

EXPLORING THE STRATEGIC ROLE OF FAN ART CONTESTS IN GAME BRAND COMMUNICATION: AN ANALYSIS ON IMC AND UGC SYNERGY

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Abstract

This study explores how the integration of Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) principles enhances the strategic value of fan art contests as user-generated content (UGC)-driven brand communication initiatives in the gaming industry. Through qualitative case and content analysis of 38 fan art contests held by ten leading game companies from 2022 to 2024, the research identifies how IMC elements are embedded in UGC practices. A coding framework was developed based on established IMC planning principles and executed using MAXQDA software. The findings reveal three core insights: first, although the application of IMC elements across UGC activities is uneven, high-frequency co-occurrence among elements such as co-creation, interactivity, and multichannel communication significantly enhances brand co-creation potential. Second, different companies exhibit distinct strategic preferences, forming biased communication orientations through specific combinations of IMC and UGC tactics. Third, short-term incentive mechanisms, such as material and virtual rewards, dominate current practices, while creative support remains largely absent, limiting the sustainability of long-term brand co-creation ecosystems. These findings contribute to a better understanding of IMC-UGC synergy and offer practical implications for optimizing brand communication strategies in digital fan communities.

Keywords Integrated marketing communication, User-generated content, Co-creation, Fan art contest

1. Introduction

Digitally transformed video game industry has given rise to the interactive community, while prompting brand managers to reconsider the diversity in their relationships with consumers (Gummeson, 1987; Kshetri, 2010; Alvarez and Fournier, 2016; Rykala, 2020). Game companies now tend to engage players through various media-driven activities such as fan art contests and leverage these contributions to their brand influence, as the role of those empowered consumers are highlighted by researchers who emphasizing the consumer-centric communication and brand co-creation (Keller, 2016; Peruta and Shields, 2018; Šerić et al., 2024). User-generated content (UGC), as well as other forms of media creations incorporating players' brand experiences and creativity, has been extensively discussed in scholarly research on value co-creation, contributing to a reshaped understanding of brand communication (Pitt *et al.*, 2005; Hollebeek, 2011; Biraghi and Gambetti, 2017; Vollero *et al.*, 2019). And integrated marketing communication (IMC) as the management philosophy complementing brand-oriented strategies for achieving synergy in the hybrid communication matrix has been widely studied, but the strategic integration of value co-creation mechanism of UGC initiatives into IMC principles remains underexplored (Duncan & Everett, 1993; Cathey and Schumann, 1996; Phelps & Johnson, 1996; Kitchen *et al.*, 2004; Lee and Park, 2007; Friedrichsen, 2013). In this note, this paper focuses on the UGC activities, fan art contests mainly, initiated by leading game companies, exploring how these activities serve as a platform for enhancing brand communication through IMC-UGC synergy. At the same time, the research, combined with qualitative and quantitative analyses of 38 UGC incentive activities from ten global game companies,

is to reveal the strategic value of integrating IMC and UGC within fan art contests for achieving key brand communication objectives from a co-creation perspective, trying to answer how does the integration of IMC principles enhance the strategic value of fan art contests as UGC-driven brand communication initiatives.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 UGC in Game Brand Communication

Existing literature has demonstrated the importance of consumer engagement in brand equity, value co-creation and profit enhancement (Pitt *et al.*, 2005; Reid *et al.*, 2005; Lee and Park; 2007; Ewing, 2009; Butkouskaya *et al.*, 2019). In this process, consumers of game brands can create and publish online content, collectively identified as UGC, including text, images, illustrations, audio, and videos, and brand-related comments, for fulfilling their needs of experiential sharing and self-expression (Hagel and Armstrong, 1997; Krishnamurthy and Dou, 2008; Alhabash *et al.*, 2014; Alhabash and Ma, 2017; Roma and Aloini, 2019; Giertz *et al.*, 2022; Ma, 2024). Those digitally empowered-prosumers' contribution can foster digital trust among players and shape others' implicit worldviews on how to perceive the game brand (France *et al.*, 2018; Hochstein, 2023). For game companies, UGC serves as an operant resource involved in brand value, enhancing the consumption value chain by increasing brand-related media activity and amplifying brand influence among potential consumers (Ahn *et al.*, 2015; Simon, 2016; Hanus, 2019; Vollero *et al.*, 2019). And many game companies are now trying to establish communication strategies and incentive mechanisms to guide user behaviour in a way that benefits the brand.

2.2 IMC in UGC Context

IMC emerged as a communication planning approach in late twentieth century (Duncan and Everett, 1993; Phelps & Johnson, 1996; Kitchen *et al.*, 2004) within the concept of 'marketing mix' (Luck and Moffatt, 2009), as the 'synergistic' demand for maximum communication impact increases (Cathey and Schumann, 1996; Lee and Park, 2007) and the alignment of diverse marketing elements for consistent 'one voice' is emphasized (Nowak and Phelps, 1994; Vollero *et al.*, 2019). This paradigm has been further enriched in digitally-empowering contexts (Vollero *et al.*, 2019) guided by relationships, content, and process (Lee and Park, 2007; Bruhn and Schnebelen, 2017; Han *et al.*, 2024). It requires communication managers to adopt an 'outside-in' approach to address consumers' needs through multiple potential touchpoints content (Duncan and Mulhern, 2004, p.9; Reid *et al.*, 2005; Pitt *et al.*, 2005; Ewing, 2009; Bruhn and Schnebelen, 2017; Šerić *et al.*, 2024). These concepts not only provide game companies with actionable brand co-creation strategies but also emphasize the significance of fostering long-term brand-consumer relationships as a fundamental principle. As integrators of marketing communication resources, game companies can leverage consumer-centric principles within IMC to understand UGC and co-creation (Šerić *et al.*, 2024). Game companies can implement incentive mechanisms and community policies to reinforce these aspects while providing knowledge-sharing opportunities across platforms for users and further shaping their creative engagement for the brand (Biraghi and Gambetti, 2017; Behnam *et al.*, 2023; Hochstein *et al.*, 2023).

2.3 Conceptual Synergy

Recent discussions on IMC highlight the need for a more consumer-centric and process-integrated

approach to game brand communication, especially when dealing UGC or fan art contests. Šerić et al. (2024) propose a multidimensional framework that emphasizes three core aspects: Process, focusing on strategic integration, coordination of communication tools, and online-offline synergy; Pillar, emphasizing message clarity, digital technology, and consumer engagement through listening, interactivity, and co-creation; and Purpose, centred on enhancing relationship quality, brand equity, and user engagement. These principles align with Kliatchko and Uttamchandani's (2023) strategic execution framework, which underlines the importance of ensuring consistency across all channels while fostering meaningful consumer relationships. In the context of fan art contests, these multidimensional IMC principles offer valuable guidance for integrating UGC into cohesive brand narratives. However, without deliberate IMC-driven planning, such contests may remain fragmented, missing opportunities to reinforce brand communication objectives. Thus, this study proposes the following hypothesis: The integration of multidimensional IMC principles into UGC-driven fan art contests significantly enhances their strategic value in fostering brand co-creation.

3. Methodology

To investigate how the integration of IMC principles enhances the strategic value of fan art contests as UGC-driven brand communication initiatives, this study adopts a qualitative case and content analysis approach. A total of 38 fan art contest campaigns were collected from 10 leading global game companies, covering 14 different games whose UGC campaigns were launched between January 2022 and December 2024. These cases span key moments in the game lifecycle, including version updates, major in-game events, and brand-driven community engagement. Drawing upon Kaid's content analysis procedures and Sparacino's coding strategies, and guided by core IMC planning principles, a coding scheme was developed to capture the structural, interactive, and strategic features of each campaign (see Appendix II). Data were coded and analysed using MAXQDA software, achieving high reliability with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.936. The analysis combines frequency, co-occurrence, and thematic techniques to explore patterns of IMC-UGC integration. Specifically, the study examines how game companies apply IMC frameworks—such as multichannel communication, co-creation design, and user engagement mechanisms—in fan art contests to build brand meaning and foster community participation. Through this multi-dimensional lens, the study identifies prevailing incentive structures, reveals synergy patterns between IMC principles and user behaviour management, and uncovers how these practices contribute to sustainable and strategic brand communication.

4. Discussions

Looking at the subcodes frequency of “Pillar” and “Process” inside the coded segments, the analysis provides insights about the “Multidimensional IMC approach” that the truly integrated IMC framework is still lacking in fan art contests operation. While the subcodes “co-creation” (45 occurrences), “multichannel communication” (37 occurrences), and “interactivity” (29 occurrences) were found to be the most commonly referenced, “listening” and “online-offline activity coordination” were cited the least, with only 17 and 5 instances respectively (see Table I).

	Code frequency	Percentage
Long-term strategy	20	13.07
Multichannel communication	37	24.18
Online-offline activity coordination	5	3.27
Listening	17	11.11
Interactivity	29	18.95
Co-creation	45	29.41
Total	153	100.00

Table I. Code frequency of subcodes of Multidimensional IMC approach

Game campaigns usually use various communication channels, with the “same theme, multi-platform release” or “brand collaboration” phenomenon being particularly common. To promote interaction with the brand, game companies frequently use techniques like “likes”, “follows”, “votes”, or “raffles offering small rewards” to engage players. To encourage them to leave comments and share their experiences, some companies also ask light-hearted and interesting questions, which can increase their engagement and brand loyalty. On the other hand, when encouraging co-creation, the majority of gaming companies tend to restrict their offline operations due to considerations like event expenses, execution difficulties, etc.,

Sub-code frequency of multidimensional IMC approach of companies also reveals that they are adopting different IMC-UGC alignment logics leading to distinct communication styles (see Figure 1). The “Co-creation” code has relatively high frequency values for NetEase Games (32.8), Blizzard Entertainment (16.7), FanPlus (25.0), and Nintendo (25.0), implying those companies are more likely to encourage player involvement in creative exchanges to produce material based on brand-established themes. Conversely, Tencent (42.9) and Valve (30.0) demonstrate the highest values in the “Interactivity” aspect, indicating that their UGC activities emphasize interaction with players. These campaigns often incorporate social incentives such as likes, follows, votes, and raffles to strengthen players’ connection with brand content and increase community activity. MiHoYo (50.0), Papergames (40.0), and FanPlus (40.0) report high frequency values in the “Multichannel communication” dimension, highlighting their commitment to multi-channel dissemination, particularly through social media or brands collaborations. These companies frequently release UGC activity information across multiple platforms simultaneously and often incorporate formats such as live streaming, short videos, and SMS notifications to maximize brand exposure. On the other hand, Infini-Brain (33.3) exhibits the highest frequency value in “Listening”, reflecting the company’s emphasis on user feedback. The values for “Online-offline activity coordination” are still generally low across these companies (e.g., NetEase 1.5, MiHoYo 9.5).

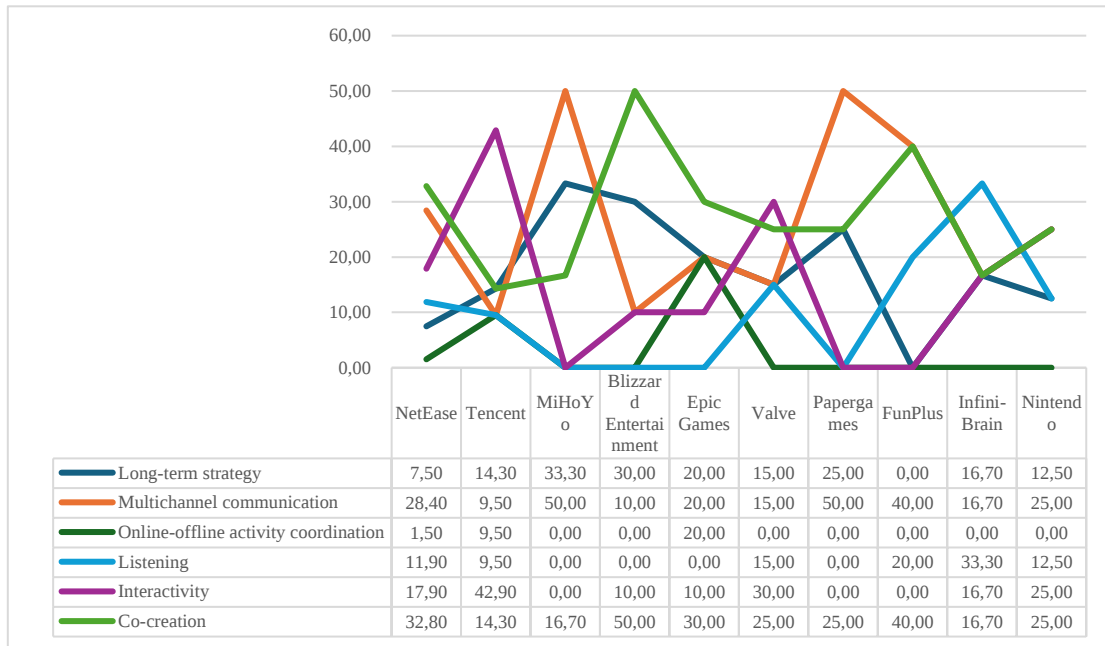


Figure 1. Sub-code frequency of multidimensional IMC approach of game companies

While incentive-based engagement is effective for short-term participation, the lack of creative support undermines sustainable co-creation communities and brand loyalty. Game companies employ strategies such as material rewards (45,1%) and virtual items (31.86%) to entice players to the brand co-creation (see Table II). The least used incentive mechanism, creative support, only makes up 9.7% of the total, yet it may be more valuable for long-term brand co-creation. Brand co-creation necessitates cultivating a devoted network of creators, including KOLs and community leaders, and should not be seen as only short-term UGC activities. By offering training, software assistance, tutorials, and official materials, game publishers can lower the barriers to user creation and empower more regular gamers to become producers. For example, MiHoYo offers official guidance and art resource bundles to assist users in improving their work while preserving brand coherence. This phenomenon reflects a broader trend wherein most companies prioritize short-term traffic over the sustainable development of a creative ecosystem. Overall, Tencent and NetEase exhibit a relatively balanced UGC incentive mechanism. However, gaming companies tend to favour material rewards over creative support, which may result in user attrition once the activities conclude, hindering the formation of a lasting culture of brand co-creation.

	Code frequency	Percentage
Creative support	11	9.73
Exposure opportunity	15	13.27
Virtual reward	36	31.86
Material reward	51	45.13
Total	113	100.00

Table II. Code frequency of subcodes of Incentive mechanism

5. Conclusion

This study provides the understanding of the intersection between IMC principles and UGC-driven brand co-creation. According to the empirical analysis, most fan art contests rely on social media platforms, with little coordination with offline brand experiences. Many UGC initiatives are one-off contests, lacking a sustained co-creation strategy to foster long-term community engagement. Most importantly, while UGC contributes significantly to brand perception, companies often fail to maximize its potential through systematic feedback, recognition, or content repurposing. Given this, brands should establish specific co-creation goals that are in line with their communication objectives in order to execute an IMC-UGC strategy successfully.

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Appendix I.The sampling data of UGC activities of global game companies

Company' name	Game' s name	UGC activity and date	Media platform	Country
NetEase Game	Identity V	20241219-I1, 20241207-I2, 20241226-I3, 20241230-I4	TikTok, Bilibili, Weibo	China
	Eggy Party	20231203-E1, 20240118-E2, 20240118-E3, 20241220-E4	TikTok, Bilibili, Weibo	
Tencent	Honor of Kings	20241104-K1, 20240113-K2, 20231215-K3, 20241125-K4	TikTok, Bilibili, Weibo	China
	PUBG Mobile	20231208-P1, 20230726-P2, 20230114-P3, 20240507-P4	Official website, TikTok	
MiHoYo	Genshin Impact	20241231-G1, 20240423-G2, 20231220-G3, 20241119-G4	TikTok, Bilibili, Official website	China
Papergames	Shining Nikki	20241130-SN	Facebook	China
FunPlus	Call of Antia	20241014-CA	Facebook	Switzerland
Infini-Brain inc	ActionTaimanin	2024AT	Reddit	Japan
Nintendo	Zelda	2024-Z1	Reddit	Japan
Blizzard Entertainment	World of Warcraft	2024W1, 20230120-W2, 20220117-W3, 20240321-W4	Official website, X	US.
	Overwatch	2023O1	Official website	
Epic Games	Fortnite	20240211-F1, 20241205-F2, 20240211-F3, 20220307-F4	Official website	US.
Valve	Dota 2	2024-D1, 20230923-D2, 20230708-D3, 20230924-D4	Official website, Fun community	US.
	CS:GO	20241218-C1	Facebook	

Appendix II. Analytical dimensions and coding categories of content analysis

Superior codes	Subcodes	Description	References
Process	Long-term strategy	It refers to initiatives on long-term brand activities reflected its efforts for sustained brand engagement through activities such as annual competitions and regular events.	(Schultz, 1993; 2003; Carmona <i>et al.</i> , 2011; Roberts <i>et al.</i> , 2014; Liu and Hornik, 2016; de Vreese and Neijens, 2016; Niederdeppe, 2016; Estrella-Ramón and Ellis-Chadwick, 2017; Kliatchko and Uttamchandani, 2023; Šerić <i>et al.</i> , 2024)
	Multichannel communication	It refers to coordinated use of multiple marcom tools across various platforms encompassing both in-game and external channels to maximize reach, engagement, and brand consistency.	
	Online-offline activity coordination	It involves the integration of online and offline brand engagement initiatives including digital campaigns that complement offline activities such as exhibitions, competitions, live performances, and community events to create a cohesive consumer experience.	
Pillar	Listening	It is thought as one component of consumer-centric communication with gather and analyse users' feedback from in-game or communities such as negotiating activities and informing marketing strategies.	
	Interactivity	It refers to the users' engagement through various touchpoints including voting, discussions, and social interactions within brand-driven UGC activities.	
	Co-creation	It refers to the process integrating UGC into official promotion or encouraging derivative works for enhancing brand awareness, user engagement, and customer loyalty through participatory content creation.	
Incentive mechanism	Material reward	It refers to monetary and tangible rewards designed to motivate users to engage in media creation such as physical merchandise and gift items.	
	Virtual reward	It refers to the non-monetary rewards in the form of in-game virtual items, including characters, skins, titles, and other digital assets.	
	Exposure opportunity	It refers to strategies employed by companies to enhance the visibility of UGC by increasing content exposure, expanding its reach, and maximizing user encounters.	
	Creative support	It refers to initiatives from companies to facilitate users' skill development in content creation including professional mentorship, learning platforms, workshops, etc.	

Appendix II. Analytical dimensions and coding categories of content analysis (continue)

Superior codes	Subcodes	Description	References
User Behaviour Management	Content Management	It refers to guidelines and requirements for activities including, themes, content formats, quality control, and stylistic expectations for innovative or original.	
	Activity Management	It sets regulations and evaluation criteria governing UGC events including the event duration, submission guidelines, review processes, judging standards, and participation rules, etc.	