

Through the looking glass: Consumers on Instagram

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The first digital photograph dates back to 1957. Today, more pictures are taken every two minutes than throughout the whole of the 1800s. And the vast majority of those are by people recording their lives and experiences, not brands or organisations.

While several organisations tap into user-generated visual content – think publisher [Hearst Magazines](#) and its analysis of Pinterest to help guide its editorial or fast-fashion jewellery online retailer [Baublebar](#), which monitors Instagram to determine which fashions are trending and then launches products to complement these – it remains a largely untapped marketing resource.

The images people share provide not only authentic brand assets that others are keen to engage with – they are also the most direct way of seeing the world through consumers' eyes.



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At the same time, the phenomenal improvement rate of mobile cameras is all but obliterating the gap between 'professional' vs 'amateur' visual content, as demonstrated by Apple's recent 'Shot on iPhone' campaign.

What's more, in a world where consumers are increasingly demanding transparency and authenticity, user-generated content (UGC) is consistently outperforming brand creative across a whole range of metrics.

Since 76% of consumers find UGC more honest than branded content, it's no surprise that companies see a 78% lift in conversion rates when their customers interact with it. After all, you'll never find a better sales rep than your most loyal and engaged followers.

Yet the value of UGC for brands extends so much further.

For example, channels such as Instagram provide the most unmediated access to consumers' lives.

People post content that expresses how they feel and what's important to them in real time, constructing stories and narratives they want to be associated with.

Kantar Added Value's recent study of holiday-related images shared on Instagram helped identify cultural trends currently shaping the world of travel and tourism. 20,000 posts were collected (identified by particular #hashtags), of which 2,000 representative ones were semiotically analysed to explore the visual signs they employed and the meanings they created.

While a similar approach can normally be employed by looking at sources in the wider culture (magazines, comms etc.), the use of UGC as raw material meant the team were able to assess the degree of consumer engagement with each of these cultural spaces, as well as quantify their relative importance. So for example, the much greater prevalence of 'Secret urban pathways' and 'Back to being a caveman' signals the growing importance of exploration for Instagram's millennial audience.

If the exercise were to be repeated next holiday season, comparing the new cultural space with the previous year would yield more insight into how they are evolving in the eyes of the consumer.

Then, players such as Olapic now enable brands to turn some of the best UGC into fully-fledged brand assets. Instead of creating professional content with agencies and models, we can now get in touch with Instagram users that have already taken that perfect shot.

Considering that 70% of people are more likely to buy a product if they see a positive and relatable consumer photo, this not only saves budget but also provides brands with the most authentic visual content imaginable.

But what to do if your brand simply does not show up on Instagram?

On a tactical level, there are some simple ways you can encourage people to take and share photos. For example, having identified that peonies are the most Instagrammed-flower, Topshop collaborated with Bloom & Wild to create a Peony Pop-Up in their Oxford Circus store, which led to huge social media exposure for both brands.

Chalk drawings, striking backdrops and a plethora of other visual elements with Instagram-friendly aesthetic can have that impact when adequately employed.

More significant, however, is the question of why people are not choosing to associate themselves with your brand when curating their online identity. One can argue that categories like travel, food and interior design are simply more social-media-friendly than say, personal care or footwear.

And this is where Kantar Added Value's recent work on creating cultural value demonstrates that brands in the same category can vary hugely in their social media exposure and engagement – and this is largely driven by how much of a role they play in culture.

For example Lush is an Instagram heavyweight, featuring prominently in millions of posts tagged as #lustime and #fightanimaltesting amongst others. By playing a clear and purposeful role in wider culture, it has become significant to consumers far beyond its actual products – and in doing so, acquired symbolic meaning of its own that people are

choosing to appropriate. By contrast #thebodyshop – despite playing in exactly the same category – has considerably fewer Instagram posts, most of which are product-centric.

A similar story emerges when comparing cultural icons like Converse with other footwear brands such as Clarks. Those that are associated with a set of values and experiences beyond their own category offer people the perfect 'raw material' for creating engaging, authentic and original content. In short, to make the most of UGC brands need to earn that right first by being in tune with the pockets of culture that their consumers care about.

Understanding and interacting with the wider world in a way that is genuinely valuable and meaningful to consumers is hard, but in an era of user-and-influencer-driven marketing brands simply have no other choice. Here are four places they can get help.

1. Video and the future of social watching:

More and more video content is shared everyday on social media, representing great sources of potential insights. But because of the difficulty to manage and analyse large quantities of video data, this type of content is often overlooked when it comes to social watching efforts. Last October, [IBM announced](#) they are bringing Watson's cognitive abilities to their already existing Cloud Video Technology. For now, the service is mostly used to monitor audience reactions and preferences, and to automate the segmentation and categorization of videos. But it represents the next frontier for social watching.

2. Understanding the meaning behind social data:

Social media watching and listening help marketers take a direct look into people's lives, without the biases that come from traditional research settings. Yet, for now, these techniques are not used to their full potential: social analysis is often limited to the 'what' and lacks the 'crucial 'why'. Turning this data into insights requires a layer of social sciences understanding, best brought by the types of culturally sensitive analysts we have at Kantar Added Value, who will uncover the anthropological meaning behind the data as the [Harvard Business Review](#) suggests.

3. Translating data analytics into action:

[McKinsey says](#) data analytics is meant to serve your business – not the other way around. It may sound obvious, but to make analytics really work, you have to start by ensuring they always answer real, precise business questions. Gathering data in the hope that something will jump out is unfortunately all too common. Make sure that the outcomes of the analysis will be actionable – and actually used. And avoid the pitfall of presenting the results in a way that is too technical and hard to understand for non-data scientists.

4. Brand logo recognition technologies to support social watching efforts:

Keeping an eye on the visual content consumers share about your brand is highly valuable, but comprehensive monitoring can be challenging to implement as users do not always reference the name of the brand verbally. Detecting your logo on media content allows for more thorough content coverage. Images are semi-analogue data, which make them more difficult to analyse compared to text-only data. But [The Stack reports](#) that logo recognition technologies already exist and are becoming more and more actionable for brands.

ABOUT IZZY PUGH

Izzy's grand tour of Added Value started as a graduate in 2000, building experience in qualitative insight, ethnography, cultural insight and brand strategy...
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