Global Review of Humanities, Arts, and Society (GRHAS)

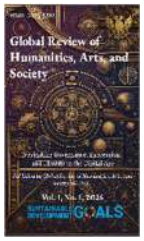
Vol. 1, No. 1, 2025 | pp. 39–48

EISSN: 3052-539X (Online Only)

https://doi.org/10.63802/grhas.v1.i1.6

Navigating Governance, Expression, and Identity in the Digital Age

grhas.centraluniteduniversity.de



Brand Communication Innovation in the New Media Environment: Consumer Trust, Social Media Interaction, and Psychological Resonance

***Qilun Hu*[1*] *and Chengwen Song*[2*]**

[1]*Kookmin University*

Abstract

As digital platforms redefine brand-consumer relationships, social media has emerged as a vital channel for fostering consumer trust, emotional engagement, and innovation acceptance. This study examines how brands leverage user-generated content (UGC), influencer marketing, and Metaverse experiences to shape consumer perception and behavior. Drawing on ten in-depth case studies from the Global Breakthrough Innovation White Paper (2024), the research employs a qualitative, multi-case approach to analyze how these strategies activate trust and identity through digital interaction. The study is guided by the Brand Communication–Trust–Social Identity–Emotional Resonance (BT-SIER) model, which integrates Two-Step Flow and Social Identity Theory to explain the psychological mechanisms behind digital brand engagement. Findings reveal that UGC fosters greater authenticity and social identification than influencer campaigns, while Metaverse-based marketing enhances immersive emotional resonance. Together, these strategies contribute to elevated brand loyalty and innovation openness. This research offers both conceptual clarity and practical insights for marketers navigating the emotional and technological complexities of contemporary brand communication.

Keywords: Brand Communication, UGC, Consumer Trust, Emotional Resonance, Metaverse

[1] **Qilun Hu,** PhD candidate in Communication Studies, School of Communication and Advertising, Kookmin University, 77 Jeongneung-ro, Seongbuk-gu, Seoul 02707, Republic of Korea.

[2] **Chengwen Song,** PhD candidate in Public Administration, General Graduate School, Kookmin University, 77 Jeongneung-ro, Seongbuk-gu, Seoul 02707, Republic of Korea.

* These authors contributed equally to this work as co-first authors.

1. Introduction (Expanded)

The landscape of marketing has undergone a profound transformation in recent decades, driven by the rapid development of new media technologies and the proliferation of digital communication platforms. Among these, social media stands out as one of the most disruptive forces, fundamentally altering how brands engage with consumers. Unlike traditional one-way advertising models, social media enables dynamic, real-time, and multi-directional communication between brands and audiences. This shift has not only empowered consumers but also challenged brands to be more responsive, transparent, and emotionally intelligent in their communication strategies.

As digital natives and digitally fluent consumers increasingly populate the global market, expectations for authenticity, interactivity, and personalization in brand communication have intensified. Brands are now expected not merely to deliver products or services, but to cultivate meaningful experiences, foster community, and align with the values and identities of their consumer base. This transformation has prompted marketers and researchers alike to re-examine the mechanisms by which consumer trust is built, maintained, and translated into behavioral outcomes such as loyalty, advocacy, and innovation adoption.

This study investigates the evolving role of social media in contemporary brand communication, with a particular focus on how digital platforms can be leveraged to create consumer trust, elicit emotional resonance, and facilitate interactive engagement. By drawing upon illustrative case studies featured in the *Global Breakthrough Innovation White Paper* (2024), this research explores the practical applications of user-generated content (UGC), influencer marketing, and immersive brand experiences—especially those enabled by emerging technologies such as the Metaverse.

The study also contributes theoretically by proposing and applying the Brand Communication–Trust–Social Identity–Emotional Resonance (BT-SIER) model. This model integrates insights from Two-Step Flow Theory and Social Identity Theory, suggesting that trust and identification with a brand community mediate the relationship between communication strategies and consumer outcomes. In doing so, the study offers a multidimensional framework for understanding how contemporary brands can strategically foster psychological engagement in a digitally saturated and socially complex environment.

1.1 Research Objectives

This study aims to:

1. Analyze the impact of social media brand communication on consumer trust: Investigating how interactive and transparent communication

strategies enhance the trust consumers place in brands.

2. Investigate how social identity influences brand innovation acceptance: Understanding how consumers' group affiliations and identity constructs shape their openness to brand innovation.
3. Compare the effects of influencer marketing (KOLs) and UGC on consumer engagement: Examining which type of content fosters deeper emotional and psychological connections with consumers.
4. Examine the role of Metaverse marketing in enhancing emotional resonance: Exploring how immersive virtual experiences contribute to stronger consumer-brand relationships and long-term loyalty.

1.2 Significance of the Study

The digital era presents both expansive opportunities and complex challenges for brand communication. While technological advancements have lowered barriers to interaction and increased brand visibility, they have also raised the stakes for relevance, transparency, and emotional intelligence. In this context, understanding how to effectively use new media tools to build trust and emotional engagement is vital for sustainable marketing success.

By focusing on the interplay among social media interaction, consumer identity, and psychological resonance, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of digital consumer behavior and branding psychology. The BT-SIER framework introduced herein provides both scholars and practitioners with a structured model for analyzing and designing impactful brand communication strategies. Furthermore, the integration of empirical case insights from diverse markets underscores the global relevance of these findings and offers actionable guidance for brands navigating the complexities of digital transformation and consumer expectation in the 21st century.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this study integrates four core perspectives—Two-Step Flow Theory, Social Identity Theory, Emotional Resonance in Branding, and Metaverse Marketing—each contributing a unique lens to understand how digital media facilitates brand communication, trust, and emotional engagement in consumer behavior.

Together, these perspectives support the construction of the BT-SIER Model (Brand Communication–Trust–Social

Identity–Emotional Resonance), which conceptualizes how communication strategies mediated by social identity dynamics and emotional triggers lead to trust formation, innovation acceptance, and brand loyalty in the digital era.

2.1.1 Two-Step Flow Theory and Influencer Mediation

Originally introduced by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955), the Two-Step Flow Theory challenges the idea of direct media influence by asserting that communication flows first to opinion leaders, who then interpret and transmit messages to the broader public. In the context of social media, Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) act as digital-age intermediaries, shaping perceptions of authenticity, relevance, and brand value through curated content.

Research by Boerman et al. (2017) indicates that the presence of influencer endorsements significantly affects persuasion knowledge, brand attitudes, and consumer trust, especially when transparency and alignment with brand values are perceived as high. These insights underscore the increasing reliance on humanized mediators in marketing communication and their role in the diffusion of brand narratives in algorithmic environments.

2.1.2 Social Identity Theory and Brand Communities

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) posits that individuals derive part of their self-concept from perceived membership in social groups. This theory has proven especially pertinent in marketing and branding research, as it explains how consumers affiliate with brands that reflect or reinforce their group-based identities.

Brand communities offer symbolic and affective benefits that extend beyond product utility. According to Zaglia (2013), social media-based brand communities enhance loyalty and advocacy by fostering emotional connections and co-constructed meaning. Campaigns driven by user-generated content (UGC) are particularly effective in this regard, as they empower consumers to engage in identity-affirming storytelling and participatory branding practices.

2.1.3 Emotional Resonance in Digital Branding

Emotional resonance refers to the depth of emotional impact a brand can generate, leading to long-term relational bonds with consumers. In the context of branding, this concept goes beyond mere satisfaction or functional performance—it involves the activation of shared values, aspirational identities, and affective memory structures.

Thompson et al. (2006) emphasized that emotionally resonant brands create cultural meaning systems that

embed themselves in consumers' lived experiences. Puligadda et al. (2021) extended this by demonstrating that digital storytelling, particularly through narrative-rich and visually compelling social media content, intensifies emotional connection and engagement metrics. This dimension is critical to the BT-SIER model, where resonance acts as both a mediator and an outcome of effective communication.

2.1.4 Metaverse Marketing and Immersive Brand Interaction

The Metaverse, defined as a persistent, interconnected virtual environment combining augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR), and real-time user interaction, has become a pivotal terrain for branding innovation. Brands now leverage the Metaverse not only for novelty appeal but to foster deeper experiential involvement and sensory engagement.

Dwivedi et al. (2022) argue that Metaverse-enabled marketing enhances brand loyalty through immersive simulations that activate emotional and cognitive empathy. These experiences—ranging from virtual try-ons and gamified product demos to branded digital worlds—enable consumers to "live" the brand rather than merely consume its messages.

For this study, Metaverse Marketing offers a cutting-edge illustration of how emerging technologies can support the final layer of the BT-SIER model—emotional resonance through embodied digital engagement.

3. Methodology

3.1 Case Study Approach

This study adopts a qualitative multiple-case study methodology to explore the dynamic interactions between brand communication strategies and consumer psychological responses in digital contexts. The case study approach is particularly suited to capturing the complexity and contextual specificity of communication phenomena (Yin, 2018). It allows for a nuanced analysis of how brands design, deploy, and iterate communication strategies across platforms and consumer segments.

By focusing on real-world examples drawn from the *Global Breakthrough Innovation White Paper (2024)*, this research examines how different types of digital engagement—user-generated content (UGC), influencer (KOL) marketing, immersive Metaverse experiences, and social media interactivity—translate into measurable outcomes such as consumer trust, innovation acceptance, and emotional resonance.

The selected case studies were purposefully sampled based on the following criteria:

- Inclusion in the white paper's innovation marketing segment (2021–2023)

- Strong emphasis on digital or social media strategy
- Availability of consumer insight or performance data
- Representation across different product categories and geographic markets (e.g., Europe, China)

This multi-case design facilitates comparative analysis across brand contexts, revealing both common patterns and context-specific insights.

3.2 Data Sources

This research relies on triangulated data sources to ensure analytical robustness and validity. The core data set consists of 10 marketing innovation case studies presented in the *Global Breakthrough Innovation White Paper* compiled by NielsenIQ, which includes both narrative case accounts and quantitative consumer feedback. These primary cases provide empirical grounding for theory-informed analysis.

Supplementary data sources include:

- Peer-reviewed academic literature on digital branding, consumer psychology, and media theory
- Industry reports on influencer marketing, Metaverse adoption, and digital trust metrics
- Brand websites, campaign archives, and social media analytics (when publicly accessible)

Together, these sources offer both breadth and depth, enabling rich thematic interpretation and model testing.

3.3 Analytical Framework: The BT-SIER Model

The empirical analysis is structured around the BT-SIER Model (Brand Communication–Trust–Social Identity–Emotional Resonance), a conceptual framework developed to examine the mechanisms through which digital brand strategies affect consumer psychology and behavior.

The model includes:

- **Independent Variables**:
  (1) User-Generated Content (UGC)
  (2) Key Opinion Leader (KOL) Marketing
  (3) Social Media Interactivity
  (4) Metaverse-Based Experiences
- **Mediating Variables**:
  (1) Social Identity Alignment (i.e., the extent to which the consumer identifies with the brand community)
  (2) Emotional Resonance (i.e., the depth of emotional connection and affective response to

brand content)

- **Dependent Variables**:

  (1) Brand Trust

  (2) Innovation Acceptance

  (3) Purchase Intent or Behavioral Loyalty

Each case is analyzed along these dimensions using a matrix coding strategy to identify thematic patterns, supported by illustrative quotes or data from the white paper and external references.

This framework allows for a structured yet flexible analysis, enabling both theory confirmation and the identification of emergent dynamics. It also facilitates a cross-case synthesis of findings in relation to the study's core research objectives outlined in Section 1.1.

4. Discussion

4.1 Authentic Engagement through UGC and Cultural Resonance

User-generated content (UGC) is not only a tool for cost-effective brand exposure but a crucial pathway to authentic consumer engagement and emotional resonance. The case of 4BRO Ice Tea vividly demonstrates this. The brand's founding team was composed of individuals from its own target demographic—young, culturally diverse, and digitally native consumers. This structural authenticity enabled 4BRO to create content that naturally reflected its audience's language, humor, and lifestyle. For example, viral TikTok videos such as "Bros don't sing, they drop beats" and "Bros do not explain, they shave," offered not only entertainment but also a sense of shared identity.

Similarly, Little Moons Mochi Ice Cream successfully harnessed the power of UGC by turning spontaneous consumer curiosity into a viral campaign. Videos of real customers searching for the product in Tesco stores garnered millions of views. By combining genuine consumer stories with strategic media buying and experiential events like the "Summer Bus Ice Cream Tour," the brand bridged UGC with structured campaigns to cultivate long-term consumer affinity.

These cases confirm the BT-SIER model's proposition that UGC strengthens both brand trust and social identity, thereby deepening emotional resonance. Moreover, the model is supported by the white paper's consumer feedback data, showing that brands perceived as "fun," "personal," and "authentic" received higher loyalty scores and more favorable word-of-mouth.

4.2 KOL vs. UGC: Navigating the Trust Gap

While UGC drives deep engagement, influencer marketing (KOL) offers rapid amplification. The case of Nestlé's Sensational Fruit Infusions highlights this

dynamic. Collaborating with trusted wellness influencers allowed Nestlé to reach broad health-conscious audiences. However, while KOLs efficiently communicated the brand's benefits, they lacked the co-creative intimacy of UGC. This suggests that influencer-driven campaigns excel in the early stages of brand awareness, but may require supplementation through UGC to sustain emotional connection and consumer-led storytelling.

In contrast, consumers reported higher perceived authenticity when they saw content created by peers. This supports existing scholarship under the Two-Step Flow Theory, which positions opinion leaders as intermediaries of trust—but not necessarily emotional proxies.

4.3 Metaverse Marketing as Emotional Amplifier

The integration of Metaverse technologies provides brands with unprecedented immersive storytelling opportunities. Yili's AMX Zero-Sugar Yogurt exemplifies this innovation. The product was launched alongside an AR/VR experience that mirrored the aesthetics of smartphone branding—sleek, futuristic, and minimalistic. It resonated with Gen Z's appetite for hybrid physical-digital experiences. According to NielsenIQ data, 88% of surveyed consumers described the product as "trendy and different," and 85% said it made the brand feel "young and innovative".

This immersive strategy reflects the BT-SIER model's third layer: emotional resonance. By engaging consumers not only cognitively (via functional benefits) but experientially, Yili created a multi-sensory branding ecosystem that enhanced trust, innovation acceptance, and purchase intent.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Consolidated Findings

This study, based on both theoretical inquiry and empirical case analysis from the Global Breakthrough Innovation White Paper, validates the BT-SIER model as a useful framework to understand brand-consumer dynamics in the digital era. The findings indicate:

UGC strengthens trust and identity: Brands like 4BRO and Little Moons leveraged community-based storytelling to foster belonging and loyalty.

Social identity reinforces innovation acceptance: By embedding brand meaning into shared cultural symbols and behaviors, brands increased consumer openness to new formats and technologies.

KOL strategies offer scale, not intimacy: Influencers excel at reach, but lack the emotional depth of consumer-generated narratives.

Metaverse marketing enhances resonance: AR/VR experiences like those by Yili extend emotional branding

into immersive realms, driving loyalty and engagement.

5.2 Strategic Implications

Brand communicators must adopt a dual-axis strategy that balances authentic community interaction with technological immersion. This means empowering consumers to become brand co-creators, while simultaneously investing in novel platforms like the Metaverse that amplify emotional depth. Moreover, brands must cultivate transparency, cultural fluency, and ethical positioning to maintain consumer trust in a saturated media environment.

Future research could further examine cross-cultural responses to these strategies, particularly how emotional resonance is mediated by sociocultural variables across regions. As digital ecosystems evolve, so too must our frameworks for understanding trust, identity, and emotion in brand communication.

References

Boerman, S. C., Willemsen, L. M., & Van Der Aa, E. P. (2017). "This post is sponsored": Effects of sponsorship disclosure on persuasion knowledge and electronic word of mouth in the context of Facebook. *Computers in Human Behavior, 82*, 330–339.

Dwivedi, Y. K., Hughes, D. L., Wang, Y., Alalwan, A. A., Ahn, S. J., Balakrishnan, J., ... & Wirtz, J. (2022). Metaverse marketing: How the metaverse will shape the future of consumer research and practice. *Journal of Business Research, 153*, 351–370.

Katz, E., & Lazarsfeld, P. F. (1955). *Personal influence: The part played by people in the flow of mass communications*. Free Press.

Puligadda, S., Ross Jr, W. T., & Grewal, R. (2021). Emotional resonance and engagement: Examining the role of digital storytelling in branding. *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice, 29*(4), 412–429.

Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1986). The social identity theory of intergroup behavior. In S. Worchel & W. G. Austin (Eds.), *Psychology of intergroup relations* (pp. 7–24). Nelson-Hall.

Thompson, C. J., Rindfleisch, A., & Arsel, Z. (2006). Emotional branding and the cultural psychology of branding. *Journal of Consumer Research, 34*(1), 150–167.

Zaglia, M. E. (2013). Brand communities embedded in social networks. *Journal of Business Research, 66*(2), 216–223.

NielsenIQ. (2024). *Global breakthrough innovation white paper: Global consumer conference (China·Nansha) & International Consumer Center City (Guangzhou) Development Forum*. NielsenIQ.

Copyright Statement for Online Publication

© 2025 by the author(s). This article is published by Global Review of Humanities, Arts, and Society (GRHAS) under an exclusive license for online publication and digital dissemination.

The authors retain full copyright of this work. GRHAS holds the exclusive right of first publication in electronic format.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0).

To view a copy of this license, visit: https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/

All rights not granted under this license are reserved by the author(s) and the publisher.