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User-generated content about brands: understanding its creators and consumers

Abstract

This consumer research study investigates the meanings behind creating and consuming user-generated content (UGC) about brands. It touches on the broader issues of the lives of persons, rather than consumers. We discuss relevant theoretical underpinnings to our empirical two-stage study that we then describe in detail. From our findings we contribute a person-centric trope of the journey that individuals can be understood as participating in as they interact with brands on the Internet for personal formation and even transformation. We conclude that for the young adult population this activity is the interactive ongoing construction of identities, as persons rather than narrowly as consumers. These actions creating and consuming UGC also underpin potential for personal transformation, as proposed in the movie “*Leaving Pleasantville*”. Our contribution is both insight and a metaphor to explain a key driver of UGC creation in 21st century postmodern life.

Key words

Branding; digital marketing; WOM; UGC; identification; CCT.

User-generated content about brands: understanding its creators and consumers

1. Introduction

The aim of the paper is to enhance our understanding of why user-generated content (UGC) about brands is created and consumed. In an acknowledged time of digital empowering of firms and consumers, Strizhakova et al. (2008) indicate that “it is imperative to assess consumer perceptions related to the meanings of branded products” (p.89). Our rationale is that social networking both represents and is enabling change in the way the Web is used since it positively encourages and embraces decentralised authority (leading, importantly for marketers, to a decline in brand managers’ authority) opening avenues for narcissistic searching for personal transformation. We designed an interpretive consumer study to explore motivations behind the recent, yet quickly very popular practice of UGC. We connect the meaning of brands for consumers to their actions in creating and consuming content on branded websites and referring to brands elsewhere within social media. In this setting marketers have tended to rush to observe, and to create virtual space for content creation, and yet have still been slow to ask consumers what it might mean to them. This is the case despite earlier research indicating the need for marketing managers to focus on consumer meaning (Stern et al., 1998). Typically, global firms seem to be engaged in communicating their brands by replicating areas of corporate websites containing brand information and sales promotions. Web 2.0 is however potentially much more open, user-centric and responsive than the first-generation web, and although this was quickly seen as likely to empower firms it has in fact also empowered others, sometimes in their role as consumers, but perhaps more importantly as persons (Deighton and Kornfeld, 2009).

The two key research questions addressed are “why” and “what does this mean”, rather than “how and to what extent” as the technology in Web 2.0 changes power relations between consumers and firms. Our findings indicate that for the young adult population sampled in this study, the aim is interactive ongoing construction of identities, as persons rather than narrowly as consumers. The mention of averting boredom as a presenting reason for this activity presents the space for seeking personal transformation – for being attracted to “*Leaving Pleasantville*”, as the movie proposes. We focused on a small section of the “web-savvy global youth culture” (Strizakhova et al., 2008, p.82) to generate this insight. This study supports the service- dominant logic reframing of marketing from being concerned with firms and consumers exchanging information and knowledge to focusing on the network with persons in exchange activities as actor to actor (Vargo and Lusch, 2009). Indeed we see persons rather than consumers (Deighton and Kornfeld, 2009). We contribute a metaphor – the journey through a labyrinth – a journey both narcissistic and beyond the self - to supplement current typologies of users to better encapsulate the transformative potential of creating and consuming user-generated content connected to brands. In asking “why” in this study we provide understanding of how young people create meaning (for themselves, rather than themselves in the role of consumers) through interactions with brands that embrace this change of power and ownership of brands. Finally we propose further avenues for research including a deeper look into the puzzles that remain from this study’s findings.

2. Context

In Western Europe and North America – perhaps in High Income Countries (HICs) generally (Burgess and Steenkamp, 2006) – there is an established “click economy” where four billion digital searches are performed each month (Chaffey, 2008). Whereas in 2008 42% of companies used social media in their marketing mix, in 2012 the percentage had increased to 88% (Smith et al., 2012). There is an explosion of information on Social Networking Sites (SNS) and “our purchase decisions are often informed by the opinions of other customers who review products or suppliers on blogs and forums” (Chaffey, 2008 p.v). An early approach was termed the mullet whereby bloggers were directed to blog at length at the back of the site, while smart advertising creates an attractive frontage ([http:// blog](http://blog) 2008). There is desire to create metrics to manage this explosion of communication, since traffic thus generated can be recorded. The emphasis is on reaching consumers. “With user-generated content, you are reaching customers who are ready to buy and customers who are participating in a community” (<http://www.seroundtable>, 2008). Fans often number in the thousands, but their contributions voice little beyond generalities such as “I *love* this product” or “this brand is coool”; some upload profiles, images and links to personal Facebook pages. What is missing from this is a theoretical and empirical understanding of motivations behind this phenomenon from the consumer perspective. So we designed a study to address this omission.

Web 2.0 created social networking sites (SNS) that Wikipedia (2014) defines as “a platform to build social networks or social relations among people who, share interests, activities, backgrounds or real-life connections”. Facebook is typical site in that every time the user goes online, a web advertisement takes up a prominent section of the page. The practice of keeping alive complex networks of relationships

across personal and working lives is of course age-old (McPherson et al., 2001). The rapidly evolving context is that by 2011 over 750 million global consumers engaged on Facebook for commercial, leisure and social purposes. With the average user connected to over 80 community pages, Facebook represents a key network.

Moreover, world revenues for companies were forecast to grow from EUR 1 billion to EUR 7-8 billion (2008-2013) positioning advertising on SNS in third place behind music and gaming (Ala-Mutka, Broster et al. 2009). However, we are researching the meaning of this activity as the Web is used, rather than the size of revenues from digitally mediated social networking. UGC carries implications for the lives of young people, as persons rather than just as “consumers” since it encourages and embraces decentralized authority and content co-creation by site owners and users in a peer-to-peer culture.

Smith et al (2012) identified three streams of brand-related UGC research. One looks at advertisements, one at the search for credibility and for advice, and a third focuses on links between the activity recorded above and sales success. The findings from our study, carried out as an inductive design with open-ended input requested from respondents contribute to the strand “search by the consumer for trustworthy sources of advice”. Our findings demonstrate in practice the conclusion of Choi et al (2014) who note that today “identity is created by information” (p.2918). Therefore, this question of source credibility needs to be placed in a wider setting of meaning creation by consumers. This is not merely a technological advance. We ask how and why are consumers reworking these resources now available to them. What uses are being made of changing power relations? For social media networking upsets firm-controlled power relations, particularly in marketing communications (Deighton and

Kornfeld, 2009). It offers potential for personal transformation by connecting content of websites to networks of connected persons. This then leads to the suggestion of further research into firm responses to insight gained into customers reworking of resources.

3. Concepts relevant to the creation of UGC

We argue that the contribution of social networking sites to organizational success is inadequately understood, despite the recent acceptance of the concept of the customer as co-creator of value in the service-dominant view of marketing. We discuss the relevance of service dominant logic, connected to consumer culture theory (CCT); we draw upon social identity theory to include brand identification and via the consumption of experience; we finally consider, given the growth of user reviews in the Web, the state of the art in selling through third party recommendation – word of mouth (WOM) theory.

3.1 Service dominant logic and CCT

In their seminal paper, Vargo and Lusch (2004) trace the development of contemporary marketing thought back to its roots in classical economics, in which markets are founded on the exchange of tangible goods for money. They argue that early marketing thought tended to focus on operand resources, that is, resources on which an act is performed to produce an effect. From this starting point, marketing became the act of embedding value in operand resources to increase their value. This line of theoretical development culminated in the marketing mix approach (McCarthy, 1960), in which product characteristics, promotion techniques

and distribution strategies combine to lock value into the product offer. The focus of marketing theory rested firmly on this ultimate product offer, which marketers strove to make as attractive as possible in a given transaction. Vargo and Lusch note that the focus moved to operant resources as the prime source of competitive advantage. These are active, indeed self-organizing and controlled by their owners. This was not perceived by firms at the advent of widespread internet access, when the manager's imagination led to notions of ever more intrusive one way communications through advanced direct marketing (Deighton and Kornfeld, 2009). Yet with hindsight Deighton and Kornfeld note that what empowered firms also empowered consumers. They advocate using the word person rather than consumer, as the literal meaning of that word is too narrow for today's empowered buyer. The person is the subject not the object in the service for service exchange (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). Having established the primacy of operant resources, Vargo and Lusch focus on actor to actor (2009), presenting a compelling and comprehensive foundation for developing insights into the marketing management task. We focus on this shift in power that is encapsulated also in the world of Web 2.0, leading to a culture of peer-to-peer interaction and new possibilities for personal transformation.

We believe that the content of SNS is essentially an operant resource, (see Figure 1 below) generated outside the organization and therefore outwith its direct control. This is not the most common view among marketers of brands. This is not to say that such resource is unreachable or impossible to influence, however. In the virtual environment, as elsewhere, consumers are co-creators of knowledge. It follows that what is important for marketers to understand better is the extent to which firms can

reach, communicate and influence consumers, via SNS and UGC. Hamel and Prahalad's (1990) analysis of sustainable competitive advantage was framed with customers and markets external to the organization and operations internal, but, due primarily to communications and information technology, organizational boundaries have become much more fluid to the extent that consumers now also create and sustain the firm's competitive advantage. Yet, as Figure 1 below demonstrates, consumers are in fact engaged on a life project with goals and resources that embrace the economic and the branded, but are not dominated by them. Hence our focus on a person or actor or peer rather than the narrower conception: consumer.

Figure 1 here

Arnould and Thompson (2005) reviewed 20 years of consumer culture theory (CCT); we now bring its theoretical concerns to place this novel consumer phenomenon of UGC in its cultural milieu. We here consider a culturally situated consumer to understand the human-technology interface created by Web 2.0 availability - reconceptualized as an actor, person or peer.

What we see in Figure 1 is this logic applied via CCT to the consumer as being in control of using resources for life projects. This extends to the observation that the operant resource for the firm's competitive advantage is now held in the consumer's mind and subsequent actions of the consumer. Indeed, turning the analysis on its head, one might argue that the consumer's social skills, in turns of their ability to acquire, consolidate and apply learning about organizations makes an important contribution to the brand. The social aspects of the life of the consumer is also

emphasized in experiential marketing (Schmitt, 1999), which views consumers less as rational decision makers who care about functional features and benefits, more as emotional human beings who are concerned with achieving pleasurable experiences (Jevons and Gabbott, 2000). This approach suggests that the world of Web 2.0 enables the focal point in an increasingly narcissistic society (Lasch, 1979) to become the daily life of the person. It also affirms and provides an updated illustration of the focus of Belk's seminal paper where he drew attention to possessions as creators of personal identity rather than merely purchased goods (1988). Personal formation, even transformation, is at the centre, rather than the firm and its marketing strategy. And so the brand is not there simply to serve the firm, somewhat uni-directionally via the internet via Facebook, Twitter, the firm's own pages and Pinterest. This may be a bitter pill to swallow for those working for the brand.

3.2 *Identification*

Identification with the brand is a process understood using social identity theory, where favorable outcomes accrue to the firm from creating customer loyalty and word of mouth recommendation (Bettencourt, 1997; Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003; Halliday and Kuenzel, 2008). Researchers suggest "our results further indicate that brand managers need to highlight self-identity signals in their product development and communications/marketing campaigns" (Strizhakova et al., 2011 p.349). When customers identify with a company they "tend to purchase more and recommend the company's products more often" (Ahearne et al., 2005 p.5). Algesheimer et al. (2005) find that customers identifying with a brand and the brand's community tend to be supportive and make positive recommendations about the brand (referred to hereafter as WOM). Co- created communities assist in this identity construction process and

created collaboratively generated content (Schau et al., 2011). The focus is less on the consumer's role as consumer of the brand, more on the person constructing their own identity and so we expect to find evidence that requires a re-thinking of the earlier established approach to a settled identity for such players. It is a far more fluid set of processes of identification that consumers are engaged in than living out a number of static roles. Indeed, these actors are not playing a role in the lives of firms or brands: they are engaged on their own identity projects as persons – as increasingly connected persons (Deighton and Kornfeld, 2009).

3.3 *Word-of-mouth*

Word-of-mouth (WOM) has been called the buzzword of the 21st century marketing professionals (Kirby and Marsden, 2006, p.161). Over 50-years of research have been carried out in the field of WOM. As early as 1955 Katz and Lazarsfeld proposed the superior effectiveness of WOM compared to newspaper and radio advertising. In 1967 (p.3) Arndt gave what is now cited as the classic definition of WOM as: “Oral, person-to-person communication between receiver and a communicator whom the receiver perceives as non-commercial, concerning a brand, a product or a service.” A key point for this study is that the content of WOM is perceived as non-commercial in nature meaning that people talk from their own free will. This is partly what has empowered the digitally-enabled consumer. Some, such as market mavens might use it to enhance their knowledge and authority, others to satisfy themselves in a helping role and other to reduce post purchase dissonance ((Jin and Huang, forthcoming). Web 2.0 with related social networking has offered firms opportunities to co-opt WOM – there is provider-generated content and this has altered the earlier status quo (Cheung and Morrison, 2008). Growth in this eWOM or UGC (distinctions can be

made - see Cheung and Morrison), has led to a blurring of this earlier boundary in the activities of social networkers. There is also an issue with management intrusion – termed WOMM by Kozinets et al. (2010). It is now worthwhile for managers to become bloggers. This is changing very fast. For example, in 2008 East et al quoted figures from work published in 2006 and noted that then “8% of advice was Web mediated; 70% face-to-face and 19% was by telephone.” (p.217). These figures are clearly already outdated; it shows how fast this issue of WOM on social media is changing.

Another factor to consider when thinking of what WOM is and how consumers might use it, is to distinguish between solicited (when a friend or neophyte asks a perceived or actual expert) and unsolicited WOM. This rather important distinction has rarely been made (De Bruyn and Lilien, 2008). In this study we essentially focus on unsolicited WOM by asking why customers spread the word, aiming to understand why information is both offered and sought. It deepens understanding of peer-peer trust, making a contribution to what has previously been noted as the second stream of inquiry: why some sources are seen as more credible than others. This study also addresses some of De Bruyn and Lilien’s issues in that, as an inductive, interpretive piece, there is some mulling over being influenced by WOM (rather than just recording successful WOM); those in the study were not pre-selected for their proactive searching out of information; data has been collected in real-time rather than retrospectively due to the diary design, with reflection taking place within weeks of the recorded actions; there is some mulling over the response made to the invitation to respond to electronic WOM left on social networks and branded websites. This approach also meets one of the concerns about WOM research identified by East et al.

(2008) when they noted that ideally WOM would be observed! In this way this study contributes to the understanding of the important phenomenon of WOM as it mutates into UGC and its correlate, viral marketing. Our findings below also support De Bruyn and Lilien's surmising that demographic similarity plays a role in source credibility –this is a key finding as to why WOM in social networks – Web 2.0 – works so well.

Consumers, in both the developed and developing world, are progressively using e-WOM/UGC actor to actor/peer to peer to share brand information on fashion, lifestyles and preferences – increasingly and rapidly in social networking (Jin and Huang, forthcoming). So WOM, from being only of concern to services marketers, and within that specialism, experiential services such as tourism and hospitality, has in its new form of UGC, taken centre stage. In a more narcissistic age of “the growing determination to live for the moment” (Lasch, 1979 p.320) it fits with the self-promotion – identified as an element of narcissism (self-aggrandizement) by Brown (1997). It is part of the search for personal transformation that is now “not a hunger for personal salvation ...but for the feeling, the momentary illusion, of personal well-being, health and psychic security” (Lasch, 1979 p.32). UGC (closely connected to other namings in the business press, such as viral marketing), or e-WOM is a more widely dispersed form of WOM, since, as Hennig-Thurau and Walsh, (2003, p.51) conclude “consumers are able to obtain information related to goods and services not only from friends, acquaintances, and colleagues”, or by other “means of personal communication, but also from a myriad of other people, otherwise unknown to them”, who wish to share their experiences of the relevant products or services. New social networking platforms have increased communication opportunities as can be seen in

figure 2. What makes these new communication platforms significantly different from traditional WOM is the scale and reach –there has been a move from mass to truly multimedia communications.

Figure 2 here

A typology that provides the answer to the question “what are consumers doing on social media?” indicates 9 categories of consumer activity (Lanson, 2011) – see figure 3. below. This leaves room for further understanding of and creation of a typology, or better, an overarching metaphor for the answers to the question “why?” It leaves space for consideration of the power shift represented in the desire to create and convey UGC/WOM (Cheong and Morrison, 2008). We supply a supplementary metaphor that has the person at the centre and that combines a walk with a purpose with some repetition and the ability to participate or leave at any point – one that is more flexible than the rather static categorization at figure 3. Below. This figurative trope or analogy is used to summarize the findings of this study (see figure 5) –it is the route for a series of life projects and personal transformation.

Figure 3 here

4. Methodological considerations

To answer the question “why?” we designed a two-stage study to take an interpretive, inductive, open-ended approach, in order to understand more deeply what motivates creators of and commentators upon UGC. The findings from the literature review are then used to interpret the raw data. In our research design respondents are not

constructing associations on the spot. This is a feature to address the acknowledged weakness in experiments and surveys underlined by Dolnicar and Rossiter (2008). For respondents are recording their own interactions with branded websites and record those (stage one), and only later do they reflect on them (stage two). Our choice of method provides one way of recording a holistic understanding of brands on the part of respondents and only tackles those brands discussed unprompted by respondents. We do not rely on the consumer memory alone (Woodside et al., 2102).

Most social sciences define theory as an ordering framework that permits observational data to be used for predicting and explaining empirical events (Sayer, 1992). However, when attempting prediction it will be found that there are simply too many variables:

The possibilities for accurate and reliable explanatory predictions for open systems are remote. The prospects of acquiring information on not only the number and nature of the mechanisms but their configuration so that the results of their interaction can be predicted are small

Scruton, 1983 p.131.

Happily, there is a competing definition of theory as “conceptualization, where to theorize means to prescribe a particular way of conceptualizing something” (Sayer, 1992 p.50). This current study uses this definition of theory, because it provides a better fit with current uncertainties than does theory as ordering framework, despite the ubiquity of this latter definition among marketing academics. We conceptualize the developing practices, issues, and prior literature and create a new metaphor rather than typology for understanding UGC. Interestingly, one of the purposes of a

metaphor can be to predict. The figure (in our case see figure 5) can be used to predict as it is a picture or symbol of what is happening in our case, as UGC is created). We use CCT to conceptualize the consumer as a person digitally empowered to use brands as resource for life projects – on a journey of formation and even personal transformation.

We devised the two-stage approach to build in reflection to follow Arnould and Wallendorf's advice (1994) that a practice often has "layers of meaning that consumers have difficulty articulating but nonetheless act on" (p.499). We are offering context-dependent findings into the population of young adults. We do so in the spirit of contributing to understanding marketing phenomena agreed to be important by scholars from different research traditions: to deepen our understanding and broadening our learning, this study takes an interpretive approach.

4.1 The research design

Young people are an attractive segment, often targeted by global firms (Strizhakova et al., 2012); they are the most active in this area of electronic social networking and UGC and quite possibly less antagonistic or resistant towards branded products (Strizhakova et al., 2011). They are, therefore, sought after for social media interaction by firms (Muniz and Schau, 2011). Findings from researching within this segment may well be transferable as it is a leading segment for consideration of the digitally empowering world. We selected a cohort of 215 final year undergraduate students, global in constituency, based in one geographical setting during the study, and tasked them with creating diaries of their interactions with branded website and creation of and/or commentary upon UGC during a four week period (stage one) and

then writing a reflection on their entries a few weeks later (stage two). 100 of those submitted provided sufficiently complete entries to create data for NVivo analysis. As structured diaries are regarded as being more accurate in tracking events as they occur (Bryman and Bell, 2007) we provided a clear format for the respondents' records. For diary-based research to be successful, researchers must ensure that they continually offer encouragement and reassurance to participants to ensure they stay motivated and committed to completing their diaries (Daymon and Holloway, 2011). We provided for this by making the keeping and handing in of weekly diaries part of the computer mediated assessment task connected to one particular module.

Within this subset, a further third of reflections were considered by independent markers to have created insight (judged by being awarded the top undergraduate assignment grade) and so were included in this study. Therefore our empirical study incorporates a diary of interactions by 100 students on the web during one month followed a few weeks later by 28 by of those participants short narratives of those recorded diary entries to enable reflection on what the activity recorded meant to them. The overall design captured social reality as constructed (Berger and Luckmann, 1967). This design is underpinned by the research approach that "the task of sociological research is to describe these shared meanings which may, in turn, make it possible to explain why people behave as they do" (McNeill, 1985 p. 113). This structure enabled introspection and reflection upon their practice, interacting with their record of this practice, since, on their own, consumers have been found relatively unreflective (Shankar et al., 2001). As such, the design is based on the individual as the unit of analysis.

4.3 Limitations

Clearly there are limitations to this study. Kenney (2009) points out that there are times when participants may forget to make an entry in their diaries, and rather than leave the entry blank, they may try to catch up by filling in their missing entries, this is otherwise known as hoarding. When hoarding occurs this can lower the validity of the study as participants attempt to recall what they had been thinking, feeling or doing. Weekly submission mitigated this risk. As discussed above, participation in any study has a distorting effect on the events that take place as part of that study. Participation heightens, at the very least, awareness of everyday practices. Several respondents commented on this. So even this open-ended research approach is somewhat intrusive; the respondent is a flawed instrument: this limitation was addressed by splitting off the recording from the reflection, so that the reflection was easily carried out to time. Diary keeping as a research method can be a costly process as Bryman and Bell (2007) due to the costs associated with recruiting diarists to take part and checking to see that diaries are completed properly. We mitigated this by making weekly diary-keeping a requirement of the module. The population sampled is young adults, which is huge and only 215 were selected, so this is not a rigorous sample for quantitative purposes. Only 100 diaries were fully completed such that only half of the cohort of students' data has been examined. And only 28 of the written reflections were included as only these were awarded marks for creating insight.

5. Findings from stage 1 of the research design

The diary of the 100 selected respondents were created in the form of excel sheets.

In sources, nodes were then created. Nodes are groups of responses that are similar i.e. we created a node called Networking. All websites that were related to social networking such as Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter were grouped together. NVivo9 software has been used to manage this information by sorting and classifying nodes and motivations to develop emergent themes.

5.1 Activities

The top activity in terms of frequency was networking (twice as frequent as the next activity) and within that, using Facebook and Twitter. Generally some of the Facebook networking was within branded sites using Facebook to access brands and then comment on their sites. Twitter was much less used in this way. Second was shopping and the top two sites (in terms of frequency of visits) were Asos and Amazon. Thirdly, it was the audio-visual world that was frequented most often and within this activity photos, YouTube and Skype were the most common sites. Fourth came the in-house University intranet and fifth came entertainment, with two UK TV programmes, Fame and Top Gear the most popular programmes.

5.2 Stated motivations and emergent themes

Networking was said, in order of frequency of reference, to be motivated by a perceived need to keep in touch with friends and family and to keep updated on products and news. As the features offered by these websites are free and dynamic, this activity fosters a need to keep updated with news (notifications), information and pictures. This opportunity for self-affirmation has been found recently to be a key reason for the phenomenal spread of Facebook (Toma and Hancock 2013). In turn, this dynamism is driving continuous reframing and affirming of identity. The

motivations for shopping, in order of frequency of reference were: information needed at the various stages of buying; looking at promotional communications, including various offers; actually buying – and selling; responding to a particular deal; browsing product reviews and finally, responding to family and friends recommendations of sites and offers to visit. The Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) of the University was accessed, as might be imagined, for information on timetabling, assignment dates and details, and university, including tutor, communications.

Finally, students turn to the audio visual world on the Net from a need to know the latest to both keep abreast of news and weather; to pursue personal interests and tantalizingly, to avert boredom. Also, respondents checked various entertainment related websites through social media. The theme overall that emerges is of a continuous affirmation and re-affirmation of the continually under construction self. The possibilities of UGC have created a certain cycle of demands and this is fuelling an increasingly narcissistic culture, predicted by Lasch in 1979, who saw 21st century persons embracing a search for meaning through never ceasing self-consciousness. He predicted these respondents, who, somewhat bored, rather than seeking intimacy with known others, distract themselves on the Web, as he wrote of a future “life full of distractions” (Lasch, 1979 p.321).

The conceptual framework for this study is shown at figure 1 above therefore fits this study. Our findings illustrate “the person with life projects seeking resources”, rather than finding a consumer at the centre. It is highly relevant for studies into the emerging field of UGC as it is the value-in-use element that is not captured using

mechanistic records of visits to sites and actions taken consequent to site visits. We are developing the theoretical contribution out of the process of moving from the raw data, and of distilling themes via analysis to gain theoretical insight (Bansal and Corley 2011). We see a person integrating resources, including brands and brand meanings and brand communities, in order to achieve life goals. This is providing a new conceptual understanding of the creators and consumers of UGC (Gioia et al., 2012) as those engaged in personal formation and open to transformation.

6. Findings from stage 2 of the research design

Five themes emerged strongly.

6.1 Engagement

Engagement with sites and the creation of UGC or commentary upon what was there created increased passion for the brand/product/service.

Observation 1

“While keeping the diary I became aware that by engaging and leaving a comment or a review, I actually become even more passionate about what I have bought or experienced. For example, after ordering a pair of shoes from EBay, I was so delighted to receive my shoes along with a Christmas card, signed from the seller, that I recommended him not only online, but to my closest friends as well.”

6.2 Trust

Trust was placed in apparently unknown persons, in a non-hierarchical world of presumed goodwill peer to peer. A matching distrust of PGC was also apparent.

Observation 2

“This activity shows that I am mainly a Spectator according to Forrester’s research typographies (2010). I reached this conclusion because I read blogs, tweets and customer reviews at least once a month (Forrester, 2010) as shown by the diary entries. Other online activity showed that I rate customer reviews highly and these affect my buying decisions”.

Figure 4 here

6.3 *A matching distrust of Provider Generated Content*

Observation 3

“However, I had negative interactions with businesses when logging onto certain social networking sites at times during the diary-keeping period. On Facebook, I found a large number of company advertisements appear on my page which can be considered irritating”.

Observation 4

“My last diary entry shows how much I recognize and respect other customer experiences more so than company advertising, and use these reviews and discussions to decide which particular product or service has the right features to meet my personal wants and needs”.

Observation 5

“I feel that I can trust consumer reviews and rankings on legitimate sites much more than what the product is trying to sell.”

6.4. *Self-identity rather than group identity*

The focus was on self-identity rather than group identity within brand engagement: a finding that presents a challenge to firms developing brand communities. Due to the level of self-consciousness this has the ring of truth:

Observation 6

“I found this website useful as I was able to gain a real perspective of the product/service quality by those who had experienced it as a consumer. In addition, I liked the fact that I had the ability to post a review to share my experience.”

Observation 7

“ I tended to join brand communities only when necessary to purchase an item or gain information. Due to this, it is clear this type of brand interface is not as commonly used as social media. This could be because I would only join brand communities once and would do so when purchasing a product or requesting direct information from the brand. This type of brand interface however did prove very useful to me and answered all queries and desires I expected them to. By joining the brand communities and sharing my information with them, I was able to access more information about the brands and have content directly sent to me to keep me up to date with them. This is therefore very useful to me in the future, as well as at present,

as I can gain information as and when I need it and will not have to share my details any more”.

6.5 *Web surfing is a part of life*

Web surfing is a part of life of these young people, it distracts them from boredom and is seen as freeing. In the reflections upon the diary records, there were expressions of frustration at any structure being put upon this random surfing activity.

Observation 8

“Additionally, as the diary I was keeping was in a categorized format, I felt in some cases, for example under the category ‘What prompted you to this website’ that I was forced to state a reason, even if it had been part of a routine or general surfing of the web.”

These stated motivations fit an empowered consumer, or even, as we discuss in the literature review and now in the data analysis, a person who is using brands and social media interaction with them as resources for life projects as part of their everyday lives. Underlying the activity recorded and reflected upon is a universally felt need to remain connected.

7. Discussion

The data has been categorized and summarized. How now is sense to be made of it? What grounds are there for creating links? Are the links there, ready to be presented in the text? Or is there a process that creates them? Weick (1995) describes sensemaking as noticing “something in an ongoing flow of events, a discrepant set of cues, something which does not fit. Second, the discrepant cues are spotted when someone looks back over elapsed experience. [Then] plausible speculations are offered to explain” (p.2). Something plausible is being constructed, as mediating

themes are brought out with which to answer the two research questions underpinning this study.

7.1 A day in the life of a UGC creator and consumer

The findings indicate clearly great use is made of peer review to subvert the monologues emerging directly from the brand owners – this is the empowered consumer in action in everyday life. Reflexivity over the actions recorded in this study would seem to indicate that Forrester’s ladder insufficiently pictures what is going on in this virtual world of the person with life goals seeking resources for this project (our conceptualization of the consumer, viewed as person/actor/peer). A ladder (see figure 4) implies that you can move consumers, as the brand owner perhaps, up the ladder, as with the Christopher et al. (1991) customer loyalty ladder. And even Lanson’s typology (figure 3) is a snapshot of what consumers may be doing at any one time. The categories are clearly not inhabited only by one segment of consumers – there is movement. And indeed who, with the ubiquity of reviews, is now inactive? In addition to the need for a more dynamic picture, these typologies leave us with the question “why?” as they answer the question “how do consumers use social media” – a question that is easily recorded given the resources of social media and the digital imprint left by activity. Indeed Big Data can give massively reassuring answers to that question (Schwartz et al., 2013). Our research answers the question “why?” And so we need to derive an overarching metaphor that embraces what meaning is being given by the digital empowerment of the consumer; that might re-frame how we see the value-in-use integrator who is at the centre of this digitally empowered world. We see a person integrating resources, including brands and brand meanings and brand communities, in order to achieve life goals. They are pursuing pleasure, passing the time, keeping abreast with affairs, keeping in touch

with friends, sharing the latest trends, advice, views and reviews; averting boredom; problem solving; rationalizing. Lasch (1979) and Brown (1997) see boredom and rationalizing (respectively) as elements of narcissism. They could be said to ready to emerge from this focus on their self to and find themselves “*Leaving Pleasantville*”. These findings could direct further research into consumer behavior and post-rationalization, as the production of blogs and reviews fuels both reflexivity and rationalizing post hoc. Rather than have watertight categories of activity there are a complex range of possibilities presented by the accessibility of the Web. Even within the buying process, at times these persons need information to buy; sometimes they are randomly surfing; sometimes they are seeking advice or affirmation. UGC and WOM have merged into a way of living with Web 2.0 as digitally empowered young people.

7.2 *A medieval labyrinth*

Hence the idea of a journey, an inward, self absorbed, self referencing journey- the search for the self and supports for self-esteem. A fitting metaphor – finding something that the meaning made in this process of creating and consuming UGC is like – would have the person in charge, but not in a very forceful fashion. It is not really networked; this is an individual personal project. A suitable pictorial metaphor needs to have the idea of a journey within it – but not a trip. There is a fast way and a slow way of traveling. It was tempting to consider something more networked – but entering a medieval labyrinth seems to capture the melding of meandering and purpose and in fact one can step straight into the centre of the labyrinth or right outside at will in these two dimensional labyrinths, such as the archetypal floor in

Chartres Cathedral – see figure 5 for a contemporary version. It is a walk one repeats – it is not on a bucket list of things to do once in a lifetime.

Figure 5 here

A labyrinth is unicursal: it consists of one path which twists and turns but leads inevitably to the centre, and then leads back out again (see figure 5). The four quadrants format might fit the four most active areas of Internet activity for respondents: networking, shopping and entering the audiovisual world of YouTube and Skype and using the University's VLE – task-based use of the Internet. But the power of this metaphor is that the underlying pattern is there, but it is also open to variation and re-interpretation in terms of the activities undertaken.

What is needed for a brand to prosper is to understand this socially connected person, who chooses to enter the labyrinth and who might keep to the rules and follow a structure, who will undertake activities that overlap and blur boundaries, and who might step over the boundaries and take a short cut inside, or leave at any point that suits them. These findings and this metaphor, suggest that to prosper brands will need to offer resources for the journey. The activities, (acting as a connector, a conversationalist etc (see Figures 3 and 4) will vary. New possibilities will emerge. But the ongoing resource integration for life projects and for identity construction will remain.

The diaries and reflections indicate a connectedness to activity that was not planned on entry and that that was not directed by forethought, but that happened. An

intriguing area to follow up on is the repeated motivation recorded for entertainment: boredom. The reconceptualized person from consumer is someone who is somewhat narcissistically focused on self-transformation that “depends on others to validate his [sic] self-esteem” – to cope with feeling “overwhelmed by an annihilating sense of boredom” (Lasch, 1979 p. 39). The labyrinth is something of an adventure, as is described in Plato’s dialogue *Euthydemus*, where Socrates describes the labyrinthine line of a logical argument:

Then it seemed like falling into a labyrinth: we thought we were at the finish, but our way bent round and we found ourselves as it were back at the beginning, and just as far from that which we were seeking at first ... Thus the present-day notion of a labyrinth as a place where one can lose [his] way must be set aside. It is a confusing path, hard to follow without a thread, but, provided [the traverser] is not devoured at the midpoint, it leads surely, despite twists and turns, back to the beginning

(Plato, 2014)

“A labyrinth is an ancient symbol of wholeness that combines the imagery of the circle and the spiral into a meandering but purposeful path” (Labyrinth 2014). It seems to fit the person in today’s consumer culture. For, as Putney writes of her choice of theme for her novel, *The Spiral Path* (2002) the title comes from a labyrinth that was part of the hero’s healing journey, as well a metaphor for the complexity of the characters’ lives and relationships. This complexity is non-hierarchical in a way that a ladder (see figure 4) simply is not. It provides the space to open the way to personal transformation as suggested in the movie “*Leaving Pleasantville*”.

8. Conclusions and areas for further research

There is a clear case of ongoing identity creation by these students and the co-option of brands themselves to form part of the self-identity. WOM has come of age as UGC! Power has shifted from firms as brand owners to the digitally empowered consumer - there was some evidence of using the sites to gain knowledge and then in some further filtering there were expressions of desire to subvert the consumerism inherent in communicating with brands over the Internet. Here the issue for firms is control, their loss of authority and therefore loss of degree of influence. The understanding gained of the motivations for creating and responding to UGC highlights a limitation to current practices owing to a failure to grasp the need to understand this cultural context of UGC production and reproduction. Our analysis presents evidence as to why young adult consumers create and respond to UGC; two puzzles, such as the trust in the authenticity of blogs and reviews that might have been infiltrated by management and the role of boredom even while traversing the labyrinth, could usefully be explored further.

Further work could usefully be done to see young adults as members of communities and so focus on networks (see Kozinets et al 2010), but one insight generated by this study is to question the heretofore assumed and researched centrality of communities in the context of individuals networking. We therefore conclude by proposing a further study of firm practices and motivations in response to this in-depth understanding of customers reworking resources and the connected decrease in firms'

direct influence over perceptions of their offerings. Particular opportunities for exploration by firms are present in the desire to avert boredom that is driving social media use – especially audio-visual site traffic. There are grounds here to build a further contribution to theory – to theory on consumer behavior, with evidence of post-hoc rationalizing of decisions being especially enabled by the use of blogs and reviews; there is a fertile soil for this research area here, reframing and reconceptualizing the consumer, to which this metaphor and these findings contribute a novel point of departure. Additionally there is the opportunity to reframe brand communities as resources for individual identity projects as first suggested by Arnould et al (2006) and affirmed and developed in the context of digital empowerment in this study.

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