

The Role of User Generated Content in Shaping a Business's Reputation on Social Media: Moderating role of trust propensity

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to identify the importance of User Generated Content for businesses and provides insight into the relationship between the propensity of trust and a businesses reputation. This research involves a cross-sectional empirical study on 217 active Facebook users. Linear regression and moderation analysis is conducted using process macro by Hayes (2012). Results show that Users' Generated Content plays a vital role in building the reputation of businesses. Furthermore, the propensity to trust modifies this relationship. Online users with a lower propensity to trust behave differently as they tend to surf more and are likely to rely on their contemporaries without verifying the information they are exposed to and place a greater emphasis on what their peers say.

Keywords: E-Word of Mouth; user generated content; reputation; social network sites.

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1. INTRODUCTION

According to Internet World statistics, Internet usage has experienced an exponential growth of 1,239% in the past two decades and exhibits a penetration rate of approximately 62%. In response to this phenomenon, marketers have developed a keen interest in using contemporary media channels such as social media networks in their marketing strategies. For over five decades marketers strive to understand the significance of customers in building sustainable competitive advantages especially those created through positive Word of Mouth (WOM). WOM generates awareness, affects purchase decisions, and influences the reputation of businesses (Kushwaha & Agrawal, 2015; Baka, 2016). Advancements in information technology and emergence of social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn etc. no longer limit physical interactions to a small social circle of family and friends (Zhang et al., 2017). Such Social Network Sites (SNS) have enabled people to socialize with strangers millions of miles away and share their culture, values, product information, and opinions on latest events.

Thus, such SNS have immensely elevated the impacts of WOM and allows marketers to advertise products and services, boost their revenues and build reputation (Michaelidou et al., 2011; Duggan & Smith, 2015). Statistics of global digital population as of July 2020 show that there are approximately 4.6 billion internet users, out of which 3.96 billion are active

social media users, with almost 3.91 billion regularly accessing their SNS through their mobile devices. Amongst the different SNS, Facebook is the most popular with almost 2.6 billion active users, followed by Youtube and Whatsapp with approximately 2 billion users (Statista, July 2020). Within the adult demographic segment of internet users, 73% use at least one SNS and a majority of adults (79%) use Facebook (Greenwood et al., 2016).

Social media marketing is both an art and a science. While most firms have established official pages and use SNS for many purposes including advertising, interacting with customers, and communicating latest information about their products and services, the success of their marketing strategies depend upon user generated content. This includes the number of likes (usually positive response of users to online content –communicated through “Like” button on Facebook), as well as the comments and shares the company gets on their pages (Bureau, 2008). Thus, social media marketing is focused on increasing traffic to official pages, and encouraging users to comment and share information within their social networks. While such engagement techniques generate positive electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM), they can serve as a source of negative e-WOM as well. Consumers may have bad experiences with the company and share negative experiences on their personal and company’s Facebook pages. While firms can hide negative e-WOM on official pages, they have no control over the personal accounts of users and this highlights why businesses are concerned about their e-WOM (Hernández-Campos et al., 2003).

User-generated content (UGC) is any content created by users rather than brands/business and takes the form of text, audios, videos, and/or images. The term "user-generated content" became mainstream in the mid of 2000 and is now considered a reliable and convenient source of information parallel to firms’ official advertisement. Researchers have studied UGC and its relationships with several variables including brand perception, brand equity, purchase behavior, and identifying influencers (Kim & Lee, 2017, Rachna, 2017; Culotta & Cutler, 2016, Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2016, Christodoulides et al., 2012, Lin & Lu, 2011, Dhar & Chang, 2009). Very few studies have explored the relationship between UGC and firm reputation (Nisar et al., 2020; Confente Confente et al., 2019; Mir-Bernal, 2019; Dhar & Chang, 2009). This study aims to add to this limited body of literature and posits that the relationship between UGC and reputation is influenced by an individual user’s propensity to trust. Trust is an important factor that impacts user engagement in economic and social exchanges and ultimately customer relationships (Bapna et al., 2017; Baka, 2016).

This paper studies the moderating impact of propensity to trust on the relationship between

UGC and a firm's reputation. The research is valuable for the firms as they need to understand what contributes in improving their online reputation. While making strategies businesses may treat most or all of the online users as a single community which is not desirable. People vary in terms of possessing traits and individual behaviors resulting in displaying different online behaviors. Identifying different types of behaviors will equip managers to come up with targeted strategies.

Relevant and recent literature is presented in the next section which justifies the need of the study as well as provides the theoretical perspective. Following literature review, methods are discussed that entail the details of sample characteristics and size, instrument used to collect the data and statistical tests conducted to find the answers of the questions raised in the research. In the next sections, empirical evidence is provided, and results are discussed in comparison to the existing body of literature. In the end, future research areas are suggested.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section gives the theoretical underpinnings of UGC and firm reputation. First the literature on UGC is reviewed, followed by an overview of research on business reputation with an emphasis on e-WOM. Based on this literature review, we present the main hypotheses of our study.

2.1 User Generated Content (UGC)

UGC is an important aspect of social media marketing and has been described as the content or the evaluations of product and services created or produced by users and the general public rather than by the company or its official marketing campaign (Vickery & Wunsch-Vincent, 2007; Daugherty et al., 2008; A.MacKinnon, 2012; N. Sethna, Hazari & Bergiel, 2017). It also identifies the medium or applications through which this content is created (Koch & Elçiseven, 2012; Naab, 2017). Many businesses' want their customers' feedback to go 'viral' (Bruyn & Lilien, 2008). The term viral means that maximum people are exposed to the information resulting in greater customer visits to their pages and this acts as unpaid marketing and promotion opportunity for the businesses (Yu & Zou, 2015). Users often provide ratings or reviews according to their experience with a specific brand and this sets other customer's expectations with these brands (Yoo & Gretzel, 2011). Thus, UGC as content, provides relevant information that consumers require during their purchase decisions (Bruyn & Lilien, 2008). UGC has also been viewed as the medium used for

generating content and is highly relevant to the impact it has on the brand marketing performance (Manap & Adzharudin, 2013).

There are three important characteristics of UGC: 1) Publication requirement meaning that the content has to be published at a platform in some specific context such as on a website or SNS, 2) Creative effort means that a certain amount of creativity has to be put into the work such as users adding their personal values to the work, and 3) Creation outside of professional routines and practices implying that the content is created without anticipation of compensation or for some commercial purposes. This distinct feature makes UGC different from paid media as the content is generated for interacting with other social network users (Vickery & Wunsch-Vincent, 2007; Naab, 2017). As customers seek more online information about a business and its market offering, they often end up on fan pages in order to gain insights into other users' opinions and experiences associated with the offerings. Businesses try to interact with customers through their official pages and improve their communication. Yet the unofficial pages, managed by public, influence users' perception and opinions more than those of the companies. Primarily for the reason that they are based on consumer's own experiences and consumer are perceived more trustworthy (Stephen & Galak, 2012). Therefore, the entire focus of firms is no longer only on paid media such as advertisements on social media and paid blogs but also on optimizing the content of their customers. UGC no longer has a dispersed nature. Technological advancements, such as the Hashtags, have reduced this dispersion. The Hashtag is attributed to Chriss Messinain who used it for the first time in August 2007 and now SNS such as Twitter and Facebook use it to consolidate online trends and data searches (Marwick, 2013). Conceptually, UGC on social network sites can be measured in three ways: a) opinion seeking – when users *ask* others for their opinions before making any decision, b) opinion giving – when people *give* their own opinion based on some experience or exposure, and c) opinion passing – when people share information received without augmenting their personal experiences or perceptions to the original information (Chu & Kim, 2011, Farías, 2017). Opinion seeking targets information generated by opinion leaders who actively express their opinions and have a large follower of users who trust their expertise (Reichelt et al., 2014). Opinion passers rely on the information readily available on social media and thus while they do not participate actively, they still have quite an impact on what is being shared by increasing the visits to a page. In Facebook, users are engaged just by logging in, and based on their interactions, have information pushed towards them in a higher frequency.

For instance, if a user likes a business page and interacts by liking posts or leaving comments, that user will receive more information associated with that page compared to the less interactive users.

However, the number of interactions may not have a positive impact on the reputation of that business (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). For example, in the tourism industry travelers rely upon the negative information provided by other travelers to make well informed decisions about their vacation plans (Akehurst, 2009). While in the offline environment, negative word of mouth is known as one of the earliest and most important factors that influences a buyer's decision, conversely in the online environment user behave more individualistically than collectively and their loyalty towards brands may not be as affected as that of offline buyers (Marsha & Richins, 1983). Even if consumers behave individualistically, UGC influences consumption decision and perceptions (Presi, Saridakis, & Hartmans, 2014). In contrast to previous practices where businesses had the ability to share information with masses, businesses have adopted different means to attract individual users to like, comment, and share their page and let individuals share their own thoughts and impact other users. Thus, the power of spreading information has shifted to individual users of SNS such as Facebook. This has transformed market dynamics as well because a firms' reputation and goodwill is considered a valuable asset of any firm, is now influenced by UGC (Nisar et al., 2020; Confente et al., 2019; Mir-Bernal, 2019; Dhar & Chang, 2009).

2.2 Reputation

Business reputation has always been considered a dynamic concept possessing three important traits:(1) reputation is based on perception, (2) reputation is the aggregated perception of all stakeholders of a firms, and (3) reputation is relative (Balmer & Wilkinson, 1991; Fombrun & Van Riel, 1997; Fombrun & Gardberg, 2000). These traits imply that reputation is socially built and may not depict reality (De Castro et al., 2006). Therefore, reputation of a firm or business accumulates over times and it represents the general perceptions of its customers over a certain time period. Conceptualizing reputation as an aggregate perception brings up two major issues: First, that reputation is often specific to a certain context. A corporation may be perceived differently on parameters of environmental performance, profitability, social responsibility, and product quality. This implies that the same company may (potentially) have a different reputation for each of these attributes of environmental responsibility, profitability, social responsibility, corporate governance, employee treatment and product quality. For instance, Wal-Mart has an outstanding

reputation for profitability, but a meager one for employee treatment (Fauver, McDonald & Taboada, 2018).

Second, that a business may have a different reputation amongst every group of stakeholders. For example, Wal-Mart had a sturdy reputation with suppliers but a pleasant reputation with customers and investors. Traditionally a businesses' reputation is influenced by the marketing activities undertaken by the company and thus a business can control what it communicates to a certain stakeholder group. These groups had limited interactions with other groups and mostly shared their experiences within their limited social circles. SNS such as Facebook have changed these dynamics. All different stakeholder groups communicate across geographical and functional boundaries. A famous example is Dave Carroll's 'United Breaks Guitars' campaign. United Airlines broke Dave's guitar during transportation did not reimburse Dave for the damage even after a year. Dave posted his song (United breaks Guitar) on YouTube, the song went viral with over a million hits in 4 days and United Airlines stock price dropped by 10% (Post, 2011). This example depicts the power of SNS and how it can impact the reputation of a business. What takes the business years to build may be lost within a few days or even hours. Therefore, UGC affects the way consumers think, feel and react to the marketing activities of a firm. Marketing campaigns often highlight the tangible attributes of their products or attract customers using psychological tactics associated with some tangible element of their products. Customers perceive that such campaigns often exaggerate the intangible attributes of the product and thus rely on UGC in the form of WOM to get more information.

Word Of Mouth (WOM) is defined as "all informal communication directed at other consumers about the ownership, usage or characteristics of particular goods and services or their sellers" (Westbrook, 1987, p.261). WOM communicated electronically is called electronic WOM or e-WOM. Therefore, e-WOM can be broadly defined as all informal communications directed at stakeholders through the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) associated with any aspect of an organization. This includes a two-way communication between the firm and its customers as well as among customers themselves (Litvin et al., 2008, Goldsmith & Horowitz, 2006). Often e-WOM is linked with the customers own experiences or at least adding their own experiences with those of other customers (Nisar, Prabhakar, Ilavarasan & Baabdullah, 2020). Since UGC has a unique property of sharing information without being edited by any single firm or business, this particular property makes SNS more reliable and convenient sources of information for users.

Hence users perceive that information provided by other users and customers are often accurate and more reliable compared to that from marketing campaigns. This leads us to derive our first hypothesis which states that:

H1: *Positive UGC on Facebook will lead to increased reputation of the firms/brands.*

In case of SNS, User generated content is the most trusted when it comes to consumer decision making as potential customers trust the UGC to be unbiased (Mir & Rehman, 2013). Consumers determine the quality a brand delivers to them based on the perceptions of other customers about the brand. In other words, the willingness of a customer to purchase a product will be based on their trust on the recommendations and views of other people, especially seeing both positive as well as negative reviews by them (Litvin et al., 2008, Pappas, Mikalef, Giannakos & Pavlou, 2017).

The concept of trust is associated with a firms' reputation and often develops when users make product purchase decisions and form opinions based on those of other users within a specific online community (Dellarocas, 2010). This shows that even though SNS users behave individualistically, when it comes to trust some collectivistic element exists. Therefore, it is imperative to understand why consumers would rely upon and trust the opinions of a stranger (e-WOM) and not exhibit the same level of trust on the marketing campaign of an organization during their purchase decision-making process. Literature shows that trust is not only based on past experience but personality traits can also determine a user's trust and this personality-based form of trust is called as dispositional trust (Kramer, 1999), generalized trust (Delgado-Márquez et al., 2012), or trust propensity by various authors (Mayer et al., 1995; McAllister, 1995).

While propensity to trust is a relatively stable trait of people (McKnight et al., 1998, McKnight et al., 2002) people may differ on whom to trust. This propensity to trust, to display faith in other people and adopt a positive attitude towards them, is not context specific i.e. it is not based upon past occurrences with, or knowledge of particular distrusted or trusted parties, but is the result of a continued lifelong experiential and socialization process (Mayer et al., 1995). Propensity to Trust is considered most relevant when unfamiliar actors are involved in a situation (Bigley & Pearce, 1998). Since on SNS the source of UGC are strangers, it is important to study propensity to trust. As people who possess a higher propensity to trust are less likely to lie, cheat or steal, and likely to observe the rights of others (Rotter, 1980), we hypothesize that people with a higher propensity to trust others will consider UGC as legitimate and true. This will impact their perceptions or

reputation of brands and businesses.

H2: *Propensity to trust moderates the relationship of Users' Generated Content with the reputation of firms such that the higher the trust propensity stronger the relationship and vice versa.*

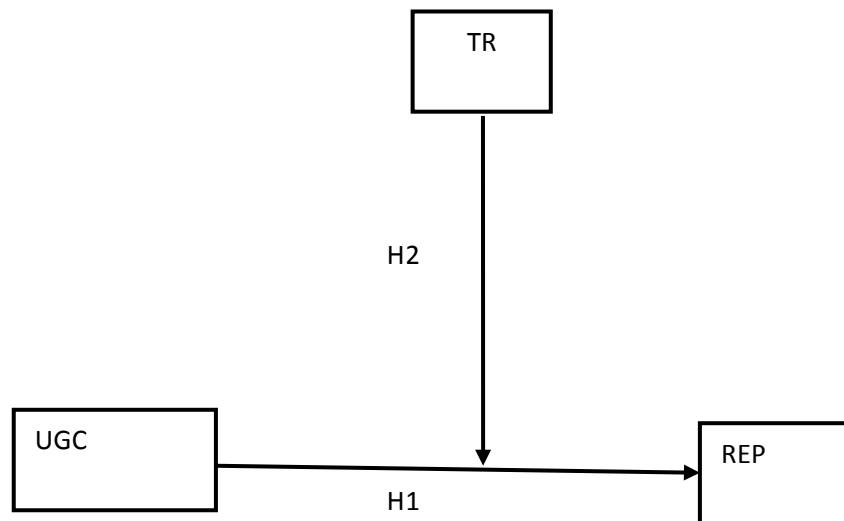


Figure 1. Research Model

3. METHODOLOGY

A web-based survey was conducted from 217 active Facebook users through Google Forms within a period of two weeks, in August 2020. To normalize data 6 outliers were removed thus 211 valid cases were used for further analysis. For measurement (see Table 1), UGC was measured on five items adapted from Chu and Kim (2011), three items used to measure propensity to trust were adapted from McKnight et al. (2002), four items used for Reputation are adapted from Fombrun and Gardberg (2000). All variables were measured on a 5-point Likert scale varying from 1 “Strongly Disagree” to 5 “Strongly Agree”.

Table 1. Measurement Scale

| Variable | Item |
|------------------------|---|
| User Generated Content | UGC 1 → I seek advice from the content shared on Facebook about Firm / Brand by other users |
| | UGC 2 → I like to get my contacts’ opinion about Firm / Brand on Facebook |
| | UGC 3 → I feel more comfortable deciding about Firm / Brand when i have explored other users’ opinion about that Firm / Brand |
| | UGC 4 → I frequently gather information on Facebook before taking any decision related to Firm / Brand |
| | UGC 5 → I mostly agree with the general opinion suggested in comments about that Firm / Brand |
| Propensity to Trust | TR 1 → I think people generally try to back up their words with their actions |
| | TR 2 → I usually trust people until they give me a reason not to trust them |
| | TR 3 → I generally give benefit of doubt when I first have interaction with them |
| Reputation | Rep 1 → Other users’ opinion build good or bad feeling about the brand |
| | Rep 2 → The Brand generally supports good cause |
| | Rep 3 → The Brand generally maintains a high standard in the way it treats users |
| | Rep 4 → I closely follow the suggestions made in comments about the Firm / Brand |

4. DATA ANALYSIS & RESULTS

Out of 211 respondents, 59% were male and 51% were female, 52% were within 20-29 years and 31% in 30-39 years, 60% log in 5 or more times on Facebook daily and 49% generally interact with posts reach to them. For internal reliability Cronbach Alpha is calculated (see table 2 for results).

Table 2. Estimation of reliability of measurement scales

| Construct | Cronbach Alpha (α) |
|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| UserGenerated Content | 0.765 |
| Propensity to Trust | 0.698 |
| Reputation | 0.728 |

Pearson correlation (table 3) represents correlation among variables. All the relations are significant on 0.01 level and are moderately correlated, which provides a good reason to proceed for regression analysis.

Table 3. Correlation

| Correlations | | | |
|---------------------|--------|--------|-----|
| | UGC | Trust | Rep |
| UGC | 1 | | |
| Trust | .330** | 1 | |
| Reputation | .578** | .336** | 1 |

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

To test hypothesis Linear Regression was applied. Summary of results is presented below in table 4 which identifies the significance of hypothesis for the study.

Table 4. Regression Summary

| Hypothesis | B | P | R² | Result |
|-------------------|----------|----------|----------------------|---------------|
| H1 | 0.578 | 0.017 | 0.334 | Accepted |

To test the hypothesis that corporate reputation is a function of user generated content, and more specifically whether propensity to trust moderates their relationship between user generated content and reputation, a hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted. In the first step, one variable user generated contents was added in the model. This variable accounted for a significant amount of variance in corporate reputation, $R^2 = .334$, $F(1,209) = 86.06$, $p < .001$. To avoid potentially problematic high multicollinearity with the interaction term, the variables were centered and an interaction term between user generated content and trust propensity was created (Aiken & West, 1991).

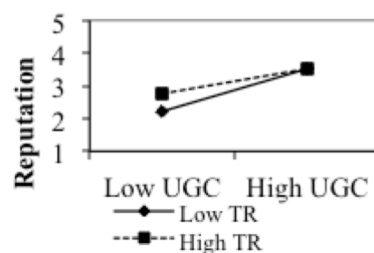


Figure 2. Comparison of Low and High propensity to trust factors

Next, the interaction term user generated content and propensity to trust was added to the regression model, which accounted for a significant proportion of the variance in corporate reputation, $\Delta R^2 = .045$, $\Delta F(1, 209) = 41.26$, $p = .001$, $b = -.1450$, $t(209) = -2.22$, $p < .05$ (0.0274). Examination of the interaction plot (Hayes, 2012) showed an enhancing effect that as user generated content and trust propensity, corporate reputation increased. Figure 3 shows the probing of moderated relation with the lower and higher trust propensity values. The slope shows the nature and significance of the impact of trust propensity on the relation of user generated content and reputation. The graph shows that at higher user generated content influence on reputation is same for both the groups: people with low trust propensity and with high trust propensity. However, at lower user generated content people with higher trust propensity show more influenced reputation than those with lower trust propensity.

5. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSIONS

The purpose of this study was to substantiate that trust propensity moderates the relationship between user generated content and firms' reputation. Results show that first hypothesis i.e. User Generated content has positive impact on firms' reputation has been accepted. Similar findings are supported in recent studies (Nisar et al 2020; Guo, Fan & Zhang 2020). With ever increasing content online and new platforms rising like mushrooms, firms seek mechanisms to understand what can affect their reputations. The finding provides another piece of empirical evidence for firms to focus on their online presence and for absorbing UGC.

While propensity to trust moderates the relation of UGC and reputation, the direction of this effect is not as hypothesized. Therefore, hypothesis two is rejected. The results indicate that people with lower propensity to trust tend to believe more on UGC and that helps build reputation of a firm. One of the possible explanation for that is people generally believe others if they know them personally (Delgado-Márquez et al., 2012), otherwise a doubt about the validity and truthfulness of the content is created in their minds which results in building negative reputation of the firm. For instance, a person telling about a product to be good but because the listener with low propensity does not trust him, so they may think that the opinion giver is manipulating the facts (Bandinelli, 2020).

Furthermore, another explanation is that people with low propensity to trust generally don't believe what the organizational sources say (Kleinkes, 2020). This leads them to believe more on users' generated content relative to firms' official communication. Users with low

propensity to trust read more users' generated content and form their opinions based on this content. So comparatively, these users consider this content to be a more reliable source of information than the firm-owned information sources (Yu & Ko, 2015). This behavior can be verified further through studying SNS other than Facebook. This will be a good addition to literature if such behavior is found consistent across different SNS.

5.1 Limitations

The main limitation of this study is that the SNS was limited to Facebook. People may interact with brands and firms through different SNS sites such as Pinterest, Instagram and TikTok and may not either use Facebook or even SNS to evaluate brands or firms. Hence, the findings of this study are not generalizable to other SNS or general WOM. Another limitation of the study is that the relationship between UGC and firm reputation is explored within a simple context. In fact factors other than user generated content, may impact the reputation of a firm such as: cultural values of the users and their perceptions of the values of the firm, experience of the user in using SNS, educational qualifications of the user in interpreting UGC etc.

5.2 Future research

Future research on UGC and firm reputation can include external factors such as cultural values and geographical locations to gain insights whether these can alter the relationship between these two variables. Another comparative analysis can be between UGC and businesses paid content and see which attracts consumers more than other. Furthermore, a comparative study can be conducted that compares the moderation of trust on online and offline reputation of firms because UGC may impact the offline behavior of consumers as well.

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