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Pavlina Katiaj, Anastasios Koukopoulos, Timoleon Farmakis, Katerina Fraidaki

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Pavlina Katiaj, Koukopoulos Anastasios, Farmakis Timoleon and Katerina Fraidaki,

Katiaj P., *The E-Business Research Center, Department of Management Science and Technology, School of Business, Athens University of Economics and Business, Email: pavlinakat@aueb.gr*

Koukopoulos A., *The E-Business Research Center, Department of Management Science and Technology, School of Business, Athens University of Economics and Business, Email: akoukop@aueb.gr*

Farmakis T., *The E-Business Research Center, Department of Management Science and Technology, School of Business, Athens University of Economics and Business, Email: t.farmakis@acein.aueb.gr*

Fraidaki K., *The E-Business Research Center, Department of Management Science and Technology, School of Business, Athens University of Economics and Business, Email: fraidaki@aueb.gr*

Abstract

Digital marketing campaigns in social media stand as a valuable tool for businesses to achieve performance and sales objectives in the digital era. In this context, video content is one of the most popular and crucial types of content for engagement on platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. Despite this, traditional advertisements often fail to capture user attention, leading to low returns on investment. This study introduces "Directed Consumer-Generated Content" (DCGC), which combines the authenticity of user-generated content with the structure of professional advertising. Through qualitative interviews with experts from an innovative marketing agency and quantitative performance data from the actual campaigns, this research provides insights into the process that the agencies follow to create DCGC as well as the performance of the campaigns, focusing on key performance metrics such as return on advertising spend across Meta and TikTok. The findings offer valuable insights for digital marketers, content strategists and researchers, highlighting DCGC's potential to improve the performance of business marketing activities, achieving audience expectations.

Keywords: *Digital Marketing, Social Media, Performance Marketing , Marketing Strategy, Directed Consumer Generated Content*

Introduction

The digital marketing landscape, including marketing communication, has evolved significantly due to the emergence of new technologies (Koukopoulos & Vrechopoulos, 2020). Social media offers various business benefits, particularly for small businesses (Doukidis et al., 2024). Social media has positioned video content as a pivotal element of effective marketing strategies. Studies have shown that video content on social media tends to receive higher engagement rates than other forms of content (Escobar-Rodríguez & Bonsón-Fernández, 2017). Furthermore, platforms like Facebook, Instagram and TikTok have developed as critical arenas for digital advertising, with TikTok reporting over a billion active users and Facebook maintaining its status with over 2.8 billion (Hellemans et al., 2021). Incorporating video content into these platforms taps into user engagement, leveraging the algorithms favouring video playback and sharing (Klug et al., 2021). Despite the growing integration of video content in marketing strategies, engaging audiences effectively remains a challenge for digital marketers. Traditional advertisements often fail to capture user attention or generate meaningful interaction (Kim et al., 2015).

As a result, companies that invest in social media marketing do not always see high returns on investments (Korgaonkar et al., 2024). To this end, innovative digital marketing agencies are implementing a new strategy to assist companies in boosting their marketing strategies and leveraging user-created video content while adhering to certain directions. This type of content is relevant to established terms in marketing literature, specifically "Consumer Generated Content" (CGC), yet it possesses distinct characteristics. This highlights a literature gap for a new term, the lack of descriptions regarding the process followed by marketing agencies to implement this type of content, and empirical evidence of its performance.

Building upon the points mentioned above, this research seeks to address this gap by analyzing qualitative data obtained from interviews with practitioner experts at a digital marketing agency that employs this strategy alongside quantitative data derived from the performance of professional advertisements. This study extrapolates the CGC term, introducing a new concept called "Directed Consumer-Generated Content". Directed Consumer-Created Content is videos crafted based on specific briefs yet retaining a consumer's

authenticity. These videos aim to bridge the gap between professional advertising and user-generated authenticity, potentially enhancing viewer engagement (Lever & Elliot, 2022). Secondly, the study provides empirical evidence and insights into marketing agencies' processes. Finally, it evaluates the performance of DCGC, focusing on metrics such as engagement, reach, and return on advertising spend (ROAS) across different social media platforms, focusing on Meta and TikTok. Understanding the impact of DCGC is crucial for digital marketers and content strategists. The findings provide insights into the processes and effectiveness of DCGC, informing digital marketing strategies and optimizing campaign designs better to meet the expectations and interests of the target audience.

Theoretical Background

Social Media Platforms

Social media can help companies improve how they generate value by reaching new customers, engaging with them, and offering innovative payment options (Farmakis et al., 2024). Meta (Facebook, Instagram) and TikTok have emerged as influential platforms in marketing strategies, each playing a distinct role in shaping how businesses achieve a return on advertising spend (ROAS) (DeVries et al., 2020). Meta's broad demographic reach and detailed targeting options allow marketers to craft customised, fine-tuned campaigns for maximum engagement and conversion rates (Hodis et al., 2015). This platform's ability to integrate detailed consumer data into campaign planning makes it particularly effective for achieving high ROAS in diverse markets (Stephen & Galak, 2012). In an era where artificial intelligence stands as a promising tool for leveraging sales and personal selling (Koukopoulos et al., 2024), social media platforms like Meta and TikTok are increasingly integrating AI-driven analytics and automation. These advancements optimize campaign performance, enhance customer interactions, and deliver personalized content at scale, further driving measurable business outcomes

TikTok, by contrast, taps into the power of short-form video content to engage users, particularly the younger generations, who prefer quick, entertaining, and visually engaging content (De Veirman et al., 2017). The platform's algorithm favours creativity and originality, often rewarding content that can go viral with minimal expenditure (Chu et al., 2024). This virality factor significantly reduces the cost per acquisition and can dramatically increase ROAS when leveraged effectively (De Bruyn & Lilien, 2008). Moreover, TikTok's interactive features, such as challenges and duets, provide unique opportunities for brands to engage with audiences directly and personally, further enhancing the effectiveness of advertising campaigns (O'Toole, 2023).

Video as an enabler for social media

The effectiveness of video content in digital marketing has been extensively studied, with research consistently highlighting its superiority over other content forms in terms of engagement and conversion rates (Dobele et al., 2007). Videos have been found to increase users time on a site and significantly improve the likelihood of purchase when included on product pages (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Additionally, video content enhances the clarity of product information and can effectively convey a brand's story, influencing consumer perceptions and buying decisions (Gupta & Harris, 2010). Storytelling is one of the most essential elements for driving user engagement on social media (Katiaj et al., 2024). An analysis by Southgate et al. (2010) indicates that videos are more likely to be shared across social networks than text and images, increasing brand visibility and user interaction. This virality potential is crucial for organic marketing strategies, as it extends the content's reach without proportional increases in spending (Dolan et al., 2016). Moreover, the emotional impact of video content has been shown to strengthen customer-brand relationships, leading to higher customer retention rates (Chang & Zhu, 2011).

Despite these advantages, the cost and resources required to produce high-quality video content can be significant, which may pose challenges for smaller brands (Bilgin, 2018). However, when executed properly, the return on investment for video marketing often justifies the initial expenditures (Hu et al., 2007).

Introducing the term Directed Consumer Generated Content" (DCGC)

CGC refers to content created voluntarily by consumers without specific directives from brands (Kozinets et al., 2010). Smith et al. (2012) define CGC as content created and shared by consumers or end-users without professional influence or direct brand input. CGC can vary widely in quality and relevance to a brand's messaging, but its spontaneous nature often yields high levels of trust and engagement from audiences,

particularly on social media platforms (Colicev et al., 2018). CGC's authenticity is frequently cited as a key factor in influencing other consumers more effectively than traditional marketing communications (Qing et al., 2024). However, the emerging trend where brands actively guide customers to create content through specific guidelines necessitates a more precise term. This type of content, which lies at the intersection of authentic consumer creation and brand influence, requires distinct recognition to be accurately studied and leveraged in marketing strategies.

"Directed Consumer Generated Content" (DCGC) is proposed to describe this type of content. While DCGC is crafted to meet specific strategic goals and often mimics CGC's authenticity, it also gives brands greater control over messaging and coherence with broader marketing campaigns. DCGC involves specific guidance regarding the content's style, tone, and message, which consumers integrate with their personal insights and creativity to produce content that aligns with brand goals. For instance, when a consumer follows a brand's brief to create a video testimonial, the content should be considered DCGC due to the brand's directional influence. Understanding DCGC will allow marketers and researchers to analyze better the impacts of consumer content that is not entirely spontaneous.

Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods research design. Qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews with two digital marketing experts at the 'Viral Passion' agency as it is depicted in Table 1.

Table 1. Experts from marketing agencies who have been interviewed

Practitioner	Role	Year in Agency
P1	Founder and CEO	10
P2	Partner and Account manager	7

These participants were selected based on their direct involvement with the campaigns in question, providing insights into the strategic and operational decisions behind the use of consumer-generated content. These interviews are designed to explore deeper insights into the strategic choices, content creation processes, and challenges faced during the campaigns. Content analysis was used to code and categorize the interview data, facilitating the identification of recurring themes and patterns (Forman & Damschroder, 2007). Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy in data analysis. The qualitative analysis involved coding the transcripts using both a priori codes, based on the literature, and emergent codes, which reflect new themes arising from the data (Ezzy, 2013). Particularly, the "Taguette" open-source software (Rampin & Rampin, 2021) was utilized for systematically tagging and categorising quantitative data. The software facilitated transparent and replicable data handling, providing a streamlined workflow for tagging, indexing, and later retrieving specific data segments. The quantitative analysis examined advertising performance metrics such as click-through rates (CTR), cost per click (CPC), impressions, reach, ROAS, and frequency of consumer-generated videos from Meta and TikTok. These metrics are critical for assessing the impact and efficiency of advertising campaigns. The data for these metrics were sourced directly from the advertising analytics provided by the digital marketing agency 'Passion Viral', ensuring accuracy and relevance to the campaign outcomes.

Results and Discussion

Viral Passion's DCGC strategy and creation process

The use of DCGC, particularly from non-influencers, is a novel area that reflects broader trends towards authenticity in marketing. Viral's DCGC strategy consists of three phases, each including three critical decisions (Fig.1). The process begins with the Campaign Setup & Creator Selection phase, where the agency undertakes strategic planning to set the campaign's objectives and identify the target audience. From a pool of potential creators, seven are selected based on their compatibility with the brand's goals. The client is then involved in finalizing five creators who best meet the campaign's requirements.

Following selection, the Video Production & Testing phase commences. The chosen creators are sent the product and a detailed brief outlining the expectations and guidelines for the video content. Each creator produces a single video with three varying introductory segments to test different hooks while keeping the main

content consistent. These video versions undergo A/B testing to determine which introduction garners the best engagement metrics, such as viewer retention and click-through rates. The final phase, Evaluation & Promotion, involves analyzing the results from the A/B tests to select the highest-performing video. This "winning" video is promoted extensively across social media platforms, including Meta and TikTok. The promotion leverages both the creator's and the brand's social media channels to maximize the video's reach and impact. This structured process ensures a data-driven approach to selecting and promoting consumer-generated video content, optimizing campaign success through strategic audience engagement.

Viral Passion's strategy capitalizes on consumer-created content (CGC), by leveraging the authentic voices of everyday individuals rather than relying on traditional influencer partnerships. By involving regular consumers in creating video content, Viral Passion facilitates a more genuine connection between the brand and its target audience. This method is particularly effective in the digital space where users are bombarded with commercial content; videos created by real consumers can stand out due to their authenticity and relatability (Reade, 2021).

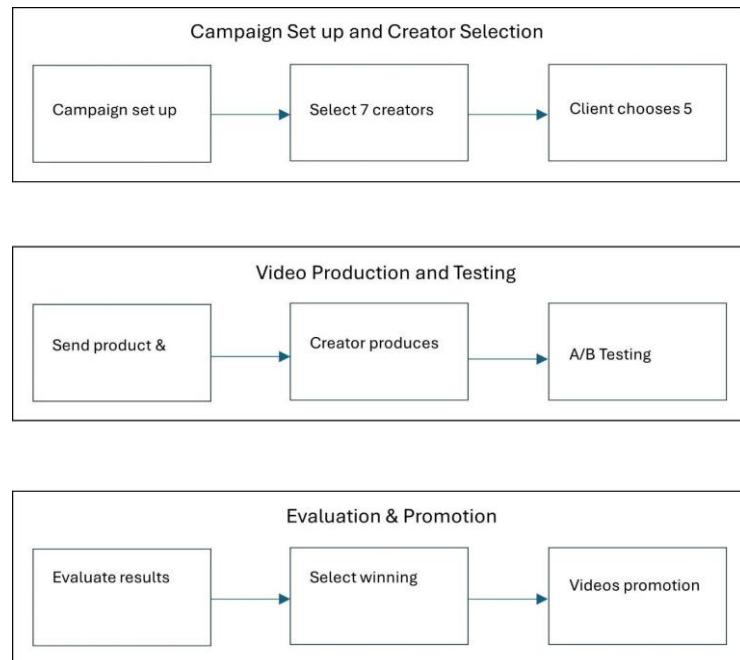


Fig.1 DCGC creation process

Qualitative insights

A definition towards Directed Consumer Generated Content

In terms of the participants expertise about the particular strategy, DCGC is defined as “*the consumer created content that is produced according to specific brand guidelines and strategic objectives, ensuring alignment with the brand's goals and messaging*”.

The following statements form the aforementioned definition:

- [...] In our strategic planning, DCGC is distinguished from traditional CGC by its structured creation process [...] (P1)
- [...] While CGC typically emerges organically from consumers without specific direction, DCGC involves a clear directive from the brand [...] (P1)
- [...] the primary way we differentiate DCGC from CGC in our campaigns is through the level of guidance we provide to the content creators. Unlike CGC, where the content is spontaneously created by users, DCGC is crafted under the guidance of a brand's strategic objectives [...] (P2)

DCGC 's strategies

According to the experts DCGC strategy consists of several building blocks. The interviews highlight the strategic selection of authentic and cost-effective content creators for Directed Consumer-Generated Content (DCGC). Emphasizing genuine engagement, creators produce multiple video variations for unbiased feedback,

with the best content widely promoted on TikTok and Meta. This approach overcomes initial client resistance to traditional polished ads by demonstrating the effectiveness of relatable, authentic content.

The following extracts summarize the strategy:

[...] Our strategy, therefore, emphasizes authenticity and direct communication from the creator to the audience, focusing less on the aesthetics like the setting or attire, and more on the message and the genuine delivery of the content. [...] (P1)

[...] we collaborate closely with the client to define the campaign's target audience and develop a detailed customer persona. This collaborative process helps us pinpoint creators from our pool who align closely with the persona, ensuring that the chosen individuals resonate well with the intended audience and can authentically represent the client's brand. [...] (P1)

[...] Based on these insights, our strategy has evolved to focus less on visual elements like the environment or wardrobe and more on the authenticity and relatability of the content. We aim for videos that feature the creator speaking directly to the audience, embodying the essence of real human interaction, which is increasingly valued on social media. [...] (P2)

DCGC's Benefits

Experts highlight several key benefits of the DCGC strategy. One notable advantage is its ability to harness the power of real people engaging in genuine discussions about brands, creating a deeper and more relatable connection with audiences. By blending authentic consumer insights with strategic brand messaging, DCGC bridges the gap between organic conversations and impactful brand narratives, offering a significant edge over traditional advertising and standard CGC approaches.

The following extracts highlight the benefits:

[...] This led us to consider how we might harness the power of real people discussing our clients' brands. [...] (P1)

[...] One of the key advantages of DCGC over traditional advertising and standard CGC is its ability to blend authentic consumer insights with strategic brand messaging. [...] (P1)

Quantitative Insights: DCGC Performance Evaluation

Table 2 presents the performance metrics of various DCGC Campaigns for various Brands.

Table 2. DCGC Campaign Performance Matrix for Various Brands

	Brand 1 - FASHION	Brand 2 - FASHION FEMALE	Brand 3 - COSMETICS	Brand 4 - Beauty Gadgets	Brand 5 - Kitchen	Brand 6 - Home
Number of campaigns	18	81	49	16	17	16
Reporting starts	2023-02-01	2023-11-01	2023-12-01	2023-05-01	2024-05-15	2023-05-01
Reporting ends	2023-09-28	2024-05-15	2024-05-15	2023-09-28	2023-11-01	2023-09-28
Impressions	6357762	6631204	2511738	4421796	664143	4907693
Reach	943350	2982922	1027053	1962019	390293	2189977
Link clicks	96987	176467	38215	66246	11211	106934
Content views	127062	274217	69385	35659	11022	85571
Adds to cart	7292	15835	10943	7888	895	12435
Checkouts Initiated	5024	7659	3283	3199	427	2738
Purchases	2566	2271	1338	1542	230	1562
Amount spent (EUR)	13.517,48 €	15.341,56 €	8.362,79 €	10.594,57 €	3.651,96 €	11.503,45 €
CTR (link click-through rate)	1,58	2,78 €	1,89 €	1,66 €	1,77 €	2,33 €
CPC (cost per link click) (EUR)	0,17 €	0,09 €	0,22 €	0,17 €	0,31 €	0,14 €

Cost per content view (EUR)	0,13 €	0,06 €	0,12 €	0,34 €	0,37 €	0,15 €
Cost per add-to-cart (EUR)	1,96 €	1,26 €	0,84 €	1,31 €	3,20 €	1,24 €
Cost per checkout initiated (EUR)	3,17 €	2,59 €	2,87 €	3,33 €	5,66 €	5,71 €
Cost per purchase (EUR)	5,31 €	7,26 €	6,20 €	6,83 €	10,90 €	9,11 €
Purchase ROAS (return on ad spend)	11,08	8,88	6,88	5,40	6,68	7,20
Purchases conversion value	125.300,64 €	136.192,52 €	57.563,64 €	55.716,20 €	24.392,39 €	83.175,85 €

Conclusion and Future Research

This study contributes to both the theoretical and practitioners as it introduces and empirically examines a novel strategy for digital marketing in a performance context. For academics, the study fills a gap in the literature by providing an analysis of DCGC, a hybrid form of content that combines the authenticity of consumer-generated content (CGC) with the strategic direction of brands. This research moves forward theoretical understanding by explaining the mechanisms through which DCGC can enhance return on advertising spend (ROAS), offering a framework for future studies to explore its application and effectiveness across different contexts and platforms. For practitioners, the findings offer feasible insights for improving performance marketing results by developing a DCGC strategy.

This research suggests that by leveraging the authenticity of DCGC content within a directed framework, businesses can create more effective social media advertising campaigns. As a result, companies can benefit from reducing content production costs while achieving improved outcomes through better performance results.. The paper comprehensively analyses DCGC's performance, utilizing qualitative interviews with marketing experts and quantitative performance data from actual campaigns.

The study's qualitative data is from interviews with only two experts from a single marketing agency. This limited sample size may not provide a comprehensive view of the DCGC strategy's effectiveness across different contexts and industries. The research focuses primarily on Meta and TikTok platforms. While these are significant players in the social media landscape, the findings may not be fully generalizable to other platforms like Twitter, LinkedIn, or emerging social media sites. The paper captures a glimpse of DCGC's performance at a specific time. Social media trends and algorithms evolve rapidly, and what is effective today may not be as impactful in the future. Therefore, future research should incorporate a longitudinal approach to assess the enduring impact of DCGC strategies and their adaptability to changing social media dynamics. The quantitative analysis is based on campaign data from a single marketing agency, which may not represent broader industry practices. The performance metrics may also be influenced by factors specific to the agency's client base and execution style.

While the study highlights immediate ROAS, it does not extensively explore how DCGC influences long-term brand loyalty and customer retention. User perceptions and attitudes towards DCGC over time remain underexplored. Additionally, this research invites further exploration into DCGC. Future research should provide more empirical evidence by conducting interviews with a broader range of experts across different marketing agencies and industries. Additionally, future studies should gather and analyze more data from various campaigns and performance metrics across various social media platforms, including emerging ones. Investigating the long-term impact of DCGC on brand loyalty and customer retention would also be valuable. Furthermore, comparative studies between DCGC and other innovative advertising methods can provide deeper insights into its relative effectiveness. Researchers should also explore the role of different types of consumer-generated content, such as text, images, and mixed media, in DCGC campaigns to understand how each format contributes to overall campaign success. Finally, incorporating consumer perspectives through surveys and focus groups can help identify the factors that make DCGC resonate more with audiences as, thereby informing strategies to optimize future campaigns.

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