A Study on the Evolution of Consumer Digital Behavior from User-Generated Content to Co-Creation

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Abstract: This study aims to explore the evolution process and driving mechanisms of consumer digital behavior from user-generated content (UGC) to co-creation, addressing the research need to understand the continuously changing roles of consumers in the digital era. Using systematic literature review and theoretical analysis, the study integrates research findings on UGC, consumer participation, and value co-creation to construct a multidimensional framework for the evolution of consumer digital behavior. The results indicate that this behavioral evolution is jointly driven by three dimensions: psychological motivation, technological conditions, and corporate strategies. Individual expressive desires and identity needs provide intrinsic motivation, digital technologies lower participation thresholds and enhance immersive experiences, and enterprises guide consumers into deeper co-creation stages through community building and open innovation strategies. The findings suggest that the transformation of consumers from information producers to value co-creators is a gradual and path-dependent dynamic process. Theoretically, this study enriches research on consumer behavior and value co-creation in the context of digital marketing, and practically, it provides references for enterprises to formulate future-oriented digital marketing strategies and cultivate brand co-creation ecosystems.

Keywords: Consumer Digital Behavior; User-generated Content; Value Co-Creation; Psychological Motivation; Digital Marketing

1. Introduction

With the rapid development of the digital economy and social media, consumer behavior patterns in online environments are undergoing profound and continuous changes. User-generated content (UGC), as a typical form of consumer participation, has long dominated research and practice in digital marketing. Through UGC, consumers can proactively share experiences, post reviews, and influence others' decisions on social platforms, thereby facilitating the spread of online word-of-mouth and shaping brand image [1]. However, as digital platforms become more sophisticated and interactive technologies advance, consumer roles are gradually moving beyond the singular identity of "content producers" toward a more diverse and in-depth process of value co-creation [2]. This transformation is not only reflected in collaborative content production but also in consumers' full participation with enterprises in product design, innovation ideation, and marketing communication, forming a dynamic, interactive, and bidirectional value ecosystem.

The shift from UGC to co-creation presents new challenges and opportunities for marketing theory. Traditional value creation models are largely enterprise-centric, treating consumers as value recipients and feedback providers [3]. Today, however, consumers are directly embedded into value creation networks through digital tools, becoming co-authors of brand narratives and collaborators in product innovation. Increasing levels of consumer participation not only alter the logic of enterprise-consumer interaction but also reshape market competition and business models. For academia, this phenomenon calls for new theoretical frameworks to explain the driving mechanisms, evolutionary paths, and managerial implications of consumer behavior.

Based on this, the present study focuses on the evolution of consumer digital behavior from UGC to co-creation and attempts a systematic analysis from a multidisciplinary theoretical perspective. First, it reviews existing core concepts and research findings on UGC, consumer participation, and co-creation, summarizing the key characteristics and stages of consumer behavior evolution. Second, integrating value co-creation theory, participation motivation theory, and network collaboration theory, it explores the driving factors of this evolution and their mechanisms. Finally, the study proposes a forward-looking theoretical framework, providing guidance for enterprises in formulating more proactive digital marketing strategies and offering new perspectives for academic research on consumer behavior. Through this study, we aim to deepen the understanding of consumer digital behavior evolution and promote the integration of theory and practice.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Research Progress on User-Generated Content

User-generated content (UGC) refers to content autonomously created and published by consumers on online platforms, including text, images, videos, reviews, and live streams. It represents an early and significant form of consumer participation in the digital marketing era [4]. The rise of UGC is closely associated with the proliferation of social media, short-video platforms, and mobile internet, which break the traditional one-way information dissemination model and allow consumers to directly influence public perceptions and brand reputation. Research indicates that UGC not only conveys authentic consumer experiences but also significantly enhances brand credibility, reduces perceived risks for potential consumers, and thereby influences purchase intentions and loyalty [5].

In marketing practice, enterprises widely leverage UGC as an essential component of promotional strategies, encouraging consumers to share, like, and comment, generating self-sustaining network effects [6]. However, most studies focus on the dissemination, emotional value, and commercial value of UGC, paying insufficient attention to how UGC serves as a starting point for consumer behavior evolution and how it promotes deeper levels of participation. Therefore, it is necessary to examine UGC from the perspective of dynamic consumer behavior evolution and explore its relationship with higher-level forms of participation.

2.2 The Multidimensional Theoretical Basis of Consumer Participation

Consumer participation is one of the core theories for understanding UGC and its evolution. Early studies often regarded consumer participation as a psychological state, emphasizing its role in promoting information processing and brand cognition [7]. With further research, consumer participation has gradually been conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects: cognitive participation reflects active attention to and deep thinking about brand information; emotional participation reflects consumers' emotional connection and value recognition toward brands; behavioral participation is manifested through concrete actions such as commenting, sharing, content creation, and participating in brand activities [8].

Advances in digital technology have enabled consumers to participate in brand interactions at low cost and high frequency. The levels of participation have progressively increased, moving from passive reception of enterprise information to active UGC creation, and further to deep involvement in product co-creation and community building, forming a stepwise participation path. This path illustrates the evolution trend of consumer participation and provides a theoretical foundation for explaining the transition from UGC to co-creation.

2.3 Co-Creation and Its Applications in Marketing

The concept of co-creation originates from value co-creation theory, emphasizing the process in which enterprises and consumers interact to jointly create value [9]. The development of digital platforms has enabled this interaction to transcend temporal and spatial constraints, allowing consumers to participate in various brand processes in real time. Co-creation takes diverse forms, including assisting in product design, proposing innovative ideas, participating in brand storytelling, and jointly managing online communities [10].

The core characteristics of co-creation are collaboration and reciprocity. Consumers not only contribute ideas and information but can also directly influence enterprise decisions, thereby enhancing their sense of psychological ownership over the brand. Studies show that consumers who engage in co-creation often exhibit higher brand loyalty and recommendation intentions, while enterprises gain innovation solutions closer to market needs and stronger competitive advantages [11]. Compared with UGC, co-creation emphasizes bidirectional collaboration and long-term relationships. It represents a deeper form of consumer participation and an important pathway for enterprises to maximize customer value [12].

2.4 Review and Research Gaps

Existing studies have extensively explored the characteristics of UGC, consumer participation motivations, and the effects of co-creation, yet several gaps remain. First, research often examines UGC, participation, and co-creation as independent variables, lacking a systematic review of their intrinsic relationships, particularly the dynamic evolutionary mechanism from UGC to co-creation. Second, most studies focus on empirically testing the impact of individual factors, with limited attempts to integrate multidimensional theories into a comprehensive analytical framework, making it difficult to reveal the overall picture of consumer behavior evolution. Third, in the context of continuously evolving digital platforms and algorithms, consumer participation behavior shows more complex and diverse characteristics, challenging the explanatory power of existing theoretical models. Finally, from a practical perspective, enterprises often lack systematic theoretical guidance when promoting the evolution from UGC to co-creation, relying instead on experience and short-term strategies, which leads to inefficient resource allocation and underutilized value creation potential.

Therefore, it is necessary to integrate existing research through theoretical analysis and propose a systematic framework that can explain the evolution of consumer digital behavior, providing guidance for future research and enterprise marketing practice.

3. Theoretical Analysis

3.1 Driving Factors of Consumer Digital Behavior Evolution

The evolution of consumer digital behavior from UGC to co-creation is the result of multi-level, multi-factor interactions. At the individual level, psychological motivations are crucial initiators of behavior evolution. Cognitive needs drive consumers to actively access and learn new information, while expressive desires and self-presentation needs motivate them to share opinions and display individuality. Social belonging and identity needs push consumers to seek peer interaction and social support, and self-actualization and value pursuit encourage consumers to invest more resources in brand co-creation. When consumers receive positive feedback in UGC creation, such as likes, shares, comments, and increased follower counts, their psychological satisfaction and self-efficacy are enhanced, further motivating them to engage in deeper participatory behaviors and ultimately evolve toward co-creation.

At the technological level, advancements in digital platforms reduce participation barriers. Social media and short-video platforms provide low-cost, user-friendly creation tools, enabling consumers to quickly produce and publish content. Artificial intelligence recommendation algorithms and personalized content delivery improve content matching efficiency, enhancing user immersion and platform stickiness. Additionally, platform incentive mechanisms, such as points, virtual honors, rankings, and fan rewards, strengthen consumers' willingness for sustained content creation, facilitating the transition from occasional UGC production to regular, frequent interaction and collaboration.

At the enterprise level, brand strategy, interaction patterns, and value propositions directly affect whether consumers are willing to enter the co-creation stage. By offering open innovation platforms, co-creation competitions, user testing programs, and community operations, enterprises provide diverse participation opportunities and creative stages, enhancing consumers' value recognition and psychological ownership. The more open, transparent, and user-centered the brand culture, the more willing consumers are to participate in co-creation, even actively taking on the roles of brand advocates and innovation drivers. Timely responses to consumer feedback and positive reinforcement are also key, effectively strengthening trust and cooperative intentions.

In summary, the synergistic effects of psychological motivation, technological conditions, and enterprise strategies collectively drive consumers from one-way UGC creators to active co-creation collaborators. This multidimensional driving mechanism provides a solid foundation for constructing dynamic evolution models in subsequent research.

3.2 Evolutionary Path from UGC to Co-Creation

Brand personalization affects consumer the evolution of consumer digital behavior exhibits stage-based and progressive characteristics, which can be summarized into three main stages. The first stage is the information participation stage, in which consumers are mainly in an observational and exploratory state, engaging in low-cost behaviors such as browsing brand content, liking, sharing, and posting brief comments. At this stage, the psychological threshold for participation is low, primarily satisfying curiosity and information needs.

The second stage is the content creation stage, where consumer behavior shifts from passive reception to active output. Consumers begin producing UGC, such as writing product reviews, posting short videos, creating unboxing or experience videos, and producing image-text shares. The key feature of this stage is a significant increase in consumer engagement, with content exerting greater influence on other consumers and the brand. UGC not only drives brand word-of-mouth but also helps brands collect user needs and pain points, laying the foundation for subsequent co-creation.

The third stage is the collaborative co-creation stage, in which consumers further deepen their participation in the brand value creation process. They not only continue producing UGC but actively engage in product design, idea solicitation, brand storytelling, and community operations, collaborating with enterprises to develop innovation plans or participate in new product testing. The distinctive feature of this stage is the formation of bidirectional or even multidirectional interactions between consumers and enterprises, where value creation is collaboratively generated. Consumers gain a sense of psychological ownership and participatory achievement, while enterprises obtain precise user insights and innovative momentum.

It is important to note that the transition from UGC to co-creation is not a one-time process; rather, it gradually deepens through continuous interaction, feedback, and psychological reinforcement. Individual differences, platform characteristics, and enterprise strategies all affect the speed and path of evolution. For example, consumers with high innovation orientation and digital literacy are more likely to rapidly enter the co-creation stage, whereas enterprises lacking incentive mechanisms or interactive designs may cause consumers to remain in the UGC stage or experience participation fatigue and attrition.

3.3 Managerial Implications and Theoretical Value

From a theoretical perspective, the study of consumer digital behavior evolution enriches the connotation of consumer participation theory and extends the application scope of value co-creation theory. Traditional research often treats participation as a static variable, while this study emphasizes its dynamic evolution process and proposes a continuous path model from UGC to co-creation, better explaining the psychological mechanisms and behavioral patterns behind deeper consumer engagement.

From a practical perspective, this research provides important implications for enterprise digital marketing management. First, companies should reduce participation barriers through technology and content optimization to encourage consumers to enter the UGC creation stage. This can be achieved by providing convenient creation tools and designing user-friendly participation processes to reduce cognitive load. Second, enterprises need to establish multidimensional incentive systems, including material rewards, honor recognition, and social exposure opportunities, to continuously strengthen consumers' participation motivation and promote their evolution toward co-creation. Finally, enterprises should build open, transparent, and inclusive brand communities, making consumers feel that their opinions are valued and adopted, thereby enhancing psychological ownership and enabling long-term, stable value co-creation relationships.

Through such strategies, enterprises can not only harvest abundant consumer-generated ideas and feedback but also improve user retention and brand loyalty, forming a virtuous cycle and ultimately constructing a consumer-centered digital marketing ecosystem.

Theoretically, this study provides a solid framework for future empirical research to validate driving factors and path relationships, offering a new research direction for understanding the evolution of consumer behavior in the digital age.

4. Conclusion

This study focuses on the evolution of consumer digital behavior from UGC to co-creation, systematically reviewing and theoretically analyzing changes in consumer roles in the digital marketing environment. The research first clarified the conceptual definitions of UGC, consumer participation, and co-creation, as well as their interrelationships, emphasizing the continuity and multi-stage characteristics of consumer behavior evolution. Based on this, a theoretical analysis framework for consumer digital behavior evolution was constructed, examining the internal logic driving behavioral transformation across three dimensions: psychological motivation, technological conditions, and enterprise strategies.

The study finds that individual expressive desires, identity needs, and achievement motivations are the fundamental forces driving UGC production. The proliferation of digital technologies, such as social media, interactive platforms, and artificial intelligence, lowers participation thresholds and enhances immersion, while enterprises guide consumers through community building, open innovation, and brand value alignment, providing continuous incentives and mechanisms for participation and co-creation. These three dimensions together constitute the driving system for the evolution of consumer behavior from UGC to co-creation.

Theoretically, this study proposes a dynamic evolution framework that integrates UGC, consumer participation, and value co-creation into a developmental process, revealing the pathway of consumer transformation from information producers to value co-creators. This framework not only addresses the limitations of traditional consumer behavior research in adapting to digital-era contexts but also expands the applicability of value co-creation theory, providing scholars with a new analytical perspective for studying shifts in consumer roles within digital marketing. The research also emphasizes the gradual and path-dependent nature of this evolution, highlighting the differences and complementarities of behavioral drivers across stages, thereby enriching the understanding of consumer behavior mechanisms in digital marketing.

Practically, this study offers guidance for optimizing enterprise digital marketing and brand management. During the UGC stage, enterprises should attract consumers to actively express themselves through topic guidance, reward mechanisms, and platform support. In the consumer participation stage, interaction quality should be further enhanced, and multidimensional feedback systems established. In the co-creation stage, enterprises need to construct open collaborative platforms and innovation mechanisms, enabling consumers to transform from passive value recipients into co-creators of value, thereby increasing brand stickiness and consumer loyalty, and fostering a sustainable brand co-creation ecosystem.

Future research can further integrate empirical data to quantitatively validate the proposed evolutionary path and key driving factors, examining differences across cultures, industries, and platform scenarios. Additionally, subsequent studies may introduce variables such as emotional factors, social influence, and algorithmic recommendation mechanisms to explore their moderating effects in the behavior evolution process. With emerging technologies such as virtual reality and generative AI, interactions between consumers and brands will become more immersive and intelligent, presenting new challenges for consumer behavior research and offering fresh opportunities for academic exploration.

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