What Elements of User-Generated Contents Lead Consumer Engagement:
An Explorative Study for a Model Development

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study aims to identify which elements of User-Generated Content (UGC) and which combinations of these elements enhance Consumer Brand Engagement (CBE) and induce consumers' behavioral changes. Specifically, it explores how UGC can simultaneously achieve high quantitative outcomes (e.g., diffusion and participation) and qualitative outcomes (e.g., long-term engagement with brands).

Methodology: This study adopts an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design. First, qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 12 consumers aged 18–29 who frequently use social media platforms. Using a Grounded Theory Approach, five key UGC elements were identified. Based on these findings, a quantitative survey was conducted with 135 respondents, and exploratory multiple regression analysis were conducted to examine relationships between UGC elements and five dependent variables: three dimensions of CBE (*Cognitive Processing, Affection, Activation*) and two dimensions of social media engagement (*Contribution* and *Creation*).

Findings: The results indicate that *Ease of participation* and *Context Effect* are the most influential elements in enhancing both the qualitative and quantitative performance of UGC. Ease of participation showed strong positive effects on all three CBE dimensions as well as on *Contribution* and *Creation*, while Context Effect significantly enhanced *Affection* and *Contribution*. In contrast, Authenticity and The Mere Exposure Effect, and Affinity did not have positive effects across engagement dimensions, suggesting that ease of access and contextual attractiveness play a more critical role in driving consumer engagement and behavioral changes.

Originality/value: This study contributes to the field of digital marketing by proposing an integrated framework that evaluates UGC from both quantitative and qualitative perspectives. By empirically identifying key UGC elements that simultaneously promote dissemination and deep consumer engagement, the findings offer practical implications for designing effective UGC-centered marketing campaigns and extend existing research on CBE in social media contexts.

Key words: UGC (User-Generated Content), CBE (Consumer Brand Engagement), Social Media Engagement, Digital Marketing, Exploratory Research

Table of Contents

1.Introduction

UGC (User-Generated Content) refers to any content, such as text, images, videos or other forms of expression, created by users on online platforms. UGC is disseminated by the users who generate it and either individually or in combination with other users' posts, facilitates the diffusion of information, thereby enabling effective communication between companies and consumers as well as among consumers themselves (Santos, 2021 & Shetu, 2023). This type of approach, which views consumers as active disseminators of information, has become increasingly important in contemporary digital marketing. By encouraging consumers themselves to be media channels that communicate brand-related information, companies can enhance brand awareness among broader users while reducing advertising costs. Moreover, marketing campaigns centered on UGC which are designed to allow all users on SNS platforms to participate easily in advertising activities can not only reduce the distance between users and advertisements but also alleviate resistance toward advertisements (Kim & Yoo, 2021). Many companies have conducted advertising campaigns that place UGC at their core and have achieved high performance in quantitative indicators such as view counts and the number of engagement actions. However, it remains unclear to what extent these outcomes lead to qualitatively high performance, including increased sales, customer acquisition, or the development of long-term relationships between consumers and brands. While UGC excels in terms of quantitative dissemination, questions remain as to whether it truly fosters deep consumer involvement and sustainable behavioral changes.

According to Hollebeek et al. (2014) and Mattia & Toni (2021), CBE, Consumer Brand Engagement is a multidimensional concept consisting of Cognitive Processing, Affection, and Activation. It can be suggested that comprehensively enhancing these dimensions is essential for genuinely strengthening consumers' engagement with a brand. However, in many UGC-centered advertising campaigns, engagement often remains limited to temporary emotional involvement or short-term buzz, failing to contribute to increasing sustained behavioral engagement over time. Furthermore, although authenticity and trust have been identified as key strengths of UGC (Baghirova & Israfilzade, 2022), these attributes may not be fully leveraged in campaign designs that prioritize diffusion and participation volume. As such, theoretical and managerial frameworks that explain how UGC can simultaneously engage a large number of consumers efficiently, enhance CBE comprehensively, and lead to actual behavioral change remain insufficiently developed. Therefore, identifying the elements of UGC that can be evaluated as both quantitatively and qualitatively superior, and developing a UGC model that can be broadly applied by companies or brands, would make a significant contribution to the field of digital marketing.

Accordingly, this study aims to clarify which elements of UGC and which combinations of these elements in UGC-centered advertising campaigns enhance CBE and lead to behavioral changes. Based on this objective, the following research question is proposed.

RQ: Which elements and combinations of them in UGC that are superior both qualitatively and quantitatively enhance consumers' engagement and induce consumers' behavioral changes?

2. Theoretical Background

In this section, through a review of previous research, this study will analyze the unique strengths of UGC that have made it remarkable in recent years from two perspectives. In addition, this study will organize existing research on the strength of the relationship between consumers and brands mediated by UGC. As a result of an intensive literature review, it was found that following two points are unclear; what kind of UGC can achieve both involving a large number of consumers on SNS and simultaneously enhancing Consumer Brand Engagement (CBE) which contributes to improvement of companies' performance, and which specific elements are required in UGC to achieve such kinds of outcomes.

2.1. Key Characteristics and Attractiveness of UGC

Santos (2021) suggested that UGC is any kind of text, data or action performed by online digital systems users, published and disseminated by the same user through independent channels, that incur an expressive or communicative effect either on an individual manner or combined with other contributions from the same or other sources. Also, in the research which explored the relationship between online purchase behavior of Generation Z on SNS and UGC by micro-celebrities, images, videos, and texts were mentioned as the format of UGC (Shetu, 2023). Integrating these previous definitions of UGC, this research defines UGC as the contents, such as images, videos, texts and/or any other activities, generated by users on online platforms.

Through a review of previous research, it can be identified that UGC has two unique aspects. The first thing is that UGC enables users themselves to act as carriers of information that companies seek to communicate, inducing the creation of a large volume of content on SNS and contributing to its dissemination (Sato, 2021, Zhang, 2021, & Baghirova & Israfilzade, 2022). The second thing is that UGC can lead to changes in the behavior of users who are exposed to it (Mattia & Toni, 2021, & Baghirova & Israfilzade, 2022).

Behind the ability of UGC to let users be carriers of companies' messages lies, firstly, the phenomenon known as the "mediatization of individuals." According to Sato (2021), this phenomenon can be attributed to the increasing demand in contemporary society for systems that allow companies to efficiently expand their reach while minimizing advertising expenditures. Therefore, a new perspective has emerged in which individuals who post content on SNS are conceptualized as "media" that function as carriers of advertising messages. In addition, as the specific method to mediatize individuals, creation of "touchpoints" that stimulate them to begin talking and sharing about the brands, campaigns and messages actively are mentioned (Sato, 2021). Companies are required to design mechanisms that can involve a large number of users on SNS platforms. Baghirova & Israfilzade (2022) propose that companies can encourage users to

voluntarily create brand-related videos through the following approaches: Hashtags, Incentives, Causes, Example videos, Use of holidays and events, and Gamification.
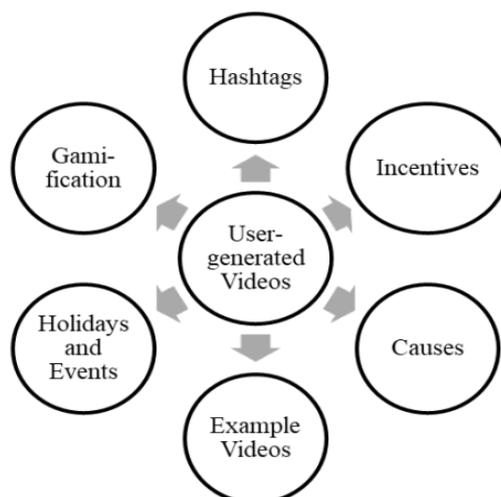

Fig.1. Approaches to foster user-generated videos (Baghirova & Israfilzade, 2022)

To increase the volume of UGC in advertising campaigns, in other words, to increase "touchpoints"with consumers, the approaches mentioned above would be effective in enabling users to play the role of media and to disseminate advertisements at lower costs.

In terms of Hashtags, the "hashtag challenge" has emerged as a campaign method that has recently attracted attention in the industry. The hashtag challenge originated from TikTok, a platform mainly focused on the creation and share of short videos, providing companies with a campaign space where consumers and potential customers can post content in a competition format using some specific hashtags (Mattia & Toni, 2021). Users can easily participate in such kinds of campaigns by creating and posting content that includes the hashtag associated with the challenge. TikTok for Business highlights a hashtag challenge conducted by Simmons, a U.S.-based mattress manufacturer, as a successful case. Aiming to enhance brand awareness among younger consumers, Simmons launched a hashtag challenge on TikTok using "#Snoozzzapalooza" in which users posted videos of stagediving onto their beds. As a result, they achieved over 1.1 million participations by TikTok users (TikTok for Business, 2021). Based on the number of likes, comments and shares, campaigns making use of the hashtag challenge can become trend topics due to its viral nature, and allow brands or companies to acquire new customers, involving a wider community of users (Zhang, 2021).

As the previous cases show, these kinds of campaigns achieved to encourage not only original fans of the brands and products, but also users on the platform who have never got touchpoints with them to participate in, and to increase the number of impressions. Also, UGC-centered campaign formats, such as hashtag challenges, that enables all users to actively participate in advertising reduce the perceived distance between users and advertisements and simultaneously decrease consumers' resistance toward advertisements naturally (Kim & Yoo,

2021). Since users are placed in an environment in which they can participate semi-unconsciously as part of advertising campaigns, they are less likely to perceive the advertising elements, and consequently less likely to develop feelings of aversion, compared with the situation in which they are directly exposed to advertising content created by companies. In addition, as one of the effects of the hashtag challenge, Mattia & Toni (2021) suggest that it can stimulate consumers' interest towards a company and its product even though it does not directly intend to promote its purchase. Hence, while UGC can achieve quantitatively high performance, such as generating buzz and gaining attention as trend topics on SNS to increase users' awareness towards brands or products, it can be suggested that UGC's contribution to build the long-term relationship between consumers and brands, such as being a fan of the brand, using their products repeatedly and recommending them to others, would not be expected.

Regarding the second aspect of UGC that leads to changes in the behavior of users, this study firstly refers to the Social Media Engagement framework proposed by Mishra (2018). This framework can be adopted when we measure users' engagement level toward brand-related content on social media, not simply engagement with the brand (Mishra, 2018). Furthermore, in this framework, engagement is conceptualized as a behavioral construct rather than a cognitive, affective, behavioral construct (Schivinski et al., 2016). It can be considered critical as a concept that enables a measurement of users' actual online behavioral changes resulting from UGC. Users' engagement as consumers are classified into three stages as it is shown in Table.1.

Table.1. Dimensions of Social Media Engagement -Based on Mishra (2018) -

Consumption	It refers to users who passively consume brand-related content without participating. This type represents a minimum level of consumer engagement on social media.
Contribution	This type accounts for the consumer's contribution to brand-related content by participating in media that was previously created by either a company or another individual (Muntinga et al., 2011). The consumers who either "like" or "share" brand-related content on social media represent the consumers who contribute.
Creation	The consumer creates and begins online posting of brand-related content. This is the strongest level of consumer online brand-related engagement (Muntinga et al., 2011). The content generated by the consumer may function as the stimulus for other consumers' consumption and contribution on social media (Schivinski et al., 2016).

Referring to this, generation of UGC can be placed in the dimension of *Creation*, the highest level of consumer online brand-related engagement. This level represents that users' activeness is maximized, and they can influence the development of other users' levels of engagement. In addition, in the same framework, it is proposed that all three engagement levels show positive correlations with Brand Equity, but only *Creation* can have a positive correlation with Purchase Intention (Mishra, 2018). This indicates that the motivation that directly leads consumers to purchase products or services can be fostered only when UGC is generated, namely when users are engaged as active creators of brand-related information. Also, in the dimension of *Contribution*, it is clear that reactions that can quantitatively evaluate content, such as "Like" and "Share" happen. Although this level does not have direct correlation with Purchase Intention, it would be the factor to disseminate UGC to a broader user base.
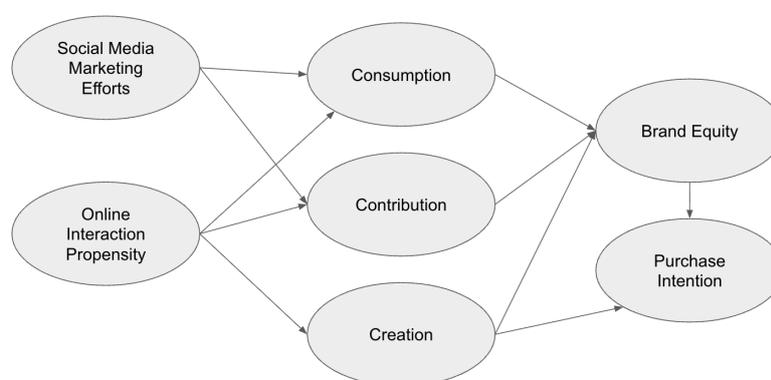

Fig.2. Framework - Social Media Engagement (Mishra, 2018)

-Revised by author-

Baghirova & Israfilzade (2022) explains that user-generated videos can foster a stronger sense of authenticity than videos created by brands can. To sense authenticity in information is essential to gain trust from consumers, and its trustworthiness might persuade recepients to adopt the brand's items into their lives (Baghirova & Israfilzade, 2022). In addition, user-generated video content, particularly videos in the form of unpacking, tutorials, and reviews can ensure that the information is authentic and visually appealing (Baghirova & Israfilzade, 2022). Thus, by providing the sense of authenticity to users and fostering trustworthiness through UGC, it would be easier to encourage them to form a favorable attitude toward both the UGC itself and brands or products appearing in the content, thereby influencing purchase behavior. It can be said that UGC has been analyzed as the factor that can enhance consumers' engagement toward brands. While the role of UGC as high-quality content that can encourage consumers' purchase behavior has been clarified, it remains unclear what kind of UGC can simultaneously achieve quantitative outcomes, such as efficient dissemination. This study explores what elements of UGC enable it to both engage a large number of consumers (quantitative outcomes) and foster long-term, positive and intimate relationships between brands and consumers (qualitative outcomes).

2.2. UGC and Consumer Brand Engagement

Consumer Brand Engagement (CBE) is the concept that enables interactive relationships between consumers and brands to be predicted and explained more clearly under recent developed social media environment (Bolton and Saxena-Iyer 2009; Malthouse and Hofacker 2010; Brodie et al. 2011, & Hollebeek et al., 2014). In recent society where consumers are no longer recipients of brands' information but are actively sharing brand-related content, this relatively new concept has emerged to facilitate a clear understanding of interactive relationships. As the level of CBE increases, the attainment of superior organizational performance outcomes, including sales growth, cost reductions, brand referrals, enhanced consumer contributions to collaborative product development processes, enhanced co-creative experiences, and superior profitability, are expected (Bijmolt et al., 2010 & Hollebeek et al., 2014). CBE is composed of three dimensions and can be measured by 10 items as it is shown in Table.2 (Hollebeek et al., 2014).

Table.2.

|	Definition	Measurement Items
Cognitive Processing	a consumer's level of brand-related thought processing and elaboration in a particular consumer/brand interaction	1. Using [brand] gets me to think about [brand]. 2. I think about [brand] a lot when I'm using it. 3. Using [brand] stimulates my interest to learn more about [brand].
Affection	a consumer's degree of positive brand-related affect in a particular consumer/brand interaction	1. I feel very positive when I use [brand]. 2. Using [brand] makes me happy. 3. I feel good when I use [brand]. 4. I'm proud to use [brand].
Activation	a consumer's level of energy, effort and time spent on a brand in a particular consumer/brand interaction	1. I spend a lot of time using [brand], compared to other [category] brands. 2. Whenever I'm using [category], I usually use [brand]. 3. [Brand] is one of the brands I usually use when I use [category].
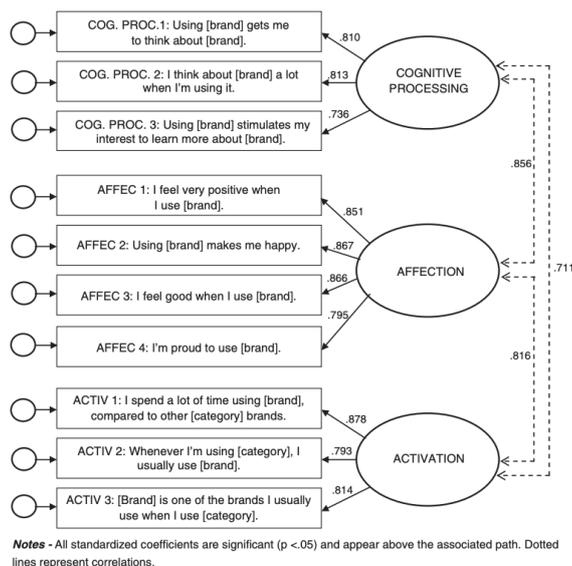
Fig.3. Confirmatory factor analysis - three-factor CBE scale (Hollebeek et al., 2014)

Under the conceptualization of CBE, consumers are positioned as the focal subject of engagement, suggesting that CBE does not necessarily refer only to paying customers but also capture the experiences of individuals within specific social media settings (Hollebeek et al., 2014). As discussed in the previous section, it is suggested that UGC can effectively gain attention and be exposed to users who are not considered as customers by encouraging users to create and post brand-related content actively, and to be the carrier of information of brands and their products. CBE is an appropriate concept for measuring the degree of engagement, as well as the psychological and behavioral changes, that occur through consumers' exposure to UGC, particularly among those who cannot be considered as customers, such as individuals who have not yet built relationships with brands or formed attachments to them. Therefore, this study regards the enhancement of all three dimensions, namely the comprehensive increase of CBE, as the goal of high quality of UGC.

Furthermore, Mattia & Toni (2021) discovered that the CBE related to the hashtag challenge can stimulate the interest towards a company and its product. It means that through thinking about the hashtag challenge, fostering positive feelings, participating in it, sending "Like", and sharing it with other users, consumers are more likely to develop interest in the brand or the product that are the focus of the challenge. However, when the goal is just to let consumers have interest in brands and products, even if users' engagement with the hashtag challenge itself increases, it can be argued that their engagement with the brand remains insufficient, referring to the components of CBE. In other words, while hashtag challenges which can ensure efficient dissemination would provide touchpoints for users with brands, they do not sufficiently show the potential to comprehensively enhance CBE that leads to improvement of companies' performance.

3. Methodology : A Mixed Method Approach

This section aims to identify the UGC elements that respond to the research question and to develop a UGC model that combines these elements, based on the literature review presented in the previous section as well as the findings from consumer interviews. Accordingly, the research design and the method used to analyze the research are examined. To identify the elements necessary for creating UGC that is effective both quantitatively and qualitatively in making changes in consumer behavior, this study adopts a mixed-methods approach. Because previous studies have not sufficiently clarified which aspects of UGC consumers find appealing, nor how and why these aspects lead consumers to take specific actions, this study first focuses on consumers' psychological processes. By combining consumer interviews with insights from previous study, potential UGC elements are exploratively identified. Subsequently, a large-scale consumer survey is conducted to exploratively examine the relationships among these elements.

Mixed-methods approach is a research methodology that conducts the collection, analysis, interpretation, and inference of data using both quantitative and qualitative approaches within a single study (Higuchi, 2011). In this methodology, there are six typical design types, one of which is called Exploratory Sequential Design. This approach involves collecting and analyzing qualitative data at first, and then based on its result, conducting quantitative analysis (Creswell & Clark, 2017, & Dawadi et al., 2021). The reason this study adopted this design as the research method is that UGC remains a relatively new concept within digital marketing research, and previous studies have not sufficiently examined its potential to produce both quantitative and qualitative outcomes. Accordingly, an indicative analysis is necessary to address the research question.
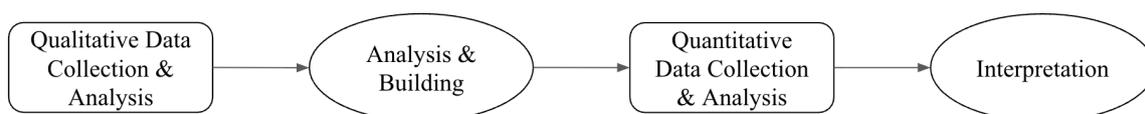

Fig.4. Exploratory Sequential Design

-Created by author (based on Higuchi, 2011, Creswell & Clark, 2017, & Dawadi et al., 2021)-

3.1. Qualitative Data Analysis

Sampling and Data Collection

To explore which aspects of UGC consumers find appealing, how behavioral changes occur through such experience, and the reasons and mechanisms underlying these changes, this study conducted interviews with consumers. To ensure that participants had sufficient experience with UGC, the interviewees were selected from individuals aged 18 to 29 who had previously used at least three of the following interactive SNS platforms that allow the sharing of images, videos, and text: Instagram, TikTok, X, Threads, and Facebook. The reason the age range of 18 to 29 was chosen is that this demographic is considered as a core group that frequently uses SNS, is highly exposed to UGC, and routinely views, consumes and generates UGC. Indeed, according to the latest survey on social media usage conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2025, based on a representative U.S. sample, users aged 18 to 29 showed the highest usage rates on Instagram, TikTok, X, and Threads (Pew Research Center, 2025).

The participants for this interview were selected using the snowball sampling method. Snowball sampling is a method in which a small number of initial participants, who are selected from the researcher's social network and meet the criteria, are asked to recommend other potential participants who also meet the criteria and are willing to take part in the study, thereby expanding a sample (Parker et al., 2019). This method is considered effective for qualitative research in exploratory studies, such as this study, where hypotheses have not yet sufficiently established and the purpose is to understand the phenomenon (Naderifar, 2017). As a result, consumers who met the participant criteria were directly contacted via email and online communication tools, and interviews were ultimately conducted with 12 participants who accepted to join it.

This interview adopted a semi-structured interview approach and was conducted between September and November 2025. Each interview was carried out by a single researcher with one consumer at a time. The purpose of this interview was to explore which aspects of various forms of UGC consumers found appealing, as well as how and why behavioral changes occurred as a result of exposure to UGC, and to identify common elements observed among cases. Accordingly, the interview questions were outlined in advance but were adjusted with flexibility depending on the flow of each interview. Each session lasted approximately 30 to 40 minutes and was conducted using online meeting services such as Zoom. With participants' consent, the interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed after completion, and documented accordingly. The transcripts amounted to approximately 21 pages in total in Google Docs.
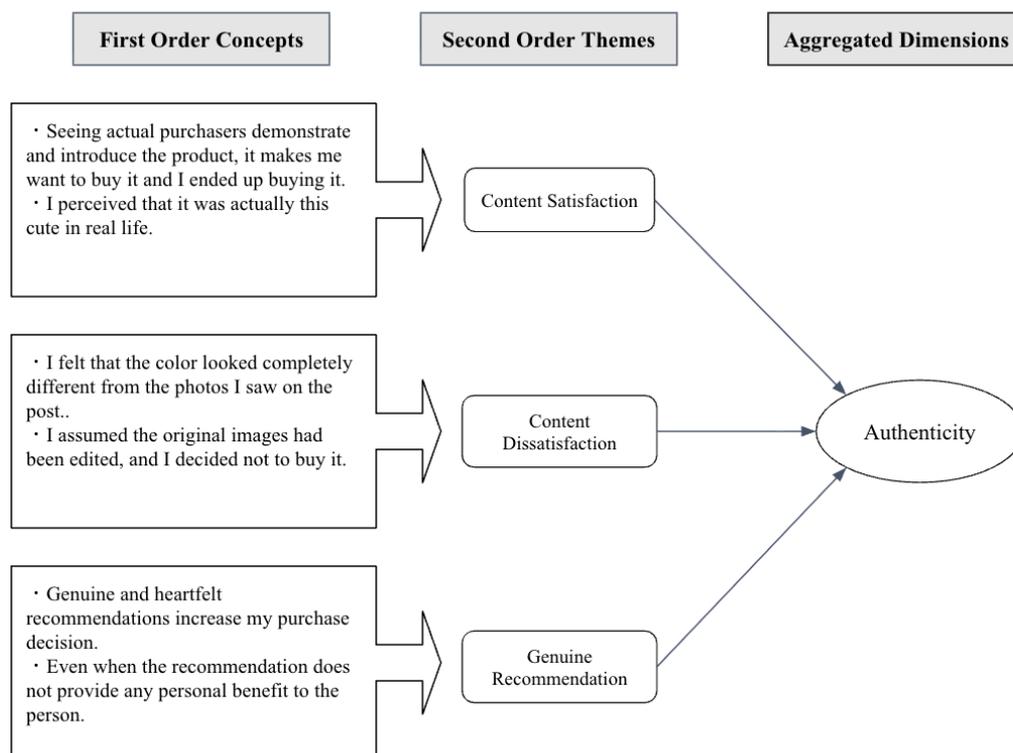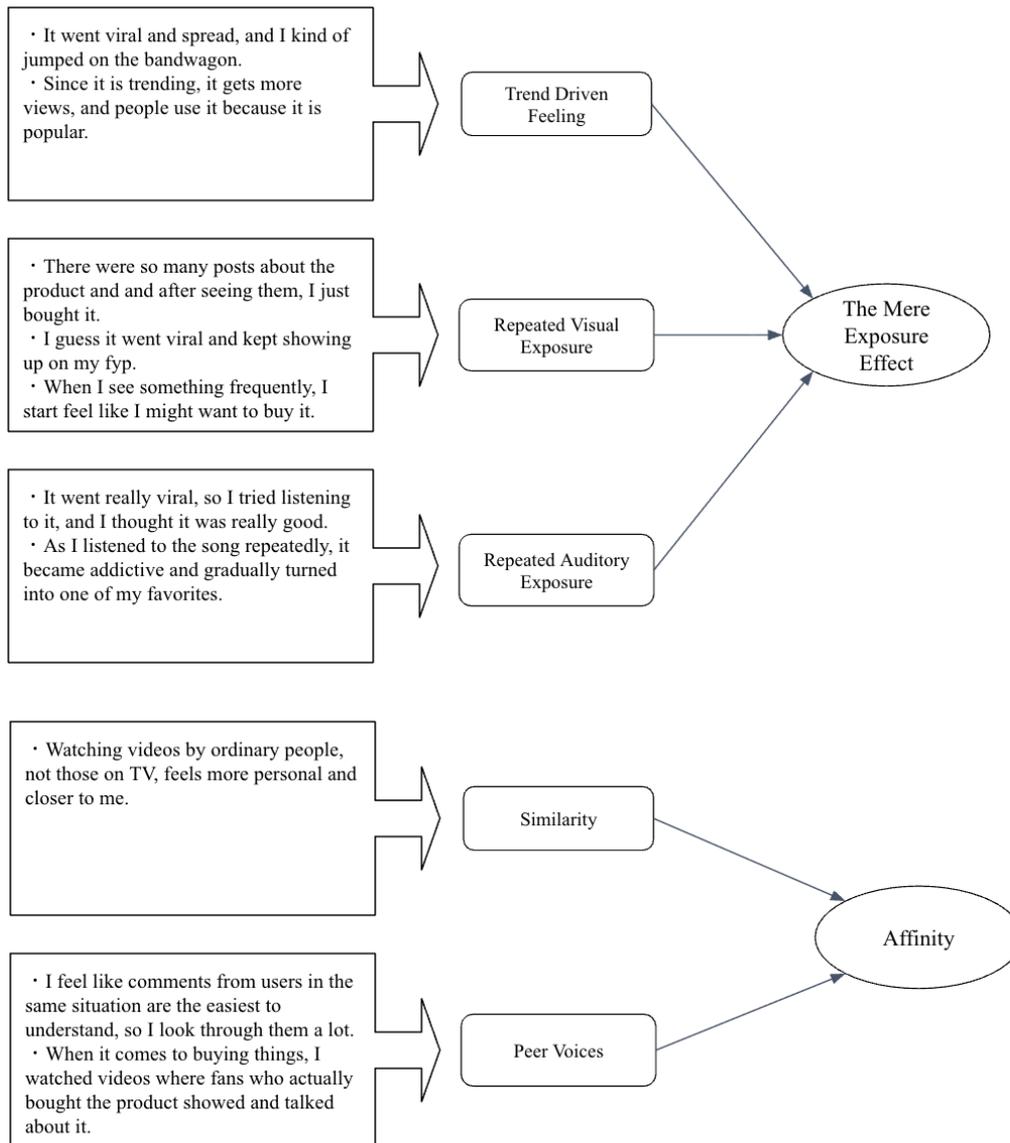
Data Analysis

In this study, based on Grounded Theory Approach (Gioia et al., 2013), open coding, axial coding, and selective coding were conducted sequentially. Firstly, at the stage of open coding, the

transcripts were segmented into detailed units, and initial labels (first-order concepts) were generated by identifying key phrases and concepts. Next, axial coding was conducted. At this point, through examining similarities and differences, and identifying the relationships among initial labels, they were organized into second-order themes by grouping them into categories and naming appropriate sub-themes. Lastly, selective coding was conducted to identify core categories from the emerged second-order themes. By integrating similarities, aggregated dimensions were extracted in order to construct data structure (Gioia et al., 2013). Also, to ensure the objectivity and validity of the analysis, a total of approximately 3.5 hours of discussions were conducted over a one-month with the supervising professor of the seminar and fellow seminar students. Although the number of participating students varied across discussion sessions, an average of seven students took part in each discussion and exchanged opinions. Through repeating this process, interviews and data analysis were conducted until theoretical saturation was reached. This section shows the results of the analysis of interview data based on the GTA and identifies five key factors of UGC that users find appealing and that are considered necessary to trigger behavioral changes beyond content consumption.

As a result, *Authenticity, The Mere Exposure Effect, Affinity, Context Effect,* and *Ease of participation* were specified as the elements that would be necessary for UGC which can lead to behavioral changes beyond content consumption. Below, each of the five factors is examined sequentially.

Fig.5. Results of Coding

・It went viral and spread, and I kind of jumped on the bandwagon.
・Since it is trending, it gets more views, and people use it because it is popular.

Trend Driven Feeling

・There were so many posts about the product and and after seeing them, I just bought it.
・I guess it went viral and kept showing up on my fyp.
・When I see something frequently, I start feel like I might want to buy it.

Repeated Visual Exposure

・It went really viral, so I tried listening to it, and I thought it was really good.
・As I listened to the song repeatedly, it became addictive and gradually turned into one of my favorites.

Repeated Auditory Exposure

The Mere Exposure Effect

・Watching videos by ordinary people, not those on TV, feels more personal and closer to me.

Similarity

・I feel like comments from users in the same situation are the easiest to understand, so I look through them a lot.
・When it comes to buying things, I watched videos where fans who actually bought the product showed and talked about it.

Peer Voices

Affinity

Authenticity

Firstly, as noted in previous research, authenticity of UGC was found to be related to consumers' purchase intentions and higher levels of CBE. As mentioned before, Baghirova & Israfilzade (2022) explains that user-generated videos can foster a stronger sense of authenticity

than videos created by brands can. The interview results indicate that consumers evaluate authenticity of UGC identified as a unique characteristic of UGC in previous studies, and this authenticity leads to increased purchase intention as well as actual purchasing experience. While Baghirova & Israfilzade (2022) discussed authenticity by focusing only on video-format content, this interview's results were organized based on statements derived not only from videos but also from other content formats, such as photos. Hence, this study reveals that authenticity plays an important role in forming consumers' perceptions and making changes in behavior across all types of UGC. This data shows that authenticity of the content affects users' purchase behavior and/or its long-term continuity; "Although the images posted by the official account of the company are not enough to fully understand the details because they are 2D, seeing actual purchasers demonstrate and introduce the product, it makes me want to buy it and I ended up buying it." (T.T.), "Genuine and heartfelt recommendations increased my purchase decisions. When I find out that the recommendation does not provide any personal benefit to the person, I tend to feel persuaded." (R.W.), "When I wanted to buy some cosmetics and went to the store to try them, I felt that the color looked completely different from the photos I saw on the post...I assumed the original images had been edited, and I decided not to buy it." (E.I), and "I felt like maybe I'd only try it once. For food especially, I noticed that the portion size was different, or the amount was different—like, it wasn't the same as what I saw in the Reel videos" (Y.T.).

The Mere Exposure Effect

Secondly, it was revealed that the mere exposure effect influences changes in users' attitude. The mere exposure effect is the observation that liking for a stimulus increases on repeated exposure to that stimulus (Zajonc, 1968 & Montoya et al., 2017). Based on the following statements from the interview, it can be suggested that repeated exposure to UGC featuring the same products, services, or brands, or employing similar formats, increases users' CBE and purchase intentions; "Why I have become a fan of Japanese idols is that […] as that kind of cute has become a trend, the dance was catchy, and their looks were cute, it went viral and spread, and I kind of jumped on the bandwagon." (Y.Y.), "Using trending music may help users encounter and access product-related content more easily...? Since it is trending, it gets more views, and people use it because it is popular." (T.T.), "There were so many posts about the product and after seeing them, I just bought it. […] I guess it went viral and kept showing up on my FYP. When it's not just one influencer, but many different people saying, 'this is really good,' and those posts keep appearing, I start to think that it must genuinely be good and feel like I want to try it myself." (E.T.), "When I see something frequently, I start to feel like I might want to buy it." (Y.Y.), "It went really viral, didn't it? So, I listened to it during my workout and thought it was really good. […] That song was used a lot on TikTok, and I thought the voice was really good. The rhythm was also great, so I went to Apple Music to listen to it properly, and I think that's when I became a fan. I wasn't a fan originally; I first heard the sound on TikTok. It was more like the song went viral, and then I listened to it." (S.Y.), "As I listen to it over and over again, it becomes addictive, and it gradually turns into something I like." (Y.Y.). Therefore, UGC related to products, services, brands

or associated topics goes viral, and becomes a trend that repeatedly reaches users, highlighting the qualitative strength of UGC. As a result, users' behavioral changes suggest that repeated exposure enabled by UGC is a key element in achieving both qualitative and quantitative outcomes.

Affinity

Thirdly, the findings indicate that when the users perceive similarities with UGC creators and develop a sense of affinity, they are more likely to perceive the content as appealing based on trust and clarity, thereby leading to changes in their behavior. In the analysis of this study, affinity is defined as a perceived sense of psychological linkage and identification with creators, which attributes to perceived similarity in values, lifestyles, or experiences (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). In the previous research, UGC's trustworthiness might persuade prospects to adopt the brand's product into users' lives (Baghirova & Israfilzade, 2022). It has been suggested that when content is created by consumers who share similar perspectives, recipients are more likely to engage in purchase behavior. Through the interview, this process was examined in detail. The following statements suggest that users develop a sense of affinity with the characteristics and situations of the content creators through the content, form positive impressions, and are consequently influenced by their behaviors; "Watching videos by ordinary people, not those on TV, feels more personal and closer to me…" (E.T.), "When I see the comment section functioning like reviews, with comments such as 'It was really good' or 'You should go,' I start to think that maybe I should try it as well. […] Comment sections filled with remarks from users in similar situations feel the most understandable and relatable to me." (Y.T.).

Context Effect

Fourthly, the findings indicate that users are attracted to and develop interest in products featured in UGC through various contextual factors, which in this study refer to situational and content-related characteristics surrounding the UGC, such as content creator, the manner of presentation, and the timing at which the product appears in the short video clip. These contextual factors shape how users perceive and interpret the product and/or the brand, for example, by enhancing the sense of authenticity and fostering trustworthiness, which in turn increases the favorable attitudes and purchase intention (Baghirova & Israfilzade, 2022). Accordingly, rather than the product or service itself, the context through which consumers encounter it via UGC has the potential to induce behavioral change. This dimension is categorized as the context effect.

Notably, several statements from the interview revealed that the attractiveness of the content creator increased users' purchase intentions toward the featured products; "Rather than wanting it because it is trendy, I want to put it (on my bag) because a cute person is using it. […] It is like the bag with it itself is cute." (Y.T.), "When I see that everyone overseas has it or wears it, it makes me want it." (H.K.). Also, some statements which indicated that natural and unexpected exposure to the products or services in UGC enables users to change their purchase behavior and to build long-term engagement with the brands or products; "For example, smartphone cases? […] It inevitably appears in the frame when taking photos. I do not think they are posting to show off; it just appears naturally and that may actually have influence." (Y.Y.),

"There are videos made by users featuring their favorite artists or idols, and the songs used in those videos. I wasn't originally interested in that 'oshi' (favorite), though. When I think the song used in the content is nice, I listen to it repeatedly because of that." (S.Y.), "They casually show outfit videos and say things like, 'Oh, this is something I bought recently,' right? [...] It is not the main focus of the content, but it still feels cute." (Y.T.).

Ease of participation

Finally, the findings suggest that the accessibility of products, services, or activities presented in UGC facilitates users' behavioral changes and enhances their intention to engage in UGC creation. It was identified as the only factor that can directly enhance "Creation", which is positioned as the highest level among three types of Social Media Engagement proposed by Schivinski et al. (2016) and Mishra (2018). "Creation" is the phase where the consumer creates and begins online posting of brand-related content (Tsai & Men, 2013, & Mishra, 2018). The content generated by consumers may function as a stimulus for other dimensions, namely, "Consumption" and "Contribution" of other users on social media, which is precisely why "Creation" is regarded as the highest level within this framework (Schivinski et al., 2016).

According to these statements, "Since it was cheap, I thought I could try it and even made me consider creating a video about it. [...] The cheaper it gets, the more I think I could make a video." (E.T.), "Cosmetics are a category that is relatively easy to experiment with. [...] It's not a particularly high-end brand, and I have purchased products from it before. Being able to try it right away was a big reason I did it." (E.I.), "I felt I should get it while it is still available because it is not that expensive. [...] It was not that expensive." (Y.Y.), as users perceive a product to be more affordable, they become increasingly willing to engage in trial purchase and are more likely to consider creating content themselves. In addition, not only the aspect of affordability, but also the aspect of time cost seems to help users' behavioral changes; "I prefer things that feel easy and casual to do it. [...] If it looks easy to copy and does not take much time, I want to try it. [...] Even if I'm not really a huge fan, I feel like I can try it because it's easily accessible. It doesn't have to be a song by an artist I've loved for a long time—if something that just comes up catches my attention and I can do it easily, that's enough. Of course, learning it over time is fun, but if it takes too long when I want to share it with everyone, it makes me frustrated." (T.T.), "There was something popular before that I wanted but couldn't get at the time, so I thought I should buy it while it's still available." (Y.Y.).

3.2. Development of the Exploratory Model

In this study, a mixed-method approach was adopted to explore the factors which are necessary for high-quality UGC, both in terms of quantity and quality, that can facilitate consumers' behavioral changes. Through a quantitative survey, the study aims to examine the relationship between concepts identified from previous research that are suggested to enable the measurement of UGC's qualitative and quantitative outcomes, and the elements of UGC inducing

behavioral changes that were extracted from consumer interviews. Quantitative data analysis seeks to propose the factors that companies can adopt when they design marketing campaigns centered on UGC. Since how specific factors related to UGC influence multiple dimensions of CBE and behavioral outcomes differentially has not sufficiently theorized in the previous research, the causal directions of these relationships remain unclear. Under such contexts, it is difficult to formulate clear hypotheses or specify causal directions in advance. Stebbins (2001) mentioned that when a group, process, activity or situation has received little or no systematic empirical scrutiny is one of the conditions which prefer exploratory approach. The accent in exploration is forever on the inductive generation of new concepts and empirical generalizations (Stebbins, 2001). On the other hand, in confirmatory research, the goal is to test hypotheses. Regarding this method, Kirk & Miller (1986) said that it is aimed at preventing discovery. To avoid overlooking potentially meaningful relationships among variables and to develop a model under this condition, this research adopt the exploratory analysis. Thus, rather than aiming at hypothesis testing, the purpose of this study is to obtain an overall understanding of the relationships among concepts derived from previous research and those abstracted from consumer interviews. MacInnis (2011) defines conceptualization as "seeing or understanding something abstract in a new way," a perspective that is consistent with the orientation of this research. One form of conceptual contribution reflected in this study is "identifying". According to MacInnis (2011), researchers who contribute through identifying establish or make known something that has yet to be established. The goal is to introduce a construct, theory, procedure, domain, discipline, or aspect of science that has not yet been examined or given serious scholarly attention. Such studies are considered generative in nature, as they contribute theoretically by revealing new research questions and thereby guiding future research (MacInnis, 2011). Through an exploratory approach, this study aims to achieve such conceptualization by identifying and clarifying previously insufficiently explored relationships among key concepts, thereby contributing to the UGC-related research by offering a structured understanding of how theory-driven concepts relate to consumer-derived insights.

Through the review of previous studies, as a goal of UGC which can be evaluated as qualitatively high, this study stated that it aims to comprehensively enhance CBE. CBE is composed of three dimensions; Cognitive Processing, Affection, and Activation, and as the level of CBE increases, the attainment of superior organizational performance outcomes, including sales growth, cost reductions, brand referrals, enhanced consumer contributions to collaborative product development processes, enhanced co-creative experiences, and superior profitability, are expected(Bijmolt et al., 2010 & Hollebeek et al., 2014).

In this study, high qualitative outcomes are conceptualized as the enhancement of the three components of CBE. At the same time, quantitative outcomes are positioned as the increase in Contribution, the intermediate dimension of Social Media Engagement, and Creation, the highest-level dimension of the same concept. Contribution specifically means to show favorability by "Like" or "Share" brand-related content (Mishra, 2018). These are visualized as the number,

and then its high performance induces buzz, makes the topic trendy, and leads to high reach among users. Creation is the dimension where users create and begin online posting of brand-related content (Mishra, 2018). This refers to a situation in which consumers are engaged with UGC, contributing to an increase in the volume of UGC and acting as agents for more efficient dissemination of the message. Then, it is suggested that its enhancement has a positive correlation with an increase of purchase intentions (Mishra, 2018). Thus, the three aspects of CBE (Cognitive Processing, Affection, Activation) and the two dimensions of Social Media Engagement, Contribution and Creation, a total five elements are adopted as factors to evaluate the quantitative and qualitative outcomes of UGC. These five elements are used as dependent variables in the analysis.

In the consumer interview, as the detailed analysis results were presented in the previous section, Authenticity, The Mere Exposure Effect, Affinity, Context Effect, and Ease of participation were identified as the elements of UGC that users find appealing and can make changes in their behavior. Among these elements, it remains unclear which factors influence the improvement of UGC in terms of quality or quantity, and to what extent these effects occur. Therefore, as mentioned above, the investigation is conducted exploratorily without fixing specific hypotheses. A list of variables and their current relationships is shown in Fig.6.
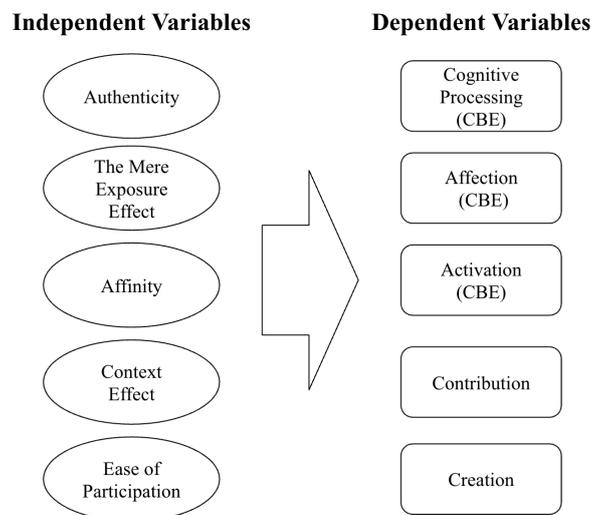

Fig.6. An Exploratory Model for UGC effectiveness

-Created by author-

3.3. Exploratory Study: Quantitative Data Analysis

Based on a survey conducted with consumers who have opportunities to encounter UGC on social media platforms regularly, the relationships among the group of variables identified in the previous section are examined in an exploratory manner.

Sampling and measurements

In this study, to identify the factors necessary for UGC that can promote consumers' behavioral changes and be evaluated as high both qualitatively and quantitatively, ten variables capable of inferring causal relationships were extracted by combining the results of previous research and consumer interviews. The survey targeted consumers with prior experience of encountering UGC. Links to the questionnaire were distributed through the author's personal network, university communities, and social media, and snowball sampling was additionally employed to have respondents share the survey with other eligible participants (Parker et al., 2019). As a result, 135 men and women aged 18–29 responded during the survey period.

Survey participants were asked to respond to 33 measurement items. All items were measured using a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree (1)" to "strongly agree (7)." The 7-point scale was adopted because Hollebeek et al. (2014) proposed measuring CBE items using a 7-point scale, and Mattia & Toni (2021), in their study examining the relationship between TikTok hashtag challenges as a type of UGC and CBE, also employed a 7-point scale for CBE measurement. Based on these precedents, a 7-point scale was deemed appropriate and used in this study. The measurement items used in this study consisted of ten variables: Authenticity, The Mere Exposure Effect, Affinity, Context Effect, Ease of participation, Cognitive Processing, Affection, Activation, Contribution, and Creation. The measurement items for Cognitive Processing, Affection, and Activation were based on the CBE scale proposed by Hollebeek et al. (2014), which has been developed, used, and validated in previous research. For Contribution, the measurement items were based on the Social Media Engagement scale proposed by Mishra (2018), which has also been validated in previous studies. For Authenticity, The Mere Exposure Effect, Affinity, Context Effect, and Ease of participation, the elements identified from the consumer interview data were converted into quantitative measurement items, which were adjusted based on a pretest before use. Specifically, for Context Effect, although the interviews included multiple contextual factors such as the content creator, the method of posting, and the timing of the product or service appearance, the survey questions were limited to the content creator to ensure the reliability of the measurement items. Regarding Creation, although measurement items that had already been developed, used, and validated in previous research exist, it was necessary to collect a sufficient number of responses from consumers who regularly create or are willing to create UGC within the limited survey period. Therefore, measurement items were adopted that were modified by the author based on previously established items. All measurement items are shown in Table.3.

Table.3. Measurement Items

Constructs	Measurement Items	References
Authenticity	1. The post seems to be frank and trustful. 2. The creator's genuine opinions	Original adjusted with pretest

	come across more than a PR-like message. 3. I feel that the information in the content is trustworthy.	
The Mere Exposure Effect	4. I feel that this type of content is trending. 5. I have seen similar content featuring the same product or brand several times. 6. Repeatedly viewing the same or similar posts makes me feel familiar with the content.	Original adjusted with pretest
Affinity	7. I feel that the creator has characteristics similar to my own. 8. I feel that the creator's preferences or lifestyle are close to my own. 9. I empathize with the topics presented in the content.	Original adjusted with pretest
Context Effect	10. I find the creator attractive. 11. The creator's presence or aura is desirable. 12. Because I like the creator, I also feel positively about the products or brands featured. 13. I admire the creator.	Original adjusted with pretest
Ease of participation	14. I feel willing to try the products or brands featured in the post. 15. I feel that the products or brands featured are easily accessible. 16. I feel that I can easily incorporate the products or brands featured into my life.	Original adjusted with pretest
Cognitive Processing (CBE)	17. Using the products or brands featured in the post gets me to think about them. 18. I think about the products or brands featured in the post a lot when I'm using it. 19. Using the products or brands featured in the post stimulates my interest to learn more about them.	Hollebeek et al.(2014)
Affection (CBE)	20. I feel very positive when I use the products or brands featured in the post. 21. Using the products or brands featured in the post makes me happy.	Hollebeek et al.(2014)

Constructs	Measurement Items	References
	22. I feel good when I use the products or brands featured in the post. 23. I'm proud to use the products or brands featured in the post.	
Activation (CBE)	24. I spend a lot of time using the products or brands featured in the post, compared to other brands in the same category. 25. Whenever I'm using that category, I usually use the products or brands featured in the post. 26. The products or brands featured in the post are one of the brands I usually use when I use that category.	Hollebeek et al.(2014)
Contribution	27. I want to "Like" the content. 28. I want to "Repost" the content. 29. I want to share the content with my friends. 30. I want to "Save" the content and look back later.	Mishra(2018)
Creation	31. I feel that I could create a similar post myself by using this content as a model. 32. I feel that the structure of this content would be easy to adopt if I were to create a post. 33. Viewing this content provided me with ideas on how to share information about products or brands with friends or others.	Created by author based on Mishra (2018)

Constructs	Label	Measurement Items	References
Authenticity	Au1	The post seems to be frank and trustful.	Original adjusted with pretest
	Au2	The creator's genuine opinions come across more than a PR-like message.	
	A3	I feel that the information in the content is trustworthy.	
The Mere Exposure Effect	ME1	I feel that this type of content is trending.	Original adjusted with pretest
	ME2	I have seen similar content featuring the same product or brand several times.	

	ME3	Repeatedly viewing the same or similar posts makes me feel familiar with the content.	
Affinity	Affn1	I feel that the creator has characteristics similar to my own.	Original adjusted with pretest
	Affn2	I feel that the creator's preferences or lifestyle are close to my own.	
	Affn3	I empathize with the topics presented in the content.	
Context Effect	CE1	I find the creator attractive.	Original adjusted with pretest
	CE2	The creator's presence or aura is desirable.	
	CE3	Because I like the creator, I also feel positively about the products or brands featured.	
	CE4	I admire the creator.	
Ease of Participation	E1	I feel willing to try the products or brands featured in the post.	Original adjusted with pretest
	E2	I feel that the products or brands featured are easily accessible.	
	E3	I feel that I can easily incorporate the products or brands featured into my life.	
Cognitive Processing	CP1	Using the products or brands featured in the post gets me to think about them.	Hollebeek et al.(2014)
	CP2	I think about the products or brands featured in the post a lot when I'm using it.	
	CP3	Using the products or brands featured in the post stimulates my interest to learn more about them.	
Affection	Affc1	I feel very positive when I use the products or brands featured in the post.	Hollebeek et al.(2014)
	Affe2	Using the products or brands featured in the post makes me happy.	

	Affe3	I feel good when I use the products or brands featured in the post.	
	Affe4	I'm proud to use the products or brands featured in the post.	
Activation	Act1	I spend a lot of time using the products or brands featured in the post, compared to other brands in the same category.	Hollebeek et al.(2014)
	Act2	Whenever I'm using that category, I usually use the products or brands featured in the post.	
	Act3	The products or brands featured in the post are one of the brands I usually use when I use that category.	
Contribution	Cont1	I want to "Like" the content.	Mishra(2018)
	Cont2	I want to "Repost" the content.	
	Cont3	I want to share the content with my friends,	
	Cont4	I want to "Save" the content and look back later.	
Creation	Cr1	I feel that I could create a similar post myself by using this content as a model.	Created by author based on Mishra (2018)
	Cr2	I feel that the structure of this content would be easy to adopt if I were to create a post.	
	Cr3	Viewing this content provided me with ideas on how to share information about products or brands with friends or others.	

When responding to these measurement items, participants were instructed to recall and answer based on content in which a specific product (including services, music tracks, locations, or other intangible items) or brand appeared or was introduced, and which was posted by an individual user rather than a company, and that had left a positive impression or impact on them.

Assessment of Reliability and Validity

To evaluate the measurement quality of the constructs, this study conducted reliability analysis. SPSS Statistics (Ver.30.0.0.0) was used for the analysis, and reliability as assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. As a result, all constructs demonstrated sufficient reliability. Cronbach's alpha values ranged from .61 to .87, indicating generally acceptable internal consistency for exploratory purposes, although one scale showed relatively lower reliability.

Although confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) is generally recommended to assess the factorial validity of measurement items, this study did not conduct CFA due to time constraints and its exploratory nature. As it was mentioned, in addition to items adapted from previous research, some measurement items were newly developed based on qualitative data analysis. Considering exploratory objective of examining newly identified factors and the combination of previously validated and self-developed measurement items, reliability analysis using Cronbach's alpha was considered appropriate at this stage. Future research should refine the measurement items more and apply CFA to validate the factor structure.

In addition, gender, Japanese nationality, age group, and approximate daily time spent on social media were included as control variables in the regression models. Although some of these control variables were statistically significant, their effects were limited, and the coefficient of determination (R^2) increased substantially when the independent variables were added to the model.

Table.4.

Measurement Items and Reliability

Aggregated Dimensions	Measurement Items	Cronbach's a
Authenticity	Au1	
	Au2	0.865
	Au3	
The Mere Exposure Effect	ME1	
	ME2	0.608
	ME3	
Affinity	Affin1	
	Affin2	0.765
	Affin3	
Context Effect	CE1	
	CE2	
	CE3	0.856
	CE4	
Ease of Participation	E1	0.784

	E2	
	E3	
Cognitive Processing	CP1	
	CP2	0.844
	CP3	
Affection	Affe1	
	Affe2	0.841
	Affe3	
	Affe4	
Activation	Act1	
	Act2	0.848
	Act3	
Contribution	Cont1	
	Cont2	0.783
	Cont3	
	Cont4	
Creation	Cr1	
	Cr2	0.805
	Cr3	

Correlations

	Authenticity	The Mere Exposure Effect	Affinity	Context Effect	Ease of Participation	Cognitive Processing	Affection	Activation	Contribution	Creation
Authenticity	1	0.067	0.385**	0.362**	0.360**	-0.12	0.228**	0.207*	0.267**	0.121
The Mere Exposure Effect	0.067	1	0.221**	0.235**	0.394**	0.363**	0.251**	0.296**	0.121	0.256**
Affinity	0.385**	0.221**	1	0.527**	0.542**	0.290**	0.487**	0.479**	0.426**	0.375**

Context Effect	0.362**	0.235**	0.527**	1	0.489**	0.365**	0.609**	0.490**	0.560**	0.310**
Ease of Participation	0.360**	0.394**	0.542**	0.489**	1	0.584**	0.602**	0.653**	0.479**	0.454**
Cognitive Processing	-0.12	0.363**	0.290**	0.365**	0.584**	1	0.646**	0.575**	0.367**	0.337**
Affection	0.228*	0.251**	0.487**	0.609**	0.602**	0.646**	1	0.681**	0.558**	0.333**
Activation	0.207*	0.296**	0.479**	0.490**	0.653**	0.575**	0.681**	1	0.564**	0.451**
Contribution	0.267**	0.121	0.426**	0.560**	0.479**	0.367**	0.558**	0.564**	1	0.427**
Creation	0.121	0.256**	0.375**	0.310**	0.454**	0.337**	0.333**	0.451**	0.427**	1

**: Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level

*: Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Authenticity	135	1	7	3.9235	1.40181
The Mere Exposure Effect	135	1	7	5.0444	1.10389
Affinity	135	1	7	4.0935	1.24526
Context Effect	135	1	7	4.4796	1.38356
Ease of Participation	135	1	7	4.2704	1.28382
Cognitive Processing	135	1	7	4.1506	1.22422
Affection	135	1	7	4.3370	1.17670
Activation	135	1	7	4.1704	1.32702
Contribution	135	1	7	3.9630	1.36539
Creation	135	1	7	4.0346	1.38953

4. Results of Exploratory Studies

Exploratory multiple regression analyses using SPSS (Ver.30.0.0.0) were conducted five times, once for each of the five dependent variables: Cognitive Processing (CBE), Affection (CBE), Activation (CBE), Contribution, and Creation. All results are summarized in Table.5.

The purpose of this study is to exploratorily identify the factors that are considered necessary for UGC to be evaluated as high level in both qualitative and quantitative terms. CBE, which can be used to assess the qualitative aspects of UGC, consists of three components, each of which has established measurement items. However, previous research has not sufficiently clarified which factors can enhance each aspect of CBE. Furthermore, it remains unclear what
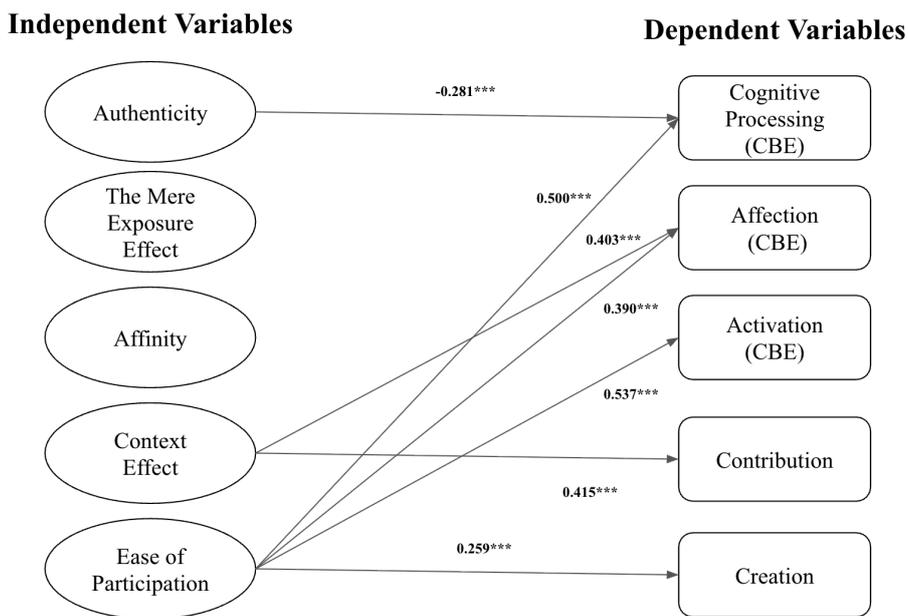
specific elements need to be embedded within UGC to increase activities such as "likes" and "shares" (Contribution) or to stimulate the creation of new UGC (Creation), thereby leveraging UGC's quantitative advantages. When causal directions are predetermined or hypotheses are constructed and tested in advance, there is a considerable risk of overlooking potentially important relationships. Therefore, in this analysis, multiple regression analysis was conducted for each dependent variable to simultaneously examine the effects of multiple independent variables on each dimension.

Table.5. All results (n=135)

	Cognitive Processing β(p)	Affection β(p)	Activation β(p)	Contribution β(p)	Creation β(p)
Authenticity	-0.281***	-0.106	-0.129	-0.004	-0.128
MereExposure	0.114	-0.017	0.017	-0.105	-0.064
Affinity	-0.031	0.112	0.161	0.088	0.226
ContextEffect	0.175	0.403***	0.183	0.415***	0.036
Ease of participation	0.550***	0.390***	0.537***	0.259**	0.354***
R²	0.444	0.510	0.509	0.396	0.292
Adj. R²	0.403	0.475	0.474	0.352	0.241

First, the relationship between Cognitive Processing and the five independent variables was examined. The results indicated that Ease of participation ($\beta = 0.500$, $p < .001$) had a positive effect on Cognitive Processing, whereas Authenticity ($\beta = -0.281$, $p < .001$) had a negative effect. No significant relationships were found between Cognitive Processing and The Mere Exposure Effect, Affinity, or Context Effect. Next, the relationship between Affection and the five independent variables was investigated. The results showed that Context Effect ($\beta = 0.403$, $p < .001$) and Ease of participation ($\beta = 0.390$, $p < .001$) positively influenced Affection, while no significant relationships were observed for Authenticity, The Mere Exposure Effect, or Affinity. Third, the relationship between Activation and the independent variables was examined. The results revealed that only Ease of participation ($\beta = 0.537$, $p < .001$) had a significant positive effect on Activation. Fourth, the relationship between Contribution and the independent variables was investigated. Context Effect ($\beta = 0.415$, $p < .001$) exerted the strongest positive influence on Contribution, followed by Ease of participation ($\beta = 0.259$, $p < .01$), which also had a positive effect. Finally, the relationship between Creation and the five independent variables was examined, and the results indicated that only Ease of participation ($\beta = 0.354$, $p < .001$) had a significant positive effect on Creation. The relationships between the independent and dependent variables are illustrated in Fig.7.

Fig.7. The Results of Exploratory Studies

Independent Variables   **Dependent Variables**

Authenticity → Cognitive Processing (CBE): -0.281***

The Mere Exposure Effect

Affinity

Context Effect → 0.500*** ; 0.403*** ; 0.537***

Ease of Participation → 0.390*** ; 0.415*** ; 0.259***

Affection (CBE)

Activation (CBE)

Contribution

Creation

5. Discussion

5.1. Main Findings

This study provides two major contributions. First, it identified five factors (independent variables) that are inferred to be related to the creation of UGC capable of engaging consumers and inducing behavioral changes, as well as five concepts (dependent variables) that can evaluate the quantitative and qualitative aspects of UGC and explored the potential causal relationships between them. Second, among these five factors, Ease of participation and Context Effect were found to be potentially essential for generating an effective UGC that can be highly valued both quantitatively and qualitatively. In particular, Ease of participation appears to be the most impactful factor, as it has a strong positive influence on four out of the five concepts used to measure the quantity and quality of UGC. Previous studies have not clearly evaluated the performance of both qualitative and quantitative aspects of UGC. Furthermore, the fundamental question of what forms UGC that can simultaneously achieve both aspects, leverage its dissemination potential while induce consumer behavioral changes and fostering close relationships with brands or products, remains insufficiently addressed.

In this study, the analysis identified the concepts that should be referenced to evaluate both the quantitative and qualitative aspects of UGC, as well as the factors that are effective in enhancing these evaluations. The results of our exploratory studies indicate that when consumers perceive participation in UGC as easy, all aspects of CBE are enhanced, contributing to behavioral changes.When users feel that they can easily access products or brands through UGC, they are more likely to engage in cognitive processing regarding those products or brands, develop positive

feelings toward them, and prioritize them in their choices. Consumers who are attracted to products or brands due to ease and reach the stage of actual usage often lack detailed knowledge about the product or brand, such as its quality, functionality, or background, and make choices based on immediate accessibility.

It can be inferred that this initial ease subsequently stimulates a higher degree of cognitive processing. The measurement items of Cognitive Processing are as follows, and it is suggested that the low barrier to engage encourages consumers to have interests; "Using the products or brands featured in the post gets me to think about them.", "I think about the products or brands featured in the post a lot when I'm using it.", and "Using the products or brands featured in the post stimulates my interest to learn more about them." (Hollebeek, et al., 2014). This also applies to the effect on Affection. Having the experience of "being able to try it easily myself" likely allows consumers to continue feeling positive emotions while using the product or brand.

Moreover, regarding Activation, it was found that easy and low-barrier accessibility positions the product or brand higher among the consumer's usual choices. Factors that make trying a product easier, such as low price or availability at nearby stores, continue to attract users both at the moment of encountering the UGC and when they actually start using the product. Features such as immediacy and cost-effectiveness are highly valued by users on social media, where trends spread rapidly. In this way, Ease of participation emerges as an important factor that can comprehensively enhance all aspects of CBE.

Furthermore, Ease of participation seems to be the most crucial factor motivating users to create new UGC, contribute to its dissemination, and play the role of brand narrators. When users perceive that the content is easily accessible and that trying or participating is simple, their friends or other users in a similar position are also more likely to feel that they can easily engage, increasing users' willingness to recommend or share the content. This may facilitate their transition into the role of brand narrators. In fact, a review of previous research has shown that content created by consumers with similar perspectives tends to make recipients more likely to jump into purchase. By lowering the psychological barriers to accessing products or brands, the element of Ease of participation is thus inferred to create effects that promote the generation of new UGC and its further dissemination. Such patterns were also observed in statements from the consumer interview, as follows; "I prefer things that feel easy and casual to do it. [...] Since the choreography is short and distinctive, I think anyone can easily copy it. So, if something seems easy to imitate or can be done in a short amount of time, I'd feel like giving it a try." (T.T.).

It was also found that the context effect of encountering products, services, or brands within UGC contributes to enhancing affection, one of the aspects of CBE. When users have positive feelings, such as attraction, admiration, or liking, toward the content creator who serves as a mediator for obtaining information about a product or brand, they tend to experience more positive emotions when actually consuming the product or brand. Furthermore, the stronger the context effect is, the more likely users are to engage in contributory behaviors toward the UGC, such as putting "Likes" or sharing. Such contributions facilitate more efficient dissemination of

UGC to a larger number of users. Insights from consumer interviews revealed that even when users do not find the product or brand itself particularly appealing, they may evaluate it positively and ultimately make a purchase because they are motivated by the desire to imitate or get closer to the creator, whose appearance, identity, aura, or personality they regard favorably; "When I see that everyone overseas has it or wears it, it makes me want it." (H.K.), "Regarding Labubu (the name of the character), it's not that I want it simply because Labubu is popular. I want it because a cute person is using it. I like the overall style of that cute person, and when I see that person putting Labubu on a bag or something, I think it looks cute. It's not that I like Labubu itself, but the sense of that whole world or aesthetic surrounding it." (Y.T.). When using products or brands encountered through UGC influenced by the Context Effect, users are likely to experience an increase in Affection, one of the aspects of CBE, because they recognize shared traits between themselves and the creator toward whom they felt positive emotions. As long as users continue to maintain positive feelings toward the creator, it can be inferred that their CBE toward the product or brand is also sustained, potentially serving as a foundation for building long-term relationships.

Authenticity, which was mentioned as the factor that can generate trust and strengthen the power to persuade users to adopt the brand's product into their lives in the research of Baghirova & Israfilzade (2022) did not have any positive effects on all dependent variables. It showed a negative effect on Cognitive Processing. Regarding this result, the perception of authenticity in UGC may suggest a new possibility: when consumers experience authenticity, they may feel satisfied with the information that they have already received about the product or brand, which could hinder the emergence of further interest or engagement with them. In the coding of consumer interviews, the secondary themes under the aggregated dimension of Authenticity included "Content Satisfaction" and "Content Dissatisfaction," which also support this inference.

On the other hand, it should be noted that the sample size was limited to 135 participants with aged 18–29, which may pose counterarguments. Additionally, Baghirova & Israfilzade (2022) specifically referred to video format UGC as the type that let users feel authenticity. Therefore, it cannot be ruled out that the lack of correlation or the observed negative effect in this study may be due to a gap arising from the fact that the UGC considered by participants was not necessarily video-based, but rather primarily in the form of images or text.

5.2. Implications

This study provides both theoretical and managerial implications. First, the major theoretical contribution is the identification of a key factor, Ease of participation toward leading effective UGC outcomes. In the previous study, as the factor of UGC that enables consumers to make changes in their purchase behavior, Authenticity is widely mentioned. By conveying a sense of authenticity, UGC can gain consumers' trust, which strengthens the persuasive power for incorporating the brand or product into their daily lives (Baghirova & Israfilzade, 2022). However, it remains unclear how effective this mechanism is in enabling consumers to build deep, positive,

and long-term relationships with the brand or product, leaving room to explore the motivations for creating UGC that is qualitatively high and capable of driving genuine behavioral changes.

As a result, the analysis highlighted Ease of participation as a key factor that contributes both to enhancing all aspects of CBE and to achieving UGC's unique capacity for engaging users and facilitating dissemination. When users feel that they can easily access a product or brand through UGC, it ultimately leads to a comprehensive increase in CBE toward that product or brand. Furthermore, this sense of ease can motivate users not only to consume the content passively but also to be content creators themselves, effectively being "mediatized". Thus, through UGC, perceiving products and brands as easily approachable encourages behavioral changes among consumers and leads to high performance both quantitatively and qualitatively. The finding that such immediate, screen-mediated simplicity is preferred and effective provides a more concrete understanding of how UGC can be leveraged in the field of digital marketing research.

In addition, the pioneering aspect of Context Effect should be highlighted. It is not the brand or product appearing in UGC itself, but rather the positive feelings toward the content creator that contribute to the content's dissemination. Furthermore, when the creator is perceived as a positive existence, users also tend to experience positive feelings toward the brand or product when they subsequently interact with it. These findings reveal aspects that have not been clarified in previous research and represent a theoretically significant contribution.

Next, the managerial contributions of this study are discussed. Companies that have conducted marketing campaigns centered on UGC have leveraged its unique characteristics to achieve efficient dissemination of related content within a short period. These outcomes are typically measured and reported through KPIs(key perfomance indicators) such as view counts, the number of related content pieces, and the number of "likes," and often result only in temporary spikes in attention or participation. However, a clear method to make use of not only the quantitative advantages of UGC, such as reach and virality, but also on its qualitative benefits, including the potential to induce behavioral changes, drive actual sales, and foster long-term relationships, has not been well recognized. Therefore, the findings of this study, which highlight the potential of creating UGC that is highly valued both quantitatively and qualitatively through the factors of Ease of participation and Context Effect, are expected to be highly relevant in marketing practice. By strategically encouraging the creation of UGC that incorporates these elements, campaigns can not only reach a larger number of users more efficiently but also generate greater long-term value. Accordingly, the insights from this study provide valuable guidance for all companies engaged in B2C business, regardless of scale, in positioning UGC at the center of their marketing campaigns and establishing effective touchpoints with consumers for engagement.

6. Conclusion

In recent society, where social media is widely prevalent, UGC has attracted attention as a new approach that enables companies to cost-effectively disseminate related content by turning

consumers into narrators of brands or products. In addition, UGC has been recognized for its unique ability to encourage viewers to integrate the featured brands or products into their daily lives. However, it has remained unclear whether UGC can not only achieve mere dissemination or short-term performance on social media, but also foster consumer relationships, as indicated by CBE, and generate long-term benefits for companies, and what characteristics are essential for UGC that can achieve these outcomes.

This study adopted a mixed-method approach combining data from consumer interview and survey to identify concepts that can serve as references for evaluating UGC that is highly effective both quantitatively and qualitatively, and to clarify the factors necessary for creating such UGC. In particular, the findings revealed that when UGC is perceived as easy to engage with (Ease of participation), consumers' overall CBE is enhanced, and they are more motivated to act as narrators of the brand or product themselves. Furthermore, the inclusion of Context Effect was found to enhance consumers' Affection within CBE and increase their Contribution activities, such as "likes" and reposts, thereby contributing to efficient dissemination.

This study has two limitations. First, both the interview and survey participants were predominantly Japanese and a sample size was not large enough, which may limit the generalizability of the results to an international context. Although the UGC to which participants were exposed included some international variation, cultural or social-norm-related factors that differ across countries could influence the aspects perceived as attractive or the triggers for behavioral change. Second, due to constraints of time and cost, the study could not exclusively target users who regularly create UGC or are willing to do so. This means that some participants may have had little intrinsic motivation or lacked the environment to act as brand or product narrators. While the survey included measurement items designed to account for this, focusing on active creators in future studies could give further insights. Despite these limitations, this study makes a significant contribution to research on UGC in marketing. s

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Appendix

Appendix 1. Coding

First Order Concepts	Second Order Themes	Aggregated Dimensions
I perceived that it was actually this cute in real life (E.T.).	Content Satisfaction	Authenticity

Although the images posted by the official account of the company are not enough to fully understand the details because they are 2D, seeing actual purchasers demonstrate and introduce the product, it makes me want to buy it and I ended up buying it (T.T.).		
For food, it's usually just a one-time thing. I don't really go back — it's not that there was anything especially bad. I felt like maybe I'd only try it once. For food especially, I noticed that the portion size was different, or the amount was different—like, it wasn't the same as what I saw in the Reel videos (Y.T.).	**Content Dissatisfaction**	
When I wanted to buy some cosmetics and went to the store to try them, I felt that the color looked completely different from the photos I saw on the post...I assumed the original images had been edited, and I decided not to buy it. [...] I stop myself before I get pulled into it (E.I.).		
People say good things about it, but then you try it and it's like, 'Oh, it's not that great.' That kind of 'Ah, I messed up' feeling happens a lot with cosmetics. Skin is just skin — it can't be helped. Everyone's skin is different, right? Even when they're promoting things or spreading some kind of weird or misleading information, they're just really good at how they put it out there (H.K.).		

I went there once, and then I noticed things like how narrow the store was — information you can't fully grasp from videos alone. That made me feel kind of disappointed (S.Y.).		
Genuine and heartfelt recommendations increased my purchase decisions. When I find out that the recommendation does not provide any personal benefit to the person, I tend to feel persuaded (R.W.).	**Genuine Recommendation**	
I feel like I'm often influenced by things people post just because they're cute or popular, even when there's no benefit in it for them (H.K.).		
When it comes to the credibility of SNS, I think it's best to directly ask people I personally trust. At the same time, I feel like there is definitely inaccurate information on SNS, but there must also be information that people share genuinely because they believe it will help someone. So while how you use SNS is important, I think it's better to use it without taking everything at face value. When I visit an account, I usually look at their past posts or tweets to get a sense of what they think and how serious they seem. Of course, I can't know for sure who they really are, but I try to get an idea of what kind of person is behind the account. If someone suddenly posts just one thing without any other content, it's hard for me to trust them. But by looking at their posts and how they		

interact with others in the comments, I kind of get a feeling of whether this is someone I can trust, at least to some extent (T.T.).		
Why I have become a fan of Japanese idols is that [...] as that kind of cute has become a trend, the dance was catchy, and their looks were cute, it went viral and spread, and I kind of jumped on the bandwagon (Y.Y.).	**Trend Driven Feeling**	**The Mere Exposure Effect**
Vlogs are always trending, so when I watch them, I sometimes think, "I want to make a baseball game vlog," and that's why I tried doing it (S.Y.).		
Starbucks might be one example. Like, "I finally got the pumpkin spice latte." As for McDonald's, Japan has seasonal food items, so I really love the Tsukimi Burger. I wouldn't post it on Instagram, but I might put it on Snapchat (Y.Y.).		
Using trending music may help users encounter and access product-related content more easily….? Since it is trending rather than users really love the artists or their music, it gets more views, and people use it because it is popular (T.T.).		
There were so many posts about CHANEL's lipsticks, and after seeing them, I just bought it. [...] The color lasts really well, and I feel like it's worth the price. [...] I guess it went viral and kept showing up on my FYP.	**Repeated Visual Exposure**	

When it's not just one influencer, but many different people saying, 'this is really good,' and those posts keep appearing, I start to think that it must genuinely be good and feel like I want to try it myself (E.T.).		
Like Hailey's products, it's not even sold in Japan, but when I see it in photos, she takes on her phone and it casually appears in the frame, I think it looks cute. And when I see it that often, I feel like I might want to buy it. [...] When I see something frequently, I start to feel like I might want to buy it (Y.Y.).		
Like on TikTok, LIKE Jennie went really viral, didn't it? So, I listened to it during my workout and thought it was really good. [...] That song was used a lot on TikTok, and I thought the voice was really good. The rhythm was also great, so I went to Apple Music to listen to it properly, and I think that's when I became a fan. I wasn't a fan originally; I first heard the sound on TikTok. It was more like the song went viral, and then I listened to it (S.Y.).	**Repeated Auditory Exposure**	
Of course, the quality of the song matters, but apart from that, there are also times when I gradually start to like it through dancing to it. It's not just about the song itself, but also the memories attached to it. As I listen to it repeatedly, it can become addictive and eventually turn into one of my favorites (Y.Y.).		

Watching videos by ordinary people, not those on TV, feels more personal and closer to me. When it's an influencer I like, I feel like I can trust them more (E.T.).	**Similarity**	**Affinity**
When I see the comment section functioning like reviews, with comments such as 'It was really good' or 'You should go,' I start to think that maybe I should try it as well. […] I think people who post tend to show only the good sides, and I feel like they hide the negative parts when they upload content. Comment sections filled with remarks from users in similar situations feel the most understandable and relatable to me (Y.T.).	**Peer Voices**	
If I see things like the color not looking like it would suit me, or negative reviews, I often decide not to buy it. When I read comments like "it didn't really work for me," I think, "oh, I guess it doesn't suit everyone," and that makes me stop and think twice (Y.T.).		
Although the images posted by the official account of the company are not enough to fully understand the details because they are 2D, seeing actual purchasers demonstrate and introduce the product, it makes me want to buy it and I ended up buying it (T.T.)		
Regarding Labubu (the name of the character), it's not that I want it simply	**Owners' Attractiveness**	**Context Effect**

because Labubu is popular. I want it because a cute person is using it. I like the overall style of that cute person, and when I see that person putting Labubu on a bag or something, I think it looks cute. It's not that I like Labubu itself, but the sense of that whole world or aesthetic surrounding it (Y.T.).		
When something is trending and I see it and think, "this looks nice," I end up buying it. That's the case with things like Stanley, for example. The same goes for clothes—sometimes I see something and think it looks good because someone who isn't an influencer at all is using it, and other times I buy something because I see someone who *is* like an influencer having it and think, "that looks nice." [...] When I see that everyone overseas has it, it makes me want it (H.K.).		
I mean, I said *Kobito Zukan* isn't that cute, right? But if Hana no Nichiyobi (a YouTuber) was wearing it and it looked really cute, I'd probably end up wanting it (Y.T.).		
I kind of feel like, well, if these girls are dancing to this kind of song, of course it's going to sell. I often see really cute girls posting those videos. IThey are not exactly dancing, but kind of moving their bodies to match the lyrics. It's not really "dancing" — it's more like they're just trying to look cool, to be honest. [...] And I guess for me too, through seeing things like that,	**Effortlessness**	

I end up opening Spotify, listening to the song, and then gradually starting to like it (H.K.).		
I feel like the things those girls casually post don't seem like they're made with the intention of going viral. Rather than being overly produced, something natural and authentic seems to be liked by everyone and spread easily. For example, with brands like Rhode, they're not constantly doing highly polished studio shoots. Instead, it's more like they're casually filming moments while traveling, or just wearing a swimsuit and applying lip product in a natural, everyday situation. They are so natural and easy to imagine (H.K.).	**Randomness**	
For example, smartphone cases? [...] It inevitably appears in the frame when taking photos. I do not think they are posting to show off; it just appears naturally and that may actually have influence (Y.Y.).		
There are videos made by users featuring their favorite artists or idols, and the songs used in those videos. I wasn't originally interested in that 'oshi' (favorite), though. When I think the song used in the content is nice, I listen to it repeatedly because of that (S.Y.).	**Unexpected Exposure**	
Like Hannah-chan, they casually show outfit videos and say things like, 'Oh, this is something I bought recently,'		

right? [...] It is not the main focus of the content, but it still feels cute (Y.T.).		
I don't really feel that way about expensive products, but more about the affordable ones you can find at drugstores or Korean brands that are relatively cheap. Since it was cheap, I thought I could try it and even made me consider creating a video about it. [...] The cheaper it gets, the more I think I could make a video (E.T.).	**Affordability**	**Ease of participation**
Like those super "baby-faced" cream blushes. [...] I've saved things like shoes and bags like this before, but to be honest, I've never actually bought them. But cosmetics are a category that is relatively easy to experiment with. [...] It's not a particularly high-end brand, and I have purchased products from it before. Being able to try it right away was a big reason I did it (E.I.).	**Immediate Trialability**	
I prefer things that feel easy and casual to do. Of course, if I manage to do something really difficult, it feels very rewarding and makes me want to try it. But things like that are more likely to come from watching videos of artists I like on YouTube and thinking, "I want to try this." If it looks easy to copy and does not take much time, I want to try it. [...] Even if I'm not really a huge fan, I feel like I can try it because it's easily accessible. It doesn't have to be a song by an artist I've loved for a long time—if something that just		

comes up catches my attention and I can do it easily, that's enough. Of course, learning it over time is fun, but if it takes too long when I want to share it with everyone, it makes me frustrated (T.T.).		
I bought it relatively early. There was something popular before that I wanted but couldn't get at the time, so I thought I should buy it while it's still available. It was not that expensive (Y.Y.).	**Cost & Time Efficiency**	