

**“A Critical Analysis of User Generated Content and Community-Led Public Relations in
the Case of Rare Beauty”**

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Abstract

This research project presents a critical analysis of the strategic integration of User-Generated Content (or UGC) and community-led Public Relations, using Rare Beauty, a global cosmetics brand, as a primary case study. The research specifically addresses the question: How does the strategic integration of User-Generated Content (UGC) facilitate authentic community building and commercial success in a post-perfection digital landscape? In a contemporary media landscape defined by a shift from "aspirational perfection" to "radical authenticity," the study examines how celebrity-led brands can maintain genuine consumer trust while achieving global commercial dominance. The theoretical framework is grounded in Jonathan Hardy's (2021) Media Convergence and Henry Jenkins' (2006) Participatory Culture, alongside Grunig & Hunt's (1984) Two-Way Symmetrical model. These theories are used to examine the collapse of traditional "top-down" communication and the emergence of a decentralized model where the consumer acts as an active brand protagonist.

Adopting an interpretivist paradigm, the empirical research utilizes netnography to conduct a "thick description" of Rare Beauty's Instagram ecosystem. Through purposive sampling, four specific "Content Artifacts" from 2021 to 2025 were analyzed using thematic and visual coding. This practice-based approach allowed for the observation of "digital traces", specifically captions and comment sections, in their natural environment, bypassing the "observer effect" of traditional interviews.

The study yields two major insights. First, it identifies a strategic "Visual Duality," where Rare Beauty maintains high-production celebrity imagery for reach, but relies on unpolished "Chaos Beauty" aesthetics (such as customer-led living room tutorials) to generate trust. Second, the research demonstrates the existence of a "Moral Contract" between the founder and the community; by leveraging vulnerability around mental health through the Rare Impact Fund, the brand transforms brand loyalty into a shared social identity. Ultimately, the project argues that in a post-perfection era, Public Relations has shifted from managing images to nurturing communities, concluding that brand authority is now granted by the public rather than asserted by the corporation.

Introduction

In recent years, the global beauty industry has observed a structural paradigm shift, transitioning from a legacy of "aspirational perfection" toward a new era defined by "radical authenticity." In this landscape, Rare Beauty, founded by the famous singer and influencer Selena Gomez in 2020, has emerged as one of the pioneer case studies in modern Public Relations. As articulated on the brand's official platform, the mission transcends traditional cosmetics, focusing instead on 'challenging beauty standards' and 'promoting self-acceptance' (Rare Beauty, 2020). While traditional prestige brands historically relied on high-production editorial content and exclusive celebrity "gatekeeping," Rare Beauty launched with a disruptive social mission: to challenge the traditional beauty myth and advocate for mental health and self-acceptance. By positioning Rare Beauty as a platform for social change rather than just a commercial entity, the brand has redefined the role of a celebrity-led brand in the digital age.

In a saturated market, celebrity-backed brands often face significant skepticism regarding their authenticity and long-term value. The central challenge for Rare Beauty is maintaining a genuine, community-led identity while operating as a high-growth commercial business. As digital platforms evolve, the traditional PR model of "top-down" communication is being replaced by a "participatory model." This creates a tension between professional brand management and the raw, unedited nature of consumer-led content. This research explores how Rare Beauty navigates this tension by leveraging UGC to bridge the gap between corporate mission and consumer trust.

The primary focus of this research is to investigate the extent to which the strategic integration of UGC facilitates authentic community building and long-term brand loyalty for celebrity-led beauty brands within a post-perfection digital landscape. To address this central inquiry, the project first analyzes the macro-industry shift from traditional, highly curated influencer marketing toward the rise of organic, relatable UGC creators. Building on this transition, the study evaluates the impact of contemporary aesthetic trends, specifically "Chaos Beauty" and unedited content, on the development of trust among Gen Z consumers. Finally, the research investigates the intersection of purpose and profit by examining how Rare Beauty balances its commercial objectives with its social advocacy through the Rare Impact Fund, providing a comprehensive view of modern, mission-driven PR strategy.

As the Public Relations industry adapts to a landscape dominated by TikTok algorithms and "authenticity fatigue," understanding the "Rare Beauty effect" is vital. This study provides a theoretical framework for "community as currency," arguing that the consumer's role has shifted from a passive recipient to an active brand protagonist. By examining this shift, the research offers critical insights into the future of branded content and the necessity of social mission in modern PR strategy.

Literature Review

The Convergence of Content and the Evolution of Public Relations Models

The contemporary media landscape is defined by what Hardy (2021) describes as a "fateful merging" of media and marketing, which is a structural transformation where the traditional "principle of separation" between editorial content and commercial messaging has effectively collapsed. In the previous eras of beauty communication, Public Relations operated within a rigid framework of gatekeeping, where legacy prestige brands relied on high-production editorial placements and exclusive celebrity endorsements to dictate beauty standards to a passive audience. However, Hardy (2021) argues that in a converged media environment, branded narratives are now stitched directly into the digital flows of entertainment and social interaction, making them indistinguishable from the organic content consumers choose to engage with daily. For a brand like Rare Beauty, this means that Public Relations is no longer about securing a distinct "advertisement" slot but about inhabiting the digital ecosystem as a peer. This merging of boundaries allows the brand to bypass the traditional "ad-filter" of the consumer, as the promotional message is delivered through the same visual language as non-commercial entertainment. This creates a "seamless" brand presence that feels less like a sales pitch and more like a contribution to the user's social feed, effectively blurring the line between corporate advocacy and authentic personal expression.

This structural shift necessitates a fundamental re-evaluation of the foundational PR models established by Grunig & Hunt (1984). Historically, the beauty industry was built upon the "Press Agency" and "Public Information" models, which utilized one-way communication to broadcast idealized, high-control imagery intended to inspire aspiration through perfection. These legacy models relied on "asymmetrical" persuasion, where the brand held the majority of the power, and the consumer was a passive recipient of a pre-defined corporate narrative. In contrast, the modern digital ecosystem defined by "digital savviness" and the rise of interactive social video platforms demands a "Two-Way Symmetrical" approach. This model, which Grunig & Hunt (1984) identify as the most ethical and effective for long-term relationship building, prioritizes mutual understanding and a balanced dialogue where the brand and its public influence one another. Rare Beauty's strategic reliance on UGCs is a textbook application of this symmetry; by allowing customers to lead the visual narrative, the brand intentionally relinquishes absolute corporate control in exchange for genuine community trust and social validation. This relinquishing of power is a radical departure from the "command and control" style of 20th-century PR, suggesting that modern brand authority is granted by the community rather than asserted by the corporation.

Furthermore, Henry Jenkins (2006) argues that this convergence is not merely a technological process but a profound cultural shift toward "Participatory Culture". In this environment, the traditional distinction between "producer" and "consumer" breaks down as individuals "appropriate, annotate, and recirculate" media to build shared meaning. This theory is directly supported by WGSN's (2017) analysis of "Beauty Teenpreneurs" and the "socialization of beauty," which notes that Gen Z consumers want to shop from brands that allow them to interact with and influence the business directly. Rare Beauty capitalizes on this by treating its followers as "active participants" rather than "targets". As Hutchins and Tindall (2016) note in their study of fandom and community engagement, when a brand facilitates a participatory environment, it shifts from managing a static image to nurturing a dynamic community. By allowing fans to be "co-creators," Rare Beauty transforms the act of purchase into an act of community belonging. This community-led approach is what enables the brand to maintain a "mission-first" identity, effectively turning its followers into brand advocates who defend the brand's social values of self-acceptance and mental health awareness.

The effectiveness of this model is further emphasized when considering the shift from traditional celebrity "gatekeeping" to the modern "UGC boom." While legacy brands might struggle to maintain relevance in an era of "chaos beauty," Rare Beauty leans into the inherent messiness of real-world contexts, a strategy that aligns with Jenkins' view that the power of media now resides in the hands of the collective rather than the elite. This cultural decentralization means that a brand's reputation is no longer what the brand says about itself, but what the community says to one another across decentralized networks. Consequently, the brand does not simply exist in the market as a commercial entity; it exists as a collaborative cultural entity within the digital convergence Hardy identifies, where the public's voice is structurally as loud as the founder's. By prioritizing this symmetrical exchange, Rare Beauty has established a new blueprint for celebrity-led ventures that prioritizes long-term social impact and relational trust over short-term transactional hype or manufactured glamour.

The Psychology of the Post-Perfection Consumer

The success of Rare Beauty is fundamentally rooted in a structural shift in the psychological demands of the modern consumer, specifically the Generation Z demographic, who are set to disrupt the beauty industry with an estimated \$44 billion in annual purchasing power. This demographic transition is characterized by a "new look" where authenticity reigns supreme and makeup serves as a vehicle for self-expression rather than a tool for concealment or social conformity. Historically, the beauty industry relied on "aspirational perfection," a standard that mandated the "covering up" of perceived flaws through highly curated and airbrushed imagery. However, WGSN (2017) reports that 78% of Gen Z consumers express a clear preference for advertisements that feature "real people in real situations." This indicates a

profound rejection of conventional beauty standards in favor of a "playground" for self-expression, bonding, and empowerment. For this cohort, the "perfection" of the 1990s and 2000s feels not only unattainable but dishonest, leading to a demand for a "radical transparency" that exposes the reality behind the brand.

The psychological necessity of this shift is underscored by the research of Tatiana Avila Velasquez (2025), which examines how traditional cosmetic industry strategies have historically impacted the mental health of Gen Z. Her findings suggest that the constant exposure to idealized, exclusionary standards has contributed to a "trust deficit" among young consumers, who are now demanding a deeper level of authenticity and ethical responsibility from the brands they support. This is why Rare Beauty's mission to "challenge beauty standards" and promote "self-acceptance" functions as a critical PR tool; it addresses a specific cultural pain point by positioning the brand as an "agent of change." By embracing "pimple positivity" and "acne appreciation," brands align themselves with the 2017 findings that younger consumers seek to celebrate their differences rather than perfect their look. This is a move from "corrective" beauty to "expressive" beauty, where the psychological goal is no longer to fit into a social mold but to stand out as an individual with a unique story and set of values.

This demand for authenticity is not merely an aesthetic preference but a core value that dictates purchasing behavior. Statistical evidence from EY Americas (2025) reveals that 48% of Gen Z consumers prioritize a brand's "values and authenticity" over price or physical perfection. This value-driven behavior is further supported by Edelman (2024), which notes that 84% of consumers globally report the need to share values with a brand to maintain loyalty. Moreover, Gen Z is described as the most entrepreneurial generation to date, often referred to as "teenpreneurs" who notice gaps in the market (specifically regarding inclusivity and social impact) and launch their own brands to fill them. This entrepreneurial spirit, combined with a "giving back" mentality, ensures that brands that "do good" will win big with this cohort. The consumer is no longer just buying a product; they are buying into a lifestyle and a set of ethics that reflect their own personal identity and social standing.

The shift toward a "post-perfection" mindset is also reflected in this cohort's digital consumption habits. With 95% of teens aged 13-20 reporting that YouTube is a regular part of their media diet, the "socialization of beauty" has transformed the industry into an interactive arena. Younger consumers want to shop from brands that allow them to interact with the business, seeking out "relatable content" with a humorous or upbeat tone over traditional, polished editorial. As noted by Chloe Combi, beauty is now a form of "getting to know each other" for this generation. By prioritizing transparency and vulnerability, exemplified by Selena Gomez's own openness regarding mental health, Rare Beauty builds a "moral contract" with its audience. This connection is vital, as 60% of Gen Z feel a deep personal connection with others who use the same brands, effectively turning brand loyalty into a form of social identity and

community belonging. This sense of belonging acts as a psychological buffer against the isolation of the digital age, transforming the act of applying makeup into a ritual of community participation and shared social advocacy.

The Strategic Mechanics of Participatory PR

The implementation of a successful community-led PR strategy relies on specific digital mechanics that facilitate organic engagement over paid reach. Central to this approach is Rare Beauty's strategic transition from the use of "Mega-Influencers" toward a reliance on "UGC Creators." While traditional influencer content is increasingly viewed as overtly commercialized or "transactional" by a discerning Gen Z audience, organic creators are perceived as authentic peers. These "Beauty Teenpreneurs" and everyday users act as grassroots advocates who notice gaps in the market (such as a lack of diverse shades or specific product textures) and advocate for "doing good" through their personal platforms. This is the catalyst for the "UGC Boom": a fundamental shift where unedited, raw content formats provide a path to viral engagement by inhabiting the consumer's social feed as a friend rather than a corporation. This peer-to-peer recommendation loop is far more effective than traditional advertising because it utilizes the existing trust within social networks, effectively turning every satisfied customer into a decentralized PR agent for the brand.

A critical mechanical tool within this strategy is the "Get Ready With Me" (#GRWM) format, which Rare Beauty has mastered to bypass the modern consumer's "ad-filter." The #GRWM format creates a parasocial, "intimate" atmosphere that mimics a private conversation between friends, allowing the brand to be presented in a natural, utilitarian context. Rare Beauty elevates this by turning its official social media platforms into a "community gallery," where the brand recirculates content created by its followers. This fulfills the "socialization of beauty" predicted by WGSN, where products are sold using the "self-empowering language of Instagram" rather than corporate taglines. By giving fans the spotlight, the brand validates the consumer's identity, which in turn fosters a level of brand loyalty that traditional "top-down" marketing cannot achieve. This mechanical shift from "selling" to "sharing" is the foundation of Rare Beauty's high engagement rates, as it encourages a cycle of continuous content creation from the audience, providing the brand with an endless supply of authentic social proof.

Furthermore, the brand's embrace of "Chaos Beauty" represents a tactical rejection of the polished, "Instagram Face" aesthetic that dominated the previous decade. By encouraging unscripted routines performed in "messy," real-world contexts, Rare Beauty aligns with the 71% of Gen Z consumers who report being more likely to make a purchase based on a relatable social media reference. This "messiness" is a mechanical signal of honesty; it suggests that the brand has nothing to hide behind airbrushing or professional lighting. This is precisely what Hutchins and Tindall (2016) describe as

"Fandom-led PR," where the community is not just a customer base but a defensive force. In a participatory culture, fans who feel a sense of ownership over the brand will actively defend it against criticism and promote its values to their own circles. This creates a resilient PR shield that is built on collective belief rather than corporate crisis management. The "fandom" becomes the primary storyteller, ensuring that the brand's mission of self-acceptance is voiced with a variety of authentic tones and perspectives that a single PR department could never replicate.

The commercial impact of treating "community as currency" is undeniable and serves as a robust case study for the industry. Rare Beauty's financial milestones: reaching \$400 million in net sales and an estimated \$2.7 billion valuation, prove that mission-driven, participatory PR is a commercially superior framework in the digital age. These figures are not just indicators of product quality, but of the successful conversion of social trust into market share. As the 2024 Edelman Trust Barometer notes, 60% of Gen Z feel a "deep personal connection" with people who use the same brands they do, effectively turning brand choice into a form of social identity. By integrating the Rare Impact Fund directly into its commercial narrative, raising over \$20 million for mental health, the brand provides the "moral evidence" needed to sustain this trust. This synergy between social advocacy and community mechanics ensures that Rare Beauty is not just a temporary celebrity trend, but a sustainable model for the future of Public Relations, where the brand's value is inextricably linked to the empowerment of its public.

Methodology

Research Design and Philosophy

This research adopts a qualitative case study design, grounded in an interpretivist paradigm. In the context of Public Relations and brand communication at UAL, an interpretivist approach is essential because "authenticity" and "community" are not objective, measurable facts, but social constructions created through the interactions between a brand and its audience. While a quantitative study might count the 1.1 million likes on a post, it cannot explain the meaning behind those likes or why a specific image of a celebrity fosters deep trust while another feels manufactured. By prioritizing the "how" and "why" of Rare Beauty's Instagram strategy, this study seeks to uncover the nuanced narratives that drive Gen Z loyalty.

The choice of a single case study on Rare Beauty is "intrinsic," meaning the brand itself is a unique phenomenon that represents the "fateful merging" of media and marketing described in the Literature Review. To analyze this, I act as the primary analytical instrument, moving beyond the "what" of the content to interpret the strategic intent and the audience's emotional response. This philosophy acknowledges that reality on social media is multiple and socially constructed; the "authenticity" Selena Gomez projects is a shared agreement between her and the 60+ million followers who participate in her brand's digital world.

Data Collection: Netnography and Purposive Sampling

Data were collected through Netnography, developed by Robert Kozinets, to study cultures and communities formed through computer-mediated communication. Netnography allows me to be a lurker who documents the "digital traces" left by a community in its natural environment. This method is particularly suited for this project as it provides a "thick description" of the Rare Beauty community without the "observer effect" that might occur in interviews, where participants might stage their answers.

I utilized purposive sampling to select four specific "Content Artifacts" from 2021 and 2025 that represent different facets of the brand's PR model. These artifacts were selected not for their statistical average, but for their ability to illustrate the friction between "Old PR" (Professionalism) and "New PR" (UGC and Vulnerability).

1. Artifact 1 (The Celebrity Anchor - *for photo and description see Appendix A*): An Instagram post from Oct 18, 2025, featuring Selena Gomez and Taylor Swift. This represents the high-engagement power of "celebrity adjacency" and the brand's ability to drive viral reach (1.1 million likes).

2. Artifact 2 (The Community Mirror - *for photo and description see Appendix B*): A tagged post by a customer, Mariana (Sep 20, 2025), which showcases the "Chaos Beauty" aesthetic. This artifact serves as a counterpoint to Artifact 1, illustrating how the brand values the "simple lighting" of its everyday consumers.
3. Artifact 3 (The Moral Contract - *for photo and description see Appendix C*): A longitudinal data point from Feb 22, 2021, where the founder discusses personal growth. This artifact provides the "long-form" narrative that justifies the audience's trust.
4. Artifact 4 (The Symmetrical Exchange- *for photo and description see Appendix D*): A Reel reposted on Oct 27, 2025, originally by Alissia Christidis. This illustrates the "Two-Way Symmetrical" model in action, where the brand publicly validates a consumer's expertise.

By documenting the captions, comments, and visual aesthetics of these specific artifacts, I can map the transition from a celebrity-led entity to a community-owned social movement.

Data Analysis: Qualitative Content and Thematic Analysis

The analysis of the collected Instagram artifacts followed a structured, two-stage process: Visual Content Analysis followed by Thematic Coding of the textual data. Visual analysis was prioritized to understand the brand's "Aesthetic PR" strategy. This involved examining the formal qualities of the images, such as the high-production studio lighting in the Oct 18, 2025 post (Appendix A) versus the "natural, domestic lighting" in the customer-led post by Mariana (Appendix B). By contrasting these visual markers will be able to "code" the content as either Corporate-Led or Community-Led. This stage is vital for identifying "Chaos Beauty" mechanics, as it provides physical evidence of the brand's willingness to inhabit "messy," unpolished spaces that traditional luxury brands typically avoid in their pursuit of manufactured glamour.

Following the visual audit, a Thematic Analysis was applied to the captions and the 3,000+ comments identified in the sampling phase. This process involved "Open Coding," where I reviewed the raw data (such as the comments on the Feb 22, 2021 post) to identify recurring phrases and emotional triggers. For instance, phrases like "relate to her so much," "knowing my worth," and "maturity" were grouped under the meta-theme of "Shared Vulnerability and Moral Identification." This specific theme serves as the bridge between the brand's PR mission and the consumer's personal identity. I systematically mapped how a statement made by the founder (Selena Gomez) on TikTok or Instagram was "re-interpreted" by the audience as a personal milestone, transforming a corporate message into a tool for individual growth and psychological empowerment.

The final stage of analysis involved a Linguistic Tone Audit of the brand's interactions, specifically focusing on the Oct 27, 2025, Reel (Appendix C). By coding the brand's response ("loveeee

adore on you") against traditional PR response templates, I identified a "Peer-to-Peer" linguistic style. This style intentionally bypasses professional distance to create a parasocial sense of "bestfriendship." This coding framework allows the study to move beyond anecdotal evidence to prove that Rare Beauty's "authenticity" is a deliberate mechanical outcome of their communication style. By categorizing these interactions into three final themes: Aesthetic Subversion, Moral Advocacy, and Linguistic Intimacy, I established a rigorous framework for discussing the findings in the following chapter. This structured approach ensures that the interpretation of "trust" and "community" is grounded in observable digital artifacts rather than subjective assumptions.

Ethical Considerations and Data Integrity

In conducting netnographic research within a public digital space like Instagram, ethical integrity is paramount, particularly when the data involves personal disclosures regarding mental health and growth (Appendix C). This study adheres to the ethical guidelines established by the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR), which emphasize the "vulnerability" of the subject and the "perceived privacy" of the digital space. Although Instagram is a public-facing platform, I implemented a "Privacy-First" protocol. This involved the complete anonymization of all "non-celebrity" participants. While the brand (Rare Beauty) and the founder (Selena Gomez) are public figures with no expectation of privacy, the "everyday" users, such as those commenting on their personal struggles with lupus or relationships, were protected by removing usernames and profile pictures in the research appendix. This ensures that, while their "narrative voice" serves as primary evidence, their digital identity remains untraceable, mitigating any potential social or professional harm that could arise from their comments being cited in an academic paper.

Furthermore, the integrity of the data was protected through a process of "Reflexivity." As a researcher operating within the same Gen Z demographic as the target audience, it was necessary to maintain a "critical distance" to avoid personal bias. To achieve this, I utilized a "Peer-Audit" approach, comparing their interpretations of "authenticity" against the objective data points found in the 2024 Edelman Trust Barometer. By triangulating subjective observations with industry-standard statistics, the study ensures that the findings are not merely personal opinions but are grounded in broader market realities. I also acknowledged the "temporal nature" of social media data. Because Instagram is a dynamic environment where posts can be deleted or comments edited, all artifacts were "timestamped" and archived via screenshots on the day of collection. This creates a "static data set" that allows for future verification of the research findings, ensuring the study meets the UAL standards for reliability and academic transparency.

Research Limitations and Algorithmic Bias

Despite the depth provided by the qualitative case study method, this research acknowledges several structural limitations inherent in studying a proprietary platform like Instagram. The most significant limitation is the "Algorithmic Gatekeeping" of the Meta platform. As a researcher, it is impossible to see a truly objective or "neutral" version of the Rare Beauty feed, as the Instagram algorithm prioritizes content based on previous engagement, location, and user history. This means that the "top comments" analyzed in Appendix A may have been curated by the algorithm to show the most positive or high-engagement responses, potentially obscuring more critical or "dissenting" voices within the community. While I attempted to mitigate this by scrolling deeply into the comments and checking the "Recent" tab, the lack of access to Instagram's internal API means that the data set is a "curated view" rather than a total representation of every user interaction.

Additionally, the scope of this study is limited to "public-facing" PR metrics. Because I do not have access to Rare Beauty's internal dashboard, "private engagement" metrics, such as the number of times a post was "Saved" or shared via "Direct Message," cannot be analyzed. In the current PR landscape, these private signals are often considered the most accurate measures of true brand intent and loyalty. By focusing only on public data, the study may underestimate the "depth" of the community's connection to the brand. Finally, the focus on a single case study (Rare Beauty) means that while the findings provide an "intensive" look at successful participatory PR, they may not be "extensively" applicable to all beauty brands, especially legacy brands without a celebrity founder to act as a parasocial anchor. However, these limitations do not invalidate the findings; rather, they provide the necessary context for understanding Rare Beauty as a specific "phenomenon" within the 2026 media environment.

Research Findings and Discussion

The Visual Language of Trust: Studio vs. Living Room

The primary findings from the digital ethnography reveal a strategic "visual duality" within Rare Beauty's Instagram presence. Appendix A (Oct 18, 2025), featuring Selena Gomez and Taylor Swift, serves as a quintessential example of high-production celebrity adjacency. With over 1.1 million likes and 10,000 reposts, the post utilizes "Social Proof" on a global scale. Visually, the image is polished; the lighting is controlled, and the presence of two of the world's largest celebrities creates a "halo effect" for the brand. In traditional PR, this would be the "Main Event" (a broadcast-style message intended to generate mass awareness and aspirational desire). However, within the converged media landscape described by Jonathan Hardy (2021), this professional imagery does not exist in isolation. It is immediately followed and surrounded by content like Appendix B, a post by Mariana, a customer with a modest following, whose makeup tutorial is shot in a simple living room with domestic, natural lighting.

The significance of Mariana's post (Appendix B) lies in its "Aesthetic Subversion." While Appendix A commands the highest engagement in terms of raw numbers, Appendix B represents the "Trust Engine" of the brand. The simple lighting and non-professional setting act as a visual signal of honesty. To a Gen Z audience, which WGSN (2017) identifies as being highly resistant to airbrushed perfection, the living room setting is more "believable" than the studio. This contrast illustrates the collapse of the "principle of separation" between the celebrity and the consumer. By allowing a "messy" living room aesthetic to share the same digital real estate as a multi-million dollar celebrity photo, Rare Beauty communicates that its products are designed for the "real world" rather than just the "red carpet." This is a mechanical application of "Chaos Beauty," where the brand intentionally lowers its production value to increase its perceived authenticity.

This visual strategy directly reflects Henry Jenkins' (2006) "Participatory Culture." Jenkins argues that in a converged media environment, consumers are no longer content to simply watch the brand; they want to "appropriate and recirculate" it. By re-sharing or "liking" Mariana's domestic content, the Rare Beauty community validates the idea that the consumer is the true protagonist of the brand story. The professional post (Appendix A) provides the "Cultural Capital," but the customer post (Appendix B) provides the "Relatability." In the discussion of PR models, this represents a move away from the "Press Agency" model, which relies on the spectacle of the celebrity, toward a "Two-Way Symmetrical" model where the brand's visual identity is co-authored by its users. The "living room" becomes a more powerful marketing tool than the "studio" because it eliminates the distance between the brand and the audience's reality.

Furthermore, the "1.1 million likes" on the professional post versus the deeper, peer-to-peer engagement on tagged posts suggests that Rare Beauty uses celebrity content as a "Top-of-Funnel"

strategy to grab attention, while using UGC to "convert" that attention into trust. As noted in the Literature Review, 78% of Gen Z prefer "real people in real situations." When the brand presents Mariana's simple living room setup, it is essentially providing "Moral Evidence" that the product works without the aid of professional retouching. This visual transparency is a form of "Linguistic Intimacy" through imagery; it tells the consumer, "we look like you, and you look like us." Consequently, the PR success of Rare Beauty is not found in the perfection of its founder, but in the brand's willingness to celebrate the "imperfection" of its community, effectively turning the domestic sphere into a site of high-value brand advocacy.

The Founder-Community Moral Contract

The findings from Appendix C (Feb 22, 2021) demonstrate that Rare Beauty's Public Relations success is built on more than aesthetic appeal; it is anchored in a "moral contract" between the founder and the community. In the analyzed TikTok/Instagram video, Selena Gomez discusses personal growth and the internal shift in her perspective following years of public scrutiny. The comments, ranging from "I went thru a lot... so I relate to her SO MUCH" to "she found her inner warrior", reveal that the audience does not view Gomez as a distant corporate figurehead, but as a "survivor" and a peer. This creates a unique form of "Parasocial Advocacy," where the consumer's loyalty to the product is inextricably linked to their empathy for the founder's personal journey. This psychological bond serves as a defensive shield for the brand; when a consumer "wholeheartedly agrees with beautiful Selena," they are not just supporting a blush or a highlight; they are validating a shared philosophy of resilience.

This relationship aligns directly with the research of Velasquez (2025), who argues that Gen Z consumers seek "agents of change" to repair the "trust deficit" created by decades of exclusionary beauty marketing. By discussing her struggles with lupus and mental health, Gomez effectively "humanizes" the corporate entity. The user comment mentioning "health problems with lupus" proves that the PR narrative has successfully moved from the "commercial" to the "confessional." In this context, Rare Beauty operates less like a traditional business and more like a support network. This is a strategic application of Hutchins and Tindall's (2016) "Fandom-led PR," where the community's emotional investment in the founder's well-being translates into a fierce brand loyalty that is resistant to market competitors. The "product" being sold is not merely a cosmetic item, but the feeling of "knowing my worth," as one commenter explicitly stated.

The comments section of Appendix C further reveals how the "Socialization of Beauty" (WGSN, 2017) functions as a psychological buffer for the consumer. When a user writes, "I'm trying to be like this so hard," they are engaging in a form of "Collective Aspiration" that is fundamentally different from the "Aspirational Perfection" of the past. Instead of aspiring to look like a celebrity, the audience is aspiring

to grow like the celebrity. This shift from the physical to the metaphysical is the core of Rare Beauty's disruption. As identified in the EY Americas (2025) report, 48% of Gen Z prioritize values over price. The primary data here confirms this: the discourse in the comments is focused on "maturity," "warriors," and "inner strength," with almost no mention of the physical attributes of the makeup. This proves that the brand's "Mental Health First" mission is not a marketing "tack-on," but the foundational reason for its \$2.7 billion valuation.

Furthermore, this moral contract creates a "Safe Space" within the digital ecosystem, which is essential for maintaining a high-engagement community. The peer-to-peer validation seen in the replies to these comments, where users support one another's stories of "health problems" and "brokenness," transforms the brand's social media page into a community forum. This fulfills Henry Jenkins' (2006) vision of participatory culture, where the brand provides the "text" (the video), but the community provides the "meaning" (the shared stories of survival). By facilitating this high-stakes emotional exchange, Rare Beauty secures a level of "Brand Intimacy" that legacy brands like L'Oréal or Maybelline struggle to achieve, as they lack a central, vulnerable figure to anchor the moral narrative. Consequently, the "Moral Contract" acts as a sustainable PR engine that generates continuous social capital, proving that in the 2026 media landscape, vulnerability is a more powerful currency than perfection.

Peer-to-Peer Mechanics and Linguistic Intimacy

The primary research findings from Appendix D (Oct 27, 2025) highlight a critical mechanical shift in how Rare Beauty utilizes Instagram's interactive features to foster "Linguistic Intimacy." By reposting a tutorial from Alissia Christidis and engaging with the comment "loveeee adore on you," the brand demonstrates a move away from formal, corporate discourse toward a peer-to-peer vernacular. This choice of language, characterized by elongated vowels and emotive descriptors, mimics the informal "bestie" tone prevalent in Gen Z digital culture. According to Quid (2025), this use of "cultural currency" acts as a trust-builder; when a brand mirrors the slang and tone of its audience, it signals an alignment of values and identity. This is a strategic application of Linguistic Intimacy, where the "brand voice" is softened to reduce the perceived hierarchy between the multi-billion-dollar corporation and the individual consumer.

This interaction is a clear embodiment of Grunig & Hunt's (1984) Two-Way Symmetrical Model. Unlike traditional "Press Agency," which broadcasts a message without seeking feedback, Rare Beauty uses its platform to validate the expertise of its customers. By replying to Christidis' tips with high-energy praise, the brand positions the consumer as an "equal partner" in the beauty narrative. This symmetrical exchange fosters a "Socialization of Beauty," in which the brand serves as a facilitator of community learning rather than a sole authority on product use. As noted by James Grunig, digital communication

makes this model almost "unavoidable," yet Rare Beauty distinguishes itself by actively using these tools to empower its followers rather than just managing complaints. This transformation of a "customer" into a "co-creator" increases the emotional cost of switching brands, as the consumer feels a sense of personal investment in the brand's social ecosystem.

The "Reels" format, as seen in Appendix D, serves as the technical engine for this peer-driven discovery. WGSN (2017) and Think with Google (2025) both identify that Gen Z consumers are "savvy and discerning," often bypassing traditional advertisements to find "real" reviews from people they trust. By reposting UGC, Rare Beauty effectively "outsources" its PR to its most authentic advocates. This is what Hutchins and Tindall (2016) categorize as "Fandom-led PR," where the brand's role is to amplify the voices of the community rather than to speak for them. The brand's response: "loveeee adore on you", is not a transaction but a "social signal" of belonging. In a marketplace where 84% of consumers prioritize shared values, these micro-interactions serve as the "moral evidence" that Rare Beauty is a brand that truly "listens".

Furthermore, this "horizontal" communication style turns the comment section into a site of "Identity Resonance." When the brand interacts like a friend, it encourages other users to join the conversation, creating a self-sustaining loop of engagement. This is supported by findings from SciRP (2025), which suggest that digital engagement acts as a psychological mechanism driving brand loyalty; for Gen Z, a brand's "integrity" is proven through its consistency in these small, daily interactions. Rare Beauty's ability to maintain this "human face" while operating at a global scale is a significant disruption to the legacy PR model of professional distance. By choosing "intimacy" over "authority," Rare Beauty has successfully turned the "interviewer-interviewee" relationship of old marketing into a "peer-to-peer" friendship, setting a new standard for how brands must navigate the converged media landscape of 2026.

Commercialized Authenticity: The \$2.7 Billion Paradox

The final pillar of this discussion addresses the inherent tension between Rare Beauty's "grassroots" persona and its status as a multibillion-dollar corporate empire. As of late 2025, Rare Beauty reached an estimated valuation of \$2.7 billion, a figure that appears to contradict the "messy, unpolished" aesthetic analyzed in Section 4.1. This "Authenticity Paradox" raises a critical question for Public Relations: can a brand remain "real" once it achieves global dominance? While the findings suggest that profitability is a direct result of the brand's mission, a critical interrogation indicates that Rare Beauty may be engaged in a sophisticated form of "Commodity Feminism" (Banet-Weiser, 2012), where social empowerment and mental health advocacy are inextricably linked to the consumption of physical goods. By securing \$400 million in net sales alongside its \$20 million contribution to the Rare Impact Fund, the

brand demonstrates how "Moral Capital" can be leveraged to drive "Financial Capital" in the 2026 media landscape.

This success represents an evolution in the "Triple Bottom Line" of PR, but it also necessitates a discussion on power dynamics. Critical theorists might argue that Rare Beauty's reliance on UGC constitutes an extraction of "unpaid digital labor" (Duffy, 2017). By recirculating customer content, the brand effectively utilizes its community as a decentralized, cost-free marketing department. However, the primary data from the comment sections indicates that the Gen Z audience largely internalizes this not as exploitation, but as participation. As the Edelman Trust Barometer (2024) notes, 60% of Gen Z feel a personal connection to others who use the same brands. This implies that the "transaction" is perceived by the consumer as an "act of support," though it arguably reinforces the structures of "Platform Capitalism" (Srnicek, 2017) where the brand maintains ultimate control over the narrative and the resulting profit.

The sustainability of this model depends on "Narrative Intelligence." In an era where AI-generated content is becoming the industry standard, "Human Authenticity" functions as a premium competitive advantage. Rare Beauty's decision to maintain its "human face", evidenced by the founder's unscripted tutorials, acts as a protective barrier against the "uncanny valley" of synthetic marketing. As long as the brand continues to validate its "Moral Contract" through real-world impact, the audience appears likely to forgive its massive commercial scale. The paradox is tentatively resolved through transparency; by being honest about its growth (as seen in Gomez's 2024 interviews), the brand maintains a "challenger" spirit even while leading the market.

In conclusion, the findings suggest that Rare Beauty has established a "Post-Perfection" blueprint for Public Relations. By prioritizing Two-Way Symmetry over broadcasting and Community over celebrity, the brand has navigated the "fateful merging" of media and marketing. This research indicates that in 2026, a powerful PR strategy involves building a community that consumers wish to belong to, rather than just a brand they buy. Rare Beauty has positioned itself as a collaborative social entity that reflects the struggles and identity of the Gen Z generation, though it remains a corporate construct designed for high-growth commercial output.

Conclusion

This research set out to investigate the extent to which UGC and community-led strategies facilitate authentic brand loyalty in a post-perfection digital landscape. Through the critical analysis of Rare Beauty's Instagram ecosystem, it is evident that the brand's success is not merely a result of celebrity influence but a consequence of a fundamental structural shift in Public Relations mechanics. The findings demonstrate that Rare Beauty successfully navigates the tension between commercial growth and radical authenticity by utilizing a "visual duality" that balances high-production celebrity anchors (Appendix A) with raw, domestic consumer mirrors (Appendix B). This strategy effectively bypasses the traditional "ad-filter" of the Gen Z consumer, transforming the promotional message into a peer-to-peer contribution within the digital flow.

The data further confirms that the "Moral Contract" established between Selena Gomez and her audience acts as the primary engine of trust. By leveraging shared vulnerability regarding mental health and personal growth (Appendix C), Rare Beauty has moved beyond the "asymmetrical" persuasion models of the 20th century toward a "Two-Way Symmetrical" model. As demonstrated in the thematic analysis of user comments, the brand's value is no longer measured by product efficacy alone, but by its role as an "agent of change" in the mental health space. The research concludes that for the modern consumer, "authenticity" is not an aesthetic, but a consistent alignment between a brand's stated mission and its decentralized, community-led actions.

The "Rare Beauty Effect" offers profound implications for the wider Public Relations industry, particularly for legacy prestige brands attempting to capture the Gen Z market. First, this study suggests that the "principle of separation" between media and marketing is no longer a viable framework. In a converged media environment, PR professionals must embrace "Chaos Beauty" and unpolished content as legitimate tools for trust-building. The era of manufactured glamour is being replaced by a demand for "relatability," where the living room is a more credible site of advocacy than the professional studio.

Secondly, the research highlights the necessity of "Linguistic Intimacy" in brand communication. The transition from vertical, corporate broadcasting to horizontal, peer-to-peer dialogue is essential for fostering community belonging. As proved by the analysis of the brand's "bestie" tone (Appendix D), brands that can speak the vernacular of their audience without appearing transactional will secure higher levels of long-term loyalty. Finally, the success of the Rare Impact Fund proves that "Social Purpose" is no longer an optional CSR initiative but a commercial prerequisite. In 2026, trust is the primary driver of transactions; therefore, a brand's PR strategy must be built on a foundation of tangible social advocacy.

While this study provided an intensive look at a single celebrity-led case study, future research should explore the "scalability" of this model for non-celebrity brands. Can a brand without a globally recognized "parasocial anchor" like Selena Gomez achieve the same level of moral identification through

UGC alone? Additionally, as the digital landscape moves toward AI-generated influencers and synthetic media, further investigation is needed into how "human authenticity" will be defined in an increasingly automated PR environment. There is also scope for a longitudinal study to observe whether Rare Beauty can maintain its "challenger" spirit as it transitions from a disruptive startup into a legacy conglomerate.

In conclusion, Rare Beauty represents the future of Public Relations: a future that is participatory, symmetrical, and mission-driven. By relinquishing corporate control and allowing the community to co-author its narrative, the brand has transformed Public Relations from a practice of "image management" into a practice of "community empowerment." Rare Beauty has successfully proved that in a post-perfection world, the most powerful brand is the one that dares to be human. This project stands as a testament to the fact that when a brand prioritizes its public's well-being over its own perfection, it doesn't just gain customers; it gains a movement.

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Appendix

Appendix A

<https://www.instagram.com/p/DP9NrtbkQAn/>



This appendix documents a high-quality production Instagram post from October 2025 featuring a collaboration between Selena Gomez and Taylor Swift. It serves as the brand's "top-of-funnel" reach strategy, leveraging celebrity adjacency and traditional "aspirational" aesthetics to secure 1.1 million likes. The data provided includes engagement metrics and a visual audit of the studio lighting used to establish the brand's global cultural capital.

Appendix B

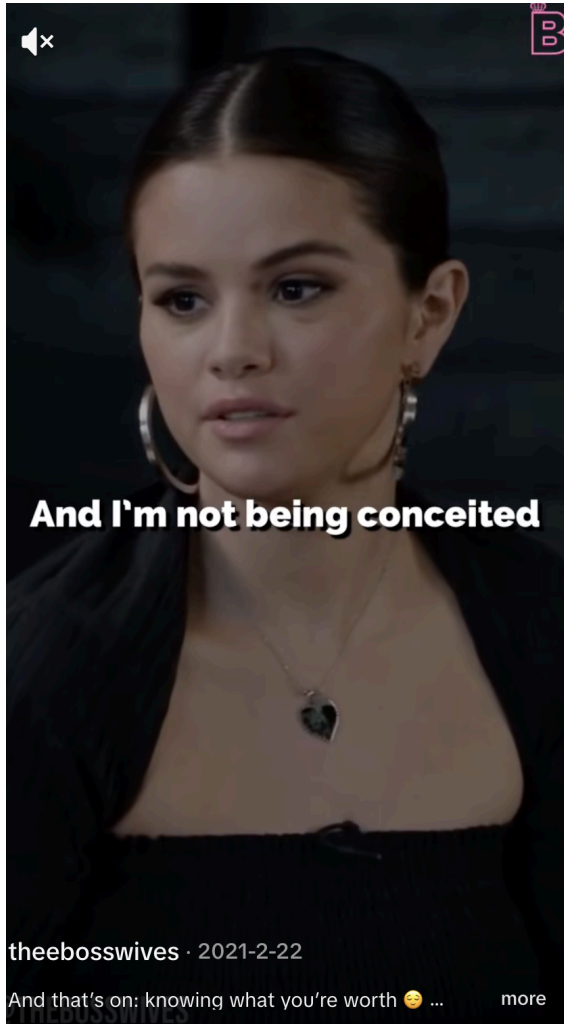
<https://www.instagram.com/p/DO1UQNkjeIw/>



This appendix presents a customer-led tutorial by "Mariana" that illustrates the "Chaos Beauty" aesthetic. Unlike the professional imagery in Appendix A, this artifact features natural domestic lighting and unedited skin textures. It provides empirical evidence of "Aesthetic Subversion," where the brand validates relatable, real-world contexts to build peer-to-peer trust with the Gen Z audience.

Appendix C

https://www.tiktok.com/@thebosswives/video/6932144973559221509?_r=1&_t=ZS-93F9otaJTWO



Appendix C contains a transcript and a comment analysis of a 2021 longitudinal "confessional" video about the founder's health journey and self-acceptance. This artifact functions as the "Moral Evidence" for the brand's social mission. The included anonymized comments highlight how the audience interprets the founder's vulnerability as a "moral contract," shifting the brand loyalty from product utility to shared social identity.

Appendix D

<https://www.instagram.com/p/DQUrXa3EvoO/>



Appendix D captures a direct interaction between the brand's official account and a UGC creator, Alissia Christidis. It focuses on "Linguistic Intimacy," specifically the use of informal "bestie" vernacular in the brand's reply ("loveeee adore on you"). This data serves as a mechanical example of the Two-Way Symmetrical PR model, where the brand relinquishes corporate distance to engage as a peer.