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Why We Share: Unpacking Motivations for Brand-Related User-Generated Content

Beauty Communities on TikTok

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Abstract

In a constant stream of social media content, consumers have grown increasingly sceptical of traditional advertising and sponsored content, making organic user-generated content (UGC) an authentic source of brand information. This shift is particularly visible on platforms like TikTok, where everyday users, especially within beauty communities, play a growing role in shaping brand narratives. Despite the growing body of research on the influence of UGC, there remains a significant gap in understanding what motivates individuals to voluntarily create and engage with brand-related content without commercial incentives.

This thesis explores the psychological, emotional, and social drivers behind organic brand-related UGC creation and engagement, with a specific focus on beauty communities on TikTok. The study is guided by two research questions: (1) What motivates consumers to create brand-related UGC on social media? and (2) What characteristics of brand-related UGC increase engagement? The research adopts a qualitative approach through ten semi-structured interviews with active TikTok users, including regular consumers, content creators, and social media professionals.

The findings reveal six key motivational categories for content creation: Product performance, personal fulfilment, monetary incentives, altruism, community seeking and social validation. In terms of engagement, six additional characteristics were identified: Attention-capture, informational value, trendiness, authenticity, exclusivity and uniqueness.

These insights highlight the growing importance of organic UGC as a persuasive and trusted form of brand advocacy. They underscore the need for brands to understand and support organic advocacy by fostering community and recognizing consumer contributions. By centring consumer motivations, this research contributes to both academic literature and practical marketing strategies in an era increasingly defined by peer-driven influence.

Keywords User-generated content, brand advocacy, peer influence, engagement, organic marketing, TikTok

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Preface and acknowledgements

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Helsinki, 23 April 2025
Riim Abdi

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

Imagine scrolling through your social media feed and stumbling upon a video of a regular user, sharing an unfiltered video about how a small organic skin-care brand changed their life. They document their personal skin journey with raw before-and-after photos, demonstrating how the products transformed their skin, and ends the video with a heartfelt recommendation. Within days, that video goes viral, amassing millions of views and thou-sands of comments from users sharing their own experiences or asking for product recommendations. This is not an isolated incident, but a snapshot of how modern consumers increasingly rely on each other, rather than traditional advertising, to make purchasing decisions. Stories like this highlight the power of organic user-generated content (UGC), content created voluntarily without direct brand incentives, in shaping consumer behaviour and brand perceptions (Dao et al., 2024).

In today's digital age, consumers are more connected than ever, and their reliance on peer recommendations has increased significantly (Otterbring, 2021). Word-of-mouth (WOM), whether offline or online, has always been a powerful driver of consumer behaviour, but the rise of social media platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube has amplified its impact. The virality phenomenon, where content spreads rapidly and organically across networks, has turned everyday consumers into influential brand advocates. According to a 2021 Nielsen report, 88% of consumers trust recommendations from people they know such as friends and family, making WOM one of the most trusted forms of advertising (Nielsen, 2023). Trust levels vary across generations, with Gen Z demonstrating the lowest levels of trust towards advertising. This shift underscores a broader trend: Consumers are increasingly sceptical of traditional advertisements, which they often perceive as biased or manipulative (Friestad & Wright, 1994).

This scepticism is explained in the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM), which suggests that consumers develop an understanding of how marketers attempt to influence them, leading to resistance against overt persuasion tactics (Friestad & Wright, 1994). As a result, consumers are turning to UGC

such as reviews, shopping hauls, tutorials, and other social media posts as a more authentic and relatable source of information. The demand for authenticity is further fuelled by the growing preference for organic, unfiltered content over polished, brand-produced advertisements. A Stackla report revealed that 79% of consumers say UGC highly impacts their purchasing decisions, and 60% consider UGC to be the most authentic form of content (Stackla, 2021). This preference reflects a broader cultural shift toward transparency and peer-driven validation in consumer decision-making (Labrecque et al., 2013).

Despite the extensive research on the role of social influence in consumer behaviour and the effectiveness of UGC, there is a notable gap in understanding what motivates consumers to create and share organic brand-related UGC in the first place. Scholars have extensively explored how UGC influences purchasing decisions, brand loyalty, and consumer trust (Muntinga et al., 2011; Cheung & Thadani, 2012; Kotler et al., 2017), but less attention has been paid to the underlying drivers that prompt individuals to voluntarily create content about brands. Why do some consumers feel compelled to post detailed reviews, or share their experiences on social media, while others remain passive observers? This question remains underexplored, particularly in the context of TikTok and beauty communities present there.

Furthermore, while brands are increasingly leveraging UGC as a marketing tool, they of-ten lack a deep understanding of the psychological and emotional factors that inspire consumers to engage in content creation. Brands should understand these motivations because UGC is a form of earned media, which is the most influential form of media for its organic nature. (Zerfass et al., 2016; Vasan et al., 2024). By exploring the motivations behind organic brand-related UGC, this study aims to provide valuable insights for both academics and practitioners, shedding light on the factors that drive consumers to become active participants in the digital marketplace.

1.2 Research Objectives and scope

To address the gap in the literature regarding consumer motivations for creating and sharing organic brand-related UGC, this study seeks to explore the underlying factors that drive individuals to engage in such behaviours, particularly within the context of beauty communities on TikTok. By focusing on

organic brand-related UGC, this research aims to uncover the psychological, emotional, and social drivers that inspire consumers to advocate for brands and share their experiences with others. The study is guided by the following research question and sub-questions:

- **Research question 1 (RQ1):** What motivates consumers to create brand-related UGC on social media?
- **Research question 2 (RQ2):** What are the specific characteristics of brand-related UGC that increase engagement?

RQ1 delves into the core motivations behind organic brand advocacy and UGC creation, exploring both intrinsic factors (e.g., personal satisfaction, self-expression) and extrinsic factors (e.g., social validation, community building). The concept of brand advocacy examines, why some consumers feel compelled to promote brands they love, even without direct incentives. This sub-question aligns with existing research on brand loyalty and customer-brand relationships but extends the discussion to the context of UGC creation. RQ2 investigates the characteristics of UGC that resonate most with audiences, such as authenticity, uniqueness, and trendiness, and how these elements contribute to higher engagement rates.

To answer these questions, this study employs a qualitative research design centred on semi-structured interviews with active TikTok users who create and engage with beauty-related content. These in-depth interviews will explore participants' motivations, experiences, and perceptions of organic brand-related UGC, providing rich insights into the "why" behind content creation and consumption. By focusing on firsthand accounts, the study captures the subjective drivers of UGC engagement, aligning with the research aim of uncovering consumer motivations in an authentic context.

1.3 Outline of the thesis

Chapter 2 (Literature review) lays the groundwork by exploring three key themes. First, it examines how social influence shapes consumer decisions from the customer journey to the power of peer validation. Next, it dives into the role of UGC in purchase decisions, including its defining features, impact, and the unique dynamics of TikTok virality. Finally, it investigates

brand advocacy and brand communities, asking why and how ordinary customers become passionate brand promoters.

Chapter 3 (Methodology) explains how this study tackles its research questions through semi-structured interviews with active TikTok users. It outlines why this approach was chosen to uncover the "why" behind organic UGC creation and engagement. **Chapter 4 (findings)** presents the heart of the research: insights from participants. It reveals why people share brand-related content (personal fulfilment, community, social validation) and what makes them engage with it (authenticity, trends, exclusivity). The chapter organizes these motivations into clear, actionable themes.

Chapter 5 (Discussion) ties these findings into theory and from there back to the broader conversation. It highlights what they mean for brands trying to harness organic UGC, acknowledges the study's limitations, and suggests where future research could dig deeper. And finally, **chapter 6 (Conclusions)**, wraps up the journey by distilling the key takeaways: No new data, just clear, practical reflections on what motivates organic brand advocacy and why it matters.

2 Literature Review

This chapter explores key theoretical concepts that acts as base for this study, beginning with the customer journey, which maps the stages of consumer decision-making from awareness to post-purchase evaluation. It then examines the influence of reference groups, which are social collectives that shape attitudes and behaviours and highlight their role in consumer decision-making. Finally, the literature review turns to social proof and validation, psychological phenomena where individuals rely on others' actions and opinions to guide their own choices. Together, these frameworks provide a foundation for understanding how social dynamics and experiential pathways shape consumer behaviour.

2.1 Social Influence in Consumer Decision-Making

2.1.1 Customer Journey

Consumer decision-making is a widely studied concept among marketers as it provides valuable insights into how people evaluate, choose, and purchase products and therefore essential for creating effective marketing strategies (Bettman et al., 1991). Mapping a customer journey offers the unique advantage of revealing valuable insights into the customer experience that might seem insignificant when evaluated using other approaches (Crosier & Handford, 2012; Tuenrat et al., 2020). One of the earliest and influential frameworks to demonstrate consumer decision-making is AIDA model (awareness, interest, desire and action). AIDA model is still very widely used in both marketing research and in practice although some scholars argue that it's outdated and in reality, more com-plex. (Kotler et al., 2017, p. 60; Hamilton et al., 2021). The AIDA model fails to consider the multichannel aspects of sales and, consequently, the various touchpoints in the customer journey.

Since the development of AIDA there has been several extensions and interpretations incorporating additional stages both prior to and following the purchase (Hamilton et al., 2021). These extensions have expanded the traditional linear model to reflect more dynamic, and often nonlinear customer experiences. While numerous internal and external factors influence consumer decision-making, social factors for example peer influence can be

considered to have a significant impact. The idea that social factors influence individual decision-making was a foundational principle in early research on social influence (Wood & Hayes, 2012).

Traditional customer journey maps do not incorporate the social environment and to address this gap, Hamilton and others (2021) created the social customer journey. The lack of focus to social influence within the customer journey contrasts sharply with extensive research highlighting the numerous ways social contexts shape customer decisions (Hamilton et al., 2021).

The social customer journey (Figure 1) is presented in six stages: Motivation, information search, evaluation, decision, satisfaction, and post-decision sharing. Each stage is shaped by social interactions, with proximal and distal companions contributing in unique ways. For example, close friends might provide emotional support, while online reviews or influencers offer valuable information (Hamilton et al., 2021).

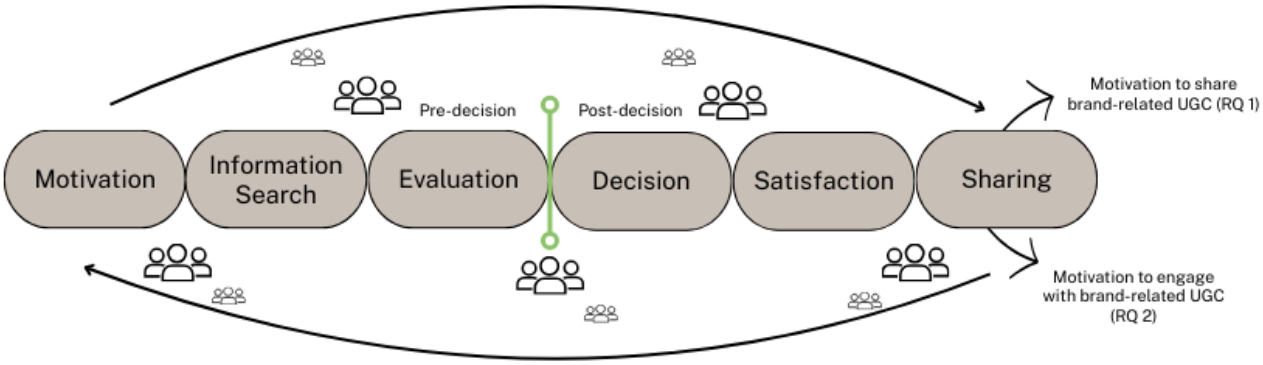

Figure 1 The Social Customer Journey (adapted from Hamilton et al., 2021)

Social others refer to individuals or groups who influence a person's decisions, behaviours, or perceptions during their journey as a consumer or decision-maker (Hamilton et al., 2021). These can be anyone within the consumer's social context, including close friends, family, acquaintances, or even strangers. Social others exert influence through their opinions, behaviours, or shared experiences, and their impact can vary based on their social distance from the individual.

Proximal social others (individuals marked bigger in figure 1) are those who are close to the individual, such as family or close friends (Hamilton et al.,

2021). They typically provide direct, emotional, or personalized inputs that can significantly shape decisions through trust and familiarity. *Distal social others* (individuals marked smaller in figure 1) are individuals or groups who are more removed, such as online reviewers, social media influencers, or societal norms. Their influence often comes indirectly, through aggregated opinions, ratings, or norms, and may rely on perceived authority or credibility rather than personal relationships.

Social others can act as "*traveling companions*" in a consumer's decision-making process, influencing motivations, information search, evaluations, decisions, and post-decision behaviours (Hamilton et al., 2021). For instance, a friend might recommend a product based on personal experience (*proximal influence*), while high online ratings from anonymous users might steer the consumer toward a particular choice (*distal influence*). This study extends the sharing part of the social customer journey by examining motivations behind sharing and engaging with brand-related UGC.

According to MacLeod and Asch (1954) Social influence arises from consumers' motivations to align with others or to differentiate themselves from them. Consumers align their opinions with the groups they themselves identify in for example purchasing decisions, brand preferences, or lifestyle choices, as a way to strengthen their sense of belonging and social identity. In consumer psychology, there are three types of social influence, that that shape consumer behaviour in different ways.

Wood and Hayes (2014) have categorized motives for social influence into three types:

1. ***Informational concerns*:** Consumers are motivated to align with others to understand reality. This involves assessing the reliability or quality of a product or service, such as determining the best brand or whether a product can be trusted.
2. ***Social concerns about relationships*:** Consumers seek to maintain positive relationships with others by agreeing with their preferences. This could involve decisions influenced by close friends, family members, or significant others to foster rapport and harmony.
3. ***Social concerns about self*:** Consumers are driven by self-related motivations, such as enhancing self-image or ensuring consistency

with personal values. Decisions are influenced by the desire to project an identity, such as choosing a brand that aligns with one's lifestyle or values.

Similarly, Argo (2019) has categorized social influence accordingly: *Utilitarian influence* occurs when individuals are motivated by rewards or the avoidance of punishment from a social presence. This type of influence generally operates through compliance with norms or expectations to gain acceptance or avoid rejection. Consumers may comply with social norms to satisfy their need to belong, maintain relationships, or align with group expectations. For example, people often choose products or services that signal their affiliation with a desirable social group or align with the expectations of their community.

Value-expressive influence arises from the desire to enhance or maintain one's self-concept (Argo, 2019). This type of influence focuses on identity and self-expression, as individuals associate with groups or brands that reflect their values and aspirations. Consumers often use their choices to project a positive self-image, reinforce their identity, or signal their alignment with social values. For instance, purchasing eco-friendly products can serve as a way to express concern for the environment while maintaining a positive self-view

Informational influence involves accepting information from others as evidence about reality (Argo, 2019) This type of influence operates through internalization, where individuals adopt others' behaviours or beliefs because they perceive them as accurate or beneficial for decision-making. Consumers often rely on social cues, such as product recommendations, reviews, or visible choices by others, to guide their own decisions. For example, a long queue outside a restaurant might be interpreted as a sign of high quality, influencing others to join.

2.1.2 Reference Groups

Reference groups play a crucial role in shaping consumer decisions by providing norms, attitudes, values, and aspirations that guide individual behaviour. Hyman (1960) introduced the concept of reference groups, which has since been refined into two primary types: *normative reference groups*,

offering personal norms and values, and *comparative reference groups*, providing aspirational benchmarks (Kelley, 1947). Childers and Rao (1992) further distinguished between familial and peer-based reference groups, emphasizing their differing degrees of influence on consumer choices.

Familial vs. Peer-Based Influences

Social influence can vary depending on the familiarity of the source. Childers and Rao (1992) observed that *familial reference groups*, especially in extended family structures, exert strong intergenerational influence on brand preferences, particularly for privately consumed necessities. For instance, items such as mattresses or home essentials often reflect the brand choices of previous generations. In contrast, peer groups tend to influence publicly consumed luxuries, such as hobbies or branded clothing, where conspicuous consumption plays a role.

This distinction is particularly relevant in cross-cultural contexts (Childers & Rao, 1992). The study compared U.S. nuclear families with extended families and found that family-based influences are more pronounced in cultures emphasizing communalism and familial cohesion, that can be seen in countries such as Thailand. Conversely, individualistic societies like the U.S. show stronger peer influences for public and luxury items due to the relative absence of family influence in decision-making for these categories.

Dimensions of Influence

The impact of reference groups varies based on the product's conspicuousness and necessity. Publicly consumed luxuries are most susceptible to peer influence due to their visibility and aspirational nature. On the other hand, privately consumed necessities are less likely to attract peer influence but demonstrate strong familial impact, as decisions for such products often stem from intergenerational norms and preferences (Childers & Rao, 1992).

The study also highlighted the mechanism of intergenerational influence, which manifests through brand loyalty passed from parents to children. For example, a family's preference for a specific detergent or food brand often continues across generations, reflecting deeply ingrained familial norms.

Self-Brand Connections and Social Identity

Escalas and Bettman (2003) argue that brands serve as tools for consumers to construct and express their self-concept. This process is influenced by the associations consumers derive from the brand usage of their reference groups. Reference groups contribute to "self-brand connections," where a brand becomes a meaningful part of an individual's self-representation. For instance, consumers may associate brands used by their member or aspirational groups with attributes they desire or align with, forging a deeper psychological connection to these brands.

The degree of this connection depends on the consumer's self-goals (Escalas & Bettman, 2003): Consumers motivated by self-enhancement are more likely to connect with brands linked to aspiration groups, as these groups represent an ideal self-image they wish to project. For example, purchasing luxury brands associated with high-status groups can help achieve the goal of appearing affluent and successful. On the other hand, consumers with self-verification goals tend to form connections with brands used by their member groups. These consumers prioritize maintaining consistency with their existing self-concept and value the predictability provided by familiar group norms. The difference is that the former seeks social elevation, the latter consistency. Consumers' self-goals by Escalas and Bettman (2003) contrast with Hayes (2014), which emphasize external social motives.

Ingroup and Outgroup Dynamics

Consumers form stronger self-brand connections with brands associated with their *ingroups*, which are groups they identify with, compared to *outgroups*, that are perceived as distinct or oppositional (Escalas & Bettman, 2005). Brands aligned with *ingroup* associations positively reinforce self-brand connections by enhancing the consumer's social identity. Conversely, brands aligned with *outgroup* identities are often rejected, particularly by individuals with independent self-construal. Independent consumers, more motivated by differentiation, actively avoid outgroup-associated brands to maintain distinctiveness, while interdependent consumers are less influenced by outgroup dynamics (Escalas & Bettman, 2005).

Reference groups not only guide consumer behaviour through aspirational or normative influences but also shape decisions via dissociative mechanisms. Dissociative reference groups are social groups from which consumers wish to distance themselves, often rejecting behaviours, attitudes, and brands associated with these groups (White & Dahl, 2006). Consumers actively avoid products and brands linked to dissociative groups to maintain their self-identity. This avoidance is heightened when the symbolic meaning of the brand is strongly associated with the dissociative group, particularly in public consumption contexts where others can observe brand choices. For example, consumers are less likely to choose a brand if they believe it aligns them with a stigmatized or negatively perceived group (White & Dahl, 2006).

2.1.3 Social Proof and Validation

Social proof is a psychological mechanism where individuals look to the actions and behaviours of others to guide their own decisions, especially under conditions of uncertainty (Cialdini, 2001). This principle is particularly influential in consumer behaviour, as people rely on social cues to evaluate the desirability and quality of products and services. Social proof manifests in various forms, including expert opinions, crowd behaviours, and user-generated content (UGC). When consumers observe others endorsing or using a product, they perceive it as a reliable choice. Research highlights that reviews, ratings, and testimonials serve as key indicators of product quality and influence purchase decisions significantly (Cialdini, 2001; Amblee & Bui, 2011).

The prevalence of online interactions has amplified the impact of social proof, making it a critical factor in shaping purchase behaviours. In online shopping contexts, social proof is often embedded in reviews, ratings, and purchase statistics. Research shows that prominently displayed metrics, such as “X people are viewing this product” or "Y purchases in the last hour,” create urgency and enhance perceived value (Arunkumar J. et al., 2023). This form of real-time validation capitalizes on the herd mentality, encouraging consumers to align their choices with those of others.

Online reviews have become a crucial part of the consumer purchasing process, offering social validation and serve as a public reflection of consumer satisfaction and trustworthiness (Saha & Verma, 2022; Patwa et al., 2024).

Positive reviews contribute to a favourable perception of a brand, reinforcing its credibility and reliability in the eyes of potential customers (Patwa et al., 2024). Companies with consistently high ratings and favourable testimonials are more likely to attract new buyers and retain existing ones, as their reputation aligns with consumers' expectations of quality and value. This alignment builds a strong reputation that can differentiate the company from competitors in crowded marketplaces.

Conversely, negative reviews can pose significant challenges to a company's reputation. Poor feedback, especially when consistent or unresolved, undermines consumer confidence and can deter potential customers from engaging with the brand (Patwa et al., 2024). However, companies that address negative reviews promptly and transparently often mitigate these effects and may even turn criticism into an opportunity for reputation enhancement. A proactive response strategy not only demonstrates a commitment to customer satisfaction but also signals accountability, which can foster trust among a broader audience (Patwa et al., 2024).

Additionally, the sheer visibility of customer reviews means that they are often among the first touchpoints for prospective buyers. The cumulative impact of reviews, whether positive or negative, influences not just individual purchase decisions but also the broader perception of the brand's value and reliability. As a result, managing customer reviews effectively becomes essential for companies aiming to build and sustain a positive reputation in highly competitive and digitally connected environments (Patwa et al., 2024).

The vital nature of reviews is apparent but a common dilemma that managers face is how to encourage customers to leave a review or just feedback in general. According to Hennig-Thurau and others (2004), businesses can encourage customers to leave reviews by understanding and tapping into the key motivators that drive sharing experiences. Early research has identified some motives for word-of-mouth communication such as product-involvement (Dichter, 1966), self-enhancement (Engel et al., 1993); Sundaram et al., 1998), Altruism and advice seeking (Sundaram et al., 1998). Additionally, Hennig-Thurau and others (2004) highlight, social benefits, economic incentives as well as concern for others.

As consumer are not a unified group in terms of motivations for sharing their thoughts online, they can be divided into segments depending on their distinct motivation (Hennig-Thurau et al., (2004). Given the presence of these different segments, businesses should design tailored strategies that align with the specific characteristics and needs of these segments, ensuring a more targeted and impactful approach. By understanding consumer motivations, businesses can use these strategies to encourage authentic and consistent feedback, which in turn helps them better understand the user experience and improve products or services (Li et al., 2022).

According to Saha and Varma (2022), businesses can encourage customers to leave reviews by simplifying the review process and making it as straightforward as possible. Customers are more likely to engage when the steps required to provide feedback are minimal and user-friendly. Offering clear instructions and creating seamless interfaces reduce potential barriers, making the process convenient and accessible for all customers.

Social proof extends beyond individual reviews and ratings to include broader metrics, such as user counts and testimonials that signal popularity and reliability (Poston, 2024). Businesses can use statements like “trusted by over one million users” or “preferred by 90% of professionals” to build trust and influence consumer behaviour. These statistics create a compelling narrative of credibility, especially when paired with visible endorsements from industry leaders or established organizations. Such tactics cater to both cognitive validation and emotional assurance, fostering trust in a brand even before direct engagement with its products or services.

Poston (2024) also emphasizes the role of UGC in amplifying social proof. Photos, videos, and personal stories shared by customers provide authentic, relatable perspectives that resonate deeply with prospective buyers. Unlike traditional marketing, UGC leverages the experiences of real users to create a sense of community and trust around a brand. Encouraging customers to share their positive experiences on social media or product pages can significantly enhance a brand’s credibility while simultaneously promoting engagement. This approach aligns with the increasing consumer preference for transparent and peer-driven content in their decision-making processes.

2.2 The role of UGC in Guiding Purchase Decisions

2.2.1 Definition and characteristics

User-generated content (UGC) has revolutionized the way people share information and interact online, transforming both social and professional landscapes. Over time, the term UGC has acquired many definitions across different disciplines and periods. In the context of marketing, Kietzmann et al. (2011) proposed UGC as the product of users' creation. This encompasses content generated by individuals on digital platforms, including text, images, videos, and reviews, which reflect their personal experiences and perspectives. Some authors (Cox et al., 2009; Ye et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2012) identify UGC as a branch under the word-of-mouth term and more specifically electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM).

In the early 2000s, platforms like Wikipedia, Yelp, and YouTube emerged, and demonstrated the power of crowd-sourced content to outpace traditional, expert-driven models (Luca, 2015). UGC platform is defined as an online space, where end-users publicly contribute and share media content such as texts, images, videos, or other digital artifacts, often within a community-driven environment (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). These platforms thrived by enabling users to create and consume content simultaneously, which redefined the role of everyday individuals in producing valuable information. Unlike traditional media, where content creation was limited to professionals, UGC platforms rely on their end-users to provide and validate content, creating a participatory ecosystem (Luca, 2015).

Although creating socially relevant media content by non-professional users is not a new concept, the term UGC has gained prominence recently due to the rise of digital technologies, especially Web 2.0 and social media (Barbosa dos Santos, 2024). These advancements encourage ordinary users to publish and interact in various ways within easy-to-use online platforms.

2.2.2 Impact of UGC

The rise of user-generated content also presents opportunities to marketers and commercial practices. Customers are no longer passive recipients of information from marketers, such as advertisements or product listings on e-

commerce platforms (Fader & Winer, 2012). Instead, they actively engage with both the company and each other, shaping purchase decisions and even influencing company strategies. As a result, brands can no longer fully control the messaging used to build their brand strategies, as consumers now play a significant role in the narrative (Fader & Winer, 2012).

There is now broad access to valuable information about how consumers interact with one another and the types of products or services they use (Fader & Winer, 2012). Social media serves as a platform for the exchange of UGC not only among consumers but also between consumers and marketers. Commercial firms have recognized the potential of UGC and adopted it as an innovative strategy to drive promotion and create engagement (Fader & Winer).

UGC is particularly effective because the content does not come directly from the brand itself. Consumers are more likely to trust referrals and recommendations from others over self-promotional brand messages, making UGC a powerful driver of brand loyalty and affinity (Piga, 2022). According to Omnichannel Holiday Study (2019), before making a purchase, more than half of consumers seek advice about the product or service in question. Increasingly, they rely on the opinions of digital influencers who showcase various products and services in their everyday lives. These influencers often serve as trusted sources, bridging the gap between brands and consumers (Piga, 2022). Some authors argue that advertising disclosures can trigger persuasion knowledge (van Reijmersdal et al. 2016; Evans et al. 2017).

UGC acts as a modern form of word-of-mouth advertising, which has always played a significant role in consumer decision-making (Duke, 2023). People trust other people including friends, family, or members of their professional networks over marketers, turning to UGC as a reliable source of information. According to a consumer content report (Stackla, 2017), 60% of consumers say that content from a friend or family member significantly influences their purchase decisions. When consumers see others excited about a product or service, it generates a desire to participate, creating a ripple effect of engagement, brand exposure, and conversion (Duke, 2023).

Digital content creator platforms in industries such as beauty, food, household goods, and fashion have become go-to tools for marketers, enabling

them to strategically place products in front of the right audience at the right time. This approach not only increases brand visibility but also fosters creative and diverse content that drives web traffic and user engagement (Piga, 2022). The growing reliance on UGC highlights the power of authentic consumer experiences in shaping brand perception and influencing purchasing behaviour. As more individuals share their satisfaction with products and services, brands gain a valuable resource for expanding their reach and building lasting consumer trust (Duke, 2023).

Mayrhofer and others (2020) argue that that user-generated branded content significantly reduces viewers' persuasion knowledge, meaning they are less likely to recognize it as an advertisement. This lack of recognition diminishes their coping mechanisms, such as scepticism, leading to more favourable reactions and higher purchase intentions compared to brand-generated posts. The study aligns with the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM) (Friestad & Wright, 1994), which highlights the importance of source identification in triggering resistance to persuasive messages. While some authors argue that advertising disclosures can trigger persuasion knowledge (van Reijmersdal et al. 2016; Evans et al. 2017), Mayrhofer and others (2020) found that, advertising disclosures were found ineffective in increasing persuasion knowledge for brand-generated content. This is potentially due to a ceiling effect where viewers already recognize the content as promotional.

2.2.3 Brand-related UGC

Brand-related user-generated content is any consumer-created, publicly shared content that focuses on a brand, product, or service, such as reviews, recommendations, or personal experiences shared online. (Tang et al., 2014). This type of content has grown in prominence, with large volumes of brand-related UGC on social media, that increasingly influences consumer purchasing decisions. Brand-related UGC has become a trusted source of information for consumers, influencing their decisions more than traditional advertising channels (Cheong & Mohammed-Baksh, 2021). Recognizing its power, marketers have begun incorporating brand-related UGC into their strategies to engage audiences and shape consumer behaviour (Rossmann et al., 2016). Unlike traditional customer testimonials, which brands carefully review and typically feature on official websites, brand-related UGC is often organic,

informal, and shared on social media platforms rather than controlled by the brand.

One of the key reasons for UGC's impact is its perceived independence from marketers. Organic UGC, created without direct influence or compensation from marketers, is often viewed as more authentic and credible (Jeong and Koo, 2015). However, not all UGC maintains this independence. A growing number of marketers incentivize consumers to create and share UGC by offering rewards, such as monetary compensation or free products, to promote their brands to social circles or even to broader audiences (Wood and Burkhalter, 2014; Kim & Lee, 2017). This practice blurs the line between organic and sponsored UGC, affecting consumer perceptions of authenticity and trust. The role of sponsorship will be discussed in the next section of this literature review.

The sources of brand-related UGC play a critical role in how consumers accept messages on social media (Boerman and Kruikemeier, 2016; Chiou et al., 2014; Liu et al., 2012). Among these sources, friends are the most prominent, as maintaining offline relationships is one of the primary reasons people use social networking platforms (Ellison et al., 2007). Friends influence purchase decisions through mechanisms like *referent power*, where people align with their friends' preferences; *reward power*, where friends are perceived as capable of offering rewards; and *coercive power*, where friends' disapproval might act as a deterrent (Goodrich and Mangleburg, 2010; Wang et al., 2012). This aligns with social influence motives by Hayes (2014) discussed earlier.

The influence of close friends is even stronger than that of casual acquaintances. Close friends share deeper, more intimate relationships, that are characterized by frequent communication, shared personal experiences, and mutual support across contexts (Bansal & Voyer, 2000; Stefanone & Jang, 2007). This relational closeness fosters greater trust, making people more likely to value and act on recommendations from close friends compared to casual friends (Ryu and Han, 2009). Additionally, close friends are more inclined to share promotional messages (Choi et al., 2017), further amplifying their impact on consumer decisions. Due to this significant influence, the study focuses exclusively on close friends as sources of brand-related UGC.

One of the key strengths of brand-related UGC is its accessibility. Unlike word-of-mouth recommendations shared in personal conversations, UGC remains accessible online, reaching a broader audience and retaining its influence over time (Cheong & Mohammed-Baksh, 2021). This permanence allows potential buyers to revisit and rely on these resources whenever they make purchase decisions (Cheong & Mohammed-Baksh, 2021). Moreover, UGC bridges the gap between traditional advertising and peer recommendations, providing a mix of personal opinion and informational content that consumers actively seek during pre-purchase stages (Cheong & Mohammed-Baksh, 2021).

Another important aspect of brand-related UGC is its ability to cater to both utilitarian and emotional needs in decision-making. Consumers engaging in rational, high-involvement purchases such as electronics or insurance, tend to seek detailed, objective insights from UGC to evaluate functional attributes (Cheong & Mohammed-Baksh, 2021). Meanwhile, even for emotional, low-involvement purchases like luxury or sensory products, UGC offers subjective opinions that help buyers align their choices with personal values and preferences (Cheong & Mohammed-Baksh, 2021). This dual utility underscores the versatility and importance of UGC in various buying contexts (Cheong & Mohammed-Baksh, 2021).

The impact of advertising and brand-related marketing efforts on social media relies not only on the original message itself but also on the user-generated content that arises in response to that message within the specific social media channel (Roma & Aloini, 2019). Each social media platforms have their own unique technical attributes and therefore specific types of UGC exchange can vary depending on the platform.

The study by Smith et al. (2012) explores how brand-related UGC differs across three prominent social media platforms: YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. Using a content analysis of 600 posts related to two retail apparel brands, Lululemon and American Apparel, the research examines six key content dimensions: *promotional self-presentation*, *brand centrality*, *marketer-directed communication*, *responses to marketer actions*, *factually informative content*, and *brand sentiment*. The findings reveal distinct patterns of UGC behaviour on each platform.

On YouTube, UGC tends to emphasize individual self-promotion, with brands often playing a supporting rather than central role (Smith et al., 2012). This aligns with YouTube's culture of self-expression and its "broadcast yourself" element. Twitter, in contrast, sees the highest focus on brands, as its concise format promotes direct, brand-centric communication. Users are less focused on promoting themselves and instead engage in sharing information and discussing brand-related topics. Facebook falls between these two, showing moderate levels of self-promotion and brand centrality, which are influenced by how actively brands engage with their audience on the platform.

While Smith and others (2012) found differences in how UGC was generated and shared, particularly noting that Facebook hosted less informative content, extended study by Roma and Aloini (2019) demonstrates that Facebook has evolved to host factually informative UGC at levels comparable to Twitter and YouTube. This shift reflects Facebook's move toward richer, more visually engaging, and interactive features. Roma and Aloini (2019) study highlight a homogenization of UGC characteristics across platforms, as Facebook and Twitter increasingly adopt features that were once distinct to YouTube, such as visual and interactive elements, narrowing behavioural differences in self-presentation and brand centrality.

The latter study builds on Smith et al.'s (2012) observation that brand sentiment varies across platforms but adds new insights by highlighting the impact of socio-technological changes on these differences. It also reinforces the idea that YouTube is less effective at facilitating interactive communication between brands and users compared to Facebook and Twitter, due to its focus on one-way content sharing. Moreover, the study uncovers emerging trends in UGC, such as geo-localized posts and content shared during brand use or personal events, which are significantly more prevalent on Facebook and Twitter.

2.2.4 The Role of Sponsorships and Endorsements

As mentioned in the previous sub-chapter UGC can be broadly categorized into organic and sponsored content. Organic UGC arises naturally without marketer influence or incentives, and it is generally perceived as more authentic and credible by consumers (Jeong and Koo, 2015). This credibility

leads to stronger positive attributions, such as the belief that the content is shared with the intent of providing useful information rather than for financial gain. The information-sharing motive implies that individuals creating brand-related UGC aim to assist other consumers in making informed purchasing decisions (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004).

Conversely*, sponsored UGC*, which is created by users in exchange for compensation such as money or free products, often raises consumer scepticism. The benefits of sponsored UGC lie in its potential to reduce annoyance and mitigate scepticism toward brand-related content on social media (Kim & Song, 2018). However, such content is more likely to evoke monetary-gain attributions, leading consumers to question the motives behind the recommendation and reducing trust in both the content and the brand (Moore et al., 1994; Wood & Burkhalter, 2014). Studies have shown that this perceived bias can negatively affect consumer attitudes toward the brand and their intention to follow the recommendation. The presence of sponsorship reduces the impact of even trusted sources like close friends, aligning their perceived credibility closer to that of paid endorsers, such as celebrities (Kim & Lee, 2017).

Content sponsorships are especially prevalent in the world of influencer marketing. Social media influencer (SMI) marketing is a strategy that relies on the notable influence of social media influencers such as internet personalities, third-party endorsers, content creators, and celebrities to drive commercial value (Musiyiwa & Jacobson, 2023). Social media influencers are individuals who have gained a following on social media platforms because of their knowledge, expertise, or passion for a particular subject (Geyser, 2021). Influencers essentially create social media content for various brands and therefore are helping brands build a positive brand reputation online by promoting a product or service and endorsing it to their audience (Geyser, 2021). It comes as a no surprise that many brands have started to incorporate influencer marketing into their marketing strategy due to its beneficial consumer responses (Vrontis et al., 2021).

Celebrity endorsements have long been a popular strategy for marketers to promote their brands, products, and services (Schouten et al., 2020). These endorsements rely on the positive image and recognition of celebrities, who have gained public fame due to their professional talents, such as acting,

sports, or music. However, the rise of social media has introduced a new category of endorsers: Influencers.

Unlike traditional celebrities, influencers gain fame by establishing themselves as experts in specific domains on social media platforms (Khamis et al., 2017). By sharing curated and relatable content, they cultivate a dedicated follower base, positioning themselves as credible voices within their niche. This ability to connect directly with their audience distinguishes influencers from celebrities, making them particularly effective in advertising.

The effectiveness of endorsements, whether by celebrities or influencers, often depends on the perceived connection between the consumer and the endorser. Consumers are more likely to adopt the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours of an endorser when they perceive shared interests, values, or characteristics (Kelman, 2006; Cialdini, 2007; Schouten et al., 2020). Influencers excel in creating this sense of relatability, leading to higher trust and stronger consumer identification with their endorsements.

Wishful identification, similarity, and trust are critical factors in the success of endorsements. Influencers outperform celebrities in these areas, particularly when promoting products aligned with their niche expertise (Schouten et al., 2020). This combination of trustworthiness and relatability explains why influencer endorsements have become an increasingly effective and popular advertising strategy.

Influencer posts are particularly effective in generating greater admiration among adolescents due to their aspirational and relatable nature (De Jans et al., 2020). Adolescents admire influencers for their perceived lifestyles, which creates a strong emotional connection. However, these posts are often seen as less credible compared to brand posts. In contrast, brand posts are viewed as more credible sources, especially by adolescents with higher levels of advertising recognition.

Brand posts and influencer posts serve different purposes in social media advertising. Brand posts are effective for increasing credibility and awareness, making them suitable for campaigns focused on building recognition (De Jans et al., 2020). On the other hand, influencer posts excel at creating positive emotional connections and admiration, which translates to higher brand

liking (De Jans et al., 2020). Brands may use these strategies for different purposes as they are perceived differently by the audience.

Marketing must be easily identifiable as marketing, regardless of its presentation style or advertising medium. The clear identification of marketing is important so that consumers know when they are being subjected to commercial influence. (Kilpailu- ja kuluttajavirasto, 2024). Clear disclosures, such as hashtags like #Sponsored, improve consumers' ability to recognize posts as advertising, which can activate scepticism (De Veirman & Hudders, 2019). On the other hand, non-sponsorship disclosures (e.g., #NotSponsored) improve consumer attitudes by reinforcing the authenticity of endorsements. According to Boerman and others (2017), disclosures do not harm posts shared directly by brands, as consumers already expect commercial intent from brands.

2.2.5 TikTok and Virality

In the digital marketing era, the constant exposure to brand advertisements has led to "attention fatigue" among consumers and social media users (Wang, 2024). This overload of information results in stress, fatigue, and desensitization to brand messages, diminishing the effectiveness of traditional advertising strategies. To address this challenge, brands are increasingly turning to innovative approaches to capture attention in a competitive market (Wang, 2024). One such approach is the use of UGC, where brands utilize the content posted by their customers to

TikTok has emerged as one of the most significant platforms for short-form video content, particularly among younger demographics (Ling, 2022). It's one of the fastest-growing social media platforms globally, with a user base exceeding 1,56 billion monthly active users (Statista, 2024). Unlike traditional social media platforms, TikTok is uniquely designed to be mobile-first, providing an immersive and immediate user experience through short videos that do not require prolonged viewer attention (Ling, 2022).

TikTok has become a hub for UGC marketing, where brands encourage their users or fans to create content promoting products, services, or experiences (Wang, 2024). Its immense popularity has drawn significant attention from companies, leading to substantial investments in advertising. The success is

largely attributed to TikTok's optimization of short video quality and its strong emphasis on fostering user interaction, which makes UGC marketing highly effective on the platform (Wang, 2024).

TikTok's user engagement is centred around its "For You" page, a personalized feed selected by an algorithm that adapts to user behaviour, making it the primary driver of content discovery on the platform (Ling, 2022). This recommendation algorithm is designed to quickly elevate videos to "viral status" while introducing users to topics that align with their interests or content based on browsing behaviour (Roostika & Yumna, 2023). High level of engagement boosts the visibility of user-generated content, giving all users the opportunity for significant exposure (Wang, 2024).

The platform's impact extends beyond entertainment, shaping online culture through interactive and viral content (Ling et al., 2022). Viral trends such as dance challenges, humorous skits, and remixed audio clips dominate TikTok, encouraging users to actively engage with and contribute to trending themes. This participatory culture is further reinforced by TikTok's affordances, such as the ability to add hashtags, sounds, and effects, enabling creators to align their content with trending topics. This dynamic and interactive environment makes TikTok distinct from earlier social media platforms, positioning it as both a cultural phenomenon and a powerful tool for digital engagement (Ling et al., 2022).

TikTok's recommendation system is a critical component of its virality model and heavily influences what content gains visibility (Ling et al., 2022). Creators strategically use trending and generic hashtags, such as #fyp (For You Page), to increase the likelihood of their videos being featured in users' personalized feeds (Ling et al., 2022). This algorithmic design creates a competitive environment where timing and strategic content placement play a pivotal role in achieving virality. Unlike platforms like YouTube, where fan bases and in-links often dictate popularity, TikTok's algorithm provides opportunities for lesser-known creators to gain significant exposure if they align with current trends and platform dynamics (Ling et al., 2022).

TikTok will only grow and broaden its appeal for several reasons (Greenwald, 2021). Greenwald (2021) explains that TikTok's algorithm, which is already unmatched in its capabilities, continues to evolve, making it one of the easiest

platforms for users to train to deliver content they genuinely enjoy. The platform prioritizes authentic, unfiltered moments over high production value, creating a space where real-life experiences take centre stage. Its precision in targeting connects micro-cultures with the content they crave, enhancing personalization and engagement. For creators, TikTok offers a low barrier to entry, allowing them to build a following faster than on any other platform.

2.3 Brand Advocacy

2.3.1 Customers as Brand Advocates

Brand advocacy, which is largely driven by WOM, is considered one of the most effective types of WOM (Keller, 2007). It enhances consumer engagement and trust more than traditional marketing methods. Research underscores that strong customer advocacy is a reliable predictor of top-line growth, as seen in the practices of leading companies such as Procter & Gamble, Apple, and Starbucks (Keller, 2007). Unlike traditional marketing approaches that rely on one-way communication, brand advocacy leverages consumer trust and the natural inclination to share positive experiences, creating an organic and influential dialogue about brands (Keller, 2007).

Studies reveal that consumers overwhelmingly share favourable opinions about brands, with positive mentions outnumbering negative ones by a margin of more than six to one (Keller, 2007). This positivity reflects a supportive consumer mindset aimed at helping others make informed purchasing decisions (Keller, 2007). Additionally, the credibility of WOM stems from the trusted relationships between conversational partners, with nearly half of WOM recipients expressing a strong intent to purchase based on these recommendations (Keller, 2007). Marketing strategies that stimulate WOM, whether through traditional media or targeted campaigns, amplify its impact by reinforcing conversations that enhance brand advocacy (Keller, 2007).

Online Brand Advocacy (OBA) represents a powerful driver in digital marketing, functioning as a purposeful and influential online expression of support for brands by experienced customers (Wilk et al., 2019). OBA significantly impacts brand loyalty and purchase intent, creating a reciprocal relationship that strengthens consumer-brand connections (Wilk et al., 2021). Unlike offline advocacy, OBA's digital nature allows for global reach,

permanence, and the use of virtual visual cues like emojis and images, which enhance emotional engagement (Wilk et al., 2019).

Recent research suggests that online brand advocacy is a multifaceted concept closely linked to offline brand advocacy, but it possesses unique online communication characteristics attributed to brand-experienced consumers (Wilk et al., 2019). Four key dimensions of OBA have been identified:

1. ***Brand knowledge:*** This encompasses detailed, intimate, and insightful brand-related information that only experienced consumers can provide.
2. ***Brand defence:*** This involves actions such as "standing up for," "speaking on behalf of," or "defending" the brand. It includes countering negative brand information online in ways that demonstrate protective behaviour towards the brand.
3. ***Brand positivity:*** This refers to favourable and positive communication about the brand, including explicit endorsements.
4. ***Positive virtual visual cues:*** These are visual elements in the online environment that express support for the brand, such as emojis, emoticons, exclamation marks, bold text, and in-context brand photos.

Brand advocates often unintentionally act as marketers for a brand by producing user-generated content that provides free publicity (Ntloko, 2024). Through activities like creating product review videos or writing blog posts about the brand, these advocates contribute to increasing brand visibility. Incorporating such organic support into public relations campaigns not only enhances brand awareness but also generates valuable user-driven content that reinforces the brand's presence and credibility (Ntloko, 2024). Brands can facilitate brand advocacy through different programs that encourages customers to advocate and share their positive experiences with others.

The best brand advocates typically come from key groups such as executive leadership, company partners, employees, and loyal customers (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2024). These individuals play a vital role in enhancing a company's reputation, expanding its brand reach, and driving sales. Effective advocates are often highly active online, possess significant social influence,

and represent the company positively (Influencer Marketing Hub, June 24th, 2024). A strong brand advocacy strategy leverages the influence of these advocates to connect with a wider audience both online and in person.

There are some practical ways brands can maximize the number of customers that advocates for their brands. Brands should show customers appreciation by offering them perks and additional benefits (Tariq, 2020). Appreciating your customers with rewards, discounts, promotions, and special events highlights that your relationship extends beyond mere transactions (Tariq, 2020). It's important to give customers something to talk about through sharing exiting news or offering personal discounts. Being active on social media is great way to reach a large audience and engage directly with customers. Many brands encourage customers to contribute their own content such as sharing a picture featuring brands product (Tariq, October 29th, 2020). Referral programs are also one way to encourage customers to talk about a brand to their networks (Tariq, 2020).

An effective brand advocacy program requires strategic planning and consistent efforts to build genuine relationships with a brand's most loyal supporters. Key steps include identifying potential advocates, such as loyal customers, employees, or partners, through data analysis of social media engagement and customer interactions (Influencity, 2024). Once identified, advocates should be engaged with exclusive insights, tools, and shareable content to amplify their communication about the brand (Influencity, 2024). Recognizing and rewarding their efforts through public acknowledgment, or special access reinforces their commitment and motivates further advocacy. Lastly, setting measurable performance indicators and adapting strategies based on feedback and outcomes ensures the program remains impactful and aligned with its goals (Influencity, 2024).

2.3.2 Brand Communities

Brand communities are specialized, non-geographically bound social structures that foster connections among individuals who share an interest in a particular brand (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). These communities create a platform for consumers to engage in discussions, share ideas, and express their admiration for the brand, thus reinforcing relationships between the brand and its customers (McAlexander et al., 2002). Research emphasizes that

brand communities are instrumental in cultivating emotional connections, such as brand love, which mediates outcomes like word-of-mouth, advocacy, and loyalty (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). Furthermore, brand community participation strengthens consumers' identification with the brand, enhancing their commitment and encouraging long-term loyalty (Dholakia et al., 2004). This dynamic underscore the importance of brand communities as a strategic tool for reinforcing brand-customer relationships.

The focus of an online brand community (OBC) can range from being centred on the brand itself (e.g., Apple, Nike) to encompassing broader shared interests related to the brand (e.g., baking communities). The orientation determines how the community members engage with the brand and its associated activities (Wirtz et al., 2013). OBCs may be fully funded by the brand, fully supported by community members, or a mix of both. The source of funding influences the resources available for community activities and the degree of independence the community has from the brand (Wirtz et al., 2013). Governance can range from being entirely controlled by the brand to being managed by community members (Wirtz et al., 2013)

OBCs offer numerous advantages to consumers by providing functional, social, and emotional benefits (Wirtz et al., 2013). Functionally, OBCs serve as reliable sources of information, offering insights into product usage, troubleshooting, and recommendations from experienced community members (Dholakia et al., 2009). These interactions reduce uncertainty in purchasing decisions, as consumers can seek reassurance and validate their choices through discussions within the community (Adjei et al., 2010). Additionally, OBCs empower consumers by providing a collaborative space to share knowledge, co-create value, and engage directly with the brand and other members.

Socially, OBCs foster a sense of community by allowing consumers to connect with like-minded individuals who share similar interests or brand preferences (Wirtz et al., 2013). Connecting with these individuals builds a sense of belonging and identity within the group, which enhances emotional satisfaction (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). For many participants, the relationships formed within these communities contribute significantly to their overall brand experience, creating a deeper emotional bond. Through a combination

of functional and social benefits, OBCs not only enhance consumer satisfaction but also contribute to a more enriching and engaging brand experience.

From a brand perspective, OBCs are valuable tools for fostering consumer engagement, loyalty, and advocacy. Active participation in OBCs strengthens emotional ties with the brand, leading to higher levels of customer loyalty and an increased likelihood of positive word-of-mouth advocacy (Algesheimer et al., 2005). By promoting interaction and engagement within these communities, brands can build stronger relationships with their customers, contributing to long-term retention and satisfaction.

OBCs also provide brands with a wealth of consumer insights. They serve as platforms for gathering feedback, understanding consumer preferences, and identifying trends that can guide product development and innovation (Kozinets, 2002). Additionally, OBCs enhance brand equity by fostering trust, satisfaction, and commitment among community members (Kim et al., 2008). These benefits translate into improved sales, as community participants are more likely to adopt new products and exhibit resistance to switching to competitors (Thompson & Sinha, 2008). Moreover, OBCs allow for cost-efficient market research and customer engagement compared to traditional methods, making them an attractive strategy for brands to cultivate customer relationships and drive growth.

Wirtz and others (2013) emphasize the importance of balancing control and flexibility in OBC governance, which ensures high-quality information exchange and the maintenance of consistent communication between online and offline brand efforts. While OBCs present opportunities to enhance brand equity, customer insights, and sales, they also pose challenges, including handling negative sentiment and maintaining active consumer participation (Wirtz et al., 2013). Successful management of OBCs depends on aligning their strategies with organizational goals, empowering consumers to co-create value, and sustaining engagement through meaningful interactions.

3 Methodology

This chapter of the thesis details the research approach used to investigate consumer motivations for creating organic brand-related content on TikTok. It begins by establishing why this specific context was chosen, followed by a thorough explanation of the semi-structured interview methodology. The chapter then outlines the data collection and analysis processes, by demonstrating how qualitative insights were systematically derived from participant responses. By transparently presenting these methodological choices, this section provides the foundation for understanding the study's subsequent findings.

3.1 Context

The beauty community on TikTok provides an interesting context for studying organic brand-related UGC. As one of the platform's most active niches, beauty content thrives on TikTok's unique ecosystem, where authentic peer recommendations often carry more weight than traditional advertising. The #BeautyTok hashtag alone has amassed over 85 billion views, demonstrating the immense reach and engagement potential of this space. This environment proves particularly valuable for research because it combines three key elements: a culture of authenticity that encourages unfiltered content, growth of niche communities, and a user base that actively participates in content creation rather than passive consumption.

To explore this phenomenon, the study employed semi-structured in-depth interviews as the primary research method. This approach was selected for its ability to uncover the layered motivations behind UGC creation while maintaining enough structure to address the core research questions. The flexible nature of semi-structured interviews allowed participants to share personal experiences organically, while predetermined themes ensured coverage of critical areas like community influence and content creation drivers.

3.2 Data Collection

The research began with targeted social media fieldwork to identify suitable participants within TikTok's beauty community. Three different user types

were selected to provide diverse perspectives: Active content creators who regularly post beauty-related UGC, casual consumers who occasionally share brand experiences, and social media specialists who possess expertise in brand-related UGC. The varying viewpoints of informants helped capturing a comprehensive picture of UGC motivations across different levels of engagement. Informant profiles can be found in appendix 1 of this thesis.

Potential informants were contacted through personalized emails explaining the study's purpose and confidentiality measures. Ten individuals ultimately participated in around 45-minute interviews conducted via Microsoft Teams, with sessions recorded for accuracy after obtaining consent. The interview guide can be found in appendix 2, please note that questions may have varied during the process based on each informants' responses and the flow of the conversations. The recordings were initially processed through Teams' automated transcription tool, followed by manual review to correct any errors and ensure truthful representation of participants' words. The reviewed transcripts were then imported into ATLAS.ti Web (version 9.15.3) to facilitate systematic analysis.

3.3 Data Analysis

The analysis used a flexible qualitative coding approach that matched the study's exploratory nature. Rather than separating open coding and thematic development into distinct phases, the analysis employed immediate thematic identification during initial review. When encountering significant statements like "I only post about products I've used for months," researcher simultaneously coded them for both specific content ("long-term product use") and broader thematic relevance ("authenticity"). This hybrid approach-maintained connection to raw data while accelerating pattern recognition.

As coding progressed, emergent themes were refined through iterative comparison across interviews. Please find the themes along with the codes in appendix 3 and example quotes in appendix 4. The researcher identified the primary motivators for UGC creation and for engagement behaviour, with particular attention to how frequently and emphatically themes appeared across different participant types. Throughout this process, researcher regularly returned to original transcripts to verify that developed themes accurately reflected participant experiences, while also noting exceptional cases

that complicated or contradicted dominant patterns. The quotes featured in the thesis were translated to English (from Finnish) using Deepseek, to which author confirmed accuracy.

3.4 Considerations

This methodology was particularly suited to investigating organic UGC because it focuses on gaining a deep understanding, capturing the subjective experiences and reasoning behind content creation decisions. The interview format allowed exploration of motivations that might remain hidden in survey data, while the multi-perspective participant selection helped mitigate individual bias. The modified coding approach addressed a common challenge in qualitative research by maintaining clear links between raw data and analytical conclusions throughout the process.

By combining TikTok's distinctive beauty community context with this tailored methodological approach, the study was positioned to generate meaningful insights about organic UGC that balance theoretical relevance with authentic user perspectives. The following Findings section presents the rich patterns that emerged from this careful investigative process. Unlike quantitative studies that focus on broad trends, this qualitative exploration highlights the individual stories and motivations behind UGC, offering a more intimate look at the consumer-brand relationship in the digital age (Belk et al., 2013, chapter 3).

4 Findings

This chapter presents the findings of the study, which seeks to uncover the motivations behind consumers' creation and sharing of organic brand-related user-generated content on social media, with a particular focus on beauty communities on TikTok. The findings are organized into four thematic sections, each addressing a core aspect of the research questions:

1. **Significance of organic content:** This introductory section delves into the importance and impact of organic UGC in today's digital landscape, particularly within beauty communities on platforms like TikTok.

2. **Motivations for creating organic UGC**: This part explores the psychological, emotional, and social drivers that inspire consumers to create and share UGC.

3. **Characteristics of engaging brand-related UGC:** This final section examines the content features (e.g., authenticity, creativity, storytelling) that make UGC more likely to resonate with audiences and gain viral status.

By presenting the findings in this way, the study not only answers the research questions but also provides actionable insights for brands looking to foster genuine consumer advocacy and leverage UGC effectively. The voices of content creators, regular consumers, and social media experts come together to paint a comprehensive picture of the UGC landscape, offering both theoretical and practical contributions to the field of digital marketing.

4.1 Significance of Organic Content

As the social media landscape continues to evolve and brands increasingly establish their presence, consumers have become more cautious of overtly persuasive messaging, such as direct advertising or influencer campaigns. While paid ads remain widely used across various social media platforms, sponsorships can sometimes evoke negative reactions from consumers, leading to unfavourable associations with the brand. Given that authenticity is a

critical factor in consumer decision-making, there is a growing demand for organic content that feels genuine and relatable.

> *"In my opinion, consumers question everything commercial, so as soon as there's even the slightest indication that something might be an advertisement or commercial, it immediately raises a little red flag—is this genuine or not? If someone posts something completely organically, like, "I Googled and found this useful," let's just say I'd much rather watch that. Nowadays, there's so much commercial content out there, and everyone has some kind of commercial motive. So, when there are still individuals in this world who create content purely out of their own passion, I find that truly wonderful."* (Informant 2)

> *"Well, I think it's pretty clear that, of course, UGC (user-generated content) that isn't labelled as a commercial collaboration is likely skipped less often than content that is marked as a commercial partnership."* (Informant 1)

The quotes above highlight how organic content is perceived as more authentic compared to sponsored content. One of the underlying factors explaining this is the perceived intent of the content creator. Sponsored content is associated with financial incentives or brand obligations, which can create scepticism among audiences. Consumers can view sponsored posts as inherently biased, assuming the creator is being compensated to promote the brand, regardless of their genuine opinion.

In contrast, organic content is seen as self-motivated and voluntary, driven by the creator's personal experiences, emotions, or enthusiasm for the brand. This type of content is associated with purer intentions. Naturally, creators with smaller followings who post sponsored content are more likely to receive better reactions from consumers. With platforms like TikTok gaining popularity, there has been a clear increase in small creators producing mostly non-commercial content within specific niches. These smaller content creators also called micro-influencers build authentic connections with their audience by sharing personal stories and providing in-depth product reviews or recommendations (Mantz, 2024). The rise of smaller creators has also intensified the competition as explained by interviewee 1.

> *"From there (TikTok), a huge number of these new, small-scale influencers have emerged, which has also intensified competition and raised the stakes in the game enormously. In recent years, we haven't seen the rise of any megastars there; instead, there are tens of thousands of mid-tier influencers. And no matter the topic—whether it's cosmetics, Asian food, or cleaning—there's something for everyone."* (Informant 1).

So, what exactly makes organic UGC so important? As established earlier, content that isn't tied to financial incentives tends to resonate more with consumers and is more persuasive. When everyday consumers share posts about products that have genuinely worked for them as explained by informant 1, it becomes incredibly valuable for brands, especially on platforms like TikTok, which offer high visibility and the potential for virality to anyone. Additionally, creators with dedicated audiences have a strong influence over their followers, often swaying their purchase decisions or sparking trends.

> *"Yeah, and then there are those UGC guys, you know? They're the ones who kind of define what the brand or product—or the brand as a whole—really is. It's through their voices that the story gets told, and they reflect it in a way that comes from their own genuine desire and enthusiasm. They want to showcase and talk about the product, and that's like an incredible asset for the brand."* (Informant 1).

> *"In my opinion, TikTok stands out from other platforms because of its element of randomness—everyone has a chance to go viral. Everyone has the opportunity to start creating content and get views. If you compare it to YouTube, for example, the audience there is very committed, and I don't even know how the algorithm works, but it's much harder to grow your visibility and follower count there.".* (Informant 2).

While TikTok and the content posted there is used for entertainment purposes it's also used as a source of information, Users there might search for suitable product for themselves and due to short-video formatting, users can get the information they are seeking, fast without using too much time on

searching. Informant 4 points out that, watching the videos also gives the user an opportunity to see the product in action, that you wouldn't probably get to experience using search engines as Google. Due to organic nature of most videos posted on TikTok, and especially those that contains something informational, users are more likely to trust that content.

> *"Yeah, um, a lot of our clients, especially when starting a collaboration, say that TikTok is like a search engine—but not Google, where so many people go, for example, to look for a store in a new city. For everyone in my age group, basically millennials, and all my friends too, we go to TikTok to search because there you can find videos that are actually filmed on location. You can see the vibe, what the atmosphere is like, what the products look like. So, you get honest opinions about the place. Because, well, a video tells you so much more than just a photo."* (Informant 4)

> *"Over the years, people have started posting more and more opinions about things, like recommendations for different places—not just information about products, but things like, 'Hey, I had an amazing experience at this place,' or 'This product worked really well for me.' I also enjoy following what other people think about certain products."* (Informant 6)

Quotes above only confirm that there is lot of discussion about different brands and products on social media platforms usually initiated by consumers themselves. Although brands can no longer completely control narratives going around about them, it's important that they establish a strong presence and take part in discussions to not only increase engagement but also shape the conversation in a positive and meaningful way.

By actively participating in these discussions, brands can build trust, foster loyalty, and humanize their image. For instance, responding to user-generated content, whether it's a positive review, a question or even a complaint, shows that the brand values its customers and is willing to listen. This type of customer feedback is also valuable for the brands as it provides direct insights into consumer preferences, pain points, and expectations that can later be used in product development.

"Absolutely, the fact that people, especially on TikTok, post and talk about things regardless of whether the companies are present there. If you, as a company, are not there, you have no way of influencing how your company is discussed online, and this has a significant impact on brand image." (Informant 6)

> *"As a brand I would show gratitude by, for example, commenting on the video on behalf of the brand, saying thank you. Thank you for this review. Whether it's negative or positive, there should be that sense of community."* (Informant 2)

When it comes to credibility, it's no surprise that consumers tend to trust other consumers more. In fact, a consumer is more likely to trust a friend's recommendation over that of a content creator or influencer, as the emotional connection between friends naturally harbours greater trust. This aligns with Hamilton et al., (2021) theory about *proximal influence* (close companions) and *distal influence* (content creator or influencer).

> *"People tend to trust the word of someone like that more. For example, if I tell my friends that something is really good, they are likely to trust my word significantly more than that of an influencer, because we have an emotional connection."* (Informant 6)

Contrary to the quote above, influencers can also build credibility and even take a friend's role when sharing recommendations or other content. Informant 2 emphasizes that there are certain social media influencers (SMIs) such as Jeffree Star that have earned their place as a key opinion leader through his honestly. She explains that people often tag on his posts brands that need "Jeffree Star review", which he then reviews. Therefore, it's possible for bigger influencers to establish themselves as a trusted source of information.

> *"If it's a specific influencer—for example, I follow Jeffree Star, who is a really big makeup influencer. He has this 'Jeffree Star Review' thing where people tag products and brands in his comments, saying, 'This needs a Jeffree Star review.' Then, as far as I know, he reviews that product for free. Also, he's such a*

> *big influencer that he doesn't really need those kinds of collaborations where he would get paid to do the review. As far as I know, he's very honest about these things. I've learned to interpret it myself because I watch a lot of social media. Not everyone notices whether it's paid or not."* (Informant 2).

The increasing amount of commercial content on social media combined with critical consumers highlights the need for authentic organic content. There is also an ethical issue where it's difficult to recognize the difference between commercial and organic unpaid content. This distinction is a critical component of consumer decision-making, which relies heavily on trust and transparency. When consumers cannot easily discern whether content is sponsored or genuine, it undermines their ability to make informed choices. According to the Consumer Protection Act, marketing must clearly disclose its commercial purpose as well as on whose behalf the marketing is being conducted (Kilpailu- ja kuluttajavirasto, 2025).

> *"Yes, and that's exactly why the Council of Ethics in Advertising emphasizes transparency, because brands send out a lot of various products to people, and now there's a big discussion about where the line is between a private individual and an influencer or whether content is an ad or not."* (Informant 1).

> *"If there's a PR event, what they post from it has to be marked as an advertisement, and this has traditionally been a bit challenging for them. It feels nicer to label it as a PR event because it doesn't seem as heavy-handed."* (Informant 1)

The rise of commercial content on social media, coupled with heightened consumer scepticism and increased regulatory scrutiny, underscores the growing importance of organic content. As platforms become saturated with paid promotions and sponsored posts, consumers are increasingly seeking authenticity and transparency in the content they engage with. This is exactly why it's important to understand what drives organic content and what factors contribute to consumers' willingness to share brand experiences that influences others.

4.2 Motivations to Share Organic Brand-Related UGC

To understand why people share their brand experiences online, you have to explore the emotional, social, and psychological drivers that inspire them to create and post content. While some motivations stem from personal satisfaction or self-expression, others are rooted in a desire to connect with others, advocate for brands they love or influence purchasing decisions. Either way there has to be some added value that makes the consumer want to create such content as explained by informant 1:

> *"Yes, in that situation, both the consumer and the influencer usually think about what the added value is—why do I want to tell my followers about this? Whether it's about finding their own community or a collaboration partner.* (Informant 1)

The next sub-section delves into the key reasons why consumers share organic brand-related UGC, highlighting the personal and communal factors. Based on the findings of the interviews, motivators contributing to why consumers share their brand experiences are divided into these categories: Performance, personal fulfilment, monetary incentive, altruism, community seeking and social validation. These categories emerged from the coding process with some aligning with previous research (will be analysed in the discussion).

4.2.1 Performance

A major motivator for sharing organic brand-related UGC is the quality and performance of the product itself. When a product exceeds expectations or delivers excellent results, consumers feel compelled to share their positive experiences with others. Interview findings suggest that a good product is a base condition for sharing brand-related UGC, meaning that unless the product performs exceptionally, consumers don't feel the need talk about that brand. Average performance does not encourage brand-related UGC, as it's not remarkable enough to inspire consumers to take the time and effort to create content.

> *"It has to be good. And I'm very quick to judge… I think a product is good when it works the first time. Then I might take it*

> *back if I have an allergic reaction, like, 'Be careful before you buy this,' but I'm very quick to decide. If I buy something and it even just looks good on my face, I'm immediately like, 'This is good.' So, yeah, and then I recommend these products to my friends or followers without hesitation."* (Informant 1)

Informant 1 highlights how immediate satisfaction with a product can drive consumers to share their experiences. When a product delivers on its promises right away, it creates a sense of excitement and enthusiasm that motivates consumers to spread the word. However, for some, the bar for sharing a product is set higher. It's not enough for a product to simply be good, it needs to be exceptional or have a lasting impact as explained below:

> *"If I think about a product, the reason for sharing is just that I like it. But liking something isn't enough because I probably use 50 products every day that I like. It has to be either a new product that I really enjoy, or it has to be extra, extra good—like, I've used three bottles of it, and that's why I want to mention it."* (Informant 9).

> *"If a brand has surprised me somehow such as releasing a foundation with inclusive shade range or just a good product overall, I'm more likely to share and advocate that brand in my social media."* (Informant 10).

Informants 9 and 10 underscore the importance of long-term satisfaction and repeated use as a motivator for sharing. When a product proves its value over time, it becomes worthy of recommendation, as the consumer has developed a strong trust in its quality. Some interviewees even shared that their motivation to create content about a product stems from a genuine love for the brand and its offerings. Even without formal collaborations, their enthusiasm for the brand drives them to share their experiences organically:

> *"Unfortunately, no beauty brand has approached me yet for a collaboration, but when I've created content on my own initiative, it's usually because I really like the brand overall. Maybe it's something I've used a bit more, or I genuinely like their products."* (Informant 8)

In contrast, if the brand or its products perform poorly, that can also motivate individuals to express their negative experiences on social media. By doing this, consumers can warn others to avoid the product or seek peer support to see if anyone else has had similar experiences. As seen in the quotes below, public criticism is reserved for extreme failures (e.g., defective packaging, skin reactions, or hygiene risks), suggesting that the threshold for expressing discontent is high unless the experience is severe or emotionally charged:

> *"If I were to share something negative, it would have to be something really extreme—like a terrible customer service experience somewhere, or a product that was, say, full of worms or something like that. Or maybe if, for example, some kind of cream had a ton of impurities and caused bad reactions for all my friends or something like that. Maybe then it would work as a warning, like, 'You wouldn't even want your best friend to fall into that trap."* (Informant 5)

> *"For example, I once bought this organic makeup product, and when I opened it, the product just spilled out everywhere—all over the sink. So, if I've had an extreme negative experience like that, I'm like, 'No no no, don't even try it.' I also have products I might comment on, like a concealer that didn't suit my skin at all—it dried out my under-eye area and everything. Yeah, I've told my friends, 'This one didn't work for me.'"* (Informant 2)

In summary, consumers are most likely to recommend a brand or product if it performs exceptionally well or warn others about it if it performs very poorly. Average experiences rarely inspire strong reactions or word-of-mouth sharing.

4.2.2 Personal Fulfilment

A clear motivation that arose from the interviews was the need to express one's identity and creativity through sharing content with others. For many, creating and posting content is not just about showcasing products or experiences, it's a way to tell their story, share their passions and communicate

their unique perspective. This desire for self-expression often drives individuals to create content that reflects their personality and style.

> *"I've always loved creating—I feel like I'm quite creative, and it's been a great way to channel that creativity, even though I'm not good at drawing or anything like that. But really, it all started from my own desire to express myself."* (Informant 5)

> *"Creating social media content in general—I'm talking about making social media content overall—it's like a space for self-expression, you know? I love it precisely because it allows me to showcase that creative side of myself, which I might not get to express elsewhere."* (Informant 6)

> *"I enjoy it (making content). I'm a pretty visual person, so I like that you can see your own touch in it, you know? It's about trying to make it visually appealing or nice in some way. I love that it allows me to express myself in that way."* (Informant 7)

For some, sharing content and expressing creativity can be like therapy such as described by informant 5. The process of creating and posting content provides a sense of emotional release and fulfilment, which allows the individual to channel their thoughts, feelings, and ideas into something tangible.

> "I think it's the creativity—it allows you to focus on just one thing. It's kind of therapeutic, even when you're editing. And I generally enjoy planning things, so it's like having some personal time. It's much better to create content nowadays than just consume it." (Informant 5).

Informant 5's experience suggests that the process of creation is more rewarding and meaningful than passively engaging with content made by others. This insight underscores the emotional and psychological benefits of content creation, making it a valuable outlet for self-expression and creativity.

4.2.3 Monetary Incentive

It is natural for individuals who create organic UGC, especially branded content, to aspire to become professional content creators getting paid for their work. This category of motivations is particularly highlighted when interviewing content creators, who frequently view their channels as a gateway to professional opportunities. However, interview findings suggest that even regular consumers can share these aspirations. While they may not yet have the follower count or influence of established creators, many are motivated by the possibility of turning their passion for content creation into a viable career or side hustle.

> *"Sometimes, just a year ago, I started taking it (content creation) more seriously and set a goal for last year to start earning some money through social media. I set up a sole proprietorship and gave myself a clear target. I think my goal was to reach ten thousand followers, which I achieved. Since then, I've been working with various brands during this time, and it's been really fun. And it's kind of absurd that you can earn 500 euros from just one video—right now, I'm here at the office working, and I wouldn't even make that much in a month. Especially since I'm working as a student."* (Informant 5)

> *"I'd say there are several motivating factors here. Maybe, well, from a content creator's perspective, financial benefit is probably one of them. It's also nice to receive PR gifts and test out new releases"* (Informant 6).

> *"Another motivation is that you want to become an influencer or a professional content creator someday, and you're starting from scratch. You need to gain followers and recognition.* (Informant 2).

Although getting views is often linked to monetary values, the quote below demonstrates well that receiving views can also have a significant emotional and psychological impact. For many creators, the act of seeing their content resonate with a wider audience, whether through views, comments, or shares can create a sense of validation, accomplishment, and connection.

> *"Well, the best part is definitely the views, especially on TikTok. I don't have a huge number of followers—just 1,500—but when a video catches on the For You Page, thanks to the algorithm, and starts getting views, comments—whether positive or negative—and people notice my video, save it, and share it, it feels really good".* (Informant 2)

The desire for professional growth is also a significant motive according to the interview findings. In addition to using content creation as a means of self-expression or growing a follower base, it also works as a portfolio. A content creator can use their portfolio to showcase their creative side and, in a way, use it as a sample of their work. Content can thus serve as a reference, for example, for potential brand collaborations. It could also be a way to test your own skills such as explained by informant 5.

> *"Then maybe you also want to grow your portfolio even if it means doing things for free, for example, because you want to find collaboration partners. And if a potential client comes along, you can show them, 'Hey, I can do this kind of thing too,' and through that, showcase your skills."* (Informant 5)

It's safe to say that although the creation of organic UGC is voluntary, there can still be a motive to secure brand deals and, more broadly, to attract the attention of brands. For example, making content about your favourite brand that you're passionate about can serve as a way to showcase your enthusiasm and creativity, potentially catching the brand's eye. This happened to one of the informants of this study that got contacted by their favourite brand just by showing genuine appreciation for their product.

> *"The biggest example is that I absolutely loved Clinique's Black Honey lip gloss, so I made a couple of videos about it. They ended up emailing me, saying, 'Hey, can we use your videos? They're really cool.' I didn't really think about getting their attention, but of course, I sometimes thought, 'Hey, it would be nice if they saw my videos.' But that's not really the main point of my content—I mostly do it for fun. I won't deny that I*

sometimes think it would be nice to tag them so they'd see it and who knows maybe even collab in the future" (Informant 3).

4.2.4 Altruism

If a brand proves to perform well, as social beings, consumers tend to share that with their friends or network. Many interviewees linked their motivation to share to a desire to help others, as it made them feel good. This altruistic drive reflects the natural human tendency to share positive experiences, especially when they believe it can help others make more informed purchasing decisions (Keller, 2007). One interviewee explained how their excitement about a product's performance led them to share it on TikTok:

> *"Mostly, I'd say if it's a really good product, I feel like it's the same as recommending it to a friend. I'm like, 'Hey, wow, I've been using this hair product, and it's super good.' I get the same feeling, like, 'Wow, I want to post this on TikTok so maybe someone else can benefit from it too. Maybe I can get something out of it, so I want to buy it and share it there."* (Informant 9)

This demonstrates how personal satisfaction with a product can translate into a desire to help others discover it. The interviewee's enthusiasm stems from their own positive experience, which they want to share with their audience, creating a sense of community and mutual benefit. For some, the act of sharing helpful content is deeply fulfilling, as it allows them to make a positive impact on others' lives. As one interviewee explained:

> *"I share tutorials and beauty tips purely out of my genuine interest in beauty and because it brings me joy to share something with my group and viewers that they might also find amazing."* (Informant 2)

The quote above highlights how the joy of helping others can be a powerful motivator. The interviewee derives happiness not just from creating content but from knowing that their recommendations or advice might benefit someone else. Similarly, couple of interviewees described the sense of accomplishment they feel when their content resonates with others:

> *"Yeah, it feels really good, especially if I've come up with a content idea myself and it's genuinely my own—not copied from anywhere—and I've shared it because it's good. It gives me a sense that I've done something meaningful, and then people talk about it in a positive way."* (Informant 2)

> *"If I've seen a product that works well for me, I'm always eager to recommend it to my friends or even share it on social media with my followers. Something about helping others find a good product makes me feel good. When someone tells me, 'Thank you so much for telling me about this product,' I always get excited and happy."* (Informant 10)

The sense of making a difference is a recurring theme among interviewees. When their recommendations lead to positive outcomes, such as someone trying and loving a product, it reinforces their motivation to continue sharing. Receiving positive feedback and being talked about in a positive way can have a validating effect and even be addictive as one informant noted:

> *"I'm surprised, but it often gives me a really good feeling or maybe even boosts my motivation. Like, I genuinely recommend something, and someone actually buys it or does something based on that recommendation. Maybe I can keep recommending things in the future because it really has an impact. It's kind of addictive in a way."* (Informant 6)

The emotional reward of helping others is further emphasized by the interviewees' reactions to positive feedback. Knowing that their recommendations have made a difference creates a sense of responsibility and pride. The motivation to help others is deeply personal and rooted in their own experiences. As one interviewee explained, their recommendations come from a place of genuine enthusiasm and a desire to share what has worked for them:

> *"It feels really good—I don't know, it's just nice because when you recommend a product, and someone comments on my video saying, 'No way, I'm going to try this,' it gives me a bit of a feeling like, 'Now I'm responsible for someone spending their money on this."* (Informant 9)

> *"It feels like it comes directly from the fact that I have a sincere intention—I like this, and if someone is looking for a specific product and I know I have something that has worked for me, naturally, I want to recommend it. I also like to ask afterward if it worked, and maybe if they mention that it was really good, it feels like I've succeeded."* (Informant 3)

In summary, the social aspect of helping others cannot be overlooked. Whether driven by the joy of making a positive impact, the satisfaction of receiving gratitude, or the sense of responsibility that comes with influencing others' choices, this altruistic drive reflects the human need to connect and contribute. As informant 8 insightfully summarized:

> *"Like with regular consumers, it's just that I think this is a nice product, and I want to show it or say, 'I tried this new lipstick. Have you noticed this?' And then there's that social aspect to it." (Informant 8)*

4.2.5 Community Seeking

It's quite common for people to share their passion for something online to find similar like-minded individuals. It could be a hobby, a specific interest, or a shared love for a particular brand or product. For many, social media platforms like TikTok serve as a digital meeting place where they can connect with others who share their enthusiasm. The sense of belonging to a community not only validates their interests but also encourages them to create and share content that resonates with others. Communities are important for brands as they provide valuable insights to what community members are talking about and what's important for them at a given time. By actively engaging with community members, brands can further increase brand loyalty and create meaningful connections. One of the expert interviewees articulated the importance of community members as follows:

> *"So, community is what we always emphasize—that people want to belong to something and be part of something. That's the driving force behind being an active participant, and it's essentially how all Facebook groups get started. There's one*

person who creates the group, starts generating content, and initiates discussions. Gradually, it evolves to the point where you no longer have to be the one constantly asking questions. When people start commenting, and you have a good community, an active community, it becomes self-sustaining. That's why we prefer talking about communities rather than customers or consumers. Because it's the community members who comment on your TikTok videos when you ask them, well, anything—like, 'How do you like to eat your food?' or 'What's your favorite thing?' They are the ones engaging with your content; they're your community members, not necessarily the people who come in daily as customers" (Informant 4).

Another expert informant highlighted how consumers are tired of seeing traditional advertisements and have lost their appeal, prompting a shift toward more meaningful, community-driven interactions. The importance of community is emphasized, particularly in the context of social media and content creation. In the current global state of recession, uncertainty and political instability, people increasingly seek sources of happiness and a sense of belonging, even if it's through digital platforms like social media. This desire for community is not only a motivator for consumers but also for creators of UGC as the feeling of being part of a group inspires them to produce content that resonates with and strengthens these connections.

"So, it's really significant (communities), especially nowadays, as the sense of community is being sought after more and more. As you mentioned earlier, people are so tired of regular advertisements and don't bother watching them anymore. Instead, there's a growing desire for something more, especially in the current global situation and state of the world. People want to feel like they're part of a community in some way. And even if it's not physically, at least on social media, we're part of this kind of group. So, the sense of community is a really important aspect there. And also, for those who create user-generated content, the sense of community is the very motivation to create it." (Informant 8)

Shared interests and passions serve as a foundation for community-seeking behaviour. Informant 1 emphasizes the two-way nature of content creation: People share content not only because they enjoy the topic but also because they recognize its value to their audience. This mutual interest creates a sense of belonging and connection, as both the creator and the audience feel understood and supported within the community. The act of sharing becomes a way to strengthen these bonds, reinforcing the idea that community-seeking is deeply tied to shared identities and interests.

> "*For example, I really enjoy sauna and ice swimming, so I know that my followers are very interested in that, and they also want to hear about all the new, beautiful ice saunas. In the same way, I also like to publish content related to it because I know I can help others with it, and I know there are many among my followers who are interested in the same topic.*" (Informant 1)

Relatability is also a strong factor affecting the need to seek a community. Informant 3 highlights how common interests and cultural context (e.g., being from a small country like Finland) create a sense of unity and belonging. The desire to "belong somewhere" is a powerful motivator, as it not only satisfies a social need but also strengthens personal connections. The informant's experience of making friends through shared interests further illustrates how community-seeking transcends mere content consumption, evolving into meaningful relationships:

> *"Yeah, and then I feel like others can relate, not just to fashion stuff but in general, to someone who likes similar things. That you find people like me. I feel like Finland, in particular, connects people a lot because it's a small country. And I've actually made a lot of friends from people who are interested in the same things as me, which is really nice because they share the same ways of thinking. It's just nice to belong somewhere."* (Informant 3).

Most informants emphasize the social benefits of content creation, particularly the ability to build and maintain relationships. Sharing content is not just about self-expression but also about creating opportunities for interaction and connection. The informant 6's focus on "engagement" and

"relationships" suggests that the social validation and sense of belonging derived from these interactions are key motivators. This aligns with the idea that community-seeking is driven by the desire for social recognition and connection. The act of creating content is linked to the broader goal of building a community, highlighting how social connections and the sense of contributing to a collective identity drive participation:

> *"Maybe from a social perspective, there's the experience behind it that by sharing content, you've gained engagement or, in some way, created something. Connections, or so-called relationships with certain people, who might then be connected to me."* (Informant 6)

> *"In some way, it has perhaps strengthened certain kinds of social relationships, so definitely the social aspect, the social benefit. Connections, creating a community, that's a motivator there."* (Informant 6)

Seeking a community can happen in different ways. In the context of social media, it can happen systematically through posting certain type of content and therefore attracting people interested in this specific content due to recommendation algorithm. Informant 5 emphasizes the importance of aligning content with the interests and needs of a specific group, in this case, young women. The feedback loop, where audience engagement and positive messages validate the creator's efforts, demonstrates how community-seeking is not just about building an audience but also about creating meaningful impact. Helping and receiving gratitude underscores the emotional and social rewards of a community that shares common values and interests. This aligns with the idea that targeted content creation strengthens the bond between creators and their audiences, making the community feel more personal:

> *"I want young women to be my target audience, and I defined this by publishing a certain type of content. When I achieved this, it felt really nice, and when I get questions and such, I really enjoy feeling like I've somehow been able to help improve someone's life. Some people have even sent me messages saying, 'Hey, this helped me,' and that's really rewarding."* (Informant 5)

A loyal community can act as a safety net during challenges, defending the creator and maintaining trust. This protective aspect of community underscores its practical value, as it provides creators with resilience in the face of criticism or mistakes. Informant 4 highlights this and points out the snowball effect of engagement, where even small interactions (e.g., comments) can lead to greater visibility and growth. This illustrates how community members are not just passive consumers but active participants who drive the success and sustainability of content. The informant's focus on the ripple effect of engagement also highlights the importance of a responsive and interactive community, as it can lead to organic growth and deeper brand loyalty.

> *"When you have a community that comments, tags, and shares your content, and then something bad happens, like a setback or a major mistake in your products, it's your community that defends and justifies you."* (Informant 4)

> *"It also makes a huge difference whether you get 2 or 20 comments on your content because it creates a snowball effect that just keeps growing. If you don't have a community, you don't have people who will react to your stories or comment on your posts, and that's how things move forward step by step. It's also likely that people will start creating content with the brand's products."* (Informant 4)

TikTok has a unique ability to facilitate a sense of community and connection among users. Informant 9 emphasizes the platform's unparalleled capacity for engagement and feedback, suggesting that TikTok's interactive features create a more dynamic and responsive environment compared to other platforms. Informant 10 expands on this by illustrating how TikTok facilitates connections between like-minded individuals, even leading to real-life friendships. The informant's observation that people post content to find a community rather than simply for self-expression underscores the platform's role in fulfilling the human need for belonging. Together, these insights reveal how TikTok's algorithm and community-driven culture enable users to form meaningful connections, making it a powerful tool for both personal and brand-related content.

"I haven't experienced the same sense of community or received as much feedback on any other social media platform as I have on TikTok." (Informant 9)

"It's amazing how platforms such as TikTok connect like-minded individuals. Because I mostly enjoy watching beauty, fashion, and lifestyle content, I also like to connect with people who share these interests. Last year, I found a friend through a shared passion for one brand, which is absolutely crazy, but you can see the power of social media there. I think people post content not just for the sake of posting but to find a community." (Informant 10)

4.2.6 Social Validation

Social validation is an important factor that motivates consumers to create brand-related UGC on social media. People naturally seek confirmation from others when making decisions, which makes peer opinions highly influential. When consumers post about brands, whether sharing positive experiences or complaints, they are often looking to connect with others, validate their own opinions, or influence their social networks. Interviews reveal that individuals seek emotional gratification from peer approval, as evidenced by the positive effect generated when others relate or express their shared experiences. Informants 2 and 6 explain how seeing positive reactions and feedback from others makes them feel good:

"Well, I'd be lying if I claimed otherwise - of course it gives you a good feeling when you realize 'oh okay, others liked this too.' That's always nice." (Informant 6)

"Another motivation is that of course I hope for positive reactions - if my video does well, I want people to comment that they tried my recipe and it worked for them. That's really rewarding. And since I'm this type of content creator, I notice when bigger influencers like my videos or mention me - like when one bigger creator once made a video based on my content, that was pretty cool." (Informant 2)

Informant 7 emphasizes the need to prove to others their 'trendy' status by buying certain products that are associated with being cool and trendy. This behaviour reflects a strategic form of impression management, where consumption choices serve as social signals to reinforce desired group affiliations. The informant' admission of deliberately showcasing trendy purchases suggests that brand-related UGC functions not merely as personal expression, but as a performative act designed to cultivate a specific social identity.

> *"As someone who's admittedly a bit self-centered, I might want to think 'hey look, I'm trendy too, I like this product' and basically position myself as that kind of trendy person, so to speak."* (Informant 7)

Sometimes people participate in trends simply because others are doing so. This type of social pressure also occurs in the context of brand-related UGC within beauty communities. Informant 4 reveals the psychological barrier to being first movers, highlighting how people hesitate to create content until they see others doing so, mirroring real-world reluctance to stand out in group settings. Informant 7 exemplifies trend-based participation, where observing multiple users engaging with a product (like the NYX lip tint) creates perceived social permission to join the trend. Both responses underscore how consumers rely on observable peer behaviour as social validation before participating, suggesting that perceived popularity lowers psychological barriers to content creation.

> *"Few people dare to be the first and only one to do something. Like if you're asked to go to the front row during a group exercise class or demonstrate moves with the instructor - hardly anyone goes if nobody else has gone first. The same applies to everything, even social media. If your post is the only one of its kind that someone shares in their stories all month, you might feel too awkward to do it."* (Informant 4)

> *"And you can really see it on TikTok too - when you notice some product has become a trend because so many others are using it. Like right now, there's this NYX Lip Lingerie tint that I've been seeing everywhere in content. I bought it myself, and*

> *today I was actually thinking - should I make a video about it too?"* (Informant 7).

Some responses also exhibit aspirational group behaviour such as wanting to be associated with certain lifestyle or people. The quotes below reveal how brand choices function as social signals for group belonging and identity construction. Informant 1 explicitly links brand preference to lifestyle affiliation, demonstrating conscious awareness of using consumption to access desired social circles. Informant 5's reflection shows a more subconscious process, where admiration for influencers' lifestyles translates into mimicking their product choices, with purchases serving as psychological tests of social inclusion ("am I cool now too?"). Both responses highlight the role of brands as both practical products and symbolic markers of group membership, particularly in visually driven communities like beauty and lifestyle. The language of "belonging" and "categories" underscores how consumption decisions are sometimes less about product utility and more about stating social position within aspirational reference groups.

> *"You can see that sense of belonging to a group there too - how the brand represents a certain lifestyle. And the consumer wants to belong to that. Then there's also that aspect of why people use certain brands in the first place."* (Informant 1)

> *"For example, there are many girls whose videos I enjoy watching and whose lifestyles I admire for inspiration. So, when they use certain products, if I buy those same products, I subconsciously think - am I cool now too? Do I belong to this category of people?"* (Informant 5)

4.3 Motivations to Engage with Brand-Related UGC

This section of the findings explores the motivations behind consumer engagement with brand-related UGC on TikTok, with a specific focus on beauty communities. It addresses the sub-question: What are the specific characteristics of brand-related UGC that increase engagement? Engagement encompasses metrics such as likes, comments, shares, and reposts, which reflect the level of interaction of the content. The motivators are split into following categories that emerged from the interview data: Attention capture,

informational value, authenticity, trendiness, exclusivity, and uniqueness, each of which plays a distinct role in driving consumer interaction. By analysing these categories, this section sheds light on how specific characteristics of UGC captivate audiences, foster connections, and amplify engagement within the dynamic and fast-paced environment of TikTok's beauty communities.

4.3.1 Attention Capture

On TikTok, content must immediately demonstrate its value to capture users' attention as they scroll and offer something genuinely worthwhile. Due to fast-paced nature of the platform mostly facilitating short-video formats, it's very easy for users to swipe away, which only emphasizes the importance of standing out. Informants highlight how the traditional "build-up" approach fails in this environment, replaced by a need for what Informant 2 calls "fast paced and straight to the point" delivery. This reflects TikTok's unique content consumption patterns where users make split-second decisions about continuing to watch, making the initial hook more crucial than on any other platform. Both informants 10 and 5 further suggest that standing out visually has become as important as the actual content message in capturing attention.

> "*What I've learned is that every video needs this kind of hook - the video starts by either moving closer to the camera or taking the camera in hand and getting straight to the point. That wavy, calm content doesn't necessarily work anymore. It needs to be really fast paced and straight to the point. Let's say it's largely about getting straight to the point and presenting things directly.*" (Informant 2)

> *"Nobody likes to watch boring content, especially on TikTok where it's so easy to swipe away. My attention span is so short and I usually watch videos that quickly go to the point or somehow captures my attention right away. It's also nice to see videos that are edited somehow in a cool way that you wouldn't typically see on your For You -page."* (Informant 10)

> *"Yeah, well there has to be at least some hook at the beginning explaining why the viewer should watch. The statistic was something like - within just a few seconds, people decide whether to keep watching or swipe away. So, for example, something visual or audio-based, or multiple things at once, or even really aesthetic content works well in beauty content. That certain type of aesthetic definitely appeals to women too."* (Informant 5)

4.3.2 Informational

The most important value adding element of brand-related content is information. Informants highlight how they find insightful content more appealing compared to other elements such as humour, relatability etc. Especially in beauty community's context, people want a solution to a problem whether it's how to apply foundation or which product to choose for certain purpose. The problem-solving motivation reveals a fundamental truth about beauty content engagement: Solutions to universal pain points generate disproportionate engagement. Informants 10 and 9 identify two key factors for successful problem-solving content: 1) addressing widespread, specific concerns (clumping mascara, under-eye lines), and 2) presenting the product as a definitive solution. Informant 9's comment is particularly interesting - content addressing niche problems with no broad appeal rarely gains traction, suggesting an implicit understanding of algorithmic distribution where mass appeal matters. Informant 10 mentions the crucial element of demonstration, highlighting how TikTok's visual format allows for immediate proof-of-concept that text-based platforms can't match.

> *"Some product that many people might have the same problem with. You know, like some mascara that clumps or something. You know, something where many people have that same problem or have been looking for some specific product, and then this is like the answer to that. If it were something nobody needs, I don't believe it would go viral."* (Informant 9)

> "*I think the types of videos that actually contain some useful information do well on TikTok. For example, some people might struggle with fine lines under their eyes, and I know for a fact*

> *that not many products address this problem well. If I were to make a video saying that this product removes my fine lines and showcasing how it works on my skin, it would probably receive lots of views."* (Informant 10)

Additionally, the before-and-after format emerges as a particularly potent engagement driver in beauty content. Informant 9's responses reveal that it provides immediate structure that satisfies TikTok users' preference for clear value (the "hook" mentioned earlier), and it delivers visual proof of efficacy within the platform's short-form constraints. What's particularly interesting is the implied understanding that even this straightforward format benefits from strategic presentation - the suggestion to 'hook at the beginning' indicates that simply showing results isn't enough; they must be framed in an attention-grabbing way. This aligns with TikTok's broader content dynamics where even proven formats require platform-specific adaptation to maximize engagement. The format's success likely stems from its ability to deliver both aspirational transformation and concrete product proof within seconds.

> *"And then I'd say those videos that show before and after results. Of course, there are those that start the video like 'here's before, here's after' - if they have that kind of hook at the beginning, then they work well in my opinion." (Informant 9)*

Informant 2 also emphasizes the importance of sufficient authority when sharing brand-related content, arguing that product endorsements alone ("this is good") lack credibility without demonstrated expertise. The distinction between trusting friends ("close friends") versus online creators highlights a trust hierarchy in UGC, where personal relationships outweigh anonymous digital opinions unless backed by visible expertise. This also aligns with proximal and distal influence theory by Hamilton et al., (2021).

> *"When I consider these content creators - the ones I follow on TikTok, for instance - I would genuinely hope that if they claim to have any authority in this field, they would actually do their homework about the brand in question. They should know which skin types the products suit before making recommendations. You see, I wouldn't trust such recommendations from just anyone except maybe my close friends. If someone simply says*

> *'this product is good' while I'm watching videos online, that's not enough for me. There needs to be proper expertise behind it for me to trust the recommendation."* (Informant 2)

The response underscores a growing expectation for creators to combine influence with substantive research to maintain credibility.

4.3.3 Trendiness

Trends serve as a powerful engine for engagement in brand-related UGC. Findings highlight how TikTok's demographic of young, novelty-seeking users shape engagement. Informant 1 discusses the sharp contrast between younger audiences, who actively pursue trends, and older consumers, who exhibit brand loyalty. This distinction is particularly relevant for industries where innovation and novelty are key selling points (e.g., cosmetics, beverages). The implicit suggestion is that brands targeting Gen Z must prioritize trend-aligned content to capture this audience's attention, as their openness to experimentation drives engagement with new products.

> *"On TikTok, it's clear there are many early adopters and young audiences. Young people love novelty. They use and try new products most frequently because their consumption habits aren't as established yet, unlike older consumers who stick to familiar brands and are harder to convince to try innovations. Of course, this applies especially to trend-driven industries like beverages, energy drinks, cosmetics, or food products." (Informant 1).*

Informant 2 on the other hand emphasizes the dual function of trends: they create shared cultural references (e.g., inside jokes, recognizable formats) and participatory engagement (users replicating trends). This aligns with TikTok's "remix culture," where virality depends on mass participation. The key insight is that trend-driven content doesn't just attract attention—it invites interaction, as users feel compelled to contribute to the larger narrative. For brands, this means leveraging trends isn't just about visibility; it's about embedding their content into communal creativity.

> *"The role of trends is massive, whether it's a trending sound, a meme, or a specific video style. It fosters this sense of community where everyone gets the joke you're telling. Or when others have made similar videos with the same sound—it absolutely boosts engagement." (Informant 2)*

Additionally, informant 8 refines the idea of trendiness by distinguishing between prevalent trends (what's broadly popular) and niche trends (what matters to specific communities). The informant suggests that for beauty-related UGC, success hinges on either cultural timing, aligning with what's already viral, or gap-filling, which is introducing something unprecedented (e.g., a disruptive product).

> *"One of the biggest factors is trendiness—how well something fits the current moment. Especially on TikTok, where there are so many niche communities (like beauty enthusiasts deeply invested in skincare). Content must either tap into something hyper-relevant or address an unmet need. For example, a revolutionary new product, like one that transforms hair styling."* (Informant 8)

4.3.4 Authenticity

Authenticity is seen as an important factor that increases engagement and overall success of brand-related UGC. Informant 8 notes that while product recommendations perform well, audiences reject content that feels "too obviously like an ad," and favour formats mimicking organic TikTok trends. This suggests viewers engage in a constant authenticity calculus, that reward content that minimizes its promotional intent within native platform aesthetics. Informant 4 strengthens this observation by emphasizing the premium placed on practical testing footage, where visible consumer use ("someone genuinely tested this") serves as social proof. Both responses reveal a paradox: audiences knowingly consume promotional content but demand it adhere to the unwritten rules of peer-to-peer sharing rather than traditional advertising conventions. The success metrics here depend less on production polish and more on perceived authenticity markers.

> *"Yeah, I do believe people enjoy watching all kinds of product recommendations or showcases. But if it feels too much like an obvious ad, I think those don't land well. The ones that feel more authentic—or just resemble regular TikTok content—are the ones that tend to perform better."* (Informant 8).

> *"Practical experiences, absolutely. That's what people care about. If it genuinely looks like an actual consumer tested the product, that's always the best kind of content."* (Informant 4)

The quotes below collectively define authenticity through technical and emotional immediacy. Informant 9's description of viral-worthy content highlights how raw, unedited formats create intimacy, with viewers likening the experience to a FaceTime call. This mirrors Informant 2's praise for "roughness" in UGC, where minimal editing and filters enhance credibility by stripping away fakeness. The preference for "just a person and a camera" underscores a shift where production values no longer correlate with trustworthiness in beauty communities. Notably, both informants frame authenticity as a sensory experience ("feels like they're recommending just to you"), suggesting successful UGC mimics the parasocial dynamics of friendship rather than the hierarchical broadcaster-audience relationship.

> *"You just set up the camera like this, hit play, and start talking about the product—like, 'Wow, I had to come tell you how good this was!' That kind of raw approach works way better. Those videos go viral more easily than over-edited ones with tons of cuts. I've noticed people, even internationally, comment things like, 'This feels like we're FaceTiming!' That personal vibe, especially in beauty content, where it feels like the creator is recommending it just to you—that's what gets traction.* (Informant 9)

> *"What I've noticed is that roundedness and roughness resonate right now. Not too much editing, no excessive filters—especially in UGC. It's usually just the person and the camera. Nothing more."* (Informant 2)

The statement by informant 2 below captures a central tension in UGC strategies, where brands attempt to balance commercial objectives with audience expectations of authenticity. The informant positions relatability ("down-to-earth") as the core value proposition of UGC, emphasizing how brands leverage "real people" to humanize their messaging. However, they introduce a critical caveat: creator credibility diminishes when partnerships become excessive ("too many brands"), suggesting audiences perceive sponsorship volume as inversely proportional to trustworthiness.

> *"To me, UGC is all about brands wanting to feel relatable and authentic, down-to-earth. That's why they feature real people. But when it comes to creators who review or share products, authenticity is still key. It circles back to what I said earlier: if you collaborate with too many brands, you lose that sense of genuineness."* (Informant 2)

4.3.5 Exclusivity

Exclusivity arose as one element of engaging brand-related UGC. Informant 1 highlights how consumers enjoy sharing products that aren't widely available yet, like items purchased abroad before their local release. There's a clear excitement in being first to try something, with the novelty itself creating social value. People feel a sense of pride in showcasing exclusive access, as it positions them as trendsetters rather than followers.

> *"You can show something really interesting that others don't have yet—like a product you bought abroad that isn't available here. It feels cool to be the first to try it."* (Informant 1)

Informant 1 continues to highlight that, luxury and hard-to-find products carry special weight in social sharing. Simply owning something scarce or high-end becomes a way to signal status. The psychology here is straightforward: Having what others can't easily get makes the owner appear more discerning or connected. This works particularly well for premium brands where exclusivity is part of their appeal.

> *“It’s totally psychological—especially with luxury or hard-to-get brands. Having access to rare products lets you show off your status.”* (Informant 1)

Successful UGC about new products needs to blend three elements: the excitement of exclusivity, the status of premium ownership, and the substance of practical information. As explained by informant 4 posts work best when they make viewers feel they’re getting special access while also learning something useful. This approach turns casual viewers into engaged followers who value both the novelty and the knowledge being shared.

> *“People are curious. If your video is the only way to see something—like a factory tour or how a product is made—that works. But we also balance it with real-use videos, not just flashy ads.”* (Informant 4)

4.3.6 Uniqueness

Uniqueness of the brand-related UGC can also determine the success of the content in terms of engagement. As social media users get flooded with large amounts of content every day, they are more likely to engage with posts that stand out through originality, creativity, or a fresh perspective. Informant 8 highlights the tension between polished, platform-native aesthetics and transparent advertising. The quote below shows appreciation when sponsored content adopts TikTok's informal style (quick cuts, captions) but still values clear disclosure. This reflects audiences’ dual desire for seamless entertainment and ethical transparency for example in influencer marketing.

> *“The common practice on TikTok is that content follows certain formats – it's edited a specific way, maybe with text or captions, so it doesn't scream 'obvious ad.' That said, it's good that you can still tell if something is an ad or not. When I use TikTok, I prefer that even ads blend in naturally.”* (Informant 8)

Informant 2 emphasizes that authenticity stems from stylistic consistency, not production value. The contrast between curated and spontaneous content suggests audiences accept both approaches if they align with a creator's

established persona. This challenges the assumption that “authentic” must mean “unpolished.”

> *“I think it's crucial to maintain your own recognizable style – not too many variations, or you lose that distinctiveness. Videos should feel natural and easy to produce. But depending on the creator, I've seen highly edited clips alongside completely raw ones where they just talk and post quickly.”* (Informant 2)

The quotes below establish individual creativity as a key engagement driver and reveal how creators consciously modulate their presentation across content types. Informant 5 distinguishes between platform trends (TikTok's high-energy style) and personal/brand identity, noting that even “quiet” approaches can work if framed strategically.

> *“TikTok content is often loud and explosive, but for my brand work, I avoid being over-the-top. Personally, I prefer a calmer tone – softer voice, slower pacing. But for 'my day' videos, you need a narrative hook upfront, not just 'Hi I'm Anna, here's my day' – people skip those now.”* (Informant 5)

> *“Everyone has their own way of creating content. Some make funny videos; others focus on quality. I personally love certain filming styles – how they angle the phone, for example. It's cool and makes me keep watching.”* (Informant 3)

The emphasis on narrative structure underscores evolving audience expectations for storytelling. Informant 3 in turn values distinctive technical flourishes (camera movements, editing quirks) over generic trends. This suggests that in saturated platforms, unique execution, whether humorous or aesthetic, cuts through basic algorithm by offering fresh sensory experiences.

5 Discussion

In this section of the thesis, the key findings will be summarized and critically analysed in relation to existing literature. The discussion will delve into the theoretical and practical implications of the findings, addressing how they advance current understanding or challenge established perspectives. Practical recommendations will be given on how brands can increase brand advocacy based on the results of the findings. Finally, the section will underscore the unique contributions of this research, emphasizing its significance for future studies and real-world applications in the field.

5.1 Key Findings

The findings reveal an interesting interplay of motivations driving consumers to create or engage with organic brand-related content (See figure 2 below). In terms of UGC creation, motivators can be categorized into social and non-social factors. These motivations operate simultaneously, often reinforcing each other in content creation decisions.

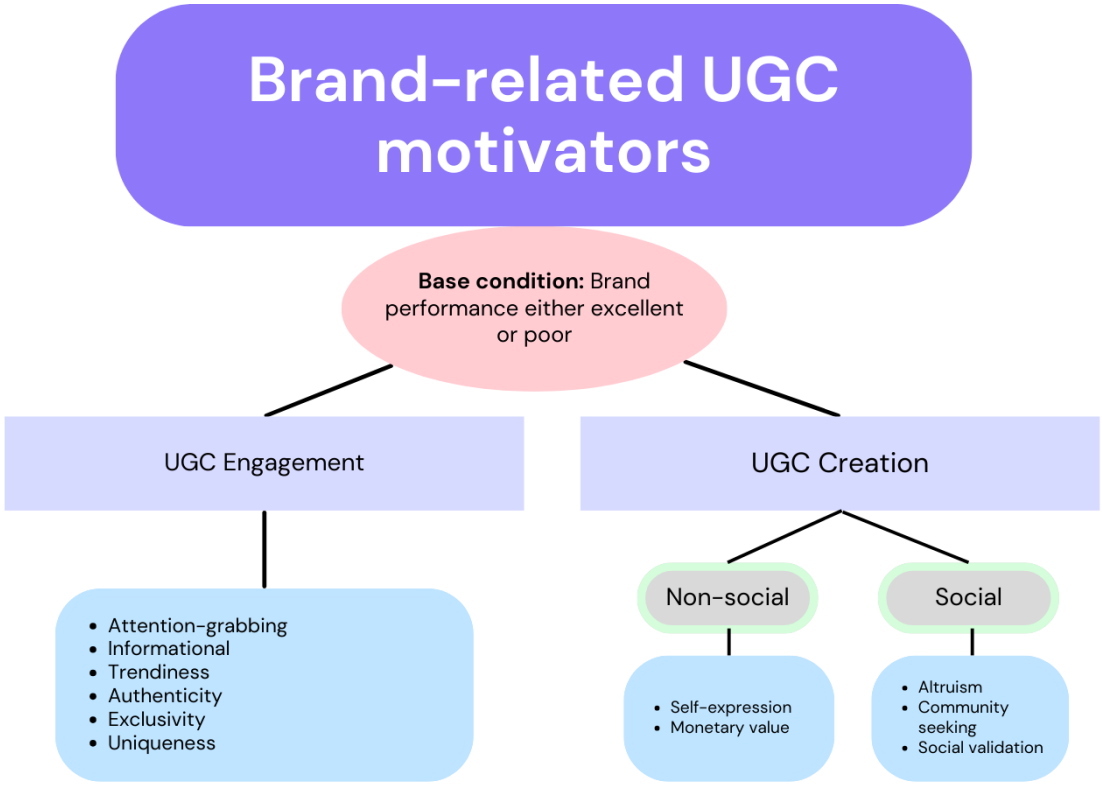

Figure 2 Brand-related UGC motivators

The findings show that product performance serves a **base condition** for driving organic brand-related UGC and engagement. Consumers only create content when products are either exceptionally good or noticeably bad. Average-performing products rarely inspire people to share because they don't stand out enough. People share about outstanding products they love or terrible experiences they want to warn others about. This performance threshold effect extends Hamilton et al.'s (2021) social customer journey model by specifying the conditions that trigger *post-decision sharing* behaviours.

Non-Social Motivations centre around personal fulfilment and financial considerations. Creative self-expression serves as one driver, with many creators describing content production as intrinsically rewarding, providing both an outlet for creativity and therapeutic benefits. The potential for professional advancement and financial gain also motivates UGC creation, particularly among aspiring influencers who view content as both portfolio building and potential income source.

Social Motivations demonstrate how UGC functions as social currency within digital communities. Altruism appears as a powerful driver, with creators deriving satisfaction from helping others make informed purchase decisions. This aligns with the observed community-seeking behaviour, where users create content to connect with like-minded individuals and strengthen group affiliations. The community-seeking behaviours observed align closely with Escalas and Bettman's (2003) self-brand connection theory, where consumers use shared brand experiences to strengthen ingroup ties. The platform architecture of TikTok particularly facilitates these connections through its recommendation algorithms. Social validation operates as both motivation and reward, with creators seeking peer approval and using content to signal group membership or trend awareness.

The findings also reveal distinct characteristics that drive engagement with brand-related UGC on TikTok. These engagement drivers reflect both platform-specific dynamics and deeper psychological mechanisms that explain user behaviour in digital spaces.

Attention capture emerges as a fundamental prerequisite, with the platform's scroll-based interface creating intense competition for user focus. Successful content employs immediate value propositions through visual

hooks and concise messaging, adapting to TikTok's limited attention nature. This aligns with the platform's algorithmic preference for high-retention content, creating a self-reinforcing cycle where attention-grabbing formats receive more visibility.

Informational value operates as the most consistent engagement driver, particularly when content addresses specific consumer pain points. The effectiveness of problem-solution frameworks and before-after results particularly exemplifies *informational influence* (Argo, 2019). In this context, it demonstrates that users approach beauty content with utilitarian intentions, seeking actionable insights rather than passive entertainment. This practical orientation is further evidenced by the premium placed on creator expertise, where surface-level endorsements fail to generate meaningful engagement without substantive product knowledge.

Trendiness functions as both content strategy and social currency on TikTok. The platform's remix culture encourages mass participation in trending formats, sounds, and challenges, creating networked engagement patterns. Notably, trend participation is linked to social validations that stems from normative social influence (Argo, 2019; Cialdini, 2001), where users adopt trending content to conform to group expectations.

Authenticity markers significantly influence engagement, though the findings complicate traditional notions of "authentic" content. Users demonstrate sophisticated discernment, rewarding content that balances production quality with perceived genuineness. The tension between authenticity and commercial content reflects the reference group dynamics described by Childers and Rao (1992), where consumers distrust distal commercial influences while valuing proximal peer recommendations. The most engaging UGC employs platform-native aesthetics while maintaining transparency about commercial relationships, suggesting audiences accept sponsored content that respects community norms.

Exclusivity and uniqueness drive engagement through different mechanisms. Exclusive content leverages scarcity and early access as value propositions, while unique content breaks through platform saturation via distinctive creative execution. Both approaches tap into users' desire for novel experiences and social distinction within their peer networks.

5.2 Research Implications

This study makes three key contributions to consumer behaviour and digital marketing literature: First, it introduces the performance threshold effect in organic UGC creation, demonstrating that consumers only share content when products evoke strong reactions that are either exceptionally positive or negative. This key finding challenges conventional models of word-of-mouth that assume a linear relationship between satisfaction and sharing, instead revealing a polarized response pattern where mediocre experiences are systematically excluded from digital advocacy.

Second, the research advances understanding of platform-native engagement by identifying TikTok-specific behaviours that drive interaction. The emphasis on immediate value, raw authenticity, and trend participation as engagement drivers extends beyond traditional social proof mechanisms, highlighting how algorithmic platforms reshape social validation processes.

Third, the study refines the concept of community-driven brand advocacy by showing how UGC serves dual purposes: product evaluation and social bonding. This blurs the line between informational and relational content, suggesting that brand-related UGC functions as both a consumption signal and a community currency in digital spaces.

In practice, this study gives marketers multiple ways to increase organic brand-advocacy in TikTok beauty communities. The findings suggest marketers should shift resources from creating branded content to cultivating organic conversations by identifying and empowering authentic brand advocates, interacting meaningfully in brand communities, and designing products with inherent “shareability” in mind. Most importantly, the research underscores that organic advocacy cannot be manufactured but must be earned through recognizing the motivations that creates respectful participation in digital communities.

5.3 Practical Recommendations

The findings of this study highlight actionable strategies for brands to cultivate organic advocacy by aligning with consumer motivations. Two key themes emerge: Active community engagement and co-creation. These are

not just theoretical ideals; they are practices already driving success for brands like Hartwall's Cult energy drink, as noted by Informant 7.

> *"Hartwall ran a TikTok campaign asking users to suggest their next energy drink flavor. People started inventing flavors, even designing logos. When Hartwall actually produced one of those flavors, it proved they listened—which made users more likely to keep posting UGC about the brand."* (Informant 7)

Co-creation taps into the altruistic and community-seeking motivations uncovered in the thesis. Brands can replicate this by crowdsourcing ideas, such as product names or packaging designs, and implementing the popular ones. Participation should be rewarded, not just with prizes, but by publicly crediting contributors. Brands can also create user-generated content-friendly challenges that align with current trends, such as 'Show us how you use our product.' Informant 7's example shows that follow-through, such as turning user ideas into real products, is critical. As Wirtz (2013) notes, trust in online communities hinges on consistent, reciprocal engagement.

Brands must also move beyond broadcasting and actively participate in conversations where their audience already gathers. As Informant 1 explains:

> *"A big part of influence happens in the comments sections—it matters how the brand shows up there. Does it engage with videos under its own name? Does it ask questions, cheer people on, or share user comments as part of its content? The goal is to foster an active community."* (Informant 1)

This approach aligns with Wirtz's (2013) emphasis on online brand communities as hubs for interaction. Brands should respond genuinely to user-generated content, such as thanking users for reviews or answering questions. They should also amplify consumer voices by featuring user comments or videos in official content and be present in trends by joining viral challenges or memes to humanize the brand. Organic advocacy thrives when brands listen, participate, and empower their communities, not just market to them. A brand's goal should not be to simply seek attention, but to earn it by contributing meaningfully to the conversation.

6 Conclusions

This study is set out to explore the motivations behind consumers' creation and sharing of organic brand-related UGC on social media, with a focus on beauty communities on TikTok. Organic UGC stands out in the digital landscape for its authenticity and relatability, making it a powerful tool for influencing consumer behaviour. The research aimed to uncover why individuals voluntarily create content about brands, what drives their engagement with such content, and how these dynamics can inform marketing strategies.

The findings reveal that consumers are motivated by a mix of personal, social, and professional factors. At the core lies the performance of the product itself: Only exceptional or notably poor experiences inspire people to share. Beyond this, motivators are categorized to social and non-social. Starting with non-social, personal fulfilment plays a significant role, as many creators find joy in self-expression and creativity. The potential for monetary gain or professional growth also drives content creation, especially among aspiring influencers who view UGC as a stepping stone to collaborations and recognition.

Social motivations are significant. Altruism emerges as a key driver, with individuals sharing content to help others make informed decisions, often deriving satisfaction from positive feedback. The desire for community and belonging is another strong motivator, as people seek connections with like-minded individuals who share their interests. Social validation further fuels participation, as creators and engagers alike look for peer approval and alignment with trends.

When it comes to engagement, certain characteristics make brand-related UGC more compelling. Attention-grabbing hooks, informational value, and authenticity are critical for capturing and retaining audience interest. Trendiness and exclusivity also play roles, as users are drawn to content that feels current or offers unique insights. The platform's fast-paced nature demands immediacy, with raw, unfiltered content often resonating more than polished productions. In conclusion, to increase brand advocacy and engagement, marketers must prioritize creating a strong sense of community and adopting a customer-centric mindset.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample consisted primarily of active TikTok users within beauty communities, which may limit the generalizability of findings to other industries or platforms. Second, the qualitative nature of the research, while rich in depth, does not allow for statistical exploration or broad quantitative validation. Additionally, self-reported data from interviews may be subject to social desirability bias, as participants could present themselves in a favourable light. Finally, the evolving nature of TikTok's algorithm and trends means that some observations may become less relevant over time.

Directions for future research

Future studies could expand on this research by exploring beauty-related UGC across different social platforms, such as Instagram or YouTube, to compare platform-specific dynamics. Exploring a completely different context such as food or gaming industry could also yield comparative insights about how product characteristics and community cultures shape UGC creation. Additionally, quantitative research could supplement these findings by measuring the prevalence of identified motivations and engagement factors on a larger scale. Finally, cross-cultural studies could examine whether these patterns hold across diverse beauty communities, accounting for regional preferences and platform usage differences.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 Overview of Informants

Informant number	Title	Years of experience	Interview date
1	Account Director (For a marketing agency)	+15 years	17.2.2025
2	Consumer	-	17.2.2025
3	Consumer	-	19.2.2025
4	CEO	+8 years	24.2.2025
5	Content creator	+2 years	26.2.2025
6	Social media specialist & content creator	+3 years	28.2.2025
7	Senior social media consultant	+5 years	6.3.2025
8	Content creator	+1 years	12.3.2025
9	Content creator	+2 years	14.3.2025
10	Consumer	-	14.3.2025

Appendix 2 Interview Guide

Themes	Interview questions
General background questions	Can you tell me about your journey and relationship with social media? What about beauty content specifically?
	What do you enjoy most about creating or sharing content on social media?
	How do you decide which brands or products to create content about?
Brand advocacy	What makes you want to recommend a beauty brand or product to others?
	How do you feel when you see others using or enjoying a beauty brand you've recommended?
	What motivates you to create content about brands on TikTok?
	How do you balance creating content for fun versus creating content to gain followers or recognition?
Engagement	What do you think makes content about a brand stand out or go viral?
	How do you feel about raw, unfiltered content versus highly polished, professional content?
	What kind of brand-related content do you think encourages the most interaction (likes, comments, shares)?
TikTok as a platform	What do you think makes TikTok a unique platform for sharing brand-related content?
	What role do TikTok trends play in your decision to create brand-related content? Follow-up: Can you share an example of a trend that inspired you to create content?
Wrap up	If a brand wanted to encourage more organic content from its customers, what advice would you give them?
	How do you see the role of UGC evolving in the future, especially on platforms like TikTok?

Appendix 3 Themes and Chosen Codes

Category	Theme	Code name	Frequency
Importance of Organic UGC	Authenticity	More authentic opinions as consumer	4
		UGC perceived relatable	2
		Brands cannot control narratives	1
	Trustworthiness	Creator credibility	2
		Less sponsored content in tiktok	3
		Organic content supports paid ads	1
	Value	Sharing recommendations	2
		Added value	1
		TikTok as a source of information	4
Motivation to share	Community	Being part of something	3
		Feedback from peers	1
		Finding a community	6
		Engage with followers	2
		Peer support	1
	Socia Validation	Hop to trends	2
		Negative experiences	2
		Good reactions	1
	Altruism	Feeling good	6
		Helping others	4
		Genuine will to share	3
	Personal fulfilment	Self-expression	4
		Growing portfolio	1
	Monetary Incentive	Exclusive offers	1
		Getting brands attention	2
		Getting views	2
		Wanting to become pro	1

Engagement	Attention-grab-bing	A hook	6
		Quick to the point	2
		Something surprising	2
	Informational value	Showing before and af-ter results	1
		Teaching viewer some-thing	3
		Useful information	1
		Solving a problem	1
	Trendiness	Hopping on trends	4
		Trendiness	2
		Trendy new things	1
	Authenticity	Authentic reviews	3
		Down to earth and raw	2
		Not doing ads	1
	Exclusivity	Showcasing exclusive products	1
		Exclusive content	2
		Something new	1
	Uniqueness	Unique way of creat-ing	1
		Something different and surprising	2

Appendix 4 Themes and Example Quotes

Theme	Example quote
Authenticity (Importance of organic UGC)	*"Nowadays, there's so much commercial content out there, and everyone has some kind of commercial motive. So, when there are still individuals in this world who create content purely out of their own passion, I find that truly wonderful." (Informant 2)*
Trustworthiness	*"People tend to trust the word of someone like that more. For example, if I tell my friends that something is really good, they are likely to trust my word significantly more than that of an influencer, because we have an emotional connection." (Informant 6)*
Value	*"Yeah, and then there are those UGC guys, you know? They're the ones who kind of define what the brand or product—or the brand as a whole—really is. It's through their voices that the story gets told, and they reflect it in a way that comes from their own genuine desire and enthusiasm. They want to showcase and talk about the product, and that's like an incredible asset for the brand." (Informant 1).*
Community	*"Yeah, and then I feel like others can relate, not just to fashion stuff but in general, to someone who likes similar things. That you find people like me. I feel like Finland, in particular, connects people a lot because it's a small country. And I've actually made a lot of friends from people who are interested in the same things as me, which is really nice because they share the same ways of thinking. It's just nice to belong somewhere." (Informant 3).*

Social Validation	*"Well, I'd be lying if I claimed otherwise - of course it gives you a good feeling when you realize 'oh okay, others liked this too.' That's always nice." (Informant 6)*
Altruism	*"I share tutorials and beauty tips purely out of my genuine interest in beauty and because it brings me joy to share something with my group and viewers that they might also find amazing." (Informant 2)*
Personal fulfilment	*"I've always loved creating—I feel like I'm quite creative, and it's been a great way to channel that creativity, even though I'm not good at drawing or anything like that. But really, it all started from my own desire to express myself." (Informant 5)*
Monetary incentive	*"I'd say there are several motivating factors here. Maybe, well, from a content creator's perspective, financial benefit is probably one of them. It's also nice to receive PR gifts and test out new releases" (Informant 6).*
Attention-capture	*"What I've learned is that every video needs this kind of hook - the video starts by either moving closer to the camera or taking the camera in hand and getting straight to the point. That wavy, calm content doesn't necessarily work anymore. It needs to be really fast paced and straight to the point. Let's say it's largely about getting straight to the point and presenting things directly." (Informant 2)*
Informational	*"Some product that many people might have the same problem with. You know, like some mascara that clumps or something. You know, something where many people have that same problem or have been looking for some specific product, and then this is like the answer to that. If it were*

	something nobody needs, I don't believe it would go viral." (Informant 9)
Trendiness	*"One of the biggest factors is trendiness—how well something fits the current moment. Especially on TikTok, where there are so many niche communities (like beauty enthusiasts deeply invested in skincare). Content must either tap into something hyper-relevant or address an unmet need. For example, a revolutionary new product, like one that transforms hair styling." (Informant 8)*
Authenticity (engagement)	*"Practical experiences, absolutely. That's what people care about. If it genuinely looks like an actual consumer tested the product, that's always the best kind of content." (Informant 4)*
Exclusivity	*"You can show something really interesting that others don't have yet—like a product you bought abroad that isn't available here. It feels cool to be the first to try it." (Informant 1)*
Uniqueness	*"Everyone has their own way of creating content. Some make funny videos; others focus on quality. I personally love certain filming styles – how they angle the phone, for example. It's cool and makes me keep watching." (Informant 3)*