

UGC Mode on Social Media

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ABSTRACT

This paper dives into the user-generated content and its influences on human life. UGC mode on social media is beneficial to interpersonal communication and information communication. It serves people to access each other and become more informative, satisfying people's needs on communication. However, UGC mode has limitations such as biased producers, information receivers lacking digital literacy, and information insecurity. This work discusses the pros and cons of user-generated content mode from communication and literacy perspectives and fills the gap of prior research.

Keywords: *User-generated Content, social media, Digital Literacy*

1.INTRODUCTION

The User-generated Content (UGC) mode of the social media is different from the traditional mainstream media, leading to different effects on interpersonal communication and information communication. This article will analyze the reasons for the popularity of UGC mode on social media platforms from the perspective of content and users and compare it with traditional media based on examples. First, users' needs are the driving force for the development of UGC. Social media platforms provide a channel for users to interact and help them build potential interpersonal relationships. Besides, people are busy with work and study; they can hardly spend a lot of time to read deeply. Social media platforms offer users the opportunity to cleverly use fragmented time to get information. Second, UGC's characteristics have significant advantages over traditional media platforms. More novel content, higher interactivity and more perspectives are all attractive to users.

In the modern media landscape, social media has become a global phenomenon. Social media have extended traditional method of gathering and sharing of information. The common thread across these platforms is that they contain user-generated content. Users can create their personal accounts and generate content in different forms. The ease with which information is posted and shared challenges the original connection between the media and users. Besides, the way

consumers receive news has changed just as quickly. In the past, mainstream media played a mediating role as gatekeepers [1]. People now read news and commentary via blogs and tweets, which supply and even replace most traditional mainstream media.

Many traditional mainstream media have established online information exchange platforms, such as BBC and People's Daily. However, official reports are sometimes biased because these media platforms are controlled by other organizations and companies. In contrast, personal accounts on social media, such as Twitter and Weibo, have a higher degree of freedom. Thus, social media platforms have become a popular channel for users to obtain information.

Meanwhile, UGC is a more flexible channel. Take video blog (vlog) as an example, UGC helps both bloggers and viewers to form para-social interaction (PSI). From a psychological point of view, a super-social relationship can be formed between vlog viewers and vloggers. Although vlogs are interacting based on the Internet, they are forming virtual communities. Para-social interaction (PSI) is defined as a relationship between spectator and performer, which is similar to face-to-face communication. One of the motivations of users who engaged in social media is their eagerness to participate in social interaction [2]. Therefore, the communication presented by the Internet may be connected to the user's social life because they are willing to establish a connection on the Internet in this way. As

the uses and gratification theory stated, users use media content as a tool to meet their needs [3]. Uses and gratifications theory assumes that media behaviours are purposive, goal-directed and motivated; besides, people select media content to satisfy their personal desires. Additionally, UGC promotes the exchange of content from different cultural backgrounds. The Internet affords its users an unprecedented level of contact with people from other cultural and social groups. It can facilitate intercultural communication and reduce the perceived distance between cultures. Intercultural communication has typically been defined as communication between individuals from different national cultures. Because of cultural variation, success or failure of intercultural communication depends on the extent to which each person understands the subjective culture of the other. UGC provides viewers with more perspectives, allowing them to understand an event or phenomenon more comprehensively.

2.SOCIAL MEDIA AND UGC MODE

2.1 People's access to information and connection to society on social media

The development of the mobile Internet has triggered changes in user consumption habits. The combined effect of the mobile Internet and the changes in user consumption habits has given birth to the further integration of new and old media. Social media has become the main media for information release. Compared with traditional media, social media, to a greater extent, includes information "shared by other known people." While browsing news and obtaining information, people also participate in secondary production and disseminating messages through online comments, sharing, and forwarding. We often visit social media platforms to seek personal or social connections and build an "acquaintance society" similar to reality. A Canadian study found that users spend twice as much attention to information forwarded or recommended by friends and family as news organizations. If they tend to share some links or comment on certain news frequently, this news will be seen by us with the labels of "like," "share," or "recommend," which is also the reason why some people often come into contact with news in social networks.

In the traditional media era, people's news environment relies on habitual consumption media channels — people watch specific news programs or buy familiar newspapers. In contrast, the news is more commonly seen in a social network environment due to casual contact or based on other people's recommendations known to the user. Moreover, if people lack trust in news on social media when they see the information is commented on or disseminated by friends, its credibility increases significantly. For young people,

the word they get through social media far exceeds their original desire to get information, and they may even discover something they haven't heard or didn't know before. The survey shows that among young Swedes, the proportion of daily news consumption on social media is more significant than that of professional news organizations, and it is evident that getting news is an essential content of people using social networks. Many young people say that they get information from social networks and even count on this content to keep them informed of current events.

The content of new media is more novel than that of traditional media. Because new media is not that official, we all use casual, humorous language to express ourselves. So every individual user can be a news disseminator. News often spread by eyewitnesses is faster than official media, and sometimes more content can be seen. The new media has changed the situation that the traditional mass media information release is strictly controlled, making the dissemination and circulation of information more freely. The Internet has formed a considerable amount of information sources through its powerful functions. In the context of new media, the main body of news communication has become the general public. Everyone can participate in news communication and become the publisher, editor, and receiver of news information.

In the information age, people are slowly getting used to getting fragmented information by searching, asking questions, communicating with each other, and gradually giving up reading long official articles and books traditionally. Instead, people are getting info through the Internet. This new way of disseminating information makes people fill up their leisure time with fragmented messages. New media has a fast iterative speed and low dissemination cost.

The era of rapid technological development has catered to people's demand for scattered leisure and entertainment time. The different allocation of people's leisure time can make people more purposeful, selective, and active; they can quickly get the information the author wants to express in the video or short paragraphs and then move on to the next one. In addition, a popular communication method in the new media era is video logs, in which people can express many things. Some people will take pictures of their own interesting daily life; some will post various tutorials, such as make-up, skincare, and cooking tutorials; some will shoot and interview celebrities, which highly satisfy the public's entertainment psychology; in addition, people also record some strange or unexpected things that happen in life are posted on various platforms and discussed with the public. In a way, these reflect the "interconnection" of the Internet, and the public is interacting, bringing people's lives closer and making "the world smaller and smaller."

2.2 Interactivity of UGC mode

Besides promoting interpersonal communication, UGC mode allows people to communicate and deeply engage with information to enhance the interconnectedness of our informative world. Interaction is the key to information communication [4]. Nevertheless, in the past, information communication relies on mainstream media which releases content physically or on official websites which are not highly interactive. However, in recent years, digital technology changes the mode of information communication by allowing users to interact with the information they receive, which significantly promotes information communication. Furthermore, UGC becomes the mainstream mode used by social media. It enhances information communication to allow users to exchange their ideas effectively and efficiently with minor biases.

For instance, everyone can comment on any video posted on Youtube and see comments from others. If people cannot comment and the content is released without interaction, the audience would probably have no opportunities to share their minds and even be misled by the content, which might be biased or fake somehow. In October 2019, CNN interviewed a Chinese merchant who runs a business selling Hanfu, which is a kind of traditional Chinese clothes. The interviewee thought that CNN intends to pay attention to traditional Chinese culture, so they shared their thoughts about preserving Hanfu culture. However, CNN twists the truth, reported that the Hanfu culture and its retro were deliberately politicised, representing ethnic antagonism and social contradictions in China. The report was posted to deliberately misled the audience on learning about Chinese culture and society. Also, CNN used its official website to post the news, leaving no chances for people to comment. If people know the truth and comments, they can learn about Chinese culture in a critical way rather than trust what they read on the news.

In contrast, user-generated contents are highly interactive so that people can freely comment and share ideas. A famous American Youtuber called Jerry Kowal makes videos about life in America and shares his videos on Bilibili, which is one of China's most dominant video platforms. He introduces his life in America from different aspects, interviews American people to share their comments on trending events, and compares life in China and America. His videos are highly interactive because he generates information from people in a different culture and encourages people to participate in cultural discussions. Moreover, his videos always have millions of comments from users over the globe. Thus, people can interact with the information they get from videos and the comments from others. Even if they think the content is biased or twist the truth, they can immediately discuss with others.

2.3 Users are both producers and receivers

More importantly, UGC break information communication barriers, which were formerly restrained by power and privilege. As Prof. Srinivasan states, technology helps communities build up connectivity with each other to empower shared economics and political and cultural objectives [5]. With the development of technology, social media platforms connect communities all around the globe and offer users diverse channels to produce their content. This result contributes a lot to information communication to a large extent. For example, before social media becomes popular, mainstream media such as Renmin Newspaper, BBC and CNN are information channels that produce content and diffuse information unilaterally to the public. Also, these mainstream media are mainly controlled by governments or parties. So, those mainstream media play the role of speaker of official parties, and they have managed the information communication for a long time. However, nowadays, information communication can be promoted by the grassroots. Everyone can actively involve in information communication as a producer and a receiver.

In addition, the bias can be corrected by the user-generated content to a certain degree. As the mainstream media has their political tendency and always uses the information to diffuse values and ideas intentionally, people can hardly receive information in a multiple-dimensional way and even get exaggerated information that is wrong and not rational. Nevertheless, UGC is more over-rounded and more helpful to information communication as the content producers are social media users worldwide. They can upload any content they want to share, and they can receive diverse content to generate new ideas about the culture. Although users might have their own bias somehow, people can receive diverse information to think, present and question. Take some Youtube influencers such as Li Ziqi as an example. Li Ziqi is a new figure of Chinese traditional culture that has more than 14 million subscribers on Youtube. Li shares the videos about creative hand-made Chinese foods and handicrafts on her social media. Her videos successfully advertise Chinese culture in a charming way that surprises western audiences and allows western people to know Chinese culture from a new perspective.

Therefore, because users are both producers and receivers, UGC mode is crucial to information communication as people can exchange ideas more effectively than before.

3.THE PROBLEMS BEHIND THE RAPID DEVELOPMENT OF UGC MODE

According to the previous content, it is evident that UGC mode is an efficient way to release and publish information. However, its limitations are inevitable.

3.1 Producers with preferences

First, the users of UGC are not professors and experts in specific areas, so the information produced might not always be correct and unbiased, leading to misinformation. Take Li Ziqi, a well-known ambassador of Chinese traditional culture, as an example. In the video, she uses two ingenious techniques to present everything in aesthetics and coziness. First is using seasonal foods to inform the audience that plant vegetables and cook own food is convenient since all the ingredients are available and easy to pick. The second is applying time-lapse photography to set up the "life of something" series. Through the time-lapse photography, the audience can feel the sense of passing and see the growth of the crops, arousing their sense of accomplishment of "remotely raising vegetables". However, farming is a long and iterative process as most crops have their growth cycle. In the lengthy cycle, farmers need to repeat watering, fertilizing, weeding, and other steps every day, none of which is simple and easy. Li Ziqi chooses to focus on aesthetics and cuts out the farming step is to satisfy her audience, most of whom are the middle-class with some aesthetic interest, for higher views and subscriptions. These office workers suffering from the "9 to 5(work from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.)" or even "996(work from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. for six times a week)" life (Sang and Tao "Research on the Profit Model of Li Ziqi IP Operation") need the poetic style of life in Li Ziqi's short videos as a placebo and a nostalgic imagination to heal themselves and an attempt to escape from the pressure. But the tranquility and coziness are not the real Chinese countryside in the early 21st century. Today's rural China is facing some crucial and consequential challenges that need attention from the outside world: the erosion of traditional rural life led by rapid urbanization development; the shortage of rural laborers, and the physical and mental health of the left-behind children, due to the influx of rural people working in the big cities. As Prof. Srinivasan questions in *Beyond the Valley*, "How are we to discern fact from fiction, and reality from imagination, within a world of information overload, surrounded by immersive technology?" [6]. The prettified country life in Li Ziqi's video has unintentionally created misinformation due to the information gap between rural and urban areas; therefore, the middle class ignored the real problems in rural China. If people keep indulging in and believing in the surreal, romanticized, idyllic life performing by Li Ziqi, it might have irreversible consequences.

3.2 Receivers lacking digital literacy

Second, the credibility of the UGC is challenged since anyone can post anything. Hence, it requires the information receivers with high digital literacy, or they will receive the disinformation. In China, recently, a short video about northern Myanmar hit 2.73 billion views on Tiktok.

The original idea of the short video comes from a book describing an old-fashioned but romantic story that the heroine was rescued by the handsome warlord in Northern Myanmar when facing life-threatening danger. Then, many immature girls have faith in this video and regard northern Myanmar as a romantic city like Paris; and the young boys decide to devote themselves to become superheroes like the warlords in northern Myanmar. Does northern Myanmar where romantic stories happen, and superheroes save the world? The following pictures show authentic north Myanmar.



Figure 1 The lines mean, "Your Royal Highness, welcome to my world--northern Myanmar where I grow up."



Figure 2 Faunce 'Economic collapse amid escalating conflict': is Myanmar becoming a failed state?



Figure 3 A Distortion of Reality: Drugs, Conflict and the UNODC's 2018 Myanmar Opium Survey



Figure 4 Myanmar: Facebook promotes content urging violence against coup protesters – study

Wars, drugs, violence are everywhere without the control of regulations. In February 2021, the president of Myanmar was just arrested by the military ("Aung San Suu Kyi aide arrested as Myanmar military seeks to quash unrest"). How could the country where the president can be easily arrested be romantic? The age, education levels, and digital literacy vary among the users of UGC. Thus, some people have deep faith in the authenticity of UGC, even though the values conveyed are wrong. If such videos continue to be widely spread, the morals of the people will be sharply increasingly looser. Some comments with misleading values and mindsets are shown below.

China is not the only country suffering from disinformation and fake news. In April 2020, "the COVID-19 is spread by 5G" was posted on social media [7]. Indeed, the COVID-19 was first widely spread in China, and it was evident that Huawei from China leads the 5G techniques, but there is no connection between them. Such ridiculous disinformation is widely spread. Many users of UGC believed in and took actions like burning many 5G towers in the UK. This disinformation is the best evidence that digital literacy has not been thoroughly improved, and people take too much stock in UGC. Suppose the UGC mode continues to develop without regulations on content, and the improvement of popularization of digital literacy is still far away. In that case, people will be shocked by the massive amount of real and fake information on UGC, thus losing critical thinking ability and will be easily led by others, which will cause profound social impact.

3.3 Feeling of insecurity

Besides, the UGC mode might make everyone feel insecure. UGC makes users' privacy more accessible, leading to personal information leakage, further resulting in cyberbullying. In August 2018, there was a cyberbullying case in China [8]. Dr. An and her husband were blamed for hitting children because they believe two 13-year-old boys sexually harassed Dr. An. The next day, the boys' families posted the video on social media. And the video and Dr. An's personal information were

spread everywhere very soon. Accordingly, the female doctor was overwhelmed with cyberbullying and chose to commit suicide. After the news came out, the public opinion changes their target to the boys' families. From this, we can see that the information receivers on social media do not know what exactly happened, showing their lack of digital literacy and critical thinking and how personal information leakage hurt. Whether they are ordinary people or celebrities, they will find threats from information leakage on social media. At the same time, analytics, algorithms, and platform operators often refuse to take responsibility for the content they disseminate, allowing vandals to distort democracy.

All in all, rumor-mongering, lack of regulators, and higher demands on audiences' digital literacy are currently facing UGC problems. Meanwhile, rumors, fake news, or biased news led by misinformation or disinformation are extremely low-cost behavior. Everyone can become a victim in such a society, which may breed cyberbullying and challenge individual rights and social order.

4. CONCLUSIONS

UGC mode on social media is beneficial to interpersonal communication and information communication. It serves people to access each other and become more informative, satisfying people's needs on communication more effectively and efficiently than traditional mainstream media. Nevertheless, UGC mode is applied by people over the globe on social media to produce and receive information, so limitations such as biased producers, information receivers lacking digital literacy, and information insecurity are inevitable. These limitations are also the challenges we face when using digital technology and are worth in-depth discussion and further study.

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