

Defining the relationship between consumers and retailers through user-generated content: insights from the research literature

Consumers and
retailers
through UGC

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to synthesise the findings of existing research on brand-related user-generated content (UGC) in the context of fashion retail and to come up with future research directions.

Design/methodology/approach – A systematic literature review of 33 research papers, selected using well-defined criteria, was done. Further, the thematic analysis identified underlying themes and their inter-linkages.

Findings – The inter-linkages of 12 emergent themes were showcased in the form of a causal-chain conceptual framework, highlighting antecedents, mediators, moderators and consequences.

Research limitations/implications – Future research involves six directions, and researchers should empirically test out the proposed conceptual framework and take the given research directions forward.

Practical implications – Retailers should understand UGC motivators to launch targeted campaigns to amplify UGC with firm-generated content and increase overall engagement and sales of a brand.

Originality/value – First, this study fills the gap of missing synthesis of existing studies on UGC about fashion retail by analysing the publication distribution, paper types, data collection tools and techniques and data analysis methods. Second, the authors have proposed a causal-chain conceptual framework based upon thematic analysis of the research literature. The emergent themes touch upon three crucial aspects of marketing on enabling technology, consumer behaviour and marketing tactics. Finally, the academic contribution of this study lies in coming up with six vital research agenda for future research.

Keywords User-generated content, Firm-generated content, Fashion, Retail

Paper type Literature review

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to synthesise the findings of existing research on brand-related user-generated content (UGC) in the context of fashion retail and to come up with future research directions. In today's digital era, social media facilitates communication not just among consumers themselves but also between brands and consumers (Quach and Thaichon, 2017). Such “various forms of media content that are publicly available and created by end-users” are defined as UGC (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). As per Morrison *et al.* (2013), UGC on social networking sites (SNSs) like Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, amongst others is a decentralized process, unlike traditional firm-generated content (FGC), implying that consumers can create and engage with such content at their discretion on such platforms. Further, a concept closely intertwined with UGC is the electronic word of mouth (eWOM); since the time the content created by users is brand-related, and both these concepts overlap a great deal (Kim and Johnson, 2016; Jin, 2012). Thus, this study uses a single term “UGC” for all sorts of brand-related content created by users. Further, the words customers, consumers and users have been used interchangeably in this study.

The importance of UGC lies in its ever-expanding nature. UGC has high penetration among millennials and generation X. As of 2019, 3.484 billion social media users are active worldwide (Hootsuite, 2019, p. 73), spending two hours and sixteen minutes online (Hootsuite,



2019, p. 78) per user on average interacting among themselves and with brands and this opens a wide avenue for marketers to target their customers online. For example, by 2018, 90.4% of millennial, and 77.5% of generation X in the United States were users of social media (Emarketer, 2018), and many UGCs have the potential to impact brand perceptions of potential customers (Smith *et al.*, 2012). Further, UGC comprises not just sentiment towards the brands (Liu *et al.*, 2017) but also impacts the purchase behaviour (Malthouse *et al.*, 2016). For example, a report by Global Web Index (2018) states that 54% of global social media users browse SNSs to research about the products.

In B2C e-commerce, fashion forms the largest segment with a size of US\$ 518.9 billion in 2018 with an estimation to grow up to US\$ 922 billion by 2023 (Statista, 2019). By 2017 itself, the overall size of the fashion retail was worth US\$ 2.4 trillion (McKinsey, 2017). Hence, the study topic of the role that UGC plays in fashion is worth investigating, given implications for both consumers and retailers. However, despite such significance, the research in this area received little response until 2017 (Table 1). The possible explanation could be that UGC is a relatively new concept, which got developed after the advent of web 2.0 (Moon *et al.*, 2014). Further, there is hardly any specific, contemporary and comprehensive systematic literature review (SLR) done in this area till now. Thus, the primary aim of this study was to understand the phenomenon of UGC in fashion, first, by synthesising the research literature in the form of SLR, second, by coming up with a conceptual framework and finally by developing future research directions to stimulate further research in this area.

Theory and background

UGC was formally defined by Vickery and Wunsch-Vincent (2007) as (1) content made available publicly over the Internet, (2) which reflected some creative effort and (3) which was created outside of professional routines and practices. Further, UGC was a sum of all ways in which people made use of social media (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). For example, content created by users in the form of social media posts, text, and video blogs, ratings, and reviews on e-commerce websites and their engagement with such content falls under the ambit of UGC. The reasons for users producing such content included customer-to-retailer conversations like queries, complaints, criticism and sarcasm, and customer-to-customer conversations like positive and negative referrals, helping other customers, comparing retailers and warning against certain products (Peeroo *et al.*, 2017). Subsequently, Smith *et al.* (2012) in their comparative study on retail-apparel brands, proposed six UGC dimensions of “promotional self-presentation, brand centrality, marketer-directed communication, response to online marketer action, factually informative communication about the brand and brand sentiment”.

The year 2014 proved to be a critical threshold in the further development of the UGC concept with the publication of crucial studies. First, Hu *et al.* (2014) did sentiment analysis of customer ratings on Amazon.com and found that rating impacted sentiment, which in turn impacted sales. Second, Moon *et al.* (2014) used the novel approach of clustering text reviews and combining them with product ratings for the prediction of box-office sales. Third, Schweidel and Moe (2014) modelled sentiments inherent in UGC with different SNSs, where they were posted, for measuring brand sentiment. Fourth, Tirunillai and Tellis (2014) used Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) to analyse customer reviews to extract customer satisfaction dimensions along with their valence. Thus, the doors opened for future research on how to analyse UGC sentiment and its impact on sales.

Floyd *et al.* (2014), through a meta-analysis, developed a comprehensive view of UGC impact on retail sales and found that the product reviews posted on third-party websites were more credible than those posted on retailer websites. Also, these reviews were more impactful

Name of the journal	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019*	Total	Contribution (%)
Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management			1 Kulmala <i>et al.</i> (2013)	1 Pihl (2014)	1 Parrott <i>et al.</i> (2015)	1 Geissinger and Laurell (2016)	1 Arriaga <i>et al.</i> (2017)	3 Esteban-Santos <i>et al.</i> (2018); Geissinger and Laurell (2018); Martensen <i>et al.</i> (2018)	1 Nelson <i>et al.</i> (2019)	9	27.3
Journal of Global Fashion Marketing	1 Phan <i>et al.</i> (2011)		1 Halvorsen <i>et al.</i> (2013)					2 Mazzucchelli <i>et al.</i> (2018), Morra <i>et al.</i> (2018)		4	12.1
International Journal of Retail and Distribution Management								1 Helal <i>et al.</i> (2018)	1 Pantano <i>et al.</i> (2019)	2	6.1
Journal of Advertising							1 Liu <i>et al.</i> (2017)	1 Pantano <i>et al.</i> (2019)		2	6.1
Journal of Business Research						1 Lee and Watkins (2016)		1 Koivisto and Mattila (2018)		2	6.1
Journal of marketing management			1 Wolny and Mueller (2013)					1 Gannon and Prothero (2018)		2	6.1
Marketing Intelligence and Planning		1 Jin (2012)			1 Ballantine and Yeung (2015)					2	6.1

(continued)

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Table 1.
Publication
distribution

Name of the journal	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019*	Total	Contribution (%)
Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics									1 Ananda <i>et al.</i> (2019)	1	3.0
Computers in Human Behavior						1 Kim and Johnson (2016)				1	3.0
Information Systems Research			1 Goh <i>et al.</i> (2013)							1	3.0
Journal of Technology and People									1 Athwal <i>et al.</i> (2019)	1	3.0
Journal of Consumer Research			1 McQuarrie <i>et al.</i> (2013)							1	3.0
Journal of Interactive Marketing		1 Smith <i>et al.</i> (2012)								1	3.0
Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services									1 Kawaf and Istanbuloglu (2019)	1	3.0
Management Research Review								1 Arrigo (2018)		1	3.0

Name of the journal	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019*	Total	Contribution (%)
Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal									1 Mazzoli et al. (2019)	1	3.0
Sport Management Review							1 Geurin and Burch (2017)			1	3.0
Total	1	2	5	1	2	3	3	10	6	33	
Note(s): * Until November 2019											

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Table 1.

than the review volume on purchase decisions. While UGC was vital in purchase decisions in e-commerce space, high ratings, positive comments or good reviews added more to the credibility of a product (Flanagin *et al.*, 2014). Subsequently, Zhou and Duan (2015) found that external UGC (hosted by third-party websites) positively moderated the relationship between the internal UGC (hosted on a retailer's website) and retail sales, and further between past retail sales and volume of internal UGC. Further, a crucial study on marketer perspectives highlighted that active customer engagement to brand-related content, synergetic to their personal goals, impacted customer purchase behaviours positively, leading to the usage of UGC as an engagement tool for increasing brand-related discussion and sales (Malthouse *et al.*, 2016). Concerning omnichannel retailing, Kang (2018) found that showrooming and webrooming positively impacted the intention to create UGC, being positively moderated by social-local-mobile experience. Finally, Roma and Aloini (2019) analysed the contemporary changes in social media space and incorporated six dimensions of UGC, including "response to advertising campaigns, location sharing, connection with personal experience, real-time sharing of brand purchase experience, real-time sharing of the brand consumption experience, exhibition of brand recommendation features" to the existing six dimensions postulated by Smith *et al.* (2012).

Methodology

This study used SLR methodology, wherein the entire process was auditable (Tranfield *et al.*, 2003). Moreover, SLR methodology is an apt, reliable and efficient tool compared to traditional narrative reviews for dealing with a big literature database (Denyer and Tranfield, 2006). Electronic databases of EBSCO, Google Scholar, Taylor & Francis Online, Emerald Group Publishing, Oxford University Press, Elsevier and INFORMS were searched for studies. The choice of keywords emerged after a careful reading of UGC definitions, synonyms and related terms. As a result, the keywords of "User-generated content," "UGC," "User-generated media," "Consumer-generated content," "CGC," "electronic word of mouth," "eWOM," "Consumer Ratings," "Customer Ratings," "Consumer Reviews," "Customer Reviews," "Fashion," "Fashion marketing," "Luxury marketing," "Luxury Fashion," "Luxury fashion marketing" and "social media marketing" were searched in titles, abstracts and keywords of the research papers.

Additionally, to maintain rigour and credibility, only those studies were considered, which appeared in the ABDC (2019 version) ranked journals. Using these criteria, the authors finally narrowed down studies to 33 research papers until the period of November 2019. Further, the authors carefully studied all these 33 research papers to understand the nuances and synthesised the findings.

Results

Publication distribution

These 33 research papers were published by six publication groups across 17 journals (Table 1), with the tipping point found in 2018 (with 11 publications). Out of these, 76.5% were A* and A category journals of ABDC ranking reflecting the importance of this topic among the leading journals. The top three countries of the first authors were US (eight), UK (six) and Italy (four).

Paper distribution

Marketing area journals published 28 research papers, showing the skew towards this area in UGC in fashion research. Further, 94% of the research papers were research-based; and

qualitative and quantitative studies, 16 and 15 respectively, were almost equally spread (Table 2).

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Data collection tools and techniques

Purposive sampling emerged as the most frequently used (46.7%) sampling method among the 15 quantitative studies (Table 3), and fashion customers (40%) as the most used sampling unit (Table 4). Online surveys (53.3%) were used primarily for data collection (Table 5).

Data analysis methods

Qualitative studies selected for this paper mostly employed techniques like in-depth interviews and netnography (Table 6), whereas quantitative studies primarily applied structural equation modelling (Table 7). A few research papers used multiple methods. Hence, double or triple counting of the same research paper might be possible, depending upon the usage of unique methods in these research papers (vis-a-vis Tables 6 and 7).

Identification of key themes

Thematic analysis was applied using the three-stage coding scheme as envisaged by Gioia et al. (2013). The initial reading of abstracts, research objectives, keywords and conclusion sections of all 33 research papers generated first-order concepts through this technique.

Methods	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019*
Quantitative		2	1		1	3	3	4	1
Qualitative	1		3	1	1			6	4
Mixed Method			1						1
Total	1	2	5	1	2	3	3	10	6

Note(s): *Until November 2019

Table 2.
Methodology
distribution (number of
studies)

Methods	Frequency	%
Purposive sampling	7	46.7
Convenience sampling	3	20.0
Simple random sampling	3	20.0
Stratified random sampling	1	6.7
Snowball sampling	1	6.7
Total	15	100

Table 3.
Sampling method in
quantitative research
studies

Unit	Frequency	Contribution (%)
Fashion Customers	6	40.0
Social media posts	5	33.3
Fashion Brands	1	6.7
Facebook Users	1	6.7
Workers on mturk.com	1	6.7
Undergraduate students	1	6.7
Total	15	100

Table 4.
Sampling unit in
quantitative research
studies

Table 5.
Data collection method
in quantitative
research studies

Further, on raising the level of abstraction, these concepts got classified into 12 second-order themes. Three aggregate dimensions of *UGC enabling technologies* (ET), *Customer attitude towards UGC* (CA) and *UGC as a marketing tool* (MT) emerged from the categorisation of these themes upon further abstraction. UGC channels and UGC types were the two themes under ET; UGC motivators, UGC topics, UGC valence, UGC credibility, Intention to purchase and Customer engagement were the six themes under CA; and user-generated branding, FGC impact on UGC, UGC due to events and social listening constituted the four themes under MT. [Figure 1](#) displays an excerpt from the above approach in the form of data structure. The mentioned themes are discussed and mapped against the 12 UGC dimensions identified by [Smith *et al.* \(2012\)](#) and [Roma and Aloini \(2019\)](#) in [Table 8](#).

Unit	Frequency	Contribution (%)
Online survey	8	53.3
Social media content download	5	33.3
Experimental	1	6.7
Text mining	1	6.7
Total	15	100

Table 6.
Research tools used in
qualitative research
studies*

Tool	Frequency	Contribution (%)
Interviews	4	21.1
Netnography	4	21.1
Content analysis	3	15.8
Case Study	2	10.5
Observations	2	10.5
Thematic analysis	2	10.5
Grounded theory	1	5.3
Systematic literature review	1	5.3
Total	19	100

Note(s): *Some studies use multiple research tools

Table 7.
Research tools used in
quantitative research
studies*

Tool	Frequency	Contribution (%)
SEM	5	27.8
T-Tests	3	16.7
ANOVA	3	16.7
Content Analysis	2	11.1
ANCOVA	1	5.6
Point-biserial correlation	1	5.6
Poisson regression	1	5.6
Sentiment analysis	1	5.6
Univariate and bivariate descriptive analyses	1	5.6
Total	18	100

Note(s): *Some studies use multiple research tools

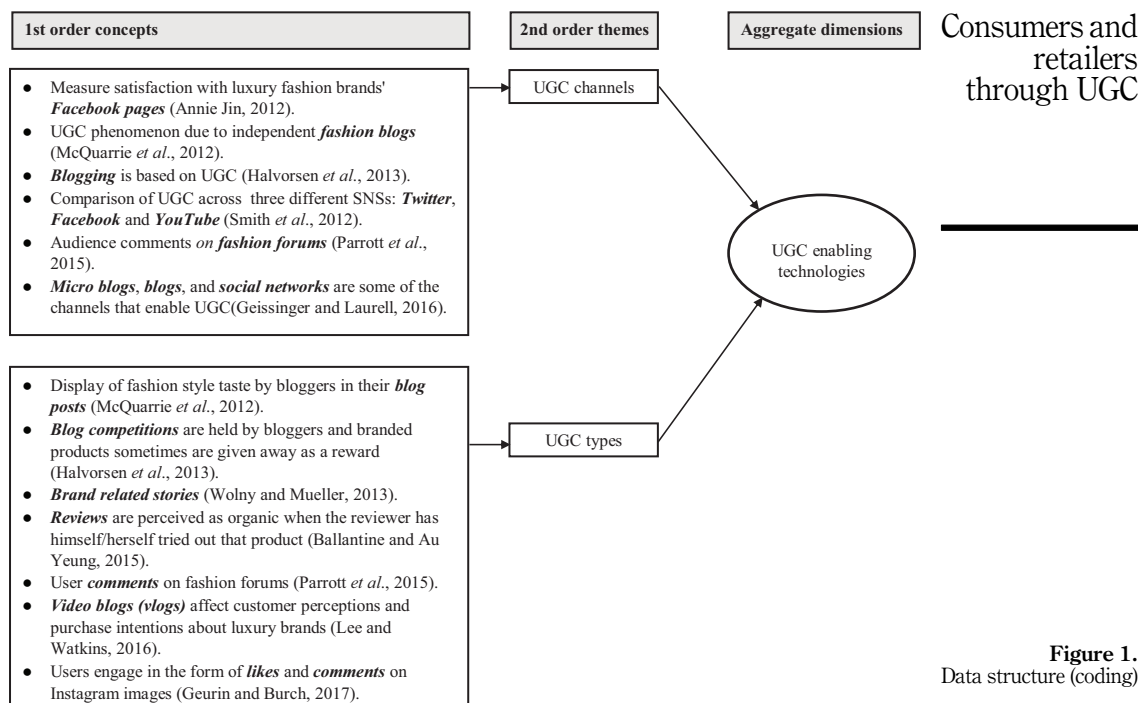


Figure 1.
Data structure (coding)

S. No	Identified UGC themes	Pre-existing UGC dimensions Smith et al. (2012) , Roma and Aloini (2019)
1.	UGC motivators	Promotional self-presentation; Response to advertising campaigns; Connection with personal experience
2.	UGC types	Location sharing; Response to online marketer action
3.	UGC channels	None of the dimensions specifically describes this theme. However, all these dimensions require UGC channels to be implemented
4.	UGC topics	Real-time sharing of purchase experience; Real-time sharing of consumption experience
5.	UGC valence	Brand sentiment
6.	UGC credibility	Factually informative about the brand
7.	Intention to purchase	Brand recommendation
8.	Customer engagement	Brand recommendation
9.	User-generated branding	Brand centrality
10.	Branded events	Marketer-directed communication
11.	FGC	Marketer-directed communication
12.	Social listening	Marketer-directed communication

Table 8.
Mapping of identified UGC themes against pre-existing dimensions

Discussion

UGC enabling technologies

UGC channels are different social networks, websites and blogs that allow the creation of content by consumers. The chosen 33 research papers were in contexts of channels like social networks (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram and Pinterest), and websites (fashion blogs and online fashion forums). The choice of these channels for research was primarily due to their popularity and mass usage among consumers and retailers. As each of these channels is unique (format, user interface, features among others) in its way, marketers need to customise and craft their messages well suited to target audiences on each such platform (Killian and McManus, 2015). Further, each of these channels allows different types of UGC, as explained below.

UGC types are the different ways technology enables the interaction of consumers among themselves and with retailers. Two major types of UGC are new content (including comments, reviews, blog posts, posting of photos and shooting of videos), and engagement actions (including likes, comments, shares and ratings). This study articulates the importance of understanding UGC types for marketers, as this can increase customer engagement through the creation of relevant content. Also, it is critical to address the motives for creating UGC.

Customer attitude towards UGC

UGC motivators are all such factors that encourage customers to interact with and about the brand on the Internet. Understanding these motivators can empower practitioners to launch targeted campaigns and further boost UGC and engagement with the retailers. In fashion-related shopping, hedonic vs utilitarian choice is a crucial motivator for UGC and attitude towards the retailers. Customers with hedonic motivation showed a more favourable attitude towards luxury brands in the form of repeat visits to branded social media pages and online shopping over there (Jin, 2012), and recommending the brands and spreading positive words about them (Parrott *et al.*, 2015) compared to utilitarian motives. UGC is created both by individual customers and influencers like bloggers, and the content created by bloggers is another source of motivation for individual customers that sparks conversations about the brand (Martensen *et al.*, 2018). Marketers, in turn, can utilise the influencers to reach out to the right target customers (Halvorsen *et al.*, 2013). As far as fashion blogs are concerned, seeking information and entertainment are crucial motivators for customers to follow and participate in a conversation with such blogs (Esteban-Santos *et al.*, 2018). Apart from these, some other motivators for UGC include users' need for social interaction, fashion involvement and product/brand involvement (Wolny and Mueller, 2013).

UGC topics are different brand-related subjects about which users express themselves. For example, some organic (without a brand's provocation) topics are personal style, tips and advice, retailers and designers, brands and purchases. In contrast, amplified (with brand's provocation) topics include contests, brands, tips given to customers, retailers and designers and products received from influencers like fashion bloggers (Kulmala *et al.*, 2013), leading authors of this study to believe in the criticality of amplified UGC for a marketer through the right strategy. Apart from these, discussions happen in general about products and services, competitors and news/trends form another set of topics for fashion-related UGC (Liu *et al.*, 2017). Further, Koivisto and Mattila (2018) found hedonic elements like luxury, art, high life and self as topics for UGC related to luxury fashion brands' events. Hence, there are broad topics on which users create brand-related content.

UGC valence indicates the positive or negative emotions of customers towards the retailers. Resultantly, valence can impact the perceptions about and sales of the brand. For instance, Goh *et al.* (2013) found UGC valence to be more impactful than FGC valence upon customers' purchase behaviour. Further, Ballantine and Yeung (2015) found that positive reviews (positive valence) led to the highest ratings, and negative reviews (negative valence)

led to the lowest ratings; but, balanced reviews (neutral valence) had most credibility. So, retailers should concentrate on obtaining positive reviews, followed by receipt of balanced (neutral) ones. Further, [Kim and Johnson \(2016\)](#) found positive UGC valence had a positive impact on emotional and cognitive responses, which, in turn, had a positive relationship to immediate and latent responses among the customers. 41.7, 20.2 and 38.1% of the tweets studied had negative, positive and neutral sentiment respectively for footwear brands ([Liu et al., 2017](#)). In contrast, [Pantano et al. \(2019\)](#) found a much higher proportion of positive sentiment than negative sentiment in fast fashion. Hence, the fashion industry displays diversity.

UGC credibility develops from the expertise and trustworthiness of the source of communication. Consequently, customers have higher trust for information received from other customers than from a brand ([Ballantine and Yeung, 2015](#)). Besides, [Martensen et al. \(2018\)](#) articulated that source expertise, trustworthiness, likeability, similarity and familiarity contributed to the persuasion power of influencer created UGC. [Mazzucchelli et al. \(2018\)](#) studied millennials and found that peer recommendations and social support positively impacted customer trust, which in turn contributed to brand loyalty. [Esteban-Santos et al. \(2018\)](#), while examining determinants of credibility, found that trustworthiness, para-social interaction (PSI), expertise and message credibility led to UGC credibility.

Intention to purchase gets impacted by exposure to UGC. For instance, [Jin \(2012\)](#) found that after customers visited a luxury brand's Facebook page, their attitudes towards that retailer positively predicted their intention to shop online. [Kulmala et al. \(2013\)](#) noticed four types of purchase-related communication on fashion blogs of new products, stories, online purchases and desired products. Further, [Ballantine and Yeung \(2015\)](#) found that positive reviews led to higher ratings and vice versa on purchase intentions. Within online luxury fashion accessories' forums, [Parrott et al. \(2015\)](#) found that brand advocacy behaviour impacted the purchase intention. In their Stimulus-Organisation-Response (SOR) framework-based study, [Kim and Johnson \(2016\)](#) found that UGC positively impacted potential brand sales. As per [Lee and Watkins \(2016\)](#), YouTube influencers are considered a trustworthy source of information, and further, the purchase intention and luxury brand perceptions of the customers exposed to such videos were higher than that of the control group. Also, [Morra et al. \(2018\)](#), in a study on real vs fake luxury fashion products, observed the positive impact of UGC on purchase intentions of fake luxury fashion; whereas, FGC moderated by UGC, impacted the purchase intentions of the real luxury products positively. Furthermore, [Morra et al. \(2018\)](#) contended that UGC acts as a primary source of information trusted by the customers for their purchase-related decisions. The research by [Mazzucchelli et al. \(2018\)](#) established that UGC in itself leads to the development of trust in the brand, which in turn induces loyalty and inspires purchases. On similar lines, [Esteban-Santos et al. \(2018\)](#) found that among other factors, trustworthiness added to the credibility of fashion blogs which in turn had a positive impact both on purchase intention and on customers' attitude towards the brand. The authors of this study contend that comprehension of the customer intention to purchase provides avenues for marketers to convert bystanders into customers by engaging with them.

Customer engagement is a highly desirable consequence of UGC for marketers since an engagement with customers can lead to conversions in the form of sales. For instance, [Goh et al. \(2013\)](#) found that customer engagement on social media led to an increase in the purchase. In their study, [Wolny and Mueller \(2013\)](#) adopted the extended theory of reasoned action framework ([Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980](#)) by testing the influence of customers' attitude and subjective norm towards engagement with brands upon their actual engagement behaviour. [Wolny and Mueller \(2013\)](#) concluded that high fashion involvement, along with brand commitment, stimulated conversations and interactions about and with the brands. [Parrott et al. \(2015\)](#), while studying the brand advocacy behaviour in the luxury fashion

category found that active brand advocates passionately and voluntarily engaged in conversations about a retailer, promoted and defended it. On the contrary, passive brand advocates in the same study primarily studied the content and communication created by the active advocates, rather than creating the content themselves. Accordingly, tapping active brand advocates for boosting positive UGC valence and building long-term relationships becomes a vital component for luxury fashion retailers. Further, [Geissinger and Laurell \(2016\)](#) found that this engagement, for an individual customer, was curvilinear, whereby a higher engagement phase was followed by a lower engagement phase, because of repeat exposure of the same or similar messages. Hence, maintaining the variety and freshness of content for retailers was vital for higher engagement levels; this was followed by a subsequent study that identified 11 distinct engagement behaviours exhibited by customers in the luxury fashion category ([Pentina et al., 2018](#)).

Another source of engagement lies in online brand communities ([Phan et al., 2011](#)). These communities can be built around fashion blogs by third-party bloggers ([McQuarrie et al., 2013](#); [Halvorsen et al., 2013](#); [Kulmala et al., 2013](#); [Pihl, 2014](#); [Esteban-Santos et al., 2018](#); [Gannon and Prothero, 2018](#); [Mazzoli et al., 2019](#)), on online fashion forums ([Parrott et al., 2015](#)) and official social media channels of brands ([Phan et al., 2011](#); [Helal et al., 2018](#); [Ananda et al., 2019](#)). Now the question arises, how exactly can retailers tap the UGC to increase conversations with and about a brand?

UGC as a marketing tool

Social media listening in the form of analysing UGC is a meaningful way for retailers to stay on top of their marketing game. In an anecdote shared by [Halvorsen et al. \(2013\)](#), one of the fashion retailers emphasised that listening to feedback from bloggers and customers was crucial to product and policy improvements. [Pantano et al. \(2019\)](#) did sentiment analysis of user tweets in the fast fashion category and concluded that listening to UGC and understanding the related sentiment could improve marketing intelligence. Other studies that mentioned the similar importance of listening to UGC were [Phan et al. \(2011\)](#), [Parrott et al. \(2015\)](#) and [Arrigo \(2018\)](#). Thus listening to UGC and understanding the underlying sentiment could be a starting point for retailers to customise FGC and plan branded events accordingly. Further, this can allow retailers to stimulate UGC.

Stimulating UGC with FGC is possible with a well-crafted social media strategy. For instance, [Smith et al. \(2012\)](#) found the response to marketer actions likely to be highest on Facebook, followed by Twitter but least likely on YouTube, which can be accepted by looking at the respective user interfaces of these platforms. Facebook and Twitter allow a higher level of one-to-many and one-to-one conversations; whereas, YouTube is primarily about the consumption of the video content rather than for communication with friends. Further, [Halvorsen et al. \(2013\)](#) found that an advertisement done on a third-party fashion blog was considered more credible and truthful compared to traditional advertising. Moreover, the availability of the comment section on such blogs further boosted the creation of UGC. Additionally, FGC with an overt product or brand focus received a significantly higher number of likes and comments, than the subtle or non-focused product or brand FGC. Thus, creating brand/product-focused content on social media is one of the ways fashion retailers could stimulate the creation of UGC in the forms of likes, comments and shares received from users.

User-generated branding (UGB), as defined by [Arnhold \(2008\)](#), involves “the strategic and operative management of brand-related user-generated content (UGC) to achieve brand goals”. [Parrott et al. \(2015\)](#) found that online luxury fashion forums facilitated active and passive brand advocacy, which in turn led to brand love. Several researchers have studied how such communities spark UGC and boost brand awareness ([McQuarrie et al., 2013](#);

Goh *et al.*, 2013; Pihl, 2014; Gannon and Prothero, 2018; Helal *et al.*, 2018; and Ananda *et al.*, 2019). Geurin and Burch (2017) by using a generic strategy framework (Porter, 1985) found that those brands elicited more engagement from their followers that posted user images related to product/brand on their Instagram channels. The possible reason for this could be that Instagram was primarily a smart phone friendly medium that was easier for millennials and generation X to engage with on the go. Subsequently, Koivisto and Mattila (2018) proposed a representation of visual UGC content across a two-dimensional matrix, consisting of a brand's position within the image and the extent of user creativity. The visual analysis of images posted by users is a step forward; as such visual cues may contain crucial sentiments towards the retailers. Finally, Morra *et al.* (2018) found that UGC had a positive effect on overall brand equity (OBE), which in turn impacted the purchase intentions of original luxury products positively. Thus the authors of this study argue that UGC plays a crucial role in brand building and further in driving brand sales.

UGC, due to branded events, is another emergent theme in this study. Retailers can stimulate UGC by planning events like fashion shows and exhibitions since the offline experience prompts users to share with their network online. For instance, Phan *et al.* (2011) shared that the 3D fashion show and its live broadcast around the world by Burberry resulted in a huge buzz online among fashion customers. Similarly, Koivisto and Mattila (2018) noticed that visitors to the "Series 3" fashion exhibition organised by Louis Vuitton resulted in buzz on Instagram. In further validation of this idea, Arriaga *et al.* (2017) found that events' FGC generated maximum engagement among other content categories. Further, Pihl (2014) argued that brand constellations, as communities of style, offered a pedestal where customers discussed their ideas on current fashion style trends. Geissinger and Laurell (2018) too analysed UGC created during fashion weeks and identified four brand constellation outcomes of amplification, concentration, division and dilution, indicating fashion retailers should plan such branded events throughout the year and create buzz around that.

Conceptual framework

The authors of this study have arranged the themes derived from thematic analysis into a causal-chain conceptual framework (Figure 2). Further, as proposed by Ngai *et al.* (2015), this model has been classified into four categories of antecedents, mediators, moderators and outcomes. The goal of this framework is to showcase the relationship between the emergent themes in the form of causal chain.

Several studies have articulated about *UGC motivators*, as antecedents, that lead to UGC. Four themes of *UGC credibility*, *intention to purchase*, *customer engagement* and *UGB* fall under the bracket of outcomes of UGC. The mediation themes of *UGC Types*, *UGC Channels*, *UGC Topics* and *UGC Valence* explain the relationship between UGC motivators and UGC outcomes. Three moderators are firm-related themes of *branded events*, *FGC* and *social listening*. This moderating role is backed by the evidence in the existing research literature that users follow brands on social media (Athwal *et al.*, 2019; Nelson *et al.*, 2019), and engage with FGC, which stimulates UGC (Arriaga *et al.*, 2017; Ananda *et al.*, 2019; Athwal *et al.*, 2019). Hence, this study articulates that these firm-related themes determine the strength of *UGC motivators* and their outcomes in this model. Further, some of the studies controlled for the demographic variables like age, gender, income (Goh *et al.*, 2013; Ballantine and Yeung, 2015; Geurin and Burch, 2017) as well as the number of social media friends (Goh *et al.*, 2013). Hence, these variables act as control variables in this proposed conceptual framework.

Future agenda

This study synthesises crucial findings from the research literature and develops a conceptual framework to leverage UGC in the fashion domain. The thematic analysis enabled

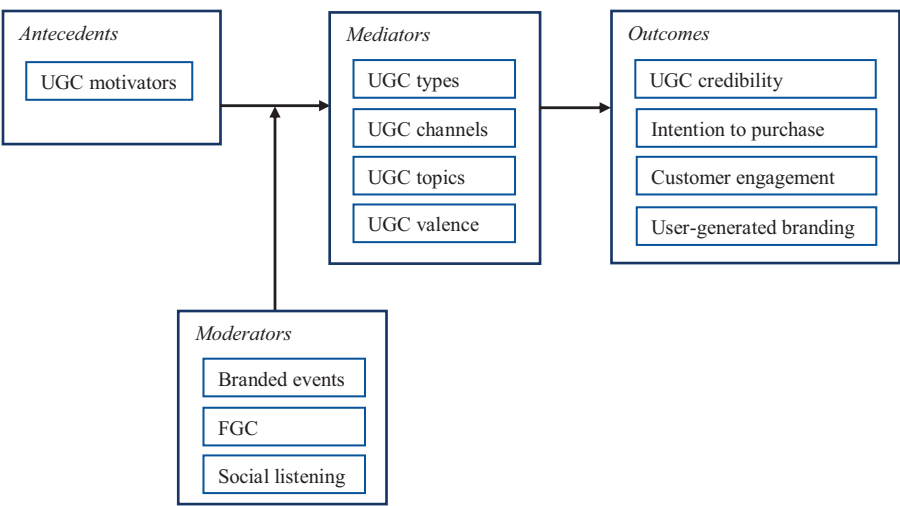


Figure 2.
Proposed conceptual
framework

Control Variables: Age, Gender, Education, Income, number of social media friends

the identification of gaps and provided directions for future research. Future directions for research are as below:

Understanding the role of FGC

The role FGC plays in stimulating UGC is understudied, as very few studies delve upon this relationship. Moreover, it is not clear whether FGC has only a positive relationship or a curvilinear relationship with UGC (Ananda *et al.*, 2019). Further, in one of the studies, UGC was found to be playing the role of a moderator in the relationship between FGC and intention to purchase original luxury fashion goods (Morra *et al.*, 2018). The conceptual framework, based upon thematic analysis, proposes FGC-related themes as moderators between UGC motivators and UGC itself, necessitating exploration in this space to understand the relationship between UGC and FGC and leading to the need for comparison on social media for luxury and non-luxury retailers (Mazzoli *et al.*, 2019).

Improving upon the sentiment analysis

Many studies delve upon understanding sentiment in UGC by analysing the textual part of the content. On the other hand, there is a non-textual part of UGC in the form of images and smileys (Goh *et al.*, 2013). Researchers have called for the analysis of imagery and smileys to understand the sentiment in UGC (Smith *et al.*, 2012; Liu *et al.*, 2017; Arrigo, 2018; Mazzucchelli *et al.*, 2018; Pantano *et al.*, 2019). Also, visual communication by users is a vital aspect of UGC, and thus future research should include it while trying to understand UGC sentiment (Mazzoli *et al.*, 2019). Further, there is also a requirement to study the causes and effects of positive and negative UGC valence in future research models (Kim and Johnson, 2016).

Understanding the role of influencers

Very few researchers have tested the role of influencers on UGC. For example, while Gannon and Prothero (2018) studied influencers like YouTubers and bloggers, as Community of

Practice (CoP) (an anthropological theory); [Martensen et al. \(2018\)](#), on the other hand, analysed the role of citizen influencers, the ordinary customers who ended up being influencers online. Also, [Parrott et al. \(2015\)](#) suggested the exploration of a sub-group of influencers known as brand evangelists, who were an extreme type of brand supporters and influencers. The idea of CoP in its parlance also demands exploration because of the possibility of the existence of communities. So, future researchers should test out these varying aspects of influencers in the UGC domain.

Exploring user-generated branding

UGB has been understudied in the UGC parlance as there is only one dedicated study ([Geurin and Burch, 2017](#)) testing the phenomenon of UGB. While [Morra et al. \(2018\)](#) studied OBE as one of the outcomes of UGC; they suggested further exploration of the relationship between OBE and purchase intention with constructs like brand awareness and its antecedents, perceived quality and brand loyalty in the model. Additionally, [Mazzucchelli et al. \(2018\)](#) articulated how UGC led to the development of trust. Research has shown that brand equity is an antecedent of brand loyalty, which further impacts trust ([Bilgihan, 2016](#)). Understanding the process of leveraging UGC to build a strong brand is critical.

Qualitative exploration of sentiment

As far as understanding the underlying sentiment of UGC is concerned, most of the researchers utilise techniques like text mining using some software. However, it may have certain limitations. For example, as per [Pantano et al. \(2019\)](#), the algorithms in such software may assign sentiment which it is not able to detect, as neutral rather than positive or negative. Additionally, as of now, such software is not able to capture the irony in UGC, which may again be positive or negative. Thus, a qualitative analysis of UGC is recommended in future studies to understand the inherent patterns of UGC sentiment in a comprehensive manner ([Mazzucchelli et al., 2018](#); [Morra et al., 2018](#)).

Studying UGC in the context of sustainable fashion

Although fashion contexts have been undertaken by researchers to understand the UGC phenomenon; however, authors believe the context of sustainable fashion and its UGC are missing. For instance, the theory of planned behaviour (TPB) proposed by [Ajzen \(1985\)](#) could offer a new perspective wherein the purchase of sustainable or eco-friendly products is concerned. In the past, researchers have tried to understand environmental psychology of customers with the application of TPB in the contexts of the workplace ([Greaves et al., 2013](#)), hospitality ([Chen and Tung, 2014](#)), educational institutes ([De Leeuw et al., 2015](#)), public transportation ([Heath and Gifford, 2002](#)) and organic fashion ([Maloney et al., 2014](#)) among others. Sustainability is an important issue, particularly in the context of fashion, where waste is paramount ([Wang et al., 2019](#)). Moreover, social media conversations about sustainable products and their implications are understudied ([Andersson and Ohman, 2017](#)). Thus, the TPB theory can be applied, and the testing of the conceptual framework proposed in this study is needed.

Conclusion

UGC is crucial both from the consumer perspective, to share their opinions about the brands with a larger world, and from the practitioner perspective, to stimulate positive UGC using FGC about their brands. The phenomenon of UGC is ever-expanding with the ever-increasing penetration of Internet and Internet-enabled devices across the world. Marketers need to develop mechanisms to manage UGC, created at such a massive scale, through technologies

like artificial intelligence. The latest technological development has enabled real-time, visual and richer content creation features in social media (Roma and Aloini, 2019), and accordingly, marketers should utilise these features to increase engagement as well as sales of their products. Further, marketers should utilise social listening to understand different elements of consumer attitude towards UGC like UGC motivators, diverse UGC topics, the underlying sentiment and their impact on purchase behaviour. Furthermore, this should enable marketers to stimulate UGC with FGC by launching targeted campaigns like contests, offers, advertisements and tie-ups with influencers. Additionally, by tying up with influencers, marketers should try to achieve brand goals since online brand communities spark UGC, which in turn leads to enhanced OBE, loyalty and trust in the brand, and finally a positive impact on purchase intention. Marketers should also conduct branded events, which too help spark UGC.

There are three novelties of this study. First, this study addresses the research gap by synthesising existing studies on UGC in fashion retail and by analysing the publication distributions, paper types, data collection tools and techniques and data analysis methods. Second, the authors have proposed a causal-chain conceptual framework based upon thematic analysis of the research literature. The emergent themes touch upon three crucial aspects of marketing on enabling technology, consumer behaviour and marketing tactics and are useful for marketers in crafting their social media strategies. For instance, customising FGC based upon social listening and stimulating UGC with FGC are some of the applications of this framework from the practitioners' point of view. Further, from the academicians' perspectives, the proposed conceptual framework opens avenues for empirical testing of different constructs that represent these themes in future studies. Finally, the academic contribution of this study lies in the development of six crucial research agendas for future research.

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