Chapter 6

Online Reputation Management and User-Generated Content

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Abstract

This chapter examines the relationship between online reputation management (ORM) and user-generated content (UGC), highlighting the strategic importance of the latter for businesses. ORM involves monitoring, directing and protecting brand perception in the digital environment, where social media and online reviews play a pivotal role. UGC significantly impacts consumers' brand perception, purchasing decisions, and loyalty: positive content increases trust and engagement, while negative content can lead to reputation crises. The chapter explains how negative feedback can be addressed within a crisis management framework, emphasizing the importance of swift and empathetic responses through case studies. It also illustrates how UGC can be used in brand creation processes, such as co-creation, community development and improving social media performance. Ultimately, it emphasizes that businesses must view UGC as both an opportunity and a risk, managing it strategically.

1. Introduction

Online reputation management (ORM) is the practice of monitoring, influencing, and managing perceptions of a business or individual's reputation in the digital environment (Gretzel, 2023). In the current digital era, where user-generated content (UGC) plays a significant role in shaping public opinion, ORM has emerged as a vital aspect of digital marketing and brand management (Bağış et al., 2025). Understanding the interaction between ORM and UGC is essential for grasping how online reputations are formed and maintained.

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In the context of ORM, the advent of information and communication technologies has transformed the hospitality and service sectors by providing users with the opportunity to evaluate and comment on their experiences. These reviews contribute to the formation of a collective online reputation through electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). Consequently, businesses have started to engage with UGC proactively to improve their online reputation, shifting their focus beyond merely managing their own narratives. Indeed, research shows that over 50% of consumers rely on online review scores when making purchasing decisions (Farias et al., 2022). From an ORM perspective, the dual role of content production is critical: content produced by the business and UGC both influence a company's reputation (Ratnayaka, 2024). As organizations learn to manage user-generated reviews and feedback, it is important to distinguish between official corporate communications and content created organically by consumers, as both play a complementary role in shaping the overall image (Sizaro, 2022). Furthermore, positive contributions from users can strengthen a company's reputation, whereas negative comments can seriously damage public perception. This highlights the importance of continuously monitoring UGC as part of an overarching ORM strategy.

In marketing literature, UGC is defined as any content (e.g., text, visuals, videos, or comments) created and shared by individual users rather than professional content creators or brands (Chen et al., 2024). UGC encompasses a variety of platforms and formats, including social media posts, product reviews, and blogs, and represents a paradigm shift from professionally curated messages to consumer-generated communications. The development of UGC has been significantly influenced by the rise of social media, which has fundamentally changed the way users interact with brands and disseminate information. These platforms facilitate not only the consumption of content but also its creation and sharing, enabling users to act as brand ambassadors and co-creators of brand meaning (Hidayah & Nurrohim, 2023).

This transformation has become even more significant as the boundaries between commercial activities and peer interactions have become increasingly blurred. Personal recommendations have gained importance because of their perceived authenticity (Laestadius & Wahl, 2017). Studies have shown that consumers generally view UGC as more reliable than brand-generated content and that it has a stronger impact on brand perception and consumer behavior (Schivinski & Dąbrowski, 2016). This shift in trust is closely related to the tendency of consumers to place greater value on content they perceive as authentic in the post-truth era, where information flows rapidly and the credibility of official sources has diminished (Yolcu et al., 2020). The proliferation of UGC has therefore brought about a conceptual distinction between marketer-generated content and UGC. While marketer-generated content is usually created for promotional purposes directly linked to brands, UGC emerges independently of commercial intent and often fosters a sense of community and social interaction (Chen et al., 2024). Thanks to its participatory structure, UGC can increase user engagement and loyalty, enabling brands to benefit from shared interests and personal stories that create emotional bonds (Lin et al., 2024).

As social media continues to evolve, so too do the strategies related to UGC. Brands are increasingly integrating UGC into their marketing efforts by actively encouraging consumer participation, thereby transforming ordinary customers into active contributors and brand advocates (Koob, 2021). This approach increases brand visibility and enables organic consumer engagement, enhancing trust and credibility (Hidayah & Nurrohim, 2023). The insights gained from user interactions now directly inform marketing strategies, underscoring the pivotal role of UGC in contemporary marketing paradigms.

Social media platforms are also the main arenas where professional and personal reputations overlap in the context of ORM. Users often strive to manage the boundaries between their personal and professional identities, while businesses must respond to customer feedback—positive or negative—to present a careful and trustworthy image (Heerden & Rensburg, 2018). This process requires continuous monitoring and timely responses to user-generated reviews to demonstrate commitment to transparency and customer satisfaction. Accordingly, ORM strategies have evolved to include analytical tools that utilize UGC data effectively. Techniques such as sentiment analysis, reputation scoring, and emotion tracking help organizations assess the short- and long-term impact of online interactions (Sanusi et al., 2018).

Technological advances mean that companies are increasingly relying on data-driven ORM approaches that enable them to proactively shape their reputation by analyzing emotional trends and behavioral patterns in user comments (Peco-Torres et al., 2025). In this sense, ORM and UGC are not isolated phenomena but deeply interwoven processes in which corporate communication and consumer expression co-create public image and credibility.

In summary, ORM is an indispensable practice in the digital marketplace, and its effectiveness largely depends on the active management and interpretation of UGC. Businesses must recognize the dual influence of marketer- and UGC in shaping reputation and adopt analytical, participatory, and adaptive strategies to maintain a credible and consistent image in the digital environment. Understanding this complex interaction enables companies to navigate reputation risks while leveraging the collective voice of consumers as a strategic asset.

2. The Role of Online Reviews and Ratings in Purchasing Decisions

Research shows that online user reviews and ratings are important factors that influence consumers' purchasing decisions. The impact of these reviews stems from various factors, including their number, tone (positive or negative) and perceived usefulness. Studies consistently demonstrate that negative reviews have a stronger impact than positive ones. In particular, low one-star ratings can deter potential buyers more effectively than high five-star ratings can encourage them. This asymmetry in the perception of negative and positive feedback suggests that consumers prioritize avoiding poor purchases and examine negative reviews much more carefully during the decision-making process (Chen & Lurie, 2013). Furthermore, although a high average rating can increase sales, a large number of positive reviews may not fully offset the negative effect of a few bad reviews (Zhu & Zhang, 2010). The number of user reviews also plays an important role in influencing consumer behavior. Findings indicate that having a large number of reviews increases sales conversion rates. This effect is particularly pronounced for products requiring high engagement, suggesting that potential buyers seek comprehensive information before making a decision. Especially as the number of product or service options offered to consumers increases and their features become more similar to one another, consumers may find it more difficult to make decisions, which can lead them to postpone their purchase to a later time (Aykaç, 2022). Interestingly, studies have shown that the effect of the number of reviews is greater than the effect of the average rating. Many consumers view the number of reviews a product has as an indicator of its reliability and desirability (Book et al., 2016).

The perceived usefulness of online reviews is another key factor influencing purchasing decisions. Consumers are willing to read reviews written by others in order to form an opinion about the quality of a product and the overall experience it offers (Li et al., 2013). A useful user review is clear and sufficiently long, and provides detailed information about the product. Studies also show that consumers value qualitative evaluations from peers and quantitative ratings during the purchasing process. This highlights the fact that online user reviews provide information on both qualitative and quantitative levels (Huang et al., 2019; Li et al., 2013). Finally, another emerging trend is the impact of word-of-mouth communication on external platforms (external WOM). Research shows that reviews on websites trigger consumer actions and that information on social media and other platforms can significantly influence public perception and encourage purchases (Huang et al., 2019). The mutual interaction between online reviews and broader consumer discourse indicates that UGC has evolved from supplementary information to become a fundamental part of marketing and retail strategies. The successful management of these core strategic elements requires the continuous optimization of the key factors that constitute consumers' primary reasons for preference—namely price, proximity, and quality—particularly in business models such as discount retailers, where these factors serve as essential sources of competitive advantage (Yılmaz et al., 2021).

In summary, online reviews and ratings play a vital role in shaping consumers' purchasing decisions. Critical factors in this process include negativity bias, the number of reviews, perceived usefulness and external WOM effects. As digital interactions continue to evolve, it is becoming increasingly important for marketers and businesses to understand these elements in order to optimize consumer engagement and sales performance.

3. Managing Negative Feedback and Crisis Response

Businesses face constant challenges in managing negative user content online. Online reviews and comments, in particular, can seriously damage corporate reputation and consumer confidence. Organizations have developed various strategies to deal with negative comments effectively. These strategies focus on elements such as responding quickly and respectfully, and offering sincere apologies. A common approach is to respond to negative comments quickly and respectfully. This approach plays an important role in mitigating potential damage to a company's reputation. According to research, when companies provide transparent feedback and offer explanations or apologies, uncertainty decreases, preventing consumers from forming negative judgements about the company's competence. This attitude reflects the principle of interactive justice, based on customers' perception of the fairness of the treatment they receive from the company (Olson & Ro, 2020). Companies that actively engage with dissatisfied customers are generally perceived as more attentive and trustworthy, positively influencing consumer attitudes (Rouliez et al., 2019). Another effective approach is to implement an apology strategy, particularly when a company acknowledges an error or flaw in its service. Research shows that businesses that openly acknowledge their mistakes reinforce a sense of responsibility and create more positive perceptions among consumers. Apologizing helps to restore trust with dissatisfied customers and encourages forgiveness (Olson & Ro, 2020; Lee & Cranage, 2012). Although corporate response strategies may vary depending on the situation, adopting a conciliatory tone is generally considered to be an effective communication strategy. Companies can also implement various methods to increase the effectiveness of their responses. For instance, using a collaborative language rather than a confrontational style helps ensure harmony in consumer relations (Rouliez et al., 2019). Companies that combine apologizing with a proactive approach demonstrate their commitment to customer satisfaction and can improve consumer relations over time (Olson & Ro, 2020; Lee & Cranage, 2012). The form of the responses provided by businesses is also of critical importance. For example, using humor appropriately in a response can be an effective way of reducing tension. However, the risk of misinterpretation inherent in such an approach should not be overlooked (Herhausen et al., 2019). Therefore, when providing such responses, companies should take into account their brand identity and the cultural characteristics of their target audience, as a humorous tone may not always leave a positive impression on consumers. Finally, businesses are increasingly recognizing the importance of involving satisfied customers in the process to mitigate the impact of negative electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) (Park & Nicolau, 2015). Within this social proof approach, encouraging satisfied customers to share their positive experiences can counteract the negative perception created by critical comments (Proserpio & Zervas, 2017).

In summary, businesses can manage negative online reviews effectively by responding promptly and appropriately — responses that demonstrate accountability, transparency and commitment to customer satisfaction. Strategies such as apologizing, establishing a conciliatory dialogue and leveraging social proof address immediate customer concerns and contribute to long-term reputation preservation. Various case studies have examined companies that have successfully managed online reputation crises caused by UGC. These studies emphasize the importance of proactive engagement and reputation recovery techniques, revealing the various strategies that organizations have adopted in response to negative UGC. One notable example is the Maxima retail chain crisis in the Baltic countries. The company implemented strategies such as compensating customers and issuing public apologies to mitigate the damage caused by the incident, which had harmed its reputation. Research by Šontaitė-Petkevičienė (2014) shows that these strategies significantly improved consumer perception, reducing negative word-of-mouth (eWOM) and anger directed at the brand. This case study shows that well-structured crisis management activities can successfully restore a company's reputation. In particular, it emphasizes that offering apologies and compensation during a crisis can have a positive influence on public perception and the acceptability of the brand (Šontaitė-Petkevičienė, 2014). Similarly, Jezierski's (2020) study of online reputation management in the hospitality industry sheds light on effective responses to negative online reviews. For example, the quality of responses to customer reviews on TripAdvisor was analyzed for hotels in Kraków, Poland. The findings revealed that businesses which provided personalized responses, approaching negative reviews with empathy and demonstrating a commitment to customer satisfaction, were more successful in rebuilding their online reputation. This highlights the critical role of carefully tailored communication in effectively managing UGC-driven crises. Furthermore, adopting a broader perspective on crisis management in the tourism sector shows that companies can benefit from developing comprehensive marketing crisis plans to deal with unexpected adverse situations, such as natural disasters or political instability. Mukolwe et al. (2023) emphasize that such plans should include strategies for swiftly engaging with UGC and mitigating potential reputational damage. They note that the ultimate goal is to protect brand value and customer loyalty. This approach is particularly important in an industry where customer trust is largely based on online reputation and reviews. Further findings on the impact of UGC in the hospitality industry clarify the relationship between consumer feedback and business performance. Anagnostopoulou et al. (2020) demonstrated that users' online reviews directly impact hotel profitability, highlighting the necessity of robust reputation management strategies. Hotels that regularly monitor and respond to customer feedback tend to achieve better financial results. This highlights the fact that continuous interaction with UGC is a critical component of reputation management. Aula's (2010) case study on an automotive brand's reputation crisis also demonstrates how a negative event can quickly escalate on social media through UGC. The company experienced intense public pressure after a negative incident with a customer went viral, providing a firsthand example of how quickly user-generated dissatisfaction can undermine a brand's reputation. Their response included direct engagement with critical comments, as well as comprehensive public relations efforts aimed at addressing the underlying issues and restoring consumer trust. In conclusion, effectively managing online reputation crises caused by UGC requires a multifaceted approach that includes immediate engagement, personalized responses and strategic public relations efforts.

Examples from various sectors, particularly retail and hospitality, demonstrate that companies can successfully mitigate reputation damage by adopting transparency, empathy and proactive customer communication.

4. Leveraging UGC for Brand Building

Businesses can leverage positive UGC in various strategic ways to enhance their brand image and foster customer loyalty (Kutlu, 2024; Vodinalı & Aykaç, 2024). It is therefore important to actively encourage consumers to share their experiences and opinions, and to create platforms that facilitate this interaction. The main strategies for achieving this goal, as highlighted in the literature, are presented alongside supporting key research findings. One effective strategy is to recognize and highlight customer contributions. Research shows that UGC is perceived as more reliable and credible than brand-produced content, leading to meaningful improvements in brand perception and value. Indeed, according to Schivinski and Dąbrowski (2016), user-generated communication on social media significantly impacts both brand value and consumer attitudes positively. This suggests that showcasing customer-generated content can enhance a brand's reputation. Another approach is the co-creation strategy, whereby brands actively involve consumers in the content development process. Pereira et al. (2022) emphasize that co-creation is a precursor to UGC and can increase brand engagement by triggering emotional and cognitive responses in consumers. Companies that involve customers in content creation increase the likelihood of positive UGC emerging, while also reinforcing brand loyalty and commitment by making consumers feel that their contributions are valued. Building a community around the brand through social media is also crucial. Brands that facilitate interaction between consumers create an environment in which positive UGC can flourish. Araujo and Neijens (2012) found that brands targeting a young audience effectively use social networks to encourage the sharing of brand-related content, thereby strengthening community bonds. This type of community interaction can reinforce brand loyalty, creating an environment in which satisfied customers become brand advocates who influence potential customers, resulting in a cyclical flow of positive content (Yılmaz & Aykaç, 2018). Additionally, companies must continuously evaluate and improve their social media presence. Ferreira et al. (2021) note that strong social media performance can significantly shape user perceptions and encourage more UGC production. Brands can encourage the continuous sharing of positive experiences by highlighting content that resonates with their target audience. Furthermore, brands can use analytics tools to track the effectiveness of UGC. Understanding which types of user content resonate most with the target audience enables companies to adapt their strategies and make this content more visible. In this context, it is also possible to encourage content creation through methods such as competitions or reward programs, thereby obtaining more sincere and enthusiastic recommendations and shares from consumers (Kumar, 2024). Finally, it is crucial that brand messages align with positive UGC. Nurfitriana et al. (2020) found that creating a brand image that reflects customer experiences can greatly boost brand loyalty and engagement. Companies should align their marketing activities with the emotions expressed in positive UGC to preserve authenticity and reinforce consumer trust (Yılmaz, 2024). In conclusion, companies can leverage positive UGC strategically by involving customers in co-creation, building a supportive brand community, strengthening their social media performance and aligning brand messages with consumer-driven insights. This multifaceted approach amplifies the positive impact of UGC and lays the groundwork for a deeper emotional connection between brands and consumers. The primary benefits that companies gain from sharing UGC can be summarized as follows, based on relevant research findings:

Increased reliability and credibility: UGC is considered more authentic than traditional advertising because it reflects genuine user experiences. When companies share positive UGC, they boost their credibility among potential customers and strengthen brand loyalty. Research by Schivinski and Dąbrowski (2016) has demonstrated the positive impact of user-generated communication on brand value and consumer attitudes. This indicates that UGC can be a powerful tool for building trust.

Increased brand engagement: Sharing UGC encourages consumers to engage more actively with the brand. Ferreira et al. (2021) note that successful examples of UGC on social media can motivate users to create and share their own content. This increased engagement creates a stronger bond and a deeper level of interaction between the brand and consumers.

Cost-effective marketing: UGC is a cost-effective marketing strategy. By utilizing content created by customers, companies can reduce traditional advertising expenses while creating an impact that reaches a wide audience. Bruhn et al. (2012) emphasized that UGC has the potential to increase sales without significant financial investment by triggering word-of-mouth marketing (Ratnayaka, 2024).

Influence on purchase decisions: Positive UGC is a powerful tool in influencing consumers' purchase intentions. Mayrhofer et al. (2019) found that UGC about brands on social media significantly influences young adults' purchasing decisions, demonstrating the persuasive power of authentic peer recommendations (Sizaro, 2022). This shows that sharing UGC can play a critical role in prompting potential customers to make a purchase.

Strengthening brand loyalty: Brands that highlight UGC can forge emotional connections with consumers. Poch & Martin (2015) note that social benefits—such as recognition and social validation—motivate the creation of branded content. Park & Lee (2021) further show that community commitment and social relationships significantly drive UGC-sharing intention, reinforcing the emotional engagement brands can achieve through UGC.

Community building: Encouraging and sharing UGC contributes to the formation of a consumer community around the brand. Borges-Tiago et al. (2019) emphasize that social media enables the co-creation of brand personality between users and companies, fostering strong community bonds and loyalty. A vibrant and engaged brand community strengthens brand loyalty by creating a supportive environment for current and potential customers.

Feedback and innovation: UGC is a valuable source of direct customer feedback for companies. Andarsari and Suryadi (2024) have demonstrated that UGC can influence product development processes, with customer feedback guiding business decisions (Heerden & Rensburg, 2018). This enables companies to enhance their products and services by considering user opinions.

Increased Visibility and Access: The spread of UGC through social media can significantly increase brand awareness. When customers share their own content, it reaches their networks, thereby expanding the brand's target audience without incurring additional marketing costs. This organic spread has a positive impact on brand awareness and perception, helping companies to grow their market reach.

In summary, companies can leverage the power of UGC to build trust, increase user engagement, influence purchasing decisions, strengthen loyalty and expand brand visibility. These benefits make UGC an extremely valuable element in corporate strategies.

5. Conclusion

The findings presented in this chapter emphasize the pivotal role of ORM and UGC in contemporary corporate strategies. In the digital age, companies must systematically leverage these tools to shape and protect their brand reputation. A proper understanding of the interaction between ORM and UGC is particularly critical for businesses looking to strengthen their position in the digital environment. Additionally, UGC presents businesses with both opportunities and risks. Positive user content can strengthen brand perception and increase customer loyalty, whereas uncontrolled negative content can escalate into crises that damage brand reputation. Therefore, organizations should closely monitor and guide UGC, encouraging positive contributions and responding quickly, transparently and empathetically to negative feedback. This chapter also emphasizes the significant impact of UGC on aspects such as brand image, customer relations, and crisis management. The content that consumers produce about brands directly affects brand image and shapes public perception. Similarly, the way companies approach customer reviews and feedback determines the quality of customer relations and loyalty. In UGC-related reputation crises, rapid intervention and strategic communication are crucial for mitigating negative effects and protecting the brand's reputation. Future research could expand the existing body of knowledge in this area by examining the evolving dynamics and emerging trends of ORM and UGC. Important areas for future research include the role of UGC on new social media platforms, the effectiveness of AI-powered reputation management tools, and the management of UGC in different cultural contexts. Such studies will help businesses to integrate UGC more effectively into their strategies, enabling them to anticipate and manage potential reputation risks.

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