

How User-Generated Content Shapes Brand Authenticity and Shopping Behavior in Social Media Advertising: A Consumer Perspective

*By Dina Younis**

This study aims to understand and examine how user generated content (UGC) and the use of micro-celebrities on popular social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok influence the shopping behavior of Generation Z. The researcher argues that exposure to UGC will significantly increases the users' intentions to search for online products, in addition to exploring how UGC influences consumer perceptions of brand authenticity in social media advertising. As consumers increasingly seek genuine connections with brands, this research will analyze how UGC, when incorporated into social media ads, can enhance or detract from perceived brand authenticity and consumer trust. A quantitative approach will be employed to analyze data through a questionnaire that will be distributed to a sample comprised of active social media Generation Z users.

Introduction

Today, in this digital era, user-generated content (UGC) has emerged as a transformative force in shaping consumer perception and behavior, specifically with the younger audience who are digital natives and are greatly affected by others' recommendations and organic content. Studies (Puha et al, 2020), showed that the usage of UGC enhances and increases the credibility of brand messages which leads to a rise in users' engagement and increased search behavior. Moreover, Individuals tend to value more authentic messages over polished marketing messages. It was found that users respond more positively to content that is created by their peers or micro-influencers than to traditional advertising messages. De Veriman and Hudders (2020) found that authenticity is a crucial factor in the relationship between the influencer, the content, and the consumer's trust and attitudes. In general, UGC by nature has a high perception of being more trustworthy, credible, and less biased than paid, non-organic messages. Unlike traditional marketing content, UGC is created and shared by everyday users, often perceived as more authentic, credible, and relatable. Platforms like Instagram and TikTok have become central to this dynamic, allowing users to interact with brand-related content in real time. As peer recommendations and organic posts increasingly influence how brands are evaluated, it becomes essential to understand the mechanisms. This study examines how exposure to user-generated content on Instagram and TikTok influences digital natives' product search behavior, perceptions of brand authenticity, and online shopping engagement. Through this

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investigation, the research offers empirical evidence on the growing significance of UGC in shaping consumer-brand interactions within the digital marketing ecosystem.

Literature Review

User-generated content (UGC) is defined as any media content that is produced or created by the end user consumer and public rather than by paid professionals and is primarily shared online (OECD, 2007). UGC is typically found on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, TikTok, etc., and on review sites, where users actively engage with the product and contribute their own opinions and experiences. According to Kaplan and Haenlien (2010), they argued that UGC contains three important requirements: first UGC must be accessible by the public, second, UGC must involve some creative effort, and third UGC must be conducted and executed with no professional practices. UGC helped users to move from passive media consumers to being active media participants by sharing their own opinions and reviews.

In marketing and branding, UGC plays a crucial role in influencing consumer behavior. According to Berthon et al. (2008), user-generated content represents a form of consumer empowerment, as individuals are no longer passive recipients of marketing messages but active participants in brand storytelling. Past scholars and researchers have noted that UGC is more commonly used by digital natives, who grew up with digital communication and high-speed internet. These individuals make up a significant percentage of today's population, with 32%, they are active social media users as they visit various social media platforms more than twice daily. Exposing them to numerous digital advertisements and messages on various social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube. As a result of its widespread popularity, social media has become a crucial part of these users' daily lives.

Djafarova and Trofimenko (2019) argued that individuals' trust in a certain brand increases when they are exposed to UGC content that aligns with their personal values and social identity. Further studies support these findings, where Jiménez-Castillo and Sánchez-Fernández (2019) found that online word of mouth and UGC play a crucial role in shaping consumer trust and brand loyalty.

According to Lou and Yuan (2019), repeated exposure to UGC content on TikTok and Instagram boosts users' emotional ties with brands, which increases their purchase intent. UGC greatly influences younger generations' perceptions of brands, trust, and shopping habits. It promotes brand authenticity, enhances credibility, and encourages both intention and action, making it a vital part of any brand's social media plan aimed at this demographic.

This study aims to examine the impact of User-generated Content (UGC) on users' online purchase intent, brand credibility, authenticity, and shopping behavior. Specifically, the study investigates how exposure to UGC on TikTok and Instagram influences respondents' purchase intentions, brand engagement,

and perceptions of brand credibility and authenticity. The research identified the following objectives:

First, to study the relationship between UGC exposure and users' intention to buy and search for online brands. Second, this study aims to examine how UGC influences users' perceptions of brand authenticity in social media advertising and to evaluate the role of UGC in enhancing users' trust in the brand and their perception of brand credibility. Third, to analyze the extent to which UGC on TikTok and Instagram impacts users' online shopping behavior. Thus, the researcher was able to formulate the following research hypothesis to meet the study's goal.

Hypothesis #1 (H1): Exposure to user-generated content on social media platforms (TikTok and Instagram) leads to an increase in users' intentions to search for online products.

Hypothesis #2 (H2): Exposure to user-generated content on social media platforms (TikTok and Instagram) positively influences users' perceptions of brand authenticity in social media advertising.

Hypothesis #3 (H3): The more users are exposed to user-generated content on TikTok and Instagram, the more they are likely to engage in online shopping behavior.

Hypothesis #4 (H4): Users' exposure to user-generated content on social media platforms (TikTok and Instagram) positively affects their trust in the brand and brand credibility.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative methodology to examine the influence of user-generated content (UGC) on individuals' online shopping behaviors, perception of brand authenticity, and brand trust on social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram. A survey method was used as the main method of data collection to measure the relationships between variables at a single point in time. This approach is appropriate for testing the proposed research hypotheses.

Population and Sampling

The population for this study consists of digital native individuals (aged 18–29) who are active users of TikTok and Instagram and have experience with online shopping. A non-probability purposive sampling technique is used to select participants who meet these criteria. The research employed a purposive sampling technique, as they all must fit the criteria of being digital natives and being active users on these social media platforms (Instagram and TikTok). The survey was distributed online to a sample size of 200 respondents ($n=200$). While a sample size of 200 may be considered modest in large-scale research, it is

adequate and appropriate for this study for several reasons. First, the study focuses mainly on active users, who must be active consumers of UGC on TikTok and Instagram. This is a very specific group that requires purposive sampling; thus, it is more important to collect data from the right sample and participant than to gather a larger, less targeted sample. Second, time constraints were an influence on the sample size, as the data collection was done in a limited time frame. This restricted the researcher's ability to reach a larger number of participants while maintaining validity and reliability. Third, many other similar studies in this field of digital media and communication have conducted sample sizes between 150 and 250 and still produced valid results (e.g., Lou and Yuan, 2019; Djafarova and Trofimenko, 2019).

Method of Data Collection

Data was collected through a structured online questionnaire distributed on social media platforms (e.g., Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp). The survey was designed using Google Forms to ensure accessibility and ease of use among tech-savvy users. Participation was voluntary, and anonymity was guaranteed. The questionnaire remained open for responses between April 15 and May 1, 2025, allowing for sufficient time to reach the target audience and ensure data accuracy within the defined sampling criteria.

The questionnaire consists of five sections:

1. **Demographics** – gender, age, platform used
2. **Exposure to UGC** – measured by items assessing frequency and type of UGC consumed
3. **Online Shopping Behavior** – including product search and purchase behavior post-UGC exposure
4. **Perceived Brand Authenticity** – using a 3-point Likert scale, statements regarding brand authenticity
5. **Brand Trust and Credibility** – using a 3-point Likert scale, statements regarding credibility and trust.

Research Variables

In order to accurately measure the study's hypothesis, the researcher was first able to provide an operational definition for each variable.

Digital Natives Users: In this research, they are defined as those users who were born between 1996 and 2010. Meaning participants between the ages of 18 to 29 are considered representative of digital natives, as this group was born in the era of high-speed internet and social media platforms.

Online Shopping Behavior: This variable relates to any action or behavior taken by individuals through the process of purchasing products online. It also encompasses the action of searching for the product information, reading

reviews, and completing online purchases. It is measured through the frequency and likelihood of online product searches and purchases after viewing UGC.

Brand Authenticity: This variable is defined as the extent to which an individual perceives the brand as genuine, transparent, and aligned with their values. This is measured by surveying the participants, asking how sincere, real, and honest a brand appears in UGC.

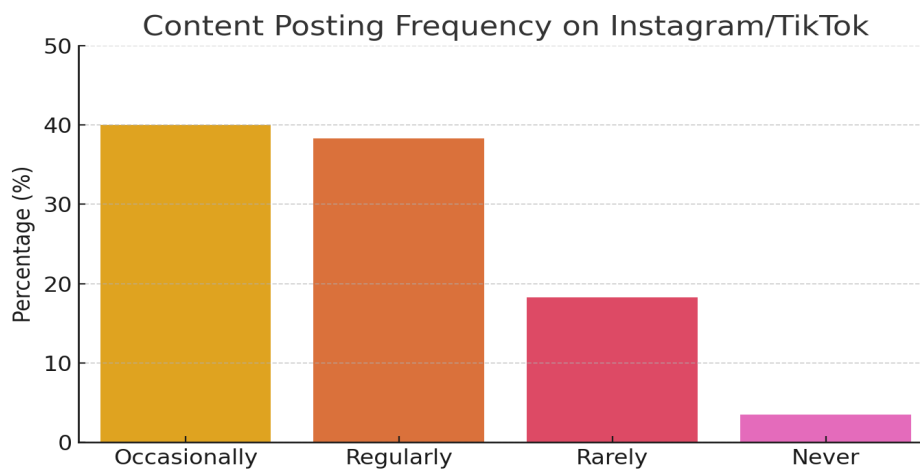
Brand Trust and Credibility: This variable is defined as the extent to which individuals see the brand as reliable and trustworthy. It includes perceptions of the brand's expertise and integrity. These are measured using established Likert-scale statements that assess individual's confidence in and perceived reliability of the brand after exposure to UGC.

Exposure to UGC: This variable refers to the extent and frequency individuals encounter and see UGC content on social media platforms. In this study, it is measured using established Likert-scale statements that see how often participants see brand-related UGC on TikTok and Instagram.

Results

The survey was divided into five main sections, with the first section asking about social media usage and degree of activity. Survey results showed that social media is deeply integrated into the daily lives of the respondents, where they were asked "How often do you use social media platforms?" The majority answered with 95% "Daily", showcasing a very high level of engagement. Moving on to content creation and posting, when asked How often do you post content on Instagram or TikTok? 40% of participants reported that they "Occasionally (a few times a month)" post on Instagram or TikTok, 38.26% post "Regularly (at least once a week)", while 18.26% post "Rarely (once or twice a year)", and only 3.48% reported "Never" posting. Figure 1 shows the percentage of Content Posting Frequency on Instagram/TikTok.

Figure 1. Content Posting Frequency on Instagram/TikTok



When asked, “Which social media platforms do you actively use? Most respondents said they frequently use Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook, showing where users mainly encounter digital content. Additionally, in response to 'Are you familiar with the term 'user-generated content' (UGC)?', 78.26% of respondents answered “Yes,” indicating a strong awareness of the concept, while 21.74% answered “No.” These results demonstrate that most respondents have a high level of engagement with social media, with many reporting daily use. Instagram and TikTok are the most popular platforms, followed closely by Facebook and Snapchat. Regarding the UGC concept, the results show it is widely recognized among this demographic. These findings support the idea that digital native users are not only very active on social media but also knowledgeable about the role of user-generated content in digital interactions and brand communication. To measure the variable purchase intention, a 3-point Likert scale was used, involving five statements for the respondents. First, I often see regular people posting about products on social media. Second, I pay attention to reviews, stories, or videos shared by other users. Third, seeing posts from others about a product makes me want to learn more about it. Fourth, after seeing someone post about a product, I usually search for it online. Fifth, Posts from other users make me curious to explore similar products or brands. The overall mean score for the purchase intention variable is 2.69 with a standard deviation of 0.39. This shows that, on average, participants were leaning more towards agreeing with the five-purchase related statement, with relatively low variability, and that most participants gave similar answers.

For the brand authenticity variable, respondents were asked a total of 5 statements that they had to answer using a 3- point Likert scale. First, I believe brands that share or promote user content are more authentic. Second, seeing real people using a product builds trust in the brand. Third, I believe a brand is more genuine when it features everyday users. Fourth, I'm more likely to trust a brand if it interacts with customers' content. And fifth, I perceive a brand as more honest when it uses customer content in its ads. The overall mean score for the Brand Authenticity variable is 2.70 with a standard deviation of 0.38. This shows that on an average participant were leaning more towards agreeing with the five-purchase related statement, with relatively low variability and that most participants gave similar answers

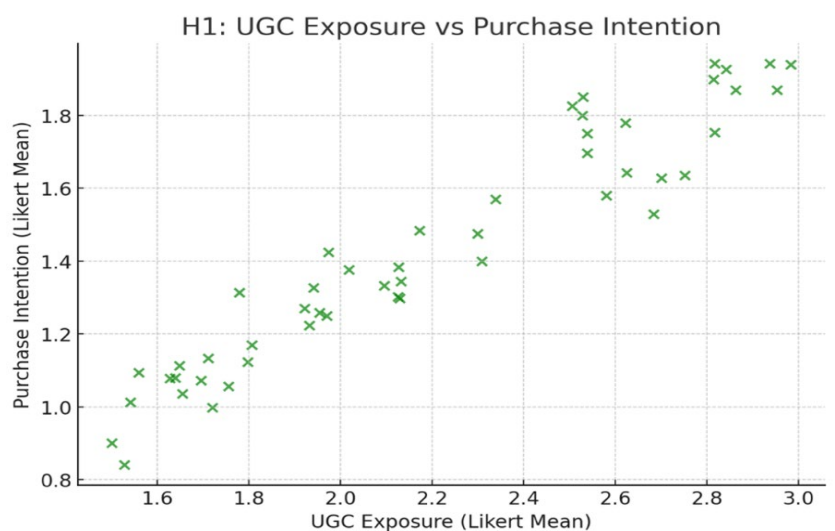
For the Shopping behavior variable respondents were asked a total of 5 statements that they had to answer using a 3- point Likert scale. First, I often see user-generated product content on TikTok and Instagram. Second, TikTok/Instagram influence my shopping decisions. Third, I have purchased a product after seeing it on TikTok or Instagram. Fourth, these platforms encourage me to explore online shops. Fifth, my online purchases are often influenced by content I see on these platforms. The overall mean score for the shopping behavior variable is 2.71 with a standard deviation of 0.41 Results showed that on an average, participants were leaning more towards agreeing with the five-purchase related statement, with relatively low variability and that most participants gave similar answers.

Finally, for the last variable, Brand trust and credibility, respondents were asked a total of 5 statements that they had to answer using a 3-point Likert scale. First, A brand seems more believable and credible when real customers recommend it. Second, I believe user-generated content is more trustworthy than traditional advertising. Third, I rely on others' social media posts to decide if a brand is trustworthy. Fourth, Brands featured in customers' reviews feel more reliable and authentic to me. The overall mean score for the shopping behavior variable is 2.68 with a standard deviation of. This shows that on average participants were leaning more towards agreeing with the five-purchase related statement, with relatively low variability and that most participants gave similar answers. The data shows that UGC has a positive influence on brand perception and consumer behavior and that there's a consistent pattern across respondents in how they view and act on UGC.

Discussion

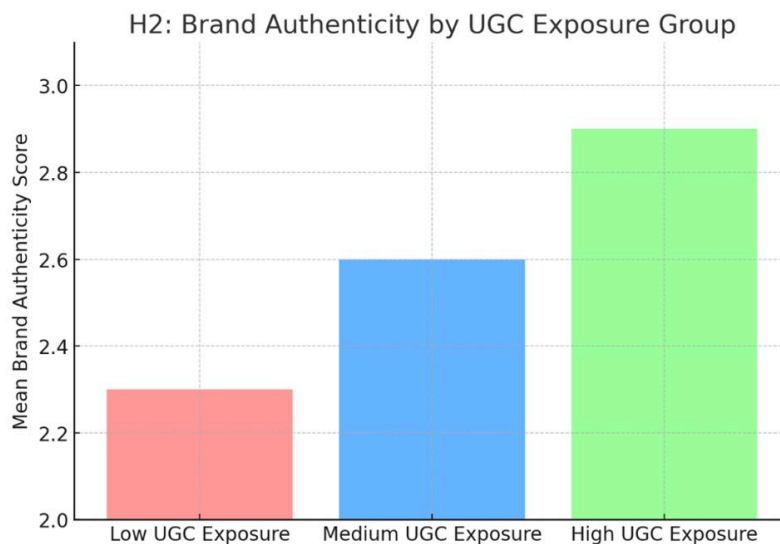
To test the first hypothesis (H1), which analyzes the relationship between users' intention to search for online products and exposure to user-generated content (UGC), a Pearson correlation coefficient test was employed. This statistical test was chosen as it was found to be the most appropriate one, given that both variables are measured using a numerical Likert scale. Participants responded to multiple statements on a 3-point Likert scale (1 = Disagree, 2 = Neutral, 3 = Agree), and an aggregated score was calculated by averaging the relevant items for each variable. Findings showed that there is a strong positive relationship between exposure to UGC and purchase intention, where $p = 0.001$ and $(r) = 0.645$. Results supported H1 as it was found to be statistically significant. Findings are shown further in Figure 2.

Figure 2. A Scatter Plot Illustrating the Strong Positive Correlation between UGC Exposure and Purchase Intention (H1)



Concerning H2, it examined the relationship between UGC and brand authenticity. H2 states that Exposure to user-generated content positively influences Users' perceptions of brand authenticity on social media platforms. A one-way ANOVA test was conducted to test whether there is a statistically significant difference or not. One-Way ANOVA is particularly suitable in this context as it assesses whether mean differences exist between multiple independent groups on a continuous dependent variable. Results of the ANOVA tests showed that there is a statistically significant difference in brand authenticity scores across UGC exposure groups, with a p-value of 0.001. This indicates that users who were more frequently exposed to UGC perceived brands as significantly more authentic compared to those with lower exposure to UGC. Findings supported Hypothesis 2 (H2). Figure 3 further illustrates the findings.

Figure 3. A Bar Chart showing how Brand Authenticity Score Significantly Increases with Higher Levels of UGC Exposure (H2)



To test the third hypothesis (H3), which analyzed the relationship between exposure to user-generated content (UGC) and engagement in online shopping behavior, a Pearson correlation coefficient test was employed. Participants responded to multiple statements on a 3-point Likert scale (1 = Disagree, 2 = Neutral, 3 = Agree), and aggregated scores were calculated by averaging the relevant items for each variable. Findings showed that there is a strong positive relationship between exposure to UGC and shopping behavior, where the p-value is 0.003 and (r): 0.619. Results supported H3 as it was found to be statistically significant. Findings showed that increased UGC exposure leads to more online shopping behavior. Results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Pearson Correlation Results for Hypothesis 3 (H3)

Hypothesis	Test Used	Correlation Coefficient (r)	p-value	Significance	Interpretation
H3: UGC Exposure → Online Shopping Behavior	Pearson Correlation	0.619	0.003	Statistically Significant	Strong positive relationship

Lastly, for the fourth hypothesis (H4), which examined the relationship between exposure to UGC on social media and brand trust and credibility, a Pearson correlation coefficient test was employed. (H4) states that users' exposure to user-generated content on social media positively affects their trust in the brand and brand credibility. Participants responded to multiple statements on a 3-point Likert scale (1 = Disagree, 2 = Neutral, 3 = Agree), and aggregated scores were calculated by averaging the relevant items for each variable. Findings showed that there is a strong positive relationship between exposure to UGC and brand trust and credibility, where $p = 0.002$ and $(r) = 0.559$. Results supported H4 as it was found to be statistically significant. Moreover, findings showed a moderate to strong correlation between the two variables, where UGC positively affects brand trust and credibility among the respondents. Results are shown table 2.

Table 2. Pearson Correlation Results for Hypothesis 4 (H4)

Hypothesis	Test Used	Correlation Coefficient (r)	p-value	Significance	Interpretation
H4: UGC Exposure → Brand Trust & Credibility	Pearson Correlation	0.559	0.002	Statistically Significant	Moderate to strong positive relationship

Conclusion

Today, User-generated content has shown to be a powerful influence on the digitally native user. These users are found to be highly responsive to peer recommendations and authentic content. This study aimed to measure the influence of the UGC on social media and brand acceptance, authenticity and trust. The study conducted empirical tests and presented evidence which showed that exposure to UGC on social media platforms (Instagram and TikTok) have a significant influence on the users' perception and shopping behaviors. The study has three primary objectives, to analyze the relationship between exposure to UGC and users' intention to purchase online brands, to analyze how UGC affect the perception of brand authenticity and credibility and lastly to examine the influence UGC have on users' online shopping behavior, specifically focusing on on platforms like TikTok and Instagram. To address these objectives, the

research operationalized key variables using Likert-scale measurements and tested four hypotheses through Pearson correlation and One-Way ANOVA. The results of this study showed a strong positive relationship between UGC exposure and the four variables: purchase intention, perceived brand authenticity, shopping behavior, and brand trust and credibility. In summary, it was found that higher levels exposure to UGC were linked with an increase in users' engagement, suggesting that UGC plays a critical role in shaping brand-consumer dynamics in online platforms. These findings reinforce the value of UGC as an authentic and influential form of advertising among digital-native generations.

This study highlights how user-generated content (UGC) does greatly influence digital natives' online shopping behaviors and also how they perceive brands across social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok. Frequent exposure to UGC positively correlates with shopping activity, brand trust, perceived brand authenticity, with higher purchase intention, the findings confirm. That UGC acts as a credible information source with a persuasive force shaping decisions these results suggest. The same pattern shows through consistent responses for variables: brands relatable to peers, endorsed by them, and authentic get digital natives. The study does contribute to the ever-growing body of literature stressing the already calculated value of UGC in digital marketing. Brands can benefit greatly if they aim to build long-term trust and loyalty with younger, socially connected audiences. This research offers some empirical evidence with practical perceptions. Marketers should thus value real user connection more than just slick advertising content in this evolving digital world.

Recommendations and Limitations

Building on the findings of this study, several recommendations are proposed for future research. First, researchers are encouraged to conduct comparative studies that evaluate the effectiveness of user-generated content (UGC) with other forms of digital and traditional advertising, such as traditional ads, influencer marketing, and branded content. This would aid in identifying strengths and weakness of UGC in different promotional materials. Second, while this study focused on the positive impact of UGC, suggestion for future research should also explore its potential negative effects, such as the spread of misinformation, over-commercialization, or erosion of trust when content is perceived as inauthentic. lastly, future studies should seek to diversify the sample demographically and geographically to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Including participants from different age groups, countries, and cultural backgrounds would allow for a more better understanding of how UGC functions across audiences. While this study provides valuable insights into the influence of user-generated content on digital natives' brand perceptions and shopping behaviors, it is not without limitations. First, the sample size of 200 respondents, though suitable for exploratory research, limits the generalizability of the findings to a broader population. Second, the data collection was conducted

within a specific cultural and national context, which may restrict the applicability of the results across different geographic regions or cultural groups. Third, the use of self-reported data through online surveys may introduce response bias. Finally, the study focused solely on Instagram and TikTok, excluding other social platforms that may also play a significant role in shaping consumer behavior.

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