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Exploring the Influence of User-Generated Content on Sustainable Consumption in the Fashion Industry

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Abstract

Previous studies have extensively explored the impact of user-generated content (UGC) on consumer behaviours. However, despite the growing body of research in this area, there remains a notable gap in understanding how UGC influences sustainable consumption within the fashion industry. This study seeks to address this gap by examining the role of UGC in promoting sustainable consumption practices. Drawing on participants' lived experiences and grounded in social influence theory, 30 semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore this phenomenon. Through thematic analysis, the findings reveal that UGC significantly shapes purchase intentions by providing authentic, relatable content that fosters brand trust. Nevertheless, the study also highlights several critical areas for future research, particularly in examining the long-term effects of UGC on sustainable consumption behaviours.

Keywords: User-generated content (UGC); sustainable consumption; fashion industry; social influence theory; qualitative research

Introduction

The advent of Web 2.0 and the proliferation of social media platforms have ushered in a paradigm shift in content creation and dissemination. This transformation has empowered users to produce and distribute user-generated content (UGC) on digital platforms, thus democratizing access to information and knowledge (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). The accessibility of UGC has expanded to encompass a diverse range of stakeholders, including individual users and commercial entities such as

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retailers and manufacturers (Ozuem et al., 2023a). This shift has fundamentally altered how information is shared and consumed; it offers individuals unprecedented opportunities to express their thoughts, exchange personal narratives, and actively participate in virtual communities (Berthon et al., 2012).

The volume and variety of UGC is vast; it encompasses personal blogs, social media posts, product reviews, and multimedia content (Daugherty et al., 2008). Brands, in particular, have recognized the significance of UGC as a powerful tool for engaging consumers and shaping brand image (Smith, 2020). By leveraging UGC, retailers and manufacturers can gain access to authentic, firsthand experiences shared by their customers, which provide valuable insights into consumer behaviours and preferences (Kim & Johnson, 2016). UGC also serves as a form of social proof that influences the purchasing decisions of other consumers and strengthens consumer–brand relationships (Chae, 2020). However, the proliferation of UGC raises concerns about the quality and reliability of the content. Ensuring the authenticity and accuracy of UGC is crucial for maintaining trust and credibility (Lim et al., 2018).

The rise of UGC has significant implications for sustainability, particularly within the fashion industry. By empowering consumers to share their experiences and opinions, UGC can promote transparency and accountability within the marketplace (Ozuem et al., 2023a). This can encourage businesses to adopt more sustainable practices, as consumers increasingly demand ethical and environmentally responsible choices (Beck, 2021). UGC can play a vital role in raising awareness of sustainability issues and fostering collective action, as users share information about sustainable initiatives and practices that inspire others to adopt more environmentally friendly behaviours (García-Torres et al., 2017). The rise of UGC presents both opportunities and challenges. UGC has the potential to contribute to a more sustainable and equitable future. By harnessing the power of UGC and addressing associated risks, society can become more informed, engaged and strive towards sustainability in industries such as fashion. The current study aims to address the following research questions:

1. In what ways does UGC facilitate or hinder sustainable consumption in the fashion industry?
2. Does UGC encourage sustainable consumption and consumer purchase intentions in the fashion industry?

Extant studies speculate that UGC plays a pivotal role in shaping consumer behaviours and promoting sustainable practices within various industries, particularly fashion. As consumers increasingly seek

transparency and ethical production, UGC serves as a medium through which individuals can share their experiences, advocate for sustainable choices, and influence the decisions of others (García-Torres et al., 2017). Brands that engage with UGC not only gain insight into consumer preferences but also face growing pressure to align with sustainability trends (McNeill & Moore, 2015). However, the effectiveness of UGC in promoting sustainable consumption depends on both the authenticity of the content and the willingness of consumers to act on the information shared (Kim & Johnson, 2016). This dynamic relationship between consumers, UGC, and sustainability presents opportunities for further exploration, especially regarding how UGC can both promote and challenge sustainable practices in the fashion industry.

Our study makes three significant contributions. First, we extend understanding of social influence theory by applying it to the context of UGC in the fashion industry; we demonstrate how compliance, identification, and internalization processes drive consumer purchase intentions. Second, we provide empirical evidence on the role of UGC as a form of social proof and illustrate its impact on reducing uncertainty and sustainable consumption. Finally, we offer practical insights for fashion brands on how to effectively leverage UGC to build stronger sustainable practices leading to a higher order of sustainable consumption.

The rest of the article proceeds as follows: First, we review the literature to identify research gaps. Next, we introduce our methodology and empirical data collection methods. Based on the emergent data, we present the main results and explore the underlying mechanisms. Finally, we conclude by summarizing the study's contributions and discussing insights and implications for managers.

Contextual background

The significance of UGC in shaping customer perceptions and influencing decision making is evident across various industries. Research suggests that UGC has a profound impact on consumer trust and credibility, particularly when compared to traditional marketing content (Daugherty et al., 2008). Other studies recognized UGC for its ability to enhance brand engagement and consumer participation, which in turn affects purchase decisions (Ozuem et al., 2023 2012). In the tourism and hospitality sectors, for example, customer reviews and online ratings significantly influence consumer choices (Ozuem and Willis, 2022; Filieri, Alguezai, & McLeay, 2015). The use of UGC in e-commerce platforms has been found to directly affect product sales and

customer satisfaction). Social media platforms, in particular, serve as a powerful channel for UGC; they amplify its influence on brand perception and purchase behaviours. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) defined UGC as "online content generated by consumers" (p. 61) and highlighted its central role in the digital landscape. This broad definition includes various forms of material created and distributed by individuals online. Research has consistently supported this conceptualization and emphasized the multifaceted nature of UGC, which encompasses written content like online reviews and social media comments, visual media such as images and videos, and interactive formats like user-generated games and polls (Ozuem, Ranfagni, Willis, Howell, & Lancaster, 2021; Berthon et al., 2008).

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2007) defined UGC as content that is created outside of professional routines, made publicly accessible on the internet, and exhibits a degree of creative contribution. This definition underscores that UGC comprises both content developed via technology-driven platforms and collaborative efforts among users with the intention of sharing it with a broader audience. The distinction between professional content creation and the spontaneous, individual contributions typical of UGC highlights the authenticity and personalized characteristics of this form of media, which can increase its influence on consumer behaviours (Wang et al., 2019; Munar & Jacobsen, 2014; Ozuem et al., 2023b).

It is also essential to recognize that platforms often provide their own interpretations of UGC in their terms of service. For example, YouTube (2023) defines UGC as content developed and uploaded by individual users on its platform. This more limited definition emphasizes the specific conditions and ownership related to the platform. Research has highlighted the importance of platform-specific definitions, as they influence the processes of content creation, dissemination, and consumption within distinct online environments (Chen et al., 2018). Hence, precise definitions of UGC depend on the particular context, research objectives, and marketing strategies under consideration.

Dimensions of UGC and their influence on consumer behaviour

Previous scholarly work has explored multiple dimensions of UGC and their effects on consumers' purchase intentions, particularly in the realm of social commerce. These dimensions – authenticity, informativeness, social influence, and engagement – offer critical insights into how UGC influences consumer behaviours (Smith et al., 2012; Naeem & Ozuem, 2021; Hajli, 2014). Each of these dimensions will be discussed in turn.

Authenticity

Authenticity is a crucial aspect of UGC, as it relates to the perceived truthfulness and reliability of the content. Authentic UGC refers to content that is impartial, unaltered, and not driven by commercial interests. Consumers are more likely to trust and engage with UGC when they perceive it as transparent and reflective of the genuine experiences and opinions of other users. As a result, authentic UGC has a significant influence on consumer confidence and participation (Karjaluoto et al., 2016).

In a world dominated by sponsored content and marketing communications, authentic UGC stands out as a symbol of transparency and trust. Consumers value it for offering unfiltered perspectives and firsthand accounts; authentic UGC enhances the trust and connection between content creators and consumers (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010; Audrezet et al., 2020). Authenticity, therefore, plays a vital role not only in consumer preferences but also in maintaining the integrity of online communities and platforms. Genuine UGC fosters a trustworthy environment where users feel free to express their experiences without fear of manipulation (Wang et al., 2019).

However, achieving authenticity in UGC poses challenges, especially in an era marked by misinformation and content manipulation. Content creators and platform managers must balance promoting authenticity while safeguarding against misuse. Effective strategies, such as robust verification processes and transparent moderation, can create an environment where genuine UGC thrives (Zhou et al., 2023; García-Torres et al., 2017).

Informativeness

Informativeness, in the context of UGC, refers to the degree to which content provides consumers with valuable and relevant information. Informative UGC helps consumers make well-informed decisions by offering insights into product specifications, performance, and practical usage. Such content typically includes detailed explanations, reviews, and personal experiences that allow consumers to assess the benefits and potential drawbacks of products or services (Moore et al., 2021; Park et al., 2007).

Informativeness enhances consumer confidence by presenting content that is seen as credible and trustworthy (Zhou et al., 2023). Consumers are more likely to engage with UGC that offers meaningful information, which can positively influence their attitudes and purchasing decisions (Cheung & Thadani, 2012). Moreover, the broader impact of informative UGC extends to improving the quality of online

interactions and fostering knowledge-sharing communities. Content creators who prioritize accuracy and relevance contribute to a digital environment that encourages informed decision making (Smith et al., 2012).

Social influence

UGC exerts a strong social influence by shaping users' attitudes and behaviours through peer-to-peer interactions. This dimension underscores the impact of engagement metrics, such as likes, shares, and comments, which serve as indicators of popularity and social validation. When UGC receives significant interaction, it signals social approval and boosts its persuasive power. Consumers often view content that garners widespread engagement as more credible and trustworthy, as it reflects the collective endorsement of their peers (Willis, 2021).

UGC's social influence extends beyond mere popularity metrics. It plays a critical role in shaping social norms and identities within online communities (Ozuem et al., 2021). Social proof – the phenomenon where individuals rely on the behaviours of others as cues for their own decision making – drives much of UGC's influence (Wang et al., 2012). Brands can leverage the social dynamics of UGC to enhance consumer perceptions and drive desired outcomes, such as increased purchase intentions and brand loyalty (Chen et al., 2018).

Engagement

Engagement is a vital element of UGC, which encompasses the level of interaction and participation that consumers demonstrate with this content. Engagement goes beyond passive consumption; it involves active behaviours such as commenting, sharing, and creating new content in response to existing UGC (Hollebeek et al., 2014). This engagement fosters a sense of co-creation and community; it encourages users to become more involved with both the content and the brand or product associated with it (Naeem & Ozuem, 2021).

Higher levels of engagement can have a positive effect on consumer behaviours, including purchase intentions and brand loyalty (Yoo et al., 2021). When consumers actively engage with UGC, they establish deeper connections with the brand, which enhances visibility and the potential for virality (Ozuem et al., 2021). Engagement, therefore, serves as a key metric for assessing the effectiveness of UGC and its influence on consumer perceptions and actions. Brands can use engagement strategically to build stronger relationships with their audiences and stimulate more active participation.

Social influence theory and UGC

Social influence theory, as originally proposed by Kelman (1958), posits that individuals' attitudes and behaviours are profoundly shaped by the social groups to which they belong. This theory emphasizes the role of social norms and peer influence in decision-making processes and identifies three distinct mechanisms through which social influence operates: compliance, identification, and internalization. Compliance occurs when individuals conform to the expectations of others to gain approval or avoid disapproval. Identification happens when individuals adopt behaviours or attitudes to establish or maintain a meaningful relationship with a person or group. Internalization, the deepest form of influence, takes place when individuals accept influence because the behaviours or attitude aligns with their own value system (Kelman, 1958).

In the digital age, UGC, defined as content created by ordinary consumers rather than professional marketers, serves as a powerful form of social influence. UGC derives its influence from the credibility and relatability of peers, as opposed to the authority of brands. By sharing personal experiences, opinions, and recommendations, consumers become influencers and impact the perceptions and behaviours of others. This dynamic aligns with the concept of social proof, a psychological phenomenon where individuals rely on the actions and opinions of others, particularly in uncertain situations, to guide their own behaviour (Cialdini, 2009).

Within the fashion industry, UGC frequently functions as a form of social proof by offering potential customers insights into the experiences and opinions of their peers. When individuals observe that others have purchased and enjoyed a fashion item, they are more likely to view the product as desirable and of high quality. This process, known as social validation, reflects a form of social influence where the approval of others leads individuals to adopt what they perceive as socially accepted behaviours or trends (Burnkrant & Cousineau, 1975). In essence, social validation serves as a catalyst for conformity within consumer behaviour, particularly in industries, such as fashion, that are heavily influenced by social norms and trends.

Fashion, as an industry, is especially susceptible to social influence due to its inherent ties to appearance, identity, and social acceptance. Consumers often consider the fashion choices of their peers when making purchasing decisions. When UGC features real people styling and wearing a brand's products, it offers potential customers authentic,

relatable endorsements, which can increase trust in the brand and enhance the likelihood of purchase (Childers & Rao, 1992). The authenticity and peer relatability of UGC often carry more weight than traditional marketing tactics, thus making it a key driver of consumer behaviour.

Research supports the idea that when a popular fashion influencer or peer shares an outfit on social media, it can prompt others to purchase the same items to achieve similar social approval or to feel included in a trend. This reflects Kelman's (1958) identification process, wherein individuals adopt behaviours or attitudes to associate themselves with a person or group. Similarly, when multiple members of a peer group showcase positive experiences with a particular fashion brand, it can lead to compliance, where individuals purchase the product to align with group expectations, even if they are not fully convinced of the product's value (Kelman, 1958; Bearden et al., 1989; Ozuem et al., 2023c).

Moreover, UGC also facilitates the internalization process in the fashion industry. For instance, when consumers repeatedly encounter UGC that resonates with their personal values, such as sustainable or ethical fashion, they may internalize these values, which results in long-lasting changes in their attitudes and purchasing behaviours. This demonstrates the profound and pervasive influence of UGC, particularly when it aligns with a consumer's core values and beliefs (Kelman, 1958; Vermeir & Verbeke, 2006). UGC thus acts not only as a medium for peer influence but also as a vehicle for deeper, value-driven behavioural change.

Methodology and methods

This study employed a qualitative research design to investigate the experiences and perspectives of Saudi Arabian participants regarding the influence of UGC on authenticity within the fashion industry. Qualitative research, particularly in-depth interviews, is an effective method for exploring complex social phenomena, as it allows researchers to gain deep insights into participants' lived experiences and subjective viewpoints (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Azemi & Ozuem, 2023). A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit 30 participants from Saudi Arabia, which ensured that each participant had purchased fashion products based on information obtained from UGC or company-generated content within the past two years. This approach provided a diverse and relevant sample capable of offering comprehensive insights (Patton, 2015).

Semi-structured interviews were the primary method of data collection; they were conducted in Arabic to facilitate ease of communication and to allow participants to express their thoughts freely

and naturally. Each interview lasted approximately 50 minutes and followed a semi-structured interview guide to maintain consistency while allowing for flexibility in probing emerging themes (Kallio et al., 2016). Data saturation, defined as the point at which no new information or themes were identified, was reached by the 29th and 30th interviews. Consequently, the final interviews, which lasted around 20 minutes, were concluded early as no additional insights were generated. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent to ensure accuracy and reliability during the subsequent data analysis process.

Data analysis

The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Ozuem, Willis, & Howell, 2022). This approach allowed for a detailed examination of participants' experiences and perspectives by identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns or themes within the data. Coding was conducted using a combination of a priori and emergent codes. A priori codes were developed based on the research questions and existing literature. Emergent codes were identified as new themes emerged during the analysis. Codes were applied to relevant sections of the transcripts, and patterns were identified and analysed to develop overarching themes. To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, several strategies were employed. Member checking was conducted to verify the accuracy of interpretations with participants. Peer review was utilized to enhance the credibility of the analysis. Triangulation was employed by comparing findings from different sources, such as interviews and existing literature. Table 1 presents the four themes with a brief description of each theme and the keywords associated with each theme.

Major themes	Description	Keywords
Social influence and peer pressure	UGC often serves as a source of social validation and inspiration, influencing consumers' attitudes, preferences and purchase intentions	Inspired Influenced Confident Validation Peer pressure Conformity Social proof
Information and decision-making	UGC provides valuable information and insights, helping consumers	Informed decision

	make informed decisions about products and brands	Purchase Information Research Review Quality Avoid
Brand building and engagement	UGC can be a valuable tool for building brand relationships and fostering customer loyalty	Community Engagement Relationship Loyalty Trust Satisfaction Customer Experience
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UGC, user-generated content

Discussions

We identified four main themes, each of which is embedded within the others. Due to the interconnection of these themes, our discussions in this section are presented together rather than in isolation. Examining participants' comments through the lens of social influence theory provides deeper insights into how social dynamics and peer influence shape consumer attitudes, preferences, and purchase intentions. This approach allows us to explore not only individual perspectives but also the broader impact of group behaviours, thus highlighting the relationship between personal choices and social pressures.

"I'm always inspired by how other people put together their outfits. It gives me new ideas for how to style my own clothes and helps me feel more confident in my fashion choices. Seeing how different people interpret trends and create unique looks is really inspiring. It also helps me step outside of my comfort zone and try new things."

This participant illustrates how UGC functions as a source of inspiration and confidence for consumers. By observing how others style their clothes, consumers can overcome decision paralysis and feel more comfortable with their fashion choices. According to social influence theory, this reflects the process of identification – individuals adopt behaviours or styles because they aspire to resemble or connect with those they admire. Seeing peers or influencers successfully styling certain clothing items provides social validation that encourages consumers to experiment with new styles themselves.

"I always read online reviews before making a purchase. It's so helpful to hear firsthand about the quality, fit, and comfort of a product. I especially value reviews from other customers who have similar body types and styles as me."

This participant highlights the role of UGC in reducing perceived risk and uncertainty, particularly regarding product quality and fit. This aligns with the compliance aspect of social influence theory, where consumers are influenced by the opinions and behaviours of others to avoid making a poor purchase decision. Reviews serve as a form of social proof; they reassure consumers that their purchasing decisions are validated by the experiences of others.

"I'm a big fan of following fashion influencers on Instagram. They always introduce me to new brands and trends that I wouldn't have discovered on my own. I love seeing how they style different pieces and get inspired by their unique outfits. It's like having a personal stylist at my fingertips."

The comment underscores the significant role influencers play in shaping consumer preferences and driving brand awareness. UGC from influencers is particularly influential due to their perceived credibility and expertise. This reflects Kelman's internalization process, where consumers accept the influencers' recommendations as being aligned with their values and standards (Kelman, 1958). Influencers act as trusted sources who guide consumers towards new brands and trends based on their curated content and perceived authority in the fashion space.

"I love seeing how other people style the same piece of clothing in different ways. It's so inspiring to see how versatile an item can be. For example, I recently bought a plain white t-shirt, and I've seen people pair it with jeans, a blazer, a skirt, and even sweatpants. It's amazing how one simple item can be dressed up or down to fit so many different occasions and styles. It helps me think outside the box and experiment with my own wardrobe."

UGC demonstrating product versatility encourages consumers to consider multiple styling options, which can enhance the perceived value of a purchase. This mirrors the identification process of social influence theory, where consumers adopt behaviours that reflect those they wish to emulate. By showcasing how a single clothing item can be styled in various ways, UGC allows consumers to visualize how the item could fit into their own wardrobe, which aligns with their desire to make versatile and practical fashion choices.

"I trust recommendations from friends and family more than traditional advertising because they know me personally and have a better understanding of my style and preferences. I'm more likely to purchase something if I know someone I respect and admire is wearing it."

This comment highlights the strong influence of UGC from trusted social connections, which can often be more persuasive than traditional marketing efforts. This is an example of the compliance process in social influence theory, where individuals are influenced by the preferences of those within their social circle to maintain social harmony and gain acceptance. Recommendations from friends and family carry significant weight because they come from known and trusted sources; this reinforces the importance of fostering community and authenticity in fashion marketing.

"I'm more likely to buy a product if I see someone who looks similar to me wearing it. It helps me visualize how the item would look on me and gives me a sense of confidence that it would suit my style. I'm more likely to connect with and relate to people who share similar characteristics, such as age, body type, or ethnicity."

This participant's statement reflects the desire for identification – consumers are more inclined to purchase products that are associated with individuals who resemble them or belong to their social group. UGC helps create a sense of belonging and social validation, as consumers see people like themselves wearing certain fashion items, which can be more compelling than seeing the same items on professional models or in traditional advertising.

"I appreciate brands that actively encourage customers to share their own photos and experiences. It creates a sense of community and allows me to see how other people are styling the products. It also helps me discover new ways to wear my clothes and get inspired by other people's creativity."

Brands that actively engage with their customers and encourage the sharing of personal experiences can build stronger relationships and

foster loyalty. This practice aligns with the identification process, as it enables consumers to feel a deeper connection with the brand and its community. When brands validate and promote customer content, they affirm the value of consumer participation, which reinforces the idea that their opinions and experiences are integral to the brand's identity and narrative.

"I find UGC more relatable than professional fashion editorials because it feels more genuine and less staged. When I see real people wearing clothes in their everyday lives, it gives me a better idea of how the pieces would look and feel. Professional fashion editorials can sometimes feel too polished and unrealistic, but UGC is more down to earth and relatable."

This comment points to the perceived authenticity and relatability of UGC compared to traditional advertising. UGC often feels more genuine because it comes from real people rather than from a polished marketing campaign. This authenticity enhances credibility and influences consumer decisions; it aligns with the internalization process of social influence theory, where consumers adopt attitudes that feel genuine and aligned with their personal values.

"I find UGC to be an invaluable resource when I'm researching new brands and products. It gives me a chance to see how real people are wearing and styling different items. I can read honest reviews and see if the quality and fit are what I'm looking for. UGC helps me make more informed purchasing decisions and avoid buying items that I might not love."

UGC serves as a valuable information source for consumers considering new purchases, which helps them make informed decisions. This reflects the compliance process, as consumers rely on the experiences of others to minimize the risk associated with trying new brands or products. By providing detailed feedback and reviews, UGC allows consumers to gather social proof, which makes them feel more confident in their purchasing choices.

"Positive reviews from other customers are a huge factor in my purchasing decisions. When I see that multiple people have had a positive experience with a product, it gives me more confidence in its quality and value. It's like getting recommendations from friends and family, but on a larger scale."

Positive UGC significantly impacts purchase intentions by providing social proof and reducing perceived risk. This aligns with the compliance process, as consumers are more likely to conform to behaviours they perceive as safe and approved by others. Seeing positive

feedback from other customers creates a sense of reassurance and validation and increases the likelihood of a purchase.

"I really appreciate brands that take the time to respond to customer feedback and address any issues promptly. It shows me that they care about their customers and are committed to providing a positive experience. When a brand responds to my feedback, it makes me feel valued and heard. It also gives me confidence that they will take action to improve their products or services."

This participant highlights the importance of brand responsiveness and accountability in building trust and loyalty. When brands actively engage with customer feedback and address issues in a timely manner, they demonstrate a commitment to customer satisfaction and transparency. This aligns with the internalization process of social influence theory (Kelman, 1958), where consumers adopt positive attitudes towards brands that mirror their own values, such as honesty, care, and attentiveness. Prompt responses to feedback signal to customers that the brand values their input and is willing to take corrective actions, which fosters a deeper sense of trust and long-term loyalty. By consistently responding to feedback, brands can create a culture of openness and mutual respect that reinforce positive consumer perceptions and encourage repeat purchases. *"I'm more likely to buy a product if I see positive reviews from other customers."*

This comment highlights the impact of positive UGC on consumer purchase intentions. Positive reviews serve as social proof; they provide assurance to potential buyers about the quality and reliability of a product. This reflects the compliance process of social influence theory, where consumers are influenced by the positive opinions and behaviours of others to conform to what is perceived as a safe and socially endorsed choice (Kelman, 1958). Positive UGC not only helps reduce perceived risk but also enhances the appeal of the product by suggesting widespread approval and satisfaction, thereby increasing the likelihood of purchase.

Managerial recommendations

UGC significantly influences consumer purchase intentions due to its perceived authenticity. Unlike traditional advertising, UGC is created by real customers and reflects genuine experiences, which builds trust, especially in industries like fashion (Daugherty et al., 2008). Fashion consumers value UGC for its ability to portray how products look and function in real-life contexts, thus reducing uncertainty and enhancing brand trust (Chae, 2020).

Fashion brands can capitalize on this by encouraging UGC through strategies aligned with consumer motivations, such as self-expression, community building, and recognition (Daugherty et al., 2008). Social media challenges are a popular tactic, inviting consumers to showcase brand products in unique ways, which taps into their desire for creativity and engagement. For example, challenges like "Style Your Way" encourage users to post photos or videos of themselves styling brand products, which leads to authentic, relatable content that resonates with potential buyers (Kim & Johnson, 2016). Contests are another effective method. Offering rewards like gift cards or exclusive products motivates customers to share genuine experiences. Open-ended prompts, such as sharing a "go-to look", allow participants to express personal style, which results in varied and authentic content (Tuten & Solomon, 2017).

Branded hashtags further amplify UGC by fostering community and extending the reach of consumer content. For example, Levi's successfully uses the hashtag #LiveInLevis to encourage customers to share everyday experiences with their products, which showcases authenticity and builds brand credibility (Smith et al., 2012). Active engagement with UGC creators, such as responding to or sharing content, fosters a positive feedback loop that encourages more participation. Acknowledging and celebrating customer contributions helps solidify brand loyalty and increases the volume of UGC (Childers & Rao, 1992). Brands like Glossier exemplify this approach by sharing UGC that emphasizes natural beauty, thus promoting authenticity in their messaging. This transparency encourages consumers to contribute real, unfiltered experiences that further enhance the brand's image (Audrezet et al., 2020). Fashion brands can strengthen their emotional connection with consumers, build trust, and drive sales by fostering environments that encourage authentic UGC through challenges, contests, and active engagement.

Conclusion

UGC has become a significant factor in shaping consumer purchase intentions in the fashion industry. As digital platforms dominate consumer interactions, UGC provides an authentic alternative to traditional advertising, which is often perceived as biased or curated (Daugherty et al., 2008). The authenticity of UGC comes from real customers sharing their experiences and opinions; UGC offers relatable, genuine insights that can strongly influence purchasing decisions (Chae, 2020). Unlike traditional ads, UGC is seen as trustworthy because it is unsolicited and honest. The power of UGC lies in its ability to build trust

and credibility. When consumers see real people, particularly peers or influencers, using and endorsing products, they are more likely to trust the brand and make a purchase (Smith et al., 2012).

Fashion brands can harness this by encouraging UGC through social media challenges, where customers showcase how they style the brand's products. This not only promotes creativity but also increases community engagement and enhances the perceived value of products (Kim & Johnson, 2016). Contests and branded hashtags further amplify UGC by offering incentives and organizing content for easy discovery. Active engagement from brands, such as responding to and sharing user content, helps build stronger relationships, makes customers feel valued, and encourages more participation (Audrezet et al., 2020). UGC campaigns that align with consumer values, such as sustainability or diversity, can deepen engagement and positively impact purchase intentions (Tuten & Solomon, 2017). UGC is a vital component of modern marketing strategies for fashion brands. By fostering environments that promote UGC through challenges, contests, and engagement, brands can build trust, enhance relationships, and drive sales in a competitive market.

Limitations and further research directions

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the research was conducted in Saudi Arabia, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other regions. Conducting similar studies in different geographic areas could offer a broader understanding of the relationship between UGC and sustainable consumption in the fashion industry. Second, the relatively small sample size may have affected the statistical significance of the results. Larger sample sizes would enhance both the reliability and generalizability of the findings, thus providing stronger evidence to support the conclusions. Third, the study relied solely on self-reported data, which is prone to biases such as overestimation or underreporting of sustainable consumption behaviours. Incorporating objective measures like purchase histories or product tracking in future research could address this limitation. Additionally, social desirability bias may have influenced respondents to give answers they deemed socially acceptable.

Future studies could mitigate this by using methods such as anonymous surveys or randomised response techniques to encourage more honest reporting. Future research could explore how UGC influences sustainable consumption across diverse demographics, including age, gender, income, and cultural backgrounds. Lastly, as the

study was cross-sectional, the findings may not capture evolving trends. Longitudinal studies tracking changes over time would provide a deeper understanding of the dynamic relationship between UGC and sustainable consumption in the fashion industry.

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