



Sharing the love: Motivation and reward in brand-related
user-generated content creation for social media

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Abstract

This qualitative research explores the motivation and reward for creating unsponsored positive social media content about brands from the perspective of Content Creators and Social Media Managers. As the social media platforms' algorithms increasingly suppress brand-created content to force paid-for business models, organic user-generated content (UGC) is becoming more and more valuable in the social media ecosystem. Building on previous work which studied characteristics of brand-reshared UGC and the decision-making process of Social Media Managers when deciding whether to repost UGC, this study used a thematic analysis of depth interviews using NVivo software with Creators and Social Media Managers to explore their experiences and expectations around content creation.

For the Content Creators, the main motivations to create were intrinsic enjoyment, self-presentation, pro-social behaviour and social networking. The minimum expectation was acknowledgment by the brand – and the smaller the brand, the greater the expectation of a response. The Social Media Managers largely understood the etiquette of acknowledging UGC on an informal basis but did not always do so, and reported various levels of awareness, promotion and use of UGC.

The limited discussion of UGC stimulation in the practitioner literature leans heavily towards tactical rewards thereby misunderstanding the nuances of motivation. The gap between Content Creator expectation and community management practice, provides an opportunity to inform practice. A model is proposed *The Virtuous Cycle of Branded UGC* which describes an effective interaction between Content Creators (brand advocates/consumers), Brands (Social Media Managers) and Audiences. Supported by the findings of this study, the model is designed to illustrate how practitioners can develop a mutually beneficial relationship with content-creating members of their brand community online by considering (a) the motivation of consumers to create positive branded content on social media and (b) the effect the brand response has on their intention to create further Branded UGC (c) the scale of the organisation.

Keywords: Branded User Generated Content, UGC, eWoM, Community Management, Citizen Advertising, User Created Content, Online Brand Advocacy, Content Creators, Customer Motivation.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This thesis is about the communication between brands and consumers on social media, specifically the valuable phenomenon of consumers creating and posting positive content about brands.

Communication about brands has historically been in the hands of a few professionals – gatekeepers to production skills and equipment, and access to the mass media through broadcasting, print and other forms of entertainment. The arrival of web 2.0 and its democratising effects mean that today, citizens can freely apply their knowledge, intelligence, and creativity to the production of video, photographs, writing and much more, and make it available to the world via social platforms in an explosion of the Knowledge Economy (Brown and Duguid, 2000; Florida, 2022).

This communication revolution includes dialogue about brands, and social networking sites provide rich opportunities for brands to interact with audiences with a view to creating customer value (Hamilton, Kaltcheva and Rohm, 2016).

An increasingly prominent source of promotional content is that which is made by the social media users rather than the company. User-generated content (UGC) is the term for digital content which is created and posted voluntarily by the users of a social media platform or website – such as videos, pictures, testimonials, posts, tweets or blogs (Patel, 2016; Rajamma, Paswan and Spears, 2020). Far from ‘filling the space’ on brands’ social media feeds, UGC is the main attraction of emerging platforms. TikTok’s Community Commerce for example stating that “*entertaining creator-driven word-of-mouth marketing... blew up in 2021*” with users saying they trust others to be their real selves on TikTok, producing genuine product reviews (TikTok for Business, 2022).

User-generated content has been shown to be effective in engaging social media users, and brand-related UGC in particular, can be a powerful tool for building brand awareness and increasing reach (Agarwal, 2020). Social media algorithms are designed to promote content that generates high levels of engagement (Qin, 2020), garnering likes, shares, and comments. Branded UGC often performs well in these metrics as it encourages users to engage with the brand and can improve brand attitude and purchase intention (Mayrhofer *et al.*, 2020; Yu and Ko, 2021).

Using UGC is not only a cost-effective strategy, but the content may also be better, and is seen by audiences as more authentic and relatable (Harris, 2020). The creator may be better able to relate to/understand the audience and the platform, and they may also have the creative skills to make better content (Jeffries, 2020). However, Voorveld’s

(2019) study identified the need for research into the ethics of the hidden persuasive intent of social media marketing. It can be further argued that it is necessary to consider the ethics of stimulating/harnessing UGC for commercial gain when the audience may not understand whether a piece of communication is acting as an advertisement. That said, it is now common practice, and positive UGC also performs well in the social media and search algorithms (Agarwal, 2020). Furthermore, UGC has been found to generate higher response rates – for example it was found that Facebook ads containing UGC attracted a 300% higher click-through rate than traditional ads (SmartInsights, 2017) therefore commercially advantageous to the Social Media Manager.

Meanwhile the commonly used 90-9-1 principle, also known as the ‘1% rule,’ posits that 90% of the users in any online community are observers or ‘lurkers’ with 9% being occasional contributors, whereas the majority of content is made by just 1% of the participants – sometimes called ‘superusers’ (Nielsen, 2006; Carron-Arthur, Cunningham and Griffiths, 2014; Vuorio and Horne, 2023) meaning that Content Creators are rather rare and special. Therefore, the commercial importance of brand-related UGC indicates that Content Creators in a community are disproportionately valuable and should be a focus of managerial attention. Furthermore, understanding what motivates and fosters this content-creating behaviour is of operational value to Social Media Managers.

1.1 Statement of the research problem

This research forms part of a professional doctorate, and as such there is a requirement to inform practice and contribute to theory. The intention is to establish a thought leadership position in respect of branded user-generated content and provide practical guidance to Social Media Managers.

Understanding how to stimulate and motivate users into content production is central to the decisions about recruiting, retaining and rewarding Content Creators, so research findings in this area will contribute to knowledge and a commercial application in digital marketing practice. There is presently a need for more understanding of the social motivations for such behaviours (Naeem and Ozuem, 2020).

The conceptual model, Figure 1 below has been created by the Researcher to describe the supposed interrelationship of the Content Creator and the Brand as a ‘Virtuous Cycle of Branded UGC’ in order to help guide the research design and communicate ideas to others quickly and effectively (Moody, 2007).

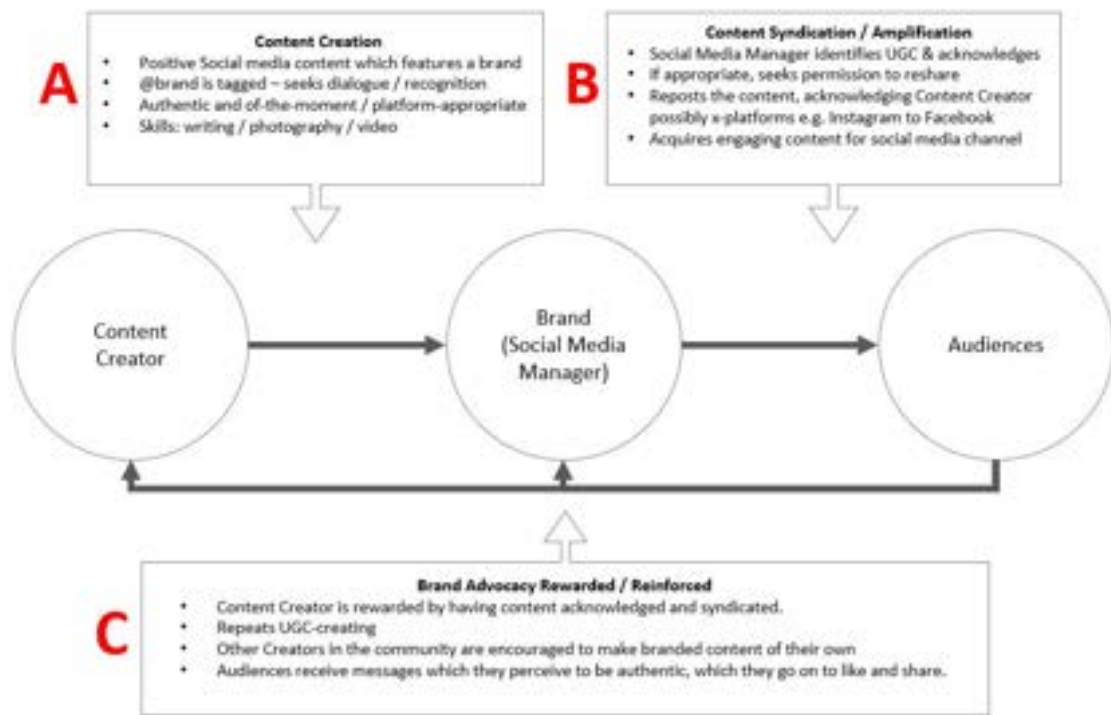


Figure 1 Proposed Virtuous Cycle of Branded UGC [author]

A – Content Creation

The Creator / Brand Advocate initiates the process by creating content and actively seeking recognition by the Brand by tagging them (associating their profile with the picture) or mentioning them (using the @companyname in the text element of the post). It is widely understood by social media users that doing this means that it will appear in the Brand's feed and come to the attention of the people managing the Brand social account (Kaemmerer, 2018; Dorney, 2021; Google, 2022; Meta, 2022). The post may have attributes of being positive in sentiment and skilfully made, timely and platform-appropriate and may also contain visual content such as a photograph or video, humour, or product information.

B – Content Syndication / Amplification

The Social Media Manager identifies items of UGC to reshare from the brand account. An earlier study by Somerfield, Mortimer and Evans (2018) found that in the selection process, preference was given to posts containing rich media – 'sight, sound or motion' (Muellner, 2014), and included a tag or mention. This finding is consistent with the guidance from The Digital Marketing Institute which advises sourcing brand advocates by 'narrowing down your customer base to those individuals who have interacted with your brand already' (Myers, 2019).

The post is reshared on the same platform or additional channels (e.g., an Instagram post reshared on Facebook) and the original Content Creator is acknowledged. This creates a benefit for the Brand of having authentic content created for free, with those audiences seeing it being positively influenced.

C – Brand Advocacy Rewarded / Reinforced

The Content Creator (CC) – who had already identified themselves as an advocate by their original action of creating the positive post, now finds their content has been acknowledged and reshared by the brand they like. The post reshare extends the reach of the post and will stimulate more interaction for the CC – likes, shares, follows, comments. The relative audience size of the brand and the CC will determine to some extent which party gains the more significant benefit; if the Content Creator has a large relevant following and the brand is small, then the brand gains a greater positive exposure. If the brand has a large audience and the CC a relatively small following, then the Content Creator will experience a lot of additional interaction as a result of being reshared.

This reinforces their positive disposition towards the Brand. The Content Creator, having had their creative efforts positively reinforced may go on to create further Branded UGC in relation to the same company and others. The Brand's online community will see the post and be able to ascertain that it was made by a consumer. This Audience may in turn be inspired to create content of their own.

The primary areas of focus for this study are areas A and C – the Content Creation and the subsequent feedback loop which should reinforce and reward the behaviour.

1.2 Research aims & objectives

This research concerns the implementation of Branded UGC as part of a content strategy for an organisation's social media feeds.

Research Aim: To understand the motivations for creating positive branded UGC, and the resulting consequences for the Content Creator, to inform good practice in social media community management.

Research Questions

RQ1 What motivates Content Creators to create Branded UGC, and what do they expect in return?

RQ2 How do Social Media Managers stimulate, use and react to Branded UGC?

Research Objectives:

- To identify Content Creators in a brand community
- To evaluate the extent of their branded UGC activity
- To explore the motivations underlying content creating behaviour
- To appraise the effects on the CC of having their UGC used by the brand
- To identify Social Media Manager practice in relation to UGC and how it is informed
- To make recommendations for the management of UGC and its creators in online brand communities

1.3 Research Design

The overall design of the thesis is indicated in Figure 2 which illustrates the structural elements of the study. This started with the conceptual framework, developed the key topics in the academic and practitioner literature which went on to inform the design of the primary data collection. The data was analysed and the literature revisited as themes emerged in an iterative process. Finally the author was in a position to propose a revised version of the conceptual model and make recommendations for best practice in branded UGC management.

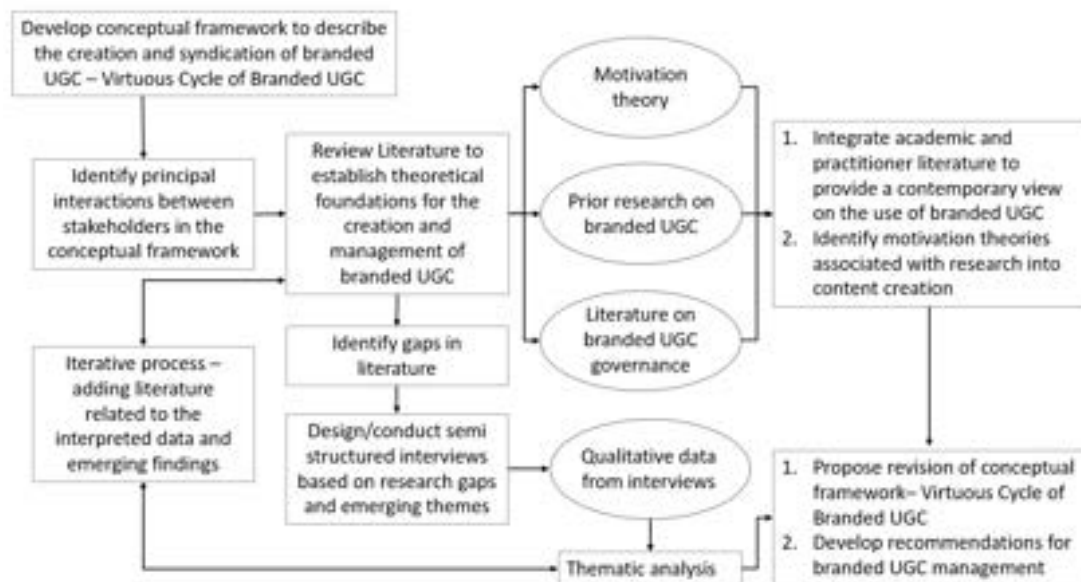


Figure 2 The Research Sequence [author].

1.4 Definition of terms

When members of the public express themselves online, the term 'user-generated content' (UGC) can be used to describe the phenomenon (Boyd and Ellison, 2018). User-generated content is closely linked to the arrival of Web 2.0 in that the online

environments allow consumers to engage with brands and one another in new ways (Jin and Ryu, 2020). UGC which refers to a brand or product can drive awareness and also have an influence on purchase decisions – so its role in promoting electronic word-of-mouth (eWoM) is pivotal (Ashley and Tuten, 2015; Kim and Johnson, 2016; Müller and Christandl, 2019; Roma and Aloini, 2019). Despite the commercial significance of branded UGC, research and terminology in this area is fragmented, with different terminology being used to refer to the same phenomenon, and conversely, the same terms meaning different things (Malthouse *et al.*, 2016). This led Rosario *et al.* to conduct a systematic review of the literature and propose a new definition for eWoM; “eWoM is consumer-generated, consumption-related communication that employs digital tools and is directed primarily to other consumers.” (Rosario, de Valck and Sotgiu, 2020). They argue that eWoM is a more specific and accurate term than UGC, as UGC does not necessarily relate to consumption. This is a helpful review which brings some much-needed clarity to the terminology, however an important consideration is that eWoM, while being consumption-related is at least as likely to be negative as positive. Indeed eWoM is a preferred route for consumers to express their displeasure with a brand publicly, with a widely held perception that their issue is more likely to be resolved if the complaint is on an open platform such as Twitter (Abney *et al.*, 2017).

Brand eWoM – a term not included in the review by Rosario *et al.* incorporates the notion of effort (on the part of the user) and endorsement, and is linked to brand identity-based behaviour (Lee and Youn, 2009; Belanche, Flavián and Pérez-Rueda, 2019) and is a viable alternative term. Consumer-generated advertising, as described in Berthon Pitt and Campbell’s paper (2008) is a related term contains comparable factors and will be revisited in the Literature Review. One main distinguishing feature of the consumer-generated adverts in the study is that although they fit the definition of Branded UGC, they further mimic the form of a tv advertisement. This makes them time consuming and complex to create and they are a less common feature of the social media landscape. Consumer-generated ads are also not always benign – some are subversive in nature and can actually undermine a brand message.

Figure 3 Comparison of BUGC in relation to UGC and eWoM on page 15 has been developed by the researcher to describe the interrelationship of the main definitions.

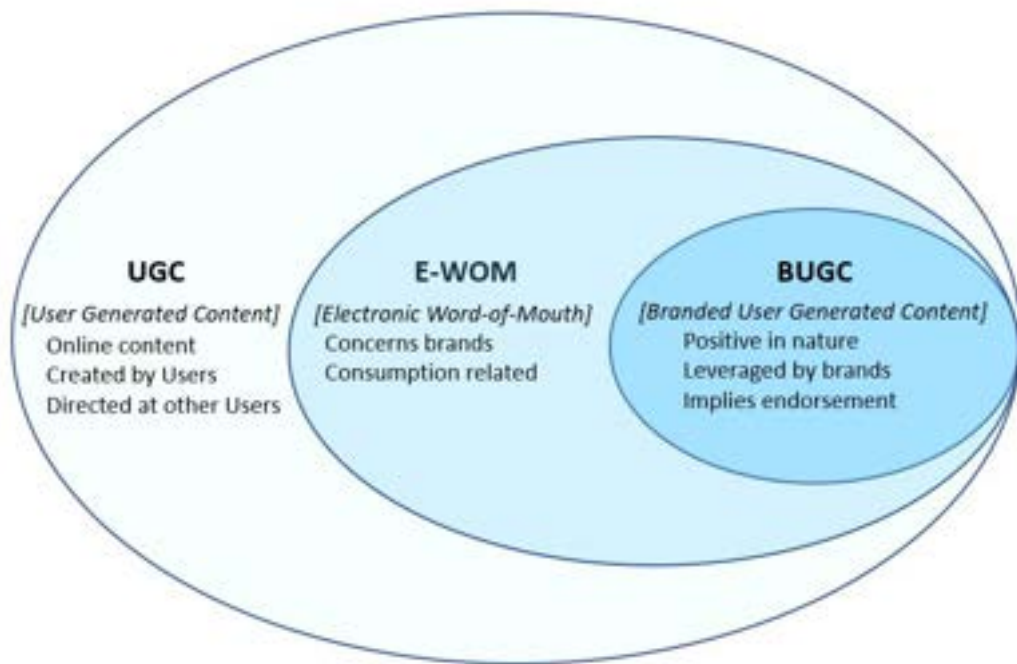


Figure 3 Comparison of BUGC in relation to UGC and eWoM [author]

As can be seen, Branded UGC is a subset of both E-WOM and UGC. The term Branded UGC clearly indicates the main features of the of the phenomenon being studied, both in the name and as described in the relevant literature and will be used for the purposes of this study. The literature review incorporates references to several of these terms due to the fragmented nomenclature in the field.

1.5 Structure of thesis

Chapter 1 has established background to the thesis in describing the business context and importance of the topic, as well as substantiating the terminology to be used. The research questions were outlined, and a conceptual framework introduced.

Chapter 2 consists of an exploration of the relevant literature with the principal areas being previous studies on Branded UGC, the motivation to create content and practitioner thought leadership on the management of UGC in online communities.

Chapter 3 presents the methodology for the study, including the interpretivist philosophical position of the researcher, the research strategy, the design of the semi-structured interviews and the procedural elements of the data collection. The analytical framework is delineated and the ethical provisions in the study are set out.

Chapter 4 begins by reviewing some of the relevant characteristics of the research participants and then presenting the key narratives from the participants organised by the emergent themes of the study.

Chapter 5 appraises how the additional knowledge emerging from the study relates to the current thinking on user-generated content.

Chapter 6 concludes the thesis and proposes a revised conceptual framework along with recommendations for practice, dissemination and further research.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature is organised around the main themes articulated in Figure 1 Proposed Virtuous Cycle of Branded UGC namely Content Creation, Content Syndication/Amplification, and Brand Advocacy Rewarded/Reinforced.

The literature review begins by contextualising branded UGC within the wider field of social media and marketing communications, and then provides a summary of recent scholarly work relating to branded UGC. The chapter goes on to explore the role and categories of user-creators in the development and dissemination of brand-related social media assets. As the phenomenon is of interest to the marketing industry as well as scholars, reputable practitioner resources are integrated with peer reviewed journal articles to ensure that both academic research and practical application are captured.

Six theories of motivation are then reviewed. Although the study of this area involves the intersectionality of information, management, people and technology (Wang and Zhang, 2012) as well as the field of psychology, this literature review focuses on the marketing field of literature and applied to the act of content creation.

Further, there is an examination of the created content and the use of extrinsic rewards or compensation as a means of stimulating behaviours in online communities.

This leads to an investigation of how the Social Media Managers may perceive the interplay between the creators and the brand, and their role in stimulating branded UGC. Here the source literature is extended to examine the main professional training bodies, authors in the field and the Trade Press for published guidance relating to the practice of management of branded UGC.

Then the feedback loop is investigated - what is understood about the effects of having content creation efforts picked up and amplified by a Brand – or indeed ignored. This is explored together with the ideas of horizontal communities and how the interrelationships of Content Creators may influence practice.

The chapter concludes with a summary of the main findings of the literature review as relate to the research question and the primary research.

2.1 Context - the rise of social media

Since the advent of Web 2.0 the internet has become a place where content can be created and shared by ordinary users rather than professionals and organisations (Stoeckl, Rohrmeier and Hess, 2007; Blank and Reisdorf, 2012; Gai, 2016; Advani and Gokhale, 2023). The organisations and professionals who historically performed a gatekeeping function over entertainment, broadcasting and publishing no longer hold sway (Florida, 2022). This in turn has had an impact on the advertising industry and it has been argued that the old distinctions between mass communication and individual communication are dissolving in ways that demand that traditional models of media management be reconsidered (Berthon, Pitt and Campbell, 2008). Indeed recent studies have found that since the pandemic there has been a significant shift towards social media to inform purchasing behaviour and decision-making processes (Mason, Narcum and Mason, 2021). An important distinction between social media and other media types is their networking function - the way in which brand-related content can be shared, endorsed or (at the highest level of engagement) created by users rather than marketing professionals (Okazaki and Taylor, 2013).

Social media has become one of the primary vehicles for the exchange of brand related information (Bigne *et al.*, 2021) and in particular, peer-to-peer dialogue or electronic word of mouth (eWoM) whereby customers can share their experiences and opinions (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004; Daugherty and Hoffman, 2013; Morrison, 2016; Das and Ahmed, 2020). This information or 'content' sharing can take many forms and have a variety of intentions – from warning other consumers of a bad customer experience to enhancement of online self-concept by association with a particular brand, or advocacy and the desire to communicate with, and promote a company or product. The act of creating content itself can be a fulfilling process showing great skill and innovation – such as the customer-inventor-generated narratives explored in the study by Wang *et al.* (2019)

Where this branded user-generated content is positive in nature, brands can seek to amplify it by sharing it in their own social channels. This confers "social proof" – the social influence tactic of using the actions and evidence of other consumers to influence the behaviour or prospective customers (Roethke *et al.*, 2020). A recent study found that all purchasing variables are positively associated with the use of UGC (Cheong and Mohammed-Baksh, 2021). In practical terms, this requires that marketers identify and reuse naturally-occurring content created by users and also invite or stimulate their audience to post content for them to reuse. This may take a variety of forms such as

photography, video, text and is usually on a social media platform such as Facebook, Instagram or Twitter (Vries and Gensler, 2017).

The marketing communications industry has advocated for branded UGC – for example an article in AdWeek the online trade journal for the advertising industry suggested “not only is UGC much cheaper to implement but it is also much more effective” (Merckel, 2017). A more negative aspect of UGC is that it can be used in some categories to circumvent the regulatory structures that protect consumers. An example of this is when alcohol brand Smirnoff encouraged consumers to post branded UGC on Instagram (Mayrhofer *et al.*, 2019). Consumer content would not be subject to the strict guidelines for alcohol advertising that Smirnoff themselves would have to adhere to under the Code of Advertising Practice in the UK (Advertising Standards Authority, 2010).

The relationship between the Brand and the Consumer can become symbiotic to the extent that the Consumer is co-creating marketing messages and even the products themselves. Consumer-generated ads have been described as “any publicly disseminated, consumer-generated advertising messages whose subject is a collectively recognized brand.” (Berthon, Pitt and Campbell, 2008; Campbell *et al.*, 2011). This collaboration can be formal or informal, and it can occur organically or be part of the marketing communication strategy. Hamilton *et al.* (2016) found that consumers who experienced satisfying and immersive social media interactions with a brand were more likely to become brand loyalists, brand ambassadors, co-creators and collaborators.

Even a decade ago, consumers expected and relished their role as active participants in brand conversations on Social Media (Hanna, Rohm and Crittenden, 2011). This social commerce is participatory in nature and involves the sharing of information about products and services by consumers, which in turn informs their buying decisions (Wang and Zhang, 2012; Okazaki and Taylor, 2013; Advani and Gokhale, 2023) and increases brand awareness (Langaro, Rita and de Fátima Salgueiro, 2015). More recently it was observed that engaging in brand-related conversations on Instagram had a positive effect on users’ intentions to engage with the platform itself (Davicik *et al.*, 2022).

Community Commerce is central to the proposition for some social media platforms – TikTok for example found that 78% of their audience agreed that ‘the best brands on TikTok are the ones that work together with users’ (TikTok for Business, 2022).

2.2 Branded UGC studies

Early studies into Branded UGC sought to first identify and describe the phenomenon but were already interested in why consumers were creating the content (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004). At this point the term eWoM was prevalent and the context was not so much social media platforms *per se*, but blogs, forums and online communities (Muñiz and Jensen Schau, 2007; Stoeckl, Rohrmeier and Hess, 2007; Daugherty, Eastin and Bright, 2008). With the relative lack of sophistication of social media applications and the limited capabilities of mobile phones and data networks at the time, the content creators needed to be relatively technically proficient, and the act of content creation was consequently quite niche. The Muñiz and Jensen Schau study is a good example of this, as it examines the vigilante marketing activities of a group of left-behind Apple Newton users (2007) who had been enthusiastic early-adopters of a piece of technology.

As the Social Media environment matured, tools for film and photography became more user-friendly and ubiquitous via the smartphone. Content creation proliferated and came within the technical capabilities of many more consumers - skill being a key determinant of content creation (Rosario, de Valck and Sotgiu, 2020). Contemporary studies considered what this meant for Brands, and sought to establish what effect branded UGC has on other consumers' behaviour, purchase intent and brand engagement (Kim and Johnson, 2016; Mayrhofer *et al.*, 2019; Davcik *et al.*, 2021; Park *et al.*, 2021)

More studies go on to examine the motivations of those who create content – more specifically positive Branded UGC (Halliday, 2016a; Naeem and Ozuem, 2020; Rosario, de Valck and Sotgiu, 2020; Advani and Gokhale, 2023) and the role of the Social Media Manager in encouraging selecting and amplifying the content is explored (Somerfield, Mortimer and Evans, 2018; Rosario, de Valck and Sotgiu, 2020). Finally, the contribution of UGC to the relationship between the consumer and the social platform on which it occurs is explored by Davcik *et al.* (2022).

These scholarly articles are captured chronologically with the main findings which are relevant to this study below *Table 1 Branded User-Generated Content Studies* along with the methodology used.

Table 1 Branded User-Generated Content Studies

Relevant Variable(s)	Relevant Finding(s)	Methodology	Study
Motivation to create eWoM	Main motivations are: • Altruism towards the company • Desire for interaction • Desire for economic incentives • Concern for other consumers • Potential to enhance self worth	Quantitative online survey.	Electronic word-of-mouth via consumer-opinion platforms: What motivates consumers to articulate themselves on the Internet? (Hennig-Thurau <i>et al.</i>, 2004)
Consumer skill in creating brand-relevant communications.	Meaning-making activities in response to a void created by lack of advertising from the brand (of a discontinued product).	Netnography. Observation & interview of an online brand community. Human Need Satisfaction Theory.	Vigilante marketing and consumer-created communications. (Muñiz and Jensen Schau, 2007)
Motivation to create different types of content (words vs. video) and the motivation NOT to create content.	Intrinsic motivations are responsible for UGC. Video creation = fun Blogging = dissemination of information.	Uses & Gratifications Model. Online questionnaire.	Motivations to produce user-generated content: differences between bloggers and videobloggers. (Stoeckl, Rohrmeier and Hess, 2007)

	Reasons not to create include opportunity costs and privacy issues.		
Motivation to create UGC	Ego defensive and Social functions of attitude best explain the act of UGC creation.	Exploratory using Functional Theory. Survey	Exploring consumer motivations for creating user-generated content. (Daugherty, Eastin and Bright, 2008)
Six dimensions of UGC	Proposes 6 dimensions of brand-related UGC - Brand centrality - Marketer-directed communication - Factually informative about the brand - Response to online marketer action - Brand sentiment Social media marketing strategy	Content analysis Inductive analysis	How does brand-related user-generated content differ across YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter? (Smith, Fischer and Yongjian, 2012)

Effects of UGC on consumer behaviour	Branded UGC activated consumers' emotional and cognitive responses. Positive branded UGC provokes eWoM behaviour, brand engagement and potential sales.	Stimulus – Organism - Response response model. Experiment using stimulus material and online self-administered questionnaire.	Power of consumers using social media: Examining the influences of brand-related user-generated content on Facebook. (Kim and Johnson, 2016)
Motivations of creating and consuming Branded UGC	Peoples' interactions in UGC creation go beyond a consumer paradigm and are part of personal formation/transformation.	Service Dominant Logic & Consumer Culture Theory. Diaries kept by 100 students of web interactions.	User-generated content about brands: Understanding its creators and consumers. (Halliday, 2016a)
Characteristics of Branded UGC which SMMs select for sharing.	SMMs favour content which is image-led. Companies with tangible offerings attract more Branded UGC than those with intangible products/services.	Mixed method – semi-structured interviews and observational analysis of Twitter feeds.	The relevance of images in user-generated content: A mixed method study of when, and why, major brands retweet. (Somerfield, Mortimer and Evans, 2018)
Persuasion qualities of Branded UGC	UGC resulted in higher purchase intention as it did not trigger persuasion knowledge. Recommended advertising disclaimers on UGC.	Experiment using disclosed advertisements vs. UGC.	User-generated content presenting brands on social media increases young adults' purchase intention. (Mayrhofer <i>et al.</i> , 2019)
Consumer perspective:	Research gaps:	Application of Motivation –	Conceptualizing the electronic word-of-mouth

eWoM creation, eWoM exposure, eWoM evaluation. Marketing Manager perspective: eWoM management and amplification.	• Incentivisation of eWoM / possible overlap with loyalty programmes. • Explore eWoM creators' abilities. • Privacy issues. • How helpful is unsolicited altruistic eWoM. • Which communities value eWoM the most.	Opportunity – Ability framework. Content analysis of literature.	process: What we know and need to know about eWoM creation, exposure, and evaluation. (Rosario, de Valck and Sotgiu, 2020)
Social media users' interaction with branded UGC creates social brand engagement.	Social responsibility, sharing experience, staying connected and reward sharing are major motivating factors. Proposes UGC SBE Model.	Semi-structured interviews / thematic analysis.	Developing UGC social brand engagement model: Insights from diverse consumers (Naeem and Ozuem, 2020)
Persuasiveness of UGC	Micro-influencers are more authentic and influential than Mega-influencers but only when the consumption type is hedonic (rather than utilitarian).	Experiments.	David and Goliath: When and why micro-influencers are more persuasive than mega-influencers (Park <i>et al.</i> , 2021)
Engagement with non-sponsored Branded UGC, UGC perceived value	Significant positive effects of UGC on Instagram users' intention to engage with the platform	Partial least squares variance based structural equation modelling	Non-sponsored brand-related user-generated content: effects and mechanisms of consumer engagement

			(Davicik <i>et al.</i> , 2022)
MOE approach to study content co-creation	Multiple stakeholders have different perspectives during co-creation.	Depth interviews & observations, market-oriented ethnography Exploratory Inductive approach, interpretive paradigm.	A proposed framework of Market-Oriented Ethnography (MOE) approach to study co-creation of content through product storytelling (Bansal, Spais and Jain, 2022)
Influence of, and motivation to create Branded UGC	Positive influence nudges the consumer towards purchase. Self-actualisation and monetary reward are the main motivators to create UGC	Quant- questionnaire	Influence of brand-related user generated content (UGC) and brand engagement on Instagram (Advani and Gokhale, 2023)

2.3 The Content Creators

Many social media users create content however the extent of their brand-related interaction varies from person to person. A scale of engagement was identified in Schivinski *et al*'s (2016) study of brand-related activities on social media:

Level 1 – following a brand on social media

Level 2 – watching brand-related videos, pictures and images

Level 3 – commenting on brand-related posts

Level 4 – writing brand-related content

The general principles here are consistent with previous concepts such as Nielsen's 90-9-1 rule which holds that in a social media community 90% of people watch or 'lurk', 9% like or comment, 1% create (Nielsen, 2006), and an earlier study which segmented social media engagement in to 3 categories of *consuming*, *participating* and finally *producing* brand-related media (Shao, 2009a).

The common thread between these ideas is that a small but highly engaged segment of the online community creates a disproportionately large amount of the content.

"We estimate that over 50 million people around the world consider themselves creators, despite the creator economy only being born a decade ago" said Alex Frolov, CEO of HypeAuditor in a recent interview with The Drum (2021a). Top influencers can command fees of over £1M to sponsor products on their social media platforms (The Guardian, 2021). At the other end of the scale Nano-influencers who are increasingly preferred by marketers (Park *et al.*, 2021) can reach smaller audiences but often in a more authentic way.

Being a Content Creator is now a legitimate career option, and the digital marketing industry has seen a proliferation of influencer talent agencies and other associated businesses (Campbell and Grimm, 2018; Campbell and Farrell, 2020). Other branded UGC creators wouldn't consider themselves Influencers at all and would better be described as Brand Advocates (Digital Marketing Institute, 2018; SproutSocial.com, 2022). TikTok argue although the definition of a 'creator' is fluid, by democratising creativity they have created an authentic and genuine atmosphere in which brands can form relationships with their customers (2022).

Voorveld (2019) posited that Source Characteristics are an important factor in the study of social media as UGC can be influential due to the way it can drive endorsement through the creator's network. Furthermore, heuristic cues – such as supportive ratings and comments - are used by the

viewer to make a judgement on the credibility of the information source (Gugerty and Link, 2020; Bigne *et al.*, 2021).

Some Content Creators are using the term 'UGC' as part of their terminology as they solicit work, although they are neither brand advocates, genuine 'users' nor influencers – see Figure 4 Extract from UGC Creator Rate Card.

The graphic is a UGC Creator Rate Card with a light beige background. It features a woman in a striped shirt on the left, a circular inset showing her in profile, and a green leafy branch on the right. The text 'UGC CONTENT CREATOR' is arched over the woman's head. The main title 'USER - GENERATED CONTENT CREATOR' is in large, bold, white letters. Below it, a torn paper effect reveals the pricing section. The pricing section is titled 'PRICING' in large green letters, with a note '*rates subject to change' below it. It lists 'UGC VIDEO CONTENT' and 'PRODUCT + LIFESTYLE PHOTOGRAPHY' with their respective prices. A bundle option is also listed at the bottom.

UGC CONTENT CREATOR

USER - GENERATED
CONTENT
CREATOR

GET AHEAD START ON YOUR COMPETITORS →

PRICING
*rates subject to change

UGC VIDEO CONTENT

1 UGC Video (15-30sec)	£125
3 UGC Videos (15-30sec)	£325
5 UGC Videos (15-30sec)	£525
7 UGC Videos (15-30sec)	£725

PRODUCT + LIFESTYLE PHOTOGRAPHY

5 Photos	£100
15 Photos	£250

Bundle: 15 Photos and 5 UGC Videos (15-30sec) £700

*Please enquire for other bundle options + monthly retainer rates

Figure 4 Extract from UGC Creator Rate Card

Social Media platforms increasingly understand the importance and commercial value of their Content Creator communities and have built functionality which facilitates the transition towards branded UGC creation – for example TikTok Creator Marketplace which helps to match creators to brands and claims to “*foster and champion creator communities and community driven brand opportunities*” (TikTok for Business, 2022)

Occurring between the marketing function and the private consumer, the landscape of UGC would not be complete without discussion of Influencers. Typified by their aspirational, well produced content these creators can reach audiences in the millions on a daily basis and often endorse brands either implicitly or explicitly (Jin and Ryu, 2020). Some research has found that UGC from Influencers is more influential (Wu and Atkin, 2017) whereas other studies found that content created by close friends was more trusted (Jyh-Shen Chiou, Cheng-Chieh Hsiao; and Fang-Yi, 2014; Boerman and Kruikemeier, 2016). The impact of Consumer-creators who are neither famous nor known to the recipient is less well understood and these are the subjects of this study.

Influencers, sometimes referred to as Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) especially in China (Hanlon, 2022) are relevant to the discussion of Branded UGC because they are on a spectrum from Nano-Influencers through to Celebrity Influencers – as their audience grows, so does the opportunity for commercial gain as described in Figure 5 below.

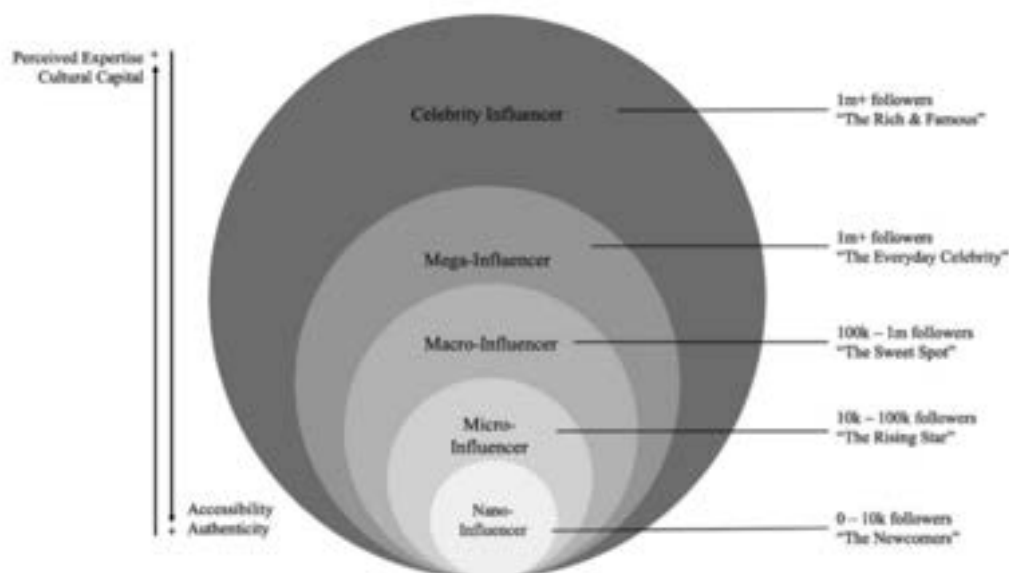


Figure 5 Types of social media influencers (Campbell and Farrell, 2020)

The level below Nano-Influencer is occupied by Content Creators who are regular Users – described in Figure 6 as Brand Advocates. This will be significant in this study both from a point of view of sample (identifying those who are creating branded content but not paid for doing so), and in the motivation for content creation.



Figure 6 Pyramid of Influence (Starnage, 2021)

In Figure 7 we see influencers described by their main area of activity (citizen journalist / KOL / Artist cross referenced with their audience size and the extent to which it is their job or their hobby .

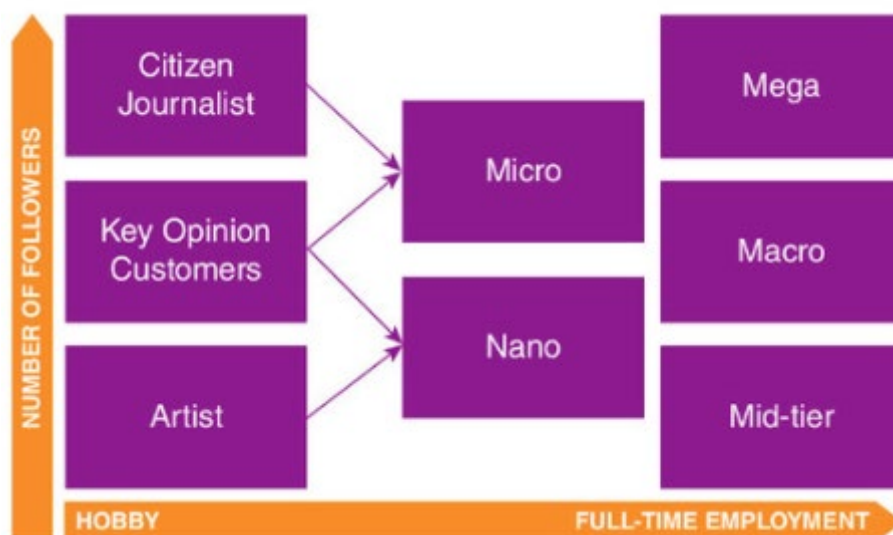


Figure 7 Types of Influencers (Hanlon, 2022)

For the marketer, there is some guidance on how to operationalise the use of Influencers – for example from Trade Bodies such as the Internet Advertising Bureau (Jeffries, 2020) and the Digital Marketing Institute (Digital Marketing Institute, 2021). In Figure 8 the motivation of Brand Advocates is touched upon with the recommendation of ‘VIP Treatment’ as a reward mechanism, however the list of suggestions is one-dimensional, focusing on product give-aways, early access, discounts and experience boxes.

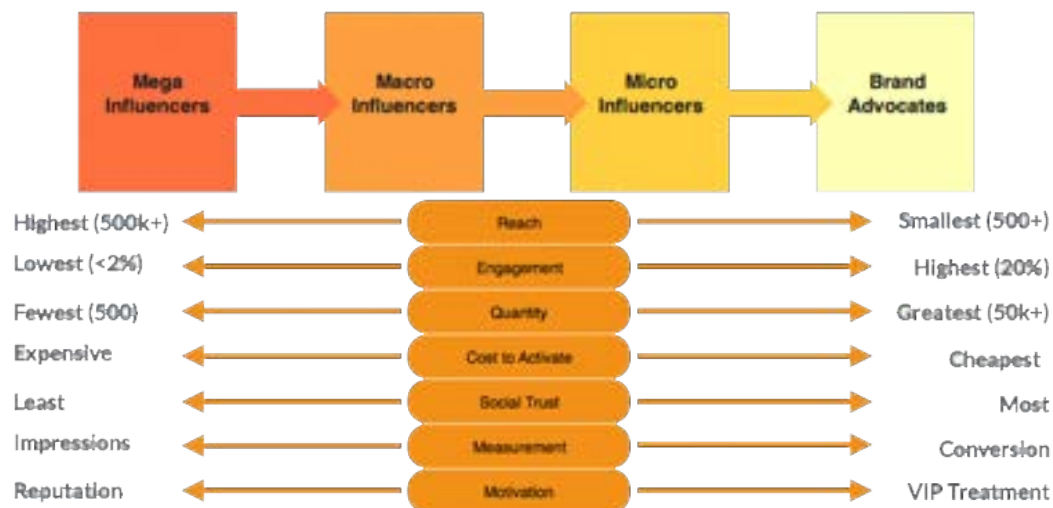


Figure 8 The Spectrum of Influencers (Starnage, 2021)

The Advertising Standards Authority defines ‘celebrity’ Content Creators as those with a following of over 30K (Glenday, 2019; Advertising Standards Authority, 2022) for the purposes of enforcing advertising regulations.

There is no distinction between different types of motivation in any of these models – they assume that all brand advocates are essentially motivated by personal interest, to gain rewards. It is therefore a simplistic perspective, and there is no discussion on how to stimulate organically occurring content.

2.4 Motivation to create content

It is widely agreed that motivation lies at the heart of all decision-making processes, influencing both the nature and the intensity of behaviour (Ross and Bettman, 1979; Kim, 2021). It is well established in the literature that a variety of motivations affect the decision to create social media content (Kayat, 2002; Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004; Milne and Ewing, 2004; Kreis and Gottschalk, 2017; Jepson and Ryan, 2018). For example Stoeckl, Rohrmeier and Hess (2007) reviewed 10 studies into motivation and found that the three most often identified drivers for content creation of weblogs

were: documentation, fun/entertainment and self expression, whereas for participation in online communities, the key drivers were the exchange of useful information and social aspects.

Consumers must have a compelling motivation to engage with brands on social media (Weinberg *et al.*, 2013) and even more so to participate in the act of creating positive content on that platform which is time-consuming.

This section of the literature review explores six of the principal motivational theories prevalent in the UGC-related marketing literature and goes on to suggest an additional motivating factor which is very specific to the act of content creation by a would-be Influencer.

2.4.1 Functional theory

The motivation to create user-generated content was investigated in an exploratory study by Daugherty, Estin and Bright which applied Katz (1960) Functional Theory (2008). This seminal work is widely recognised as essential to understanding the complexities of motivation and attitude which underpin behaviour, and places individuals into one of four categories: utilitarian, knowledge, ego-defensive, and value-expressive functions. Researchers developed this theory to propose additional categories – most importantly Smith’s 1973 extension to the value-expressive type (Smith 1973, cited in Chinoy, 1975; Dwyer *et al.*, 2013) the social function.

Daugherty *et al* (2008) applied these categories to UGC creation as follows:

Utilitarian Functional Type: This personality is primarily motivated by self-interest, to either gain rewards or escape punishment. In UGC terms this means creating content to gain some personal incentive.

Knowledge Functional Type: Motivated by the need to understand experiences by gaining information and thereby feeling an intrinsic wisdom. This personality produces UGC to help them understand their world, the topic and themselves.

Ego-defensive Functional Type: This represents motivation to defend against internal insecurities and external threats – so UGC is created to minimise their own self doubts, feel belonging and reduce guilt.

Value-expressive Functional Type: Here UGC creators gain self-esteem from creating content which they feel has value to the community they are part of. It validates them and the things they feel are important in the world.

Social Function Type: This describes the motivations which relate to relationships with others – seeking out interactions with friends and behaving in ways which are received favourably by

important others and their reference groups. This is particularly significant for UCG as it encapsulates the concepts of sharing and interacting socially in an online community.

2.4.2 Human need satisfaction

Berthon, Pitt and Campbell (2008) built on the work of Muñiz and Schau (2007) and Dahl and Moreau (2007) when they explored the phenomenon of *consumer-created ads* in their exploratory study. The earlier studies had explored how customers had been drawn to undertake creative tasks, and Berthon et al. (2008) then explored a series of cases of consumer-generated advertising, and identified three main motivating factors which were driving the creators:

- *Intrinsic Enjoyment* – for the sake of creation – usually by people who are technically skilled, creative or both. The act of creating is the primary motivation.
- *Self-Promotion* – Creation with the aim of attracting attention to, or promoting him or herself to the company or some other entity which might view the content. Here the effect is the main goal.
- *Perception Change* – to alter opinion, to have a specific effect on a target audience – here the effect is the main motivation.

It was identified that these three factors are not mutually exclusive in fact all three can be present simultaneously.

A later study used this framework to examine feedback to Consumer-Generated Ads and was able to use it to identify examples of each type of motivation:

- *Intrinsic Enjoyment*: The iPod Dance – in which a young Brazilian posted an unfinished but creative video featuring iPods on YouTube which went viral.
- *Self-Promotion*: iPhone New York capitalised on the buzz around the launch of a new iPhone creating a video which ostensibly promoted the phone's features but also showcased the maker's contact details.
- *Perception Change*: The Poor Bastard David's "Starbuck's Ad" a video which juxtaposed the cost of a drink at Starbucks with the cost to save a child in a refugee camp.

(Campbell *et al.*, 2011).

Human need satisfaction was applied to the social media context in a study which was primarily concerned with examining the way in which the features and design of different social media platforms appealed to differing needs of the users – for example distinguishing between Instagram and YouTube which focused on creative outlet, and Twitter and Weibo appealing primarily to the need to build relationships (Zhu and Chen, 2015). This may have been true in 2015 however

increasingly platforms are less unique in their features. Whereas TikTok was for short clips and YouTube was for long-form video, Instagram for photos and Twitter for short textual posts this is no longer the case (Tolcheva, 2022). Notwithstanding this, the human need classifications, adapted and applied to social media participation are helpful as summarised in Figure 9 Reasons users engage in social media (Zhu and Chen, 2015)Figure 9 below.

	Relationship	Self-media	Creative outlet	Collaboration
Poster	Self-presentation, Develop relationship	Have an impact, Promote one's self	Hobby sharing, Showcase of creativity	Help others establish reputation/fame
Follower	Develop relationship	Fans of celebrities, Update news and information	Aesthetic content, Entertainment	Learn new things, Find answers/help

Figure 9 Reasons users engage in social media (Zhu and Chen, 2015)

2.4.3 Uses and gratifications theory

While not all users of a social media platform create branded UGC, most users who create branded UGC do so on a social media platform, bringing this research into the scope of the literature review. Xu *et al.* conducted a study into what makes people use social media platforms applying the *Uses and Gratifications* theory (UGT) from the field of communications. They also applied *Utilitarian and Hedonic Gratifications* and *Social Presence* Theories and considered social media use as a *response to loneliness* in their hypotheses (2012). In a subsequent study by Rohm Kaltcheva and Milne (2013). it was found that both utilitarian and hedonistic outcomes are sought when consumers interact with brands in social media.

UGT has typically been used in the communications industry to understand what people do with media (Menon, 2022). Applied to Social media, it determines that platforms accommodate their users' needs in different ways and people are active users of media, making their selections depending on what gratifications they seek (Wibowo, 2022). Examples of gratifications are affection, convenience, information seeking, sociability and self-expression.

An application of UGT to the context of UGC creator motivation can be found in the study by Lee *et al.* (2014) where the elements of uses and gratifications theory were developed specifically for the context of UGC as follows:

- Social Network Motive - to communicate with others
- Learning Motive – to obtain feedback and comments
- Hedonic Motive – to please others with their UGC

Of the theories applied to the study, the Uses and Gratifications actions contained the behaviours most closely associated with content creation such as self-expression and sociability. It suggests that users select media for intentional communication purposes and their behaviours are goal-directed furthermore they are aware of their motives for selecting a particular type of medium rather than alternatives.

2.4.4 Stimulus-organism-response model

The Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model originates from the field of environmental psychology has been widely used in the field of marketing to understand the reasons behind human behaviour (Buckley, 1991). In a response to Pavlov's classic Stimulation-Response theory, the S-O-R model proposes that the Stimulus (environment) acts upon the Organism (customer) to create a Response. The addition of the 'Organism' acknowledges that not all people are the same and that things like past experiences and personality traits will act as mediating factors on the response.

Zhang *et al.* (2014a) applied the model to explore the motivation to engage in social commerce and the model had been used extensively to examine online behaviours (Gatautis *et al.*, 2016; Zhu, Kowatthanakul and Satanasavapak, 2020). Kim and Johnson (2016) similarly applied the S-O-R model to their investigation into brand-related UGC on Facebook finding that the stimulus of seeing positive UGC created an emotional and cognitive response and exerted a significant positive influence on the brand relationship.

2.4.5 Motivation opportunity ability framework

In their exploration of eWoM, Rosario *et al* use the Motivation, Opportunity, Ability (MOA) framework as an organising device, arguing that it has been successfully used to analyse both the sending and the receiving dimensions of the information exchange (Rosario, de Valck and Sotgiu, 2020).

The MOA model was first introduced as a means to understand information processing in the context of advertising (Batra and Ray, 1986; MacInnis and Jaworski, 1989). Literature in the UGC field has subsequently extended this concept of information processing to include *participation* in eWoM (Lee and Youn, 2009; Ashley and Tuten, 2015).

MOA works on the principle that the degree to which people process information (or participate in UGC) is based on:

- Motivation – goal-directed arousal such as anticipated reward ... or desire or willingness to participate
- Opportunity – access to technology or time

- Ability – do the users have personal attributes such as – skill, literacy, social resources, aesthetic sensibilities.

2.4.6 UGC social brand engagement model

With its foundations in social influence theory and building on the earlier work of Ramirez *et al.* (2018) Naeem and Ozuem (2020) proposed a UGC Social Brand Engagement model (Figure 10) to describe the identification and internalisation types of social influence in UGC. Based on a qualitative study in the luxury fashion sector this model describes in detail the social influences on the UGC creator and attempts to capture the main themes arising from their research and is the most recent and UGC-specific of the models discussed here.

This model reflects a nuanced and multidimensional landscape of influences and actions which goes some way to describing the complexity of what is happening however the brand is absent. To make it possible to replicate and build on this study, the model would benefit from some simplification – for example the central sections could be reduced to make the narrative flow around the model more explicit.

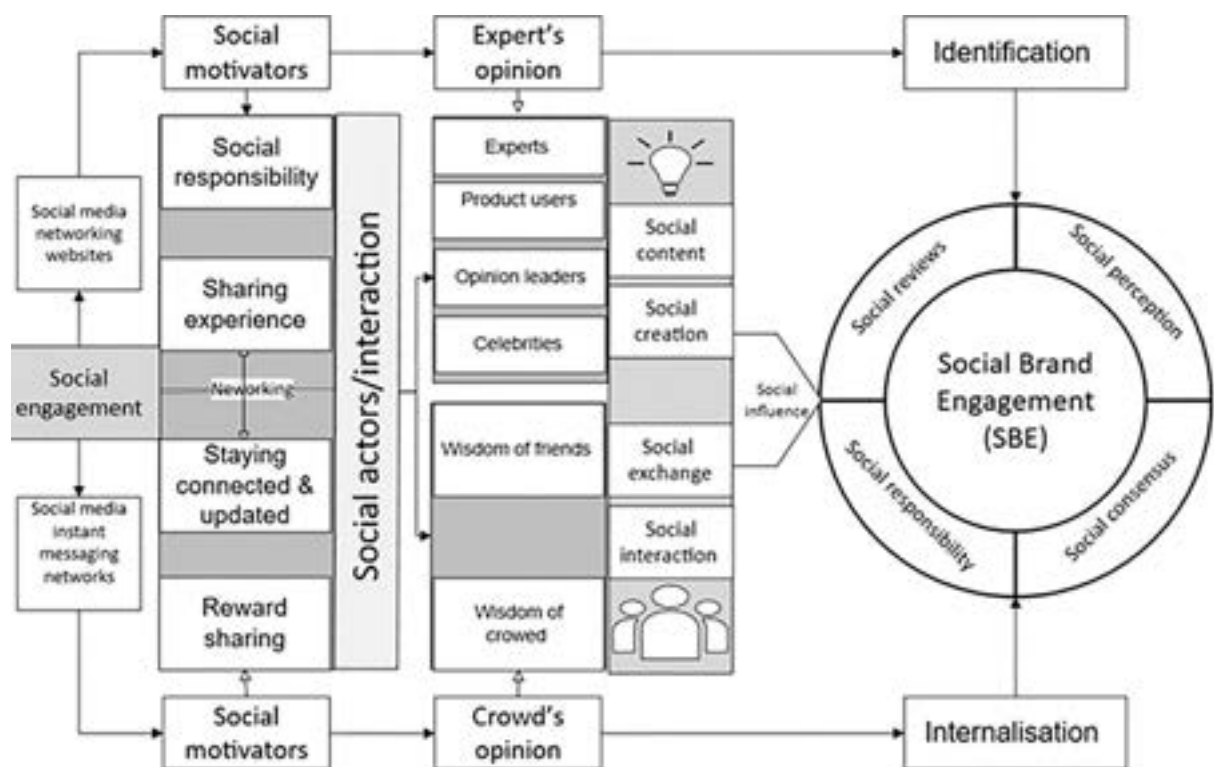


Figure 10 UGC social brand engagement model

2.4.7 Early-stage influencers

While this is not a theory of motivation in keeping with the other content here, this seems the best place to discuss a motivating factor which may be relevant in some cases.

As discussed in section 2.3 on page 26, different levels of Influencer are generally discussed on a spectrum which relates to audience size. The fame, earning power and commercial opportunities of Influencers are dictated by the quantity and quality of the follower base they attract.

At the top end, Influencers are modern-day celebrities, and even at more modest levels this has become a viable career and part of the social media ecosystem. TikTok's creator communities for example have a vital role in creating content which is organic and relatable (TikTok for Business, 2022). According to HypeAuditor's Influencer Income Survey only 4% of Influencers make enough money from their social media activities to live on however 26% hope to do so in the future (HypeAuditor cited in The Drum, 2021a).

Of the Influencers who are making money from their accounts it was reported that 40% of the income came from brand promotions (Baklanov, 2021). Early stage Users/Micro-Influencers may pursue branded content-creating activity as they are building their platforms and seeking/mimicking commercial endorsement behaviour as a precursor to becoming an Influencer. This 'need' or 'utility' could be covered in one of the other motivation models however it is quite specific to the branded UGC context so warranted discussion here.

It is hypothesised that early-career Influencers are less likely to behave like brand ambassadors and more likely to be serial Content Creators, prolific in their production of branded UGC but not necessarily loyal or exclusive to one brand.

2.4.8 Motivation theories applied to UGC

Table 2 summarises these six motivational theories and the UGC-related studies where they have been applied, as well as the main findings

Table 2 Motivation Theories applied to UGC-related studies

Theory	Study	Dimensions / Findings
Functional Theory	Exploring Consumer Motivations for Creating User-Generated Content. (Daugherty, Eastin and Bright, 2008)	Ego-defensive and Social functions of attitude are most related to UGC creation.
Human Need Satisfaction Framework	Ad Lib: When Customers Create the Ad. (Berthon, Pitt and Campbell, 2008)	Intrinsic Enjoyment, Self-promotion and Change Perception are the main motivations for Customer Created Ads. Propose brand responses.
Uses and Gratifications Theory	It is not for fun: An examination of social network site usage. (Xu <i>et al.</i> , 2012) New members' online socialization in online communities: The effects of content quality and feedback on new members' content-sharing intentions. (Lee, Park and Han, 2014) Social media addiction: What is the role of content in YouTube? (Balakrishnan and Griffiths, 2017)	Platforms accommodate their users' needs in different ways and people are active users of media, making their selections depending what gratifications they seek. Feedback on content can affect future intention to participate in UGC creation Both viewing and creating activities are associated with psychological and interpersonal satisfaction.

Stimulus-Organism-Response Model	What motivates customers to participate in social commerce? The impact of technological environments and virtual customer experiences. (Zhang <i>et al.</i>, 2014a)	Stimulus (environment) acts upon the Organism (customer) to create a Response.
Motivation Opportunity Ability Framework	Conceptualizing the electronic word-of-mouth process: What we know and need to know about eWoM creation, exposure, and evaluation. (Rosario, de Valck and Sotgiu, 2020)	Motivation – goal-directed arousal such as anticipated reward ... or desire or willingness to participate Opportunity – access to tech or time Ability – do the users have personal attributes such as – skill, literacy, social resources, aesthetic sensibilities.
UGC Social Brand Engagement Model	Developing UGC social brand engagement model: Insights from diverse consumers. (Naeem and Ozuem, 2020)	Social responsibility, sharing experience, staying connected and reward sharing are major motivating factors.

2.5 Dimensions of skill and effort

The 'M-O-A' Framework in particular (see page 34) considers that opportunity and ability are required for the 'motivation' to be enacted into behaviour. The assets created through branded UGC vary widely in form, function, complexity and utility to the brand, and thereby require varying levels of commitment and skill.

At the lowest level, any kind of text, data or action would be considered UGC (Santos, 2022), for example a single-sentence written product review on a shopping site would be considered content. This constitutes a low level of skill and effort on the part of the creator. At the other end of the scale high levels of expertise, effort and utility can be found in UGC as demonstrated in the #whitecupchallenge whereby Starbucks invited users to create a design for a reusable coffee cup via a contest (*Figure 11*) which then went in to commercial production – which makes this an example of co-creation as well as UGC (Bughin, 2014).



Figure 11 Starbucks #WhiteCupChallenge (Patel, 2016)

On YouTube, common product-focused UGC content takes the form of “reviews, reportage, unboxing, demonstration, advertisement and vlog commentaries” (Rajamma, Paswan and Spears, 2020)

Rich media and imagery has the most utility for the Social Media manager (McCoy, 2020) and is therefore the most sought-after when selecting UGC for syndication (Somerfield, Mortimer and Evans, 2018). Video is particularly effective, prompting 95% absorption of the information compared to just 10% when reading text (Francis, 2021)

2.6 Solicitation & incentivisation

Branded UGC can occur spontaneously, coming to the attention of the brand either via user tags or mentions, or found via social listening activities. Indeed it can occur without the Brand being aware at all. Increasingly, as marketers appreciate the value of UGC, it can be solicited via a call or promotion (Kim and Lee, 2017).

In some communities the collection of branded UGC has been productised. For example, in the case of The Ambassador Platform, a marketing solution for the Higher Education sector has a built-in UGC functionality which allows the Community Manager to put out a 'call' for content to Student Ambassadors registered on the programme who then upload their content for the organisation to repurpose on their social media platforms (The Ambassador Platform, 2022) see Figure 12.

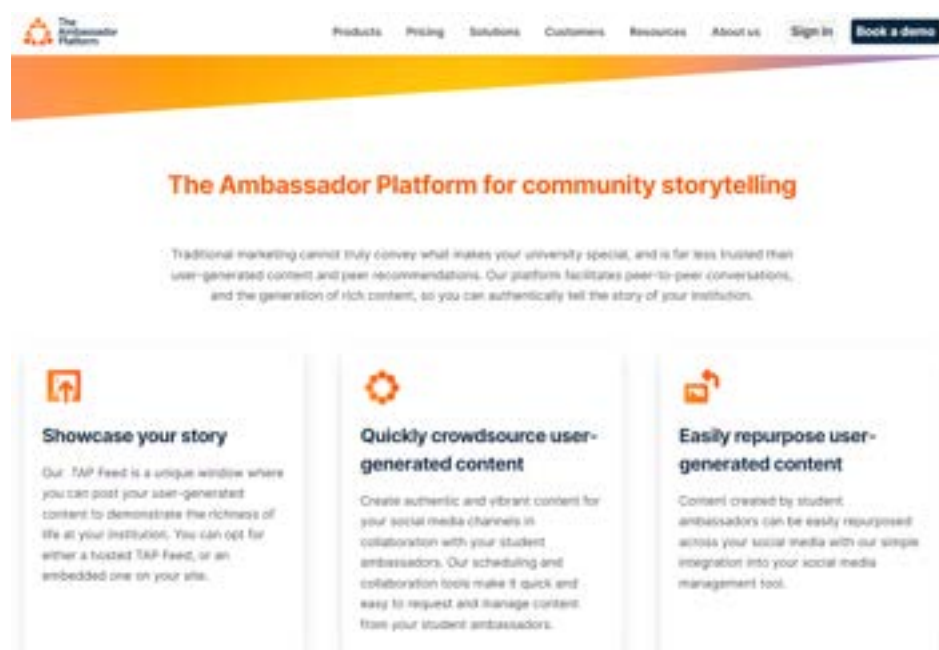


Figure 12 The Ambassador Platform - Solutions for UGC Web Page

Some calls for UGC are incentivised, however it is not always necessary or indeed desirable. In their study of eWoM incentivised e-referrals, Ahrens *et al.* found that higher rewards led to a rise in referrals (2013) however subsequent studies on voluntary online contributions found that monetary rewards had the effect of suppressing intrinsic motivation; the effect of enjoyment in helping others

was undermined by rewards and led to lower quality contributions (Zhao, Detlor and Connelly, 2016; Qiao *et al.*, 2021). To mitigate this, intervention strategies of goal-setting and challenge-seeking were proposed (Qiao *et al.*, 2021). A differential effect was revealed in the study by Zhao *et al.* in that *extrinsic rewards* had a negative effect on members of a community who were already engaged and active, whereas inactive members were positively stimulated to engage in helping (2016). Other studies found that material reward had a positive short-term effect but no long-term effect on knowledge sharing in an online community (Zhan *et al.*, 2021) whereas another study found almost the opposite, that after an initial financial incentive, desirable knowledge sharing behaviour ‘spilled over’ into non-incentivised activity (Kuang *et al.*, 2019). Kaplan and Haenlein argued that UGC and customer-to-customer communication is usually ‘*created outside of professional routines and practices*’ (2010). Not only are the findings in these studies somewhat conflicting, but none of these studies were applied to the phenomenon of branded UGC creation, but rather other types of voluntary online community actions. Kim and Lee investigated the reaction to organic versus sponsored brand-related UGC in their study, but not the motivation to create it. (2017) which demonstrates a gap in the literature.

2.7 Branded UGC practice – grey literature

This thesis is concerned with the Social Media Manager’s interaction with branded UGC as well as the social media user’s motivation to create it. Previous research found that Social Media Managers will adopt their own approaches to interacting with Content Creators, in efforts to maximise the effectiveness of their social channels while taking advantage of UGC as a resource-efficient means of gathering social media content. Based on their learning, experience and perceived best practice they advance their own strategies, policy and belief systems for managing UGC (Somerfield, Mortimer and Evans, 2018).

This part of the literature review considers the information which is freely available to the practitioner on the topic in the grey literature. A widely adopted definition states “grey literature represents any recorded, referable and sustainable data or information resource of current or future value, made publicly available without a traditional peer-review process” (Savić, 2019). The principal problem with grey literature is establishing its credibility (Gul *et al.*, 2020) – which is a challenge an SMM would also face. This review will cover ‘1st tier grey literature’ which is highly controlled/highly credible – including books, magazines, government reports and white papers (Gul *et al.*, 2020).

Here we explore the guidance on applied use of branded UGC through the lens of the main categories of digital marketing thought leadership: Professional bodies, Textbooks and the Trade Press.

2.7.1 Professional bodies on UGC

Content from four professional bodies was reviewed for UGC-related guidance. These were The Digital Marketing Institute (DMI), Chartered Institute of Marketing (CIM), The Content Marketing Institute (CMI) and The Content Marketing Association (CMA).

The Digital Marketing Institute makes brief mention of UGC in the Content Marketing and Social Media Marketing modules of the Digital Marketing Professional Certificate, recommending brand-related Giveaways to stimulate UGC (Myers, 2019) suggesting GoPro as an exponent of the practice.

Figure 13 shows the area of the GoPro website which invites users to upload their content, including an incentive 'Get selected and score cash, gear and global exposure' (GoPro.com, 2022).

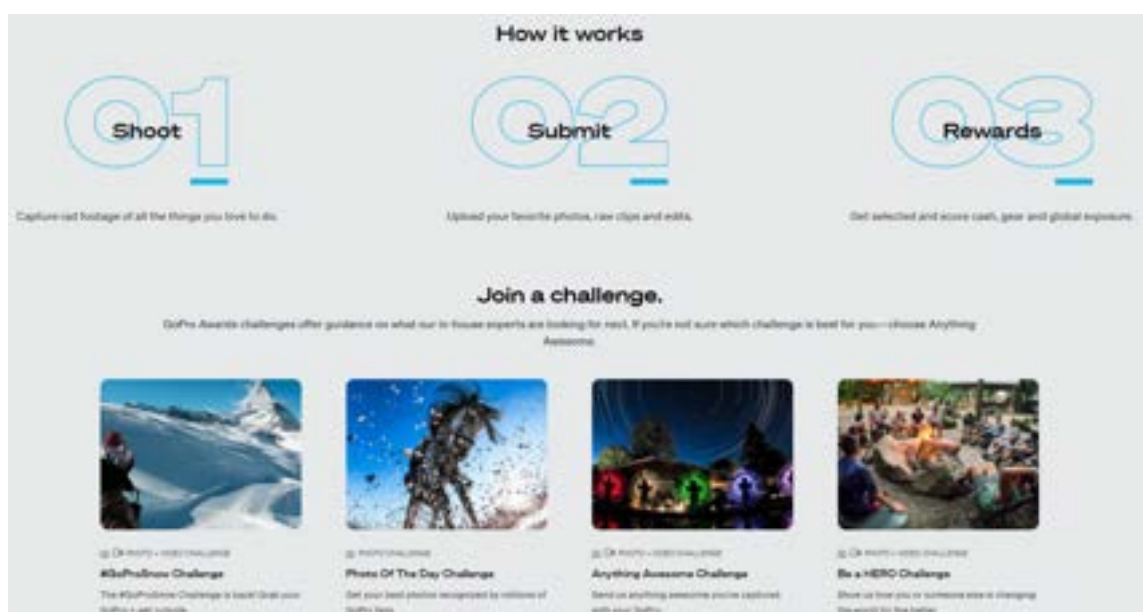


Figure 13 Extract from GoPro.com/Awards

The Chartered Institute of Marketing content offers no guidance on the topic of UGC in the curriculum materials and a search of their website returns no results.

The Content Marketing Institute suggests the following UGC tactics:

- Designing UGC prompts into the customer journey suggesting the nudges can be integrated into web pages, packaging, emails. They also advocate incentivising with discounts or prizes.
- Encouraging photograph tagging by making packaging original, by making a selfie-friendly backdrop or setting in store and reposting any with brand mentions in the company social feeds. Hosting 'best photo of the month' contests.
- Setting challenges – decide what the consumer needs to do to enter, determine the prize and develop a campaign to promote the challenge. Seeding unboxing videos which are

especially popular on YouTube by paying attention to packaging, colours, extras such as a branded postcard – and inviting customers to shoot an unboxing video.

- Using a social listening platform such as Awario, Mention or MediaToolkit to watch out for branded UGC which can be reshared (Barysevich, 2021)

The Content Marketing Association identified *brands sharing UGC* as one of the 2021 trends they expected to continue in 2022, proposing “UGC has become a mainstay and will continue to perform in 2022” and then proposing that the best way to capitalise on the trend is to incentivise the audience with a giveaway or a shout-out on the brand page. They also suggest working with an UGC management tool such as Crowdriff (VERB Interactive (Canada) cited in Glazebrook, 2022).

2.7.2 Textbooks on UGC

The authors in this section were selected based on being on the recommended reading list for CIM Certificate in Professional Digital Marketing (Chaffey, Hanlon, Kingsnorth, Smith) and Digital Marketing degree programmes at Sussex University, University of Chester, University of Northampton, Loughborough University (Chaffey, Hanlon, Tuten, Smith).

Several core textbooks include a theoretical model of the Ladder of Engagement (see Figure 14 below) with descriptions of different degrees of UGC as examples of behaviour occurring at different levels of engagement, culminating in ‘collaborative co-creation’ which occurs at the top (Chaffey et al, 2012, 2013, 2017, 2022)



Figure 14 The Ladder of Engagement

The discussion about UGC is contextualised as being a relationship with engaged customers which contrasts with the other guidance which speaks rather more as a transactional process where UGC is harvested opportunistically.

Recent textbook *Digital Marketing: Strategic Planning & Integration* includes a chapter on Content Marketing and has a short discussion of UGC in the wider context of Storytelling (Hanlon, 2022). While it describes some of the features and benefits of UGC there is little to inform good practice.

Social Media Marketing considers the *motivation* to produce UGC, making the distinction between organic content which the creator is intrinsically motivated to create and share, and consumer-solicited content (CSC) which describes ‘invited but non-compensated’ citizen advertising (Tuten, 2021). This text also provides a relatively detailed explanation of UGC Campaigns – whereby brands invite content which meets certain criteria and then leverages it in their networks or request personal stories or photographs which essentially act as testimonials (Tuten, 2021).

2.7.3 The Trade Press on UGC

The search term ‘Top Digital Marketing trade publications’ was applied in Feedspot, a web content reading platform which searches and ranks online magazines by traffic, social media followers, domain authority and freshness. The top magazines were then searched for the term ‘user-generated content’ to evaluate articles on the topic.

Campaign Magazine (UK) campaignlive.co.uk. Included multiple articles about UGC campaigns such as Allianz’s light installation which invited users to submit new year resolutions to be launched into the alpine sky (Douglas, 2022)

Digiday Magazine (USA) digiday.com. Ryan Harwood, CEO of Gallery Media discusses the role of UGC on TikTok as a part of a ripple effect when a trend gains traction (Barber, 2021). Zach Stuck, CEO of Homestead Studio suggests one of the attractive aspects of Snapchat and TikTok (in comparison with Facebook) is that UGC performs well on those platforms (Monillos, 2020). In an article on the launch of Facebook Video, Neil Patil, COO of Tubular Labs explained that commercial production restrictions during lockdown had caused ‘homemade’ content to become acceptable and had driven demand for UGC (Willens, 2020).

Figaro Digital (UK) figarodigital.co.uk. In an article titled ‘*Social Proof Tactics to Build Trust with Generation Z*’ Ricards argues that to engage with Gen Z it is particularly important to have authentic-feeling content and that brands should use UGC as less than 31% of customers in this demographic trust influencer content (2020). Furthermore, he maintains that 40% of Gen Z shoppers view social proof as an integral part of the decision-making process. The article goes on to recommend *Reminding* customers to share, *Inspiring* customers by explaining what you are looking for and

Incentivising participation with a prize draw. Finally, it suggests how to syndicate the UGC on product pages, social media pages and in email newsletters (Ricards, 2020). In subsequent article, *The Future of Social Media in a New Post Lockdown Era* the use of UGC is advocated, explaining the benefits of UGC that visual content is made by the most engaged customers without any of the usual expenses of travel, equipment or staff (Carlese, 2020). The piece goes on to suggest the need to understand and nurture the UGC-creating fans. In a contrast to the more transactional incentives advocated in other literature, this article suggests 'inviting them to an exclusive community'. Continuing on the subject of reward, it is suggested that the chance for a consumer's post to be featured may be reward enough, but that smaller brands may benefit from adding an incentive (Carlese, 2020). There are further tactical suggestions on how to encourage the creation of UGC by launching with a paid/owned post which explains how they want people to engage – like a how-to tutorial video. The piece mentions the #wipedown challenge by Fenty on TikTok and the #sweatselfie campaign by Gymshark as examples of UGC-generating campaigns (Carlese, 2020).

The Drum Magazine (USA) thedrum.com. Positioned as an '*Emerging trend in Public Relations to watch out for*' this article by Rastogi proposes that the "perceived authenticity of UGC such as reviews, photos and videos gives it significant influence over consumer brand perception" (Rastogi, 2022). In '*How to harness user generated content to build your brand*' there are recommendations on how to encourage audiences to create UGC including starting a campaign with a hashtag and incentives. The author Amy Green from Pinpoint Media who position themselves as 'expert in curating and enhancing the benefit of UGC for your business' also posits the statistics that UGC-based ads get a four-times higher click-through rate, and that as few as 16% of brands have a strategy regarding UGC (Green, 2021). In the Awards part of the search, the winner of the Drum Awards for Social Media Best Social Media Diversity and Inclusivity Programme was 'Get in Cambridge', an UGC-based campaign featuring minority student voices from Cambridge University (The Drum, 2021b).

Marketing Magazine (Malaysia) marketingmagazine.com.my. Features two articles relating directly to UGC; An article showcasing UGC - ViacomCBS balcony stories which utilises UGC for storytelling and allows users to submit their own videos (MarketingMagazine Asia, 2020). A 'how to' article by Asit Gupta suggesting how to find and engage with satisfied customers and suggests using specialists like his own company AdvocacyAsia (2016).

In summary the information available to readers of the trade magazines is limited in terms of practical advice on the management of UGC, although the practice is recognised in Awards and Case Studies. An exception is the articles published by Figaro Digital, which has contemporary articles with actionable guidance, but this publication has one of the smaller audiences.

2.8 UGC feedback & content-sharing intentions

The process by which people join an online community and go on to create and share content is described as the member life cycle (Joyce and Kraut, 2006). The role of feedback on early content creation can impact the transition from 'lurking' to full active participation; specifically, the creator may worry about the quality of their content, and also be fearful of feedback (evaluative feedback, friendly feedback or no feedback) (Lee, Park and Han, 2014).

Feedback performs an important function in online communities in terms of cue-inferring, information-sharing and relationship-building (Kim *et al.*, 2012), and can be categorised as follows:- informational-based (technical or numeric, such as likes or shares), or emotion/subjective feedback which (personal feelings and comments) (Lee, Park and Han, 2014). Through a series of experiments, the study by Lee *et al.* found that self-esteem was a critical factor in UGC-creating intentions and that positive informational and emotional feedback encourages Content Creators to engage in more active UGC sharing, although this was in the wider context of social media participation rather than explicitly branded UGC.

This has implications for the management of organic brand related UGC in terms of the feedback from the brand that the user seeks.

2.9 Horizontal communities

UGC is an important component of the increasingly powerful online communities which have manifested to celebrate the brands they love (Parrott, Danbury and Kanthavanich, 2015). The concept of community is important to the discussion of branded UGC as there is a presumption that many Content Creators are part of an online brand community (OBC) which is managed and sponsored by a brand. Much of the literature discussed thus far has been concerned with the vertical nature of this community (between the brand and it's fans), however it can also be argued that interactions *between* members of an online community may also influence UGC creation, also that the shared interest that connects members of a community may not be the brand itself but rather a connected topic, indeed creators could be members of an online open community (OOC) which does not have any brand affiliation (Wilk, Harrigan and Soutar, 2018).

In their study of UGC behaviours among the beauty blogging community, Gannon and Prothero found a Community of Practice (CoP) existed (2018). Defined as *"a group of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic and who deepen their understanding of this area by interacting on and ongoing basis."* (Le May and Wenger, 2008, p. 3) positing that content creation amounted to 'practice'. Further, they found that communities existed horizontally between Content Creators, with defining characteristics; mutual engagement, shared repertoires, and joint

enterprise (Gannon and Prothero, 2018). They build on the earlier work of Sorensen and Mara who describe Content Creators as both practitioners and as forming a community (2014). It was found that in the shared repertoires, creators had a shared vocabulary which they used in their content, and also found assistance from their community in terms of tools and artefacts – specifically the acquisition of products, and the selection of UGC production tools such as cameras and editing software (le May and Wenger, 2008).

2.10 Chapter summary

The motivation to create UGC and eWoM have been explored in the academic literature, but in the wider context of participation in online communities. The effectiveness of Branded UGC as a form of persuasive social media content is also well understood. The intersectionality of ‘motivation to create’ and ‘branded UGC’ is less well researched and constitutes a gap which this research contributes to.

Six motivational frameworks were identified which have been applied to UGC-related studies and the Uses and Gratifications theory and the Motivations-Opportunity-Ability framework were found to be most suited for the theoretical underpinning of this research.

Industry thought-leadership in the forms of Trade Press, Professional Bodies and textbooks are mostly under-developed, and focus on tactical approaches such as incentivising UGC creation with giveaways. There was no meaningful discussion of the management of serial branded UGC creators, nor how ‘feedback’ on UGC might affect future content-creation intention.

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY & DESIGN

The review of the contextualising literature in the preceding chapter identified a gap in understanding of what motivations are acting on Content Creators which lead them to produce branded UGC. It also found limited literature concerning how the Social Media Manager should elicit and respond to this content. This chapter sets out the research philosophy, strategy and the methodology deployed to address these topics through primary research. It further sets out the measures taken to ensure the data are of a high quality and are valid and reliable.

3.1 Research philosophy

The establishment and statement of a research philosophy provides a framework for understanding the nature of knowledge, reality and truth (Bryman and Bell, 2015; Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2016). It provides a reference point for key decisions in the research process relating to methodological choices and supports their justification – key elements in establishing the validity and credibility of the findings (Saunders et al, 2019). This work is exploratory in nature and informed by a desire to understand the influences of abstract notions such as human relationships, motivation, and creativity upon the act of content creation in such a way that it becomes possible to propose good practice for Social Media Managers.

3.1.1 Ontology – subjective interpretivism

In philosophy, ontology is the field of metaphysics which is concerned with the study of existence – the identification of what exists in the world and what constitutes reality (Guizzardi and Halpin, 2008).

The study of social media management is both a science and an art (Priyadarshini, 2016; Barber, 2018) In general terms, the philosophical position favoured in the fields of cognitive sciences, informatics and computer technologies is positivist, following a long tradition of what constitutes a ‘scientific’ view of the world (Lanfredini *et al.*, 2016). The social sciences, by contrast, have long held interpretivism as a key philosophical position as it provides a sound basis for understanding complex social scenarios (McBride, Misnikov and Draheim, 2022). A review of the methodology present in the literature used in this study revealed that the majority adopted positivist approaches and a smaller number of the studies had interpretivist characteristics – (see Table 2 Motivation Theories applied to UGC-related studies on page 37).

The author believes that Content Creators and Social Media Managers are social entities which inhabit the same physical and virtual spaces. These actors, think and reflect. They perceive situations differently in ways which affect their perceptions of content creation, the motivation to create it and the response from brands and audiences. For this reason, the positivist approach is rejected in

favour of a subjective interpretivist ontological position which holds that social phenomena and their meanings are continually being accomplished by social actors (Greener, 2008; Bryman and Bell, 2015).

3.1.2 Epistemology – social constructionism

Epistemology is concerned with how knowledge can be constructed and how the researcher arrives at 'truth'. The central theme of the research relates to motivation – the internal processes which drive Content Creators to behave in a way that results in the production of a particular kind of communication. Although motivation explains much human behaviour, it is not generally observable (Beck, 2004) – although the resulting behaviours are - and we are often not even aware of our motivation at a conscious level until invited to reflect upon it. This makes interpretivism the most appropriate philosophical approach to this study, applied to data gathered in a depth interview conducted by an insider-researcher. Often associated with qualitative studies (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018) interpretivism requires researchers to derive meaning from that which is expressed about the phenomenon of interest being studied, with an emphasis on thoughts and ideas. They do so by seeking to make sense of subjective and socially constructed meanings, through the lens of the participant (Cresswell, 2003; Saunders, Philip Lewis and Thornhill, 2019) as well as the researcher's interpretation to arrive at the "truth".

The underlying epistemology of this thesis is social constructionism, which proposes that reality is determined by the social and cultural context in which it occurs (Losantos, Montoya and Exeni, 2016). When applied to research, the resulting exploration is a collaborative process with both the researcher and the participants constructing new knowledge (McNamee, 2012).

3.1.3 An abductive approach to theory development

The approach to theory development is often presented as binary, with the two contrasting approaches being inductive and deductive. The deductive approach will typically test a theory or hypothesis – the study being designed to evaluate the theory (moving from theory to data), whereas an inductive approach will seek to build theory from the data – which is often exploratory in nature (moving from data to theory) (Saunders, Philip Lewis and Thornhill, 2019).

In fact, a third approach to theory development is available to the researcher; abduction starts with the observation of a phenomenon, seeks plausible theories to explain the phenomenon and then collects data sometimes with the aid of an organising conceptual framework (Flick, 2018). This approach often incorporates new 'surprising facts' during the research and can go back and forth between the theory and data collection. Saunders *et al.* suggest that most management researchers use some aspect of abduction in practice (2019).

This thesis builds on an earlier study into the phenomenon of branded user-generated content by Somerfield (the author), Mortimer and Evans (2018) which led the researcher to develop a conceptual framework (Figure 1). This study is exploratory in nature but goes back and forth from the framework to test and further develop the theory, and therefore adopts an abductive stance to theory development.

Although it can be argued that abduction is more commonly associated with pragmatist or post-modernist philosophy (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2016), the aim is to create a theory that is grounded in the subjective experiences of individuals and the social and cultural contexts in which they are situated, it can be consistent with a subjective interpretivist philosophy.

3.1.4 Insider-outsider positionality

Traditionally the researcher engaging in a study is an outsider, who seeks to understand another culture by observing it (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2010) however more recently researchers have tended to explore communities which they are themselves past or present members (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009; Paechter, 2013).

In this instance the researcher has insider-outsider status in terms of both membership of an online community from which the participants were recruited (as an UGC creator), and as a colleague actively working with one of the practitioner subjects but also a researcher aware of the impact of how ones' own biases and experiences may influence understanding and attempts to achieve objectivity (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994). Paechter discusses positionality at length, in particular the challenges of retrospective research on an online community with which you are still actively engaged, and also the ethical position of doing so (2013). She points out that members who engage in a community and then belatedly reveal themselves as researchers can be rejected. In this instance there is no such subterfuge and the contexts are not sensitive in nature. Two important advantages of the insider/outsider are access to subjects for study, and the shared vocabulary and understanding of processes, contexts and dialogues (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009). Where the researcher and subjects come from the same community, there is a requirement for reflexivity - where relationships between researchers and participants are openly acknowledged and addressed. Evaluative rigour can be achieved as long as the researcher demonstrates that they understand the ways in which their own value system might impact the outcome of the study (Kitto, Chesters and Grbich, 2008) – see 3.7 on page 65.

Professional Doctorates respond to the urgent need for relevant industry focus in the knowledge economy (Fink, 2006) and require that the researcher is an active participant in the industry related

to their discipline. Consequently insider-research status has particular salience for professional doctorate researchers, who by their nature are more likely to be on the inside.

3.2 Sampling

For any study, the sample size is dictated by the resources available, the nature of the study and the time horizons. In this instance purposive sampling was used; a non-random technique in which a quantity of information-rich cases are selected on the basis of their knowledge or experiences, and also their willingness and availability to participate (Etikan, Musa and Alkassim, 2016).

The two principal drawbacks of this method are firstly, that it can be prone to researcher bias (Sharma, 2017), and secondly the results cannot be generalised to a wider population (Acharya *et al.*, 2013). The advantages of purposive sampling are significant in that it allows researchers to select participants with specific relevant characteristics or experiences which are relevant to the research objectives which in turn facilitate a deep understanding of the topic or issue. Furthermore it is time- and cost-efficient, and can be particularly helpful in gaining access to hard-to-reach populations (Smith, 2014; Bryman and Bell, 2015). In this instance it is evident that the branded UGC-creating population is very small (the 1% in any online population as Nielsen put it (2006)). Also the study called for matched pairs of Content Creators and Social Media. These two conditions ruled out the self-selecting and probability methods of sampling for all practical purposes.

The participants were recruited using an open online community (OOC) on Twitter: #NorthantsHour which is mainly populated by SMEs and in which branded UGC is commonly observed, and also from the Researcher's extensive local business network on LinkedIn. The initial concept was view each incident of branded UGC from two opposing points of view (the CC and the SMM), which would make it possible to establish whether they were aligned in an approach somewhat similar to the co-creation ethnographic study by Bansal *et al.* (2022). In practice, suitable cases were identified, and direct approaches were made to Content Creators and practitioners whereupon a limitation appeared; practitioners agreed to take part but could not identify a 'creator' participant from their community, or when they did, the creator failed to respond to the request for interview. The requirement for only 'matched pairs' of participants was therefore reframed. Instead, practitioners and creators were interviewed about their experiences working with UGC without needing to refer to the same case. One matched pair was successfully interviewed, and the findings were not meaningfully different to the outcomes of the other interviews, which further supported the decision.

One of the practitioners was from the higher education sector and one of the Content Creators was a student (the only matched pair of participants As an employer-funded doctoral researcher working

at a University, it was understood from the outset that representation from the Higher Education sector would be included in the field of enquiry for this study. The use of Branded UGC has been adopted in the Universities sector including UoN for many years (Higgins, 2018) in keeping with wider social media marketing practice (Gallegos, 2017; Feldwick, 2018). The remaining six social media managers worked in marketing agencies, specialist social media agencies and in a client-side Social Media Manager role.

11 of the participants were female, 9 male. The ages of the participants ranged from 22 to 52, however the majority were in their 30s, and in employment.

Some Content Creators were identified by Practitioners, and several of the Practitioners were found to also found to be Content Creators and thereby able to answer Content Creator questions.

Selection was based on UGC contribution and to some extent participation in the #Northanthour local network. Although this introduced a geographical homogeneity into the sample this was not considered to be a critical issue since the research is qualitative and is not therefore seeking to generalise but rather is exploratory in nature.

To anonymise the participants, pseudonyms have been used in the results section of this research. The names were chosen to reflect their ethnic and gender identities while obscuring the details. In some places, company names or contextual details of the narrative have been redacted from the quotes or anonymised by substitution of another less identifiable word or phrase. The participants' profiles are summarised in Appendix 1 on page 141.

The target sample size was five matched pairs of participants (*n.20* subjects in total) however with the exploratory nature of this qualitative research the main objective was to reach thematic saturation. When the objectives are narrowly defined and there is homogeneity in the study population, code saturation is typically reached in sample sizes of (9-17) interviews (Hennink and Kaiser, 2022). However as Rijnsoever points out, this is dependent on correctly evaluating factors such as the complexity of the question, the granularity of the coding and the appropriateness of the sampling method (van Rijnsoever, 2017).

Following the successful completion of consent forms, interviews were conducted with six social media managers, one specialist practitioner, eight creators and five individuals with hybrid roles (*n. 20* subjects in total) resulting in around 16 hours of recorded interviews. Five of the creators were also able to contribute to the creator interview themes and six of the creators were able to comment with authority on the practitioner themes. The 'overlap' of participants was coded in the data set so the source attributes could be identified if relevant.

The recruitment and interviewing of participants, and coding of data continued until “saturation” was achieved. The argument for saturation sample size in qualitative research is that there is a point at which additional interviews will not provide new or valuable information (Malterud, Siersma and Guassora, 2016). The concept of data saturation entails bringing new participants to the study until nothing new is being added (Marshall *et al.*, 2013).

After interview *n. 14*, no additional nodes relating to the key themes were added to the coding frame, however a further *n.6* interviews were conducted to allow a margin of error and to gather a range of participant experiences to triangulate what had already been captured. After *n. 20* interviews it was decided that saturation point had been reached.

3.3 Method – semi-structured interview

Research design requires the painstaking planning of research to produce results which are robust and valid (Smith, 2014). The methodological choice for this study – the interview – is both consistent with the ontological position and makes the best use of the advantages of being an insider researcher. The prevalent tool for qualitative research is the interview, being the most effective method for investigating the viewpoints of the participants (Mojtahed, Tiago Martins and Peng, 2014). A range of approaches to interview design are available to the researcher and it is common to categorise these in terms of how they are structured (Marshall *et al.*, 2013; Brinkman, 2020); from an unstructured interview which resembles a conversation and is fluid in nature, to a structured interview which has highly standardised questions and follow up questions (Mueller and Segal, 2015).

Unstructured interviews have the advantage of being naturalistic in form which can help to build empathy between the researcher and subject and are extremely adaptable, however the main disadvantage is that they may not result in the required information being collected; as there are no priori parameters, the onus is heavily on the interviewer to ensure that the conversation is steered in directions which answer the research questions (Mueller and Segal, 2015; Bihu, 2020).

The *fully structured* interview with a uniform sequence and construction of questions, permits no deviation and is inconsistent with the exploratory aims of this study. While it has the advantage of permitting a clear data collection pathway which in turn makes for easy comparison between respondents, having much in common with the questionnaire (Brinkman, 2020), the strict form of the fully structured interview hampers the process by which themes are allowed to emerge. There is also little scope for building rapport between the subject and interviewer when the narrative is so tightly controlled. *Semi structured* interviews however permit the researcher to explore the phenomenon of interest to reveal why the participant has behaved in each way, as well as simply

‘what’ and ‘how’ (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2016). The semi-structured interview is the most appropriate instrument to explore these factors as well as the motivation for content creation and the effect of any brand response or intervention.

The alternative approach of the Focus Group was considered; however, the advantages of efficiency and debate did not compensate for the key issues identified by Acocella (2012) of group think, inhibition and confidentiality.

A positivist attitude towards the interview would conceive the interviewer as a neutral figure, exerting no influence in an attempt to acquire knowledge which is value-free (Gubrium *et al.*, 2012). Having chosen an interpretivist epistemology, the author rejects this position in favour of the notion that it is possible for the interviewer to act with ‘honest intent’ as they play their role in the interview process. Interviews are a social process, consisting of human interactions between the researcher and the subject and as such cannot be entirely value free as argued by Lee & Aslam (2018) in their call for ‘the wholesome interview’.

The author, who was the interviewer for all subjects was able to utilise the lived experience of engaging with brand-related UGC resulting in a shared vocabulary and understanding of the processes.

The Semi-Structured Interview is typically utilised to elicit subjective viewpoints from subjects about a phenomenon they have experienced. The objective knowledge about a subject is used to frame a set of questions– which should be open-ended in design – and create structure for the interview (McIntosh and Morse, 2015). The subject is free to contribute their subjective responses as they wish and the interviewer can follow up with supplemental questions which further probe the topic of discussion. It is the structured question, and the free response that give rise to the name semi-structured and the method positions the researcher to collect highly relevant and specific data – such that it cannot be captured by quantitative methods.

Social media content is rich in expression, and those who work with it are adept storytellers and inherently communicative people, used to handling narratives of their own making (van Laar *et al.*, 2017). These characteristics which, together with the opportunity to connect and discuss their craft meant that interview was the most cogent and naturalistic research instrument to use for both the researcher and the participants.

This study therefore used an exploratory design and a qualitative research method to examine UGC Content Creators’ motivations to create positive brand-related posts and their subsequent lived experience of feedback on the content they created. It further sought to understand the Social Media Manager’s role in the interplay between UGC-creator and brand. This was achieved through a

series of semi-structured interviews with Creators and Social Media Managers and identified using a selection of UGC cases on social media platforms and through the Researcher's commercial network.

3.3.1 Interview design

The boundaries of the interview were determined by the research questions, and the principal topic categories were derived from a synthesis of the research questions arising from the conceptual framework, and the main themes in the literature review (Smith, 2014; McIntosh and Morse, 2015). See Figure 15 Research Questions applied to Conceptual Framework.

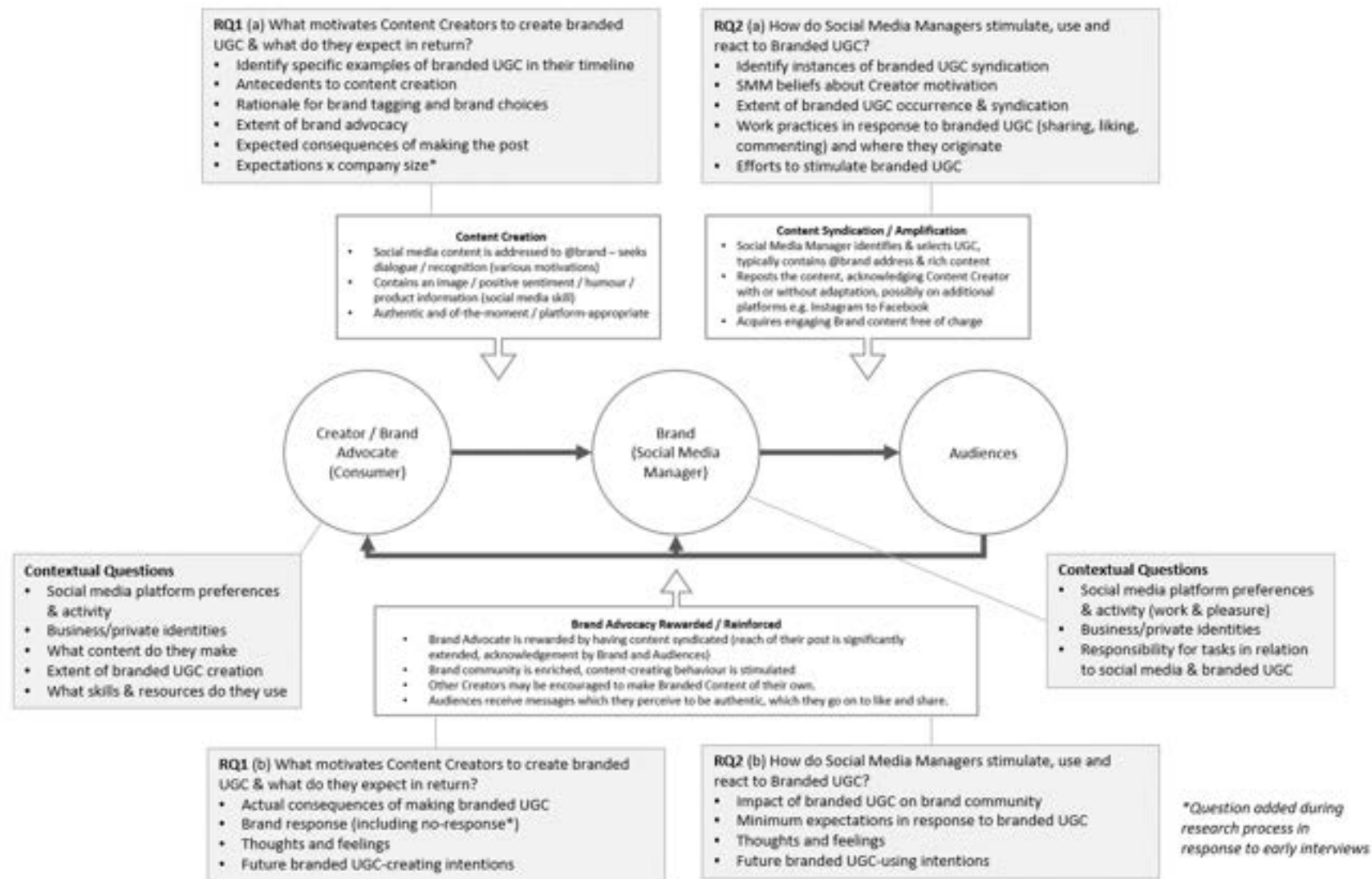


Figure 15 Research Questions applied to Conceptual Framework

The insider-researcher paradigm permitted information from practical experience and previous fieldwork to be used to develop the questions (McIntosh and Morse, 2015) whereas the exploratory approach and semi-structured interview design permitted the question set to develop as it was informed by the responses of each interviewee.

Data was collected using two semi-structured interviews with two categories of participant, Creator and Practitioner. The initial plan supposed that these two classifications of participant would permit the phenomenon to be viewed from alternative paradigms thereby permitting a comparison.

Early in the data collection phase it became evident that this binary classification of research subjects was too simplistic. Some Social Media managers had limited experience of working with UGC in their professional lives but extensive experience of being an UGC Creator in their personal lives. Other Social Media managers had almost no private presence on social media, preferring to 'switch off' from it when not at work. Several of the Content Creators also had some sort of commercial experience with social media – either as entrepreneurs or in the context of their 'day job'.

The exploratory design meant that it was possible to combine elements of both interviews to encompass the emerging narratives of the interview subjects and their experiences with UGC.

3.3.2 Question set – Interview guides

Logic determined the order in which the questions were presented, with increasing focus from general familiarisation to the very specific (Bradley, 2013). For example:

↓	General questions about social media	'What social media platforms are you active on at the moment?'
↓	Questions about content creation	'What sort of content do you make?'
↓	Specific questions about branded UGC	'Do you ever make content about companies and tag them in?'
↓	Highly specific questions exploring a named incident	'Can you tell me about what led up to making this post?'

Figure 16 Hierarchy of interview questions [author]

This permitted the participant to 'warm up' and relax into the discussion, while also permitting the researcher to gauge each participant's familiarity with the topic through use of vocabulary and relevant examples. In some cases the participants did not have English as a first language, so the warm-up questions were particularly relevant to allow the Researcher to mediate their pace and vocabulary to put their Interviewee at ease.

Interview Guide 1 - Content Creator Version (see Appendix 6 on page 151) This interview guide began with warm-up questions about social media usage followed by exploration of the subject's content-creating behaviour and perceptions of feedback. The interview then focused on the interview of Branded UGC, establishing terminology and then going on to explore the subject's experiences of it, specifically motivation to create it. The interview went on to explore brand advocacy, expected outcomes and future intention to create branded UGC.

Interview Guide 2 - Social Media Manager Version (see Appendix 7 on page 154) The Social Media Manager version of the interview guide began with warm up questions about social media usage in both a private and commercial context. The questions then explored how the subject had been trained to use social media and how they evaluated their content. The interview then focused on Branded UGC, establishing the terminology, and explored the extent to which it was created within the brand communities managed by the subject, and what the normal procedures would be in response. The interview then widened out to explore beliefs and practices in relation to Branded UGC and future intent to use it in a commercial setting.

The interviews began with a reiteration of the informed consent and purpose of the study and then followed the themes in the relevant interview guides.

If it became apparent that the participants had a wider breadth of experience than originally anticipated – which could be ascertained during the early warm-up questions - some of the questions from Interview Guide 1 (Content Creator) were presented to Social Media managers and vice versa.

Through exploratory questions, some topics emerged and were added to subsequent interviews – for example:

- The size of the brand determined the expectation of the response
- Failure to respond to UGC resulted in a diminished brand advocacy.

3.4 Data collection

The data which are collected during the primary research phase are the raw materials for the formation of knowledge, indeed robust data collection procedures are key factors influencing the trustworthiness and reliability of the research (Kitto, Chesters and Grbich, 2008). For qualitative researchers the main way they find out what subjects think about a phenomenon is to ask them (Given, 2008). Words are therefore the main units of data they work with, whether that be in written or recorded form, notwithstanding that tone and a range of nonverbal communication can also be analysed.

The interviews were conducted in accordance with the approved research proposal (see Appendix 8 on page 157) .

The research participants were offered the choice of a face-to-face interview or a video call, at a time of their convenience. Although the advantages of face-to-face interviews are well documented and in the past video calls were primarily used to facilitate long-distance communication (Creswell and Poth, 2018) more recent studies have revealed significant advantages of research conducted via video calls (Rutakumwa *et al.*, 2020). These include convenience, time saving, and being in a more intimate environment – typically the participant’s own home or workplace (Wong-Wylie, Rempel and Cook, 2020). Furthermore, face-to-face meetings in an era when covid was still a significant factor (July – October 2022) could be seen as unsafe and unnecessary. Meanwhile hybrid working has become the norm for many, particularly those in office-based roles (Office for National Statistics, 2022). It was therefore unsurprising that almost all of the participants elected to be interviewed remotely. In two instances the interviews took place in-person, but in both cases, MS Teams was used as a recording device in the room (one was audio-only as the subject found the camera off-putting).

At the close of the interview, each participant was given the opportunity to add anything else they wanted to say about UGC, thanked and given the option to have early sight of the research findings. They were also offered sight of the transcript if they wished – which none of the participants took up.

The interviews ranged from 30 to 70 minutes in duration.

3.5 Data handling

The data involved in the research was handled appropriately and in accordance with the Research and Ethics Committee Guidance (2018), and the approved Data Management Plan (see Appendix 9 on page 168). These included consideration of anonymisation of the data and safe collection, storage, and retrieval of the assets. Individual names of participants were redacted from the social media data and as far as possible the social media posts were anonymised.

The sequence of data processing can be seen Figure 17 on page 60.

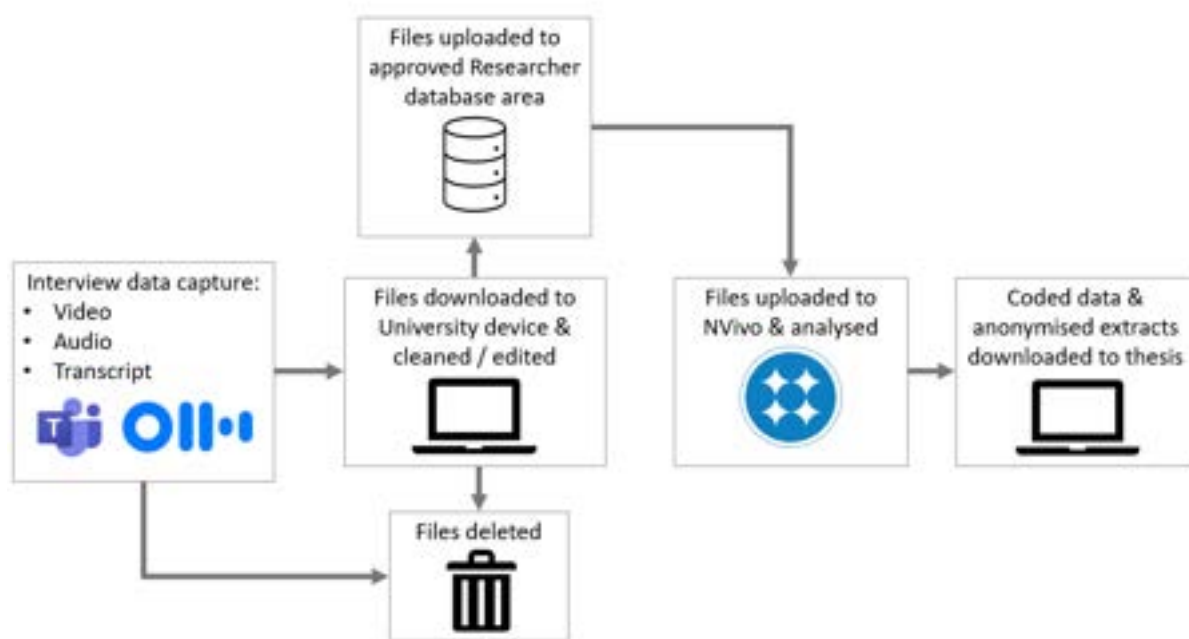


Figure 17 Data handling process [author]

Microsoft Teams was used to facilitate the interviews over video call, and to record the face-to-face interviews. All the interviews were transcribed in Microsoft Teams with the recording and transcription functions on and addition, each interview was audio recorded and transcribed using Otter.ai¹. Each participant was made aware of the transcription and audio/video capture services being used at the start of the interview and gave their permission to be recorded.

Audio recording is considered a useful and necessary step in interviewing to ensure rigour and validity (Rutakumwa *et al.*, 2020). The use of diverse tools was to ensure that there were multiple data sources in the event of a failure of any of the devices, which would result in the loss of the interview. It also meant that each interview yielded 4 data files:

- Mp3 file of the audio from Otter
- .txt file for the transcript from Otter
- Mp4 file of the video from Microsoft Teams
- .txt file of the transcript from Microsoft Teams

Transcription is an indispensable step in data analysis (Flick, 2013), and reducing the conversion of an hour of conversation textual format results in the loss of para-linguistic phenomena (such as laughter) and does not capture nuances of tone of voice. Nevertheless, transcription is an inevitable step in qualitative data reduction, and speech-to-text automation has undergone a technical

¹ Otter.ai is a technology company that develops speech-to-text transcription applications using artificial intelligence and machine learning.

revolution in recent years (da Silva, 2021). While there are some benefits to human transcription in that the data can be edited and nuances of tone of voice captured which can improve the quality of analysis, the laborious nature of the task can have a negative impact on quality (da Silva, 2021) and time and cost implications of doing so were an important factor in the decision to use automation.

In the early interviews, the output from the two automated text systems was compared, and the Otter files were found to be significantly more accurate – therefore these were used as the basis for the interview transcripts.

The files were downloaded from the app and from MSTeams to a University device, corrected then and uploaded to the secure research file repository as required in the data management plan. The transcripts were then imported into NVivo for analysis, and the other files retained for cross-referencing.

Active data collection took the form of interviews with subjects. Prior to this, the Participants were given information about the research. Cooper & Schindler described this as “disclosing procedures before requesting permission to proceed with the study” (2014). The recruitment process included full disclosure of how the participant information would be used – See Participant Information Sheets Appendix 2 and Appendix 3 on pages 142 and 145 respectively, and then obtaining informed consent via the Consent Forms Appendix 4 & Appendix 5 (see pages 148 and 150).

Passive data collection also occurred in the form of observation of online communities in public social media environments as a means of identifying appropriate subjects and verifying their branded UGC-creating behaviour. An ethical challenge connected with this method is that it can be impractical to obtain informed consent from the subjects (ESOMAR, 2009) however in this case the subjects gave consent as they were also the interview subjects. This method has the additional benefit that the data collected from each participant’s social media history is retrospective, thereby removing the risk of the Hawthorne Effect (Frey, 2018) whereby the participant changes their behaviour because of being observed. This data was collected in the form of written notes.

3.6 Analysis Strategy

Thematic analysis is a qualitative data technique that involves identifying and categorising patterns, themes and concepts in textual data thereby facilitating the organisation, reduction and sense-making of the data (Gibbs, 2007). Other analysis methods are available to the researcher, such as discourse analysis, narrative analysis or phenomenological analysis however these were rejected on the basis that they were unsuited as procedures to answer the research objectives of this study, and inconsistent with the philosophical position. Thematic analysis is widely accepted to be a

cornerstone of qualitative research because it is accessible, flexible and cost-effective (Herzog, Handke and Hitters, 2019; Braun and Clarke, 2021).

Guidelines for conducting thematic analysis were provided by Braun and Clarke (2006). NVivo² software was used to classify, organise and visualise textual data. NVivo is considered a standard software tool that supports researchers to conduct thematic coding of qualitative data, and was used to code the data into nodes.

As all of the interviews were conducted recently by the Researcher, there was already a high level of familiarity with the data at the outset of the coding. The interpretivist ontology and abstractive approach to theory development meant that a preliminary coding framework was loosely organised around the Research Questions applied to the Conceptual Framework Figure 15 on page 56, and the questions in the interview guide. Subsequent themes were allowed to emerge and coding decisions were made in real time as the data were analysed. A sample transcript can be found in Appendix 10 on page 169.

Analysis began at an early stage of data collection as there are several advantages to coding during the data collection phase. Important themes can be identified, meaning that subsequent data collection can be refined to explore those themes in more depth, thereby providing more detailed and nuanced understanding of the topic (Gibbs, 2007). It also permits increased reflexivity as the researcher can reflect on their coding decisions over a longer period, and while the data collection is still ongoing (Braun and Clarke, 2021).

The process by which the data are coded in Nvivo is that a section of the transcript is selected and then associated with a 'node'. This permits each theme be viewed cross-sectionally across all the narratives where that coded theme occurs, and for data visualisation such as word clouds and frequency diagrams to be created.

In the process of conducting research for a doctoral thesis, it is not uncommon for unforeseen challenges and setbacks to occur. Unfortunately, in this case, an unexpected computer error caused the loss of the first round of thematic coding. As a result the data had to be coded a second time. Although losing the initial coding was an unfortunate setback, it brought with it some advantages, as in the second round of coding, the themes were given alpha-numeric prefixes to make them appear in a more logical order in Nvivo which more closely matched the interview sequence. The researcher took steps to ensure that the second round of coding was conducted with the same detail and rigour as the first round – including referring to notes and early visualisations of the data nodes to ensure

² NVivo is a qualitative data analysis package which helps researchers to find insights in unstructured or qualitative data.

that no themes were missed. In the second round of coding, due to the familiarity with the data from the first iteration, it also became possible to apply some terminology from methodological frameworks in the literature as can be seen in Figure 18 Visualisation of data nodes / thematic coding. While losing the first round of coding was certainly a setback, it ultimately resulted in a more comprehensive and well-structured analysis of the data that formed the basis for the conclusions and recommendations.

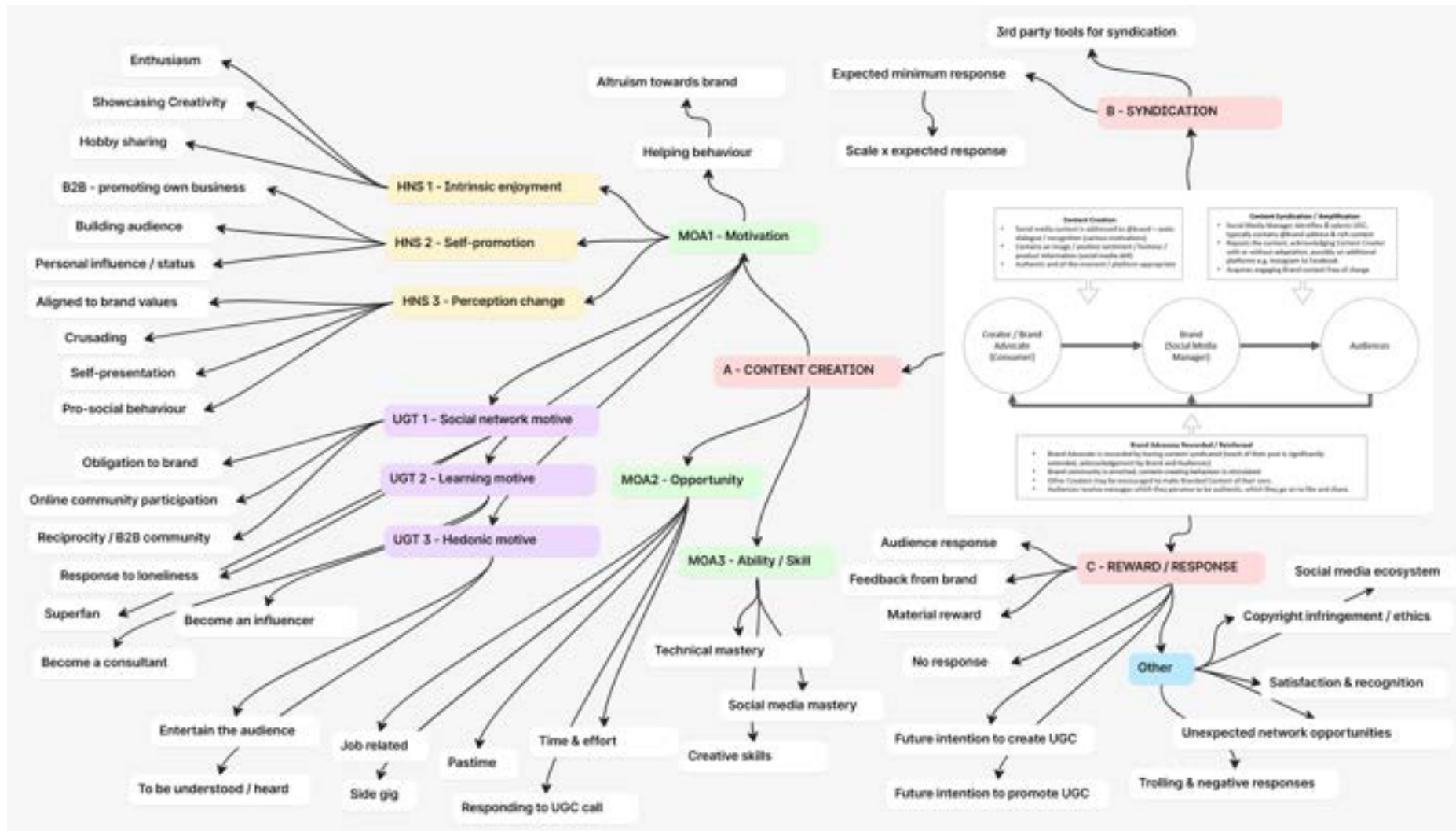


Figure 18 Visualisation of data nodes / thematic coding

3.7 Ethics

Conducting research in an ethical manner is critical for several reasons; it protects the research participants from harm by prioritising their safety, rights and wellbeing. It ensures the trustworthiness of the findings, and thereby makes the findings more likely to be accepted by the scientific community and society as a whole, and more likely to contribute to the advancement of knowledge (Alasuutari, Bickman and Brannen, 2008). The reputation of the Researcher and the University can be damaged leading to negative consequences for both, if research is conducted which is not compliant with ethics procedures and the associated laws and regulations (Emerald Publishing, 2023). This research was conducted in a manner consistent with the University of Northampton Ethics Code and Procedures (University of Northampton, 2018), and ethics approval was obtained prior to the start of data collection (see 3.4 on page 58). Each research participant was sent the version of the participant information sheet (Appendix 2 and Appendix 3) and consent forms (Appendix 4 and Appendix 5) relative to their primary role – Social Media Manager or Content Creator. The consent form was either signed or agreed by email before the interview. This was a requirement of the ethics approval process for the research, and to be compliant with the Data Protection Act 2018 which requires that data be collected and used lawfully, transparently and for specified purposes (Legislation.gov.uk, 2018).

There were three main sensitivities from an ethical standpoint in this study:

- talking to people in the context of their working practices
- discussing online personas and motivations
- observing data on social media platforms

When interviewing subjects about their **working practices**, one of the main welfare considerations is whether there is any impact on the participant's reputation (for example perceptions of competency in their job) and confidentiality relating to business-related factors. It was judged that anonymity of subjects and redaction of identifying characteristics from the narratives mitigated these factors. A second consideration which was present in one of the participants was that of power dynamics (this can occur when the Researcher is a supervisor or has authority over the person in the workplace). This was judged not to be a significant risk because the participant was in a different department and of a similar level of seniority which reduced the likelihood that the individual felt compelled to participate or answer in a particular way.

Discussions of **online personas and motivations** had the potential to be a complex issue and could have led individuals to feel distressed (some motivations being socially embarrassing to admit). This

risk was mitigated in the interview design and the sensitive handling of follow-up questions by the interviewer.

Whether **social media posts** constitute private data is a topic of some debate among researchers, since their creators are posting in an inherently public forum but could not reasonably expect their material to be subject to research activity (Markham and Buchanan, 2012; Rooke, 2013; Winter and Gundur, 2022). Collecting information in online public places has been ethically contentious for years (McKee and Porter, 2009), but the Cambridge Analytica / Facebook scandal of 2018 brought privacy issues to the fore (Turchi, 2018). In order to mitigate these concerns, the social media observation was small scale and derived from the accounts of the interview participants with their full knowledge and consent. This brought with it the advantage of post hoc commentary on social media posts, by those who created them – enabling interpretation and understanding of the phenomena.

3.8 Time horizons

The duration of the study was 33 months, which does not include a 6-month suspension which was for reasons connected to the COVID-19 pandemic.



Figure 19 Duration of study

The data were collected from multiple individuals, each interviewed once over a six-month period from 15.7.22 to 10.1.23. This cross-sectional time horizon was consistent with the timeline agreed during the approval process and met the requirements of the research as part of the requirement for the doctoral degree, which is necessarily time constrained (Saunders, P Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). The duration of this cross-sectional study was judged appropriate for the exploration of the phenomenon of interest and the demographic profile of the subjects both of which were stable. A limitation of this time horizon is that it is not possible to observe changes over a longer period of time (Neuman, 2010; Cassell, Cunliffe and Grandy, 2018), which could arise from the subjects themselves, or more likely, from the social media environments in which the phenomenon of branded UGC occurs.

3.9 Chapter summary

The methodological decisions taken in this exploratory study are influenced by the aims and objectives of the research, the subjective interpretivist philosophical stance of the Researcher and the unique access and insight afforded by the insider's perspective.

As such, they led to a qualitative study comprising 20 semi-structured interviews with Content Creators and Practitioners. Taking an abductive approach to theory development, the themes were allowed to emerge during the reduction and analysis process of coding the data in NVivo.

The findings of the study are set out in Chapter 4.

4 FINDINGS

This study set out to discover what motivates Content Creators to make positive social media posts about companies, and what they expect to happen next. It achieved this by interviewing those who make the content, and those who sit behind the brand persona and act on behalf of the company – the Social Media Managers. With the benefit of an insider-researcher lens, it was possible to explore the experiences of producing and working with branded user-generated content from multiple paradigms including content creator, social media manager, and hybrid identities.

This exploration was also set within the contextualising framework Figure 1 on page 11 which the researcher developed after earlier research which explored parts of the UGC/Creator/Manager phenomenon (Somerfield, Mortimer and Evans, 2018).

The findings of the study are set out in this chapter, starting with contextualising information about the characteristics of the participants, and then organised by the chronology described in the proposed Virtual cycle of branded UGC, namely A – Content Creation, B – Syndication, C- Reward / Response. The data are further subdivided into categories described in Figure 20 Emergent Themes on page 69.

Throughout the findings, the research participants are referred to by their pseudonyms, prefixed by letters indicating their role (CC= Content Creator, P=Practitioner) – see Appendix 1 on page 141 for the participant profile summary.

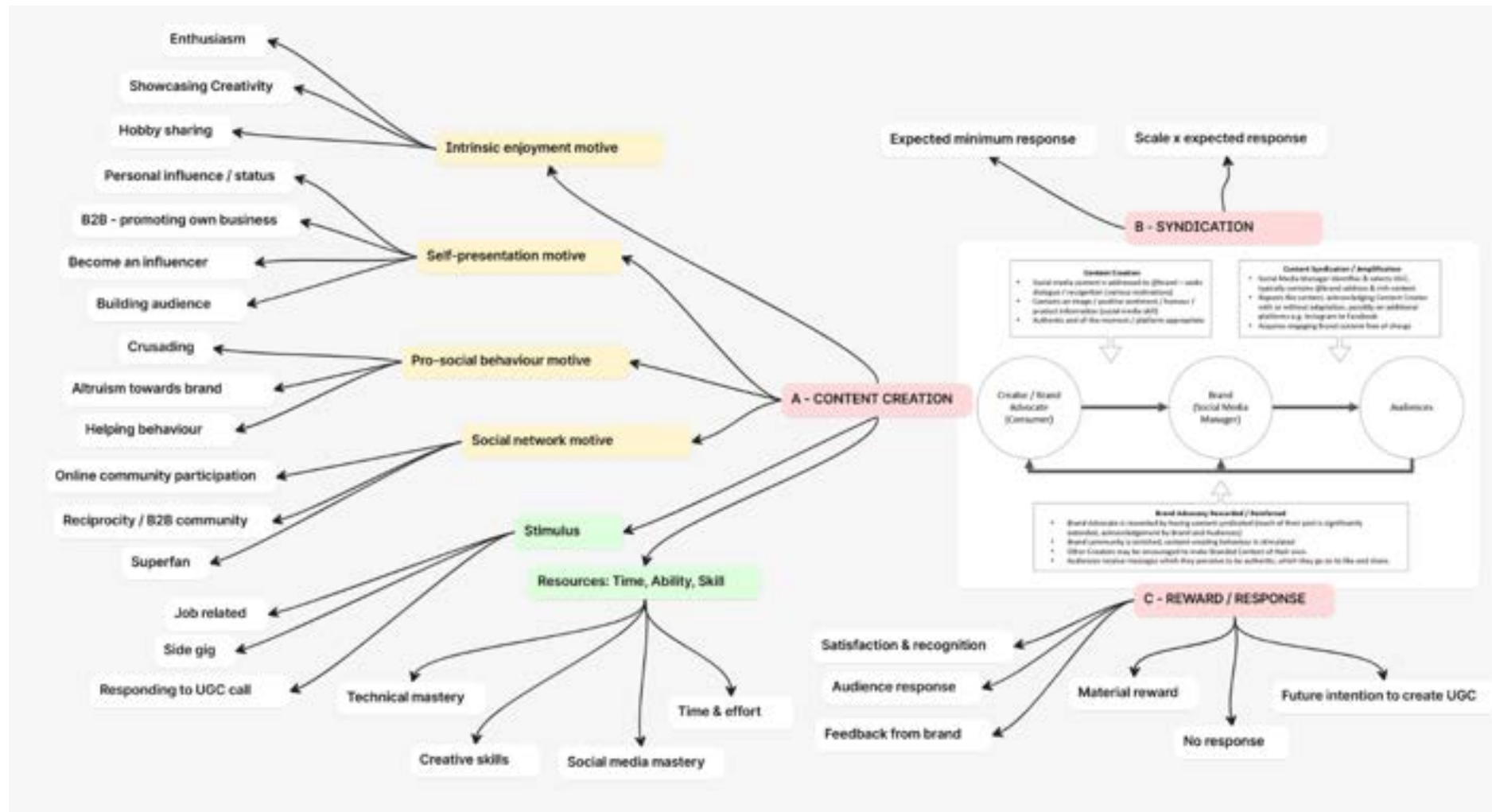


Figure 20 Emergent Themes

4.1 Who are the Content Creators?

This section explores the characteristics of the research subjects. The research participants were recruited in the context of the role they performed at the time of the study – i.e. Content Creator (CC), Social Media Manager or Practitioner (P) or in some cases where they had a hybrid role Practitioner-Creator (CCP).

At an early stage of the data collection, it became clear that almost all of the subjects actually had multiple identities relevant to the study and everyone created content to some extent. While this was not entirely unexpected, the extent of it was surprising. Referring back to the literature, the characteristics of UGC creators seems to be an area which is under-researched. When exploring each research participant's experiences and responsibilities, it emerged that they had a complex range of online identities beyond their private selves; accounts inside and outside of work, whether within their work identity as an actor, broadcaster, lecturer or public figure, or in the context of a business, social enterprise or charity. CCP Anna is a good example of this. She runs an Instagram account connected to her day job, and also posts as her 'work self' on LinkedIn and Twitter. Facebook is entirely personal. She also runs a business with Instagram, Facebook and Twitter accounts. In addition she is part of a community organisation and shares responsibility for two social media accounts for that. In total she is actively posting on 10 social media accounts, using them in a range of ways. This demonstrates the complexity of identities and the challenge with classifying the research subjects.

The Content Creators in the study are mostly small-scale classified as Nano Influencers when applying Figure 5 Types of social media influencers (Campbell and Farrell, 2020) on page 28 or Figure 7 Types of Influencers (Hanlon, 2022) on page 29 which means that their following is less than 10K. The exception to this is CC Kelly who with 1.1M Facebook followers is classified as a Mega Influencer.

Section 4.1 concludes by ascertaining that the participants understood the terminology and had engaged in the phenomenon of branded UGC creating.

4.1.1 Content Creators use social media in their day jobs

The Content Creators – identified through their UGC-creating behaviour on their personal accounts often used social media in the performance of their 'day job' and posted on a variety of topics and niches. This is consistent with findings in the literature which indicates that it is advantageous for Content Creators to be connected to multiple networks (Liu-Thompkins and Rogerson, 2012)

CC Hattie for example explains that in her day job in journalism she is required to consider how her work can be promoted on social media. *'You've got to have an eye on what you can do for social when working on a story because we're trying to attract different audiences, and the best way to do that at the moment is through social platforms....it's part of the commissioning process now'.*

CC John who is Content Creator in his free time explains that in his day to day job in PR he primarily does long-form writing for the website and then promotes it on the appropriate corporate social media channels *'It's definitely a normal part of my work process.'*

Three of the participants could be described as being part of the burgeoning 'gig economy' which is characterised by short or zero-hours contracts, part time and remote working (Larsson and Teigland, 2020, p. 331; Nieken, 2022) combined with a business startup or 'side-hustle' – CCP Emma is a freelancer, and is paid by charities and corporates to produce content. CCP Pria works part time as a researcher and has her own food business which she promotes using social media. CCP Mark runs a retail business and lives his life on social media both for work and pleasure: *'I make content like breathing. I make it to promote my business and I'm just as likely to make it to express what I'm doing in my free time on my personal accounts. I don't really compartmentalise.'*

Social media platform preferences among these subjects were Instagram and Twitter for content creation, followed by Facebook and then TikTok and YouTube for consuming/following.

4.1.2 Social Media Managers create content by night

The Social Media Managers are similarly complex in their identities: – P Sarah has a background as a travel blogger and is self-taught. She has maintained her blogging while working as a Social Media manager in an agency *'as an individual, I'm the Content Creator – I have my blog on WordPress and I use Instagram'*. The two subjects with most seniority (P Drew and P Harry) could also identify as Content Creators, and while they were less likely to be making content for work, they both participated in social media content creation as part of their hobbies and personal lives *'I follow a lot of people in my hobby and sometimes post content about that – it's not very professionalised, and I like that'* [Harry].

Platform usage in a professional context was dictated by the nature of the client and the marketing strategy, but included Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube and Facebook.

There were exceptions to this – CC Robert works in Insurance and his day job does not involve any social media. Conversely P Ali who works on social media all day chooses not to use it much outside of work *'I use it a lot less than my friends. I have a private life, and I like that. I think I know too much about the dark side of it so I can't enjoy it quite the same. The people that I see all the time, the people I'm close to find out stuff about me by being with me, not online'*.

It is evident therefore that most of the research participants have a range of identities, present and past experiences within their practice which they were able to contribute to the study. While their selection for the interviews focused on one aspect of their identity, all could talk knowledgeably about the interplay between brand account management and UGC creators. Interestingly, CC Robert - who does not use social media at work at all – was one of the most opinionated about how small businesses should use social media content, showing clear commercial understanding of the role of brand-related UGC. All of the participants, whether practitioners or creators were to a greater or lesser degree 'creative' – encompassing a wide range of skills from photography and writing to baking and model making.

4.1.3 Verified UGC-Creating behaviour

As was identified in 1.4 Definition of terms on page 13, the terminology of branded UGC is neither universally agreed nor widely used by the general public. The phenomenon of branded UGC was explained to each of the research participants to establish whether they understood it conceptually. This was consistent by the approach taken by Advani & Gokhale (2023) when they included a definition in their survey about Branded UGC.

All of the CC participants understood the term, had seen examples of branded UGC in their social media feed and could identify instances of creating posts themselves that fitted the definition. This was cross-referenced by viewing their social media accounts – an important step to triangulate the data which enhances the internal validity of the data (Given, 2008). One participant went so far as to say it is 'mainly what I do' [CCP Emma].

All the participants classified as 'Social Media Managers' were conversant with the concept and the practice of resharing branded UGC. One of the interviewees also brought up the subject of paid Content Creators calling their work 'UGC' as identified in the literature review - Figure 4 Extract from UGC Creator Rate Card on page 27.

4.1.4 Attitudes to platforms

The participants were asked about platform preferences, thoughts and feelings. This is because the social media platform is the environment in which the UGC phenomenon occurs, and therefore the content tools and functionality, policies and particularly the algorithms have a direct impact on the Content Creators and the Social Media Managers. Furthermore, creators can be very dependent on their platform(s) of choice, a relationship that Yan *et al.* (2022) described as co-innovation.

Several of the participants referred to the changing rules of the social media platforms and the sense that it is getting harder and harder to get content seen without paying. This is likely to continue, with

more platform algorithms becoming more like TikTok which focuses more on what users like than who they follow (Dentsu, 2022).

Both the creators and practitioners had a negative attitude towards the platforms and the way they were developing in relation to UGC. The concerns centred around these themes:

- Increasing complexity
- The decline of organic reach
- The rise of advertising and sponsored content

CCP Emma's comment is typical: *'I don't like a lot about any of them. My favourite platform is Instagram. I used to prefer that platform because there was far less advertising than Facebook and it was about sharing really nice images. ... Obviously, it's changed now. I still enjoy using it to a degree. I think we've messed up the algorithm a lot on it.'* Despite the negativity, all of the participants accepted that social media was still the best way to connect with people and find out what was going on.

Whatever the Content Creators or Social Media Managers may want to do, the way the platforms operate and monetise is a very significant factor in the future direction for UGC.

P Harry is most in tune with the evolving strategies of the competing platforms because his business involves trading influencer-produced content. He believes that UGC represents a significant commercial opportunity for brands because UGC is cheaper and more effective than commercially produced content. *'The gap between what they would have used to pay and what they can get away with paying for UGC is immense.'* P Harry is watchful of this phenomenon and doesn't particularly welcome it, as his business model involves monetisation of the professional Content Creators' work. He also sees it as exploitative as the small Creators do not have any professional representation or rights management and typically little or no financial compensation. *'YouTube have always been very bullish about how they support creators and Zuckerberg has earmarked a lot of cash for Facebook creators, but it's not real - it's just marketing. Right now, I wouldn't say it's anything more than just positioning in the market.'*

4.2 A - What motivates Content Creators to make branded UGC?

This is the largest section in the findings and concerns motivational dimensions. The ‘Motivation’ classification tends to concern goal-directed arousal such as anticipated reward, desire to be part of a community, or wish to enhance status by self-presentation (see 2.4.5 on page 34). Understanding what motivates Creators to make UGC is fundamental to the research question, however motivation may be subconscious, and it was evident that when the questions about motivation were asked, it was the first time some of the Creators had considered why they make content.

Some types of motivation are harder to recognise and admit because they are socially embarrassing – for example it would be unusual for someone to confess that they were ‘virtue signalling’ – the conspicuous mentioning of products or brands to impress others of their moral or social conscience (Wallace, Buil and de Chernatony, 2020). Consequently, it was necessary to infer the motivation from the data in some instances.

The Content Creators tend to be prolific in their posting, and the research found that the motivation to create post ‘A’ may be entirely different to post ‘B’. Most were trying to achieve different things from their various platforms and accounts, so this is far from one-dimensional. Frequently it was apparent that the Creator was simultaneously motivated by one than one factor – for example “*I want to build my audience, and shine a light on the work done by X*”.

Four principal motives will be discussed in this section – intrinsic enjoyment, self-presentation, pro-social behaviour and social network motive. Each of these has sub-themes which emerged from the data.

4.2.1 Intrinsic enjoyment motive

In this study, intrinsic motivation was often the first motivation to be expressed by the subjects and occurred frequently in the data. When the participants discussed the act of creating their UGC (writing, photographing, composing the message) they did so using emotive language and means of expression indicating that they felt passionate about this reason to create content.

Intrinsic Enjoyment – for the sake of creation – (see 2.4.2 on page 32) means that the act of creating the post is self-oriented and making the content is inherently enjoyable or rewarding in its own right. Intrinsic satisfaction is typically reported by people who are technically skilled, creative or both (Berthon, Pitt and Campbell, 2008). It has found to be a leading motivation of professional Content Creators who particularly in the aftermath of COVID-19 seek the ability to express themselves (Florida, 2022).

CC John articulated his intrinsic motivation as more of a compulsion or catharsis: *'There's.. a relief, when I've got the thoughts in my head that go mad, or my neurons are firing because I'm so excited or upset about [the subject of the post] or I'm so super angry about it. I just have to get it out there.'*

The way he describes his 'neurons firing' and a range of emotions that he wants to express through his writing indicate the role his UGC performs in his creative life.

Other participants refer to their content creation as being more like a quiet intense focus. Research into creativity describes the state of 'flow' as a state of deep concentration and absorption that comes from the act of making something (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014) closely connected with the attribute of creativity and curiosity (Schutte and Malouff, 2020).

P Drew explains how the stages of creation and engaging with the community fit together: *'I love taking photos of the things I've made - being able to do a really good photo is it's a big deal. And then having the engagement - it's really validating.'* She goes on to explain that she believes that the engagement she gets back on the post is a reflection both on the item she made, but also on the quality of the social media post. In this instance, the social media post is a creative device being used to story-tell another creative output which is the creation of a model, with the inclusion of product mentions (which makes it brand-related UGC). Previous research found that the demonstration of individual competence or 'achievement' was a strong motivation to post on social media (Luarn, Yang and Chiu, 2015). This could take the form of artistic or creative merit, or thought leadership, both of which emerged as themes.

Several of the subjects explained that the act of creating was more important than any response. CC Sara said she used her blog as a diary and a way of expressing herself. This is consistent with the 'documenting or archiving' motivation (Bardram and Langheinrich, 2010; Luarn, Yang and Chiu, 2015). Although her content is a blog which includes extensive brand mentions, she claims that she would still write it even if it didn't get much engagement as it is *'her baby'*. Although the participants claim not to care whether they get much response, it is possible that they are practicing a self-protection strategy which has been described as an attempt to 'avoid the unpleasant psychological consequences that result from a decision that turns out poorly' (Larrick, 1993). In this case the decision (to invest time and creative effort) into something which may not gain the desired outcomes could be viewed as a risk. Studies have indicated that getting less positive feedback than others on social media can lead to feelings of rejection (Stsiampkouskaya, Joinson and Piwek, 2023). Previous studies have shown that social media users hope to obtain positive judgement from others, as it improves life satisfaction (Yang *et al.*, 2013) Therefore adopting a stance that the "response doesn't matter" acts as a self-protection buffer against disappointment.

For CC Mudiwa, even the choice of the company to target for UGC is part of the creative process, as she chooses locations which either make her outfits look good or fit well with her lifestyle and personal branding: *'I feel like I'm someone who really is into aesthetics. So when I do choose a restaurant, I first research it to see what is the vibe, what is the aesthetic of the place.'* The fact that the target for her UGC is selected this way indicates that the creative act takes priority over any attempt to connect with a brand when she is making lifestyle content.

4.2.2 Self-presentation motive

Social media creates an opportunity for people to communicate their positive attributes to others (Choi and Seo, 2017). It has long been understood that people carefully manage the impressions others have of them to have a more favourable outcome in their interpersonal relationships (Leary, Kowalski and Leary, 1986; Toma, 2016). In contemporary society, social media output represents a significant dimension of this presentation management (Kreling, Meier and Reinecke, 2022). This section encompasses both self-presentation and self-promotion.

In motivation theory, self-promotion is classified as one of the Human Need Satisfaction categories – see section 2.4.2 on page 32. Branded UGC is sometimes created with the aim of attracting attention to the Creator, promoting them to the brand or others in the audience. Here the effect is the main goal (Berthon, Pitt and Campbell, 2008). Successful participation in most social contexts requires that one is seen as competent, likeable, and having thoughts and accomplishments which are admirable - however boasting is seen as an unattractive character trait (John, 2021).

Consequently, although it is a legitimate and pragmatic communications motivation, it is somewhat less likely to be self-reported by the research participants. There were, however, instances where the participants admitted a self-promotion motive. For example CC Kirk, who works in the Performing Arts said he had made content because he knew it would appear in places that would benefit him, acknowledging that his was a fiercely competitive industry (as if to excuse this 'pushy' behaviour as a necessity).

While Content Creators were slow to own that they had created content for self-promotion, Practitioners believed they observed self-promotion in action in their online communities. The themes which emerged in this category were: Personal influence and status, promoting a business or commercial venture of their own and building an audience for their social media platform.

Within the self-presentation theme, three subcategories were identified; firstly personal influence, status and image-building, secondly promoting a business or venture, and thirdly building an audience/becoming an influencer.

4.2.2.1 Personal influence, status and image-building

A theme that emerged from the data was one of elevated status by engaging in branded UGC creation. CC Robert revealed his enjoyment of the increased status afforded by his social media account. He talked about being consulted by business owners and the local council, which in his own words gave him a '*voice of power*' which he hoped to use to make things better. CC Kelly is clear that her channels are there to support her identity as a thought leader and not with a view to monetisation despite her Mega Influencer categorisation.

P Drew observes this status-enhancing behaviour among the UGC contributors in her brand community. She believes that having a UK/University location in a post is a prestigious thing, and elevates the status of the posters who are largely international. This is consistent with research which found that social media users regularly use location information to manage impressions and build an image (Luarn, Yang and Chiu, 2015). CCP Pria explains how she used social media to manage an existential crisis. Having just had her third baby she found herself at home with three small children and struggling with the loss of the status that her career had afforded her. Her identity had been linked to her job and she used her social media first to build a new identity and connect with others and then leverage that to start her own business. UGC was part of the content and served the purpose of establishing her as a creative and business owner thereby (in her eyes) enhancing her status.

In contrast, P Harry who works with professional Content Creators says '*I don't tend to work with the kinds of creators who it is obvious that fame and ego and recognition are a key part of it. I mean, they exist – but they aren't the ones I want to do business with.*' But asked whether he sees status and fame motivating people in his industry he says he has seen it, particularly among young people, which he attributes to naivete or a desire to overcome some challenge in their personal lives.

4.2.2.2 Promoting own business or venture

As explored in the earlier findings on Content Creators 4.1 on page 70, several of the participants are entrepreneurs. This had a bearing on their motivations to create content which mentioned other companies. Several mentioned the experience of being on the receiving end of branded UGC. A participant who is both a Content Creator and a practitioner observed of UGC that it is really useful, in fact believed that the current social media algorithms meant that UGC was now the only way of getting content seen. '*So unless we get that we kind of dead in the water.*'

On this theme, CCP Pria also made the observation that the algorithm dictated whether the audience would see the content, not whether your content or your business was any good '*The power is in the hands of your community.*'

4.2.2.3 Building audience / becoming an Influencer

As we have seen, the number of followers a person has is one of the ways their status as an influencer is classified (see 2.3 on page 26) and is generally thought of as a key performance indicator factor in social commerce (Jin and Youn, 2022). Consequently the acquisition of followers is generally understood to be a positive thing for Content Creators.

Creating UGC and tagging in a brand with a large following is potentially a way of eliciting new followers for an account and increasing the reach of the post. If the (brand) account with the larger following were to Like or Share that UGC, the reach of the post and interaction with it will increase exponentially. The Creator's account handle would be exposed to a large following, making it more likely that some of those people will elect to follow the Creator's own account.

This is a practice mentioned by three of the subjects, all of whom are Practitioners, which suggests that their professional understanding of techniques for building an audience are being applied to their personal UGC-creating behaviour. P Sarah states *'one of my posts on Twitter where I've mentioned them, and not only will it be shared in their like channel and they say thank you, like, "we appreciate the work that's done...that's gone into this" and then they've got a big following, so I have people kind of liking the tweet and retweeting it themselves. So that kind of drives traffic back to me.'* She goes on to explain that she knows this because of her job as a Social Media Manager.

Developing a large audience is a prerequisite for monetisation. CC Kelly who has an audience in excess of 1 million on Facebook thinks of this as a future income stream. As another practitioner puts it: *'It's the business they're building. The audience are an asset that builds up over time and they can make money'* [Robert]

Mudiwa also wants to build her audience but in a specific targeted way: she is trying to reach out to the brands to showcase her skills with a view to getting work with them: *'If I did have a very positive experience, I will caption it in a way of showing that this is somewhere you should go to. But most of the time I caption it as an experience to show them [the brand] what I can do.'* She is seeking commercial opportunities by getting the brands to be aware of her, rather than seeking to build her follower base.

4.2.2.4 Changing perceptions

The theme of changing perceptions emerged from the data and encompassed the concept of trying to change perceptions of the person creating the content, or on a topic they closely associated with. In both instances, brand related UGC was one of the types of content utilised to achieve this outcome. This motivation was identified in the literature as perception change to alter opinion, to have a specific effect on a target audience (Berthon, Pitt and Campbell, 2008).

Organisations commonly use storytelling techniques to communicate meanings aligned to their brands to reinforce or change perceptions, and this can often be particularly effective when those stories are co-created with their consumers (Bansal, Spais and Jain, 2022) however brand alignment is key to a successful outcome. Similarly some Content Creators may, on a conscious or subconscious level choose to create UGC drawing upon brands which positively reinforce the identity or self they are trying to communicate to the outside world.

Reflecting on Content Creator motivation in the communities she manages, P Ali observes *'I'd say that if a brand aligns with their values and their ethics as a person, I think it helps them to build more credibility for themselves, because not only are they supporting a brand, which they believe in, it's also beneficial for them because people will come to them because they're interested in that aspect. For example, if they're vegan or if they're interested in sustainability, and they're recommending a brand which is really strong, recycling and being sustainable, they kind of it reflects their values back to them.'* In this way, the Content Creator borrows brand associations which over time accrete their own identity.

4.2.3 Pro-social behaviour

Pro-social behaviour is a broad class of behaviour defined as having costs for the self and resulting in benefits for others (Wittek and Bekkers, 2015, p. 579). Exhibiting pro-social behaviour in a desire to create content which helps others (Choi and Seo, 2017) was identified frequently in the data, expressed primarily as the desire to support a brand and help them to establish fame or success but also to help the audience become aware of the brand or benefit in some way from a such discovery. Other forms of pro-social which also involved brands included 'crusading' behaviour – for example urging people to change behaviour (for example shop locally, eat vegan food, employ neurodivergent people). There were two clear subcategories in this motivational theme which were brand-directed altruism and crusading/activism.

4.2.3.1 Brand-directed altruism

It is widely understood that positive word of mouth helps businesses to flourish and that when a business has attributes that an individual values and wants to support, they can become evangelists in favour of that company (Panda *et al.*, 2020). Every Content Creator in the sample mentioned helping business, and helping their audience connect with those businesses.

P Sarah spoke about a time she made content motivated by a desire to support the brand and inspire her audience to seek it out: *'I would probably say it was to nurture the brand. So my last blog post was, [about] a pop up event in London...and I thought it's a cool thing. So I wanted to talk about how fun it was. I wanted to inspire people, and educate them as well... And because I thought the*

brand had done such a good job.....I guess in the back of my mind, I hoped that people would then choose to go off of the back of my post.' [Interviewer] *'So you would you say you were hoping to support that company by giving them some promotion?'* [P Sarah] *'Yeah, absolutely.'* This example demonstrated altruism towards the brand together with a motivation to entertain and educate her audience.

P Minnie explained her UGC experience relating to an author. Having read a personal development book on holiday and feeling inspired, she was moved to tell others about it on LinkedIn. Prompted to consider whether she hoped to support the author by doing this, she said *'I follow them on social and I like them, so yeah it's kind of a 'thank you' and to lift them up.'* She also revealed that she imagined them receiving the alert on their LinkedIn account and becoming aware that she (P Minnie) had created the post in praise of their book. The reward for this altruism via branded UGC is articulated by CC John. *'It's the way it makes me feel when I know I've supported a business – totally without payback – because I believe in them. That feels great. Like a random act of kindness.'*

An emphasis on creating branded UGC to benefit small, local businesses emerged from the data. While both large and small companies repost UGC in their social media feeds, small businesses are often seen as more trustworthy and authentic (Costa, 2022) run by 'real' people and linked to tradition, history and places (Schnell, 2013).

CCP Anna observed that she would rather support a small enterprise or start-up, or something that was physically located near to her. *'I don't need to make UGC for Tesco's – I'm irrelevant to them.'*

Creators with an international audience had good reason to prefer large international brands as targets for their brand-related content. *'I've got an international audience. If I'm recommending something like a bar of soap, I'd like my audience in Africa and Mexico to be able to get it too'* explains Kelly. CC Mudiwa describes a similar thought process and explained that when she made UGC featuring products from a Zimbabwean clothing brand from her home country, her UK audience was disappointed when they were unable to buy the products. She is now an ambassador for Superdry so her audience can buy the products she features.

The Creators making content which featured international brands did not do so with the aim benefiting the brand, instead it was to benefit themselves or their audience – however altruism can extend to helping others make favourable decisions about brands (Luarn, Yang and Chiu, 2015).

To sum up the brand altruism section, a practitioner point of view from Harry: *'Lots of people talk positively about lots of brands. They are literally out there in the world, showing the love... I think it happens especially at a small business level. They perhaps understand that there are people behind small businesses and they want to support one another.'*

4.2.3.2 Crusading / activism

Some participants were motivated to create content in part by a desire to communicate on a topic that could be classified as activism or a desire to promote change or comment on a societal issue or cause. They will sometimes adopt brands or create content in response to this perceived ‘problem’ and become evangelists (Panda *et al.*, 2020). This is consistent with a move towards a “post materialist” society where individuals seek a higher purpose on topics such as climate change or society rather than material desires (Inglehart, 1977; Grasso and Giugni, 2021).

At a local level: Subjects regularly created branded UGC in an effort to speak to their audience at a hyper-local, neighbourhood level or within their subject niche. The whole purpose of CC Robert and one of CCP Emma’s accounts was dedicated to the support of businesses, events and organisations their home town.

At a societal level: Again CCP Emma engages in purpose-driven branded UGC, promoting diversity for example and event which she chose to write about: *‘It’s a spoken word event that supports marginalised voices, people of colour, LGBTQ people, etc. So I just thought it was important that people know about it and go and support it next time.’* [Emma]. CCP Anna has created UGC which relates to environmental topics and culture.

These posts are likely to be motivated by a genuine desire to support issues but could also serve the purpose of managing perceptions of self – being seen to be an advocate. Here, perceived authenticity will be key to how it is interpreted by the message recipients (see 4.2.2 self presentation on page 76). This reflects the same increasingly common challenge faced by companies who decide to speak on social issues (Josephs, 2022).

Kelly explains that the main reason for her channels is to educate her audience – predominantly black African women – on parenting. *‘We have to hold on to our culture, but there are some damaging things we don’t need to pass down from generation to generation.’* This thought-leadership motivation for her account as a whole permeates the UGC she creates.

One of the participants brought up the subject of activism unprompted and rejected it, explaining that although she grew up in 1980s London and experienced racism as a woman from the Indian subcontinent, the subject of equality was not one that she wanted to get involved in via her online identity. *‘I’m 40 years old. So I don’t really have anything to say like I get a bit annoyed when people go on about it. [racial prejudice] I’m not saying it doesn’t exist in systematic ways. But I’ve learned to not allow that to hold me back. Or I pretend it doesn’t exist. And I just I just turn up anyway... I’m not an activist about anything. I’m not controversial.’*

In general, feeling heard and seen on social topics that were important to them motivated most of the participants to make content at some point, and this included branded UGC. This is consistent with the identification of 'expressiveness' as a motivation for social media participation found by Luarn *et al.* (2015).

4.2.4 Social network motive

The Social Network Motive - to communicate with others (Lee, Park and Han, 2014) was one of the biggest themes discussed in the interviews as it encompasses several concepts of community and connection – between the Social Media Managers and the Creators, and between the Creators and other members of their online community. Typically, these motives are underpinned by perceived social benefits (Zhang, Zhang and Liu, 2022).

The themes captured under this category are: online community participation, B2B ecosystem and reciprocity, obligation to the brand, social support, the superfan, informing and entertaining an audience and to be understood or heard and appreciated.

4.2.4.1 Online community participation

Active participation in an online community is a significant part of the motivation to create content (Advani and Gokhale, 2023) especially if that community exhibits a subjective norm of content-creating (Luarn, Yang and Chiu, 2015). Community management is a significant part of P Drew's job role and she observes *'There's a difference between user-generated content and community management. Community management is about people.'* Indicating here that in their view, UGC = Content whereas Community Management = Relationships.

In a similar vein P Harry talks about the professional Creators he manages, and explains that many of them are motivated by a desire to be part of a tribe. They are creating content not so much for recognition but to connect with others who share their interest, niche or sub genre. He believes that in many of the subcultures he sees on YouTube, where branded UGC is created in homage to big franchises like Lego or Marvel, there's no expectation that the brands should engage or reply. He goes further and believes there is no desire for the brands to get involved – the fan communities are self-sustaining. He goes on to give a commercial example from his own experience *'Warhammer are a large company and they make miniatures and they have a live stream called the "hobby roundup" and they pick images from social media that have been tagged with Warhammer community. And they will pick up the best ones and go "This is great." ...and then often, people will take a screenshot and post it say "I'm so glad that I was featured thanks for featuring me." but at no point, I think, do any of those people think that they tagged Warhammer to be to be a potential influencer.'*

4.2.4.2 B2B ecosystem & reciprocity

As identified in section 4.1 on page 70, there was some significant crossover in roles with the Content Creators, some of them having day jobs in Social Media, others running businesses, side-hustles or Freelancing. A concept which emerged from the interviews was the idea of reciprocity between Content Creators who were trying to promote their own businesses or organisation. This further fits in with the concept identified in the literature of 'horizontal communities' (page 46) which share a vocabulary and norms of behaviour and also the more general concept of reciprocity in online relationships whereby members of a community typically help one another (Quinton and Harridge-March, 2010).

Several participants reported making content which connected to other businesses which they liked and indicated being part of a B2B community. This could be classified as 'brand-related UGC' if we accept that the 'user' may be an individual posting on a business account. Both Content Creator and Practitioner subjects mentioned this – drawing little distinction between which 'hat' they were wearing when they made the content.

An example of using branded UGC strategically to create business relationships was provided by P Harry: *'One of the first things that we did when we moved to Northampton was that we made interviews with a few other local businesses to help be part of the community... it was just purely to become part of the business community so people knew us...[and now] a few people will share our posts to their stories and tag us in so it's kind of twofold - people creating content, their own content about us or sharing us.'* [P Harry].

A study by Stsiampkouskaya *et al.* (2023) found that when on social media, acquaintances are driven by the social norm of reciprocity and tend to give 'Likes' only to those who have 'Liked' their posts before which could have a bearing on brand-brand relationships.

CCP Emma who runs a community organisation's social media account is clear that they don't have a budget to pay for their content to be boosted, so there's no way they will have the means to do sponsored posts. So for them, it is very important that people interact to improve the organic reach of their posts and awareness of the organisation. *'The only way you can do it organically is with other people supporting you can't do it on your own'* she says. The idea of reciprocity emerged at this point - when talking about companies who did not reciprocate with content she said that while she wouldn't actively 'blacklist' them, she would in future turn her attention to those companies who follow and interact with her account. She explains *'it's not necessarily that I want something back from somebody, but it's like we're all in the same boat together.'* This came through most strongly from CCP Priya who used the analogy of 'putting the bins out' to describe making and

sharing UGC for others - which further reinforced the notion of neighbourliness and community.

'You might put your neighbour's bins out once or twice, but if they never return the favour, you're not going to keep putting their bins out.'

4.2.4.3 Obligation to the brand

The research found that sometimes, Creators made UGC out of expectation and obligation to the brand. From time to time, Content Creators with a relatively modest following may still be gifted products or experiences – at which point they may feel they ought to produce content which is positive in nature.

P Drew explained that she has hobbies and interests that involve brands, and she routinely tags those brands in when she has made something using their products. As a result, occasionally the brands gifts her products to look at for free so when they do, Drew feels obligated to create content about it and it is likely to be positive in nature due to a sense of obligation.

One of the subjects participated in an event which was targeted towards Content Creators. P Sarah used some of her vacation to go on a conference for bloggers in the Czech Republic. The event was partially educational but they were also taken on a range of experiences by the local Tourist Board. She maintains she was under no obligation to post anything about the trip, but as a travel blogger, and freshly loaded with skills and content it was almost inevitable that she would take the opportunity to do so.

Obligation can be problematic. CC Kelly explained how financial compensation made a bad experience with a product difficult for her. She was approached by a hair product start-up, and engaged to do a before/during/after product demonstration on her social account. After just two days of using the product, she found that it was damaging her hair. The sponsor insisted that she should say something positive about the product but as Kelly put it *'you didn't pay me to lie, you paid me to review and your review is bad!'* This reveals the conflict between authenticity / duty to her audience, and the requirement to fulfil an obligation to the sponsor can arise when gifting or financial compensation is involved.

4.2.4.4 Social Support

A theme which was brought up by two of the interviewees was a response to loneliness which was somewhat unexpected although it did appear in the literature (see 2.4.3 on page 33). This was not directly related to the creation of branded UGC but emerged as an extension to the conversations about motivation and reasons for using social media to connect to others: *'I didn't realise that I am building a community and I'm an influencer. I thought they were my friends.'* Another Content

Creator explains that social media is like a friend that is 'always awake' and gives the example of a time that she was in America on her own and feeling lonely, and was able start up a conversation in her community even though it was 4am back home in the UK.

4.2.4.5 The superfan

During the development of the conceptual model it was anticipated that some Users would be serial Content Creators, while for others, UGC-creating behaviour would be more connected to fandom or being a super-user or brand advocate for a smaller number of brands or entities (Barroso, 2020).

Community Manager P Taco had observed this fandom, explaining that members of the community he manages loved to talk to one another about their niche interest in the brand, and particularly valued any interaction with the brand *'they think it's a special experience to interact with a brand.'*

CC Olivia exhibited fan-behaviour when she created UGC relating to a theatre show. Her post featured an actress she followed who had a strong social media presence, she felt as though she had a closer connection after her post was 'liked' by the star. *'You know they've got this huge audience, but they've seen your post and read your words, and it's like, oh, they've recognised me.'*

4.2.4.6 Informing & entertaining their audience

Hedonic Motives are broadly categorised as – to please others with their content-creating efforts, even when it is brand-related (Lee, Park and Han, 2014). Several of the participants cited their audience as the main focus for their content creation.

CCP Emma explains that she wants to create content that people want to see - and believes the audience doesn't want to see self-promotion all the time. She maintains that supporting other organisations through UGC brings variety and relevance to her own content output. Here she is considering the totality of her content, showing that she uses branded UGC as part of her content strategy.

Other Creators were not strategic in their approach to using branded UGC but still motivated by entertaining their audience: Talking about a specific branded UGC post, CC Hattie explains she simply wished to entertain her audience by posting a photograph of herself and her friends enjoying an afternoon tea. Although she tagged in the venue, she was not motivated by a desire to give them publicity, it was purely entertainment value. She was however communicating consumption-related fulfilment in the post which infers recommendations (Luarn, Yang and Chiu, 2015).

4.2.4.7 To be understood or heard and appreciated

This theme is connected to the social network motive but differentiated by what the Content Creator gets back from the process. One of the participants explains that she considers a post successful when the message she intended to convey has reached the intended audience and been

understood. She values comments such as “*Yeah, I get this*” or “*yeah, this is really true*” as indicators that her meaning has been decoded.

Several of the participants employ self-disclosure in their content which has been found to be an effective way of building closeness on an online community (Lee, Im and Taylor, 2008). CC Olivia explains ‘*it is nice when people send a message or something a bit more valuable than just a ‘Like’. I’ve had messages from all across the world, but some of the stuff I’ve written for like Macmillan and you know about cancer and grief and all that stuff. I think that’s where I’ve got the most... not not numbers, but it’s just really heartfelt messages from people ... like I got this message from a man in Dubai that had read something that I’d written... and I just thought ‘wow’.*’

CC Hattie who frequently creates content about Mental Health explains that if she can prompt one person to get the help they need by sharing her own content, she believes it is worthwhile.

4.2.5 Intersecting motivations

Concluding the section on motivation, it is evident from the research that most posts do not have a singular motivation, the real situation is far more complex. CCP Mark frequently creates brand-related UGC on his private accounts as well as his retail business accounts. Using a recent example of a post which consisted of a photograph and text which tagged product and a retailer he explained that he was able to express his own quirky home-interiors aesthetic via his social media account, while also attempting to support another small business. This illustrates a complex interplay between attempting to support another small business and help his audience to find and purchase a sought-after product, while embodying his enthusiasm for collecting vintage, and showcasing his own distinctive taste in interior design and awareness of vintage home accessory trends, which by association promotes his own business selling vintage. In this single post we see at least five separate motivations at work.

4.3 Enabling factors

As discussed in the Introduction on page 9, as a rule of thumb only 1% of users in an internet community actively create new content (Nielsen, 2006). Content co-creation (where customers and brands create things together) is described as the highest level of the ladder of engagement (Chaffey and Smith, 2022, p. 172).

In this section of the findings, the enabling factors for content creation are explored. Themes captured here are both circumstantial and relate to the Creators’ personal attributes. It encompasses concepts of how the Creators carve out the time to make UGC, and how they acquired

the skills and competencies required to make successful content, and what opportunities may have prompted them to start making branded UGC.

The three factors explored here are time and effort, digital literacy and competency, and ability/skill.

4.3.1 Time & effort

Since content creating is time-consuming, it was interesting to explore how it fitted into the Creators' lives. Costly Signalling Theory proposes that individuals are prepared to engage in 'costly' behaviour if it results in conveying positive information to others (Choi and Seo, 2017). For this to take place, resources such as time or money are expended in a way that is visible to others and conveys a positive attribute to others (for example supporting the community, being intelligent or well-connected), resulting in some benefit to the signaller. The 'cost' incurred by Creators is primarily time, although they are also likely to have invested in a certain amount of equipment such as lighting or a higher specification of mobile phone.

Captured in response to the question 'How much effort goes into creating UGC' the Content Creators reveal that this can be a lengthy activity. CCP Priya maintains that she 'gives a lot of herself' when she makes content. This includes the subject of the content (her cooking recipes), the time to film and edit the piece. This is reinforced by CC Kelly *'So it takes a lot of time to plan content, create content, and I do a lot of content.'* When asked how much effort goes into the planning, CC Hattie says the question made her smile because she initially thought *'none at all'*, but when she thought about it she realised that she actually spent quite a lot of time on it as she was always looking for ways to connect, sometimes even waking up composing tweets in her head.

Professionalism and the changing functionality of the social media platforms themselves seems to be a context for P Sarah's reply to this question about how much time she spends on her blog. When she first started blogging, she would type the blog post, add some images and do a spell check, press Publish, and that would be it. However now, she does SEO research and keyword research. She checks her headlines has a good headline score. When she publishes it she then syndicates it on all her social media platforms to try and get it seen. *'It's kind of like overwhelming in a way because you've got all these different social media channels. You know, you've got to post it over Twitter and then Facebook and an Instagram. Of course Instagram is no longer just photos anymore. You've got the pictures, the reels, the stories it's almost like once you publish a blog post, like it doesn't end there. You need to think of ways to keep getting reshared....so it can take a lot of effort.'*

At this point it is worth explaining that of all the research participants, Sarah is the respondent who seems to take her content creation and content reach the most seriously. This is likely to be connected to her hybrid status as here she is applying principles from her day job as a Social Media

Manager to her leisure-time Content Creation activity. She earlier explained she was self-taught, so her perception of the rise in complexity may be in part due to her increasing understanding of the tools and techniques of social media marketing which she was unaware of when she started blogging.

For several of the participants, UGC creating was their primary hobby or leisure activity. For others, the content creation went hand in hand with another hobby (model making, fashion, cinema, travel). P Drew for example says that it's really closely associated with her other hobbies. She might spend a couple of hours constructing a model in the evening and then would post what she had made on social media and wait for the response. *'It's like a hobby within a hobby. Or maybe an online extension of my physical hobby?'* CC John explained how he would write his blog post on a Saturday, and then edit and publish it on a Sunday. This indicates that the UGC creating behaviour occurs in leisure time.

P Ali, speaking about her sister who is a teacher explains that she blogs about travel as a hobby. She is open to gifting but mostly wants to build a platform and communicate her message in a creative way. She has no intention to monetise the hobby.

CC Mickey found his way into content creation through his hobby and vice versa. He found it hard to make time for his fashion photography until he found an online community. *'There's something very different about getting positive feedback from hundreds of strangers – it's quite exhilarating..... The feedback gave me more of a reason to set up shoots and I got better and better at content.'* As he understood the platform better, he started tagging products and events into his posts and making branded UGC.

For some of the research participants, the content creation has become a second income stream. The content creation is an opportunity for material gain, but their social media channel also provides a opportunity to create content and an outlet for their creativity. CC Mark explained that the content creating had snowballed and become like a second job whereas CC Robert maintains that he never thought of it as a way to get a second income, but found that now he rarely had to pay for his entertainment because he tended to be gifted a lot of experiences in return for UGC. This indicates that what started as a hobby for some has become something more akin to a 'side hustle' – generally defined as a side job which you are passionate about, as opposed to a 'side gig' which is simply a second job for monetary gain (Amitabh, 2022).

4.3.2 Digital Literacy & Competency

To create successful branded UGC, the Content Creators require a high level of *digital literacy* – defined as the 'competencies and skills required for navigating a fragmented and complex

information ecosystem' (Eshet, 2004; Tinmaz *et al.*, 2022). Further, they need to exhibit a high level of *digital competence*. The European Union 'DigComp 2.1 Digital Competence Framework for Citizens' (Carretero, Vuorikari and Punie, 2017) describes five areas of competency

- Information and data literacy
- Communication and collaboration
- Digital content creation
- Safety
- Problem solving

Of these, strong communication and collaboration, and digital content creation are particularly important factors for UGC creation.

As identified in 4.1 on page 70, a large proportion of the Content Creators have working lives which equip them with some of the digital skills and understanding required to make UGC. For example CCP Anna creates UGC using her work account and says this is where she learned to tag other accounts in and say positive things about them – although the learning was not formalised in any way, she 'learned on the job'. She then began to make branded UGC on her small business and personal accounts too. *'It started out as a work thing but it sort of spilled over.'*

CC Hattie works in journalism and makes content as part of her work. CC John works in PR and writes for a living. CC Mickey started his career in IT but has moved into videography so has a high technical and creative competence. CC Robert works in finance but has been a keen photographer and writer for many years. Evidently all of these Content Creators have transferrable digital literacy skills which they apply to their UGC.

4.3.3 Ability / skill

All of the Creators in the study made branded UGC which consisted of copy, imagery or video content. A factor identified in the behavioural literature was the 'ability' to carry out an action. In the context of Content Creation, the themes which emerged from the data were categorised as creative skills, planning and social media mastery.

A wide-range of self-expression and creativity was reported across the research participants, Practitioners and Content Creators alike - with skills ranging from acting/performance artists, to crafting and model-making. CC Robert revealed that his first social media account was about a novel he had written, which he went on to combine with his music and photography. He therefore demonstrates that he has an aptitude for a wide range of media types. However, the research participants typically favoured either copy or imagery as their primary form of communication. Ultimately all used both when creating brand-related UGC on social media.

Some of the research participants are predominantly writers (Minnie, Emma, Sarah and John), preferring long-form content which they typically publish on their own blog sites.

They write about experiences and tag in brand accounts for example P Sarah specialising in travel has been blogging for 11 years. CC John specialises in entertainment, writing about shows and movies on his blog. He normally writes but often takes photographs as well, which he uses predominately for the social media posts to promote the link to his long-form blog. It is a typical practice to promote blogs using social media (Quandros, 2022)

Using photography or video content to augment blog posts makes them more visually appealing and drives up SEO which the participants understand *'I sometimes use pictures that I find on the internet but I think it's better to take photographs myself – it's more authentic'* says Sarah *'Blogs need pictures – they'd be pretty dry if they were text-only – I'm sure that would negatively impact engagement and search. I mean I suppose it's possible, but no. I wouldn't want to read that either.'*

Some of the Content Creators, especially those focusing on Instagram are more driven by their enjoyment of imagery – for example CC Robert and CCP Priya use photography and video as their primary type of content production and Instagram as their primary platform, with the aesthetic of their accounts acting like a showroom or exhibition.

Both Practitioners and the Content Creators understand the growing need to move to the moving image to get the content seen due to the changing nature of the algorithms and features of the social media platforms. CCP Emma is experimenting with video in her freelance work but is finding it difficult to get her clients to engage with the content creation. In discussing the type of content needed for the platforms P Drew says *'We're creating more reels and videos now because that's what we need to do to cut through'* Videos are more time consuming to create and edit, although using the native platforms to create the content reduces this (for example filming content on the phone with the TikTok app significantly reduces the production time and effort). Several of the Creators were less comfortable in this medium and acknowledged the need to adapt.

The planning, scheduling and repurposing content was observed as a theme, and covers a range of organisational skills which facilitate efficient social media practice, including planning, scheduling and repurposing content across platforms. Being in a position to create relevant UGC is partly dependent on anticipating or planning opportunities to create content or releasing content at the right time. Some of the interviewees were quite strategic about this – for example CC Robert normally thinks ahead and is already planning content for the next month, engaging with local places doing seasonal events so he can promote them before they happen. There is no point posting what you did if it's over and nobody else can go to. He sees this as part of the reason he is successful:

'Sometimes people don't post about it until it's happening. It's almost too late then'. Similarly CC Kelly invests a lot of her time in planning – because of her day job commitments she needs to plan and schedule her content so that it drops regularly over a period of time.

P Shahid and CC Robert both talk about zeitgeist and trend-spotting so their content is more likely to be successful: *'I also spy trends as well. Like you start to realise if there's a certain thing on TV or... a certain event that went really well then normally I'm like okay, and it sounds like the public like that kind of event. For example, bottomless brunches have gone crazy this year.'*

CC Hattie takes a more opportunistic approach to her feed, gathering content as she goes. Sometimes she will photograph something and keep it for when she hasn't posted for a while. She says she is always on the lookout for anything that will make an interesting post, especially for Twitter. *'I guess I'm looking for ways to connect with people all the time. So something odd happens. I might tweet about it...but I might not tweet about it for a few days until I remember.'*

None of the respondents discussed targeting brands for UGC as part of their planning phase, indicating that cultivating relationships with specific brands was not their primary concern.

Another social media technique exhibited by a Content Creator was repurposing material across platforms as well as an understanding of what different social media platforms need content-wise. P Sarah explains that she typically creates the blog first but then thinks about which platform the content will perform best on – so if her content lends itself to TikTok she will repurpose it for that platform. As Meta owns both Instagram and Facebook, business integrations now allow cross-posting and scheduling. CC Kelly takes advantage of this integration to make her content posting more efficient. She has recently found that her TikTok videos are easily repurposed on Instagram. This is a technique that helps Content Creators to be more efficient and productive, and to maximise the reach of their output.

Social media participation can be straightforward at the entry level but increasingly complex and time consuming as one becomes aware of the techniques and strategies available. One of the themes which emerged from several of the participants was their awareness of their own agency and skill as a social media Content Creator, and they understand that they have acquired a special skill. CC Robert, refers to small business owners when he says that he has found that many have a love/hate relationship with social media and find themselves conflicted. They know it is important but are so busy they don't have time to do it well. They don't understand it, their photographs aren't great and their posts don't get a very good reach because they don't follow good practices. *'So a lot of them need a bit of a push in the right direction or need me to show them a few little tricks and tips.'* This demonstrates that he believes his own skill in social media is superior to that of the

business owners he comes into contact within the course of making his UGC as well as an acknowledgement that SMEs are time-poor – which connects to his strong conviction that his work should be acknowledged (see 4.4.1 on page 94).

Technical understanding of how platforms work also emerges – CC Mickey explains that he has come across creators who have the skills to make a beautiful image but don't understand how algorithms work so don't use key words to post, resulting in poor reach.

Some participants had a low level of awareness of their own social media mastery but associated their positive outcomes with their ability to connect with their audience, suggesting they categorised their social media practice as a means-to-an-end rather than thinking of it as a skill in its own right.

4.4 B – Content Syndication

This section is concerned with what happens to the content after it has been made and posted by an individual. It starts with the practices of the Social Media Managers and how they come to identify branded UGC which they could repost, building on the earlier work by the researcher (Somerfield, Mortimer and Evans, 2018) and then explores the expectations of the Content Creators and the Social Media Managers in terms of how the Brand should respond. It also covers the emerging themes of company size and wider community interaction.

The Social Media Managers discussed how they sourced UGC to utilise on their accounts; Four of the participants described an almost identical procedure, which demonstrates that checking for UGC is a normal part of the daily routine of a Social Media manager. Each morning they search the relevant hashtags, location tags and mentions. They also check the accounts that they know post relevant UGC frequently and check any alerts they may have set up on their social media dashboards. They find content they can use, evaluate it. If they decide they would like to use it, they ask the Content Creator's permission and then repost them on their page.

The decision-making process is consistent with the 2018 study which found that image-led UGC was valued by Social Media Managers for its authenticity and story-telling attributes (Somerfield, Mortimer and Evans, 2018). *'The point [of this] should be fairly obvious, which is to give our audiences a slice of life as it were ...to get across the authenticity of the [experience] and also to cover things that we wouldn't be able to necessarily cover because we can't be everywhere - user-generated content is very important in that regard, because if they put up the photos, we can we amplify that to more people. ...If we've spot something that we think might be interesting, we do a*

few checks like, is it actually one of our community members?... Is this image high enough quality to share? Like people didn't mind - 95% of people would say "yes, you can share my stuff".' [P Drew]

None of the Social Media Managers interviewed used a third-party platform to solicit or manage the UGC from their communities. P Drew had experimented with a system but found it more difficult to keep track of who said what and where. She believes that keeping the activity on the native platform gives visible accountability and encourages participation from others in the community.

All the practitioners gave examples of calls to their base for UGC contributors, in particular photography. Some of the accounts typically run event-driven 'shout-outs' for content – for example inviting the audience to tag them in if they are attending an event, or celebrating a holiday which is relevant to the brand. Other times they have encouraged posts which are more related to product usage or visual representations of their brand.

P Taco explained that his team recently created a post which asked the audience to share what they had made using packaging – he works for a brand with a long automotive heritage. This is directly comparable with the Starbucks White Cups campaign discussed in the literature on page 39. They also attached previously submitted photographs to the post to help illustrate the meaning. The activity stimulated a good response including several posts that were reshared by the brand.

CCP Priya solicits UGC via an on-pack message *"please share your creation on your social media, we'd love to see"* including her social handles. This way she is able to acquire photographs of her product in use.

The subjects were asked whether their content creating was ever in response to an explicit invitation and almost all said yes. Most had responded to an unincentivised call for content. CC Robert argued that businesses should ask for this content more often, and should reward it with a low-value item (he suggests a free coffee). *'The whole point of social media is you want new eyes on it all the time.'* He demonstrates that he understands the concept of unduplicated reach, and the idea that existing customers are more likely to have prospective customers in their friendship group, and therefore make it worth the incentivisation.

Not everyone agrees though. CC Anna says *'It puts me off to be honest...I wouldn't put up a picture of me drinking a can of Coke on my own socials in response to ... like a competition or something... because that feels a bit cringe.'* She goes on to suggest it might depend on the language and context. She might respond if it was something she cared about and felt authentic, but would not do so if it was purely in response to 'bribery' as she saw it. She considered that behaviour to be embarrassing.

'I will share a picture of my dog dressing up at almost every opportunity. You only need to hint. I'm there and we're in it to win it.' [PCC Mark]

4.4.1 Feedback expectations – Creator perspective

To test some of the stated motivations for Content Creators and to examine ideas such as gratitude and reciprocity, the content-creating subjects were asked what they expected to happen as a result of their post publication.

The highest level of response-expectation was observed in CC Robert who definitely expects his content to be both acknowledged and reshared by the brand, saying that for him it was an “unwritten rule” that if he featured a brand on his account, he wanted to be sure they were going to share it to their audience. He qualifies this by explaining that he uses social media activity as a predictor of whether they are likely to reshare content, believing it was possible to tell from their social media accounts how active they were.

Most of the respondents had a high expectation that the brand should acknowledge that their post had been seen (by a ‘Like’). Blogger P Sarah expects feedback saying *‘They should acknowledge that, I think, straight away. That's just the polite thing to do.’*

Apart from CC Robert, the participants had a lower expectation that their content would be reshared, believing it should be reposted ‘some of the time’ or ‘in an ideal world’. A reshare was considered the ‘best case scenario’ The expectation of a reshare did seem to be connected to the resources expended on the content – so the more time, effort and skill had gone into creating the post, the higher was the expectation of a response.

Some of the respondents made excuses for the brands if they did not acknowledge their post: *‘Maybe they're not on Instagram that much. ...they might not necessarily see it, they might not have time.’* Others were clear that they did not post in order to get acknowledgement so were ambivalent about it.

At the lowest level of response-expectation was CC Kelly who said of brands *‘Reply, don't reply. I don't care. I didn't make it for you, it was for the benefit of my audience.’* This participant has over a million followers so when she posts, she typically gets hundreds of comments and thousands of likes from her audience – so it is to be expected that brand response is not her concern.

Although the participants exhibited a range of expectations of response to their content, the data revealed a clear hierarchy of response desirability. At the bottom end, requiring the least effort and performing the function of an acknowledgement was a ‘Like’. The next level was a like and a positive comment. The next level included a reshare into the same platform, and the highest level of

response was resharing into other platforms or beyond the post (for example product gifting or exclusive access) see Figure 21 Hierarchy of response desirability [author].



Figure 21 Hierarchy of response desirability [author]

The extent to which each of these levels of brand reaction was desirable to the Content Creator mirrors the generally understood ‘value’ of each of these reactions – with a ‘like’ carrying a low weighting and a ‘share’ carrying a high weighting (Kaur *et al.*, 2019).

4.4.2 Feedback expectations - Social Media Manager perspective

When brand-related UGC occurs, it is the SMMs or executives that respond on behalf of the brand either in-house or in an agency managing the account on behalf of a client. The research found that SMMs’ practices around UGC were influenced by:

- Policy or instructions from a client
- Practice among peers (e.g. in an agency setting)
- Observations of norms on other brand accounts on social media
- Own instinctive response to the posts

Few of the SMMs had formal training or instruction on UGC but had learned by doing, and practicing self-development. This was consistent with the findings of Olsson & Bernhard’s (2021) study of female entrepreneurs’ adaptations for increased digitisation and social media usage. One practitioner who used a dashboard to manage their social media pages believed that the way the dashboards highlight the notifications, messages and tags prompts action from the community manager.

The data suggested that the level of interaction should be proportionate to the effort expended to create the content. If the UGC is a simple interaction such as a comment, a low-key approach would be adopted: *‘We can ‘Like’ it and things like that. Even comment, it’s not so much of a big thing to comment like that as much as sharing but it’s still important to let them know we’re grateful and that we’re thankful for them. [P Ali].*

In contrast a more elaborate piece of UGC should warrant a more thoughtful brand response. Here P Shahid suggests that high level UGC would indicate someone could become a co-creator for the brand which reflects the top end of the 'Ladder of engagement' discussed in 2.7.2: *'I would say you should reshare if the quality is good enough and I think if you do have any upcoming collaborations, consider them. If someone's taking the time to write about your brand, then that's someone who you want to keep in contact with for sure.'*

This demonstrates that the SMMs and the Content Creators are in agreement about the value of different responses described in Figure 21 Hierarchy of response desirability [author Hierarchy of response desirability].

4.4.3 Scale as a determinant of expected response

Response expectation is differentiated by scale – several of the research participants did not expect a large brand to reply or acknowledge a post as much as they did an SME. In fact larger brands are more likely to have strategies for managing content including UGC (Razina *et al.*, 2019) and would be more likely to have dedicated resources to manage their social media platform than a small business.

P Sarah explains *'I would expect that the company would acknowledge the post in some way. I really like it when they kind of reshare it on their channels. Depends on how big the brand is. I would expect that if they are massive brand that loads of people talk about, I would hope for them to reshare my stuff, but I wouldn't expect it.'*

Two main themes emerged which were central to the idea of small-scale businesses being expected to respond; firstly gratitude – the respondents thought that small businesses 'needed' their positive UGC because they had limited resources to market themselves. Secondly personal interaction – the Content Creators had more of a sense that small businesses have identifiable/relatable people behind their social media accounts.

'I think I expect a small company to be more grateful somehow, more appreciative.' Says CC Olivia, *'I think when it's a small company I sort of expect the owners to get to hear about it or even be the ones running the account. When it's some big company it doesn't really feel like people at all. Although then if they reshare it's a bigger deal.'*

Two of the practitioners identify another dimension of UGC practice relating to business scale - the appropriation of content without permission. This is perceived as particularly unforgivable if done by a larger organisation, sometimes resulting in a backlash.

4.5 C – Brand Advocacy Rewarded / Reinforced

The final stage of the conceptual model Figure 1 Proposed Virtuous Cycle of Branded UGC on page 11 conceives a feedback loop flowing from the Audience and the Brand to Content Creator which rewards and reinforces the brand advocacy in the following ways:

Benefits to the Content Creator

- Acknowledgement by Brand and Audiences
- The reach of the original post is extended when it is shared in the Brand network

Benefits to the Community

- Audiences receive brand-related messages which they perceive to be authentic and go on to engage with
- Content-creating behaviour is stimulated

In this section, the themes around the feedback loop are explored to test the conceptual model, focusing on the effect on the Content Creator and their branded UGC-making intentions. The consequences when the brand does (or does not) respond to the brand-related UGC are explored. This is a critical part of the conceptual framework as it is the ‘reward’ that is expected to compensate the UGC act and reinforce the future behaviour. As Creators have a variety of motivations, the reaction to feedback was expected to vary from individual to individual.

Recognition that a desired behaviour has been performed should function as a symbolic reward for those who are motivated by seeking social status (Choi and Seo, 2017). All the content-creating participants had experienced UGC acknowledgement. They describe the point at which the company reaches out to them and report pleasure and a feeling of achievement. Interestingly most of them interpret the acknowledgement in the context of validation of their creative act rather than in the context of them for supporting the brand.

CC John explains that if he has created some UGC and the brand says they want to use it, he finds it validating, both in terms of the brand interaction he was posting about (use of a product) but also that the post he made is worthy of sharing. CC Mudiwa explained her feelings of excitement at having her work reshared and that she felt ‘reassured’ when brands comment on her posts: *‘at least they see my work and they were appreciating it.’* CC Hattie described the way it made her feel closer to the brand – when Snagtights.com replied to her Tweet and it made her feel valued as a result of their response.

The sentiment was very positive – a summary of emotions expressed by participants can be found in Figure 22 below.



Figure 22 Brand response word cloud

From the literature we expected to see the Content Creators anticipating that a ‘reshare’ would extend their own following and the reach of their post. This did not emerge extensively in the data however CC Mudiwa explained the benefit of her content being reshared by an account with many more followers: *‘I mentioned them, and not only was it shared in their channel and they said “thank you, we appreciate the work that’s done.” ...they’ve got a big following, and people were liking the tweet and retweeting it themselves. So that drove traffic back to me.’*

CC Lewis also mentions this benefit saying it definitely grows his audience when a brand reshapes his content.

4.5.1 Consequences of failure to acknowledge

The conceptual model presented a situation where the UGC was shared by the brand and therefore a positive cycle was initiated. This study also asked the question ‘What happens if the brand remains silent’. All of the Content Creators could recognise this situation and had experienced it themselves.

The research participants attributed the failure to acknowledge or share to three main factors (or combinations of the three).

- Failure on the part of the brand
- Time pressure / volume of interaction / did not see their post
- The content was not good enough

For some Creators the lack of response from the Brand feels like a rejection or a lack of care. P Sarah explained that she gets annoyed because she knows that the brands have social media managers (a job she does herself) so believes they will have seen the content come in and haven’t bothered to

reply, which to her reflects negatively on the brand. *'No, it's rude'* says CC Robert *'They aren't playing the game'*.

Some of the participants made excuses for the brand and speculated on what the reasons might be that the brand failed to acknowledge them – usually related to how busy they would be and the volume of correspondence they probably received. *'I know it's not personal. It's not that they've seen it and then they just probably either haven't seen it or they just don't have time to read all of this stuff.'* Says P Drew, who goes on to say that in the past when she has responded to a brand call out for UGC and the brand has not acknowledged or shared her post, she found it rude and disappointing but also wonders whether they ever saw it.

Some Content Creators interpret the lack of a response as a rejection of their work *'It would make me think that I've not created the content that is useful for people. Nobody likes it at all. Even the people that have been tagged in it. [This] would indicate that perhaps the quality of what I've put out is a bit rubbish or they didn't see it.'* [says CCP Emma] Similarly P Sarah says *'You do kind of wonder, you know, why wouldn't they share this is? Is it that my content isn't good enough?'*

All of the participants admitted experiencing feelings of disappointment if they got no response from a brand even if they earlier claimed it did not matter what response they got from the brand because they were making content with their audience in mind. If they had made specific content about the brand and directed it towards them (by tagging), or if they had responded to a call for UGC, the disappointment was exacerbated.

The data indicated that failure to respond would deter the Content Creator from making future content featuring that brand. *'I'm still a fan of hers'* says P Minnie *'but I probably wouldn't shout it out again.'* She explained that she feels she wasted her time, because she didn't get what she wanted from it. This shows that her motivation was not satisfied in the exchange.

Perhaps the response that encapsulates all of this the best came from CC Mudiwa who explains: *'I had done a whole video - I did a restaurant review and I had done a voiceover as well on that. So I did post on my Instagram and on my TikTok and it happened to blow up on TikTok a bit.'* This reflects a high time/effort level on her part, and a post that she perceives performed well. She goes on to share that the brand did not respond in any way. She didn't get a like, comment or reshare and was upset about it – to the extent that she considered taking the video down. In the end she decided to leave the video up but resolved not to go back to that place again.

This seems to demonstrate that the high time and effort plus the success of the post led the Content Creator to feel entitled to acknowledgement. When none came, it created negative emotions

towards the brand and made her want to withdraw her present content and any prospect of future UGC.

For others, the failure to acknowledge seems to feel more of a snub, to the extent that it affects the way they feel about the brand. Responses included that the CCs would 'think less of the brand'.

CCP Anna goes further and explained that she felt embarrassed for putting the content out only to hear nothing *'it made me look like a bit of a mug. I just don't feel the same way about them now because if you look at their [social media] feed it [seems to be] all about community...but they left me hanging. Also my audience can see that so the rejection is a bit public.'* This indicated that an aggravating factor was that the identity of this brand led her to believe they would be receptive to UGC from their community, but in here experience they were not resulting in cognitive dissonance.

4.5.2 Future intentions to make & use brand-related UGC

When asked whether they would talk about brands in the future, all of the respondents said yes they would, some citing convenience of social media as making this an easy thing to do, while others said that talking about brands and products was likely to continue to be a mainstay of their content.

A study by Choi and Seo (2017) found that public recognition of a person's goodwill was more likely to result in future acts of goodwill than private recognition, and that status-seeking individuals were more likely to engage in pro-social activity. By this logic, if a brand reshapes a post (public recognition), the creator would be more likely to go on to make more positive UGC for that brand (future acts of goodwill). In this study, none of the respondents stated that they would be more likely to make branded UGC as a result of public recognition for their efforts, although as Hareli & Weiner (2002) found in their study of achievement motivation, 'achievement strivings' do not take place in a vacuum, but rather in a social setting and this would likely be an uncomfortable admission – implying 'status seeking'. However, as a failure to reshare was seen to discourage future UGC creation (see 4.5.1 on page 98) it would seem logical that a creator is more likely to make content for a brand if they seek acknowledgement occurring in the community, and if they experience it themselves in response to branded UGC that they make.

From the point of view of the Social Media Managers, there was unanimous intention to use UGC in the future. Although professional influencers are expected to see continued growth, several of the practitioners expect a swing towards nano-influencers going forward in a bit for authenticity. P Sarah explains that a limiting factor on this at the moment is the adequate tools to engage with this at scale: *'I think smaller Content Creators are probably the key, the way forward... I think one of the challenges is [that] managing multiple nano influencers is just harder work, isn't it? You know, it's*

harder work to get in front of the same number of eyeballs. But, all of my instincts would be that that's going to get you better engagement and better outcomes.'

P Drew makes the distinction between paid for or 'professional Content Creators' and authentic / organic Content Creators and expects brands to start putting budget behind boosting that organic content *'I think for me it has to be authentic user-generated content. I think that people are so savvy now on what is not real. ... I've seen it recently - where [a person] bought a thing, made a review of it. And then the company has subsequently realised this review is really good and gone "Can we can we boost it?" and made it into a paid ad. So the piece was authentic... and they've thought "How can we put it in front of more people".'* He explains that particularly on Social Media he expects to see much more of this and expects it to be the future of brand work because the less authentic the voice, the less effective the work.

4.6 Chapter summary

The 20 interviews yielded sufficient data which was relevant for RQ1 and RQ2 to reach saturation. Initially coded to 44 nodes in NVivo (see Figure 18 on page 64), this was subsequently rationalised into 28 themes (see Figure 20 on page 69).

The interviews with the CCs, and the CCPs were able to answer **RQ1 What motivates Content Creators to create Branded UGC, and what do they expect in return?** to a large extent which permitted the development of four emergent themes for motivation which were Intrinsic enjoyment, Self-presentation, Pro-social behaviour and Social network motive.

What they expected in return was also explored from the CC, CCP and P perspectives.

Interviews with the CCP and P participants focused on **RQ2 How do Social Media Managers stimulate, use and react to Branded UGC?** Revealing that expectations were similar but approaches were informal.

The study also found:

- A high degree of intersectionality between CCs, CCPs and Ps
- Creative skill and digital competency were enabling factors in branded UGC-creation
- Expectations of brand response, which if not met, suppress future UGC-creating intentions
- Creators expected more from SMEs than large companies

The Discussion Chapter will explore the implications of the findings in the context of the extant literature, as well as the limitations of the study.

5 DISCUSSION

This chapter encompasses a discussion of the findings and key insights of the study in the context of the published research in the field. The implications of the study are explored, with consideration of the limitations of the study and recommendations for further research.

15 studies into branded UGC were identified in the literature review. The mainly positivist and quantitative body of research approached the topic of branded UGC-creation from a transactional stance with an emphasis on the effect of UGC on the viewer – for example whether it increased purchase intention (Kim and Johnson, 2016; Mayrhofer *et al.*, 2019; Park *et al.*, 2021)). The role of the Social Media Manager was not considered except for (Somerfield, Mortimer and Evans, 2018). In contrast, this qualitative, interpretivist study considered the opportunity for an ongoing relationship with the Content Creators by exploring responses and their consequences and found that the reaction of the Brand (via the Social Media Manager) did indeed have a bearing on future content-creating intentions. Further, the research methodology permitted a more nuanced and detailed exploration of the Content Creators' backgrounds, skills and commercial understanding which contributed new knowledge to this subject.

The study of motivation is an extensive field which intersects many disciplines, so the inquiry focused on studies into marketing communications and social media, specifically the motivation to create UGC. The literature tended to be situated within online community participation, with fewer studies about branded UGC creation, however six main theories are analysed in section 5.3 on page 106.

The industry literature search revealed limited guidance about the management of branded UGC despite the significant evidence that the topic has a growing commercial significance due to the increasing pressure from social media platforms to make companies pay for content reach. This presents an opportunity to develop some best practice for SMMs. The study set out to close this research gap, and explore what motivated individuals to create branded UGC, what response they expected from the Brand and how the actions of the Brand affected their future UGC-creating intentions.

Using a qualitative research methodology and exploratory design, *n.* 20 individuals with experience of creating or working with branded UGC were interviewed, and a thematic analysis applied to the data in pursuit of answers to these research questions:

RQ1 What motivates Content Creators to create Branded UGC, and what do they expect in return?

RQ2 How do Social Media Managers stimulate, use and react to Branded UGC?

5.1 Key findings

There were six notable findings from the study; one relating to the characteristics of Content Creators, one relating to motivation and the other four relating to the mechanics of brand-creator interactions when UGC occurs.

5.1.1 Content Creators are complex and highly skilled

The study found that there was a high degree of intersectionality between the Content Creators and the Social Media Managers among the research participants. These individuals had developed a complex set of creative skills and digital competencies and had a high level of commercial awareness. Previous studies into eWoM and branded UGC have tended to focus on the source characteristics of Creators in terms of their social media output or demographics (Han, Lappas and Sabnis, 2020) or with undergraduate students as research subjects (Halliday, 2016b). The findings of this study intersects with a theme in the Naeem & Ouzuem (2020) study into UGC which identified Content Creators who were in their 30's and 40's and had a relevant professional identity working with brands or marketing. This result suggests a re-framing of how we think of Content Creators: as some of them are skilled and marketing-savvy individuals who have multiple boundary-spanning identities.

5.1.2 Content Creators have four principal motivations

Four categories of motivation emerged from the data, those being intrinsic enjoyment, pro-social behaviour, social network motive and self-presentation. A theme which did not emerge in any meaningful way was material gain. This is a surprising and significant finding because where UGC is discussed in the practitioner literature, material rewards are suggested as a strategy to stimulate UGC (Myers, 2019; Carlese, 2020; Ricards, 2020; Barysevich, 2021). These findings logically suggest alternative approaches to UGC stimulation would be more effective especially as some studies found that monetary reward inhibited intrinsic motives (Zhao, Detlor and Connelly, 2016; Qiao *et al.*, 2021).

5.1.3 There is a clear expectation of brand response

When UGC is created in favour of a brand, it should be acknowledged. The minimum expected response is a 'like' (or platform equivalent) which is the base level in a hierarchy of desirability, rising to commenting and resharing. While this etiquette seemed to be understood by Content Creators and Social Media Managers alike, it had not been identified in the literature relating to branded UGC, although previous research has posited that parasocial interaction theory (PSI) can be used to mould successful brand-consumer relationships on social media (Labrecque, 2014). PSI theorises that consumers interact with online personas (e.g. brands) as if they are engaged in a two-way

conversation and expect the same interaction as if they were communicating with a 'real' person (Labrecque, 2014; Stern, Russell and Russell, 2015). The findings of this study therefore extend the idea that parasocial interaction theory should be applied as a strategy for brand-related UGC management.

5.1.4 Content Creators expect more of SMEs than of Large companies

When Creators make content for a small or medium-sized business they have a higher expectation of feedback and response. This finding is interesting because smaller businesses may be less well equipped and resourced to be responsive, and yet have more to gain from a positive relationship with their community on social media. This is consistent with a recent study which found that consumers had higher communications expectations from smaller companies, because they expect small companies to be warm and friendly, but don't have the same expectation from large companies (Wang and Aggarwal, 2019). Furthermore, small companies are perceived by consumers to have low marketplace power compared to large companies; they need to develop customer loyalty through warmth and service as they aren't in a position to leverage price or variety as a large company can, accordingly a low power status requires more communal behaviour (Rucker, Galinsky and Dubois, 2012) therefore when a small company fails to reciprocate communication, the consumer judges them more harshly than a large company. This could mean there is less of an imperative for large companies to respond to UGC, although if they do, the appreciation is likely to be far greater.

5.1.5 Failure to respond damages future branded UGC-creating intention

Following on from the expected brand response, a finding of the research was that when a brand failed to acknowledge or interact with the Content Creator, the future intention to make UGC in favour of that brand was inhibited. Further, in some cases the relationship with the brand was negatively impacted as well. This finding underlines the importance of a response strategy, particularly for small businesses because behaviour that violates expectations is disproportionately damaging (Aggarwal, 2004). This supports earlier research which found that small companies would be punished more harshly than large companies for failing to communicate, and that this included negatively impacting purchase intention (Aggarwal, 2004; Paharia *et al.*, 2011).

5.1.6 Social Media Managers' UGC practice is informal

Although the Social Media Managers thought that branded UGC should be acknowledged, none of the participants described it as 'policy' or 'best practice'. The only instance of a policy that was mentioned was in the case of an agency working for a client whose policy was NOT to respond to UGC. This is an important indicator that there is a need for the importance of response to be more widely understood in the industry.

Five of these six key findings inform and reinforce the need for a conceptual model of the Virtual Cycle of Branded User-Generated Content to be promoted to Social Media Managers. The main theoretical topics are explored further below.

5.2 Understanding the Content Creator

The literature review found that studies into the characteristics of Content Creators were principally concerned with demographics and social media statistics – the classification of CCs based on audience size being the most common (Voorveld, 2019; Campbell and Farrell, 2020; Starngage, 2021; Hanlon, 2022) with particular attention to the top end of the scale – celebrities and mega-influencers. Meanwhile research into the field of social media engagement tended to agree that users who created content were a small but highly engaged segment of the population (Nielsen, 2006; Shao, 2009b; Schivinski, Christodoulides and Dabrowski, 2016; Chaffey and Smith, 2017). This thesis contributed to the understanding of this small but disproportionately important 1% of ‘users who create’ described by Nielsen (2006), and revealed semi-professional identities. Far from ‘wannabe influencers’ the subjects of this study had a desire use their considerable creative skills to achieve a range of outcomes.

Furthermore, a large proportion of the Content Creators had social media management experience or responsibilities, and vice versa which had not been identified in the earlier literature. As lead users of social media (Jacobson, 2020), it is logical that Social Media Managers would themselves be Content Creators in their private lives, existing as they do at the intersection between social media consumers, social media influencers.

The reason that these findings are somewhat different to other UGC studies may be that the purposive sampling strategy in this case drew participants from online communities and the researcher’s professional network, resulting in a somewhat older demographic with more business experience (being further into their careers). In contrast to this there are concerns that many contemporary published studies have an over-reliance on convenience samples of undergraduate students (Wild, Kyrolainen and Kuperman, 2022), often justified in social media research by the notion that ‘younger’ people are heavy social media users (Xu *et al.*, 2012; Zhang *et al.*, 2014b) – which at the time of the research was probably true. As we grow up with social media, the age profile of high social media users extends well beyond the typical 18-25 window – in fact a recent study found that a quarter of all social media users in the UK fell into the 25-34 age group (Dixon, 2022).

A characteristic of qualitative research and non-random sampling techniques is that the results are not generalisable, however it should be anticipated that in the future, studies into social media usage will need to include a broader age range.

5.3 Analysis in the context of motivational theories

The literature review identified six main organising theories of motivation had been applied to UGC in previous empirical studies. These were: Functional Theory, the Human Need Satisfaction Framework (HNS), Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), the Stimulus-Organism-Response Model (SOR), the Motivation Opportunity Ability Framework (MOA), and the UGC Social Brand Engagement Model (USBEM) (see Table 2 Motivation Theories applied to UGC-related studies on page 37).

The thematic analysis of the data in this study identified four principal categories of motivation to create branded UGC, which were: intrinsic enjoyment, pro-social behaviour, social network motive and self-presentation. When reviewing the thematic nodes at a more granular level, three of the theories – MOA, HNS and UGT were useful for organising ideas and settling on terminology.

The most important of these, Motivation Opportunity and Ability Framework addresses both the factors that cause an individual to *want* to create content, and the enabling factors of “Opportunity and Ability”. In the findings of this study, these are expressed as ‘time and effort’, ‘digital literacy and competency’ and ‘ability/skill’ (see section 4.3 on page 86). Within the category of Motivation, themes emerged which seemed to have similarities with the HNS Framework (Intrinsic Enjoyment, Self-Promotion and Changing Perceptions) and UGT (Social Network Motive, Learning Motive, Hedonic Motive). Three of these terms were retained in the final aggregated set of principal motivations, with a fourth (pro-social behaviour) added as it was a theme that emerged strongly in the data.

One of the studies in Table 2 was by Lee, Park & Han (2014) which used Uses and Gratifications Theory to explore UGC. A more recent paper by Park & Lee (2021) seems to update this work and uses factor analysis to explore UGC sharing motives derived from literature. This paper is a recent mainly quantitative study of UGC in Korea and serves as an interesting comparison (see table below).

Factorised Motivations from ‘UGC Sharing Motives and Their Effects on UGC Sharing Intention’ (Park and Lee, 2021)	Comparable Motivation factor in this study
Self-Creation – a combination of ‘self-achievement’ and ‘self-enjoyment’	Intrinsic Enjoyment
Community Commitment – Creators can provide enjoyment and information to others and feel part of a community.	Social Network Motive (part)
Self- Expression Motive – a combination of ‘uniqueness’ and ‘self-enhancement’ – users create content to manage their	Self-Presentation

online impression	
Social Relationship Motive – this factor is mainly about interaction with others	Social Network Motive (part)
Reward Motive – this combines the concepts of ‘social reward’ and ‘economic reward’ – the users have a desire to become famous or make money	
	Pro-Social Behaviour

Table 3 Comparison with Motivation Factors from Park & Lee [author]

This comparative analysis which maps the ‘factors’ from the two studies shows that there is significant overlap in motivational themes. The main difference is the appearance of ‘Reward Motive’ as a factor in the Korean study and the ‘Pro-Social Behaviour’ which appeared in this study. The ‘Reward Motive’ category did include ‘social benefits’ as well as financial benefits, and as ‘pro-social behaviour’ can also be socially beneficial, it is possible that these categories may have some thematic overlap at a more detailed level and the different cultural contexts of Korea and the UK contribute to how these motivations are expressed by the research subjects.

5.4 Contribution to understanding branded UGC

This study contributes to the current understanding of branded UGC in three principal ways:

Firstly it suggests a more nuanced consideration of the demographic and behavioural characteristics of Content Creators, from a youth-orientation towards thinking of CCs as creative individuals with careers, commercial acumen and production skills.

Secondly, this study builds on previous motivational theories, picking up on several of the same themes but arriving at four main motivations to create branded UGC. This particularly supports the recent study into UGC sharing motives by Park & Lee (2021) which found five motives but with extensive overlap.

The third contribution is that this research introduces new information about the requirement to respond to brand-related UGC, and the consequences of failure to do so. It also found that the penalty was more severe for SMEs than for large companies.

5.5 Scale and response strategies

Since it was found that the size of the company dictated the perception of the Content Creator, a differentiated approach to UGC response could be considered, drawing on Customer Relationship Management (CRM) principles which have a customer orientation and a goal of driving a profitable

long-term relationship by treating the best customer preferentially (Munandar, Oktaviani and Angraini, 2022).

Larger companies may have the resources to automate their response processes. Some CRM systems now permit the integration of social media (WP-CRM.com, 2021; Emarsys.com, 2022) and increasingly use artificial intelligence (AI) to manage some of the customer interactions (Chipman, 2023; Zoho.com, 2023). One of the challenges with using AI is when humans realise they are interacting with a machine and feel uncomfortable (Blut *et al.*, 2021; Gros, Li and Yu, 2021). This may be particularly problematic if a Content Creator has a parasocial motivation to communicate (Labrecque, 2014) with the Brand and then feel deceived if they suspect the response is not human, however because customer expectation of large companies is low (Wang and Aggarwal, 2019), the consequences of automation detection are unlikely to be severe.

SMEs in contrast should seek to build more authentic dialogue because consumers have a high expectation of communication and friendliness with them and will punish the company harshly if those expectations are failed (Wang and Aggarwal, 2019). Consequently these CRM processes should be integrated into the operational procedures of the Social Media Team (or briefed into their agency if outsourced) rather than risk alienating the Content Creators with a clumsy automation.

5.6 Limitations

This study has several limitations. Firstly, the motivations identified in the data were based on stated or implied motivations revealed during the interview process which means that subconscious or socially unacceptable motivations are less likely to be present. An experimental or content analysis research design could potentially resolve this limitation. Secondly the small sample size of this study limits the extent to which the results are generalisable or transferrable into other contexts (Thorogood and Green, 2018), a common challenge with qualitative research. A follow-up study with a quantitative research design could make the results more generalisable. Thirdly, this study is situated within the UK which is a country with a highly developed social media environment, which cannot be representative of the whole world. Furthermore some cultures may have different norms of behaviour in terms of reciprocity and society online, which are significant constructs in this study. These limitations impact the international transferability of the findings of this study. Fourthly, while 'stated future intentions' can be a useful predictor of future behaviour, their reliability can be affected by external and internal factors. This affects the reliability of the hypothesised causal relationship between [future UGC-creating behaviour/brand closeness] and [failure to acknowledge UGC]. This could be tested using longitudinal research. Finally, there were many benefits to the insider-researcher positionality as outlined in the methodology chapter, but a limitation of this

approach is the risk of bias. Inter-rater reliability is sometimes used in qualitative research to improve the validity and the reliability of the study by having multiple data coders (Kitto, Chesters and Grbich, 2008) and could address this limitation.

6 CONCLUSION

This thesis explored the phenomenon of brand-related UGC from the perspective of the Content Creator and the Social Media Manager. This inquiry was set against a backdrop in which social media is an important source of brand-related information for consumers and user-generated information is perceived to be more trusted and authentic than brand-generated information (Naeem and Ozuem, 2020; Cheong and Mohammed-Baksh, 2021), making UGC a matter of operational interest for Social Media Managers.

The first research question (**RQ1**) sought to understand what content-creating activities the CCs undertook, what skills or competencies they deployed, their motivations for doing so, and what they hoped to achieve by their actions.

The second research question (**RQ2**) investigated the phenomenon of brand-related UGC through the lens of the Social Media Manager. This explored their response to, and use of UGC in their work, and policies, processes and beliefs in relation to it.

The contextual exploration of the research participants revealed the intersectionality between the two groups of participants.

Social Media Management is an emerging profession, a job role which has only really been in existence since around 2010 (Jacobson, 2020; Netto, 2022) and this thesis has made both theoretical and practical contributions to this nascent discipline.

6.1 Implications for theory

This study makes two contributions to theory. Firstly it advances the understanding of motivation theory. In identifying the four motivations to create branded UGC of Intrinsic Enjoyment, Social Network Motive, Self-Presentation and Pro-Social Behaviour from the data and comparing them with the long-established motivation theories, it is possible to see that HNS, UGT and especially the MOA framework continue to be relevant theoretical constructs.

Secondly, following the findings of the study, a new version of the Virtuous Cycle of Branded UGC is proposed (see Figure 23 below) for the purposes of explaining the relationship between the Content Creator, the Social Media Manager and the online audiences.

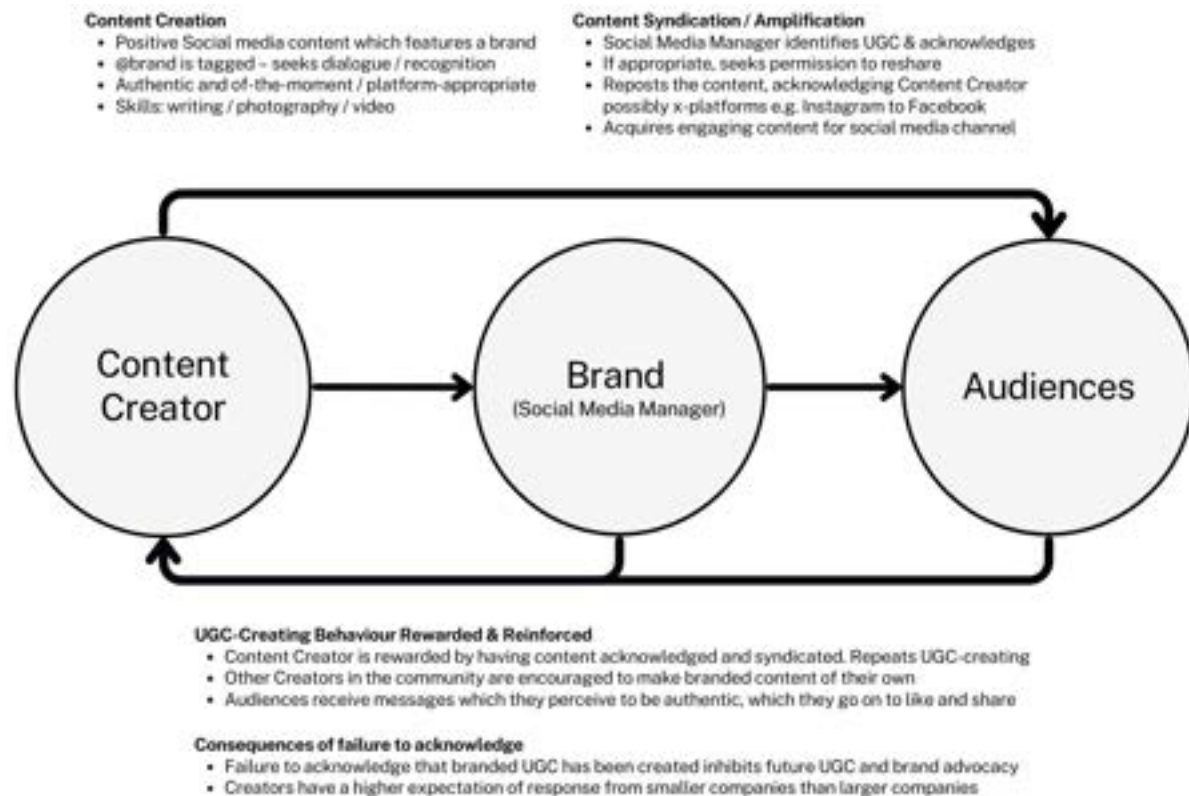


Figure 23 Virtuous Cycle of Branded UGC [author]

The conceptual model has been updated to incorporate the ‘Consequences of failure to acknowledge’ section, and the idea that Creators have greater expectations of smaller companies than larger companies.

The benefit of a model to describe a phenomenon is that it gives a common frame of reference for those researching in the area and can make it easier to grasp the main ideas of the concept towards a common understanding. If adopted, it can be used more widely for education and training in the field of Social Media Marketing.

6.2 Implications for practice

A key attribute of a professional doctorate is that it should advance knowledge in the chosen discipline but should also consider how that knowledge can be applied in practice, thereby bridging the gap between theoretical research and real-world applications (Anderson *et al.*, 2015). The research findings can provide guidance to practitioners and policymakers and ensures that the work has a meaningful impact beyond academia. The practical contribution of this study is that it provides strategic direction for social media managers to inform the way they interact with Content Creators and introduces tools to support the operationalisation of the guidelines across social media teams.

6.2.1 Recommendation 1: Content Creator Relationship Management

It is recommended that rather than thinking of incidents of branded UGC creation as discrete events, Social Media Managers should adopt CRM practices in relation to Content Creators, namely:

- Use social media monitoring tools to track brand mentions, comments and user-generated content related to the brand.
- Where positive branded UGC occurs, acknowledge it.
- Identify users who create brand-related content and engage with them in a positive and personalised way.
- Analyse each user's brand-related content to understand what their motivation(s) are which will help to create targeted campaigns which resonate with them (See section 6.2.2).

6.2.2 Recommendation 2: Content Creator Motivation Guide

Communicating the findings of the thesis to a wide audience is a matter of interest to the researcher, as the professional doctorate is rooted in practice by its nature (UON, 2023). This means making the material accessible to those who do not have a background in the field and those who may not be familiar with academic language and conventions (Allegretto, 2021). Social media infographics are an appropriate way to reach Social Media Managers as the medium is context-appropriate and many learners find it easier to absorb and retain information which incorporate both graphic and text elements (Yarbrough, 2019).

The four principal motives identified in this study can be used to frame more effective appeals for UGC from the brand community. This can be communicated to digital marketing professionals in short form via an infographic (see Figure 24 on page 112), which has the advantage of simplifying complex information into visual elements which makes it easier to understand, share and remember as well as being more effective at increasing social media attention than original research articles (Kunze *et al.*, 2021).

In addition to the four approaches to motivation, the infographic includes a final panel which sets out the importance of acknowledgement of UGC. Further, it is recommended that this be adopted as policy for Social Media Managers (see 6.2.1 on page 111).

While infographics can be effective at getting attention, they do not contain enough information for a more nuanced understanding of research (Ferreira *et al.*, 2022) so should link to a long-form publication such as a blog article, podcast or other searchable web-based media. The findings on motivation can also be pitched as article content to practitioner journals read by Social Media professionals such as Wired, Marketing Week and The Drum and thereby further disseminated to Practitioners.



Figure 24 Content Creator Motivation Guide [author]

6.3 Future Research

There are three recommendations for further research, based on gaps and limitations

The first relates to the conceptual model; Further testing through empirical research would be required to examine whether the relationships predicted in the conceptual framework hold up in the real world. There are three areas that would benefit from further research:

- Quantitative testing of the Content Creation motivation theories to improve the generalisability of the findings.
- Further examination of the supposed effect of non-response on future content-creating and brand advocacy.
- Exploration of the 'Audience' dimension of the model, as the research so far has centred on the Content Creators and the Social Media Managers

Peer review and publication in appropriate academic journals, and presentation at appropriate conferences would be necessary for the Virtual Cycle of Branded UGC to gain acceptance in the academic community.

The second recommendation for further research is to extend the enquiry into motivation and reward into employee-generated content. This is prompted by the interesting findings about the intersectionality between Content Creators and Social Media Managers and their multi-faceted identities. Here the 'pro-social' behaviour observed in this study could overlap with 'brand citizenship behaviour' by employees (Saleem and Hawkins, 2021).

The third area of further enquiry relates to the finding that Content Creators expect more acknowledgement and gratitude from SMEs than from large companies, which would have implications for small businesses in particular. This together with the concept of the reciprocal small business eco-system on social media would seem to be a rich area for enquiry with important commercial implications.

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Appendix 1 Participant profile summary

	Name (Anonymised)	Primary role	Sector/Category
1	P Drew	Social Media Manager	Education
2	P Ali	Social Media Manager	Agency / Charity
3	P Taco	Social Media Manager	Agency / Retail
4	P Harry	Practitioner/Specialist	Social Media Management
5	P Sarah	Social Media Manager	Agency / B2B
6	P Minnie	Social Media Manager	Agency / Retail
7	P Shahid	Social Media Manager	Media
8	CCP Anna	Content Creator/Practitioner	SME / Retail (art)
9	CCP Emma	Content Creator/Practitioner	Charity / Local Activism
10	CCP Pria	Content Creator/Practitioner	SME / Retail (food)
11	CCP Mark	Content Creator/Practitioner	SME / Retail (homeware)
12	CCP Lewis	Content Creator/Practitioner	Arts / Retail
13	CC Robert	Content Creator	Events
14	CC Harriet	Content Creator	Media
15	CC Kirk	Content Creator	Performing Arts
16	CC Kelly	Content Creator	Wellness
17	CC John	Content Creator	Entertainment
18	CC Mudiwa	Content Creator	Fashion
19	CC Olivia	Content Creator	Education
20	CC Mickey	Content Creator	Fashion / Photography

P= Practitioner

CC=Content Creator

CCP=Content Creator/Practitioner

Appendix 2 Participant information sheet – Content Creator



Participant Information Sheet – Content Creator

Sharing the Love: Motivation and Reward in Branded User-Generated Content Creation

Introduction

You are being invited to take part in this research study investigating the motivation of people to create social media posts talking about brands and organisations. Before you decide whether you wish to participate, it is important for you to understand why the study is being conducted and what it will involve. Please take some time to read the information provided and discuss it with others if you wish. Please ask if there is anything that is not clear, or if you would like more information.

What is the purpose of the study?

The aim of this study is to understand what motivates private individuals to create positive posts about brands on social media (Branded UGC), and how the company's response affects the relationship.

Why have I been invited?

You have been asked to take part in the study because it is thought you sometimes create the sort of social media content that this study is interested in – positive, unsponsored, and featuring a brand or company. This may be because a company has noticed your posts and nominated you, or it could also be because the researcher has noticed your posts on social media.

Do I have to take part?

Taking part is entirely voluntary. If you decide to take part, you will be asked to sign a consent form to confirm that you understand the project and are happy to participate. If you decide to take part and then change your mind, you are free to withdraw from the study or withdraw any data you have given within 30 days of participating.

What will my participation involve?

Once you have agreed to take part in the study, you will be asked which of your social media platforms may be analysed for Branded UGC content.

The last 12 months of public posts, on those platforms will be reviewed by the researcher, and if examples of Branded UGC are found, they will be screen-captured (an image of the post collected) so they can be analysed.

Your participation will also involve an interview which may be conducted face to face or via a video call. This conversation typically lasts around 40 minutes and will be recorded

so it can be analysed later. The interview will cover your thoughts, feelings and beliefs about the social media posts you create.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

The information obtained from this study will be used for recommendations for good practice in social media management in relation to people who create content - like you.

What are the possible risks or disadvantages of taking part?

The interview may result in you being more self-conscious as you create social media content for a while, as we will be exploring your motivation.

What if something goes wrong?

If you have any concerns about any aspect of the way you have been approached or treated during the course of this study, then please contact the research supervisor Kathleen.mortimer@northampton.ac.uk.

Will my information be kept confidential?

All the information collected for this study will be anonymised and stored in a secure, password-protected space approved by the University of Northampton research Ethics Committee. If your posts are reproduced for publication, your username will be redacted, however it is difficult to entirely anonymise public social media posts while still retaining their meaningful content – for example images.

What will happen to the results of the study?

The results from this study will be used in the following ways: as part of the Doctoral Thesis for the researcher, as academic journal articles or conference papers. If you would like to receive a summary of the findings, then please indicate this on the consent form or contact the lead researcher.

How will my data be processed?

This study has been reviewed by an ethics committee to check that your personal data will be kept secure and used only in the way you have been told it will be. Your consent will be sought for processing your data in this way. The ethics committee has also checked that data collection is “in the public interest, scientific or historical research purposes or statistical purposes... proportionate to the aim pursued” as required by the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (2016, Article 9).

Under the GDPR all researchers must have a legal basis for processing any personal data about you. During the study you will be asked for information about your age, gender, employment and social media usage. The University of Northampton confirms that processing of your personal data will be handled in a lawful manner as required by GDPR article 89(1) and the Data Protection Act 2018 sections 19(1)(b) and (c). We therefore confirm that the processing of your data in this project is in the public

interest, has due regard for your rights and freedoms as a participant ('data subject') and will be stored and processed in a secure manner. The University of Northampton is the Data Controller for this project. If you have any concerns about the collection, use and storage of data in this project please contact the University of Northampton's Data Protection Officer phil.oakman@northampton.ac.uk

How long will you keep my data?

We will retain the data for 5 years so that if we want to conduct a comparative study in a few years' time to evaluate changing attitudes we can reprocess this data together with new findings.

Who has reviewed the study?

This study has been reviewed and approved by Kathleen Mortimer.

Contact for further information

If you have any questions about this study or your possible [involvement](#) then please contact me using the contact details below.

Researcher: Kardi Somerfield – kardi.somerfield@northampton.ac.uk

Supervisor: Kathleen Mortimer – Kathleen.mortimer@northampton.ac.uk

Thank you for considering taking part in this study.

Appendix 3 Participant information sheet – Practitioner



Participant Information Sheet – Practitioner

Sharing the Love: Motivation and Reward in Branded User-Generated Content Creation

Introduction

You are being invited to take part in this research study investigating the motivation of people to create social media posts talking about brands and organisations. Before you decide whether you wish to participate, it is important for you to understand why the study is being conducted and what it will involve. Please take some time to read the information provided and discuss it with others if you wish. Please ask if there is anything that is not clear, or if you would like more information.

What is the purpose of the study?

The aim of this study is to understand what motivates private individuals to create positive posts about brands on social media (Branded UGC), and how the company's response affects the relationship.

Why have I been invited?

You have been asked to take part in the study because your job role may involve social media management practices which bring you into contact with consumers who produce Branded User-Generated Content.

Do I have to take part?

Taking part is entirely voluntary. If you decide to take part, you will be asked to sign a consent form to conform that you understand the project and are happy to participate. If you decide to take part and then change your mind, you are free to withdraw from the study or withdraw any data you have given within 30 days of participating.

What will my participation involve?

Once you have agreed to take part in the study, you will be asked to identify Branded UGC creators in your community with a view to approaching them to participate in the study.

Your participation will also involve an interview which may be conducted face to face or via a video call. This conversation typically lasts around 40 minutes and will be recorded so it can be analysed later. The interview will cover your processes, thoughts and beliefs about the Branded UGC posts created by people in your community.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

The information obtained from this study will be used for recommendations for good practice in social media management in relation to people who create content – so it might inform your practice.

What are the possible risks or disadvantages of taking part?

The main risk of taking part is that having identified content creators in your community, their participation in the research might adversely influence their future content-creating behaviour. This will be mitigated by the interviewer positioning the content creation in a positive light during all interactions with consumers.

What if something goes wrong?

If you have any concerns about any aspect of the way you have been approached or treated during the course of this study, then please contact the research supervisor Kathleen.mortimer@northampton.ac.uk.

Will my information be kept confidential?

All the information collected for this study will be anonymised and stored in a secure, password-protected space approved by the University of Northampton research Ethics Committee. There is a small chance that the results from the interviews might contain extracts which would be identifiable to someone known to the subject. Furthermore, as social media posts are hard to anonymise due to imagery and copy, it is likely that some of the brands mentioned by consumers will be identifiable.

What will happen to the results of the study?

The results from this study will be used in the following ways: as part of the Doctoral Thesis for the researcher, as academic journal articles or conference papers. If you would like to receive a summary of the findings, then please indicate this on the consent form or contact the lead researcher.

How will my data be processed?

This study has been reviewed by an ethics committee to check that your personal data will be kept secure and used only in the way you have been told it will be. Your consent will be sought for processing your data in this way. The ethics committee has also checked that data collection is “in the public interest, scientific or historical research purposes or statistical purposes... proportionate to the aim pursued” as required by the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (2016, Article 9).

Under the GDPR all researchers must have a legal basis for processing any personal data about you. During the study you will be asked for information about your age, gender, employment and social media usage. The University of Northampton confirms

that processing of your personal data will be handled in a lawful manner as required by GDPR article 89(1) and the Data Protection Act 2018 sections 19(1)(b) and (c). We therefore confirm that the processing of your data in this project is in the public interest, has due regard for your rights and freedoms as a participant ('data subject') and will be stored and processed in a secure manner. The University of Northampton is the Data Controller for this project. If you have any concerns about the collection, use and storage of data in this project please contact the University of Northampton's Data Protection Officer phil.oakman@northampton.ac.uk

How long will you keep my data?

We will retain the data for 5 years so that if we want to conduct a comparative study in a few years' time to evaluate changing attitudes we can reprocess this data together with new findings.

Who has reviewed the study?

This study has been reviewed and approved by Kathleen Mortimer.

Contact for further information

If you have any questions about this study or your possible involvement then please contact me using the contact details below.

Researcher: Kardi Somerfield - kardi.somerfield@northampton.ac.uk

Supervisor: Kathleen Mortimer - Kathleen.mortimer@northampton.ac.uk

Thank you for considering taking part in this study.

Appendix 4 Consent form – Content Creator



Consent form – Content Creator

Sharing the Love: Motivation and Reward in Branded User-Generated Content Creation

Please read each statement below and then confirm that you agree or disagree by placing your initials in the appropriate box.

	Yes	No
I have read and understood the information provided to me in the information sheet.		
I have had an opportunity to ask questions about this research.		
I agree to my social media posts being analysed on the accounts listed below.		
I agree to the interview being recorded.		
I understand that I can decline to answer any questions.		
I understand that I can withdraw my answers in part or full, anytime up until 1 November 2022.		
I agree to anonymised quotations being used in any academic presentations or publications of this work.		
I understand the limits to confidentiality in the project – the researcher has explained that there is a small chance that my anonymised contribution may be identifiable to someone else.		
I agree to my data being used in any subsequent, ethically-approved work that builds on this current project – such as a subsequent follow-up study.		

Please list the social media platforms and account names you give permission to be observed:

Example: Twitter @kardisom LinkedIn @kardisomerfield

Name, ~~signature~~ and date of person giving consent (the participant).

Name, ~~signature~~ and date of person obtaining consent (the researcher).

Appendix 5 Consent form – Practitioner



Consent form – Practitioner

Sharing the Love: Motivation and Reward in Branded User-Generated Content Creation

Please read each statement below and then confirm that you agree or disagree by placing your initials in the appropriate box.

	Yes	No
I have read and understood the information provided to me in the information sheet.		
I have had an opportunity to ask questions about this research.		
I agree to the interview being recorded.		
I understand that I can decline to answer any questions.		
I understand that I can withdraw my answers in part or full, anytime up until 1 November 2022.		
I agree to anonymised quotations being used in any academic presentations or publications of this work.		
I understand the limits to confidentiality in the project – the researcher has explained that there is a small chance that my anonymised contribution may be identifiable to someone else.		
I agree to my data being used in any subsequent, ethically-approved work that builds on this current project – such as a subsequent follow-up study.		

Name, ~~signature~~ and date of person giving consent (the participant).

Name, ~~signature~~ and date of person obtaining consent (the researcher).

Appendix 6 Interview Guide – Content Creator

Thank you for participating. Reminder of informed consent and that the session is being recorded.

Warm up questions

What social media platforms are you active on at the moment?

What do you like about each of them?

What do you use them for?

Do you post as a private individual or a business or maybe both?

Tell me about the last post you created?

What was it about?

You as a content creator

(establish skill set, test Opportunity and Ability from MOA model)

What sort of content do you make?

e.g. take a photograph or video, write copy, film a video, research hashtags?

How much effort goes into that?

How did you learn to do that?

(learning from others in the community – see Community of Practice)

How do you feel when you make a post you are proud of?

Getting feedback

What would you consider to be a successful post?

Tell me about the response you get to a good post?

(unprompted – do they mention technical/numeric or emotion/subjective)

Branded UGC creation

Now I want to talk about a particular type of post – which is when you make a post about a company that you like. I've got an example here. *Shows artefact [branded UGC post]*

Can you tell me about this post?

Prompt: Can you tell me more about what lead you to making this post?

What do you hope will happen because of people seeing this post?

(test Uses in Uses & Gratifications theory)

I see that you have tagged the company in – tell me more about that?

(may reveal what they hoped would happen, also confirms they understand it will come to the brand's attention)

Do you see posts by other people talking about brands in your timeline?

(test for mimicking of influencers)

What response did you get from that experience?

Prompt if they don't mention brand response: What about the company – did they give you any feedback?

Prompt if they don't mention the community response: What about wider audience – did they give you any feedback?

Was it what you expected to happen?

(did the gratification meet their expectation)

Prompt: and how did that make you feel?

Brand advocacy

How would you describe your relationship with that company?

(a fan? Something more casual? a personal relationship outside of social)

Do you know anyone else who supports this brand online?

(testing for horizontal community)

How did the relationship change after having this online interaction?

(stronger, weaker, the same)

Would you post about this company again?

Wider UGC discussion

One of the reasons I wanted to interview you was that I can see that you make brand related content from time to time.

How do you choose what to post about?

What do you hope will happen as a result?

(test for Uses from Uses & Gratifications model. Also do they expect to become an influencer, or get intrinsic or extrinsic rewards)

Have there been any positive outcomes from your posts?

(testing for gratification types)

What about any negative consequences?

(looking for no-reply or negative reply)

Future intention to create UGC

Do you expect to post about companies in the future?

Do they understand their own agency as an UGC creator?

What do you think companies should do when you post positive things about them?

Does it make any difference whether the company is big or small?

Do you do ratings or reviews on websites or things like TripAdvisor?

Do you expect to create content for a living in the future?

(test for wanting to be an influencer or work in social media)

Thank you for participation. Reminder rights to withdraw from the study and procedure for doing so.

Appendix 7 Interview Guide – Social media manager

Thank you for participating, reminder of informed consent and that the session is being recorded.

Warm up questions

What social media platforms are you personally active on at the moment?

What do you like about each of them?

What about SM platforms for work purposes – which ones do you use?

What do you use them for?

(establish how strategic vs. ad hoc they are)

Who does what in relation to SM in your company?

(Establish the extent of hands-on decision-making about social media, also what resources they have in the company)

Your content strategy

What sort of content do you use in your channels?

Understand original content vs. reshared content, also use of third parties such as agencies or influencers?

How much of your resource does that take up?

How did you learn your social media skills?

(was there any formal training – see Community of Practice)

Prompt: do you use any courses, books, websites or online communities to help you?

(establish whether they use any of the professional resources identified in the literature)

Measurement

What would you consider to be a successful post?

Tell me about the response you get to a good post?

(unprompted – do they mention technical/numeric or emotion/subjective)

Branded UGC creation

Now I want to talk about a particular type of post – which is when a consumer makes a post about your company voluntarily. I've got an example here. *Shows artefact [branded UGC post]*

Can you tell me anything about this post?

Prompt: Do you know anything about the customer that made this post?

As you can see, they have tagged your company in. Is this something you see often?

Is it helpful to your business when people do that?

(ascertain whether the social media manager is aware of the benefits of UGC)

UGC Feedback loop

What would normally happen with that post now?

(looking for response – like, share, comment, repost, resyndicate. Discussion of quality factors. Is there a policy)

Prompt: is there a policy or is it ad hoc?

What do you think they hope will happen because of people seeing this post?

(test Uses in Uses & Gratifications theory)

What do you think they expect from tagging you in?

(do they imagine it is for intrinsic or extrinsic motivations?)

Brand advocacy

How would you describe this customer's relationship with your company?

(do they know of them? Do they imagine them to be a brand advocate, or something else)

Do you know of other consumers who support this brand online?

(testing for horizontal community)

Does anything happen to the relationship after having this online interaction?

(stronger, weaker, the same)

Wider UGC discussion

One of the reasons I wanted to interview you was that I am interested to know what you think of using UGC in your channel.

How do you choose whether to repost a piece of UGC?

What do you hope will happen as a result?

(do they consider the feedback to the customer in the outcome?)

Do you ever try and solicit UGC using a campaign or triggers in your communications?

(testing to see whether they do any of the actions suggested in the literature)

Have you tried incentivising UGC?

What about working more closely with a brand advocate for example letting them try new products first?

If so what was the outcome?

Future intention to use UGC as part of a content strategy

Do you expect to use UGC in the future?

Prompt: What is the thinking behind that?

Thank you for participation. Reminder rights to withdraw from the study and procedure for doing so.

Appendix 8 Approved research proposal



Sharing the Love;

Motivation and Reward in Branded User-Generated Content Creation

ABSTRACT:

In recent years it has become common practice for consumers to create Social Media (SM) content in which they talk positively about companies and products, and for those companies to share the content in their own SM channels. The use of this 'User Generated Content' (UGC) to add authenticity and consumer dialogue to the social media stream of a brand has now become a commonplace strategy as it is generally seen as cost effective, authentic and customer-oriented. The proposed research is concerned with the User's role in this process, namely the motivation to create content which relates to a Brand and the effects on the User of having their content syndicated by the Brand on their social media platforms.

This study will ~~make a contribution~~ to academic knowledge in this emerging area and ~~also~~ inform professional practice by making recommendations for the management of UGC and its contributors in online Brand Communities. This qualitative study will use a combination of depth interviews with 20 UGC creators drawn from four Brand Communities, and internet mediated observations of their public brand-related social media posts.

SUPERVISOR: DR KATHLEEN MORTIMER

KARDI SOMERFIELD | 88107700 | JUNE 2022

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1. Introduction

In recent years it has become common practice for consumers to create Social Media (SM) content in which they talk positively about companies and products. Brands in turn are capitalising on this freely-occurring endorsement by sharing the content on their own SM channels (Somerfield, Mottimer, and Evans, 2018). The harnessing of this 'User Generated Content' (UGC) to add authenticity and consumer dialogue to the social media stream of a brand has now become routine as it is generally seen as both cost effective and customer-oriented.

This relatively new practice presents a range of opportunities for Researchers to make a meaningful contribution to knowledge in digital marketing.

2. Aims & objectives

A conceptual model is proposed to describe the area of interest; the inter-relationships between the consumer and the brand as represented by their social media managers and the effects produced (see Figure 1).

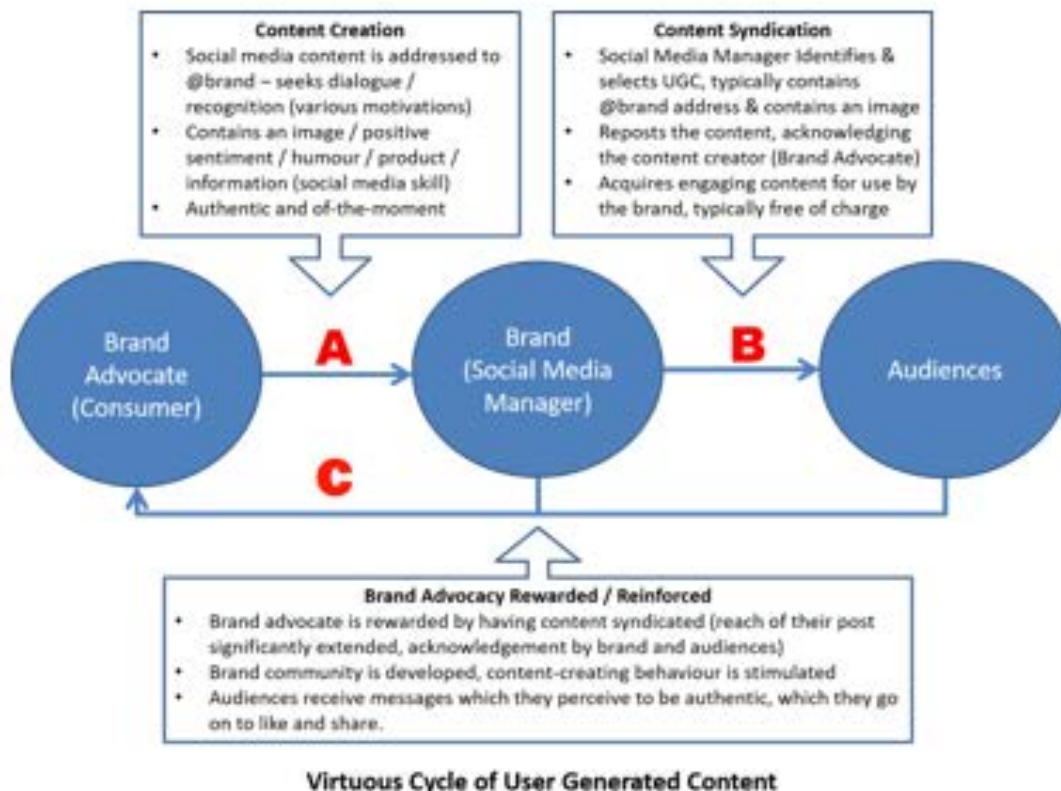


Figure 1 Virtuous Cycle of Organic User-Generated Content (unpublished)

This Research Proposal is concerned with the areas marked A and C on this model, focusing on the user experience, namely the motivation of the User to create content which relates to the Brand, and the subsequent effects on the User of having their content syndicated by the Brand.

Research Aim

To understand what motivates private individuals to create positive posts about brands on Social Media, and how the company's response affects the relationship. To make recommendations for good practice in social media content management relating to UGC.

Research Objectives

- a. To identify content creators in a brand community
- b. To assess their characteristics and the extent of their UGC activity across brands
- c. To explore the motivations underlying content-creating behaviour
- d. To appraise the effects on the User of having their UGC used by the brand in the context of their original motivation
- e. To make recommendations for the management of UGC and its contributors in online brand communities.

3. Literature review

The arrival of web 2.0 democratised the production of online material, and made it possible for almost everyone to express themselves especially on social media (Labrecque et al., 2013; Wyrwoll, 2014). The effect on brand relationships is that they have become more dynamic and public in nature (Rollins, 2009) and methods involving consumer-consumer activity have grown in significance for marketers over time (Geurin and Burch, 2017).

When members of the public express themselves online, the term 'User Generated Content' (UGC) can be used to describe the phenomenon (Boyd and Ellison, 2018). Additionally 'User Generated Branding' (UGB) has been defined by Burman & Arnhold as ...“the strategic and operative management of brand related user-generated content (UGC) to achieve brand goals” (2010). In relation to Figure 1 Virtuous Cycle of Organic User-Generated Content (unpublished) this is indicated by 'B'. In practical terms this requires that marketers identify and reuse naturally-occurring content created by users **and** also invite or stimulate their audience to post content for them to reuse. This may take a variety of forms such as photography, video, text and is usually on a social media platform such as Facebook, **Instagram** or Twitter (Vries and Gensler, 2017).

This research proposal concerns the use of UGC as part of the content strategy for organisation's social media feeds. For example: the digital marketing team at UoN has been using UGC extensively in recent years, in keeping with practice in the Universities sector (Higgins, 2018) and more widely in the Social Media Marketing industry (Gallegos, 2017; Feldwick, 2018).

The nature of the relationship between the creator and the brand has not been extensively investigated. Online users are considered self-aware and their online identities can often be complex reflections of themselves (Araujo, Neijens and Vliegenthart, 2015). It is thought that Functional theory is critical to understand motivation and behaviour. It describes four personality functions; utilitarian, knowledge, ego-defensive and value-expressive (Katz, 1960). These four motivational types were used by Daugherty et al (2008) to explore the motivation to create branded content but did not go so far as to investigate the

feedback loop to investigate what happens if the brand talks back. The proposed research seeks to close this gap in order to inform the actions of Social Media Managers in their work with content creators.

A study by Halliday (2016) examined the motivations and meanings of content creation via diaries in which young adults recorded their online brand interactions and the motivations for them. This research was underpinned by the seminal concept of Service Dominant Logic (SDL) which argued that human beings apply their skills and knowledge to benefit others, and in return acquire the benefit of others' competences (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). A key finding of Halliday's research was that the participants used content creation as "part of their wider lives as persons, rather than just as consumers" (Halliday, 2016). More recently, Crowston and Fagnot (2017) explored the drivers for creating UGC. This work was helpful in describing motivations around the concept of 'Helping Theory' and a model was proposed to describe levels of contribution to the joint effort (Figure 2).

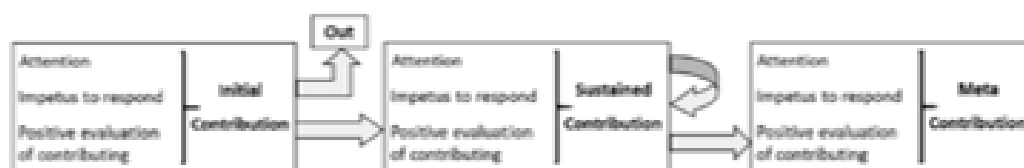


Figure 2 Helping Theory Model - Crowston & Fagnot

Although the context was not the same as the phenomenon of interest being explored here in that it was considering contributions to Wikipedia rather than brands, the stage theory proposed will be adapted for this inquiry. A key outcome of Crowston and Fagnot's work (2017) was that recognising the phases of contribution (initial, sustained and meta) had implications for practitioners managing UGC projects.

In summary, the motivation to create content has been researched quite extensively in the literature as has brands' use of UGC and the way it performs relative to other types of content. Missing from the literature is the feedback loop: what happens to the content creator when a brand notices, responds and reuses their content.

4. Contribution to Practice

A range of commercial tools for managing Branded UGC are coming to market – Taggbox, Stackla, Pixlee, TAP – which would seem to offer Brand Community Managers a systematic way of harnessing and developing UGC, however there has been little research into the effect on the contributing consumer. TAP have consulted with the Researcher and have expressed an interest in the findings of this study. Understanding how to stimulate and motivate users into positive content production is central to the decisions about how to recruit, retain and reward content producers, so research findings in this area will have a contribution to knowledge and a commercial application both at The University of Northampton and more broadly in Digital Marketing practice.

5. Methodology

5.1. Approach

Attributes of qualitative research in general include a naturalistic research setting and an interpretive epistemology (Cohen and Crabtree, 2008) with the researcher seeking to make sense of subjective and socially constructed meanings, through the lens of the participant (Cresswell, 2003). The prevalent tool for qualitative research is the interview, being the most effective method for investigating the viewpoints of the participants (Mojtahed Baptista Nunes et al., 2014).

The Observation meanwhile permits a longer time horizon, and addresses the truth of what content was actually created. Garcia et al. argue that the blending of online and offline worlds require that researchers incorporate computer-mediated communication into their research design (2009) since the two spaces interact with one another in transformative ways (Bakardjieva, 2005).

5.2. Methods

Netnography will be used to select participants on the basis of their online behaviours in the public domain on the most-used social media platforms Instagram, Twitter and Facebook (5.3 Sampling).

Once informed consent has been obtained, observations of branded content generation on social media will be collected. This will involve analysing historical posts from the participants' social media accounts.

Semi structured interviews permit the researcher to explore the phenomenon of interest to reveal why the participant has behaved in a given way as well as simply 'what' and 'how' (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2016). The interview is the most appropriate instrument to explore these factors as well as the motivation for content creation and the effect of any brand response or intervention. The alternative approach of the Focus Group was considered, however the advantages of efficiency and debate did not compensate for the key issues identified by Acocella (2012) of group think, inhibition and confidentiality.

The findings will be used to develop recommendations which will inform the practice of Social Media Managers

5.3. Sampling

Purposive sampling will be used; a non-random technique in which a quantity of information-rich cases are selected on the basis of their knowledge or experiences, and also their willingness and availability to participate (Etikan, Musa and Alkassim, 2016).

The stages of selection will be as follows:-

1. Identification of host organisations/practitioners

3-5 target organisations who have demonstrated a strategy of promoting UGC in their communications will be identified and appropriate ethics approval & permissions sought to work with their Community Manager / Digital Marketing Manager.

This research is being undertaken as part of a Professional Doctorate therefore there is a requirement to inform practice. The University of Northampton (UoN) is the Researcher's employer and a relationship has been developed with the organisation's digital marketing practitioners to ensure that the insight can effectively transfer to action. Consequently this is the main stakeholder and host organisation for the research.

In order to better make a contribution to knowledge, the scope of the research extends beyond the Higher Education sector. 2-4 other UGC-using organisations will be invited to participate.

2. Shortlist of potential participants

In conjunction with the Practitioners identified in stage 1, contributors of UGC will be identified in their respective online communities and invited to take part. Selection will be **on the basis of** UGC contribution and location. Face to face interviews are most desirable therefore proximity to Northampton will be considered in order to reduce cost and increase the likelihood of participation – although Robinson notes that this would introduce a geographical homogeneity into the sample (2014) this is not considered to be a critical issue since the research is qualitative and the sample is not therefore seeking statistical significance but rather is exploratory in nature. The target sample size is 20, however this could be extended or reduced if the themes prove to be diverse or homogenous. Skype or telephone interviews may be necessary if the sample size is insufficient due to the location restriction.

3. Invitation to participants

The UGC contributors will be invited to participate in the research consisting of

- internet mediated observation (review of historical Facebook, **Instagram** and Twitter posts with particular reference to content which relates to brands).
- a depth interview (approx. 40 minutes duration) which covers motivation to create branded content, experience of brand contact following content creation, response to feedback from brands

Contact will be made via the medium the UGC is observed in e.g. by a direct message on Twitter or by email if the host company has alternative contact details.

5.4. Data Handling

The interviews will be voice recorded and transcribed ready for data reduction. Social Media Posts will be observed and saved as picture files in a data repository on TUNDRA2 in accordance with UoN guidelines.

The Thematic analysis of emergent themes will be conducted on both types of data using Nvivo. A preliminary coding framework will be set up, and additional data nodes will be added as they occur.

6. Ethics

The research will be conducted in a manner consistent with the University of Northampton Ethics Code and Procedures (University of Northampton, 2018), and ethics approval will be obtained prior to the start of any data collection (see **Error! Reference source not found.**).

One of the main areas of ethical debate for researchers revolves around whether social media posts constitute private data, since their creators are posting in an inherently public forum, but could not reasonably expect their material to be subject to research activity (Markham and Buchanan, 2012; Rooke, 2013). Collecting information in online public places has been ethically contentious for years (McKee and Porter, 2009), but the Cambridge Analytica / Facebook scandal of 2018 brought privacy issues to the fore (Turchi, 2018). In order to mitigate these concerns, the social media analysis will be qualitative, small scale and derived from the accounts of the interview participants with their full knowledge and consent. This brings with it the advantage of post hoc commentary on social media posts, but those who created them – enabling interpretation and understanding of the phenomena.

Individual names of participants will be redacted from the social media data and as far as possible the social media posts will be anonymised.

6.1. Data Management Plan

The data involved in the research must be handled appropriately. The Data Management will be drawn up in accordance with the Research and Ethics Committee Guidance (2018) and includes consideration of anonymisation of the data and safe collection, storage and retrieval of the assets.

6.2. Active Data Collection

Active data collection will take the form of interviews with subjects. Prior to this, the Participants will be given information about the research. Cooper & Schindler described this as "disclosing procedures before requesting permission to proceed with the study" (2014). The recruitment process will include obtaining Informed Consent as part of the recruitment process.

6.3. Passive Data Collection

This research will also include the observation of online communities in public social media environments. An ethical challenge connected with this method is that it can be impractical to obtain informed consent from the subjects (ESOMAR, 2009) however in this case the subjects will be giving consent as they will also be the interview subjects. This method has the additional benefit that the data collected from each participant's social media history is

retrospective, thereby removing the risk of the Hawthorne Effect (Frey, 2018) whereby the participant changes their behaviour as a result of being observed.

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Appendix 9 – Data Management Plan



Motivation & Reward in branded UGC creation

Kardi Somerfield
University of Northampton

1 Information on the data that will be collected or created produced by the research project

1.1 What kind(s) of data will you collect or create?

Qualitative Data:

1. Audio files of interviews x 20 collected via personal smartphone using a voice recorder app.
2. Video recordings of interviews in MS Teams using University account.
3. Documented transcripts of interviews x 20 created on a University Laptop
4. Photographic Files of Social Media posts which are already in the public domain created on a University Laptop x 20
5. Permissions letters and consent forms exchanged by email using University account.
6. Draft Chapters of research output

2 Data storage and back-up

2.1 How will data be stored and backed up during the research?

The Audio files will be held on the Researcher's iPhone (protected with biometric passcode) as .WAV files until they are transferred to the Researcher's laptop where they will be saved on the University OneDrive which is password protected. The files will be snipped to remove any information to identify the subjects and named using an anonymised file naming convention. They will then be transcribed. The resulting .DOC files will be edited and stored on OneDrive and then uploaded to NVivo. Once the transcription is complete the WAV files will be deleted from the Researcher's Smartphone.

The Photographic Files (PDFs) will be created on the University Laptop, anonymised as far as is reasonable and stored on OneDrive and then uploaded to NVivo

The Paper notes will be scanned on the University Printer which will email the PDF file to the Researcher. The files will be saved on OneDrive and then uploaded to NVivo.

The folder containing the research data will be duplicated to TUNDRA2 at the end of each working session

Permissions letters and consent forms will be saved on TUNDRA2 in a different location from the research data to preserve anonymity

Draft chapters of the Research output will be saved to OneDrive.

2.2 How will you manage data security and access during the project?

In each instance the data will be saved in locations recommended by the University specialists and password protected. Where any third-party applications are considered, advice will be sought from the relevant IT support teams to check that the security is appropriate for the task. Should it become necessary to share the data (for example if an additional researcher needed to classify some cases) then sharing permissions would be temporarily granted to that folder.

3 Documentation and metadata

3.1 What documentation and metadata will accompany the data?

Since the data is qualitative, the main metadata will relate to date and time of creation and file size.

Once the data has been added to NVivo, additional classification metadata will be created and appended to the nodes.

4 Data sharing

4.1 How will you share the data? Expected difficulties in data sharing, along with causes and possible measures to overcome these difficulties.

Data sharing will be discussed with the host companies as the resulting data may be under an embargo if the resulting research is considered to deliver a competitive advantage (proposed 3 years after the end of the research i.e. 2025).

5 Data preservation and archiving

5.1 Which data are of long-term value and should be retained, shared and/or preserved?

The data of long-term value are the interviews and the social media posts. This behaviour and these attitudes are likely to change over time in this emerging field and so may offer some comparative value in approximately 5 years' time.

5.2 What is the long-term strategy for maintaining, curating and archiving the data?

The data will be anonymised and preserved in accordance with prevailing University guidelines from the Graduate School.

6 Ethical and legal issues

6.1 How will you manage any ethical issues relating to data management?

The data will be anonymised as outlined in the Ethics Form, however since participants have the right to withdraw from the research during the early phases, so records should be maintained such that the data can be traced back to the participant (a Lookup table kept securely by the Researcher) and redacted from the data set upon request.

6.2 How will you manage any copyright and Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) issues?

Copyright and IPR issues are not anticipated.

7 Responsibilities for data management

7.1 Who will be responsible for data management?

The researcher will have lead responsibility for enacting the data management plan.

Appendix 10 – Coded Transcript – CC Robert

On the following pages is a transcript of the interview with Robert who is a Content Creator.

On the left hand side of the page is the transcript including the time stamp.

On the right hand side is a visualisation of the 21 nodes that were used to code this interview and where they occurred. The transcript has been redacted to remove names and identifying businesses.

This example was chosen as it demonstrates the insider-researcher positionality. Although the Researcher and CC Robert had never met before, they shared an understanding of a place, some of the SMEs and other entities such as influencers, councils, and agencies operating there. This shared vocabulary and context enabled a naturalistic interview.

Interviewer 0:00

Right so that's that done and just in case I'm gonna do one in here as well [microsoft teams] so that's recording as well, but as I say, it's literally just so that I've got a transcript. So XXXXXX tell me about you. So obviously I've contact you because I saw your Instagram account, but is it a day job? Is it something you do for fun? Tell me about it.

subject 0:36

No, so I started in the first COVID just had a lot of friends that were struggling. I suppose mentally was keeping themselves sane because I think everybody sort of made banana bread and they come for their walks, and it was kind of out of ideas. And I've always been into photography and go into cool places locally anyway. I thought there's not really many people that sort of spread the word about sort of things that are happening around around town. So I kind of said, right, I'm going to start a blog and it's going to be any cafes, restaurants DJs artists, shops, parks, basically a yellow pages for Northamptonshire. Yeah. Northamptonshire within like an hour radius. So Northamptonshire, Milton Keynes some of the surrounding villages. And it's kind of just snowballed. Really. It's kind of become almost like a bit of a side second. Job now really,

Interviewer 1:30

yeah. So is your is your day job connected to any of those things?

subject 1:35

Not at all no I work in Finance. Okay,

Interviewer 1:38

So this really is different for you. Okay, cool. So tell me a little bit about what social platforms you are on. So I know you from Instagram. Is that your main social media platform?

subject 1:55

Only using this. I think Facebook to be honest, I think my own personal Facebook's kind of died a bit. I think it's kind of on its way out. Tik Tok is amazing, but it's not great for local eyes. That's more global. So which is okay, it's got a global brand. But if you're a cafe in Northamptonshire Tiktok might not be the best shout because you will get a lot of views and a lot of engagement but not as useful. There's no point in having a million followers in America when you're a cafe in Northampton. So it's kind of a bit.. Instagram seems to be the one that gets the most local engagement, which is the most important thing. Yeah.

Interviewer 2:30

Coding Density

Requests for UGC
Copyright infringement
HMS 1 - intrinsic enjoyment
HMS 3 - Changes perception
Audience response
Technical mastery
Monetary & gifted
Future intent to become consultant
Other outcomes
Causeing
Future intent to become influencer
Expected minimum response
Planning
Personal influence & status
UGC 1 - Social Network Motive

Helping behaviour
State of mind
Altruism towards brand
Creative skills

Social media mastery

Okay. So, okay, that answers my other question as well. So, so when you post Are you are you thinking about it from an individual perspective, or is this starting to become a business for you yet?

subject 2:49

It's kind of a bit of a half and half I think. I never wanted to think that it'd be an income or, or a side job. I'm not getting paid an income as such, but I don't pay for a lot of things. So for example, the last month I've gone to about three or four different new launches or restaurants or been in a hot air balloon ride. I'm going to a place on Thursday. I've got a meal out scored on Saturday. So it's kind of normally about three or four invites a week, which I'm not paying for. So it's not an income base. I'm getting a lot of things that normally would have to pay for.

Interviewer 3:21

They are benefits for you in kind as it were, that are starting to presumably be quite rewarding in their own right?

subject 3:30

Companies reach out to me and ask about what in their social media or the thing is, they're more like tradesmen, like electricians and skip hiring and estate agents, and that isn't really what I'm about. But I've spoke to a couple of business owners that have said they would they would be potentially interested in just having almost like a XXXX power hour where I offer consultation about Instagram algorithms and how to get the most out of their social media platforms as more what probably go down

Interviewer 4:01

almost be like a consultant or something then wouldn't you? You'd be working as a trainer or a social media consultant, because they've seen what you can do?

subject 4:11

I think there's a lot of love hate with social media, most most business owners have got a lot of conflicts with the fact that when they're just so busy, they haven't got time to do social media. They don't understand how it works. They're not... their photos aren't great. They're not, they're not spreading the word in the right way. So a lot of us need a bit of a push in the right directions or to show them a few little tricks and tips.

Interviewer 4:32

Right, so So tell me a little bit about your content. No, no, no, this is weird because I've looked at it. That's why I'm talking to you. But so tell me sort of about your decision making process when you're deciding to actually make a piece of content. I'm especially interested for the purposes of research.

Coding Density

Requests for UGC
Helping behaviour
Copyright infringement
HNS 1 - intrinsic enjoyment
HNS 3 - Changes perception
Audience response
Technical mastery
Monetary & gifted
Future intent to become consultant
Other outcomes
Side gig
Consulting
Future intent to become influencer
Altruism towards brand
Expected minimum response
Creative skills
Planning
Personal influence & status
UGC 1 - Social Network Motive

Social media mastery

I'm particularly interested in the content where you are, you know, you are referencing a company or a brand or a product in some way, but particularly the stuff where you aren't being you're not being compensated, you know, you've just made a decision to make it so tell me, tell me what goes through your mind when you decide to do something?

subject 5:15

Well, I kind of treat Instagram as almost like my Instagram and Twitter is almost almost my exhibition. So I want it to be lots of colour, lots of diversity between different things visually, which is there. Because I try and post about six or nine times a day. It means that I'm constantly meeting new people or engaging with new people locally. So again, that's adding more followers. It's adding more interaction with different people. They share my work on their stories, so brings in more people. So it's a kind of a win win. And when it comes to it when it comes to my Insta Stories, I try and treat it like on creating flyers or posters or on payments that go on to anything. Oh my god that's happening next Saturday. All right, that's happening next month. I'll get it on my diary. I'll get tickets. So it's almost a bit like a kind of Yeah, it's almost like a poster book of someone who lives locally. It can go through my account the antidote to people to who to hate this. This concept of "Northampton's a shit town" because they every every town in England is probably

Interviewer 6:16

you're a man after my own heart. Because that's why I do what I do too

subject 6:24

like, it maybe a shithole, but it's my shithole. So it's kind of

Interviewer 6:27

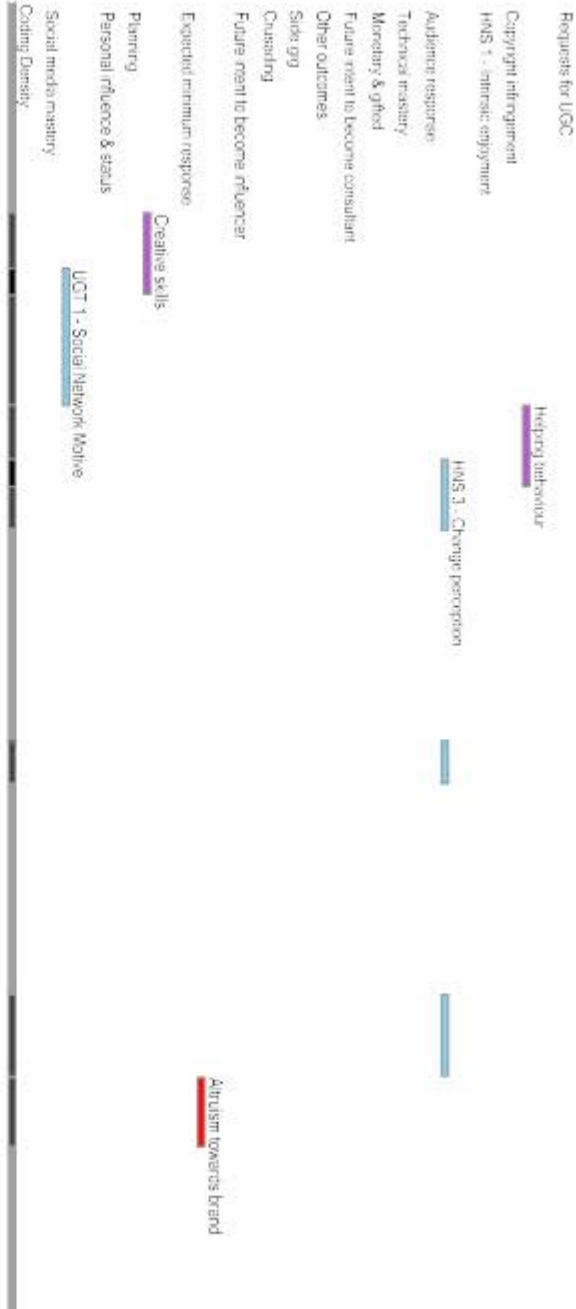
fun. It also even isn't, because there's loads going on, but you've got to look.

subject 6:34

Yeah, because I've been surprised. I mean, a lot of people say to me, I didn't even know that was ours. Like it's like literally 10 minutes from your house or there's an I think it's because again, because people aren't great for social media. You've got these gorgeous little cafes or little shops or you've got these places that aren't great at spreading the word, and I'm that middle man that fills the gap. I'll spread the word for you.

Interviewer 6:56

Fantastic. So So in terms of the actual content creation, so there's the bit where you're deciding what you're going to include. So you must have you know, you've kind of got your eyes open all the time about events and places. So tell me how you decide what you're going to do. Is it something



that appeals to you personally, you've talked about trying to make it you know, keep the variety going. So, you know, how do you pick something that you're going to feature?

subject 7:27

Well, selfishly when I started the account, even though it was about other people, it was also myself I wanted to because it could because you can't travel abroad or go very far because of COVID I wanted to do things close to home so I had to find things I wanted to ...find fun things and activities to do that was in my area. And I want to meet I wanted to meet new people. I wanted to meet DJs artists, photographers, creative people, business owners. So selfishly, it's almost a social thing is that I want to be able to go into town recognise people and also be able to help them where I can actually a lot of times or go into town or pop into cafes and say how's business how you get an honest or a bit quiet on Wednesday as we talk about what they could do for events or they're looking for certain DJs or photographers and musicians and I know people so it's kind of, again, I'm trying to get there, get people inside, get people on sets.

Interviewer 8:19

So you're almost in that context you are kind of this connects you you're able to bring people together. So it's kind of almost your brand as well because you're this you become this kind of I mean, I hesitate to use the word influencer because that's become a almost like a thing in our minds that separate but you're you're this you're this connector in the business community then

subject 8:49

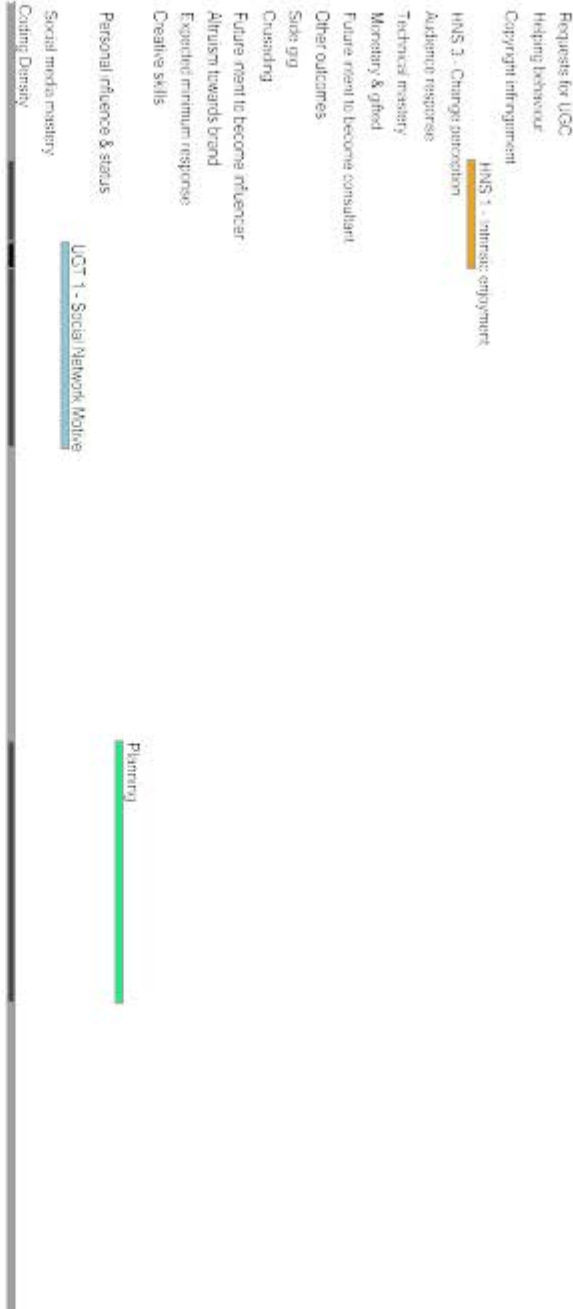
also that what I've realised because I've been doing it for about this getting you two years, two years ish. I'm normally thinking ahead on myself. So I'm already thinking about things that are coming up in the calendar for September and early October. So that will be engaging with with local places that are doing Halloween things autumn those things, workshops or things that people can do there's going to be going more out of summer and go more into autumn winter time and a lot of guys research and and also reaching out to new people are the same right or what I've actually got coming up soon I'll come and visit and take some photos for you and then and that way because I think ahead. Hey, sometimes people don't post about it until it's happening. It's almost too late now.

Interviewer 9:30

Yeah, can't go you know. So you're telling me about the thing that I just missed.

subject 9:35

So for me, I want to be posted after two or three weeks before it happens. I think we've got time to sort of bookend



Interviewer 9:40

okay. And so you just mentioned photography then because you've got a nice aesthetic, I think on your on your posts. So is that something you work at? I mean, have you just got an eye Do you spend a lot invest a lot of time and effort in your, you know your reels or talk me through that creative process a little bit.

subject 9:59

So this is actually this isn't actually my first Insta account because I published a novel A few years ago. And I set up an Insta account for my novel so it's all about books and movies and music. But alongside that, I've always been into photography and I've done it all myself over various summers just how to edit photos and how to take photos of things. It's kind of self taught. So I wanted this account to be fun for myself. So I've kind of combined it with photography, music and socialising made place to kind of ticks all those boxes by myself as well.

Interviewer 10:34

So it's part of I don't want to put words in your mouth but is part of the joy of it for you the creative process.

subject 10:42

Oh, definitely. Definitely.

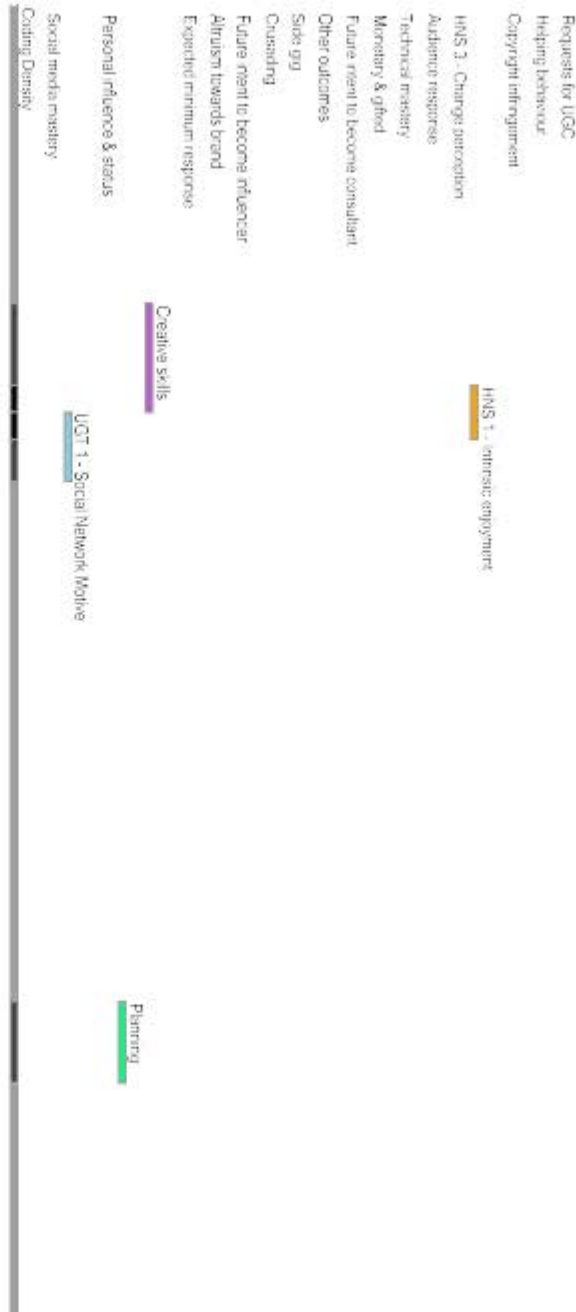
Interviewer 10:45

Yeah, it sounds like you love both the words and then if you presumably if you're a writer to the copy is quite rewarding as well as the imagery.

subject 10:56

Yeah, and also it's also spy trends as well. Like you start to realise if there's a certain thing on TV or a set or a certain event that went really well then normally I'm like okay, and it sounds like the public light that kind of event, for example, but bottomless brunches have gone crazy this year. I think basically we've been able to get drunk in the daytime I think I think it's been brunches, pop up, pop up. Restaurants go into cafes, but one night. I think they what I'm realising is I think this is I'm not sure it's a good or a bad thing. But it's almost like being a cafe isn't enough. You have to be a cafe that can be a disco. You can be a cafe. It's got to be a book club.

Interviewer 11:38



There are a few places that have done that - the sandwich place the XXXX place on the XXXXXX Road, that place do you know it? Is it a club? Is it a shop? Is it a sandwich bar, is it you know, I think that you're absolutely right. That's quite a trend isn't it?

subject 11:53

Using that as an example I think they've lost so much business that XXXX who owns it, it she was saying their wedding organising business, and they've lost so much footfall. People don't tend to go out shopping. So the daytime, they barely get any customers in for food. So it's almost right. We need to fill the gap. We'll make it a music venue. We'll make it a place where we can have brunches. We can have cocktail nights so it's almost I think people are realising that if they just rely on one avenue of income they're probably not going to make it which is so sad

Interviewer 12:22

so it's almost like the the financial pressures which are far from over, aren't they? It's kind of forcing people just to try stuff.

subject 12:33

Yeah because I think at the moment I think a lot of independents are going to struggle this year especially but the reality is people aren't going out for those coffees anymore or going out because their money is tight and people are just staying in.

Interviewer 12:46

That discretionary spend is going to be hit hard, isn't it? Right let's not get depressed. We could end up down a rabbit hole with that. Tell me what you consider a successful post what what's what's a what's a good one for you?

subject 13:04

I've stopped focusing on this a bit because since I've I've done a few podcasts with local social media agencies that I've kind of done talks with, and sometimes they focus so much on likes and follows and engagement. When to post when to do that. And what I realise is there's actually no way to win. It's over-complicated. I just post when I think I think "oh this post will do well" it doesn't do anything at all. Another one I'll spend three seconds on will do really well. There's no kind of logic.

Unknown 13:32

Like there's no yeah, there's hard to predict.

Content Density

Requests for UGC
Helping behaviour
Copyright infringement
HMS 1 - intrinsic enjoyment
HMS 3 - Change perception
Audience response
Technical mastery
Morality & greed
Future intent to become consultant
Other outcomes
Side gig
Custody
Future intent to become influencer
Expected minimum response
Creative skills
Planning
Personal influence & status
UGC 1 - Social Network Motive

Altruism towards brand

Social media mastery

subject 13:35

And also what I realise if social media is I've stopped looking at followers and likes because I can do a post where I don't think it's done that well. And I'll see someone the next day they're gone. Oh, I love all your stories. And I'm always telling my friends about your posts, and I'm thinking "I've never, you've never liked one of my posts. I've never seen you." They don't say anything but they are watching. Yeah. So even though technically that they're not, they're not contributing when it comes to likes and comments, but they're spreading the word to friends or they're they are they are watching you every day that that is not contributing.

Interviewer 14:10

They're just not putting their hand up. To let you know that okay

Unknown 14:19

okay

Interviewer 14:26

OK now I'm trying to get a little bit specific. Can you tell me about the last time you created a post and tagged the company in. I mean is that something you always do? Try and do? Yeah. Okay, so what do you want? When you tag the company, and let's suppose you haven't spoken to them yet. You've decided to create a post about something that interests you. You've created the posts, you've tagged them. In? What do you expect to happen next?

subject 15:02

It's not it's almost like a bit of an unwritten for me and unwritten rule that if I do a feature I'd like to do they're going to share on their stories so that their audience can see that I've done it for them. Obviously, sometimes you can collaborate and by adding them as a collaborator then it will show on their feed as well. But generally speaking, 99% of time, if I do a feature about them they normally share on their stories. What tends to happen is they tend to think I'd always try and follow it up with if I've not visited before then I'm out I'll pop in and take some photos or I didn't introduce myself or sometimes so Oh, next time you're in town pop in and you can have a copy on this kind of thing and then but what's nice that is it means that I get to know everyone so if we're going if we're going to town I tend to know most people now which is nice.

Interviewer 15:52

Yeah. Okay, so

subject 16:56

Requests for UGC
Helping behaviour
Copyright infringement
HNS 1 - intrinsic enjoyment
HNS 2 - Change perception
Audience response
Technical mastery
Monetary & gifted
Future intent to become consultant
Other outcomes
Sides gig
Coaching
Future intent to become influencer
Altruism towards brand
Creative skills
Planning
Personal influence & status
UC* 1 - Social Network Motive
Social media mastery
Coaching Density

Expected minimum response

what I try and do every post I do or every story I try and maximise it to it to its full potential. So for example, if I know that your FridgeStreet is stuck to things Ah, yeah, I'll do a bit of research and find out all the brands or the localised thing

Interviewer 17:13

that's how you came to my attention actually because you tagged me in in a visit to vintage guru. So that was how I became aware of you

subject 17:23

vintage guru but also tagging pretty straight. And three or four different suppliers are not as targeted when I'm targeting trends I am going to feature on more

Interviewer 17:35

maximise your reach Yeah. Okay, so So do you ever have situations where you don't get a response from you know, are you ever sort of surprised if you you know, if you don't get any feedback from a company must happen sometimes

subject 17:56

awkward to be found out but normally get a feel for it because you can tell by their social media accounts on how active they are. So if I went on to your FridgeStreet account, and I noticed that your last post was three weeks ago, and you've been you've got no Insta Stories in the last 24 hours, my prediction is that you're not that active on Instagram. Yeah. If I did a post about you, it could be it could go either way. Whether or not you're going to reply

Interviewer 18:21

okay, because I'm not looking at the moment. Yeah, yeah. Which should be done right.

subject 18:27

The flip side if I can see someone is posted every day, I'm like, well, they're on

Interviewer 18:32

Yeah, that'd be glad at the content okay. Okay, so. So can you tell me a time when? Second, so, do you normally write about things where you would kind of describe yourself as a fan so you're, you're prolific and you're posting about brands?

Requests for UGC
Helping behaviour
Copyright infringement
HMS 1 - intrinsic enjoyment
HMS 3 - Change perception
Audience response
Technical mastery
Morality & gifted
Future intent to become consultant
Other outcomes
Sides gig
Custody
Future intent to become influencer
Altruism towards brand
Creative skills
Planning
Personal influence & status
UGC 1 - Social Network Motive
Social media mastery
Coding Density

Expected minimum response

So so I'm specifically gonna tell you a little bit about why I'm investigating this. I'm interested in content creators who are who write about other companies and that's my specific interest. And so some people are like super fans of a brand and they write about that a lot. You I would describe as someone who is more prolific you you write about lots of things and tagging lots of brands. And so do would you say that you normally are creating content for companies that you feel positively disposed towards? I mean, do you normally need to be warm, you know, feel warm towards an organisation to bother doing it?

Subject 19:15

I mean, if I've got a good relationship with the people that I'm blogging, I've met them we get on really well, we're actually good friends now. They helped me I help them, then that's when it's perfect because it's kind of everyone's winning in that scenario. I've had a few plays I've been to where that communication not very good when I've when I've served on both sides. I've been a bit kind of it's almost like I'm an afterthought, and I didn't know he was coming in. It's all a bit messy.

Interviewer 20:18

Does that make you feel like you perhaps don't want to endorse them?

And also, sometimes you're going to somewhere that the food wasn't great.

subject 20:29

Yes that can happen. Well it wasn't horrible, but it's yes, it was. All right. So but that's that's, that's to be fair, that's quite bad. Normally most places tend to be have a good standard and that they're generally very appreciative to go in Yeah. Okay. I'll be what's quite nice as well though, because I know so many different types of people. I'm sure I'm uncommon mix in different places together. So for example, there's been some runway brewery in water we've been there before. It's a brewery in in water animate and every normally every weekend they do almost like they build up a band and lock food vendor come and they do like the theme night. And they always ring me and say Oh, are we looking for like an American rock band? Do you know any local bands?

Interviewer 21:21

So you've become almost like a fixer. Yeah, the

subject 21:25

kind of. they're just all messed up. Are we looking for like a really good Motown standard, you know? It's like, yeah, so So I tend to I'll send them ideas. Yeah, though. I get so many messages from people saying XXXX Do you know anyone that does kid's balloon hires? You know, anywhere that does on that, like the yellow pages used to be

Requests for UGC
Helping behaviour
Copyright infringement
HMS 1 - intrinsic enjoyment
HMS 3 - Change perception
Audience response
Technical mastery
Monetary & gifted
Future intent to become consultant
Side gig
Clustering
Future intent to become influencer
Altruism towards brand
Expected minimum response
Creative skills
Planning
Personal influence & status
Social media mastery
Coding/Density

UCT 1 - Social Network Motive

Other outcomes

Interviewer 21:45

Sounds transformative for you, because this was part of your reason for doing it right. And now your diaries full

subject 21:56

yeah, I've I've had to actually be... when I first started I just said yes to everything, but it made a lot of weekends hectic. For example, there was one weekend where I went I think on the Friday I went to a food festival and another DJ night the next day I went to three food festivals. I'm not I can't, I can't maintain. I've got to say no, I've got to say no to things. I can't go to everything. I'm just gonna have no long so I have to pick and choose a bit now.

Interviewer 22:22

Okay. So you've talked about, I think, some positive consequences of you doing this content? And have there been any negative consequences for you?

subject 22:38

Yeah, there's definitely some lessons learned when I first started and I think I assumed especially artists and photographers, I didn't I didn't realise that some of them are really protective of their art so whereas I always thought they would want to be spread the word about them. They're quite. "No, I don't I don't I don't want my work on your page."

Interviewer 23:00

What so they're almost like you're they're seeing you as infringing copyright rather than sharing like promoting them.

subject 23:09

I don't want my work on your pages my work so since I've kind of learned that not so much cafes and restaurants but definitely when it comes to artists and musicians they can be a bit more protective over there are definitely a few.

Interviewer 23:24

I think usually, I think sometimes because I've kind of because I I illustrate I think sometimes I've come up against, you know, sort of proper artists and I think sometimes, especially if they haven't figured out how to monetize what they do. I think that's why in my experience, that's when they can become almost a little bit precious because they believe that their content is being taken and used for free, which I can understand but that's especially if they you know, they can't don't have a way



of taking that promotion and turning it into however they do make their money. And I think that that can be you know, that can be challenging

subject 24:23

I got the impression when I first started it because when I when I started out I knew I was going to hit it hard. So I was I was almost going to come into play into glory. Posts 10 times a day come from nowhere with what I wanted to build up a following but quickly and I definitely found from a lot of local bloggers not all of them but but got the impression that it was like "who are you?"

Interviewer 24:42

been on some stepping on some turf? Did XXXXXXX come after you?

subject 24:52

I do get the impression that some people like I don't I don't know who this guy thinks he is

Interviewer 24:59

so to that I was gonna say talking about blogger world do you do you think that this I mean, we talked about this sort of being part of your life but you know, do you see yourself as looking at like influencing or you know, getting a big following and having that as part of your work portfolio now or in the future?

subject 25:22

Let's finally be looking at the most simplest terms, does Does my page influence people it probably does, but I'm not gonna have a way to be an influencer

Interviewer 25:33

I think maybe the "influencer" word has become a bit loaded, so don't feel weird about it. Because you know, don't think "Kardashians" but you know, being able to influence influence, You know, people's buying behaviour, let's say, you know. I think you are at some level of influence. And now I'm just wondering if you thought about it as something that might become like a job for you

subject 26:05

I think,

Interviewer 26:07

Requests for UGC
Helping behaviour
Copyright infringement
HMS 1 - intrinsic enjoyment
HMS 3 - Change perception
Audience response
Technics mastery
Monetary & ghost
Future intent to become consultant
Other outcomes
Side gig
Coaching
Altruism towards brand
Expected minimum response
Creative skills
Planning
Personal influence & status
UGT 1 - Social Network Motive
Social media mastery
Coding Density

Future intent to become influencer

or was the yoga you know, it might not be part of your motivation.

subject 26:11

I think it could be it could be monetize it just depends whether or not I'm willing to I suppose it depends on work if I'm willing to promote things that I don't feel passionate about, which I'm not sure I want to or whether I'll go down the route of actually managing people's social media accounts, but I think realistically looking at me working full time and the life I've got I don't think I've got the time to do that. That would mean my my blogging would get less and less, but I have less time for it. Those are kind of a Yeah, I'm not sure. I'm not sure to be fair on that. I never stops getting money in mind. So I'm not overly fussed about making money from it.

Interviewer 26:46

It's almost like it sounds to me like it's an extension of your social life and creative life perhaps. Yeah, was that fair to say?

subject 26:57

If I added up all the free stuff that I've got this month, it probably equates to 800 pounds, but I've not seen the money myself. Yeah. So experienced that so yeah, so not not a monetary amount, but definitely value.

Interviewer 27:12

Yeah, that sounds like sounds like it has value to me. I think that right?

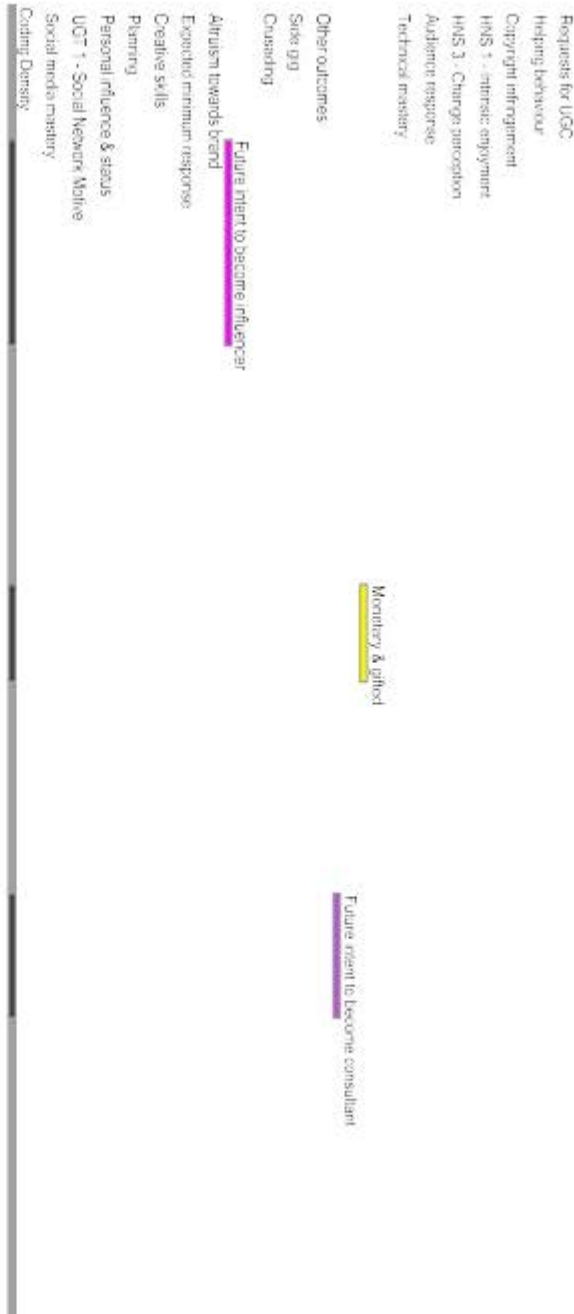
subject 27:19

was difficult I think especially even now, but it was I get the impression must be so difficult for social media coaches or because it's a real hard time to ask people for money because I think if even if a cafe is said that I'll give you if I give you 50 pounds, we do some post form and they are taken from it. It's quite a tough time and they may not

Interviewer 27:42

maybe depends what field you're working in. Because if if actually you were in the car trade, you know if you're if the type of work you were doing was reviewing electronics, electronic gadgets and your audience could be international, then that's a different kind of thing.

But I think whenever it's localised and events based then you know I think you inevitably have relationships with these people you know, their, you know their people to you and a lot of what you're doing feels like it's pretty altruistic



subject 28:35

i know, so like to get to a point has happened a few times where I'm actually starting to engage with with perhaps local businesses and local council and actually having a bit of a voice of power to make that sound even better because for example, if you've been to a free range farm and they do their sunflowers, and they do Yeah, yeah. I know them quite well. Now. They're always saying Oh, like, is there anything you could recommend for next year? And I'm like all have you thought about like lavender fields like lavender you thought about wildflowers? So based on talking about wildflowers last year left I've now got wildflower wildflowers this year. So some people do ask if you've got any ideas that then make it even better for next year or can any ideas because

Interviewer 29:15

it's interesting because there is quite a lot of... right this is just about to run out. Let me restart it [recording]

Interviewer 0:02

because that she there is quite a lot of consultation. So I think the other thing that can be, I mean, just because we're talking about our local area, there's also you know, the people who always jump into comments on the cron you know, saying that, Oh, you know, blaming other people, when in actual facts to my mind, there's actually quite a lot of outreach or if you if you look for it, you know, quite often they want to have public consultation or businesses want to know what to do. So I think if you're prepared to actually, you know, have ideas I do think that there's quite a reception for it, you know, you can influence what happens

subject 0:42

definitely and also as well, sometimes the council are the best that listening to the actual population of a town or what people actually want.

Interviewer 0:50

But I think they can they do sometimes I think there's, there's there's sort of counsellors but I think also, you know, there are committed, I don't know, I don't know how people can be bothered to go on committees. That's where I was come unstuck because I would hate to be in a meeting but for you know, with Dusty people and lots of you know, arguing, but yeah, it's just interesting how you can come to influence a place isn't it? Yeah, cuz

subject 1:19

I'm speaking to local business owners. For example, if you owned a coffee shop, if you own vintage guru, if vintage gallery was in St. James, or just in their rent will be half what it is on St Giles Street. Yeah. So there's that thing of you're just because you've got an NN1 postcode means you're doubling your rent on a venue when which means it's going to discourage people from I've been in

Requests for UQC	
Helping behaviour	
Copyright infringement	
HMS 1 - intrinsic enjoyment	
HMS 3 - Change perception	
Audience response	
Technical mastery	
Monetary & gifted	
Future intent to become consultant	
Other outcomes	
Sides gig	
Clustering	
Future intent to become influencer	
Altruism towards brand	
Expected premium response	
Creative skills	
Planning	
Personal influence & status	
UC1 1 - Social Network Motive	
Social media mastery	
Coding Density	

place in Northampton Town and they'll do it in they'll do it two or three miles away because it's cheaper which doesn't really right you want town tends to be kind of a thriving place with empty dead shops.

Interviewer 1:53

Yes. So so I'm assuming Well, no, I'm not going to put your work put words in your mouth. So do you intend to continue to post so user generated content which this is UGC so you intend to continue to do this for the foreseeable you know, this is you this you're going to carry on?

subject 2:19

So it's almost as if this extended me now I think it's just

Unknown 2:24

out? Yeah, okay.

subject 2:27

I mean, one thing I would say is you have to you have to be mindful of everything has a shelf life, and then on Facebook, Instagram will eventually become like Facebook and will slowly

Interviewer 2:37

so it's always gonna be a new platform, right? Yeah,

subject 2:41

so it's almost thinking well, actually is it time to jump ship and move to move to a different platform? So that might happen eventually, because you know, you never know do what's popular and what's going to change. So webinars, maybe Instagram forever, I don't know. But I'd like I'd like to keep them instead rather. Than change it.

Interviewer 2:57

And so tell me, what do you think a company should do then when they because this is really at the heart of what I'm so I should back up a minute. What I'm trying to do with this research is come up with recommendations for social media managers, in terms of how they they manage naturally occurring positive brand content so so what that was that's what I would describe what you do, you know you except when you're approached you are spontaneously creating user generated content

Request for UGC
Helping behaviour
Copyright infringement
HMS 1 - artistic employment
HMS 3 - Change perception
Audience response
Testimonial mastery
Monetary & gifted
Future intent to become consultant
Other outcomes
Side gig
Crusading
Future intent to become influencer
Altruism towards brand
Expected minimum response
Creative skills
Planning
Personal influence & status
UGC 1 - Social Network Motive
Social media mastery
Coding Density

that's positive in nature. So what do you think social media managers should do to encourage more of what you're doing?

subject 3:48

I think what I've realised is when when somewhere gets social media, right they normally bang on and that guarantee they're making a good profit because you when you do social media, right? It's like a kind of a catalyst where people assume it's busy people want to go there. People are ringing to book tickets for it. It looks popular because it's always popping up on your feed in front of my god Where is this place? While still you've got somewhere that looks they do one post a week and look down and there's no one in there anymore, doesn't mean no one goes there. So you need to create that constant buzz and energy the fact that you need to be in this restaurant, you need to come to this cafe

Interviewer 4:29

and her she's been encouraging people to because there's always the stuff that they can make themselves right. But what you do is pretty special because you are creating things that is more authentic because it's not by the company, it's by someone else. Yes, it's gold dust for them, isn't it?

subject 4:50

But it's pretty how different restaurants and cafes been their social media because I know a lot of them. They they haven't got a social media manager but they in house they might they might almost give social media to someone who's almost like part of their job role. Or they might give it to say three or four people and say of right keep taking photos keep keep sharing. I think the big thing as well is really encouraging your customers to talk about it. So incentivize, like, tag us in on your posts. You get a free coffee. Or whatever situation because you want to the whole point of social media is you want new eyes on it all the time. Anyway, doing that as by getting people getting your name out constantly to try and encourage young people to constantly be tagging you in sharing where they are taking photos.

Interviewer 5:38

So how do you think they should do that? What do you think it should be some sort of promotion, do you think they should be, you know, having that, you know, signage in store or have you seen any good examples of that, where they're encouraging that?

subject 5:53

I think what I realised again, the restaurants and cafes are doing really well or really, really aesthetically pleasing. So they've got and they've got lots of different angles where you can go to one restaurant and you might have a flower wall on that corner. A different colour wall on that one.

Costing Density

Social media mastery

UCT 1 - Social Network Motive

Responses for U3C0

Helping behaviour
Copyright infringement
HMS 1 - intrinsic enjoyment
HMS 1 - Change perception
Audience response
Technical mastery
Mastery & gifted
Future intent to become consultant
Other outcomes
Size pg
Cursing
Future intent to become influencer
Altruism towards brand
Expecting minimum response
Creative skills
Planning
Personal influence & status

The tables are different colours. So essentially it means that I could go to that cafe every day for a week and have my phone

Interviewer 6:15

ha each time and each one would look onpoint recordings,

subject 6:19

versus still the little pocket themes going on because it means that your photos got more varied. If you just got a wide cafe. Every photo is going to be white because you've got whether it's a break of the colour so anybody got a restaurant or cafe and it's filled with different colour themes you've got lots of points of interest, so it keeps visually you think it's a bit of a valley in general, when you go to a place this is really Instagrammable Yeah, this is gonna be great photos. You know, this looks awesome.

Interviewer 6:47

Yeah. Well, they said now I think you should absolutely be part of the business plan. Don't even open it. Until you figured out what is your, you know, how is it going to look on Instagram?

subject 6:58

I mean, that's not not as extreme as it sounds, I know that there's places in London restaurants and cafes, I've actually I think restaurants that have got each table has got its own design, almost either a disco part a punk part or whatever so So you essentially every time you come you're in a new theme and I think that keeps the engagement going but there's people

Interviewer 7:22

Yeah, so each time your posts are looking like you're in a new place and yeah,

subject 7:29

this person she reached out and she was really struggling because she used to she used to make her own candles. But it's the same for you with Fridge Street is that there's only so many so many ways you can take a photo of a magnet has so many ways. It's like I'm looking at ways to make this look different. But I can't really avoid it.

Interviewer 7:46

Yeah, I mean as I say, I'm lucky because each time I each time I draw a new place it's tends to bring a new audience. So my you know, the variety I'm getting is not from the execution. It's just from the

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nature of where the places but it does mean that it's so free. So for example, in the summer, when I get a little bit burnt out, to be honest, it comes to the point where I don't want to do it and now I'm only doing it for my own enjoyment. So I'll rest it a little bit and then I come back in the run up to Christmas typically but you're absolutely right in fact that you know, there's only you know that in fact, you know, sometimes there's a bit of tension between trying to have some sort of look and feel and being consistent versus you know, trying to have it look different all the time. So always there's a creative challenge.

subject 8:38

personally, I'll find it whenever you open a social media account. I always trying to choose three things that you really enjoy. Yeah, because that you've got that trio of of interest. It means you can you can alternate between those three things. So, for example, there's a cafe in High Wycombe that's like a cafe and a plant shop. So it means that their photos can be food, drinks and plants. Yeah.

Interviewer 9:02

So it's a great strategy. Actually, yeah, cuz I think one of the things that people sometimes underestimate, with especially with small businesses, it is emotionally exhausting. It's you know, trying to like keep on being enthusiastic and, you know, jumping up every morning and wanting to talk about your bakery or whatever it is. It's tough, right? Just to you know, do that weekend, week out weekend week out. It's

subject 9:35

not to bang on about about the current situation but I know a lot of cafes are noticing a big drop off in in people that come in in the cost of the cost of produce. This almost will actually we're actually we're losing money as it's like, really worked out. Well actually. I'm selling it for this, but it's costly. It's to make it make it

Interviewer 9:58

well, and then you end up in a bit of a downward spiral. You know, you it's hard to be so enthusiastic about your business. And then of course, the less marketing you do, it's a bit of a death. Sentence, isn't it? So? Yeah, well,

subject 10:13

lately if you get if you get it, right, it's like if we if you've been to XXXX bar, yeah. They have they have nailed it in every aspect. They've nailed it. And it shows you that if you do it right, and you've got you've got the right venue and the right people in the right social media content. It will you will be busy.

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Interviewer 10:31

Yeah. No, absolutely. Great. Well, I think I've come to the Oh, hurry. Yeah, I have I have come to the end of my questions. So I'm just trying to so just an opportunity for you. So just to conclude, if you like. So this whole idea of, you know, get creating user generated content, any last thoughts about what a social media manager should do? So encourage people to participate, you know, because it's a it's quite a collaborative thing, isn't it? You know, there's, there's what you can create, but there's also encouraging people to do your advertising for you in an authentic way. So would you have any final recommendations for those social media managers, if you had their ear,

subject 11:22

really understanding what it is that they're, they need from you? So you might, you might have one customer that's really good at photography. And they're really good at visually creating a beautiful image. They respect they just don't understand how algorithms work or how to post or how to get the most engagement. So they need more assistance with social media, whilst other people might be awful at photos and it will actually I need someone to actually take the photos. So it's more understanding what what they actually what, what they're good at and what they're lacking. I'm filling that gap.

Interviewer 11:56

Yeah. Okay. Thanks. I think that's fair enough. We're talking a lot about small businesses, aren't we? Because that's the nature, the nature of it, but you know, the reality is they may not have these sorts of skills in house a lot of the time or they're, they're all on a massive learning curve. Because, you know, when you're a small business person, you're the HR director, your finance your, you know, the head chef and bottle washer, quite literally. So, you know, having a social media person, you know, Vic can very often be, you know, a junior member of staff who's you know, part time waitress part time, you know, on the socials. So that is must be happening all the time. expensive

subject 12:38

and also is understanding Are you do you want me to run your account for you or do you just want to want me to teach you how to bring in some people just want almost just teach me how

Interviewer 12:50

Yeah, and actually do you know, I think often because I've done some bits of So, you've probably got from my email that I teach this stuff. I'm a I run a course at university for advertising and digital marketing, so a lot of times, so I'm mostly teaching students this stuff, but also sometimes I do engagement with small businesses. And I've done some stuff with charities before when usually, when charities are a funny one, because they often have an older demographic of, you know, volunteers. And they're really out of their depth at this stuff. And normally, they just want someone to do it, but it's probably it's pretty problematic to just try and parachute someone in. Because, you

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know, in reality, you might have someone come in for six months and do a load of posts but a they're not very they're not authentically part of your organisation and perhaps don't really understand it very well. And also then when they go you're back to square one. You know, I would always advocate trying to build the capacity within the organisation if you can, because, you know, I think it's quite a brave thing to post on behalf of another company. You know, you got to get the tone, right. You got to get your content, right. You know, I think it's quite a big ask unless you're really close to them. Or you've got a really tidy plan, you know, if you, you know, if you are promoting events, you know, what the events are going to be and you've got a schedule and you know, it's fairly formulaic then you'd be okay. But I think some of the some of the content that works really well is kind of off at the moment. And that's kind of harder to do to order I think.

subject 14:30

Although I have seen a massive increase. We're doing my blog. I do post a lot of social media. Coaches, I'm a page there's quite a lot in Northampton and Milton Keynes that do agency work. Where they do lots of different packages for different clients sort of localised. So there's definitely people out there that want that want it.

Interviewer 14:49

Oh, undoubtedly, there are, as I say, I think you know, I think that's a it used to be web design, didn't it? I felt like everybody was buying web design. I feel like everybody has now figured out that Wix isn't that hard to do. And now everybody wants someone to do their socials. So, yeah.

subject 15:07

also realise it's not companies that want social media management, it's more individual. So you are getting a girl that does nails and beauty and she wants to someone's run her account set so it's so nice. She's she's the only person employed our company has hired someone to teach her how to do social media for herself. So business has changed as well.

Interviewer 15:31

Yeah, well, it's been really, really good to meet you. I'm so delighted that I like randomly. Well, it wasn't random. I had a strategy, but you're exactly who I wanted to talk to about this because, as I say, I'm trying to I've got a conceptual model that I'm working on and you know, I'm keen to speak to the people who are making the content as well as the people who are, you know, the corporate, the people who are perhaps in a marketing department who have the responsibility for community management. So these these would typically be probably larger organisations. To be honest, because we've been really focusing on SMEs, haven't we? But obviously, that, you know, there are companies that have you know, lots of people working on social and it's really that motivation, which you articulated really well for you what, you know, you're that whole sort of creative passion and altruism, which absolutely ticks two of the main reasons that I suspected people do this stuff. I think everybody thinks, or there's a perception that people think that people make this type of content, because they, you know, want to be an influencer, but actually usually it starts with some

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other kind of motivation, you know, about wanting to help or be creative. So, and that's what I was getting most from you. I don't know if that. You know, I don't know if that reflects how you feel, but that's the most sense of what was in motivating you at the start.

subject 17:05

Yeah, it's kind of it's definitely a mixture. It's definitely it's a win win because I'm selfishly, it's changed my life in a good way where it is for myself where I get to meet people and get to try new things. But then, on the other side, it's happening the businesses,

Interviewer 17:19

local, I mean, there was clearly a financial or material benefit for you as well. But, you know, it seemed like there was at least three things going on there. The creative part of you, the helping part of you, and perhaps the more material part of you have all worked together there. So, so thank you. You have anything you wanted to ask me are you all good? runner or good? Fantastic. If you're interested when I when I finally smashed all of this data together and firm, there'll be some sort of, you know, outcome from it and I will share it with you if you're interested. Awesome. Definitely. Okay. Well, thank you so much for your time today. Thank you. It's been good. All right, then. Thanks a lot. Bye.

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