

## **The Impact of User-Generated Content Quality on Brand Engagement in Restaurants: The Mediating Role of Functional and Emotional Value with a Focus on Gen Z in Sri Lanka's Western Province**

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This study explores the impact of user-generated content (UGC) quality on brand engagement within the restaurant industry, specifically focusing on Generation Z consumers in Sri Lanka's Western Province. It examines how key dimensions of UGC—content quality, design quality, and technological quality—enhance its perceived functional and emotional value, which in turn mediates the relationship between UGC quality and brand engagement. Grounded in the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) model, this research addresses a critical gap in the literature regarding the multidimensional attributes of UGC quality and their role in fostering brand engagement, particularly in emerging markets. The findings aim to offer practical insights for marketers seeking to leverage UGC as a strategic tool to build deeper connections with the digitally driven Gen Z demographic.

A quantitative methodology was employed to analyze the relationships between UGC quality, functional and emotional value, and brand engagement. Data were collected from 294 respondents through an online survey targeting individuals born between 1997 and 2012, residing in the Colombo, Gampaha, and Kalutara districts of Sri Lanka's Western Province. The survey utilized a structured questionnaire with a 5-point Likert scale to assess key constructs, including content quality, design quality, technological quality, functional value, emotional value, and brand engagement. Statistical analysis was conducted using SPSS to test hypotheses and validate the conceptual framework, with mediation effects examined through advanced statistical techniques.

The results indicate that UGC content quality and technological quality significantly influence brand engagement, with emotional value playing a crucial role in strengthening consumer connections. Functional value enhances practical utility, aiding in decision-making processes. High-quality UGC—characterized by visually appealing imagery, authentic reviews, and seamless technological integration—positively impacts both emotional and functional value, leading to increased brand engagement. However, while UGC design quality contributes to emotional value, it does not significantly affect functional value, highlighting a disparity between aesthetic appeal and practical utility. Emotional and functional value both serve as strong mediators in the relationship between UGC quality and brand engagement, reinforcing the need for engaging, useful, and emotionally resonant UGC to drive consumer loyalty. Despite its valuable insights, this study has certain limitations that may affect the generalizability of its findings. Geographically, it is confined to Sri Lanka's Western Province, restricting its applicability to other regions with different cultural and economic landscapes. Additionally, its exclusive focus on Generation Z may not reflect the engagement behaviors of other demographics, such as Millennials or Baby Boomers, who interact with UGC differently. The study primarily examines social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok, overlooking broader UGC dynamics across other digital channels. Moreover, the cross-sectional design captures a single moment in time, limiting insights into evolving consumer behaviors. The reliance on self-reported data also introduces potential biases, including social desirability effects and recall inaccuracies. The study provides strategic recommendations for maximizing the impact of high-quality UGC to enhance brand engagement among Gen Z consumers in Sri Lanka's restaurant industry. Restaurants should focus on curating visually appealing, authentic, and easily shareable UGC to establish strong emotional and functional connections with customers. Personalization, driven by customer data, along with an emphasis on storytelling and authenticity, can further deepen consumer engagement. Investing in seamless digital platforms and collaborating with influencers can amplify the reach and impact of UGC. Establishing feedback loops and ensuring brand consistency across all touchpoints will further reinforce both functional and emotional value, fostering long-term consumer loyalty and stronger brand engagement.

**Keywords:** *Brand Engagement, Emotional Value, Functional Value, Generation Z, User-Generated Content (UGC)*