

## LEVERAGING USER-GENERATED CONTENT (UGC) IN ENHANCING OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING INSTITUTION: A COMPREHENSIVE STUDY ON STUDENT FEEDBACK AND EVALUATION

**Norfardilawati Musa<sup>1\*</sup>, Shuhaida Md Noor<sup>2</sup>, Christina Mary Richard<sup>3</sup>**

<sup>1, 3</sup>*Open University Malaysia (MALAYSIA)*

<sup>2</sup>*Universiti Sains Malaysia (MALAYSIA)*

\*norfardilawati@oum.edu.my

Received: 11-01-2024 Accepted: 05-02-2024 Published: 03-06-2024

### **Abstract**

User-generated content (UGC) refers to any form of content created and shared by users or consumers through various online platforms and social media channels, rather than by the brand or organisation itself. The advent of the internet and social media platforms has greatly facilitated the generation and dissemination of user-generated content. UGC has become a powerful tool for consumers to engage with brands, influence others, and shape brand perceptions which directly or indirectly impact the image of the organisations. Unlike conversations or interactions initiated by brands or organisations, UGC offers more spontaneous, authentic and truthful feedback compared to other forms of feedback mechanism. While not all feedback or interactions may be positive, paying attention to UGC will allow brands or organisations to monitor the situation on the ground, address issues immediately, and strategize effectively for improvements. Open and distance learning (ODL) institution is one of the organisations that can be affected by UGC related to their products or services. With stiff competition among higher education providers, both public and private universities, ODL institutions play a crucial role in providing accessible and flexible educational opportunities for distance learners. To be on par with other established universities, ODL institutions must ensure continuous improvement and effectiveness of their ODL programmes. Therefore, these institutions need to gather and analyse the information shared regarding the products and services offered to them. This research aims to investigate the application of UGC in collecting, analysing and utilising student feedback to enhance the quality of open and distance learning programmes. The research will explore the utilisation of UGC in collecting student feedback and evaluations in an ODL institution to understand student experiences, engagement levels, interaction patterns, and content creation practices through the analysis of UGC. It will identify strengths and weaknesses revealed or shared in the UGC related to open and distance learning programmes offered and recommend ways for continuous enhancement of open and distance learning experiences based on the analysis of UGC. The research will apply mixed-methods, combining qualitative and quantitative techniques to gather and analyse data. In the first phase of the study, qualitative method will be employed to identify the collection of related UGC using Octoparse software to extract data related to the ODL institution from any public website. The data will be analysed thematically to gain insight into students' experiences, challenges and preferences. In the second phase, a survey will investigate key variables that emerge from the first phase. The survey will focus on verifying issues raised by the students, factors influencing the OUM students' perceptions of OUM services and products, their satisfaction,

and their suggestions for improvements. This research is expected to provide valuable insights to improve program quality, meet the specific needs of distance learners, and foster a culture of continuous improvement. The research outcomes will contribute to advancing open and distance learning practices and enhancing the quality of educational experiences.

**Keywords:** User-generated content (UGC), open and distance learning (ODL), social media, online platform, distance learners, strength and weaknesses.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

In today's fast-evolving world with everything going digital, communication through social media or any online platform is inevitable. Technology has revolutionised the way we live, be it in communication, education, social or economic endeavours. (Couldry & Mejias, 2020). With the prevalence of social media, user-generated contents (UGC) are rapidly gaining the attention of organisations in different fields due to the power that they have on public perceptions (Narangajavana Kaosiri et al., 2019). UGC has also become a burgeoning subject of interest in communication studies. Although research on UGC is still relatively new compared to other communication research on media, it has already had a decisive impact on the communication field (Naab & Sehl, 2017). Following a comprehensive analysis of the concept of UGC, Santos (2022: p. 15) has defined UGC as follows:

*“...any kind of text, data or action performed by online digital systems users, published and disseminated by the same user through independent channels, that incur an expressive or communicative effect either on an individual manner or combined with other contributions from the same or other sources”.*

The growth of UGC in social media has made an impact various industries and sectors, including the education. The impacts of UGC on products and services have compelled business/service providers such as higher education providers (HEP) pay greater attention to how they can be leveraged towards improving their offerings, image and brand (Sagynbekova et al., 2021).

Open and distance learning (ODL) institutions are constantly looking for innovative ways to improve their services in providing good and quality education. ODL institutions are unique in that they play a crucial role in providing accessible and flexible educational opportunities for distance learners (Bozkurt, 2019). To ensure the continuous improvement and effectiveness of the ODL programs and services received by distance learners, it is essential to gather and analyse student feedback and evaluations. In a fast-paced digital era nowadays, consumers are ever more powerful, playing a critical role in reviewing products and services through UGCs

(Martínez-Navalón et al., 2021; Siddique et al., 2021). The public and target customers can easily get all of the information that they require through social media. With the advantages of UGC in providing information or feedback from customers, ODL institutions should leverage on UGCs as a treasure trove for customer data and feedback towards enhancing their products and services.

### **1.1 Research Problem**

In contemporary digital landscapes, UGC has emerged as a pervasive force, signifying any content generated and disseminated by users or consumers through diverse online platforms and social media channels (Saura et al., 2022). It is argued in this study that UGCs are powerful because they reflect the sentiments of customers. The pervasiveness of UGCs has been greatly catalysed by the advent of the internet and the proliferation of social media platforms. UGC wields substantial influence, empowering consumers to actively engage with brands, exert influence on others, and sculpt brand perceptions, thereby exerting direct or indirect impacts on the overall image of organisations (Bakri et al., 2020; DeGruttola, 2019; Fox et al., 2018). This form of interaction and feedback stands distinct from conversations initiated by brands or organisations, as UGC offers a more spontaneous, authentic, and veracious form of feedback compared to conventional mechanisms (Yamagishi et al., 2023).

However, not all interactions and feedback within UGC environments are uniformly positive. This variability in feedback necessitates a conscientious approach by brands and organisations, particularly the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institutions, to effectively navigate and respond to the diverse range of opinions and sentiments. Any feedback through the UGC sources must be attended carefully by the ODL institutions as part of their strategies to remain competitive in the dynamic and challenging education industry. The education industry in Malaysia, specifically, are getting fierce competition from both, local and foreign education industry players (Hasan et al., 2017; Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2012) In today's digital landscape, UGC serves as a potent force in shaping perceptions and opinions towards brands, product or service available in the market. Today, Malaysia's education sector is witnessing intense competition from both local and foreign players and therefore are constantly pushing for transformation where traditional boundaries are being pushed, and the emergence of innovative educational models and technologies are greatly welcomed (Manzoor et al., 2021; Mohd Ali et al., 2019). As such, ODL institutions cannot afford to overlook the impact and significance of UGC in influencing perceptions, preferences, and ultimately, enrolment decisions.

In light of this, ODL institutions should not only actively engage with UGC but also leverage it as a valuable source of insights and feedback (Timoshenko & Hauser, 2019). This proactive approach will not only allow them to address concerns and criticisms promptly but also to identify areas of strength and opportunities for improvement. Moreover, it positions ODL institutions to align their offerings with the evolving needs and preferences of their target audience.

In summary, the powerful impact of UGCs highlights the imperative for ODL institutions, and indeed all brands and organisations, to proactively engage with and harness the potential of UGC. In the competitive landscape of the education industry, this approach is indispensable for maintaining relevance, driving innovation, and ultimately ensuring long-term success and sustainability. Doing so enables the ODL institutions to monitor the prevailing sentiment on the ground, promptly address emerging issues, and devise strategic approaches for ongoing enhancements. Within this dynamic landscape, ODL institutions have the potential to emerge as a subset of organisations significantly affected by UGC pertaining to their products or services. As such, this study needs to be implemented to assist the ODL institutions in remaining competitive in a challenging market and to be on par with other established HEPs.

## **1.2 Research Objectives (RO)**

Based on the problem statement discussed above, the following research objectives have been developed to guide this study. The primary objectives of this research are:

- RO1: To explore the utilisation of user-generated content (UGC) for collecting student/public feedback and evaluation on ODL institutions.
- RO2: To understand student/public experiences about ODL institutions through the analysis of UGC.
- RO3: To identify strengths and weaknesses revealed in the UGC on ODL programs, courses and materials.
- RO4: To provide recommendations for improving the design, delivery and continuous enhancement of ODL experiences based on the analysis of UGC.

### **1.3 Research Questions (RQ)**

The research questions for this study are as follows:

- RQ1: What are the key methods and platforms used for collecting student/public feedback through UGC on ODL institutions?
- RQ2: What is the prevailing student/public experiences on Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institutions as reflected in their generated content?
- RQ3: What are strengths and/or weaknesses aspects of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) programs, courses, and instructional materials revealed through user-generated content (UGC)?
- RQ4: How can insights gained from the analysis of UGC facilitate the continuous improvement of designing, delivering, and experiencing ODL programs?

## **2 METHODOLOGY**

This research will employ a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative techniques to gather and analyse data.

### **2.1 Data Collection Method & Data Analysis**

In addressing all the research objectives and research questions, the data collection process will be divided into two stages. The first stage will involve the utilisation of the Octoparse software data scrapping tool to extract UGC data related to the ODL institution from selected public websites such as ODL official websites and ODL students Forum in Facebook. This research will focus on the Open University Malaysia (OUM) and therefore the UGCs data collection will be limited to those pertaining to OUM. OUM stands as a trailblazer in open and distance learning within Malaysia. As the nation's leading institution in this field, OUM has progressed from offering academic programs through a blended pedagogy—incorporating face-to-face tutorials, e-learning, and self-directed study—to our present model, which relies on entirely online learning. OUM has been established since August, 1999. This first stage of data collection focuses on gaining insights on OUM student experiences and the strengths and weaknesses of the OUM programs, courses and instructional materials.

Octoparse (<https://www.octoparse.com/>) is one of the web scrapping software available in the market. Web scrapping can be defined as web extraction or harvesting, which is used to extract data from the World Wide Web (WWW) and save it to a file system or database for later

retrieval or analysis (Zhao, 2017). Basically, the main objective of web scraping such as Octoparse is to extract information from one or many websites and process it into simple structures such as spreadsheets, database or CSV file (Diouf et al., 2019) (refer Figure 1). This scrapping process will help researchers to explore how UGC is utilised for collecting student/public feedback and evaluation on ODL institutions. Based on the related data extracted from the UGC sources using octoparse software, researchers will analyse the data using thematic analysis to answer relevant research objectives.

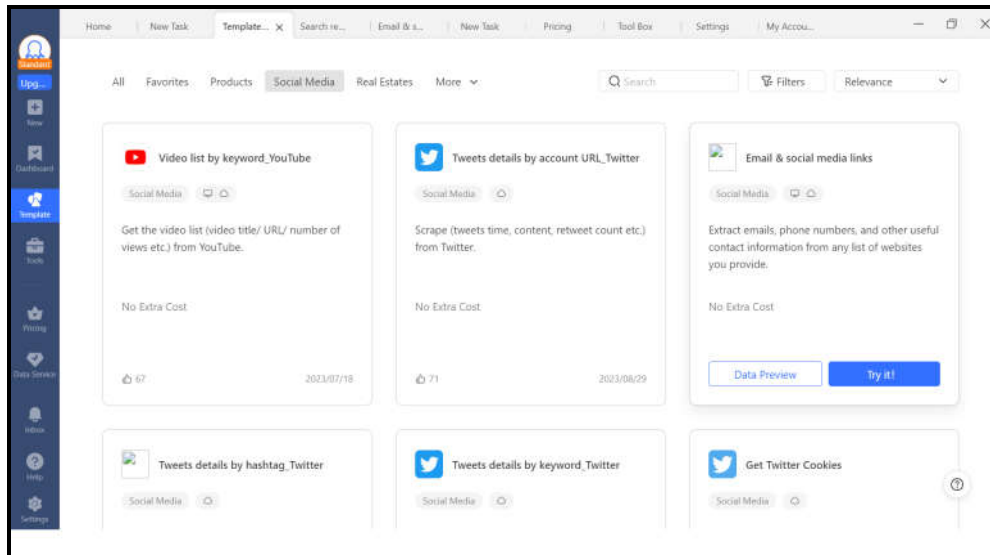


Figure 1 Octoparse Software

The second method of data collection involves a survey that employs a questionnaire (quantitative method) developed based on data generated from UGC analysis to address the fourth objective (RO4). The population and sample for this second stage of data collection will consist of current students of OUM. The purposive sampling method will be applied to identify the sample for this survey. The survey method will be used to validate the data obtained from the first phase of the study and will allow for generalisable conclusions. At this stage, the researcher seeks student/public responses on how information shared through UGC affects their perceptions towards ODL institutions.

Findings from the qualitative and quantitative will be compared, and recommendations will be made on how to improve the OUM program designs, delivery and continuous enhancement of ODL experiences.

### 3 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

It is expected that the research will help researchers to understand comprehensively student experiences, engagement levels, interaction patterns, UGC creation practices, and perceptions

on assessment strategies in ODL institutions. Currently, UGC serves as a valuable platform for both students and the public to express their opinions freely and provide genuine feedback towards ODL institutions. Voluminous information can be gathered using UGC sources because they cover numerous platforms including forum discussions, social media interactions and online reviews.

Since UGC sources can be considered as an authentic data as the contributors consists of non-profit parties, UGC is capable of offering rich insights into the experiences of students and the public with ODL institutions. By analysing UGC data, it helps to reveal patterns of engagement, satisfaction levels, and areas of concern for both groups. The strengths and weaknesses of ODL institutions in term of programs offered, delivery, experiences, and flexible learning options, accessibility will be highlighted for a continuous improvement.

### **3.1 Discussion**

The study will delve into comprehensive discussion based on the findings revealed through the rigorous pursuit of the four research objectives outlined in the previous topic earlier. Through a systematic analysis based on data collected on both, qualitative and quantitative methods, this study seeks to gain valuable insights into the role and impact of UGC in shaping the experiences, perceptions and feedback of both students and the wider public regarding ODL institutions, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of the institutions being investigated, to provide recommendations for further enhancement in term of the programs design and delivery.

## **4 CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, the study underscores the pivotal role of UGC in shaping the landscape of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institutions. The insights garnered through the analysis of UGC provide a thorough understanding of the experiences, strengths, and areas for improvement within the ODL landscape. The recommendations put forth are intended to serve as a roadmap for ODL institutions in their pursuit of excellence and continuous enhancement. By harnessing the power of UGC, ODL institutions can not only adapt to the evolving needs of their stakeholders but also emerge as leaders in accessible and flexible education delivery.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

N/A.

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