


Chapter 7

The Role of UGC in Brand Building Authenticity and Trust in the Food Industry

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ABSTRACT

User-generated content (UGC) is crucial for building brand authenticity and trust in the food industry. Consumers seek real-life reviews, photos, and testimonials to validate brand claims, fostering transparency and credibility. UGC provides social proof, reduces perceived risks, and creates emotional connections traditional ads often miss. It highlights customer experiences, promotes a community feel, and supports a customer-centric approach by integrating feedback. This enhances trust, engagement, and loyalty while positioning brands as transparent, reliable, and committed to quality, safety, and sustainability — key factors in the food sector's competitive landscape

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INTRODUCTION

User-generated content (UGC) over the last few years has revolutionized the way consumer brands communicate with consumers, particularly in industries where transparency, trust, and authenticity are of the essence (Sang et al., 2024). The food industry, with its emphasis on quality, safety, and ethical practice, has increasingly used UGC to interact with consumers more meaningfully. UGC means reviews (Chari et al., 2016), social media postings (Ouschan et al., 2019), photographs, videos (Dineva, 2023) and testimonials voluntarily created by consumers, giving genuine feedback regarding their experience (Hether & Calabrese, 2020). In contrast to traditional marketing, which is not genuine in the minds of today's consumer (Yu & Zou, 2015)s, UGC presents genuine, pertinent (Beurer-Züllig & Klaas, 2020), and instantaneous feedback making consumers feel transparent (Hochstein et al., 2023).

Consumer trust in food-related UGC is growing due to cultural shift towards peer endorsement. (Nielsen, 2025) explains that over 80% of worldwide consumers are more likely to trust their peers' recommendations than branded communications. Trust in the food industry is vital for not only brand loyalty but also health, nutrition, and food safety issues (Lui, 2018). UGC lies at the heart of consumer constructions of authenticity (Morrow, 2022)—identified as the correspondence between a brand image and consumer expectations—which has a positive effect on purchase and long-term loyalty (Mathur et al., 2022).

However, despite UGC's growing presence, existing research largely concentrates on its role in general branding or luxury goods sectors, with limited focus on its nuanced role within the food industry (Viktoria Rampl et al., 2012). Few studies have empirically examined how different forms of UGC (e.g., text-based reviews versus video content) influence trust and purchase decisions across demographic groups (Lui, 2018). Additionally, there is a lack of clarity on how food brands can effectively manage both positive and negative UGC to reinforce authenticity and trust without losing control over their brand narrative (Lassoued & Hobbs, 2015).

This study addresses these gaps by exploring the impact of UGC on brand trust, loyalty, and purchase intention in the food sector. It also investigates the moderating effects of content format, demographic variables, and eWOM (electronic word-of-mouth). By examining the consumer-brand relationship through the lens of UGC, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of digital brand-building in trust-sensitive markets. The insights gained from this research are expected to offer practical implications for marketers aiming to optimize UGC strategies in the food industry, while also enriching academic discourse on digital consumer behavior.

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