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## IMPACT OF BRAND-RELATED USER-GENERATED CONTENT ON BRAND POSITIONING: A STUDY ON PRIVATE HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTES IN VIETNAM

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### Abstract

With the advent of social media, Vietnam has changed the way customers perceive the information about the brand. In the context of higher education, the adoption of social media has received attention with the increasing rate of social media usage among undergraduates. Brand-related user-generated content (UGC) on social media emphasizes the social ties between users and users' participation, which promotes the communication to build and maintain the relationship with the brands. Although brand positioning offers a significant competitive advantage, the association with brand-related user-generated content in social media with brand positioning in the context of higher education is still an under-researched area. Accordingly, using social identity theory and social exchange theory, this research aims to deepen our understanding of the influence of brand-related user-generated content on brand positioning and purchase intention. Employing a quantitative survey design, 384 Vietnamese undergraduates were selected based on purposive sampling. The findings suggest that brand-related user-generated content influence brand positioning and brand choice intention. However, there is a significant mediating effect of the reliability and understandability of the content.

**Keywords:** *Brand Positioning, Brand-Related User-Generated Content, Emerging Countries, Higher Education.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

We live in an era of unprecedented and rapid globalization that presents unique opportunities and threats to marketing and brand managers (Samiee, 2019). Similarly, Rapid changes in information and communications technology (particularly in social media) have brought customers together, creating potential global customer segments (Bolton et al., 2018). Social media is using as a promotional tool which offers a reward for the customers to engage in a certain behavior (Jang and Moutinho, 2019). However, customers' active engagement with brands in a lean-forward way, facilitates the customer to simply being exposed to passive advertising messages (Dolan et al., 2019). Finding new ways of engaging consumers have increasingly become a major goal of brand marketing and promoting the creation of brand-related user-generated content (UGC) (Kitirattarkarn et al., 2019), which refers to the creation of content relevant to a brand by consumers (Roma and Aloini, 2019). Indeed, the increasing prevalence of UGC as a marketing prompt is often taken as one of the major changes taking place in branding (Koivisto and Mattila, 2018). Although marketers worry about losing control of their brand with UGC and even having consumers create negative UGC, most have embraced it as a potentially powerful new tool (i Agustí, 2018).

The rapid diffusion of social media has significantly changed the higher education communication landscape (Al-Rahmi et al., 2018). The spectacular growth of social media and user-generated content (UGC) provides a huge quantity of information that allows for the firsthand ascertaining of the experiences, opinions, and feelings of the social media users relating to higher education institutes (HEIs) (Chugh and Ruhi, 2018). In an increasingly competitive higher education sector, HEIs are facing significant challenging in attracting and recruiting new students (Peruta and Shields, 2017). HEIs offer many of the same degree programs for similar fees by diminishing the potential to be the differentiator in attracting students in a cluster market place (Lax, 2017). Similar to customer confusion on the cluster marketplace, prospective students may find the decision-making process of selecting HEI confusion (Mahfoodh, 2017; Postareff et al., 2017). Furthermore, HEIs have begun to realize that the relatively simple promotional tools of the past no longer work (Almasri et al., 2018). This has driven the need for HEIs to focus on developing their brand with the help of social media (Eldegwy et al., 2018; Foroudi et al., 2019). Because, the emergence of social media, the student's interaction with social media gain higher attention. The social media brand communities have facilitated students to meet and share their experience and enthusiasm

regarding their preferred HEIs (Manca and Ranieri, 2016; Islam and Rahman, 2017) which influence the perception of the prospective students.

In this context, Twitchell (2004) argues that HEIs should manage their brands and create a unique position more proactively. HEIs need to cultivate an effective relationship with the students in creating unique positioning in the minds of the prospective students (Foroudi et al., 2017). How HEIs manage the relationships with the students and how students perceive HEI brands can impact the students' perception with the HEI's brand positioning (Nguyen et al., 2016) and in turn on students' intentions to select the institute in the future (Casidy and Wymer, 2018; Eldegwy et al., 2018; Panda et al., 2019). But, the notion of brand positioning has barely made its mark on higher education literature. The dearth of research on brand positioning in the higher education sector may be because HEIs are high credence quality products with complex and due to numerous factors, such as internal structures (Pinheiro and Stensaker, 2014; Izagirre-Olaizola et al., 2015), sub-branding by schools/majors/facilities (Williams Jr and Omar, 2014), institutional resistance to change (Kim et al., 2017), information gap between choice factors identified by students (Briggs and Wilson, 2007; Phau et al., 2010), diverse stakeholders (Miller et al., 2016; Cho, 2017) and formal communication mechanisms (Tyner and Costa, 2018).

Further, this study is focusing on the higher education sector of Vietnam, and emerging country, in relating to social media adoption, and branding. Since the previous researchers have mainly focused on emerged countries in studying on social media which is claimed as bias and lack of generalizable implications in emerging countries.

What is unknown is whether such engagement with brand-related UGC is effective for higher education. Research is needed to demonstrate whether engaging in creating brand-related UGC affects the HEI's brand positioning and subsequent brand choice behavior in the context of higher education.

The exact relationship between brand-related UGC in social media and brand positioning has remained unclear. Since brand-related UGC has widely embraced by the students assuming it is transmitted by a trustworthy information source, this study tries to enrich the existing knowledge related brand-related UGC and brand positioning in the social media sphere. Therefore, this study reviews the existing literature on brand-related UGC while incorporating studies on branding to provide a comprehensive understanding of these constructs.

Since, UGC provides the promise of personalized information, challenges to the reliability, and understandability has been acknowledged by some scholars. Some challenges

stem from the complexity and volume of information, which are due to the dynamic nature of the UGC. Thus far, the literature has yet to reveal a consistent pattern of relationships between perceived information reliability and understandability of user-generated HEIs' information. The mediating effect of reliability and understandability of content among brand-related UGC and brand positioning has not fully investigated. Therefore, this study investigated the influence of brand-related UGC on students' perception of HEI's positioning.

Based on social identity theory and social exchange theory, this study attempts to explore whether and how consumers' motivations to engage in brand-related UGC and its influence on brand positioning and brand choice intention among the undergraduates in social media sites.

Specifically, this study aimed to examine the relationship between brand-related UGC in social media, brand positioning, and brand choice intention. Reliability and understandability of content were incorporated as mediating variables in developing the relationship among brand-related UGC and brand positioning.

Based on the identified research aims, the following research question has developed.

(i) What is the extent to which brand-related UGC is related to brand positioning, and brand choice intention as perceived by undergraduates?

There are two key objectives, which were formulated to address the research question.

(i) To evaluate the relationship among brand-related UGC, brand positioning and brand choice intention among undergraduates

(ii) To identify the mediating effect of reliability, and understandability of content among brand-related UGC and brand positioning.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT**

### **2.1. Brand-related UGC**

Social media empowers the interaction, collaboration and the sharing of the content among the online users (Carr and Hayes, 2015). It facilitates to share user's views and exert their individual and collective influence on the customers as well as on brands (Dessart et al., 2015; Kumar et al., 2017). This influence accelerated the accessibility of brand content by the customers (Ashley and Tuten, 2015). One of the ways of consumers' interaction with social media happens through user-generated content (UGC) (Koivisto and Mattila, 2018). UGC refers to "media content created by members of the general public and includes any form of

online content created, initiated, circulated, and consumed by users” (Kim and Johnson, 2016, p.98).

UGC is published content created by users outside of professional routines and practices (Goh et al., 2013) It is a published content that has been created by the general public without involving paid professionals which allow users to connect through “many-to-many” rather than traditional “one-to-many” (Sadek et al., 2018). The present study is focusing on UGC which its related brands. The consumers are generating content relating to brands on the different social media platforms (Godey et al., 2016). The members of the social media platforms access the contents and use it for their purposes (Muntinga et al., 2011). Brand-related UGC represents a new way of behaviour that is reshaping online consumer communication, collaboration, and distribution of brand information (Vernuccio and Ceccotti, 2015).

Influential brand-related UGC could affect the consumer’s brand preference and select a certain brand over the competitors (Godey et al., 2016). Developing a distinctive image in the consumers’ minds is the most vital task for marketing professionals (Manhas et al., 2016). With the emergence of social media, UGC has already seen as a popular way of influencing the consumers’ decisions (Cantalops and Salvi, 2014). In such a way, brand-related UGC could be able to affect the positioning of the brand in the minds of the consumers. Influenced consumers with brand-related UGC will be motivated to purchase a certain brand over other competitive brands.

## **2.2. Reliability and Understandability of the Content**

The evaluation of UGC reliability is largely depending on the users’ perception of content and source credibility (Jin et al., 2015). The evaluation of reliability often depends on the users’ experiences and personal preference (Correa et al., 2010). The users must believe that the experienced shared by other users are reliable; otherwise, they will not continue reading the UGC and will not act on its advice (Ma and Atkin, 2017). When consumers are searching for information on social media to purchase a brand, UGC is much important as it shares users’ true experiences (Cantalops and Salvi, 2014). If readers have perceived that brand-related UGC as true, accurate and believable; they may agree with it and will pay more attention to it (Ma and Atkin, 2017; Lin et al., 2017). This increases the possibility to create a distinctive brand image and perception in the consumers’ minds (Romaniuk and Sharp, 2000). So, the brand positioning process could be able to continue with the reliable brand-related UGC shared in social media.

A brand can be easily positioned in the consumers' minds if brand-related UGC is understandable (Tjia and Honantha, 2013). Difficult-to-understand information often leads to uncertainty and ambiguity for the consumers (Hillen et al., 2017). Hence, the lack of understandability in brand-related UGC may cause consumers to reject the users' opinions, and perhaps reject the entire brand page (Ma and Atkin, 2017). The more understandable brand-related UGC is more likely to allocate a space in the consumers' mind about a brand (Schamari and Schaefer, 2015).

This study examines to what extent consumers perceive the reliability of brand-related UGC and whether brand-related UGC can be used for the process of positioning the brands in the minds of the customers. Furthermore, this study examines whether the level of understandability of the content generated by users could influence the brand positioning.

Hence, the following hypotheses are offered.

***H1: Brand-related UGC positively influence (a) reliability of content, and (b) understandability of content***

***H2: Reliability and understandability of the content mediates the relationship between brand-related UGC and brand positioning***

### **2.3. Brand Positioning**

Positioning is the way for companies to motivate consumers to perceive, think and feel about their brand versus competitive entries (Fuchs and Diamantopoulos, 2012). Positioning is a process of emphasizing the brand's distinctive and motivating attributes in the light of competition (Gwin and Gwin, 2003). Keynes (2017) emphasizes that arriving at the proper position requires establishing the correct point of difference (unique to the brand) and point of parity association (connected with the category, not necessarily unique to the brand). According to such a perspective brand positioning is of a high level of subjectivity since it refers to the consumer's perceptions (Klein et al., 2019).

Positioning creates a distinctive image or identity for the brand, product, service or organization in the minds of the consumers (Urde and Koch, 2014). Brand positioning is a process to create, change, or foster a specific image of a brand in the mind of the consumers. (Pike et al., 2018). It is a fundamental basis for marketing activities and product strategies (Talay et al., 2015). Brand positioning is regarded as a key tool for brand implementation in competitive markets (Aaker, 1996; Hooley et al., 1998). This is mainly the process which a brand aims to be perceived as distinct and offering superior value concerning competitors

(Krawczyk and Xiang, 2016). As stressed by Keller et al. (2011) brand positioning studies play a fundamental role in the formulation of an optimal marketing strategy by clarifying the brand's essence in the minds of consumers, what goals it helps consumers achieve and how it does so in a unique manner relative to its competitors. Successful brand positioning creates brand preference that influences a decision to choose the specific brand over competitive brands (Brexendorf et al., 2015).

Brand positioning is the company's attempt to design the brand's offers an image so that it occupies a distinct and valued place in the target consumer's mind" (Pike et al., 2018). It is mainly the process through which a brand aims to be perceived as distinct and offering superior value concerning competitors (Payne and Frow, 2014). Successfully managing consumer perceptions is thus essential for effective brand positioning (Halkias et al., 2016). In this process, a brand becomes significant for the consumer, through the creation of a strong, favourable and unique brand positioning (Alden and Nariswari, 2017). A successful brand positioning means that the target market understands the company's brand values, purchase the company's product or service due to the brand values attached to it and is loyal to the company's brand/product (Napoli et al., 2016).

With the advent of social media, brand-related UGC facilitates communication with consumers to share information about the brands (Estrella-Ramón and Ellis-Chadwick, 2017). By series of communication with brand-related UGC could effectively create a position in the consumers' minds (Micu et al., 2017). The content shared by the users would much helpful for the consumers to identify the brands over competitors and create a strongly favourable brand image in their minds (Kim and Johnson, 2016). Consumers' favourable brand positioning in their mind could ultimately lead them to purchase a certain brand and not the others (Mohd Suki, 2016).

Effective brand-related UGC can generate a favourable attitude towards the brands and greater intention to comply with recommendations and reviews made in the UGC (Parveen et al., 2015). In this sense, this paper intends to contribute to the literature by shedding new light on consumers' intention to involve with brand-related UGC in social media and its impact on brand positioning and brand choice intention.

In principle, companies can position their brands on an almost infinite number of associations (e.g. a mobile phone can be positioned upon its size, shape, handiness, user-friendliness, stylishness, etc.) (Jun and Park, 2017). Several authors have classified these associations into distinct groupings based upon alternative bases of positioning (Williams and

Williams, 2017; Rutter et al., 2017). The positioning bases underlie the positioning strategy of a brand.

Despite the importance of brand positioning, however, limited empirical attention has been paid to the question whether the use of certain positioning strategies (e.g. social media marketing strategies) results in more superiorly positioned brands than the application of other strategies (e.g. user-based positioning) (Keller and Lehmann, 2006; Pham and Muthukrishnan, 2002). The purpose of the current study is to close this gap and compare the effectiveness of brand-related UGC on positioning strategies of real brands from a consumer perspective and thus provide brand managers and advertising professionals with empirically-based insights for making sound positioning decisions.

## **2.4. Brand Choice Intention**

The brand choice intention has been receiving increased attention in the extant literature (Phung et al., 2019). The brand choice intention is considered a measure of customer behaviour as it incorporates a ranking of different brands among competing brands (Davvetas and Diamantopoulos, 2017). It enables information processing (Ebrahim et al., 2016) and gathers experience as the main source for the brand choice (Lemmetti and Tuominen, 2017).

The brand choice intention is the tendency that customers will select the brands and deliver their user experiences to friends and relatives (Mohseni et al., 2018; Ojiaku and Osarenkhoe, 2018). Brand choice intention represents the possibility that customers will plan or be willing to purchase a certain brand in the future (Baker et al., 2016; Román and Sánchez-Siles, 2018). It is the process of an individual's intention to select a brand before purchase (Vanwesenbeeck et al., 2017; Davtyan and Cunningham, 2017). The brand choice intention is measured by focusing on utilitarian belief as to the main driver of customer evaluation response and emotional response which contributes to preference development. An increase in brand choice intention means an increase in the possibility of purchase (Quintal et al., 2016). When customers have a positive brand choice intention (Bhargave et al., 2016), this forms a positive brand commitment which propels customers to take an actual purchase action (Mundel et al., 2018).

Hence, the following hypotheses are offered.

***H3: (a) Reliability of content and (b) understandability of content positively influence brand positioning***

***H4: Brand positioning positively influence brand choice intention***



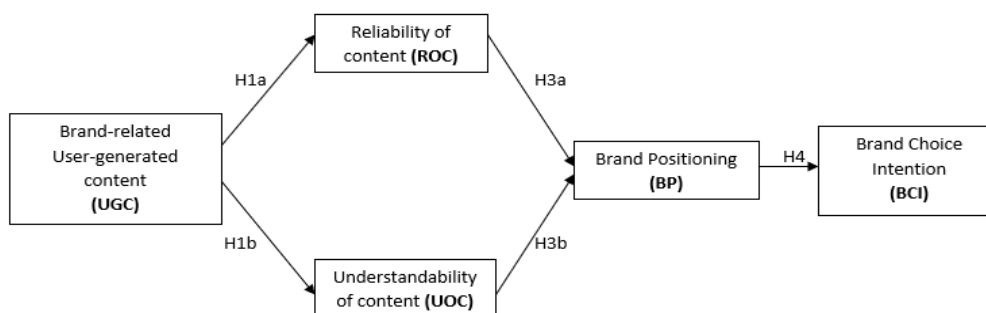


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

### 3. METHODOLOGY

In this study, only the quantitative approaches will be adopted and conform to the deductive approach. The present study is descriptive research which is used to describe the topic of interest and finally, the causal relationship of the variables can be examined through a hypothesis. The research paradigm is based on positivism with the adoption of realist ontology that perceives reality to be objective and logical by observing causes or mechanisms driving effects in human behaviour (Neuman, 2014). Besides, the positivist perspective focus on the social pressures and situations operating on people to shape their attitude and behaviour that reflects in this empirical study.

The data collection instrument was a structured, self-administered questionnaire. The questionnaire comprised five sections which relate to brand-related UGC, brand positioning, brand choice intention, reliability of the content and understandability of content. Each section rated using 5 points Likert scale, where 1= strongly disagree, 2= disagree, 3= neutral, 4 = agree and 5=strongly agree. Data was collected from the sample of 384 undergraduates who are currently pursuing their higher education in Vietnamese' HEIs.

Before applying statistical tools, first, reliability and validity tests were undertaken. Data were analyzed using SPSS (version 25) to perform several appropriate statistical techniques depending on the research question. Correlation and regression tests were used to identify how strongly selected variables were related to each other or the degree of association between the two variables (Kothari, 2004) and to predict the value of the dependent based on the known value of the independent variable, assuming that average mathematical relationship between two or more variables (Kothari, 2004). Confirmatory factor analyses were undertaken to reduce the bulk items into the manageable number and to obtain the best fit. Therefore, the present study mainly adopted SEM to obtain the best fit/confirmatory factor analysis using AMOS25.

#### 4. FINDINGS

To assess the adequacy of the measures, the authors estimated the convergent validity through: item reliability, construct reliability, and average variance extract (AVE) (see Table 1). Firstly, item reliability was evaluated based on the factor loadings of the items (i.e., observed variables) on their respective constructs. As all the factor loadings were higher than the threshold value of 0.5, convergent validity was supported (Hair Jr and Lukas, 2014). Secondly, construct reliability was assessed through both composite reliability (CR) values and Cronbach alpha coefficients. As all the CR values and Cronbach alpha coefficients were higher than the threshold value of 0.7, construct reliability was supported (Hair Jr and Lukas, 2014). Thirdly, the AVE was assessed because it is the summary indicator of convergence. As all the AVE values were higher than the threshold value of 0.5, convergent validity was supported (Hair Jr and Lukas, 2014).

**Table 1:** Reliability and Validity measurements

Constructs	Cronbach's alpha	CR	AVE
Brand-related UGC	0.875	0.877	0.644
Reliability	0.925	0.928	0.763
Understandability	0.866	0.875	0.640
Brand Positioning	0.846	0.851	0.658
Brand Choice Intention	0.763	0.818	0.540

Further, discriminate validity was estimated to ensure the adequacy of the measures. Discriminant validity was evaluated by comparing the square root of the AVE of each construct with the bivariate correlations among constructs (Table 2). A measurement model is considered to have acceptable discriminant validity if the square root of the AVE of each construct is higher than any of the bivariate correlations among the constructs (Iglesias et al., 2019). As all the square roots of AVE were higher than the bivariate correlations among the constructs, discriminant validity was supported (Iglesias et al., 2019).

**Table 2:** Discriminate Validity

	ROC	BP	BCI	UOC	UGC
ROC	<b>0.874<sup>a</sup></b>				
BP	0.356 <sup>b</sup>	<b>0.811<sup>a</sup></b>			
BCI	0.483	0.505	<b>0.735<sup>a</sup></b>		
UOC	-0.039	0.093	0.140	<b>0.800<sup>a</sup></b>	
UGC	-0.248	-0.078	-0.177	-0.186	<b>0.802<sup>a</sup></b>

The square root of AVE in the diagonal

b Pearson correlations among constructs

To assess model fit, the comparative fit index with the overall model chi-square measure ( $\chi^2$ ), the comparative fit index (CFI), the goodness of fit index (GFI), the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), and Associated PCLOSE were used (Byrne, 2010). For the current model,  $\chi^2$  /df is 1.052 ( $\chi^2 = 88.336$ ; df = 84), CFI is .995, GFI is .906, AGFI is .866, RMSEA is .022, and Associated PCLOSE is 0.867. An adequate model fit was, therefore, indicated.

Having successfully validated the structural model's goodness-of-fit to the data, the next step was to examine the research hypotheses using path measurement coefficients (regression weight estimates and critical ratios) from the SEM analysis performed with AMOS 25. Table 3 on the summaries these results, from which it is seen that hypothesized causal paths in the structural model were significant at the 0.05 level.

**Table 3:** Path Coefficient Weights for the Structural Model

Hypotheses		Estimates	CR	p-value	Comment
Code	Path				
H1a	UGC-> ROC	0.339	2.432	0.015	Supported
H1b	UGC->UOC	0.177	2.543	0.001	Supported
H3a	ROC->BP	0.395	3.564	***	Supported
H3b	UOC->BP	0.136	4.125	***	Supported
H4	BP->BCI	0.285	3.209	0.001	Supported

At a significance level of 0.05, the estimated values empirically support all the direct effects that are part of the hypothesized model. Table 3 presents the standardized path estimates and t-values for each of the hypothesized model relationships for each construct. Concerning the structural relationships proposed in the conceptual model brand-related UGC, reliability of content, and understandability of content, had a significant relationship with brand positioning

toward the higher education sector supporting H1(a), H1(b), H3(a), and H3(b). Based on the standardized estimates between paths, association with brand positioning had a significant influence on brand choice intention supporting to the hypotheses H4.

Further, the correlation between the UGC-BP, UGC-BCI, BP-BCI variables was 0.541, 0.671, 0.628 respectively, indicating a moderate positive relationship among them. The R-Square among UGC and brand positioning were 0.42. 42% of the variance in the brand-related UGC was explained by brand positioning. Furthermore, the R-Square among brand-related UGC and brand choice intention was 0.36. 36 % of the variance in the brand-related UGC was explained by purchase intention. The R-Square among brand positioning and the brand choice intention was 0.47. 47 % of the variance in brand positioning was explained by brand choice intention.

When the new predictor, the reliability of content, was included, the Adjusted R-square value changed 0.591 .59.1 % of the variance in the brand-related UGC was explained by brand positioning and brand choice intention. The Beta value (standardized) of the new predictor (reliability of content) has increased to 0.64 and it was significant (sig-value=0.000).

Similarly, understandability of content was included, the Adjusted R-square value changed 0.574 .57.4 % of the variance in the brand-related UGC was explained by brand positioning and brand choice intention. The Beta value (standardized) of the new predictor (understandability of content) has increased to 0.72 and it was significant (sig-value=0.000).

In addition to this, the mediating effect of reliability, and understandability of content between brand-related UGC and brand positioning had analysed (Table 4).

**Table 4:** Mediating effect of brand trust, and brand co-creation

Path	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	Mediation
UGC->ROC->BP	0.0032(0.9803)	0.3816***	Full Mediation
UGC->UOC->BP	-0.5664(0.5723)	0.1145***	Full Mediation

In the present study, the 95% confidence interval of the indirect effects was obtained with 5000 bootstraps resamples (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). Results showed that the direct effect between UGC and BP was B= 0.0032 (p=0.9803) which is not significant. Besides, results indicated that the indirect effect became significant after including ROC as the mediating variable (B=0.3816, p=0.000), which indicates a Full mediating effect of Supporting H2a. Similarly, the direct effect between UGC and BP was B= -0.5664 (p=0.5723) which is not significant. Besides, results indicated that the indirect effect became significant after including

UOC as the mediating variable ( $B=0.1145$ ,  $p=0.000$ ), which indicates a Full mediating effect of Supporting H2b.

## 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The primary purpose of this study was to test the relationship between brand-related UGC, brand positioning and brand choice intention perceived by undergraduates related to the higher education sector. In this process, the researcher has mainly focused on developing a conceptual framework including mediating variables which are the reliability of content and understandability of content among brand-related UGC and brand positioning. The conceptual model was developed based on the critical review of previous literature and in consideration of the main research question and research objectives. Furthermore, five hypotheses were developed to demonstrate the relationship between the main constructs of the research model.

Through the examination of the role of brand-related UGC in positioning a brand using social identity theory and social exchange theory, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the undergraduates about the brand-related UGC in social media in Vietnam and its impact on the formation of brand positioning and brand choice intention.

The theoretical model and corresponding hypotheses were addressed the research objectives posed in this study. The outcome of the data analysis indicated that a relationship between brand-related UGC, reliability of content, understandability of content, brand positioning, and brand choice intention exists at a significant level. Furthermore, the variance among brand-related UGC and brand positioning was able to explain with a higher percentage including the reliability of content and understandability of content as mediating variables. Moreover, introducing modifications, the theoretical model was developed with overall goodness-of-fit to an acceptable level.

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