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Beyond Higher Ed Marketing: Unsanctioned User Generated Content

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in
Marketing

By
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Under the mentorship of Lindsay Larson

The impact of User Generated Content (UGC) on higher-education marketing is an entirely untouched area of marketing research, therefore the current study aims to better understand how widely disseminated this content is among students, how they perceive this content and its impact upon their university, as well as what kinds of students are drawn to participate in and consume this content. A sample of 187 university students at a large public institution were surveyed regarding their engagement with UGC content associated with their school, and the ways in which it may effect their perception of the institution.

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Introduction

@GSUproblems, a twitter account devoted to chronicling the absurdities of student life at Georgia Southern University, posts a photo submitted to the account of an online exam question: “What is a Microphone?” with the only response options being ‘true’ or ‘false.’ @NotMarkBecker, a parody account of Georgia State University’s President, sends a message of support to the Juggalo March on Washington event with a hashtag ‘#Juggaloforlyfe.’ On any given day, University students around the country are reading through the social media feeds from twitter handles such as @BarstoolUGA, @FSUprobz, or even the musings of those openly pretending to speak for University leadership or athletic coaches to discuss issues around campus as a form of satire or parody (for example Clemson University’s @NotDaboSwinney, or the University of Florida’s @NotRandyShannon). While University marketing teams painstakingly work to hone a strong, unified brand for their school through traditional and social media channels, their message is only a small part of online content that current and future students at these Universities are ingesting.

The impact of User Generated Content (UGC) on the effectiveness of higher-education marketing is an entirely untouched area of marketing research, therefore the current study aims to better understand how widely disseminated this content is among students, how they perceive this content and its impact upon their school, and finally what kinds of students are drawn to participate in and consume this content. User Generated Content constitutes any information created by an individual that is posted on a public network; of particular interest are social media accounts created by students at any institution in an unofficial capacity, that might be followed or viewed by other students. These accounts may even represent themselves as University affiliates and post information that is unregulated by the institution, satirical or otherwise. While not traditional, many people utilize UGCs as a means of authentic communication and a source of information, therefore these accounts may impact the way that students attending a University perceive the University brand, outside of the intended branding of University marketing. Although entertaining and engaging, by associating with the school name, UGCs may reinforce an unwanted reputation or undermine the messaging that University officials strive to maintain. Alternatively, UGC accounts drive large amounts of traffic for little to no expense. Therefore, if and when properly aligned with a University’s messaging, this type of media marketing could potentially help a University to shift to a less costly and more effective marketing strategy than what is currently in use.

User Generated Content

UGC (User Generated Content) is “media content created or produced by the general public rather than by paid professionals, primarily distributed on the Internet” (Daugherty, Eastin, Bright, 2008, p.16). The boom in usage of UGCs over the past decade mirrors the technological increases in Internet usage and efficiency. These media and social networking platforms have evolved to include websites such as Wikipedia, LinkedIn, MySpace, Facebook, Yelp, Youtube, and Twitter (Luca, 2015, p.4). The millennial generation heavily practices this method of communication because of its ability to be personalized, entertaining, and informative. Instead of professionals posting censored and filtered information, these accounts undercut the system by posting information with much more excitement and personality. This makes accounts more entertaining and seemingly credible to followers because they feel like they are receiving genuine information (Krumm, Davies, Narayanaswami, 2008).

UGC accounts impact marketing and consumer behavior. According to a recent study, “65% of consumers trust word of mouth on the Internet more than content produced by advertisers” (MacKinnon, 2012). In addition, 66.3% of people surveyed also “rely heavily on user generated content when attempting to make purchasing decisions” (MacKinnon, 2012, p.14). UGC drives a tremendous amount of Internet traffic with more than 69 million users. They are also highly profitable for the creators who are sometimes compensated if their accounts are popular; UGCs have grossed more than \$450 million in advertising revenue on accounts (Daugherty et al., 2008). According to a 2012 research study, UGC influenced consumer-purchasing behavior more heavily than did consumer marketing content (Goh, Heng, Lin, 2013). This means that the marketing done by various institutions may be less efficient than accounts made by their own students in swaying student and future-student opinions about a University or College.

Although there is vast information on user generated content, very little research has been done regarding UGCs and institutions of higher education. A survey of students regarding their usage of, and beliefs about UGC from accounts associated with their own University examines possible correlations with perceptions of impact on the University brand. Firstly, the survey seeks to determine whether individual differences impact perceptions of these accounts, and whether those perceptions correlated with a student’s involvement or interest in these accounts. Secondly, the survey would seek to investigate whether engaging with these accounts predicted perceptions of the potential impact the accounts have on the reputation of the University.

Methods

A convenience sample of 238 students at a large public University in the southeastern United States was obtained through an anonymous online survey. While useful for collecting anonymous survey data, online surveys create an environment in which a “distinct possibility exists for inattentive” responses that can cause data to be less reliable than in-person sampling (Rouse, 2015). Therefore, based on a ‘trap style’ attention check (Maronick, 2009), 51 participants were removed leaving 187 for analysis. Students who chose to participate in the survey were offered extra credit within their courses. The survey consists of several multi-item scales regarding their perception of

UGC associated with the University they attend. Finally, demographic questions were provided.

Participants

Of the students who participated, 91.81% were between the ages of 18-24. This sample included almost an equal amount of male (47%) and female participants, (53%). In addition, caucasian respondents comprise a majority of this sample at 78.02%, followed by 10.34% black, 3.04% asian / pacific islander, and 3.45% Hispanic. A majority (98.7%) of students reported being at the junior or senior level at the University.

Survey

The survey began with a section describing the phenomenon of UGC social media accounts, which was the primary focus of the survey. Examples of these accounts and screenshots from such accounts that are associated with the University were provided as examples to help students recognize the topic of the survey. Students were then asked if they have ever seen social media accounts of this kind, which are unofficial but associated with their University. If they responded that they understood and were familiar with this phenomenon, the participant was moved on to the next set of questions regarding the amount of exposure to and attention they have given to these accounts, to include how often they view these accounts and how often they interact with these accounts through posts, comments or shares (both presented on a 6-point likert scale from 'never' to 'frequently').

Next, students completed several three-to-four item inventories that measured items related to their perceptions of UGC accounts associated with their University, such as opinions on the humorousness of these accounts (Duncan & Nelson, 1985) and their interest level in the accounts (Allen & Madden, 1985), as well as the degree to which they felt these UGC's impacted the reputation of their university and perception that the account content is reflective of and authentic to the participant's own experience of their school (a modified version of Sujan & Bettman's 1989 'brand similarity' scale). Participants then completed inventories to assess individual differences of their personality such as the need for humor (Allen and Madden, 1985). All inventories were modified to fit the specifics of this topic, and all have acceptable levels of reported reliability and validity, which held for our data set.

Results

Data Analysis

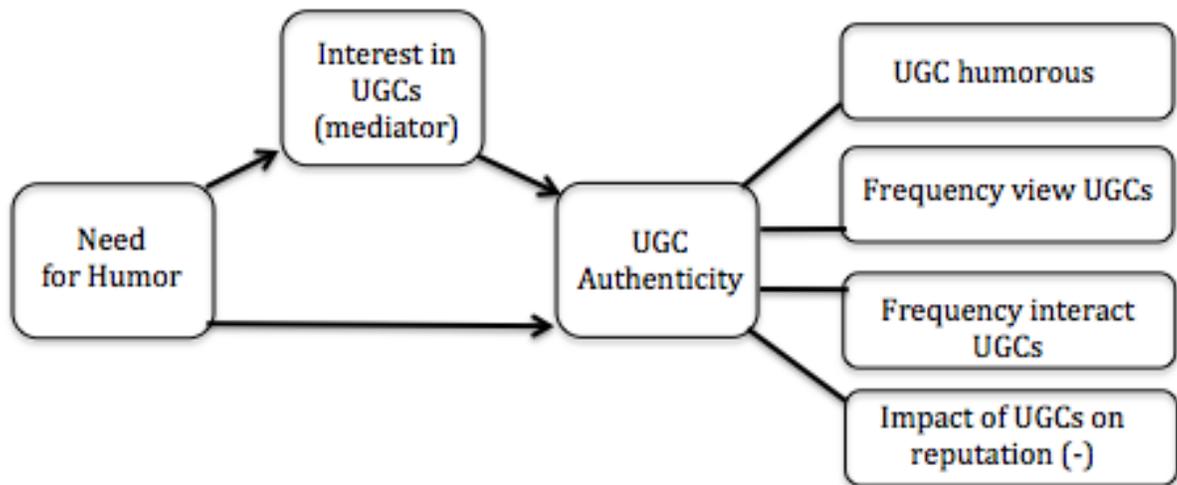
In terms of student engagement with UGCs, a full 100% of participants were aware that social media accounts such as these exist for their University. Only 7% of the sample said they never look at these accounts, while a larger percentage (21.4%) said they do not move beyond looking and actually interact with these accounts (by posting,

commenting, or sharing them). An ‘occasional’ view of or interaction with the accounts was the most common response (38% and 28.9%, respectively), while 20.4% reported that they look at the accounts ‘frequently’ or ‘very frequently,’ and 14.5% interacted with these accounts that often. These numbers suggest that students are aware of, following, and interacting with these accounts to a degree that warrants investigation.

First, the hypothesis was tested that individual differences in the need for humor would predict perceptions that University UGCs feel authentic to them, such that those who enjoy humor in general are more prone to finding the UGCs content to be a reflection of their own college experience, and mediation of this relationship based on interest level in the UGCs was investigated. The millennial generation tends to react very positively to humor (Tabaka, 2016), and as most of these UGCs are parody or satire, it was assumed that this desire for humor might be driving interest, which then results in students perceiving the UGCs as especially authentic to their own experience. Results indicate that the need for humor was a significant predictor of interest in UGCs, $b = .272$, $SE = .096$, $p = .005$, and that interest in UGCs was a significant predictor of perceived authenticity of UGCs, $b = .317$, $SE = .053$, $p = .000$. These results also support the mediational hypothesis, as need for humor was no longer a significant predictor of perceived authenticity after controlling for the mediator, interest in UGCs, $b = .127$, $SE = .07$, $p = .08$, consistent with full mediation. Approximately 17.4% of the variance in perceived authenticity was accounted for by the predictors ($R^2 = .174$). The indirect effect was confirmed using a bootstrap estimation approach with 5000 samples. These results indicate the indirect coefficient was significant, $CI = .0234, .1510$. In other words, the need for humor influences perceptions that the UGCs speak to the student’s authentic college experience, because of need for humor’s influence on interest in UGCs.

Next, ANOVA was conducted to determine whether this outcome (perceptions of authenticity) would predict other important variables. Analysis revealed a significant relationship between perceived authenticity of UGCs to one’s own experience of the University and perceptions that these accounts are funny ($F(15, 171) = 3.08$, $p = .000$), how frequently the accounts are read by students ($F(15, 171) = 2.21$, $p = .008$), how frequently the accounts are interacted with by students either through commenting, posting or sharing ($F(15, 171) = 2.21$, $p = .008$) and beliefs about whether these accounts have a negative impact upon the school’s reputation ($F(15, 171) = 7.63$, $p = .000$). In other words, if a student sees these accounts as a valid reflection of their own college experience, they find the UGC accounts more humorous, are more likely to look at and engage with them, and less likely to be concerned that these accounts could reflect poorly on their University.

Resulting Model



Discussion

These initial results suggest first of all that those who find UGCs associated with their University to be an authentic reflection of their own University experience tend to be those look at them the most, interact with them the most, find them funny, and are less concerned about the impact these accounts have on their University's reputation. In some way, even if these accounts are somewhat subversive or crude, their authenticity to the student's experience makes them fairly funny (the humorousness scale mean was 4.6 out of 6, $SD = 1.18$), perhaps due to some form of in-group social function of a shared humor (Fine & De Soucey, 2005) that causes people going through a shared experience to also have a shared culture of jokes. Furthermore, the likelihood of finding these accounts authentic and similar to one's own experience was predicted by individual differences in the need for humor, which is a relationship that is actually mediated by interest level in these accounts. In other words, The more a student enjoys humor, the more interested they are in UGC account content (which are typically designed to be entertaining and funny), and that interest influences how much they see these accounts as a reflection of their own experience at the University. Need for humor was fairly high within the sample (mean of 4.72 on a 6-point scale, $SD = .85$), with only 7% of the sample falling below the mid-point of this scale. This should come as no surprise, as the millennial generation greatly values humor (Tabaka, 2016).

Results also suggest that the more a student sees these UGCs as a legitimate reflection of their experience, the less they believe that the content (which is oftentimes unflattering) made public on these accounts impacts their University's reputation negatively. This would suggest that student interest in these accounts potentially blinds them to the impact that these accounts could have on their University's reputation. University marketing must therefore take into account the positive impact within the student body of unsanctioned UGC accounts associated with their brand, as well as the potential for negative impact outside of the University community that students may not necessarily realize.

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