# Whose voice is heard? The influence of user-generated versus company-generated content on consumer scepticism towards CSR

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**on consumer scepticism towards CSR**

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**Abstract**

Social media is increasingly used to communicate corporate social responsibility (CSR). Stakeholders respond to CSR messages with user-generated content (UGC), signalling approval or disapproval, potentially shaping consumers' perceived legitimacy and scepticism towards CSR. Few studies have explored how UGC shapes these consumer responses. In the context of the UK food retail industry, this study explored what makes UGC more or less believed than company-generated CSR communication on social media. Through qualitative inquiry, the study identified that unique characteristics of social media, such as system-generated cues, lead UGC to be more believed than company-generated content, shaping perceived legitimacy. The study indicates the risks of communicating CSR through social media may be greater than previously suggested. It identifies recipient-related conditions under which these risks can be minimised.

**Summary statement of contribution**

By adopting a legitimacy theory perspective, this study contributes to knowledge by empirically identifying what makes UGC more/less believed when it co-exists with company-generated content about CSR. Through this, we contribute to understanding the factors that shape consumer perceptions of UGC in the formation of perceived legitimacy and scepticism towards CSR. It identifies recipient-related conditions under which UGC influences scepticism. The study contributes to practice in identifying how managers can minimise scepticism towards their CSR.

**Key Words**: CSR, Social media, User-generated content, Scepticism, Legitimacy, Consumers

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**Introduction**

Communicating corporate social responsibility (CSR) is challenging. Whilst consumers express desire for CSR information, they become leery when initiatives are promoted (Du et al., 2010). This creates a 'Catch 22' situation when organisations communicate CSR (Morsing et al., 2008). By promoting their socially responsible credentials, companies attract consumer scepticism (Pomering and Johnson, 2009). Scepticism can affect equity, lead to negative word-of-mouth (WOM) and reduce purchase intent (Leonidou and Skarmeas, 2017). In an era when organisations spend billions on promoting CSR, scepticism can diminish the effectiveness of communication campaigns (Leonidou and Skarmeas, 2017). This impacts return on investment. Concerning from a practitioner perspective, consumer scepticism of the corporate world is on the rise (Skarmeas and Leonidou, 2013).

Scepticism can detrimentally impact corporate legitimacy (Du and Vieira Jr., 2012). This is important because perceived legitimacy is essential in ensuring stakeholders' sustained support (Suchman, 1995). Legitimacy theory states that organisations can only secure their existence if they are perceived as operating within the values and norms of society (Farache and Perks, 2010). This is based on the idea that society allows an organisation to operate providing it behaves in accordance with its norms and values. CSR can be considered as a means of reinforcing legitimacy, as it provides an opportunity to communicate to stakeholders the organisation's congruence with societal concerns (Clarke and Gibson-Sweet, 1999). According to legitimacy theory, companies disclose CSR information to present a

socially responsible image so their behaviour can be legitimised with their constituents (Farache and Perks, 2010). While organisations use CSR to address complex societal and environmental problems, fulfilling consumer expectations and gaining legitimacy is an increasingly complex process (Schultz et al., 2013). The current study therefore adopts legitimacy theory as its theoretical framework, enabling these complexities to be explored in the context of social media. Through this we contribute to understanding the formation of legitimacy.

Social media is, for some, considered the ideal channel to communicate CSR to overcome scepticism and enhance legitimacy (Du and Vieira Jr., 2012). This is because it is more credible than traditional advertising (Kesavan et al., 2013; Sparks and Bradley, 2018), enjoys greater persuasive power (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010), effectively engages consumers (Uzunoğlu et al., 2017) and affords greater visibility (Lee et al., 2018). Consequently, organisations have embraced social media to communicate CSR (Stohl et al., 2017).

Despite its benefits, social media can create problems for organisations and adds complexities for maintaining legitimacy. When a company uses this channel, stakeholders' opinions are included alongside the company-generated CSR message, through user-generated content (UGC). UGC refers to publically visible online content initiated, created, circulated, and consumed by users (Kim and Johnson, 2016). It often includes brand-related subject matter (Smith et al., 2012). Negative UGC can lead to unfavourable attitudes towards brands (Lee et al., 2008). It can negatively impact purchase intention (Christodoulides et al., 2012; Lee and Youn, 2009) and detrimentally effect sales (Corstjens and Umbiljis, 2012). There is increased danger that stakeholders will, through UGC, critique, expose, and voice scepticism about organisations' CSR efforts in a critical conversation about corporate legitimacy (Lindgreen and Swaen 2010; Stohl et al., 2017). The significance of UGC's

impacts has called for further investigation of this phenomenon in a CSR setting (Rim and Song, 2016).

Whilst some effects of UGC have been identified, when it coexists with company-generated communication 'the degree to which each can be believed remains unclear' (Flanagin and Metzger, 2013, p.1626). In a CSR communication context, limited research examines the factors that make UGC more or less believed than company-generated content. Understanding these factors is necessary to develop ways of minimising the negative effects of UGC, ultimately reducing scepticism and enhancing perceived legitimacy. The purpose of this study is to investigate what makes UGC more or less believed by consumers when it coexists with company-generated CSR communication in their formation of perceived legitimacy towards the organisation's CSR.

Further, the effect of UGC may differ depending upon recipients' perceptions and characteristics. Yet little is known about the recipient-related conditions under which responses to UGC develop (Boyd et al., 2016), specifically in relation to scepticism towards CSR. This study adds novel insight in identifying the recipient-related conditions under which UGC influences CSR scepticism.

The study explored UGC and scepticism in the context of the UK supermarket industry, where CSR communication is increasing (Utgård, 2018). The study examines UK supermarkets at an industry level, as the holistic industry has been reported to communicate above what is legally obliged about CSR policies and practices (Jones et al., 2005). Consumers are interested in such communication, as supermarkets' social responsibility is important in their grocery shopping decisions (Memery et al., 2012). Increasingly, supermarkets use social media to communicate their CSR credentials. They therefore open themselves to frequent scrutiny from consumers through UGC. Supermarkets' growing

involvement in CSR communication, particularly via social media, means this industry is an ideal vehicle to explore UGC and consumer scepticism towards CSR.

The research questions guiding this study are: 1) what makes UGC more or less believed than company-generated CSR communication in shaping consumers' perceived legitimacy? 2) Under what recipient-related conditions does UGC influence consumer scepticism? Through this, the study makes theoretical contributions in bringing together CSR, social media and legitimacy theory to identify the unique characteristics of social media that make UGC more believed over company's CSR communication in consumers' formation of perceived legitimacy. Further, it establishes three recipient-related conditions that influence the effect of negative UGC and the extent to which scepticism develops. These include: recipients' utilitarian orientation; issue support and their perception of company responses to UGC.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. First, literature to establish the parameters of the study area and theoretical knowledge gaps is outlined, followed by the research methodology. Third, the analysis and findings are presented. Finally, the paper concludes with a discussion of study outcomes and their implications for academics and practitioners, limitations of the study, and future research directions.

## Literature Review

### *Legitimacy theory*

CSR is an organisation's commitment to minimising harmful effects of its actions and maximising its long-run beneficial impact on society (Mohr et al., 2001). CSR is often regarded as one of the best ways for businesses to maintain legitimacy (Schultz et al., 2013). Legitimacy can be considered as 'a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of

norms, values, beliefs, and definitions' (Suchman, 1995, p.574). The theory assumes there is a 'social contract' between the company and society (Perks et al., 2013). Legitimacy is vital for organisational survival as it influences consumer decision-making, positive evaluations of the company and purchase intent (Dowling and Pfeffer, 1975; Lee et al., 2018). This could be because consumers tend to allocate their resources to desirable, proper, or appropriate organisations (Suchman, 1995). Thus legitimacy supports organisations' credibility (Chung et al., 2016). By contrast, organisations with limited legitimacy risk being perceived negatively by stakeholders (Colleoni, 2013).

The UK supermarket industry has been seen to act in ways that could damage its legitimacy. For example, they have been accused of irresponsibly managing their supply chains (Czinkota et al., 2014) and contributing to obesity through marketing practices and selling high-calorie products (Lee et al., 2013a). Therefore they are challenged in gaining legitimacy. CSR initiatives can, however, act as an effective tool in offsetting negative images of the organisations (Lee et al., 2018). Thus, understanding what makes company communication more believed in the formation of consumers' perceived legitimacy is important, particularly for the food retail sector.

*CSR communication*

Legitimacy management rests heavily on the effective communication of CSR actions between the organisation and its stakeholders (Du and Viera Jr, 2012). Organisations use CSR communication to gain legitimacy by improving dialogue and engagement with consumers (Ferrell et al., 2010; Seele and Lock, 2015; Sen et al., 2006). Given a solid CSR record, effective communication will raise consumer awareness of an organisation's CSR, leading to loyalty, advocacy behaviours (Du, Bhattacharya and Sen, 2007) and improved corporate/brand image (Du et al., 2010). Theoretical advances have been made to understand

how the medium, message and source can be used to maximise CSR communication effectiveness. For medium, Schlegelmilch and Pollach (2005) identify corporate websites as a more appropriate channel to communicate CSR than corporate reports where, although credible (David, 2001), readership and effectiveness is limited.

The strategic approach to legitimacy requires organisations to carefully design and implement their communication strategy, paying attention to details of their CSR messages as well as utilising various communication channels (Du et al., 2010; Du and Vieira Jr., 2012). Prior literature suggests that credibility can be maximised through CSR message content, *e.g.* presenting the actual impact of the organisation's CSR on society is considered more credible than communicating policies (Pomering and Johnson, 2009). Schmeltz (2012) identifies that young consumers favour factually-based CSR communication. For corporate advertising related to environmental actions, such adverts' credibility was significantly greater than advertisements discussing general principles and values (Berens and van Rekom, 2008).

Regarding message source, prior research identifies that messages constructed and verified by the organisations (*e.g.* advertising) serve to persuade consumers, but enjoy higher credibility when constructed by the company and verified by a third party (*e.g.* cause-related marketing) (Berens and Popma, 2014). However, CSR communication constructed and verified by third parties, whilst being more credible, risks being perceived as a PR device (Berens and Popma, 2014). This suggests a context where the act of communicating CSR is challenging.

What, how and where to communicate CSR from a business perspective has therefore received attention in a number of areas (Du et al., 2010; Schlegelmilch and Pollach, 2005). Fewer studies have explored the stakeholder-specific factors that influence CSR communication effectiveness. Those that do suggest 'issue support' influences how CSR messages are received. This is the extent to which consumers support the focal issue of a

CSR initiative *i.e.* what it is and what it does (Du et al., 2010). Issue support relates to consumers' motivation to process CSR information (MacInnes et al., 1991). Whilst their research is conceptual, Du et al. (2010) argue that CSR communication about initiatives perceived to be more relevant to stakeholders is more likely to break through media clutter and hence be more effective. When consumers are interested in a social issue, they may show greater support (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2004), potentially placing more faith in the organisation's CSR message.

### *Scepticism*

A key challenge in communicating CSR is minimising consumer scepticism (Schmeltz, 2012), *i.e.* an individual's tendency to doubt, disbelieve, and question (Skarmeas and Leonidou, 2013). The relationship between CSR and scepticism is well-established in the context of cause-related marketing (Singh and del Bosque, 2008), environmental claims (Webb and Mohr, 1998), socially irresponsible behaviour (Green and Peloza, 2014), and specific CSR programs (Pirsch et al., 2007). According to Morsing and Schultz (2006), the more companies' ethical and social activities are exposed, the more critical stakeholder attention they attract. This is recognised as a 'self-promoter's paradox' (Ashforth and Gibbs, 1990), where organisations that overstate their corporate legitimacy risk decreasing legitimacy.

Doubting an organisation's CSR may prevent consumers supporting such initiatives or rewarding the company. This limits the favourable responses the organisation can reap from its CSR engagement. Sceptical consumers pose risks as they are more likely to warn others not to buy certain products (Laczniak et al., 2001), boycott brands they dislike (Chylinski and Chu, 2010), or engage in active retribution behaviour (Dabholkar, 1994). Sceptical consumers believe organisations communicate false or incomplete information to

mislead them to improve corporate image (Parguel et al., 2011). Scepticism can therefore damage the consumer-company relationship (Skarmeas and Leonidou, 2013).

Studies have considered how to communicate CSR to reduce scepticism and enhance legitimacy. For example, endorsed communication and genres traditionally regarded as highly credible, such as corporate reports, are recommended (Morsing et al., 2008; Morsing and Schultz, 2006). Communicating CSR messages with factual language (Sen et al., 2009), utilising specific examples of CSR initiatives and achievements, with supporting facts, is considered preferable over general descriptions of principles (Berens and van Rekom, 2008). Communicating initiatives with a high level of CSR 'fit' (*i.e.* the perceived congruence between a social issue and the company's business) can also minimise scepticism (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006; Du et al., 2010). Other studies (*e.g.* Schlegelmilch and Pollach, 2005; Schmeltz, 2012) argue companies should move beyond communicating through subtle channels, such as corporate reports, to embrace new media.

### *CSR communication in the digital age*

Voluntary disclosure of CSR through social media can enhance an organisation's legitimacy, elevating its image and perception among stakeholders (Manetti and Bellucci, 2016). This is because, when companies communicate on social media, they open their messages to criticism, creating an impression of sincerity (van Halderen et al., 2011). Korschun and Du (2013) advocate social media for CSR communication, as it enables 'virtual CSR dialogues'. These allow consumers to actively participate in CSR creation, signalling that the company is open, transparent and committed to its CSR causes. Haigh et al. (2013) reinforce this, suggesting communicating CSR through company Facebook pages bolsters consumers' positive perceptions of the CSR initiative.

Recently, researchers have started applying legitimacy theory in a social media context. For example, Colleoni (2013) and Castelló et al. (2016) analysed stakeholder tweets about organisations' CSR and sustainable development to measure the outcomes of communication strategies. Etter et al. (2018) use sentiment analysis to study how individual judgements in blogs, tweets and Facebook shape organisational legitimacy. As legitimacy can be increased by gaining social support (Suchman, 1995), Lee et al. (2018) contend that social networking sites are an effective platform for CSR communication, to gain social support for CSR initiatives. Social media is therefore advocated as a tool for organisations to legitimise their presence within society and change their socially responsible reputation among stakeholders (Manetti and Bellucci, 2016).

Surprisingly, much research advocating social media for CSR communication treat it as a traditional communication channel. Social media, however, differs significantly due to its interactive nature. When an organisation communicates CSR through social media it attracts user-generated content. Unlike traditional channels, organisations' social media communication typically coexists with UGC (Eberle et al., 2013). Therefore, stakeholder opinions form part of the communication, blurring the boundaries between company-controlled and third party communication. Historically, WOM was generally equated with one-to-one communication, whereas UGC may be read by millions of consumers (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Unless removed by the organisation, UGC is visible for the indefinite future. Stakeholders can respond to UGC, expanding and developing the online conversation about the company message. This user-generated communication could enhance or detract from a brand, affecting its reputation and legitimacy (Sparks and Bradley, 2018).

Additional characteristics set social media apart from traditional communication channels. Distinct from user-generated content, social media presents receivers with system-generated content. System-generated content is often numerical information which the social

media site generates, such as number of 'follows' or 'likes' a post receives (Lee et al., 2018). This signals the popularity of an organisation or users' approval of its posts (Westerman et al., 2012). Whilst some studies question the meaning of Facebook 'likes' on corporate social media pages (McCorkindale and DiStaso, 2013), others identify that system-generated cues can influence public opinion. Utz (2010) finds that an individual's number of social networking site friends influences their perceived popularity. For organisations, companies with high numbers of followers are more likely to be deemed as trustworthy and credible (Jin and Phua, 2014). This is reinforced by Lee et al. (2018), who identify that high numbers of followers on an organisation's social media page leads consumers to perceive the organisation's CSR initiative as socially approved. This suggests the unique features of social media can shape consumer perceptions.

Social media aggregates user comments about company posts in a way which is not possible through traditional communication channels, enabling large volumes of UGC to accumulate. Flanagin and Metzger (2013) find, in the context of movie ratings, higher volumes of ratings from movie-goers significantly impact consumers' perceived credibility of, reliance on and confidence in such ratings. Lee (2009) explores the effects of online user-generated reviews, identifying that volume of reviews positively affects online shoppers' purchase intentions. Thus, evidence suggests the unique features of social media may shape consumer perceptions, attitude and behaviour. In the context of CSR communication, this could create challenges for organisations that use social media to communicate CSR campaigns.

Alongside its potential challenges, research has begun to question the benefit of communicating CSR via social media. Gruber et al. (2015) argue that company-managed social media pages are the least credible channel in the eyes of the consumer. This reinforces Colleoni's (2013) findings that, when virtual CSR dialogues are used, company

communication on social media is perceived as marketing practice, engendering negative stakeholder responses. Boyd et al. (2016) emphasise this, suggesting CSR communication on social media resembles advertising and PR. The study recommends companies move away from social media as a CSR communication tool. Fournier and Avery (2011) argue social media is an environment designed purely for connecting people, where brands are unwelcome. Despite such challenges, companies increasingly embrace social media to communicate CSR (Eberle et al., 2013). Consequently, UGC inevitably develops (Whelan et al., 2013). This could be incongruent with the corporate CSR message, potentially posing considerable risk to reputation and perceived legitimacy (Eberle et al., 2013).

*User-generated content*

UGC is found to be more impactful than marketer-generated content (MGC) on consumer purchase behaviour, particularly when there is a higher level of information richness (Goh et al., 2013). UGC is found to impact sales of music (Dhar and Chang, 2009), books (Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006) and video games (Zhu and Zhang, 2010). The valence (positive or negative) of UGC can also drive (or impede) consumer purchase behaviour (Pavlou and Dimoka, 2006), with negative UGC detrimentally impacting brand sales (Corstjens and Umbiljis, 2012). Conversely, in the context of online news, recipients are identified as being more sceptical towards UGC (Wahl-Jorgensen et al., 2010). In this instance, UGC was characterised as being uninformed and inarticulate. This was because the political opinions of the content creators were perceived as being irrelevant, with limited expertise.

For CSR, conventional wisdom suggests CSR communication sparking positive UGC will be perceived more positively, with higher credibility, than messages generating negative UGC. The negativity effect (Folkes and Kamins, 1999), where negative comments have

greater impact than positive comments, reinforces this. Consistent with this phenomenon, Eberle et al. (2013) show the detrimental impacts of negative comments about an organisations' CSR initiative are greater than the favourable effects of positive comments, influencing corporate reputation. For utilitarian products, negative product reviews have more effect than positive reviews (Sen and Lerman, 2007). Negative UGC damages stakeholder trust, perceptions of CSR and corporate reputation (Haigh and Wigley, 2015), undoing the positive impacts of CSR communication.

Negative UGC clearly concerns organisations. Dekay (2012) emphasises this, identifying that 48% of organisations studied deleted negative UGC on Facebook. In their investigation of 251 European corporations, Illia et al. (2013) found that communication managers were concerned about using social media to communicate CSR, due to negative UGC. Hence it creates significant challenges for organisations when they communicate via social media.

*Company response to UGC*

An emergent theme in the literature examines company responses to UGC. Although research is still in its infancy, studies in a hospitality and tourism context consider how company responses to complaints or negative reviews impact consumers (e.g. van Noort and Willemsen, 2011). Chan and Guillet (2011) suggest that, for hotel managers, being unresponsive to customers' negative comments may result in losing the customers' future business. From a CSR perspective, if companies do not acknowledge or respond to UGC, they may alienate existing and potential customers.

Some benefits of responding to UGC have been identified. Sparks et al. (2016) found that, when hotels respond to reviews, consumers show more trust in the organisation. This echoes van Noort and Willemsen (2011) who identify that company response, or 'webcare

interventions', to negative customer-generated blogs about car brands engender more positive brand evaluations. Lee and Song (2010) exposed participants to online customer complaints. When organisations responded with an apology, compensation, and/or corrective action, consumers evaluated the company more favourably. Hence when companies do not respond to publically visible complaints, they allow negative information about the brand to stand unchallenged, potentially damaging the organisation's reputation. Whilst many of these studies hail from a hospitality perspective, they suggest that company responses to UGC could be influential in a CSR context.

Based on the review of relevant literature, a number of gaps emerge. Although scholars note the importance of attaining legitimacy through CSR campaigns (Du and Vieira Jr., 2012), 'few studies have actually examined the mechanism that leads to perceived legitimacy' (Lee et al., 2018, p.203), particularly in the context of social media. Whilst prior research suggests UGC can have significant impacts for organisations and their legitimacy, studies do not consider what makes UGC more or less believed than company-generated content to cause such effects, particularly from a legitimacy theory perspective. The unique features of social media, such as its system-generated cues and the way it aggregates UGC, could influence the extent to which consumers believe UGC and perceive it as more legitimate than the company message. This has led Castelló et al. (2016, p.407) to argue 'research is […] needed to understand how corporations gain legitimacy through engagements in social media'.

Prior literature focusses upon communication source characteristics (*e.g.* Du et al., 2010). Recipient characteristics receive less attention. From a consumer perspective, however, the effectiveness of CSR communication will be driven by the nature of the source *and* the unique perspective and characteristics of the recipient (Flanagin and Metzger, 2013). Whilst UGC can lead to positive and negative responses, little is known about the recipient-

related conditions under which such responses develop (Boyd et al., 2016), specifically in relation to consumer scepticism (Skarmeas and Leonidou, 2013). Research suggests that when a company responds to UGC, consumer perceptions may be more positive. This has not been examined in the context of CSR or UGC on social media.

We address these gaps in theory and, in doing so, answer calls for research to gain insights into consumers' discernment of CSR communication (Lauritsen and Perks, 2015). The relatively embryonic nature of social media calls for exploratory research.


**Methodology**

Qualitative exploratory research through semi-structured interviews was adopted for a number of reasons. First, it is relevant for exploring and understanding consumer perceptions, beliefs and values (McCracken, 1988; Öberseder et al., 2011). Second, limited empirical research that examines CSR communication, social media and UGC exists and this context lends itself to a qualitative approach (Boyd et al., 2016; Zaltman et al., 1982). Third, the CSR literature calls for future research relating to social media to adopt qualitative methods (Lee et al., 2013a). Qualitative inquiry enables a sense of realism when examining consumers' responses to CSR communication (Green and Peloza, 2014), enabling in-depth exploration of consumer views, perceptions and opinions. This approach is in line with previous studies that examined consumer response to CSR communication (*e.g.* Brunk, 2010; Mohr et al., 2001; Öberseder et al., 2011) and impact of social media (Boyd et al., 2016).


*Data collection*

The study design minimised the risk of social desirability bias, which can occur during investigation of consumers' response to CSR (Brunk, 2010; Green and Peloza, 2014). Interviews were conducted in convenient venues, where participants felt most comfortable, to

encourage open and honest discussion (Öberseder et al., 2011). Participants were advised of the interview topic and its aim of exploring their opinions and attitudes and that there were no right or wrong answers. Face-to-face interviews rather than focus groups were used to minimise self-presentational concerns (Wooten and Reed, 2000) and prevent participants conforming to the opinion of dominant group members (Bristol and Fern, 2003).

A semi-structured interview guide was developed to ensure essential issues were discussed without losing focus (Bryman, 2012) and to maintain continuity and conversation flow (Gordon and Langmaid, 1988). Questions were developed based on the literature. Their relevance was tested through discussion with three CSR specialist academics and a social media business practitioner. The interview guide followed well-established interview procedures; questions stemmed from general to specific inquiries (Bernhard, 1988) to encourage open-ended responses, enabling deeper understanding of individuals' perceptions and attitudes. It was piloted with two male and two female participants. The interview guide was adapted and evolved in use to ensure continued relevance.

Introductory questions sought to establish participants' relationship with their most used supermarket and social media usage, specifically in the context of information about their named supermarket. Participants were then asked general questions about their awareness and perceptions of CSR. From this, questions focused upon supermarkets' CSR. Participants were asked to recall and discuss specific examples of supermarkets' CSR initiatives, CSR communication they had experienced on social media and their experience of associated UGC.

In line with prior qualitative investigation into social media (Marder et al., 2016), vignettes were used to help stimulate participants' thinking and discussion in a focussed way. Participants were presented with real-life examples of company-generated CSR communication from Facebook and related UGC. These placed the social media

phenomenon in a concrete CSR context (Törrönen, 2018), allowing in-depth exploration into the reasons behind the perceived believability of UGC. Consistent with Kim and Johnson (2016), vignettes were taken from Facebook, as it is a dominant social media platform which enables UGC to be presented with company-generated posts simultaneously. Vignette 1 was taken from Tesco's Facebook page. This concerned reducing food waste and donating to the food redistribution charity FareShare (see Appendix 1). The post demonstrated high CSR 'fit' and used factual information. Questions allowed participants to discuss their perceptions of the organisation's initiative. (*E.g.* 'what is your reaction to this post?'; 'how does it make you feel towards the supermarket?')

Real-life examples of associated UGC (including positive, negative and neutral comments) were included in Vignette 1 (see Appendix 1 for details of the inputs). Participants were asked how the UGC affected their perception of the CSR, the extent to which it influenced their opinions of the CSR initiative, whether they found company- or user-generated communication more believable, and why this was the case. This was repeated with Vignette 2, from Sainsbury's, using a Facebook post which advertised the organisation's commitment to ban barn eggs from all its own-brand products. A similar mix of user-generated comments was then presented to participants (Appendix 1). Using vignettes from two different supermarkets ensured participants' perception of the individual companies did not influence their response.

20 interviews were conducted in the UK. All interviews were conducted in person by one interviewer, reducing the potential for bias to emerge (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The interviews ranged from 60 to 120 minutes in length. To maximise the study's reliability, and reduce the risk of observer bias, all interviews were recorded with participants' permission and subsequently transcribed verbatim by the interviewer, without waiting until all interviews

were completed (Silverman, 2010).  Observational notes were taken during interviews, to gain a full picture of participants' responses.


*Sample*

As in-depth exploration was the goal of this research, a small but diverse sample is recommended (Öberseder et al., 2011).  Interviewing continued until a high level of repetition in response occurred (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).  The sample is consistent with recommendations that 20 to 30 interviews are appropriate in a qualitative study (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011).

Based on purposive sampling, potential respondents were contacted outside different supermarkets using an intercept method to screen them for relevance to the study.  The screening criteria used was that participants had to have a general understanding and knowledge of CSR and some awareness of how it was used by the UK supermarket industry. This generated an initial six participants.  At the end of each interview, a snowball technique was utilised, where respondents were asked to suggest others who fitted the criteria.

In total, 11 females and nine males were interviewed, ranging from 18 to 60 years old. Care was taken to select participants that covered a broad range of backgrounds, engagement in social media, knowledge of and attitudes towards CSR, and demographic criteria with regards to marital status, education and occupation.  The characteristics of the sample demonstrate the diversity of the participants interviewed (see Table 1).


(Please take in Table 1 about here)

**Table 1 – Sample characteristics**

| Participant number | Gender | Age | Occupation | Education Level | Pre-existing attitude towards supermarkets & CSR | Ethical orientation & buyer social responsibility | Social media usage |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| #1 | M | 18 | Full-time senior school student | Lower school leaver certificate | Negative in his attitude towards supermarkets, showing some cynicism towards them and their CSR. | Limited engagement in buyer social responsibility. | Highly engaged in social media. |
| #2 | M | 21 | Full-time undergraduate student | High school leaver certificate | Ambivalent about supermarkets and their CSR. | Demonstrated low engagement in buyer social responsibility. | Regular user of social media, but rarely generates content. |
| #3 | F | 19 | Full-time undergraduate student | High school leaver certificate | Indifferent in her opinion of, and trust in, supermarkets and their CSR. | Has some socially responsible practices, but these are often influenced by external factors. | Used several social media sites but was relatively passive. |
| #4 | F | 20 | Full-time undergraduate student | High school leaver certificate | Relatively positive in her attitude towards supermarkets. | Not highly ethically oriented, engaging in limited buyer social responsibility. | Highly involved on social media. |
| #5 | M | 26 | Nurse | Undergraduate degree | Relatively cynical towards the supermarket industry in general and showed limited trust in their CSR. | Limited ethical orientation. Favours convenience and cost over social responsibility in purchasing. | Highly engaged on social media. |
| #6 | M | 27 | Primary school teacher | Post-graduate degree | Relatively positive in his general attitude towards supermarkets, yet has limited trust in them. | Engages in some buyer social responsibility. | Highly engaged on social media. |
| #7 | F | 26 | Highways maintenance | High school | Shows cynicism towards supermarkets and is | Engages in some buyer social responsibility, yet | Regularly uses social media. |

| | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | officer | lever certificate | sceptical towards their CSR. | mainly as a result of social pressure. | |
| #8 | F | 26 | Customer service assistant | Undergraduate degree | Shows mixed opinions of supermarkets. | Limited ethical orientation. | Limited engagement in social media and is passive on such sites. |
| #9 | F | 29 | Customer-Relations Manager | Lower school leaver certificate | Her attitude towards supermarkets is predominantly positive. | Demonstrates high levels of ethical orientation. | Highly engaged on several social media sites. |
| #10 | M | 38 | Lecturer | Post-graduate degree | Highly cynical towards the supermarket industry and sceptical towards their CSR. | Demonstrates engagement in buyer social responsibility, but is mainly mindful of his environmental impact. | Low levels of engagement in social media. |
| #11 | M | 42 | Chiropractor | PhD | Relatively negative in his attitude towards supermarkets, but is aware of their CSR. | Demonstrated some ethical orientation and engages in social responsibility at a personal level. | Not highly involved on social media. |
| #12 | F | 35 | Drama Therapist | Master's degree | Shows both positive and negative attitudes towards supermarkets and their CSR. | Highly engaged in buyer social responsibility. | She engages on social media regularly. |
| #13 | F | 39 | Yoga teacher | Undergraduate degree | She is highly cynical towards supermarkets in general and has limited trust in them. | Highly engaged in buyer social responsibility. | Highly engaged in social media. |
| #14 | M | 53 | Computer Engineer | Post-graduate degree | He rarely shops with supermarkets and has limited trust in them or their CSR. | Limited ethical orientation. | Highly engaged on social media. |
| #15 | M | 51 | Head Teacher | Post-graduate degree | He regularly uses supermarkets, yet shows some negativity in his | Social responsibility is important to him. | Never uses social media. |

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|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | attitude towards them. | | |
| #16 | F | 48 | Secondary school teacher | Post-graduate degree | Highly cynical and sceptical in her attitude towards supermarkets' communication and behaviour. Sceptical towards their CSR activities. | Shows some ethical orientation. | Highly engaged on social media. |
| #17 | F | 47 | Part-time administrator, civil service | BTEC National Certificate | She is negative in her attitude towards supermarkets, with limited trust in them. | Has socially responsible values, but does not engage in buyer social responsibility. | Some social media engagement. Uses Facebook daily. |
| #18 | M | 55 | Business Development Manager | Undergraduate degree | He has a relatively negative overall attitude towards supermarkets, yet shows positivity towards their CSR. | Very highly ethically oriented, with high buyer social responsibility. | Uses no social media sites. |
| #19 | F | 55 | Unemployed | Lower school leaver certificate | She is ambivalent in her attitude towards supermarkets. | Not heavily engaged in buyer social responsibility | Uses Facebook and YouTube. |
| #20 | F | 60 | Retired | High school leaver certificate | She has a mixed attitude towards supermarkets and their CSR. | Highly ethically oriented and highly engaged in buyer social responsibility, which is 'very important' to her. | Uses social media, but is not highly engaged on the platforms. |

*Data analysis*

In line with prior research (*e.g.* Boyd et al., 2016), we used a comparative method in coding and analysing the data. This involved simultaneous data collection and analysis, the data coding process, constant comparison, memo writing, sampling to refine the researcher's emerging theoretical ideas, and integration of a theoretical framework (Charmaz, 2006). Data generated and extant theory were compared and contrasted throughout the data collection and analysis process, in a fluid movement between theory and data (Green and Peloza, 2014). To gain a high level of familiarity with the data, numerous readings of the transcripts, reflective diaries, and field notes were undertaken, which were examined in identifying emerging themes. Throughout the coding process verbatim sections of the transcripts were coded. In accord with prior studies (*e.g.* Britt and Perks, 2015), descriptive codes were created. Topic coding (Richards, 2009) was then used to arrange and label the data according to different themes and sub-themes. A priori coding was used for themes that were determined prior to data analysis (Britt and Perks, 2015). Posteriori coding was used for themes that emerged from the data (Gibson and Brown, 2009). Coding of data was carried out until theoretical saturation was reached. Thematic analysis was then applied and the findings were based upon rich text analysis.

In total, 573 pages of transcripts were reviewed, alongside accompanying field notes to better understand what made UGC more or less believed than company-generated content and the recipient-related conditions that influenced these effects. Consistent with prior research (Brunk, 2010), participants were provided a copy of the transcript to verify the interviewer's interpretation.

**Findings**

The findings are presented through evidence based on rich text, with interpretation supported by extant literature. Key themes are discussed in line with the study's research

questions. Initially, the characteristics of social media which make UGC more believed than company-generated CSR communication, thus shaping perceived legitimacy, are explored. Themes that emerged include: the range of opinions UGC offers; volume of UGC; and presence of system-generated information. These influencing factors are considered in relation to participants' formulation of scepticism and perceived legitimacy. Finally, recipient-related conditions that influence consumer scepticism are examined.

### *Range of comments*

Research recommends companies include factual information (Sen et al., 2009) and demonstrate high CSR 'fit' (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006) to minimise scepticism towards CSR communication. Using vignettes, participants were shown company-generated content that had been communicated on social media, which met these criteria (see Appendix 1). Based on prior research, it was expected such communication would be believed and generate limited consumer scepticism, whilst maximising perceived legitimacy. Yet one of the characteristics of social media is that it enables an array of associated UGC to be viewed simultaneously with the company message. The vignettes therefore included UGC. This represented the more dynamic and confused reality of how CSR communication is seen by consumers on social media.

Participants were questioned about the extent to which they believed the company-generated content and UGC. We found that, when CSR communication coexists with UGC, the company message was distorted. Despite the CSR message being factually-based, with high CSR 'fit', for most participants UGC was more believed. A key reason for this was the range of aggregated opinions UGC provided, which would not be available through traditional WOM. These opinions differed in valance and were in some cases incongruent with the company message.

*In isolation I might think that the CSR is great, not recognising all the issues these people [through UGC] have raised. […] I'd sway more towards the comments. There's more comments there, rather than just one point of view, there's lots of points of view (#19).*

*With Facebook you can get more of the background, you can have more expert knowledge from other people who know what they're talking about. They [UGC] help broaden my ideas, because this way I've got, instead of just the company view, I've got lots of other views and I can bring them all together. […] It [UGC] gives you a broader perspective on anything really. That's the good thing about social media, is it allows lots of views to be put across in one place (#5).*

Although organisations' CSR communication on social media may, in isolation, be believed by consumers, when it coexists with UGC, its perceived believability and, ultimately, its perceived legitimacy is reduced. It seemed that as UGC exposed participants to new opinions and information, their perception of the CSR communication was reshaped, particularly as some UGC was incongruent with the company-managed communication. This challenges the extent to which using concrete, factual message content can enhance the effectiveness of the CSR message.

When UGC was mixed in valance, the existence of a negativity effect was evident. In discussing the vignettes, negative UGC was weighted most heavily and seemingly more believed. In contrast, positive UGC had limited influence. This led recipients to doubt the legitimacy of the company-generated message and develop scepticism towards the CSR:

*The negative comments kind of contextualised my initial perceptions and made me realise things I wasn't previously aware of. So they've tarnished my positivity a little bit and made me wonder if the supermarket's trying to capitalise on CSR (#11).*

Negative UGC may have been more believed, and therefore influential in shaping consumer scepticism, as negative cues tend to be more informative than positive or neutral comments (Ahluwalia, 2002; Green and Peloza, 2014; Rim and Song, 2016). As one participant observed: *'people being critical about something is more useful than being positive' (#5).* Further, positive comments that praise CSR campaigns and reinforce the company message do not violate the recipient's expectations and hence have limited impact on their opinion of the CSR. The notion that social media can be used as a medium to reduce consumer scepticism and enhance perceived legitimacy towards an organisations' CSR communication still holds sway in the literature (Bruhn and Schnebelen, 2017). This approach, however, is unlikely to be effective once the consumer is exposed to negative UGC. Instead, it emerged that enhanced scepticism resulted in reduced perceived legitimacy. As cynicism towards the supermarket industry is rising (Lee et al., 2013b), this is an important finding in raising organisations' awareness of the risks UGC could create when social media is used for CSR communication.

Therefore, we find that when consumers perceive UGC to add additional information and opinions to company-generated messages, such content is more believed because a broad range of perspectives is perceived as being more reliable than a single company message. When UGC includes comments negative in valance its detrimental effect, in influencing scepticism, is much higher than the favourable effect of positive UGC. This adds new insight

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for CSR communication, as prior research suggests the negativity effect does not always hold for traditional WOM. For example, East et al. (2008) found that positive WOM has more impact on brand purchase intention than negative WOM. Yet we identify the opposite in the context of CSR communication on social media. In this context UGC creates a challenge not considered in studies that advocate social media for CSR communication (*e.g.* Haigh et al., 2013; Kesavan et al., 2013).

### *Presence of system-generated information*

One characteristic, unique to social media, which made UGC more believed than company-generated content and shaped perceived legitimacy was system-generated information relating to UGC (*e.g.* number of 'likes' comments received). Participants used this information as a cue that signalled the extent to which the comment was publically supported. As Interviewee 7 remarked when viewing UGC in the vignettes:

*I'm just looking at the difference in 'likes', [...] because that's another thing I actually look at, if someone makes a comment, is how many 'likes' they've got (#7).*

When UGC gained numerous 'likes' from other social media users, participants perceived such comments as 'endorsed', giving them greater weighting. This enhanced the perceived believability of the comment, leading participants to believe such UGC over the company-generated content.

*Yeah, I did actually look at the 'likes'. [...] Definitely would look at the 'likes' to see which way people are swayed towards and I'd maybe go with them (#8).*

Interestingly, system-generated information relating to the company-generated post was considered less important to participants. This is in line with McCorkindale and DiStaso (2013) who question the meaning of a Facebook 'like' in relation to company-managed content. Our findings extend this research in suggesting the opposite for 'likes' of user-generated comments. Participants looked to the number of 'likes' comments received to gauge how much an argument or opinion was publically supported. When participants perceived others supported the UGC, it was more believed than the company-generated post.

Unlike company-generated content, UGC often lacks facts or evidence from known experts (Lee et al., 2018). Consumers are faced with overwhelming amounts of information to evaluate on their own. When they face high volumes of invalidated UGC, perhaps consumers see 'likes' on a comment as guidance by which to form attitudes towards the company-generated message. This may lead them to place more weighting on 'likes' of UGC comments over company-generated content, leading to stronger belief in UGC. Based on prior research about system-generated information as a signal of social approval (*e.g.* Hofer and Aubert, 2013), when UGC receives a high number of 'likes', this signals how others evaluate the UGC (*i.e.* social approval of the comments). From a legitimacy theory perspective, what is considered desirable according to social norms is, by definition, 'legitimate' (Lee et al., 2018; Suchman, 1995). Thus, the level of perceived social support towards UGC (signalled by the number of 'likes') should increase its believability and the extent to which it is perceived as legitimate. This is because it signals that the UGC is desirable within the norms of society (Suchman, 1995). Hence, higher perceived social norm of the UGC should lead such content to be perceived as more legitimate than the company message.

Given the negativity effect, it emerged that when negative UGC received high numbers of 'likes', it had greater influence. Scepticism towards the company-generated CSR message therefore grew.

### *Volume of user-generated content*

The volume of UGC associated with company-generated CSR communication emerged as an influencing factor on the extent to which it was believed over the organisation's message. Participants' belief in the UGC informed the extent to which they subsequently perceived the organisation's CSR message as legitimate.

Interestingly, not all UGC was believed in all cases. Several interviewees recalled instances where they had seen CSR communication on social media, which had generated a small number of user comments. In these cases participants were less willing to accept UGC at face value and it was questioned more. They indicated that their doubt stemmed from the belief that, when there was a small volume of UGC, it is more likely this had been fabricated by the organisation posting the CSR message. UGC, in this instance, was therefore perceived as being unreliable and participants were reticent to believe it.

> *I'm always a bit wary when there aren't many [UGC] comments. [...] It kind of makes you wonder if they work for the company or something (#13).*

It emerged that, when there was less UGC, participants scrutinised such comments more closely. In these instances, issues arose relating to message source, which could explain this finding. As participants believed the UGC could have been constructed by the company, they were less willing to believe it. This led interviewees to doubt the UGC. In these instances, UGC lost its perceived transparency and legitimacy.

In contrast, when participants recalled experiencing large volumes of UGC, this effect was less evident. It emerged strongly from the data that, when high volumes of UGC were present, as opposed to low volumes, the UGC was believed more:

*When you get 20 or 30 or 40 or 50 comments, you start to think, 'maybe I was ambivalent about it [CSR] before, but that many people might have a point'. [...] One person won't make me change my mind, but if there's enough volume of comments, it'll change my perception of things (#5).*

When large volumes of UGC accumulate, it makes it less likely that any one organisation has complete control over all the opinions represented (Flanagin and Metzger, 2013). As volume of UGC increases, it seems consumer confidence in and perceived legitimacy of such content grows. Therefore, whilst small numbers of user-generated comments could be fabricated by the organisation, leading consumers to doubt them, large volumes of UGC are less easily manipulated and therefore less susceptible to being perceived as 'fake'. In these instances, participants indicated that they would more readily believe UGC, which subsequently has greater influence on their perceived legitimacy of the CSR message. These findings are akin with prior research which, although set in differing contexts, show similar effects. Studies suggest that volume of user ratings is positively associated with outcomes such as purchase intent (Lee, 2009; Liu, 2006). In the context of movie ratings, Flanagin and Metzger (2013) identify that greater volumes of UGC are perceived as more credible and reliable.

Therefore, whilst supermarkets may use social media as a CSR communication tool to increase legitimacy, if consumers perceive the company has manipulated the UGC associated with their post, the attempt to generate consumer belief in the message and gain legitimacy may be in vain. These findings add complexity to the debate over whether social media is an

ideal CSR communication channel. They have implications for practitioners in terms of what to monitor and expect in relation to volume of UGC, when using social media to communicate CSR. Whilst prior research suggests consumers are more likely to believe UGC over the company message (Goh et al., 2013), in an era of fake news the findings provide interesting insight which demonstrates a shift in consumers' willingness to take UGC at face value.

### *Recipient-related conditions*

The findings suggest negative UGC is often weighted more heavily and is more believed than company-generated content. This can lead to enhanced scepticism towards the CSR message. We identified key recipient-related conditions under which such scepticism could be reduced. This could help organisations manage the potentially negative effects of UGC. Central to this was the role played by recipients' *utilitarian orientation*; *issue support*; and *perception of company response to UGC*.

### *Utilitarian orientation*

It emerged that negative UGC had limited effect when participants had a utilitarian perspective. Under this recipient-related condition, participants identified that the positive outcomes of the CSR communicated outweighed any unfavourable motives that may drive the initiative. For instance, in discussing vignette 1, participants with a utilitarian perspective indicated that, when the CSR message indicated that so many people would benefit from the initiative, it acted as a buffer against associated negative UGC.

*This is the kind of scheme I like to see.  I think Tesco are really trying and I'd support that.  […] These [UGC] say it's a PR stunt, but I don't care if somebody's going to benefit (#20).*

Interviewee 2 emphasised how negative UGC was dismissed when they perceived CSR to deliver benefits:

*A lot of people are quick to shoot it [the CSR] down on Facebook, but it's good news anyway, so it should be encouraged. […] At the end of the day, if all those people in need get charity then it's good (#2).*

With this perspective, participants exhibited limited scepticism towards CSR and exposure to negative UGC did not change their opinion.  Interestingly, limited attention was paid to positive UGC, indicating that under this recipient-related condition UGC is discounted by consumers.

*Issue support*

Prior research suggests that issue support is an important influencing factor in the relationship between CSR communication and participants' scepticism (Du et al., 2010).  Our findings extend this, identifying a key element within this variable which could drive consumers' issue support and shape scepticism.  When CSR initiatives were considered local to the participant, they were more inclined to support it, creating greater issue support and less doubt in the integrity of the scheme.

Participants were questioned about their perceptions of supermarkets' CSR communication. Greater support and minimal scepticism was demonstrated towards CSR messages about local initiatives.

*If Sainsbury's are doing an initiative in London or whatever I don't really care. But if Asda have set up something for school kids here, if it's local to you it matters more (#5).*

Interestingly, such individuals initially exhibited pre-existing scepticism towards the supermarket industry. This was minimised in discussing supermarkets' local initiatives. Probing questions were asked to determine why local programmes 'mattered more'. Such schemes sparked their interest as there was less perceived distance between the CSR activity and the consumer. As the participant could relate local initiatives to a known context, it made it easier for them to construct positive evaluations about the CSR.

Whilst the above evidence referred to CSR communication in general, the importance of issue support translated to the social media realm:

*I follow our local Sainsbury's on Facebook and [...] I remember seeing a message from [them] about raising money and they donated it to a local cause, which was good. They've done a couple of local causes round here and it's those I'm a bit more interested in (#17).*

This response evidences that the locality of the initiative helped strengthen her support for the CSR. She believed the donations would make a difference in her local community, making the initiative more tangible. As she perceived an element of her closer physical space would

be positively impacted, she demonstrated greater support for the initiative, minimising the extent to which she considered associated negative UGC. This helped develop a buffer against scepticism when CSR was communicated via social media.

This resonates with research that identifies how local CSR activities are rated more positively than national schemes (Ross et al., 1992). It supports Green and Peloza (2014), who find CSR initiatives of large organisations are recalled more readily and evaluated more positively when it is relevant locally. We would argue that if supermarkets use social media to communicate their CSR, emphasising that the initiative is local can strengthen issue support. Creating this recipient-related condition builds an antidote to negative UGC, providing a more robust buffer against UGC's effect on scepticism.

*Perception of company response to UGC*

The interactive nature of social media enables consumers to interact with brands more directly than traditional communication channels allow (Uzunoğlu et al., 2017) and brands can respond to UGC. In discussing the vignettes, the extent to which participants exhibited scepticism was minimised when the company had responded to UGC.

> *Well, one thing that jumps out at me is where the company's replied to people, which I find a lot better than ignoring them [UGC]. Otherwise it looks like the marketing team have just thrown a message out there and then sort of gone and hidden away and just ignored everyone that's put a negative comment (#1).*

The company response Interviewee 1 referred to attempted to justify the claims made in the initial CSR message by providing the user with a link to further information about their related CSR activities and credentials (see Appendix 1). Interestingly, this participant

previously demonstrated a negative attitude towards supermarkets and high levels of scepticism towards their CSR. Therefore, we would expect negative UGC to enhance their scepticism. Yet the company response reduced the perceived degree of negativity in UGC. When companies do not participate in any dialogue with UGC, they are perceived as secretive, giving consumers reason to doubt their CSR. It is important to note that this emerged in the case of negative UGC. When UGC was positive, the lack of company response did not seem to affect participants' opinion. Hence the presence (versus absence) of organisational responses to negative UGC could prevent recipients of UGC drawing unfounded negative inferences. Perhaps, by responding, the organisation gives an impression that it listens and responds to its publics. This subsequently impacts whether recipients develop scepticism towards the organisations' CSR. Thus, by meeting this recipient-related condition, it may be within organisations' power to overcome the negative impacts of UGC.

**Discussion and theoretical implications**

By synthesising the CSR communication, social media and legitimacy theory literature, this study adds to the limited research on UGC in the context of CSR communication. It addresses calls for research into interactive CSR communication (Britt and Perks, 2015), specifically in the context of perceived legitimacy (Castelló et al., 2016), and the degree to which UGC is believed when it co-exists with company-generated communication (Flanagin and Metzger, 2013). Past research shows overwhelming support for social media as a positive tool for CSR communication (*e.g.* Kesavan et al., 2013). Yet when CSR is communicated through this channel, UGC inevitably develops, with potentially damaging implications for organisations (Eberle et al., 2013; Goh et al., 2013). Uncovering the unique characteristics of social media and how this relates to perceived legitimacy advances insight into the little understood phenomenon of the processes by which consumers

are influenced by UGC. In identifying these factors, a more complete picture emerges of what makes UGC more believed than company-generated content and the subsequent effect on consumers' perceived legitimacy and scepticism.

We identified that consumers' perceived legitimacy is shaped by the unique characteristics of social media, which influence whether UGC is believed over company-generated content. Prior literature suggests communicating CSR initiatives on social networking sites can increase perceived legitimacy (Lee et al., 2018). By examining this phenomenon through in-depth qualitative enquiry, the current study adds new insight, which runs contra to such extant research. When CSR communication co-exists with UGC, and UGC is more believed, the likelihood of companies increasing perceived legitimacy is reduced. This is because it distorts the CSR communication by aggregating a range of opinions, often incongruent with the company message. Supporting Manetti and Bellucci (2016), this disparity between corporate values and societal values means the organisation loses legitimacy as consumers perceive UGC to be more believable and legitimate. This is heightened when such UGC is aggregated in greater volumes, leading consumers to perceive UGC as being more legitimate than the company message.

Despite organisations' attempts to create legitimacy by communicating their CSR through social media (Du and Vieira Jr., 2012), if users accredit UGC, expressed through 'likes', over company-generated communication, companies' CSR communication efforts may be in vain. A further contribution of this study therefore lies in identifying that system-generated cues on social media, namely 'likes', influence the extent UGC is believed over company-generated information. User comments that receive higher numbers of 'likes' are more believed. UGC often lacks 'traditional authority indicators', such as known reputable experts (Metzger and Flanagin, 2013). When user comments receive a high number of 'likes', this signals to recipients that the viewpoint is supported and endorsed. In these cases

recipients are less likely to scrutinise UGC (Metzger and Flanagin, 2013) and willingly believe the 'endorsed' posts. This is an important contribution as, despite the importance of social media activity for CSR communication campaigns, the extent to which system-generated cues affect consumers' perceived legitimacy is not well understood (Lee et al., 2018).

In support of prior research (Green and Peloza, 2014; Rim and Song, 2016), we identified a negativity effect. When incongruent with the company message, negative UGC leads to enhanced consumer scepticism towards the CSR. Interestingly, this effect emerged even when the CSR had a high level of 'fit' and the company message contained factual information. Whilst studies suggest such message content will minimise scepticism (Sen et al., 2009), we find that the effectiveness of this approach is limited when it coexists with a wide range of UGC.

This study is therefore important for the development of CSR communication in the digital era. Although prior research advocates the use of social media to communicate CSR and enhance legitimacy, its unique characteristics lead consumers to believe UGC over company-generated content. In a setting where a strong negativity effect is present, this can enhance, rather than reduce, scepticism and detrimentally impact perceived legitimacy. In the social media environment, the ability of factual message content, alongside high CSR 'fit', to minimise scepticism is thrown into question. Hence if social media is used to communicate CSR, it poses new risks and cannot be treated as a traditional communication channel.

When negative UGC is more believed than company-generated CSR communication, perceived legitimacy can decrease and consumer scepticism increase. Much of the literature that considers UGC indicates that organisations face a challenge in controlling it (Kim and Johnson, 2016). A further contribution of the current study is in identifying that, whilst UGC

cannot be controlled, the risk of scepticism developing can be minimised under different recipient-related conditions. This emphasises the current study's contribution, as 'there has been limited study of the factors that reduce the negativity bias' (Rim and Song, 2016, p.476). When recipients have a utilitarian orientation, they are less likely to believe negative UGC as they judge that, providing the CSR delivers sufficient benefits, the activity is positive. This creates a buffer against negative UGC. Therefore organisations should use their CSR message to emphasise the positive quantifiable outcomes of their initiatives and the number of people who benefit from the activity. This assures recipients that their CSR delivers maximal social welfare. Under this recipient-related condition, such consumers are more likely to support the CSR, regardless of the motives that drive the activity.

Research highlights the importance of issue support in maximising CSR communication effectiveness (Du et al., 2010). We add novel insight here in identifying that the perceived locality of a CSR initiative is an important variable which strengthens issue support. Under this recipient-related condition, consumers responded more positively to the CSR, which acted as a buffer to negative UGC.

Whilst it is impossible to prevent UGC about CSR, we identify that when organisations respond to negative UGC it can reduce its perceived believability. We find that consumers believe an organisation lacks honesty when it neglects their comments. Scepticism towards the company-generated CSR messages could be minimised if organisations respond to negative UGC with further information or justification. This provides new insight as prior research has focussed on consumer motivations for creating UGC (Daugherty et al., 2008), rather than on the effect of organisations' responses to UGC. Studies that consider company response to consumers' eWOM focus upon reviews and complaints, which differ in nature to UGC (van Noort and Willemsen, 2011). Further, company response has predominantly been explored in the context of hospitality and tourism

(Sparks and Bradley, 2016). Our results extend those of Sparks et al. (2016) by identifying the impact of proactive company responses to UGC in the context of CSR communication. In this case, consumers perceive the company to be more committed to its stakeholders, ultimately minimising UGC's influence on consumer scepticism towards CSR. Through these recipient-related conditions, a more nuanced view emerges of the potential buffers against negative UGC and scepticism.

Synthesising these findings, the current study contributes to legitimacy theory in identifying that, because of UGC, legitimacy is now a negotiated and uncertain outcome between numerous parties. When an organisation communicates CSR on social media, the public can comment, re-comment, and the company may respond. Through this process, the credibility and believability of the message is shaped. This suggests, in the digital era, perceived legitimacy of the CSR message is not determined at the source. Instead, it reflects a holistic process where consumers' perceived legitimacy is determined through the generation of UCG, system created cues, and company responses.

**Managerial implications**

A number of management implications emerge from this study. The perceived wisdom is that social media should be used to communicate CSR. Our study highlights potential pitfalls of this approach. Whilst the authors accept that social media has the potential to be a powerful, positive tool for CSR communication, managers should be mindful that when they communicate through this channel they will likely receive publicly visible user-generated comments. As negative UGC develops, consumers believe this over the company-generated message. This may overwhelm the positive effects of the CSR communication. Negative UGC is more believed when it aggregates in high volumes and is endorsed by other users through system-generated cues, such as 'likes'. Managers should

therefore monitor the range and volume of UGC, alongside system-generated information, that develops in response to their social media posts. Communicating CSR through social media could backfire if these factors are not given sufficient attention.

When negative UGC does develop, managers have expressed their concerns about how to manage these (Illia et al., 2013). Some organisations even delete UGC on a regular basis (Rim and Song, 2016). We identify that using this approach may lead to lower volumes of UGC, where consumers see the posts as fabricated by the company. We suggest that the negative effects of UGC can be minimised under specific recipient-related conditions. Managers should use their CSR message to appeal to consumers' utilitarian orientation, emphasising the number of beneficiaries and positive outcomes of their CSR. Further, companies must move away from their current 'department store' approach to CSR, where they devise and communicate CSR messages without targeting specific consumers (Jones et al., 2009; Lee et al., 2008). By engaging in CSR that is local to consumers and targeting communication about the initiatives geographically, organisations can enhance issue support. Under these recipient-related conditions a stronger buffer against UGC is created, minimising the risk of scepticism developing. Finally, responding to, rather than removing, UGC can lead consumers to perceive the company as more honest. Providing the consumer perceives the company as responsive to UGC, under this recipient-related condition the detrimental effect of negative UGC can be minimised.


**Limitations and areas for further research**

The goal of this study was exploration and conceptualisation. Qualitative research enabled a deeper understanding of the implications of social media communication to be gained. Whilst the study sheds light on the influence of UGC on consumer scepticism, and the recipient-related conditions under which this occurs, a degree of caution must be applied

to the findings.  The actual impact of CSR communication on social media, and UGC, may differ in a real-life setting as the study may suffer from a demand artefact as participants were asked to read the organisations' CSR messages and related UGC.  In reality, they may have ignored such communication.  To mitigate this limitation, participants were questioned about the company-managed pages they visit on social media and the attention they pay to UGC.

Given that the findings seem to indicate a causal relationship between the three recipient-related conditions and UGC's effect on scepticism, collecting quantitative data and modelling the strength of such relationships would extend this study and offer further insights.  The study suggests that participants' perception of company responses to UGC minimises scepticism.  Future research that examines when and how to respond to UGC about CSR would be valuable.

Like all research, the boundaries of time and context limited the study.  Social media is an ever-evolving entity.  As the current study is the first, to our knowledge, to identify the recipient-related conditions under which UGC influences consumer scepticism, different business contexts with different samples may unveil additional recipient-related variables that help explain consumer response to UGC.  The current study provides a foundation on which future research can be built that explores additional recipient-related conditions in the context of alternative sectors and countries.

Variants of trolling behaviour are increasingly seen in marketing-relevant contexts (Golf-Papez and Veer, 2017).  As such these can be seen as extreme forms of negative UGC, such as that posted by trolls, on social media.  Whilst not evident in the reported study we believe it would be an interesting avenue for further research.  Specifically, the consequences of trolls and hate language on social media in a CSR context and the associated effects on the perceived believability of such UGC is an area in need of exploration.

The extent to which consumers believe UGC may differ depending on the relationships between the recipient, the organisation and the creators of UGC. In future studies, it would be interesting to explore the effects of such relationships on consumer response to UGC and their level of scepticism. Further, our study is limited to the context of UK supermarkets at an industry level. The current study could be expanded by examining the influence and effects of UGC at an individual brand level. It may be that consumers' emotional brand attachment shapes how they perceive and respond to UGC about the brand and its CSR. Future studies can examine whether negative UGC has a lesser effect when consumers exhibit brand affection or self-brand connections.

**Appendix 1: Vignettes**

Vignettes showing CSR communication were presented to interviewees and originated from Tesco and Sainsbury's Facebook pages. Details of the vignettes, including the company-generated content and associated UGC, are provided below.

*Vignette 1: Tesco*

*Company-generated content*

The CSR communication explained that Tesco is strengthening its partnership with food redistribution charity FareShare. The company described the scheme, evidencing its positive impacts with facts. Details were provided about the charity and the capacity in which Tesco has helped. The company announced it will divert all surplus fresh food from its distribution and online grocery centres to FareShare. Factual evidence was given to support this. For example, the communication explained that Tesco had redistributed 4,200 tonnes of food, saving FareShare an average of £13,000 per annum and provided food for more than 50,000 people. Tesco emphasised that its actions were part of its wider commitment to use its scale for good.

*User-generated content*

Examples of associated UGC were presented to interviewees. Comments were mixed in valance, including positive, negative and neutral posts. Comments varied in length, from one to 10 lines. The majority were four lines in length. The content of some comments suggested the initiative was a 'PR activity' and questioned Tesco's motives. Others contradicted negative posts, applauding the scheme. The comments received varying numbers of 'likes' from other Facebook users. In some cases, the company had responded to the UGC. The names and photographs of those posting the comments were visible to reflect the true nature of social media.

*UGC Examples:*



**Mark Isgrove** I've spend 2 years trying to get me local Tesco to not throw out 40 items of good bakery goods each day and instead distribute to local charities or homeless centres. But they won't. This "fareshare" seems at odds to what I've experienced from Tesco.
16 October at 21:44 · Like · 👍 3

**Steph Spragg** Well done Tesco, I hope this will eventually mean ✕ an end to supermarket waste and doing something constructive with unsold food
19 October at 19:30 via mobile · Like

**Nicola Cappin** Good. Though im not entirely sure we need to pat tesco on the back. Its what all food businesses do without making a song and dance about it. Good charity work doesnt involve asking the press for a thank you for it. Still, pleased to hear they r doing this.
16 October at 20:45 via mobile · Like · 👍 2

*Vignette 2: Sainsbury's*

*Company-generated content*

Sainsbury's CSR communication promoted its move to ban the use of eggs from caged hens in all its own-brand products, with a commitment to use eggs only from cage-free hens. Supporting quotes were provided from the Director of Sainsbury's brand and a senior scientist from the RSPCA. The communication also highlighted that for every dozen Sainsbury's Woodland Eggs sold, 1p is donated to the Woodlands Trust. Facts were used to support this, showing Sainsbury's has raised £1.4m for the Woodland Trust through this initiative.

*User-generated content*

As with Vignette 1, UGC included positive, negative and neutral posts. The majority of comments were four lines in length. The content of some comments questioned the meaning of 'cage-free' and suggested the scheme was a marketing gimmick. Others demonstrated support for Sainsbury's actions, praising its high standards of animal welfare. The comments received varying numbers of 'likes' from other Facebook users. For some comments, Sainsbury's had responded, an example of which is below.

*UGC Examples:*

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