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Bodily Realities in Digital Journalism: The Role of User-Generated Content in Embodied Witnessing

Runze Qu ^a, Rukun Zhang ^b and Jinghong Xu ^{a,c}

^aSchool of Journalism and Communication, Beijing Normal University, Beijing, People's Republic of China;

^bSchool of Media and Communication, Shenzhen University, Shenzhen, People's Republic of China;

^cInternational College, Krirk University, Bangkok, Thailand

ABSTRACT

In the evolving digital era, user-generated content (UGC) plays a crucial role in shaping journalistic narratives, shedding light on the corporeal realities of news coverage. This study delves into the embodied nature of UGC—its visual, auditory, and emotional components—that significantly enhance the perceptual immediacy and authenticity of news. Utilizing descriptive and correlational analyses, this research examines how these embodied characteristics impact journalistic authenticity and emotional resonance. The findings illuminate that aspects such as on-site Filming and emotional Language are closely linked with journalistic objectivity and emotional intensity. Moreover, the incorporation of UGC foregrounds ethical challenges, highlighting concerns over privacy and misinformation, which are pivotal in maintaining journalistic integrity. This analysis underscores the necessity for news organizations to adeptly navigate these complexities, promoting an understanding of how the corporeal engagement facilitated by UGC redefines journalistic practices and values. By emphasizing the material and discursive positioning of bodies in journalism, this paper contributes to broader discussions on the corporeal dimensions of communication in the digital age, offering guidelines for establishing ethical standards that respect both the integrity of news and its inherently participatory nature.

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Introduction

In the context of digitalization and platformization, user-generated content (UGC) has shifted from a peripheral supplement to a central element of news production. Platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, and YouTube have restructured information flows, enabling ordinary users to participate directly in event coverage through visual, auditory, and textual contributions. This decentralization reshapes the boundary between traditional media and audiences while introducing new forms of immediacy and multiplicity in journalistic narratives (Colistra, Buchman, and Duvall 2017; Franquet, Villa, and Bergillos 2011). With the spread of algorithms and mobile imaging tools, UGC increasingly triggers sensory resonance and instant cognition in news reporting.

Amid these transformations, embodiment has gained theoretical significance in communication studies and journalism ethics. It refers to the sensorial dimensions of news—such as first-person footage, ambient sound, bodily gestures, and emotional expressions—that create experiential proximity (Chouliaraki and Al-Ghazzi 2022). These features establish mechanisms of embodied witnessing, through which UGC makes others' experiences emotionally accessible to distant viewers (Chouliaraki and Mortensen 2022). The viral 30-second bridal video from the Beirut port explosion illustrates how “flesh witnessing” compresses space-time, heightens verification anxiety, and enhances perceived authenticity and emotional resonance (Global News 2020; O'Grady 2020). Such immersion intensifies engagement while challenging traditional media's narrative authority (Wahl-Jorgensen, Williams, and Wardle 2010).

However, integrating embodied UGC into mainstream journalism intensifies tensions between speed-driven presence and verification norms. Its unverified nature invites scrutiny and raises misinformation risks (Sözeri 2013). Research on journalistic embodiment has moved from reporters' physical experiences (Deuze and Glitsos 2024) to conflicts between “flesh testimonies” and editorial authority (Mortensen and Nørgaard Kristensen 2023), yet it lacks cross-platform measurement frameworks to examine links between embodied intensity, authenticity, and emotional impact. Moreover, UGC often contains ethically sensitive content—such as private moments or violent scenes—raising issues of privacy, consent, and dignity (Ugille 2008), requiring a balance between public knowledge and ethical limits.

To address these challenges, this study identified 50 high-impact news events and collected more than 500 individual news texts (articles, broadcast scripts, and platform posts) about them for content analysis. From these events, five were selected for detailed case-study analysis to examine visual, auditory, and affective elements of UGC. It explores how embodied witnessing influences audience perception and emotional response, offering empirical grounding and theoretical insights to foster authenticity and emotional resonance while upholding ethical standards. This research also contributes to the broader discourse on the “embodied turn,” emphasizing how the body—through its sensory and affective capacities—functions as both a medium and object of journalistic practice. In doing so, the study responds to the special issue's call to reconsider embodied communication and professional values in an increasingly digitized environment.

Literature Review

Multimodal Expressions of Embodiment in News UGC

As journalism becomes increasingly digitized and platform-driven, UGC has evolved into a central source of news information. Its real-time uploads and decentralized dissemination accelerate responsiveness while diversifying perspectives (Paulussen and D'heer 2013). Through multimodal forms—images, audio, and language—UGC integrates into mainstream workflows, reshaping the logic of “who can witness” and “who has the right to narrate” (Allan 2013; Hermida 2020; Wahl-Jorgensen, Williams, and Wardle 2010).

Embodiment has thus become a key concept for interpreting UGC's communicative features. It denotes the transmission of bodily experience through vision, sound, and speech, producing experiential proximity in news. Embodied expressions typically

appear in unedited first-person footage, ambient noise, unstable framing, and interrupted speech, enabling viewers to perceive events more directly (Pantti 2019). Unlike traditional narrative witnessing (Peters 2001), flesh witnessing (Chouliaraki and Mortensen 2022; Chouliaraki and Al-Ghazzi 2022) stresses the presence of the witnessing body, enhancing sensory realism and emotional proximity. As scholarship has shifted from connective to flesh witnessing (Mortensen 2015), sensory representation in UGC is increasingly recognized as pivotal to constructing authenticity and trust.

Studies identify several modes of embodiment in UGC. Visually, non-professional videos often display shaking and erratic zooms, forming a distinct bodily perspective (Andén-Papadopoulos 2014). Aurally, background sounds—ambient noise, shouting, crying, footsteps—intensify spatial and emotional presence (Chouliaraki and Al-Ghazzi 2022). Linguistically, first-person pronouns, fragmented speech, and emotionally charged language connect personal experience with public crisis (Pantti and Huslage 2009). These multimodal elements reinforce the witness's presence and affective investment. Yet most analyses remain case-based and lack cross-platform frameworks for systematic comparison.

Platform affordances further shape embodiment. On X, UGC often appears as short clips under 30 s, emphasizing visual shocks and emotions like fear or grief (Arcos, Rosso, and Salaverría 2025). Tweets embedding YouTube clips act as viral triggers (La Gatta et al. 2023). YouTube supports longer narratives with contextual depth (Jung et al. 2024; Newman et al. 2025). TikTok leverages music, filters, and editing to heighten sensory impact, with videos averaging under one minute while reaching 17% of adults online in 2024 (Leppert and Matsa 2024). While these studies show platform distinctions, most focus on isolated cases, limiting generalizability.

Accordingly, this study proposes the following research question:

RQ1: How are visual, auditory, and emotional characteristics of UGC embodied in news coverage? What are the similarities and differences in its multimodal expressions across platforms and news genres?

Embodiment, Authenticity, and Emotional Resonance: The Impact Mechanisms of UGC

In journalism, the embodiment of UGC operates both as a representational mode and a mechanism that strengthens perceived authenticity and emotional resonance. Audiences frequently interpret its unmediated sensory presentation as “unmanipulated direct experience,” enhancing credibility and emotional intensity (Chouliaraki and Blaagaard 2013). Unlike traditional structured narratives, the bodily perspective in UGC encourages viewers to equate visuals with lived experience—a process known as perceived authenticity (Van Zoonen 2012). For example, Western outlets often incorporate conflict footage featuring close visual proximity and subjective angles to boost credibility and verification (Chouliaraki and Mortensen 2022).

Embodied features also amplify emotional expressiveness and audience resonance. In disasters or protests, shaky visuals and chaotic sounds heighten immediacy (Tenenboim and Cohen 2015), while cues of pain, anger, or grief strongly enhance empathic engagement and moral evaluation, driving content diffusion on social platforms (Baum and Abdel Rahman 2021; Papacharissi 2015). The interplay of embodiment and emotional

tension enables UGC to surpass traditional reporting not only in reach but also in stimulating affective arousal and participation.

From a media psychology perspective, UGC's sensory complexity and emotional intensity influence cognitive processing. According to Sundar's (2008) MAIN model (Modality, Agency, Interactivity, Navigability), high "sensory density" shapes heuristic judgments and encourages behaviors like sharing and commenting (Valenzuela, Piña, and Ramírez 2017). Cross-platform dissemination reinforces these dynamics: embedded YouTube videos offer narrative depth that compensates for limited visual immediacy, enhancing credibility, whereas native TikTok clips, propelled by concentrated emotional momentum, rapidly achieve virality through dual activation of empathy and trust (La Gatta et al. 2023).

However, these effects are context-dependent. UGC from unknown sources, with editing traces or exaggerated emotional cues, may prompt audience skepticism and distrust (Tsfati et al. 2020). Algorithmic preferences for emotional content further risk bias and polarization, allowing "emotional truth" to overshadow "factual truth" (Haim, Graefe, and Brosius 2018). Therefore, while embodied UGC enhances authenticity and engagement, its advantages are constrained by platform logics and sociotechnical contexts. Existing research focuses mainly on media effects, leaving theoretical and empirical gaps in modeling the relational chain between embodiment, authenticity, and emotional resonance across media environments.

Thus, this study proposes the following research question:

RQ2: How do different forms and intensities of embodied expression in UGC construct authenticity and emotional resonance in news reporting?

Ethical Tensions of Embodied UGC and Divergent Governance Across Platforms

Embodied UGC enhances news authenticity and emotional resonance through heightened presence and affective intensity, yet simultaneously introduces significant ethical concerns. Non-consensual exposure is a primary issue, as UGC frequently includes graphic portrayals of injuries, suffering, or death captured without subjects' consent, potentially violating privacy and dignity (Allan 2013). This ethical tension is particularly pronounced in high-risk contexts such as wars, disasters, and protests, where "crisis witnessing" footage is presented as evidence despite questionable ethical standards (Chouliaraki 2006). Such content may arise from deliberate testimonial intentions or algorithm-driven incentives, complicating distinctions between legitimate witnessing and exploitation (Mortensen and Trenz 2016).

The authenticity of UGC further exacerbates these ethical dilemmas. Emotionally intense or dramatized content—potentially manipulated or presented out of context—can rapidly circulate without adequate verification, misleading audiences (Brandtzaeg et al. 2016). Traditional editorial workflows often lack robust mechanisms for assessing content provenance, allowing unverified or falsified material to be disseminated as factual (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017). Highly embodied UGC, marked by sensory intensity, may obscure verification deficits, eliciting affective rather than analytical responses (Brandtzaeg et al. 2016).

Platform algorithms further compound the ethical complexity associated with UGC distribution. Recent research indicates social platforms prioritize emotionally intense, visually striking content to maximize engagement, thereby reinforcing biased circulation patterns

(Karlsson, Van Couvering, and Lindell 2022). Such algorithmic incentives encourage creators to amplify affective visuals and narrative dramatization to enhance visibility. Consequently, news organizations must navigate the delicate balance between informing the public and ethically representing suffering (Sontag 2003).

Despite ongoing appeals from international bodies such as UNESCO and national press councils for unified ethical guidelines, normative frameworks for UGC vary considerably across media systems and platforms. Established news organizations like BBC and CNN typically apply rigorous verification processes and editorial screening, emphasizing source credibility and visual appropriateness, sometimes employing secondary reviews to mitigate ethical breaches (Singer 2014). Conversely, digital-native outlets such as Vice News often prioritize immediacy and visceral impact over explicit ethical disclaimers or transparency regarding content provenance (Allan 2013). Certain regional and content aggregation platforms still adhere to a “publish fast, revise later” ethos, exacerbating ethical ambiguities (Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti 2013).

In summary, embodied UGC significantly enhances the communicative effectiveness of news yet amplifies ethical risks, particularly related to invasive exposure and emotional commodification. These risks intensify in algorithmically governed environments, where visibility and virality often overshadow ethical scrutiny. Media institutions demonstrate notable divergence in managing these tensions through varying governance strategies, editorial judgments, and representational approaches, prompting the following research question:

RQ3: What kinds of ethical dilemmas are raised by embodied UGC in news reporting, and how do news organizations differ in their normative responses?

Method

Research Design and Methodological Logic

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach combining content analysis and case study under the complementary logic of triangulation. Content analysis identifies reproducible macro-level patterns of UGC embodiment, while case studies provide in-depth explanations of ethical tensions and institutional practices. This design captures the representational features, dissemination mechanisms, and governance of embodied UGC. Content analysis systematically examines embodied characteristics across platforms and their relationships with news authenticity and emotional resonance, addressing RQ1 and RQ2. Case studies focus on ethical controversies and platform-specific responses, primarily answering RQ3 while supplementing the explanatory dimensions of other research questions.

The logic of this explanatory embedded mixed-methods design lies in integrating the breadth of quantitative inquiry with the depth of qualitative exploration. This approach is particularly suitable for revealing complex communicative phenomena based on structured coding (Creswell and Clark 2017; Yin 2018). In journalism and communication research, embodied UGC manifests not only as observable visual and auditory features but is also deeply embedded in context-specific normative judgments and emotional dynamics. A single method would be insufficient to capture these multi-layered effects. Therefore, this study combines large-scale content analysis to identify macro-level

features and effects with selected case studies that enhance explanatory power regarding ethical risks and platform-specific regulatory strategies.

At the event level, we constructed a sampling frame of 50 high-impact news events spanning multiple countries and platforms, each involving user-generated content (UGC) in text, image, or video form. From coverage of these events, we assembled a content-analysis corpus of more than 500 individual news texts (articles, broadcast scripts, and native platform posts) to address RQ1—how UGC is embodied—and RQ2—how it relates to authenticity and resonance. We then purposively selected five cross-platform events for in-depth case studies to examine ethical tensions and institutional governance differences (RQ3). In short, the event level provided the sampling frame (50 events), the content-analysis level used the individual news text as the unit of analysis (>500 items), and the case-study level comprised a purposive subsample of five events.

Sampling Strategy and Platform Distribution

The content analysis drew on 50 high-impact news events that served as the sampling frame, establishing a cross-platform comparative structure. At this stage, the unit of analysis was the individual news text (article, broadcast script, or native platform post) that incorporated UGC. These “50 events” refer to 50 representative news incidents selected through a stratified purposive sampling strategy at the event level. Specifically, the selection was guided by four criteria: (1) public significance of the event, (2) richness of UGC content, (3) salience of embodied characteristics, and (4) comparability across cultural and geopolitical contexts. Events span natural disasters (e.g., 2018 California Wildfires), social protests (e.g., 2020 George Floyd Protests), public health crises (e.g., early COVID-19 responses), and political conflicts (e.g., 2014 Crimea Crisis), all characterized by high impact and heavy UGC reliance.

Within each selected event, a cross-platform strategy was employed to identify five prominent news platforms for comparative analysis. Platform selection was based on three factors: the platform’s influence in covering the event, click-through volume, and level of audience engagement. Priority was given to media organizations that combine journalistic professionalism with strong digital communication capabilities, including BBC, CNN, The Guardian, YouTube, Al Jazeera, NPR, and Vice News—ensuring a balanced comparison between traditional and digital platforms. After platform selection, 1–2 representative texts with high levels of UGC integration were chosen from each platform based on criteria such as headline prominence, homepage ranking, and degree of UGC embedding. These texts include main reports, derivative commentaries, and related extensions to ensure the completeness of content and typicality of embodied characteristics.

Because many events were covered by multiple outlets and some outlets contributed more than two relevant items, the final corpus exceeded 500 individual texts. This broad and diverse sample base effectively captures both the depth and breadth of UGC-based news reporting. In terms of platform typology, traditional public broadcasting institutions (e.g., BBC, CNN) tend to adopt more standardized UGC integration practices, whereas digital-native platforms (e.g., YouTube, Vice News) emphasize user-generated content and algorithm-driven distribution. By comparing UGC representation and ethical handling across different journalistic logics, this study explores how embodied characteristics

generate distinct media effects and ethical implications. To ensure research transparency and reproducibility, the complete list of 50 selected events, platform samples, the complete coding book, and data documentation have been uploaded to the Open Science Framework (OSF).

Operational Definitions and Coding Scheme

This study developed a structured coding book to operationalize embodied characteristics, encompassing three main variables with multiple dimensions. Independent variables were classified based on multimodal embodied communication theory (Andén-Papadopoulos 2014; Chouliaraki 2006), comprising visual evidence, auditory evidence, emotional expression, and sense of engagement. Visual evidence drawn from embodied witnessing literature, emphasizing first-person imagery for authenticity (Chouliaraki and Blaagaard 2013). Auditory evidence was informed by McLuhan's concept of "acoustic space," highlighting immersive auditory elements (McLuhan 1994). Emotional expression employed Ekman's typology of verbal and nonverbal emotional cues (Ekman 1992). Engagement integrated narrative transportation and interactivity theories, focusing on narrative perspective and audience involvement (Green and Brock 2000; Sundar 2015). These categories structured sensory elements systematically within multimodal UGC, aligning with the "immersion–perception–empathy" theoretical model in embodied journalism (Peters 2011).

Dependent variables included news authenticity—measured through Factuality, Objectivity, and Transparency (Karlsson, Van Couvering, and Lindell 2022; Wardle and Derakhshan 2017)—and emotional resonance, evaluated across emotion type, intensity, expression modes, and audience response, based on Gross's emotion regulation theory and Brandtzaeg et al.'s analytical framework (Brandtzaeg et al. 2016; Gross 2002).

All variables were evaluated using a five-point Likert scale (1 = minimal presence, 5 = high manifestation) to enhance discriminative capacity and comparability. Specific operational rules clarified scoring criteria, particularly for dimensions involving subjective judgment. For instance, character portrayal scoring ranged from 1 (individuals not visible or facing away) to 5 (explicit facial expressions and bodily gestures, such as crying or shouting). Language interaction scoring varied from 1 (completely silent visuals) to 5 (rich verbal content including narration and ambient descriptions). Interactivity required explicit engagement cues (e.g., open-ended questions or hashtags like "#WitnessTogether") for a score of 5. Narrative perspective scores ranged from 1 (third-person observation or overhead shots) to 5 (strong subjective engagement with first- or second-person perspectives, e.g., "I saw it"). Emotion expression modes scoring ranged from 1 (single-mode, text-based) to 5 (multimodal expressions incorporating visual, verbal, nonverbal, and auditory cues). These guidelines were pilot-tested and refined through team discussions to ensure replicability and internal consistency.

Coders underwent standardized training and conducted a pilot coding session, which was excluded from the final analysis. Independent coding of identical samples by two coders yielded a Cohen's Kappa coefficient of 0.89, indicating strong intercoder reliability. Discrepancies were resolved through discussions to reach a complete consensus. Detailed operational definitions and measurement methods are presented in Table 1. As each dimension was individually analyzed, internal consistency measures (e.g., Cronbach's alpha) were not computed. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS 26.0.

Table 1. Coding book for content analysis of UGC.

| Variable | Dimension | Operational definition | Measurement method |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------|---|---|
| Embodied Characteristics | On-site Filming | Extent of unedited first-person perspective videos or images in UGC. | 1 = None, 5 = Extensive |
| | Character Portrayal | The degree to which facial expressions and body postures in UGC display emotions and reactions. | 1 = No Significant Display, 5 = Very Significant Display |
| Auditory Evidence | Background Noise | Presence of ambient sounds such as crowd noise or traffic that enhances reality. | 1 = No Background Noise, 5 = Extremely Noticeable |
| | Language Interaction | How event descriptions and witness statements convey emotions and information. | 1 = No Language Interaction, 5 = Extremely Rich Interaction |
| Emotional Expression | Nonverbal Cues | Emotions are expressed through non-verbal means like facial expressions and gestures. | 1 = No Emotional Expression, 5 = Very Strong Emotional Expression |
| | Emotional Language | Emotional impact of language used in UGC, including tone and word choice. | 1 = No Emotion, 5 = Extremely Intense Emotion |
| Sense of Engagement | Interactivity | The degree to which UGC invites audience participation. | 1 = No Interaction, 5 = Highly Interactive |
| | Narrative Perspective | Whether the UGC narrative makes the audience feel connected to the event. | 1 = No Engagement, 5 = Extremely High Engagement |
| News Authenticity | Factuality | Presence of factual support in UGC, such as statistics or interviews. | 1 = No Factual Support, 5 = Very Detailed Factual Support |
| | Objectivity | Whether UGC presents multiple viewpoints and avoids bias. | 1 = Completely Biased, 5 = Fully Balanced Reporting |
| | Transparency | Extent of source and process disclosure in UGC creation. | 1 = None, 5 = Comprehensive and Detailed Information |
| Emotional Resonance | Emotion Type | Types of emotions conveyed in UGC. | Classification: Joy, Sadness, Anger, Fear, Other |
| | Emotional Intensity | Intensity of emotional expressions in UGC. | 1 = Very Low, 5 = Very High Intensity |
| | Emotion Expression Modes | Diversity of emotional expression modes in UGC. | 1 = Single Mode, 5 = Very Diverse Modes |
| | Audience Emotional Response | Intensity and types of audience reactions elicited by UGC. | 1 = No Apparent Reaction, 5 = Extremely Strong Reaction |

Case Study Strategy and Platform/Contextual Comparison

To address RQ3 and elucidate the mechanisms underlying the correlations identified in RQ1 and RQ2, this study employed an embedded case study approach following content analysis (Creswell and Creswell 2017; Draucker et al. 2020; Mills, Durepos, and Wiebe 2009). This approach allowed an in-depth exploration of how embodied UGC functions within specific communicative contexts and platform structures, complementing quantitative findings by highlighting production logics, emotional tensions, and ethical dilemmas across diverse sociotechnical settings. Each case examined narrative forms, platform dynamics, ethical controversies, and audience responses, capturing contextual nuances beyond statistical analyses.

Case selection followed five criteria: (1) significant public visibility and communicative impact; (2) availability of rich UGC featuring prominent visual, auditory, and emotional elements; (3) clear embodiment characteristics suitable for multimodal analysis; (4) representation across five event categories—social movements, natural disasters, terrorist attacks, breaking incidents, and political conflicts; and (5) distribution across multiple platforms, enabling comparison between traditional and digital-native outlets. Platforms

Table 2. Case-study subsample: five events selected from the 50-event corpus.

| Case | Global impact | UGC content details | Embodied characteristics | Event type |
|------------------------------------|--|--|---|-------------------|
| 2020 George Floyd Protests | Highlighted racial inequality and police violence worldwide. | Extensive coverage via videos, images, and posts. | Eyewitness videos with ambient sounds capturing live reactions. | Social Movement |
| 2018 California Wildfires | One of California's most devastating wildfires. | Videos, images, and personal accounts of the fire and its damage. | Visuals of destruction and oral accounts for sensory impact. | Natural Disaster |
| 2019 Christchurch Mosque Shootings | Triggered discussions on religious and racial extremism. | Survivor videos, photos, and interviews from the scene. | First-person accounts and visuals offering deep emotional insights. | Terrorist Attack |
| 2020 Notre Dame Cathedral Fire | Sparked global discourse on cultural and historical preservation. | Videos and photos documenting the fire and efforts to extinguish it. | Detailed visuals of the fire damage enhance the emotional impact. | Breaking Incident |
| 2014 Crimea Crisis | Focused international attention on the Russia-Ukraine territorial dispute. | Local videos, images, and interviews showing daily life and military presence. | Diverse visuals enhance the authenticity of reporting. | Political Event |

Note: The five case-study events are a purposive subsample drawn from the 50-event sampling frame. The content-analysis corpus comprises more than 500 individual news texts collected across multiple platforms for the 50 events; case studies operate at the event level, whereas content analysis was conducted at the text level.

included legacy broadcasters (e.g., BBC, NPR) and digital platforms (e.g., YouTube, X), chosen to highlight differences in editorial practices, algorithmic curation, and user engagement, critical for evaluating presentation strategies and ethical governance.

The selected cases were the 2020 George Floyd protests, 2018 California wildfires, 2019 Christchurch mosque shootings, 2020 Notre Dame Cathedral fire, and 2014 Crimea crisis. These events were characterized by substantial UGC exhibiting strong embodied elements through eyewitness footage, audio testimonies, and emotional expressions. The classic UGC formats—videos, images, audio, and text—enabled comprehensive analysis of how embodied features influenced perceptions of news authenticity and emotional resonance. Table 2 provides a summary of each event's global significance, UGC richness, primary embodied attributes, and categorization, establishing a basis for interpreting platform-specific variations and ethical dimensions.

The analysis focused particularly on four recurring ethical dimensions: (1) presence or absence of informed consent; (2) inclusion of graphic or potentially traumatizing content; (3) disclosure of personally identifiable information; and (4) application of ethical indicators, such as content warnings or labels. These dimensions were comparatively assessed across platforms and sociocultural contexts, revealing the influence of media systems and normative frameworks on editorial decision-making and audience interpretation.

Result

Results of Content Analysis

To address RQ1 and RQ2, this study presents descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation analyses of embodied characteristics in UGC and their relationships with perceived news authenticity and emotional resonance. The analyses draw on the content-analysis corpus of more than 500 individual news texts sampled from 50 high-impact events. To ensure

reliability, 20% of the formal sample underwent random double-coding by two trained coders following established content analysis standards (Lombard, Snyder-Duch, and Bracken 2002; Neuendorf 2017). Cohen's Kappa values exceeded 0.80 for all variables, averaging 0.91, indicating strong intercoder agreement suitable for subsequent analyses (Landis and Koch 1977).

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive results revealed varying frequencies among embodied characteristics. Visual evidence showed relatively high frequencies for On-site Filming ($M = 2.96$, $SD = 1.32$) and Character Portrayal ($M = 2.68$, $SD = 1.30$), emphasizing direct scene presentation and individual-focused details. Auditory evidence highlighted Background Noise ($M = 2.66$, $SD = 1.49$) and Language Interaction ($M = 3.00$, $SD = 1.49$), underscoring sound's role in constructing presence. Emotional expression and engagement presented higher averages for Nonverbal Cues ($M = 3.02$, $SD = 1.42$) and Emotional Language ($M = 3.00$, $SD = 1.40$), while Interactivity ($M = 2.66$, $SD = 1.49$) and Narrative Perspective ($M = 3.18$, $SD = 1.41$) exhibited greater variability. These results affirm the diverse representation of crisis events through UGC.

This distribution indicates an imbalance: auditory and affective elements often reflect user-driven expressions, potentially amplified by platform preferences for immersive, emotionally engaging content.

Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation analyses revealed several significant relationships. On-site filming positively correlated with objectivity ($r = .310$, $p < .05$), suggesting firsthand visuals are perceived as more authentic. Language Interaction positively correlated with factuality ($r = .290$, $p < .05$), indicating verbal narratives enhance factual evaluations. Emotional indicators demonstrated a negative correlation between Interactivity and Emotional Intensity ($r = -.337$, $p < .05$), suggesting excessive interactivity may weaken emotional impact. Nonverbal Cues negatively correlated with Emotion Expression Modes ($r = -.285$, $p < .05$), likely due to the implicit nature of some embodied expressions. Emotional language negatively correlated with Audience Emotional Response ($r = -.419$, $p < .01$), indicating overt emotional expression can trigger defensive audience reactions. Other relationships were not statistically significant.

Although some variables lacked statistically significant correlations, the overall findings highlight embodiment's multifaceted influence on perceived authenticity and emotional resonance. Embodied expressions in UGC appear not to be linearly linked to communication outcomes but instead interact complexly with audience cognitive frames, contextual expectations, and platform-specific factors.

Results of Case Analysis

George Floyd Protests (2020)

UGC videos extensively documented police enforcement and protest scenes, featuring tense expressions, intense physical movements, and impactful original audio such as "I can't breathe" and crowd chanting. These elements created strong audiovisual shocks, accelerating the protests' spread to over 2,000 cities. The typical combination of "on-

site filming + language interaction + nonverbal emotional cues” formed a highly embodied narrative structure that significantly enhanced the immediacy and urgency of the event. The first-person perspective enhanced viewers’ sense of co-witnessing, aligning with the positive correlation between on-site filming and perceived objectivity observed in content analysis.

California Wildfires (2018)

Local residents generated content—photos of flames, evacuation videos, and voice recordings—emphasized sensory features like smoke, coughing, and urgent tones. The integration of visual and auditory signals deepened audience awareness of danger and evoked strong emotional resonance. When incorporated into mainstream coverage, these multimodal materials exemplified the embodied style of disaster reporting. The immersive experience produced by low-resolution visuals and close audio also reflects the nonlinear relation between user expression and audience resonance indicated in quantitative findings.

Christchurch Mosque Shootings (2019)

Survivors generated content depicted scenes of chaotic escape and individuals being shot. Though brief, the videos conveyed intense visual impact and heavy background noise or crying. The traumatic, sudden, and uncontrollable nature of the event was powerfully embodied through the contents. The live-streaming nature of the UGC (broadcast on Facebook in real-time) and the extreme violence it captured triggered global attention during the early stages of dissemination. This case validates the structural influence of UGC composed of “first-person perspective + intense emotional cues,” which shaped both the diffusion path of the incident and the platform’s response mechanism. The uncontrolled spread of raw content raised concerns about the ethical boundaries of authenticity, forming a basis for later discussion on ethical risks.

Notre-Dame Cathedral Fire (2020)

Tourists’ smartphone videos of smoke and flames, uploaded in real time, contrast with aerial mainstream footage by offering low-angle, sound-rich depictions. These materials were widely reposted on platforms like YouTube and X, exemplifying how low-quality but high-sensory UGC can spread virally. In this case, the narrative perspective shifted significantly toward the first-person view, supporting the collaborative relationship between “narrative perspective” and other embodied characteristics identified in the content analysis.

Crimea Crisis (2014)

Contents generated by local residents depicted soldier patrols and political expressions. Though lacking overt violence, shaky cameras, background noise, and blurry images conveyed tension and repression, exemplifying “low-intensity embodiment” in political reporting. This case shows that embodiment extends beyond visible bodies to include affective atmosphere and spatial perception, supporting nuanced links between background sounds and emotional intensity in non-conflict contexts.

In addition, the case studies revealed differences in how platforms utilize UGC. For example, CNN and BBC emphasized narrative coherence and editing rhythm, whereas platforms like YouTube and Al Jazeera preserved the original structure of UGC to

emphasize immediacy. This contrast highlights editorial preferences between mainstream and digital-native platforms in presenting embodied expressions. While not explored in depth in the discussion section, this observation is recorded here as an important result.

Ethical Tensions and Platform-Based Differences

While UGC significantly enhances the immediacy and emotional resonance of news reporting, its embodied expression also gives rise to various ethical risks. These include the dissemination of violent imagery, violations of privacy, and issues related to cultural sensitivity. Different platforms have adopted markedly distinct response mechanisms, revealing structural disparities in ethical governance.

During the George Floyd protests, first-person UGC with graphic details of victims circulated widely. Traditional media (e.g., BBC, CNN) blurred visuals and added warnings, while YouTube and X initially failed to intervene, moderating only after user complaints. This case highlights the ethical tension between the public interest and the dignity of victims when first-person UGC is involved.

In the California wildfires, UGC showing evacuations of vulnerable groups often lacked identity masking, sparking concerns about secondary trauma. NPR and Al Jazeera minimized such risks with contextual notes and visual obscuration, whereas YouTube's inconsistent treatment of duplicate footage exposed the limits of user-driven moderation.

In the Christchurch mosque shooting, survivors generated content documenting the chaos of escape and the brutality of the attack, including bloodshed and facial close-ups. Outlets such as CNN and The Guardian chose to present the events indirectly through interviews and animated reconstructions to avoid triggering secondary trauma among viewers. However, some social media platforms allowed unedited videos to spread widely in the early stages, triggering accusations of ethical negligence. In response, the French Council of the Muslim Faith sued Facebook and YouTube for failing to contain the spread of extremist violence. Following lawsuits, Facebook launched its "One-strike" policy and invested in automated detection algorithms.

During the Notre-Dame fire, UGC raised disputes over filming in restricted heritage zones. Although lacking violence or privacy issues, the absence of copyright clarification revealed tensions between cultural heritage protection and public access.

UGC from the Crimean crisis consisted primarily of videos showing military patrols and civilians expressing political views. While these did not involve explicit violence, they posed significant risks of facial identification and geolocation exposure. YouTube did offer facial blurring tools, but their usage was inconsistent. In contrast, mainstream media such as the BBC tended to blur sensitive segments or crop video frames to mitigate threats to individual privacy and personal safety.

Overall, traditional media adopt proactive measures—editing, masking, and contextual narration—whereas digital platforms prioritize raw documentation and information flow, relying on reactive moderation. Furthermore, platform-specific ethical responses are influenced by regional legal and cultural contexts: for example, Al Jazeera emphasizes anonymity and facial masking when reporting from conflict zones, while U.S.-based platforms place greater emphasis on the legality of first-person recordings. These patterns reflect how embodied UGC generates distinct ethical tensions and governance frameworks across different media environments and cultural settings.

Discussion of Findings

Manifestations and Differential Mechanisms of Embodied Expression

RQ1 explores the embodied characteristics of UGC in visual, auditory, and linguistic forms, as well as the mechanisms underlying their variations. Content analysis indicates notable differences in both type and intensity across multimodal expressions. Visual on-site filming—such as first-person perspective videos and unedited images—and auditory interactions—including spoken dialogues and descriptive narration—emerge as the most prominent embodied elements. In contrast, nonverbal emotional cues, emotional language, and narrative perspectives exhibit greater variability across platforms and individual creators.

These findings suggest that UGC embodiment manifests primarily through two dominant modes: “scene reconstruction” and “emotional expression.” In disasters or breaking events, UGC emphasizes embodied presence and immediacy, often through first-person footage and original sound recordings, thereby transmitting a visceral sense of presence. Conversely, creators frequently utilize linguistic and nonverbal cues to elicit empathy and construct emotionally charged subjective narratives (Papacharissi 2015). This aligns with the concept of experiential presence, wherein multimodal UGC converts bodily experiences into communicable public resources (Chouliaraki 2010).

Quantitative analysis reveals a significant positive correlation between on-site filming and news objectivity ($r = .310, p < .05$), suggesting audiences perceive first-person footage as relatively neutral information. This finding resonates with the notion of flesh witnessing, emphasizing embodied viewing pathways as key to perceptions of authenticity (Chouliaraki and Al-Ghazzi 2022). Additionally, linguistic interaction correlates positively with factuality ($r = .290, p < .05$), indicating that information-rich descriptions enhance event verifiability. By contrast, background noise has no statistical relationship with authenticity ($r = .064$), implying that ambient sounds enhance sensory immersion without necessarily increasing informational trustworthiness.

The case study further identifies variations in embodied expression across news genres and platform contexts. In disaster events (e.g., California wildfires, Notre Dame Cathedral fire), UGC adopts “sensory-intensive expression,” utilizing smoke, cries, and dynamic filming to generate immersive effects. Conversely, in political violence incidents (e.g., Christchurch mosque shootings), platforms frequently proactively block or edit highly embodied UGC materials, reflecting ethical considerations and content screening practices.

Additionally, embodied presentations of UGC are jointly influenced by platform algorithms and cultural logics. Recommendation systems commonly amplify content featuring first-person perspectives and heightened emotional intensity, providing such content with a dissemination advantage (Gillespie 2018). This incentivizes creators toward an “algorithm-oriented” expressive style, prominently seen on digital platforms like YouTube and X. In contrast, traditional media outlets (e.g., BBC, The Guardian) prioritize balanced narratives and neutral framing, adhering to “de-emotionalization” norms within editorial workflows.

Overall, these findings suggest news organizations must transcend simplistic assumptions equating visualization with authenticity by critically examining the structural forms and communicative mechanisms of embodiment in UGC. Specifically, it is essential to

scrutinize variations in embodied elements across events, platforms, and audience contexts. Equally important is remaining attentive to algorithmic influences shaping UGC styles. Without such critical engagement, emotionally intense and highly impactful UGC may become dominant, marginalizing more balanced or nuanced communication modes. This risk is particularly acute in reporting disasters, protests, and political violence, where embodied UGC not only affects audience judgments of authenticity but also reshapes the dynamics governing who can witness and speak in the public sphere.

Mechanisms Linking Embodied UGC to Perceived Authenticity and Emotional Resonance

RQ2 explores how different forms and intensities of embodied UGC affect audience perceptions of authenticity and emotional resonance. Findings indicate that the relationship between emotional expression (nonverbal cues and emotional language) and emotional resonance is complex and nonlinear, involving interactive effects.

Data reveal a significant negative correlation between emotional language and audience emotional response ($r = -.419, p < .01$), indicating that intensified emotional language does not inherently enhance resonance. Likewise, interactivity negatively correlates with emotional intensity ($r = -.337, p < .05$), challenging the conventional notion that increased interactivity necessarily enhances emotional resonance. Case analyses suggest that environments with extensive interactive features or comments impose substantial cognitive load, potentially leading to emotional disengagement. This phenomenon aligns with cognitive load theory, wherein excessive interaction or complex emotional processing reduces cognitive resources available for empathy and emotional resonance (Sweller 2020).

Nonverbal cues, including facial expressions and gestures, typically deepen emotional resonance but carry inherent risks, as demonstrated by a negative correlation with modes of emotional expression ($r = -.285, p < .05$). This indicates that overly vivid or exaggerated nonverbal expressions might trigger audience skepticism, diminishing perceived authenticity. This “emotional authenticity paradox” illustrates that embodied elements intended to enhance authenticity and immersion may, if excessively emphasized, result in emotional detachment or suspicion (Chouliaraki and Al-Ghazzi 2022).

On the visual dimension, imagery such as first-person filming and close-up emotional expressions is often assumed to strengthen perceptions of presence and immediacy, thereby enhancing news credibility. However, the analysis reveals that visual elements, such as character portrayal, exhibit no significant positive correlation with objectivity, and some audiences may even question their authenticity when the content appears overly performative or narrowly framed. This observation underscores that authenticity is not a monolithic construct. In the operational framework of this study, authenticity consists of three dimensions: factuality, objectivity, and transparency. While objectivity emphasizes the presentation of multiple perspectives and avoidance of bias, factuality concerns the provision of verifiable evidence. Consequently, a visually immersive UGC clip may still be perceived as lacking objectivity if it features conspicuous editing or an overtly singular perspective. This understanding aligns with Zelizer’s (2010) conceptualization of the multidimensional nature of journalistic objectivity.

The study further identifies the potential for emotional manipulation within embodied UGC, where creators might amplify specific emotional cues through editing or selective highlighting to steer audience sentiment. Documented in branded UGC contexts (Kim and Johnson 2016), this practice has increasingly surfaced in news scenarios. Without adequate regulation, emotional mobilization may lead to ethical concerns regarding audience manipulation. For example, during the George Floyd protests, emotionally charged footage was rapidly disseminated via social media and algorithmic recommendations, reinforcing collective mobilization (Bakir and McStay 2018; Weeks 2015) while also risking audience emotional fatigue and defensive reactions.

In summary, UGC authenticity is evaluated multidimensionally through factuality, objectivity, and transparency. Embodied expression does not inherently enhance authenticity or emotional resonance; rather, audience cognitive frameworks, platform interaction mechanisms, and cultural contexts jointly moderate these effects. Embodied UGC characterized by singular perspectives, excessive emotional dramatization, or insufficient informational transparency may ultimately be perceived as inauthentic despite heightened immediacy.

Ethical Tensions Across Platforms and Contexts

RQ3 examines ethical issues arising from embodied UGC across various news platforms and contexts, as well as governance strategy variations. Case analyses reveal apparent differences in platform management of ethical risks, shaped significantly by governance approaches (manual pre-screening versus algorithmic post-moderation) and contextual sensitivity (political events, disasters, violent content).

Several incidents involved UGC directly depicting victims' faces and bodily details without consent. For example, videos from the Christchurch mosque shootings included graphic imagery and identifiable victim details. Traditional media organizations, such as the BBC and CNN, typically blurred or removed sensitive footage and issued viewer discretion warnings. Conversely, platforms like YouTube initially permitted wide circulation of unedited videos, eliciting public criticism. Facebook reported removing approximately 1.5 million related videos within 24 h, blocking around 1.2 million at upload (Vincent 2019). Although TikTok and YouTube did not release precise figures, they reportedly implemented delayed removals and reactive content filtering. This illustrates a key divergence: traditional media proactively intervene (editing, blurring, contextual framing) to mitigate ethical risks, while digital platforms emphasize information freedom and original recordings, relying mainly on reactive measures such as user reports and algorithmic detection. Such contrasts reflect underlying tensions between journalistic professionalism and commercial platform logics (Gillespie 2018).

Ethical controversies also vary by context. In natural disasters and breaking news events (e.g., California wildfires, Notre Dame Cathedral fire), debates focused on secondary trauma and privacy concerns, as UGC frequently included distressing evacuation and injury scenes, circulating with minimal restriction. Viewer comments revealed experiences of "secondary trauma." In contrast, political conflicts and social movements (e.g., George Floyd protests) generated concerns about emotional mobilization and manipulation. Rapid dissemination of unverified or context-lacking UGC segments, combined with algorithmic amplification of emotionally charged footage, intensified public anger and

collective action. These dynamics underscore platforms' ethical responsibilities regarding emotionally driven content dissemination (Bakir and McStay 2018; Weeks 2015).

The analysis also notes that contextual differences influence governance practices. Western media outlets often incorporated protest-related UGC, while non-Western media tended to obscure chaotic scenes, prioritizing official sources. These variations reflect diverse platform strategies, institutional cultures, and ethical governance approaches.

Overall, ethical risks associated with embodied UGC exhibit structural diffusion patterns across events and platforms. News organizations must balance public information rights with victim dignity protection, prioritizing proactive ethical interventions. Digital platforms, conversely, should develop preemptive ethical review mechanisms rather than relying solely on post-hoc removal. Additionally, observed variations across cultural and legal contexts highlight the need for more unified international ethical standards to address global challenges posed by embodied UGC.

Research Limitations and Future Research Directions

Research Limitations

This study predominantly sampled major news platforms and social media, potentially omitting content from smaller or localized platforms, thus limiting generalizability across diverse UGC environments. Although the analysis covered 50 representative events and over 500 news texts, the selection focused on high-impact global incidents, possibly overlooking routine news scenarios where UGC might function differently. The primary methodological reliance on content analysis emphasized visual forms of UGC, providing less systematic consideration of purely textual or audio-based content. Furthermore, despite ensured intercoder reliability, the interpretive nature of coding inevitably introduces a degree of analytical subjectivity. Future studies could enhance robustness by employing triangulated approaches, such as audience surveys, ethnographic observations, and in-depth interviews, to complement content analysis.

Future Research Directions

Several avenues for further research emerge from this study. Investigations should explore the embodied characteristics of UGC across different cultural and platform contexts, examining how cultural perceptions of emotional expression and privacy shape UGC acceptance, dissemination, and platform governance practices. Additionally, advancements in virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) technologies offer promising areas for examining how enhanced embodied experiences influence UGC production, consumption, and overall news reporting. Further research is also needed to investigate the long-term implications of embodied UGC on news credibility, audience trust in news organizations, and potential shifts in news consumption behaviors.

Conclusion and Implication

Enhancing Journalism Through Sensory Integration

The integration of UGC into journalism signifies a pivotal evolution in news reporting and consumption, resonating with the corporeal themes highlighted in the "Bodies in

Journalism” special issue. UGC employs visual and auditory components to enhance storytelling, utilizing sensory elements and emotional resonance for immersive news experiences. This sensory integration allows audiences direct, firsthand access to unfolding events, such as protests and natural disasters, capturing immediacy that traditional media may not fully convey. This study illustrates how embodied characteristics in UGC amplify presence and illuminate how platforms and contexts shape audience perceptions and ethical considerations.

The embodied nature of UGC enhances authenticity and immediacy, deepening audience engagement and trust by providing a tangible sense of presence. UGC expands narrative scope and intensifies emotional impact, embodying the sensory and emotional labor central to journalism. This aligns with the special issue’s exploration of how sensory, emotional, and affective dimensions critically, yet often implicitly, inform journalism.

Navigating Challenges and Future Technologies

Despite its benefits, UGC integration presents challenges, notably misinformation risks stemming from unverified content and potential emotional manipulation through emotive representations. These dual implications underscore the complexity of integrating embodied personal experiences into journalism, where sensory expressions enhance authenticity yet pose threats to factual accuracy.

To address these challenges, news organizations must establish rigorous verification processes and clear ethical guidelines tailored to UGC’s unique attributes. Essential training programs for journalists should emphasize ethical handling and critical evaluation of UGC, balancing immersive potential with factual reliability.

Emerging technologies, including VR and AR, offer promising avenues for further integrating sensory experiences in journalism. These technologies can enhance sensory engagement, reshaping how audiences experience news events. These technological developments closely align with the special issue’s focus on evolving embodied journalism through innovative sensory integrations.

Implications for Journalistic Practice

The study’s findings underscore the necessity for strategic management of UGC to bolster journalistic authenticity while mitigating associated risks. Establishing robust ethical guidelines and comprehensive journalist training programs reflects an essential recalibration of journalistic practices informed by corporeal insights. This ensures the productive integration of UGC within evolving digital journalism frameworks. Additionally, platforms must transition from reactive moderation towards proactive ethical screening, especially in politically sensitive or emotionally intense contexts.

In conclusion, UGC signifies a fundamental shift toward embodied journalism, foregrounding individuals’ physical and emotional experiences within narrative processes. This shift aligns closely with the special issue’s thematic concerns and compels journalism to innovate and adapt practices accordingly. Recognizing UGC’s potential to foster engaging, authentic, and corporeally resonant journalism emphasizes its role as a form of “flesh witnessing,” enriching yet complicating journalistic practices. Ultimately, this highlights

the critical role of embodied experiences in contemporary journalism, advocating a nuanced understanding of how sensory and emotional dimensions shape and are shaped by journalistic narratives.

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Author contributions

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Data Availability Statement

The study's datasets are available on the Open Science Framework at <https://osf.io/q93vd/>, DOI: 10.17605/OSF.IO/Q93VD.

ORCID

Runze Qu  <http://orcid.org/0009-0007-5649-3827>

Rukun Zhang  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6987-9311>

Jinghong Xu  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4654-0603>

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