular platform or specific moment, thus failing to capture the dynamics of changes in consumer perceptions on an ongoing basis. In fact, in the context of modern branding, brand image is dynamic and can change drastically due to a viral trend or controversy triggered by user content. Therefore, it is important for future research to develop adaptive, cross-platform, and big data analytics-based methodological approaches to be able to reveal more accurate and predictive patterns. In line with this, collaboration between academics, marketing practitioners, and technology developers is an important prerequisite so that understanding UGC and its influence on brand image can be used not only as a diagnostic tool, but also as a strategic instrument in making more ethical and long-term business decisions.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a literature review method to examine the influence of user-generated content (UGC) on brand image on social media. This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to explore existing concepts, theories, and empirical findings in depth and critically, without collecting field data directly. Literature studies are considered relevant in the context of this study because the UGC phenomenon and brand image dynamics are issues that have been widely discussed in academic and practical studies, so they can be analyzed from various theoretical and contextual perspectives.

The main data sources in this study come from scientific articles published in reputable journals, academic books, industry research reports, and relevant international conference proceedings in the last five to ten years. The literature collection process was carried out systematically through academic databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus, and ScienceDirect using keywords such as user-generated content, brand image, social media



marketing, consumer trust, and brand co-creation. After that, the process of selection, categorization, and thematic analysis was carried out on the literature that had been obtained. The analysis technique used was qualitative content analysis to identify patterns, tendencies, and conceptual relationships that emerged from the various literatures reviewed. With this method, the study aims to formulate a complete and critical understanding of how UGC influences brand image formation, as well as its strategic implications for companies in the digital era.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Conceptualization of User-Generated Content (UGC) in the Context of Social Media

User-Generated Content (UGC) is a term that refers to all forms of content produced and shared by ordinary users through digital platforms, especially social media. This content can be in the form of text, images, videos, audio, or a combination of all of them. The characteristic of UGC is that it is not produced by professional media institutions, but rather arises from the individual initiative of users who want to express their experiences, opinions, or creativity. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2007), UGC is classified as content that is published openly, reflects creative efforts, and is produced outside the scope of professional activities. In social media, the form of UGC varies greatly, from status uploads, product reviews, to reaction videos or tutorials that often go viral because of their relevance to the real experiences of users (Jamal, 2025).

The characteristics of UGC are very striking when compared to commercial content. It is participatory, because it opens up space for users to become both information producers and consumers (Bruns, 2008; Jenkins, 2006). In addition, UGC is considered more authentic and spontaneous, because it generally does not go through a curation process or brand direction. This makes UGC a more credible source of information in the eyes of the

audience, especially when it comes to reviews or testimonials about a product or service. According to Faladhin (2024), users tend to trust information from fellow users because it is considered more honest and socially relevant, compared to traditional advertising. Decentralized content production and not being tied to media authority makes UGC grow massively and rapidly in the digital realm, especially when the content touches on socially or emotionally relevant issues, allowing for widespread viral spread (Santos, 2022).

However, in its development, UGC is not always pure. There is a distinction between pure UGC and UGC that has undergone brand intervention. Pure UGC is content that is voluntarily created by users without any incentives, direction, or sponsorship from a company or brand. In contrast, branded UGC involves users, especially influencers or content creators, who are sponsored or directed by brands to produce content that is in accordance with certain marketing strategies. An example is paid collaborative content between brands and micro-influencers in campaigns on Instagram or TikTok. Although both are categorized as UGC, this distinction is important in assessing the level of authenticity and motivation behind the content produced. According to Hidayat et al (2025); Saputra & Marta (2020), content that appears "organic" from influencers has often gone through a process of curation and brand direction, even though it is packaged as if it were authentic. Therefore, it is important to understand the dynamics of commercialization in the UGC landscape.

UGC plays a major role as a form of participatory and credible consumer communication. In the digital era, consumers are no longer passive recipients of information, but instead become active actors in the message delivery process. They share opinions, provide input, and even influence others through their experiences. This is part of a participatory culture, where users have the power to produce meaning and disseminate information (Sihotang & Malau, 2020). This process creates a horizontal communication space between



users, which complements (and sometimes rivals) vertical communication from brands to consumers. The credibility of UGC comes from the impression of authenticity and honesty felt by the audience, especially in a social context that demands transparency and trust. This is also supported by research from Handayani (2023) which shows that UGC has a significant influence on purchasing decisions because it is considered more trustworthy than official marketing content.

Furthermore, UGC also plays a strategic role in shaping digital public opinion. With the power of social media networks, content shared by individuals can go viral and shape collective perceptions in a short time. UGC often functions as social proof, where people tend to trust and follow actions or views that have been validated by other users (Kurniawan et al., 2025). In social or political issues, UGC can give rise to alternative narratives that are not always covered by the mainstream media, making it an important tool in setting the public agenda. Thus, UGC has evolved from being merely an individual expression to an influential instrument in the realm of digital communication and mass opinion formation, and plays a significant role in the dynamics of the attention economy that defines today's media interactions.

2. Theory and Dimensions of Brand Image in the Digital Era

Brand image, theoretically, is the total perception formed in the minds of consumers towards a brand based on associations that develop over their experiences. This concept emphasizes that brand image is not just about logos or visual designs, but also includes values, personality, and reputation formed through long-term interactions between consumers and brands. According to Farida & Susilowati (2025), brand image is part of brand equity and plays a crucial role in differentiation and purchasing decisions. Aaker also classifies the elements that form brand image into several main dimensions, namely brand associations, perceived quality, credibility, and brand personality.

First, brand association is any form of meaning that consumers associate with a brand either functionally (e.g. product reliability), symbolically (lifestyle), or emotionally (nostalgia or personal values). According to Baktiar (2024), this association has a certain depth and strength that will determine the level of consumer attachment to the brand. Second, perceived quality is a subjective evaluation of consumer product superiority that is often not in line with objective quality (Pandiangan et al., 2021). This shows that perception can be formed through brand narratives, previous experiences, and opinions from other users.

The next dimension is brand credibility, which according to Erdem and Swait (1998), is the perception that a brand is reliable and has the expertise to fulfill its promises. This credibility acts as a signal of trust, especially in a market full of uncertainty. Next, brand personality refers to the human attributes attached to the brand, such as "young," "friendly," or "innovative." This theory was developed by Jennifer Aaker (1997), who compiled five main dimensions of brand personality: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness. These dimensions help consumers form deeper and more personal emotional connections with brands.

However, entering the digital era, the brand image formation landscape has undergone a significant transformation. Social media has replaced many traditional communication channels as the main platform in shaping consumer perceptions. Social media is referred to as "a hybrid element of the promotion mix" that enables two-way communication between brands and consumers. In addition, user-generated content (UGC) content created by users such as reviews, testimonials, and experience uploads has a major influence on brand image formation. According to a study by Ilahi et al (2025), UGC is considered more authentic and credible than conventional advertising, making it more effective in shaping brand perceptions.

Not only that, the ability of consumers to voice their opinions publicly makes the



dynamics of brand image more fluid and fast-changing. As stated in the theory of real-time branding by Fournier and Avery (2011), brand image is now temporary and is heavily influenced by responses to issues or trends that are developing at that time. On the one hand, this opens up opportunities for brands to gain positive exposure virally. On the other hand, even small mistakes can quickly spread and significantly damage a brand's reputation.

In addition, advances in technology and data allow companies to carry out personalized branding, a data-driven approach to creating experiences that are more in line with individual preferences. Research by Surjono (2025) shows that proper personalization can increase consumer loyalty and emotional attachment to a brand.

Overall, the formation of brand image in the digital era is not only determined by the company, but is the result of a complex interaction between communication strategy, user experience, and the power of the digital community. Therefore, to maintain and strengthen brand image in this era, companies need to be adaptive, open to consumer participation, and have a responsive and empathy-based communication strategy.

3. The Influence of User-Generated Content on Brand Image Formation and Change

User-Generated Content (UGC) or content generated by users is now a crucial factor in the formation and change of brand image, especially in the era of digital and interactive social media. Research from Jesselyn & Sari (2024) shows that UGC has the power to create a more credible brand perception because it comes from fellow consumers, not from the company itself. This credibility arises because consumers tend to trust the experiences of others who are considered more honest and unbiased, so that UGC can significantly strengthen the positive image of the brand through the electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) effect (Gultom & Irwansyah, 2021). For example, product reviews on YouTube or testimonials on Instagram that are voluntarily

created by consumers are often more effective in forming trust and purchasing decisions than traditional advertising.

However, the influence of UGC is not always beneficial. Negative content uploaded by consumers can also disrupt or even damage brand image if not managed properly. According to a study by Suryatini et al (2025), negative UGC that is widely spread on social media can significantly reduce the perception of brand quality and trigger the spread of negative perceptions that lead to a reputation crisis. This is reinforced by the findings of Wibowo et al (2022) who found that negative reviews have a stronger impact than positive reviews because consumers tend to be more sensitive to negative information in the decision-making process. Therefore, brands need to respond to this dynamic with a responsive and empathetic reputation management strategy.

Furthermore, there are several factors that moderate the influence of UGC on brand image. First, the authenticity of the content greatly determines how much impact it has. According to a study by Sari & Rosilawati (2025), content that is considered original and comes from real experiences is more likely to influence consumer attitudes and trust in the brand. Second, the type of platform where UGC is distributed also plays an important role. In a study by Popp and Woratschek (2017), it was stated that platforms that emphasize visuals, such as Instagram and TikTok, are effective in building emotional and lifestyle brand associations, while platforms such as Yelp or TripAdvisor are more dominant in influencing rational perceptions of product and service quality. Third, the level of community involvement is another important factor. Brands that have active and loyal communities tend to be able to balance perceptions when negative UGC is distributed. This type of community often acts as informal brand ambassadors who help maintain or even restore brand image through active participation in digital discussions.

Thus, UGC management becomes an essential part of modern branding strategy. Brands need to not only monitor the content that



is circulating, but also actively build a digital ecosystem that encourages consumer participation in creating positive narratives. By facilitating authentic UGC, encouraging community engagement, and responding quickly to negative content, companies can leverage UGC as a strategic tool in forming a strong, adaptive, and relevant image in the eyes of the public.

4. Strategic Implications for Brand Management in the Participatory Era

In the participatory era, brand management has undergone a fundamental shift from the traditional top-down approach to a more open, interactive, and participatory approach. This change is in line with the idea of consumer empowerment (Azizah & Sofiah, 2024), where consumers now have the power to influence brand narratives through digital channels, especially social media. The rise of user-generated content (UGC) has become a major catalyst in this transformation. UGC has been shown to play a significant role in shaping brand perceptions because it is considered more credible and authentic than content compiled by marketers (Iswanto et al., 2025). Research also shows that consumers tend to trust reviews and testimonials from other users more than the brand's own claims, making UGC a very effective organic marketing tool.

The strategy of collaboration with content creators and influencers in this digital ecosystem is a crucial step for companies. According to the theory of source credibility (Hovland et al., 1953), the effectiveness of communication messages is greatly influenced by the perception of the credibility of the message sender. In the context of social media, influencers who are close to the audience are often considered more trustworthy than the brand itself (Salsabila et al., 2024). Therefore, the practice of collaborative co-creation between brands and creators in producing content is a strategic approach that is in line with the principle of active consumer engagement, which emphasizes the importance

of emotional and cognitive involvement of consumers in creating shared value.

However, UGC also has a negative side, especially when the circulating content causes a reputational crisis. In the crisis communication literature, the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) theory developed by Coombs (2007) states that a company's response to a crisis must be adjusted to the public's perception of responsibility and expectations. Social media accelerates the escalation of a crisis, so companies are required to have a fast, empathetic, and coordinated crisis management protocol. The absence or delay in responding can cause long-term damage to brand trust.

For this reason, a digital analytics-based monitoring system is essential. Social listening and sentiment analysis not only help in early detection of issues, but also provide strategic insights into consumer perceptions, market trends, and identification of brand advocates. This is in line with the data-driven marketing approach, which utilizes technology and analytics to support strategic decision-making in brand management. With the right analytics, companies can design communication strategies that are more responsive and adaptive to the dynamics of the digital public.

Furthermore, the participatory era requires companies to reposition the role of consumers from mere communication targets to active partners in brand co-creation. The concept of co-creation of value emphasizes the importance of interactive experiences between consumers and companies in creating value (Alicia et al., 2024). This leads to the formation of brand communities, where consumers form social groups around brand identities and contribute to strengthening brand narratives through horizontal interactions. In this context, companies must create spaces and structures that enable active consumer participation on an ongoing basis.

Thus, brand management in the participatory era is not only about image control, but also about building a relationship of mutual trust and collaboration with the public. Brands that are able to adapt to the logic of

participation and open dialogue will have a sustainable competitive advantage in this dynamic and open digital ecosystem:

CONCLUSIONS

The conclusion of the discussion on User-Generated Content (UGC) and brand image theory in the digital era confirms a fundamental shift in communication strategy and brand management, where brand power is no longer fully controlled by the company, but is formed collectively by the digital community through active consumer participation. UGC, as content generated by users, becomes an authentic, credible, and influential source of information in shaping brand perceptions because of its free, spontaneous, and real-experience-based nature. In an open and interactive social media ecosystem, consumers now act as co-creators who are able to accelerate the spread of opinions and change brand images through reviews, testimonials, or viral campaigns, both in positive and negative directions. This requires companies to adopt a responsive, empathetic, and analytics-based communication approach, as well as build emotional engagement with audiences through co-creation strategies with influencers and loyal communities. Brand image theory that emphasizes the importance of emotional perception, credibility, and quality is increasingly relevant when contextualized with the horizontal and organic influence of UGC. Therefore, sustainable brand strength in the digital era can only be achieved through synergy between a participatory approach, openness to consumer input, and adaptive capabilities in managing reputation in real-time, making UGC not just a communication tool, but a strategic asset in building brand trust and relevance amidst ever-changing digital dynamics..

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