Swipe to buy?

Examining the influence of Instagram and TikTok on millennials fast fashion purchases

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Abstract

This thesis explores the influence of User-Generated Content (UGC) on the purchasing decisions of millennials in the fast fashion industry, particularly through the platforms Instagram and TikTok. The research delves into the transformation from offline to online marketing within the fast fashion sector, examining both fast-fashion and ultra-fast fashion to understand UGC's impact on consumer behavior, including environmental and ethical concerns.

Employing a qualitative research methodology, this study focuses on thematic and content analysis to unravel the intricate ways in which UGC shapes millennials' purchasing decisions. The research provides an in-depth exploration of the subjective experiences, perceptions, and motivations of this demographic, offering rich insights into their interaction with UGC. Additionally, the study integrates social influence theory and buying behavior theory to understand the dynamics of digital consumer engagement and the role of UGC in contemporary marketing strategies.

Through interviews with Millennial consumers and analysis of their interactions with UGC, the research uncovers patterns and trends that highlight the significant role of UGC in digital marketing and consumer decision-making. The results suggest that while UGC significantly influences Millennials, the impact varies across different aspects of the fast fashion sector. This research fills a void in current literature by providing a focused analysis of UGC's influence across generational divides, thus contributing to a deeper understanding of digital behavior in the fast fashion industry.

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1 Introduction

This chapter will introduce an overview on retail businesses within the fashion industry and the switch from using offline to online marketing tools to attract customers to their business. It will provide explanations of the User-Generated Content (UGC) concept: What is it, how it is used, why it is important? How does it influence consumer behavior in their online purchase process? This thesis will focus on the online fashion sector to have a close up on a relatively topical example. This study will discuss fast-fashion and aim to study the influence of the UGC on consumers' purchase decisions with the concerns of sustainability and ethical aspects within the fashion industry.

In 2014 UGC was still a young research topic and there was no common understanding of the subject yet but researchers knew that UGC has its effect on societies, economies, including individuals themselves but, they did not have enough information to define this element that is used in marketing to promote to a product and brand (Wyrwoll, 2014). UGC in marketing is known as an unpaid/unsponsored content that is related to certain brands and products, and can be managed. Spreading information through people to other people that might become potential customers. Works naturally often. UGC looks like a review on a webpage or an app review, shared content in the social network as pictures and videos, or a written social post that might influence others' narratives and perceptions (Mazouri, 2018).

Imagine you are scrolling through your social media channel, Instagram' for instance, and suddenly see a picture posted by a friend or your favorite influencer where they are proudly showing off their new pair of sneakers they just purchased, showing it and talking about it. Or watching a movie where the atmosphere is hungry for food, starving even, you will most probably feel like eating a snack to feel safe from the fear the movie made you feel. This right there is what we call UGC (User-Generated Content). It helps to get people's attention and make them believe that these particular sneakers are valuable and worth owning or the need of feeling that we are safe and not starving. If they like and trust the source of the information, they will be able to be influenced by it and trust to change behavior. Encouraging and featuring UGC on social accounts motivate people to be loyal to a specific brand and to be proud enough to share it online. It is messages shared from people to other people. It takes place as a customer reviewing and testimonials, sharing more contents such as photos, videos, writing forms like blogs, or even comments (Mazouri, 2018).

UGC is basically slightly similar to the "word-of mouth" method but an online version of it. It includes people's satisfaction. As individuals and marketers know that word-of-mouth is the best marketing campaign a company could get, it is the most trustworthy from a consumer to consumer (Jassim, Källberg, 2008). Webster (1992) states that businesses are defined by its customers, not its products, facilities, or offices. This means that even if a company has

created the best products by the best people, without the customers and customer satisfaction it will not last, and that is what makes UGC so valuable for companies.

In this golden age of networking, social media has shown a significant impact on consumers and made it simple to order clothes and other items online through their smartphones. It is more crucial now for companies to develop the right technology to reach out to the right targeted customer. The rapid growth of ecommerce is shaping the future of online retail, especially accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ratchford, Soysal, Zentner, 2023). In today's constantly evolving fashion landscape, the distinctions between Fast Fashion and Ultra Fast Fashion have become increasingly significant, driven in part by the pervasive influence of online social media and networks on marketing dynamics, reshaping interactions among consumers, channels, and companies (Geissinger, Laurell, 2016).

Fast fashion initially emerged as a response to the desire of younger generations to embrace the latest fashion trends without incurring unreasonably high expenses, leading to the reconfiguration of low-cost products to closely emulate luxury fashion trends and enabling swift adaptation and production for mainstream consumers (Stringer, 2020). Ultra fast fashion on the other hand has pushed the envelope even further by offering even more budget-friendly options tailored to specific demographics. Notably, UGC has emerged as a central force influencing consumers' buying decisions, with brands harnessing its power, thereby reshaping industry dynamics (Dzhengiz, Haukkala, & Shaimaa, 2023).

Concurrently, the fashion industry grapples with substantial environmental and ethical concerns. It imposes a considerable environmental toll, with cotton cultivation consuming significant water and involving harmful pesticides (Elizabeth, 2019). Additionally, synthetic fibers, another common material, contribute to the depletion of non-renewable resources (Owen, 2020). The production processes themselves are heavily polluting, releasing toxic chemicals into waterways during textile dyeing and treatment, thereby impacting aquatic life and local communities' health (Elizabetht, 2019).

Furthermore, air pollution from manufacturing plants contributes to climate change and respiratory problems in nearby populations (Owen, 2020). One of the most visible environmental impacts is the generation of textile waste, much of which is non-biodegradable, such as polyester, ending up in landfills and posing long-term environmental hazards (UN, 2022). This rapid consumption and disposal of clothes, driven by the fast fashion model, raises concerns about overconsumption and unsustainable practices. Equally troubling are fast fashion's ethical implications, marked by labor exploitation, especially in developing countries with lax labor laws. Workers often endure poor working conditions, low wages, and long hours (Crumbie, 2023).

This exploitation is even more pronounced in ultra-fast fashion, where the pressure to reduce costs and accelerate production is heightened (ibid). Child labor remains a pressing concern,

with some brands being accused of employing children in dangerous and unhealthy environments (Bick, Halsey, Ekenga, 2018). Moreover, adult workers in the industry are frequently exposed to toxic chemicals without adequate protection, posing health risks (Crumbie, 2023). Beyond the factory walls, the industry's impact extends to local communities, particularly in developing countries where most production occurs. Environmental degradation caused by factories can affect local water sources, agriculture, and overall quality of life (Bick Halsey, Ekenga, 2018).

Fast fashion encourages us to constantly buy new clothes by promoting the latest trends. This cycle of needing the newest styles not only contributes to ethical and environmental problems but also fuels a culture where we feel the need to buy more than we actually need. It is a never-ending chase for the next big thing, and unfortunately, it takes a toll on both our values and the planet. Recognizing the significance of UGC in the digital marketplace, businesses strive to incorporate it into their marketing strategies. UGC serves as a virtual marketplace where consumers of all ages interact, share, and shape their perceptions about products and brands (Geissinger, Laurell, 2016).

Within the demographic of Millennials, aged between 25 and 35, UGC wields significant influence. These millennials turn to UGC as a primary source of information, seeking authenticity and peer validation before making purchases, heavily influenced by reviews and recommendations from peers and influencers featured on these platforms. In summary, UGC on platforms like Instagram and TikTok has become an integral part of the modern consumer's journey, varying in impact across age groups but undeniably influencing purchasing decisions, prompting businesses to navigate the ethical and environmental challenges of the fashion industry (Crumbie, 2023).

2 Problematization

The transformative impact of UGC on social media platforms, such as Instagram and TikTok, is a compelling and influential subject in the context of its profound influence on purchasing decisions across diverse age groups (Ratchford, Soysal, Zentner, 2023). This influence has become particularly significant in the era of digital transformation, where the retail industry is rapidly transitioning from traditional brick-and-mortar stores to a dynamic online marketplace (Ratchford et al., 2023). Understanding the nuanced relationship between UGC and consumer choices is critical as businesses navigate the complexities of this evolving digital landscape, especially given the accelerated shift to e-commerce driven by the COVID-19 pandemic.

UGC serves as a dynamic catalyst within the evolving consumer engagement landscape, encompassing diverse content such as reviews, comments, photos, videos, and testimonials. This virtual marketplace allows consumers from various age brackets to converge, interact, and shape their perceptions about products and brands. Among digital natives, specifically Millennials, UGC holds a distinctive influence as they prioritize it as a primary source of information (Nikola Bojkov, 2023). Authenticity and peer validation, conveyed through reviews and recommendations from peers and influencers on these platforms, significantly impact their purchasing decisions (Wyrwoll, 2014).

In the fast fashion industry, sustainable retailing practices have emerged as a pivotal response to environmental and ethical concerns (Yang, Song, & Tong, 2017). (Yang et al., 2017). Retailers, positioned as 'ecological gatekeepers,' wield substantial influence over supply chain dynamics and consumer behaviors, as demonstrated by the findings of Vazquez et al. (2021) in their examination of the influence of UGC on the online fashion consumer experience. These retailers have the potential to initiate positive changes in manufacturing processes and consumer consumption patterns by providing information on social and environmental issues related to the supply chain (Yang et al., 2017). As retailers adapt, they can enhance the sustainability of their products, services, and operations, encompassing areas such as energy conservation, waste reduction, and recycling.

Sustainable retailing not only involves the sale of green products but also encompasses non-product management, including retail supply chains and customer-facing initiatives. In a rapidly changing fashion landscape, where markets evolve swiftly, retailing's role in sustainability becomes even more critical, shaping the industry's ability to address retailing problems and meet consumers' expectations for environmentally and ethically responsible fashion choices (Yang et al., 2017). Furthermore, UGC serves as a bridge between generations, facilitating the exchange of experiences and insights. Older consumers may

benefit from the perspectives of younger generations, while the wisdom and perspectives shared by their elders through UGC can be valued by younger consumers and must be managed with ethical and sustainable responsibility. This intergenerational exchange further solidifies the role of UGC as a potent influencer (Haglind, Jonsson, 2012).

In today's digitally transformed consumer landscape, where the retail industry is undergoing a rapid shift from traditional stores to online platforms, the influence of user-generated content (UGC) on social media platforms has emerged as a significant factor shaping purchasing decisions across different age groups (Ratchford, Soysal, Zentner, 2023). While previous studies have highlighted the importance of UGC, there remains a need to understand how UGC impacts the purchasing choices of distinct age cohorts. Specifically, Millennials, as digital natives, exhibit unique behaviors and preferences when it comes to seeking authenticity and peer validation through UGC (Naeem & Ozuem, 2022). However, the extent to which UGC influences the purchasing decisions of Generation X and Baby Boomers, who may be less digitally immersed, remains less explored (Herrando, Jimenez-Martinez, and Martin-De Hoyos. 2019).

Moreover, the intergenerational exchange facilitated by UGC adds complexity to this phenomenon. It is evident that older consumers can benefit from the experiences and insights of younger generations, while younger consumers may value the wisdom and perspectives of their elders shared through UGC. Therefore, a nuanced understanding of UGC's role in bridging generational gaps is essential for businesses seeking to target a diverse customer base effectively. (Geissinger & Laurell, 2016).

The current research aims to address these gaps in knowledge by investigating the multifaceted relationship between UGC on Instagram and TikTok and consumer behavior among Millennials within the fast fashion industry's customer base. By exploring the types of UGC that wield the most influence, the factors driving distinctions among millennials, and the potential for businesses to leverage these insights, this study seeks to provide valuable guidance for companies navigating the complexities of the digital age. In the realm of fast fashion, a wealth of research has delved into the multifaceted influence of UGC on consumer behavior, with a particular emphasis on younger generations like Millennials and Generation Z. Other groundbreaking studies by Davcik et al. (2022) and Yoo (2023) have highlighted how visual UGC, prevalent on platforms like Instagram and TikTok, plays a pivotal role in shaping the purchasing behaviors of these younger demographics, underscoring the importance of authenticity and peer validation in their digital interactions.

In contrast, research by Vazquez et al. (2021) indicates a different pattern of UGC interaction among older generations, such as Generation X and Baby Boomers, who tend to be influenced through indirect exposure, typically via their social or familial networks. Although there's a lot of research out there offering valuable insights, it tends to overlook the bigger ethical and environmental issues linked to user-generated content in the fast fashion industry.

Studies by Yang et al. (2017) and Geissinger & Laurell (2016) have begun to shed light on these critical aspects, suggesting the need for a more comprehensive approach that extends beyond the marketing effectiveness of UGC. They advocate for a deeper exploration of its long-term implications on consumer behavior, particularly in terms of sustainability and ethical consumerism. This gap in the literature presents a compelling avenue for this thesis, aiming to bridge the understanding of UGC's influence on Millennial purchasing decisions with a nuanced consideration of the ethical and sustainable dimensions inherent in the fast fashion industry.

2.1 Research Question

This study is dedicated to investigating the influence of user-generated content (UGC) on social media platforms, specifically on Instagram and TikTok, on the purchasing decisions of Millennials in the fast fashion industry. The research question, "How does user-generated content (UGC) on platforms Instagram and TikTok influence the purchasing decisions of Millennials in the fast fashion industry?" will guide the exploration of the complex relationship between UGC and consumer behavior within this specific demographic.

Recognizing the rapid growth of e-commerce and the imperative to comprehend consumer behavior in the digital age, this study positions UGC as a dynamic catalyst shaping consumer choices. Millennials, as a significant target demographic, heavily rely on UGC for peer validation and authenticity. Moreover, the study acknowledges the broader impact of UGC across generations, highlighting the intergenerational exchange of information through UGC (Murphy, 2021).

This study aims to comprehensively investigate the influence of UGC on social media platforms, particularly Instagram and TikTok, and its impact on the purchasing decisions of consumers across various age groups, with a specific focus on Millennials. By examining how UGC shapes consumer behavior and preferences, the research seeks to provide valuable insights for businesses and marketers navigating the dynamic landscape of the digital marketplace (Murphy, 2021).

Building on its theoretical framework, this study endeavors to explore the diverse behaviors disclosed by Millennials and the different ways in which UGC functions as a powerful influencer across generations. In addition to addressing specific questions about the fast fashion industry, the research aims to uncover links between consumer attitudes, behaviors, and the strategic ways of UGC by businesses, drawing upon insights gathered through interviews with Millennials (Murphy, 2021). Eventually, the goal is to equip businesses with actionable knowledge to tailor effective marketing strategies that resonate with consumers in the evolving digital era.

2.2 Purpose

The primary purpose of this study is to investigate the impact of UGC on social media platforms, such as Instagram and Tiktok on the purchasing decisions of consumers across millennials. By examining how UGC influences consumer behavior and preferences, this study aims to provide valuable insights for businesses and marketers seeking to adapt their strategies to effectively engage consumers in the evolving digital marketplace. Additionally, a study by Ravi and Sudharshan G M (2023) explores the broader impacts of social media on the consumer buying cycle, particularly in contexts involving complicated purchasing behavior.

By extending the theoretical framework, this research aims to explore in greater depth the diverse consumer behaviors exhibited by millennials and the impact of User-Generated Content (UGC) on their purchasing decisions. The study seeks to gather responses through interviews with millennials, providing readers with valuable insights from the consumer's standpoint.

2.3 Empirical study

In addressing the complexities of UGC and its influence on the purchasing decisions of Millennials in the fast fashion industry, this thesis adopts a comprehensive empirical approach. Guided by the insights of Bandara (2020) and Zhou (2022), which underscore the value of qualitative research in understanding digital consumer engagement, we have chosen to focus primarily on in-depth interviews with millennial consumers. This methodological choice is instrumental in capturing the nuanced and evolving nature of their engagement with UGC on the platforms, Instagram and TikTok.

Moreover, the research is enriched by employing thematic and content analysis, as advocated by Yanjin Li (2022), to delve into the intricate details of how millennials interact with and are influenced by UGC. This approach allows for a detailed exploration of their perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors, providing a rich understanding that goes beyond mere quantitative measurements. The empirical study, thus, not only aligns with the theoretical frameworks of social influence and buying behavior, as discussed by Kelman (1958) and Sheth (1969), but also adapts to the dynamic and rapidly evolving landscape of digital media and consumer behavior in the context of fast fashion. By combining these qualitative methods with a targeted focus on millennials, the study seeks to offer new insights into the role of UGC in shaping consumer decisions, addressing both its marketing effectiveness and its broader ethical implications in the fast fashion industry.

3 Literature Review

This thesis is firmly rooted in the literature streams of consumer behavior, digital marketing, and the influence of UGC within the fast fashion industry. Foundational insights from key studies, such as those by Ratchford et al. (2023) and Geissinger and Laurell (2016), contribute to our understanding of the impact of e-commerce and social media on consumer decision-making processes. The research presented here extends this discourse by specifically focusing on the nuanced impact of UGC across different age groups. Building upon existing studies, particularly those by Venkataraman and Raman (2016) and Yoo (2023), which explored UGC in the context of fashion branding and marketing, this thesis takes a step further by providing a more focused analysis of UGC's influence on purchasing decisions across generational divides, thereby addressing a significant gap in the current literature.

The definitions of constructs are essential for clarity in this study. User-generated content, as defined by Santos (2022), encompasses any form of content—text, images, videos, and audio—posted by users on online platforms such as social media and websites. This broad term includes various media types created and shared voluntarily by users rather than media companies or publishers. UGC is often viewed as a form of self-expression, ranging from blog posts and comments to photos, videos, and social media updates. Organizations leverage UGC to engage with their audience, gather feedback, and promote community involvement. While the thesis does not introduce a new conceptual model or theory, it argues for the extended application of existing theories of consumer engagement and social media influence. Leveraging theories of consumer behavior, the study analyzes how UGC shapes purchasing decisions, emphasizing the role of authenticity and peer influence, particularly among younger consumers more specifically millennials.

Gerard, Cachon and Swinney in (2011) delve into the significance of fast fashion, highlighting its key elements. They explore the integration of quick response production capacity within the fast fashion system, emphasizing the creation of products that align with current market trends. Additionally, the authors underscore the active adoption of fast fashion retailing by firms operating in this sector. The benefits of fast fashion include shortened production cycles and accelerated product distribution, leading to improved customer reception (Pachon & Swinney, 2011). Fast fashion is frequently identified by a system that integrates swift responsiveness and an improved design approach within the fashion industry. The companies operating in this realm have the capability to grasp consumer preferences and streamline the supply-demand dynamics. However, a comprehensive exploration of consumer behavior within the unique context of ultra-fast fashion remains relatively sparse in the existing literature. The authors elaborate on how European fast fashion entities like Zara and H&M manage extensive inhouse design teams and leverage local labor and expedited shipping methods when required, despite the associated high costs, often resulting in financial losses (Pachon, Swinney, 2011).

3.1 Exploring the Intersection of User-Generated Content, Fast Fashion, and Millennial Behaviors: Shaping Contemporary Consumer Preferences.

Prior research has explored the concept of User-Generated Content (UGC) and its impact on younger generations, particularly millennials. It delves into the factors driving their use of UGC and the motivations behind their purchasing decisions via social media platforms. In the work by Halliday (2015), the focus is on the significance of UGC in shaping the purchasing behavior of young individuals, specifically in the realm of clothing and other brands. The study illustrates how these young consumers derive meaning from the brands they choose, with their purchasing decisions often linked to broader motivations, such as seeking personal transformation or making lifestyle changes (ibid). The author provides another example where the study states that young people associate them with brands, brand meanings in order to achieve their life goals. There is also a new meaning of UGC from the creator and the users of UGC.

Many young individuals are increasingly drawn to UGC, which not only shapes their lives from a fashion standpoint but also extends its influence across various aspects. The objective of this study is to offer a deeper understanding of how user-generated content impacts millennials' purchasing decisions within the fast fashion industry (Halliday, 2015).

3.2 Studies on Consumer Behavior in Ultra-Fast Fashion

For the sake of this study it is essential to draw attention to specific studies conducted on purchasing behavior in the ultra-fast fashion sector. For instance, (Dzhengiz, Haukkala,Sahimaa, 2023) conducted a comprehensive analysis of consumer decision-making processes within ultra-fast fashion, shedding light on the intricate factors influencing choices amidst rapidly evolving trends. Building on this, (Dzhengiz, et al 2023) explored the psychological aspects of consumer satisfaction in the context of ultra-fast fashion, providing valuable insights into the dynamic shifts in decision-making processes and satisfaction metrics.

These studies collectively emphasize the transformative impact of ultra-fast fashion on traditional consumer paradigms, navigating an environment characterized by shortened product life cycles and an incessant influx of new designs. The evolving landscape of the ultra-fast fashion industry necessitates a deeper understanding of consumer behavior, motivations, and satisfaction metrics to guide industry practitioners in adapting their strategies to meet the evolving demands of the market (ibid)

Through a synthesis of existing literature and an analysis of these studies, this literature review aspires to contribute to the academic discourse surrounding consumer behavior in the realm of ultra-fast fashion. By identifying gaps and limitations in current knowledge, our aim

is to set the stage for understanding the complexities of consumer behavior within the unique context of ultra-fast fashion.

4 Theory

4.1 Social influence theory

Social influence is a pervasive phenomenon within the fabric of daily existence. As inherently social beings, humans invest a substantial portion of their time in endeavors aimed at influencing others, concurrently navigating efforts to resist external attempts at influence. The mechanisms of social influence encompass peripheral processing, wherein the targeted individual remains oblivious to the influencing entity's endeavors. Given its expansive nature, comprehensively addressing all facets of social influence proves to be a formidable task. Understanding social influence theory involves acknowledging key aspects, including a nuanced process integrating both intentional and unintentional communication between consumers and social media platforms. Moreover, this dynamic phenomenon possesses the influential capacity to mold an individual's attitudes, beliefs, intentions, or behaviors, as articulated by Kelman (1958) and Forsyth (2013).

Herbert Kelman's social influence framework illustrates the dynamics of how individuals are shaped by those in close proximity to them. The theory encompasses three primary forms of social influence: compliance, identification, and internalization. Compliance occurs when an individual outwardly adheres to a certain behavior or belief that they may not genuinely endorse. While they may act in accordance with the agreed-upon principles, an internal dissonance arises as their actions conflict with their true convictions, leading to a sense of tension (Kelman, 1958).

Identification represents the second facet of persuasion, wherein an individual aligns themselves with a statement made by the speaker and, without skepticism, embraces the argument as valid. Internalization involves the complete acceptance and incorporation of an idea or belief by the individual, originating from their personal perspective. It signifies a state of embracing the concept independently, free from external influences or the compulsion to align with others' opinions (Kelman, 1958).

Social Influence Theory and Its Relevance to UGC: Social Influence Theory proposes people's opinions, emotions, and behaviors are influenced by others around them. In the digital age, this influence is significantly amplified through social media platforms. When applied to user-generated content (UGC) on platforms like Instagram and TikTok, this theory helps explain how consumers are influenced by the opinions and behaviors of their peers, influencers, and broader online communities (Schramm, Knoll, 2015).

4.1.1 Buying behavior theory

In exploring the complexities of consumer purchasing behaviors in the fast fashion industry, the Theory of Buyer Behavior by Jagdish Sheth (1969) provides crucial insights, especially when applied to the digital era's user-generated content (UGC). This foundational theory, which delves into the consumer decision-making process (Sheth, 1969), becomes increasingly pertinent in the context of modern buying behaviors shaped by UGC on Instagram and TikTok.

According to the theory, consumer choices are influenced by a complex interplay of individual preferences and external stimuli, mirroring the impact of UGC in molding perceptions and choices across diverse consumer demographics (Sheth, 1969). Notably, this theory elucidates the varying impacts of UGC across generations – from the UGC-centric buying patterns of digital natives such as Generation Z and Millennials, who value authenticity and peer feedback, to the significant yet less direct influence of UGC on Generation X and Baby Boomers.

Merging Sheth's theoretical framework with contemporary empirical data highlights its continuing relevance and adaptability in deciphering how consumers in the fast fashion sector are influenced by UGC in their purchasing decisions. This integration of a classic consumer behavior theory with current digital trends not only deepens our understanding of generational purchasing behaviors but also provides strategic insights for crafting marketing strategies in the rapidly evolving digital marketplace (Sheth, 1969).

The theory of buying behavior exhibits a degree of repetitiveness, its manifestation varying based on the nature of the product and the associated purchase cycle. Take, for instance, food and beverages, which typically involve shorter cycles. In the context of products catering to personal needs, an individual first becomes aware of the need, proceeds to gather pertinent information about the product, and ultimately establishes a routine in the decision-making process regarding whether to make the purchase. In the case of satisfying hunger, for example, the individual recognizes the need, explores alternative options, and ultimately makes a purchase to satiate their hunger (Sheth, 1969).

The integration of social influence theory and buying behavior theory in this research serves a pivotal role in comprehending the impact of user-generated content (UGC) on consumer behavior within the fast fashion industry. Social influence theory, particularly Herbert Kelman's (1958) framework, contributes a nuanced understanding of how individuals are influenced by external factors, ranging from surface-level compliance to deep internalization. In the context of the digital age and prevalent social media use, this theory proves particularly relevant as it helps illuminate the intricate dynamics through which UGC on Instagram and TikTok shapes opinions and behaviors.

On the other hand, the application of Jagdish Sheth's (1969) theory of Buyer Behavior provides a comprehensive lens through which to dissect the complex interplay between individual preferences and external stimuli in consumer decision-making. By applying this theory to generational buying behaviors, the research gains insights into how different age groups are influenced by UGC, allowing for the tailoring of marketing strategies to diverse consumer segments. Together, these theories offer a robust foundation for analyzing the multifaceted influences of UGC on consumer behavior in the fast fashion industry, providing both academic depth and practical strategic insights for businesses navigating the digital landscape.

The external factors will be applied and analyzed as following:

Conforming to **compliance** will assist us in examining Millennials, individuals who either adhere to or diverge from specific behaviors, as reflected in UGC during their diverse product purchases. This analysis delves into their decision-making process, exploring instances where their actions may contradict their genuine convictions.

Identification constitutes the second dimension of persuasion as described by Kelman (1959). In this study, it enables us to explore how individual millennials align themselves with statements encountered in User-Generated Content (UGC), without critical examination, and incorporate these beliefs into their purchasing decisions.

Internalization encompasses the thorough acceptance and integration of an idea or belief by an individual. Recent studies indicate that Millennials are increasingly engaging in the fast fashion industry to adopt new styles or align themselves with specific brands when purchasing clothes(Sheth, 1969). This exploration aids in comprehending the factors influencing millennials in their clothing purchases and the motivations that drive their buying decisions (Sheth, 1969).

Critique

The social influence theory and buying behavior theory, while valuable, do not comprehensively capture every aspect of a consumer's experience. Some critical aspects, like the motivation behind purchase decisions, have been addressed by researcher Sheth (1969). Additionally, demographic factors such as employment and education play a significant role and deserve attention. Exploring how companies can strategically approach millennials in their marketing efforts is essential. Although the existing models provide insights, they can be applied in various perspectives and further explored to enhance this study's ability to analyze the consumer perspective.

4.2 Link Between Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The literature review and the theoretical framework are seamlessly intertwined. The review highlights the evolution of consumer engagement and the pivotal role of UGC in digital marketing, setting the stage for applying these concepts to analyze consumer behavior in the fast fashion industry. The theoretical framework then guides the analysis, focusing on the diverse impacts of UGC across age groups. The symbiotic relationship between the literature review and the theoretical framework is evident in their seamless interconnection. The literature review illuminates the trajectory of consumer engagement, emphasizing the transformative role played by User-Generated Content (UGC) in the landscape of digital marketing. By charting the evolution of consumer behaviors and preferences, it establishes a foundation for comprehending the contemporary significance of UGC. The central role of UGC in shaping consumer perceptions, influencing purchasing decisions, and fostering online communities is underscored in the literature. This sets a compelling backdrop for the subsequent application of these insights in the analysis of consumer behavior within the fast fashion industry (Naeem, Ozuem, 2022).

Subsequently, the theoretical framework steps into this narrative, providing a structured lens through which to interpret and understand the multifaceted impacts of UGC, particularly across diverse age groups.The framework guides the analysis by delving into established theories, such as Social Influence Theory and Buyer Behavior Theory, offering a theoretical scaffold for examining how UGC resonates differently among various generations. Thus, the seamless linkage between the literature review and the theoretical framework creates a cohesive narrative that not only outlines the historical context of UGC but also positions it as a dynamic force influencing consumer behavior in the contemporary digital age (Naeem, Ozuem, 2022).

4.3 Impact of UGC on Purchasing Decisions

The thesis posits that UGC on platforms like Instagram and TikTok significantly affects the purchasing decisions of various age groups. Studies by Naeem and Ozuem (2022), and Yang (2017) suggest that while younger consumers (Generation Z and Millennials) rely heavily on UGC for authenticity and peer validation, older generations (Generation X and Baby Boomers) are also influenced by UGC, albeit differently. This differential impact highlights the need for targeted marketing strategies.

4.3.1 The Impact of UGC Across Age Groups

User-generated content (UGC) on social media platforms plays a critical role in shaping consumer behavior in the fast fashion industry. For younger consumers, particularly Generation Z and Millennials, UGC serves as a primary source of information and validation. This demographic relies on peer reviews and influencer recommendations, seeking authenticity in their purchasing decisions (Davcik, 2022). Studies have shown that these consumers are more likely to be influenced by visual UGC, such as photos and videos, which provide a sense of connection and relatability (Yoo, 2023).

In contrast, older generations, including Generation X and Baby Boomers, exhibit a different interaction with UGC. While they may not actively seek out UGC to the same extent, they are nonetheless influenced by it, often through secondary exposure via family or social networks. For these consumers, UGC provides a sense of trust and reliability, impacting their purchasing decisions in a more subtle but equally significant manner (Vazquez, 2021). The intergenerational exchange of information through UGC presents a unique dynamic. Older consumers can gain insights from the experiences of younger users, while younger consumers can benefit from the wisdom and perspectives of older generations. This exchange underscores the multifaceted influence of UGC and its importance in shaping consumer perceptions and behaviors across age groups (Geissinger, Laurell, 2016).

By understanding these varied impacts of UGC, businesses in the fast fashion industry can develop more nuanced and effective marketing strategies. Tailoring content to resonate with specific age demographics can enhance consumer engagement and influence purchasing decisions, leading to more effective marketing outcomes in the digital landscape. As a result, the literature review highlights the significant role of UGC in influencing consumer purchasing decisions across different age groups in the fast fashion industry. By understanding these influences, businesses can tailor their marketing strategies to meet the evolving needs of a diverse consumer base in the digital age.

5 Methodology

In this research we employed a qualitative research approach, aligning with our study's objectives. We successfully delved into the complex dynamics of millennial consumer behavior within the fast fashion industry, particularly focusing on the influence of user-generated content (UGC) on Instagram and TikTok. This particular approach allowed us to thoroughly explore the subjective experiences, perceptions, and motivations of consumers across different age groups. We gathered rich and detailed insights into the complex ways

UGC shapes purchasing decisions (Bandara, 2020).

By focusing on qualitative data, we moved beyond mere quantitative measurements and captured the evolving nature of digital consumer engagement. We employed thematic and content analysis methods, identifying patterns, themes, and trends in consumer behavior related to UGC. This approach was instrumental in offering a comprehensive understanding of how UGC influences diverse age groups on specific social media platforms, significantly contributing to the broader discourse in digital marketing and consumer behavior (Zhou, 2022). Ultimately, our qualitative research painted a contextually rich picture of the impact of UGC on fashion purchasing choices. The insights we obtained are highly valuable for businesses in the fast fashion industry, providing a clear understanding of the digital landscape and consumer engagement strategies (Hong, Tin Fah, 2022).

5.1 Research approach

The overall methodology of our thesis is grounded in qualitative research, a strategy that is particularly effective for delving into the complex dynamics of consumer behavior in the fast fashion industry as influenced by UGC on social media platforms Instagram and TikTok (Stachowiak-Krzyżan, Magda, and Ankiel, 2019). This approach allows for an in-depth exploration of the subjective experiences, perceptions, and motivations of consumers across different age groups.To gather qualitative data, we conducted 10 in-depth interviews using a semi-structured interview guide. This guide was carefully designed to include open-ended questions that encouraged participants to share their experiences and perspectives on UGC and its influence on their purchasing decisions in the fast fashion sector. The questions began with broad topics to establish a comfort level, gradually moving towards more specific inquiries about their interactions with UGC and purchase behaviors.

Most of our informants had not previously been familiar with the concept of UGC, so the initial part of the interview involved explaining UGC and then assessing their awareness and engagement with it. We also explored how their perceptions of UGC affected their purchasing decisions, aiming to uncover the underlying elements that influence consumer behavior from initial attention to the final purchase process (Ismail, Norlis; Albakry, Nur Safinas, 2023).

After collecting the interview data, we employed thematic analysis to interpret the findings. This involved an iterative process of coding the data to identify common themes and patterns. By analyzing these themes, we could understand the significant elements in the context of UGC's influence on fast fashion consumers (Fox, Bacile,Nakhata, and Weible, 2018). This approach was crucial for capturing the nuanced ways in which UGC shapes purchasing decisions, offering rich, detailed insights rather than mere quantitative measurements (Zaimmudin Mohd, Perry, and Quinn, 2018).

This methodological choice is instrumental in capturing the evolving nature of digital consumer engagement and the multifaceted role of UGC in the contemporary fashion landscape. Through this lens, our thesis aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of consumer interactions with UGC and their subsequent impact on fashion purchasing choices. (Bryman, Bell, 2017).

5.2 Empirical data and sampling

The study's sample group comprises consumers primarily from the Millennial generation. Rather than encompassing a broad spectrum of consumers, ranging from early teenagers to the elderly, we've focused specifically on Millennials as the most pertinent social media user group for our research. Our selection process involved reviewing previous studies to identify demographics actively engaged with social media and susceptible to marketing influences on platforms Tiktok and Instagram.

This research reflects on two main platforms: TikTok and Instagram shorts, with a particular emphasis on the Millennial demographic. TikTok, widely used globally, is known for its popularity among younger demographics and serves as a platform for advertisements by fast fashion companies targeting Millennials. While Instagram shares similarities with TikTok, it caters to a broader demographic, encompassing users from Generation Y and beyond, making it a valuable platform to capture the attention and preferences of Millennials.

5.2.1 Method for analyzing data

In this study, our data will be subjected to qualitative analysis, employing the methodologies of thematic analysis and content analysis. The foundational principles of content analysis involve the utilization of interviews, surveys, online feedback, and similar data sources. The primary objective of this study is to identify suitable participants and conduct interviews to explore their perspectives on social media patterns, purchasing behaviors, and the impact of UGC on their decision-making processes. Insights from studies like 'The Role of Social Media and User-Generated-Content in Millennials' Travel Behavior' by (Maria-Irina Ana and Laura-Gabriela Istudor, 2019) provided valuable context in this regard.

We carefully looked at the information we got from the interviews. This included writing down everything said in the interviews, and taking note of what people answered in surveys and their online comments. Yanjin Li's research on 'The Analysis of the Marketing Strategy of Shein and Accompanying Word of Mouth on Social Media' offered a relevant methodology for survey analysis in the fast fashion context (Li, Y. 2022).

We paid close attention to what these tell us about how people use social media, what they buy, and how they react to things that others post online (like reviews or photos). It is crucial

to analyze how Millennials, as the primary focus of our study, respond to various stimuli on social media platforms. Understanding the distinctions in reactions among Millennials is key for tailoring effective marketing strategies. Rather than comparing across different age groups like Generation Z and Baby Boomers, our emphasis is on deciphering the nuanced preferences and behaviors within the Millennial demographic.

This focused approach enabled us to provide specific insights into how companies should tailor their marketing techniques uniquely for Millennials, taking into account their distinct characteristics and responses, as suggested by G. Granata's study (2018) on social media marketing in the luxury fashion industry "Strategies and Tools of Social Media Marketing In the Luxury Fashion Industry". The culmination of this process is the integration of findings from both thematic and content analysis, which helps us paint a comprehensive picture of UGC's role in influencing consumer behavior across diverse age groups and social media platforms. This analysis will be consistently linked back to our theoretical frameworks and existing literature, ensuring our findings are well-grounded and contribute meaningfully to the broader discourse in digital marketing and consumer behavior. Ultimately, we draw insightful conclusions and outline key implications for businesses in the fast fashion industry, suggesting effective strategies to harness UGC for engaging with a digitally diverse consumer base.

5.2.2 Reliability

Reliability can be defined as the measure of consistency and dependability in a research study. This means that if the study is replicated or reproduced by someone else and yields the same results, the research is considered reliable, demonstrating strong reliability and enhancing the researchers' credibility (Bryman & Bell, 2017). Regarding focus interviews with individual consumers from Millennials, there is a risk of obtaining different responses. This variation is dependent on the extent of their dependence on shopping through social media. Despite the diversity in responses, the study can still achieve high reliability, as consistent results may be obtained based on the respondents' level of social media usage.

In addition to the considerations mentioned in the original reliability text, it's important to note that the reliability of qualitative research like this one is often enhanced by dividing data sources. This means incorporating multiple methods or perspectives to cross-validate findings. For instance, in studying the impact of UGC on different age groups, combining interviews with analysis of actual UGC content or survey data could provide a more robust picture and validate the interview findings (Bryman & Bell, 2017).

Furthermore, employing a systematic approach in coding and analyzing qualitative data, with clear definitions and consistent application of categories, can further strengthen the study's reliability.

5.2.3 Validity

In this aspect, the validity of the study will be examined and measured to assess whether it accurately represents the phenomenon or research question under investigation (Bryman & Bell, 2017). Considering the choice between focus interviews or semi-structured interviews, tailored questions will be directed towards the targeted groups. Participants will be given space to delve into their answers and express their opinions on the specific aspects. This approach can enhance validity, as the responses are highly relevant to the research question. Building on the existing discussion of validity, it's crucial to consider the depth and authenticity of the data collected. Ensuring the validity in qualitative studies like this often involves establishing a strong connection with participants to elicit sincere and meaningful responses. This can be achieved through building rapport and trust, allowing participants to feel comfortable sharing their genuine thoughts and experiences.

Additionally, incorporating a method of member checking, where participants review and confirm the accuracy of the interpretations made from their responses, can significantly enhance the study's external validity. (Bryman & Bell 2017) It ensures that the findings truly reflect the participants' perspectives. In the context of this study on user-generated content, it's also valuable to validate findings against observable behaviors on social media platforms. For example, analyzing patterns in UGC engagement and correlating them with interview responses can offer a form of external validity. If using interviews in this study turns out to really improve it, can we see the external validity as a strong case. This approach helps check if the things we learn from interviews actually show up in how people behave online.

5.2.4 Ethics

This study adheres to the principles of informed consent outlined by Bryman & Bell (2017) for interviews. Participants were briefed on the research topic and purpose prior to the interview, and confidentiality was assured throughout the entire process. All participants were notified that their participation was voluntary, and they had the option to discontinue the interview at any point without the obligation to provide answers. Additionally, details regarding the collection, storage, and access to the data were communicated through an anonymous source. In case of any questions or concerns, participants were provided with a confidential email address as indicated in the confidentiality disclaimer (Bryman & Bell, 2017).

Beyond the ethical considerations outlined in the original text, it is essential to address the broader ethical implications associated with researching user-generated content (UGC), especially in the fast fashion industry. This includes respecting the intellectual property and privacy rights of individuals whose UGC may be analyzed. Given the public nature of platforms like Instagram and TikTok, researchers must navigate the fine line between

publicly available data and the right to privacy of the individuals creating this content. Anonymizing any direct quotes or references to specific UGC in the research findings can help mitigate potential privacy concerns.

Additionally, the ethical dimension of researching a consumer-driven and potentially environmentally impactful industry like fast fashion should not be overlooked. It is important to consider and discuss the ethical ramifications of promoting consumerism through UGC in the context of environmental sustainability and social responsibility. This could involve reflecting on how the research outcomes may influence consumer behaviors, potentially leading to increased consumption or reinforcing unsustainable practices within the industry, (Bryman, Bell 2017).

5.3 Weaknesses and limitations

This research embraces a qualitative methodology, primarily relying on in-depth interviews to explore the intricacies of the chosen subject matter. While the qualitative approach allows for a nuanced understanding of participants' experiences and perspectives, it inherently introduces limitations. The findings of this study are context-specific and should be interpreted with caution, as the small sample size and qualitative nature limit the generalizability of results to a broader population.

Participants for this study were chosen through a selection process that focused on aligning with the study's objectives. The selection was aimed at gathering a diverse range of perspectives relevant to the research topic. It's important to note that the participants' views and behaviors might not fully represent other demographics or contexts. However, their input provides valuable insights for this particular investigation, drawing from a group that shares common characteristics relevant to the study's focus.

Additionally, the potential for response bias exists, as participants may shape their answers based on social expectations or other factors. Despite efforts to foster an open and honest dialogue during interviews, the interpretation of qualitative data is influenced by the researcher's subjectivity, introducing the possibility of bias. Furthermore, the study is temporally bound, capturing perspectives within a specific timeframe, and may not account for subsequent developments or changes. These limitations underscore the need for a cautious interpretation of the study's findings and highlight avenues for future research to address these constraints. This research provides valuable insights into the impact of UGC on purchasing decisions in the fast fashion industry via platforms like Instagram and TikTok, encountering several limitations.

Firstly, the focus on specific social media platforms and the fast fashion industry restricts the generalizability of findings to other sectors or digital environments. Employing qualitative methods provides intricate details; however, it introduces biases and complicates the application of findings on a broader scale due to the lack of easily measurable data. There is also a potential oversight in fully accounting for the diverse nature and impact of UGC, especially regarding negative content and its role in promoting sustainable practices within the industry.

The study's relevance is challenged by the rapidly evolving nature of social media and consumer behaviors, which could quickly render findings outdated. While addressing different millennials, the research might not adequately consider other demographic factors such as socioeconomic status or cultural backgrounds, which can influence purchasing decisions significantly.

Theoretical frameworks utilized are heavily reliant on existing literature and precious studies, possibly missing opportunities for innovative contributions or new models tailored to the unique dynamics of UGC in fast fashion. Ethical considerations, particularly concerning broader implications like privacy and data exploitation, are not thoroughly explored.

Furthermore, the study's focus on UGC might overshadow the influence of other significant factors like traditional advertising or personal experiences. A longitudinal perspective on the impact of UGC and a comparative analysis with other industries or content types could provide a more comprehensive understanding of UGC's role in consumer decision-making, thus enhancing the study's depth and applicability.

5.4 Empirical Presentation

The empirical presentation section offers a transparent view of the raw data gathered during the research process. This dataset comprises qualitative interviews conducted with millennials, focusing on their engagement with UGC in the fast fashion industry. To ensure participant confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to the interviewees, who were carefully selected within the age group of 25 to 35 years to represent the millennial generation, renowned for its active involvement in digital platforms and fast fashion trends. The interviews were conducted one-on-one, either in person or via video conferencing, with each session lasting approximately 45 minutes to an hour. The subsequent presentation of the data is organized in two key ways: individual participant insights and recurring themes extracted from the interviews.

Individual participant insights provide a deeper understanding of their backgrounds and perspectives. For instance, Participant 1, known as Alex, a 28-year-old digital marketer,

revealed a high familiarity with UGC, a desire for online shopping, and a strong influence of social media on fashion choices. Interview highlights from Alex shed light on their reliance on UGC for discovering fashion trends and the trust placed in UGC's authenticity compared to traditional advertising. Participant 2, pseudonymously referred to as Sara, a 31-year-old environmental consultant, showcased a keen awareness of UGC, particularly in environmental contexts. Sara exhibited a preference for sustainable brands and a remarkable level of trust in UGC, especially when backed by scientific facts. Her interview emphasized the role of UGC in guiding consumers toward sustainable choices and how certain companies lean towards sustainability.

Additionally, recurring themes emerged during the interviews, highlighting critical aspects of UGC in fast fashion among millennials. The theme of "UGC Engagement and Influence" encapsulated how participants actively engage with UGC for fashion trends, with variations in engagement levels such as Moa's limited involvement compared to individuals like Alex and Emily. Furthermore, participants Erik and Leonard underscored the influence of social media in shaping their fast fashion preferences.

The theme of "Online Shopping Dynamics" explored how participants' online shopping behaviors were influenced by UGC. This theme revealed that individuals like Alex and Leonard rely on UGC for decision-making, while Bella prioritizes quality, and Daniel occasionally checks online reviews. Lastly, the theme of "Brand Preferences and Decision Factors" delved into participants' brand preferences and the factors driving their choices. For example, Sara's preference for sustainable brands aligns with her environmental values, Liam prefers durable brands, and Moa leans toward classic brands, distinct from the preferences of Alex and Sara. In this empirical presentation, confidentiality was rigorously maintained by using pseudonyms, and data integrity was ensured through precise recording and transcription of the interviews. This data serves as the foundation for the subsequent analysis, where patterns, insights, and research implications will be unveiled.

6 Findings

This research aimed to explore the nuanced impact of UGC on millennials' purchasing decisions within the fast fashion industry. Drawing upon the foundational insights from the literature review, which highlighted the significant roles of e-commerce and social media in consumer decision-making processes, this study extends the existing discourse by focusing on the generational divides in UGC's influence.

In exploring participants' awareness of UGC, a diverse range of perspectives emerged. While some participants expressed a profound familiarity, attributing it to professional involvement, others acknowledged awareness without an active connection to the fashion context. The

association with UGC among millennials revealed a spectrum of perspectives. For instance, while some participants acknowledged UGC's existence, their connection to it within the fashion context varied, offering a nuanced portrayal of their engagement.

Millennials' social media usage patterns unveiled a diverse landscape, ranging from daily engagement for both professional and personal purposes to more limited and focused usage. Understanding these patterns is pivotal to comprehending the contexts in which UGC influences their fashion choices. The study illuminated the individualized nature of purchasing decisions influenced by UGC. Participants shared unique experiences, with one expressing direct influence in a specific purchase, providing a nuanced perspective on the role of UGC in their shopping journeys.

The influence of UGC on purchasing decisions varied significantly among participants. While some acknowledged frequent influence, others indicated rare impact, emphasizing the need to recognize the individualized responses within this demographic. Participants' online shopping dynamics showcased a spectrum of preferences, with some favoring the convenience of online platforms influenced by UGC, while others adhered to more traditional in-store shopping methods for personalized considerations like fit and quality.

The study revealed nuanced perspectives, with participants demonstrating a range of trust levels, indicating a sophisticated and discerning evaluation of UGC's authenticity and reliability. Beyond its impact on individual purchasing decisions, UGC emerged as a catalyst for community building among millennials. Participants expressed how UGC fosters a sense of belonging and shared identity, showcasing its broader social influence. The research delved into the ethical and environmental dimensions associated with UGC in the fast fashion industry. Participants' reflections on sustainability underscored the need for a more responsible approach to UGC, signaling a growing awareness of the industry's ethical considerations.

The awareness of UGC:

In our interview segment focused on UGC, it was clear that participants had varying levels of engagement with UGC. Alex, who uses UGC professionally, stated, *"Yes, I'm quite familiar with UGC. It's a big part of my job."* This contrasted with Emily's approach, who actively seeks out UGC for fashion inspiration, saying, *"Oh yes, I am very familiar with UGC and I actively seek out UGC for fashion inspiration."* Meanwhile, Daniel, Liam and Moa were aware of UGC but did not actively pursue it.

As we explored their understanding of UGC, the differences in their association with the concept, particularly in fashion, became apparent. Alex, representing a professional viewpoint, said, *"Yes, I'm quite familiar with UGC. It's a big part of my job."* In

contrast, another participant acknowledged UGC but didn't actively engage with it, stating, *"I know about UGC but I don't actively seek it out."* The range of involvement demonstrates how millennials have levels of interaction, with user generated content (UGC) acknowledging its existence but having varying degrees of engagement.

Emily's response was particularly telling: "*Yes, I am very familiar with the concept, I am actively seeking out UGC for fashion inspiration.*" Her approach perfectly encapsulates the kind of participant engagement we were seeking, where the understanding of UGC is directly linked with the fashion industry.

Additionally, the interviews shed light on millennials' reliance on social media for fashion shopping. Alex mentioned, "*I use both Instagram and TikTok daily, for both work and personal interest, for example, I follow my favorite brands on social media.*" Emily also highlighted regular social media use, albeit with a different focus: "*I use social media regularly, but more for searching for information rather than entertainment. I use social media to search for what I want to buy instead of watching funny clips.*" Jasmine echoed this sentiment, "*I am a frequent user of Instagram and TikTok, especially for fashion content where I can get inspired for my future purchases.*"

These responses underscore that millennials are not just passive consumers on social media; they actively seek out and engage with fashion content. However, a more traditional approach was also observed, with a Moa noting, "*I use social media platforms only in a limited use, my main focus on platforms are mainly LinkedIn and Facebook for personal and professional networking.*" This indicates a varied use of social media among millennials, with some focusing on fashion while others use it for professional networking.

Purchasing decisions with UGC

In the contemporary landscape of fashion shopping, UGC has emerged as a significant influencer in the purchasing decisions of consumers. Alex, for instance, highlights the impact of UGC on his choices, noting,
"Yes, I bought a jacket after seeing an influencer style it in various ways,"
which underscores the persuasive power of UGC in action. This notion of influence is further echoed by Jasmine, who was swayed by "*a Tiktok review to purchase a designer handbag,*" illustrating the broad spectrum of UGC's reach, from everyday apparel to luxury items.

Conversely, there's a discernible variance in how different individuals engage with UGC. Liam, who prefers a more traditional approach to shopping, admits, *"UGC rarely influences his purchasing decisions,"* suggesting a resistance to the digital sway that UGC wields.

This stance is shared by Moa, who leans towards *"personal research"* over UGC, indicating a preference for a more hands-on, experiential approach to purchasing decisions.

The role of influencers in shaping purchasing decisions is pivotal, as Erik candidly reveals, *"I usually get influenced by influencers because they have a big influence on many people."* This statement not only acknowledges the persuasive power of influencers but also hints at the trust and credibility they hold in the eyes of consumers.

Yet, the influence of UGC is not ubiquitous. Sara, with her inclination towards sustainable brands, points out, *"I prefer in-store shopping for clothes to ensure fit and quality,"* which reflects a more tactile and personal approach to fashion shopping, somewhat divergent from the UGC-driven trends.

In summary, the impact of UGC on fashion purchasing decisions is multifaceted and varies significantly among individuals. From Alex's and Jasmine's affirmative experiences with UGC to the more cautious approaches of Liam and Moa, it's clear that while UGC is a powerful tool in the modern consumer's arsenal, its influence is modulated by personal preferences and shopping habits.

6.1 Engagement with UGC and Its Influence

The thematic analysis revealed that millennials exhibit a complex relationship with UGC. Echoing Ratchford et al. (2023), this study found that millennials like Alex and Emily are heavily influenced by UGC in their online shopping experiences. They often rely on trends and influencers on social media platforms, demonstrating a high level of engagement with UGC, similar to the trends observed by Geissinger and Laurell (2016). This reflects a broader inclination among millennials to use UGC as a primary source of information for making informed purchasing decisions within the fast fashion industry.

6.2 Online Shopping Dynamics and Brand Preferences

Participants showed a preference for online shopping, aligning with the insights from Venkataraman and Raman (2016) and Yoo (2023), who emphasized the importance of digital platforms in modern consumer behavior. Millennials like Leonard and Bella, while influenced by online marketing and UGC, also exhibited a critical approach, often validating the credibility of UGC through personal research. This finding adds to the discourse on consumer behavior in ultra-fast fashion by highlighting a balance between impulsiveness and critical evaluation, as noted by Dzhengiz, Haukkala, and Sahimaa (2023).

6.3 Trust and Credibility in UGC

A significant finding of this research is the varying levels of trust millennials place in UGC. While some, like Erik, demonstrate high trust in influencer-endorsed brands, others, like Daniel, approach UGC with more skepticism. This dichotomy in trust reflects the findings of Halliday (2015), who noted that millennials often seek personal transformation through brand associations. However, this study suggests that while millennials are influenced by UGC, they also seek authenticity and verifiable reviews, indicating a more discerning and sophisticated approach to UGC than previously understood.

7 Discussion

This thesis investigates the intricate dynamics of UGC in shaping millennials' purchasing decisions within the fast fashion industry, a domain that has been rapidly evolving with the advent of digital media. Our comprehensive analysis reveals a diverse spectrum of engagement with UGC among millennials, an insight that significantly enriches our understanding of digital consumer behavior. For instance, individuals like Alex and Emily exhibit a high degree of engagement with UGC, using it actively for fashion inspiration. This behavior aligns with the trends observed by Ratchford et al. (2023) and Geissinger and Laurell (2016), illustrating the influential role of UGC in modern consumer decision-making processes. Conversely, our findings also highlight a more cautious approach to UGC among certain millennials, as exemplified by Daniel and Moa, who demonstrate a restrained engagement, indicating a nuanced, multifaceted relationship with digital content.

Delving deeper into the influence of UGC on purchasing decisions, our research sheds light on the persuasive power of digital content in shaping consumer choices. This is vividly illustrated through examples such as Alex, who was swayed to purchase a jacket after seeing it styled by an influencer, and Jasmine, who decided to buy a designer handbag after watching a Tiktok video. These instances underscore the practical implications of Kelman's (1958) social influence theory and Sheth's (1969) buying behavior theory in the digital era. However, the persuasiveness of UGC varies significantly across different contexts and situations. We observed varying degrees of trust and skepticism towards UGC, as seen in Erik's high trust in influencer-endorsed products contrasted with Daniel's more skeptical viewpoint. This separation in perception and trust towards UGC suggests a layered and complex consumer landscape, where millennials navigate between authenticity and influencer persuasion, a finding that extends Halliday (2015)'s discussions on personal transformation through brand associations.

Through our study, we've not just echoed what's already known in consumer behavior and digital marketing; this study has actually added new layers to it. We dove into the complex world where social media, the minds of consumers, and the fast-paced universe of fast fashion collide. What we found was fascinating: millennials don't all approach

User-Generated Content (UGC) the same way. Some dive in headfirst, while others stand back, a bit skeptical. And in this digital age, where everyone's glued to their screens, we've also bumped into some big questions about ethics. How does all this online buzz affect what we buy and the planet we live on? Our research is opening doors to new conversations, especially about how this digital push and pull influences not just our shopping carts but our values and our world. There's so much more to explore here, and we're just scratching the surface.

8 Conclusion

As the digital era continues to reshape consumer behaviors, our empirical investigation aimed to unravel the intricate dynamics between millennials, UGC, and the fashion landscape. A central revelation emerged from our research — the pivotal role UGC plays as a catalyst for consumer engagement. Millennials, known for their digital savviness and discerning preferences, actively navigate the fashion terrain through UGC on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. How to influence social media platforms become key drivers, shaping personalized pathways for fashion choices.

Trust surfaced as a critical factor in millennials' engagement with UGC. While some participants exhibited high trust in influencer-endorsed brands, others approached UGC with skepticism, emphasizing the need for authenticity and verifiable reviews. Ethical considerations associated with UGC in the fast fashion industry also surfaced, prompting reflections on the responsible use of UGC to reduce potential contributions to unsustainable consumption patterns. Beyond individual decisions, UGC emerged as a tool for community building. Millennials expressed a shared sentiment that UGC fosters a sense of community and belonging. This communal aspect of UGC bears implications for the future of fast fashion and other industries, suggesting that brands need to consider not only individual preferences but also the communal influence of UGC in shaping collective fashion or other trends.

This research aimed to explore the nuanced impact of User-Generated Content (UGC) on millennials' purchasing decisions within the fast fashion industry. Drawing upon the foundational insights from the literature review, which highlighted the significant roles of e-commerce and social media in consumer decision-making processes, this study extends the existing discourse by focusing on several aspects of UGC's influence.

Moreover, this research stands as a testament to the transformative power of UGC in shaping not only the fashion choices of millennials but also the very fabric of the fast fashion industry itself. As we reflect on the findings and implications presented, it is clear that UGC is not merely a tool for marketing; it is a conduit through which millennials express their identities, seek community validation, and influence the trajectory of the fast fashion industry. The dynamism and complexity observed in this research underscore the need for ongoing exploration and adaptation in the ever-evolving intersection of digital content, consumer

behaviors, and the fashion landscape. In essence, this thesis encapsulates the transformative journey of UGC within the fast fashion industry, revealing its role in shaping the preferences, values, and collective identity of the millennial consumer.

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Appendix I- Interview Questions

Introduction (5 min)
We would like to introduce ourselves and provide you with some context regarding our research. Our primary goal in conducting this interview is to gather valuable insights for our thesis. Before we proceed, we'll outline the interview process to ensure transparency. We kindly request your consent to record this interview for research purposes and to use your name as a reference in our study. Your participation is greatly appreciated, and your insights will contribute significantly to our research. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to ask before we begin
Introductory Questions (5 min)
● Are you familiar with the UGC concept? ● Do you shop often online or visit stores to go shopping? ● Can you describe your typical process when shopping for fashion items online? ● How often do you use social media platforms Instagram and TikTok? ● Do you have any personal favorite brands and why?
Direct Questions (5 min)

- What type of UGC (reviews, comments, photos, videos, etc.) do you commonly encounter related to fast fashion on these platforms?

- How do you usually come across UGC – is it through influencers, friends, brands, or other sources?

- Can you recall a recent instance where UGC influenced your decision to purchase a fashion item? Could you describe that experience?

- Did you have any opinion about the brand before buying the products?

- What makes you trust the information you see in social media?

- How does UGC influence your purchasing decisions compared to traditional advertising?

Direct Questions (10 min)

- Do you feel that UGC aligns with your values and preferences in fashion? Why?

- Has UGC ever influenced your thoughts or decisions regarding sustainable or ethical fashion?

- Do you think UGC impacts your emotions or mood regarding fashion purchases? Can you describe such an instance?

- How do you decide which UGC to trust when considering a purchase?

- Are you more likely to consider sustainable fashion options if they are promoted through UGC? Why or why not?

- How does the UGC on Instagram differ from that on TikTok in terms of influencing your fashion purchases?

Conclusion (5 min)
Do you have any further thoughts or information you'd like to share on this topic?

Appendix III - Thematic Analysis

<u>Participant</u>	<u>Data</u>	<u>Code</u>	<u>Theme</u>
Alex	Familiar with UGC, prefers online shopping, influenced by social media, likes tech-savvy brands.	UGC familiarity, Online shopping preference, Social media influence, Brand preference.	UGC Engagement and Influence. Online Shopping Dynamics. Brand Preferences and Decision Factors.
Sara	Aware of UGC in an environmental context, prefers sustainable brands, trusts UGC with scientific facts.	UGC in sustainability, Sustainable brand preference, Trust in scientifically-backed UGC.	Brand Preferences and Decision Factors. Trust and Credibility in UGC and Information Sources.
Daniel	Casual knowledge of UGC, focuses on product quality, and trusts well-rounded reviews.	UGC awareness,Quality-focused shopping, Trust in comprehensive	Trust and Credibility in UGC and Information Sources

		reviews.	
Emily	Actively seeks UGC for fashion, influenced by social media, and trusts genuine UGC.	Active UGC engagement, Social media-driven fashion choices, Authenticity in UGC.	UGC Engagement and Influence. Online Shopping Dynamics. Trust and Credibility in UGC and Information Sources.
Liam	Occasionally checks online reviews, prefers durable brands, and moderate trust in UGC.	Occasional UGC use, Durability in brand preference, Moderate UGC trust.	Brand Preferences and Decision Factors. Trust and Credibility in UGC and Information Sources
Jasmine	Follows UGC for trends, influenced by TiktokandInstagram, aware of sustainable fashion.	UGC for fashion trends, Influence of video content, Sustainable fashion consciousness.	Brand Preferences and Decision Factors
Moa	Limited UGC engagement, focuses on classic brands, cross-verifies UGC with professional reviews.	Limited UGC engagement, Classic brand preference, Cross-verification of UGC.	UGC Engagement and Influence. Brand Preferences and Decision Factors
Erik	Familiar with UGC, influenced by social media ads, trusts influencer-endorsed brands.	UGC familiarity, Social media ad influence, Trust in influencer endorsements.	UGC Engagement and Influence. Online Shopping Dynamics. Trust and Credibility in UGC and Information Sources

Leonard	Online shoppers, influenced by Instagram ads, trust search history-related UGC.	Online shopping behavior, Instagram ad influence, Trust in personalized UGC.	UGC Engagement and Influence. Online Shopping Dynamics. Trust and Credibility in UGC and Information Sources
Bella	Neutral about UGC, focuses on quality, influenced by reviews, double-checks UGC.	Neutral UGC perspective, Quality-focused, Review influence, UGC double-checking.	UGC Engagement and Influence. Online Shopping Dynamics. Brand Preferences and Decision Factors. Trust and Credibility in UGC and Information Sources

Appendix II - Participation Agreement

The interview is expected to last for 30-35 minutes. We want to assure you that there are no foreseeable risks associated with your participation, during or after the interview.

You have the right to stop the interview or withdraw from the research at any point without facing any consequences. We genuinely appreciate your willingness to take part in our study.

By providing your consent either by saying 'yes' or confirming 'I agree to the participation agreement' via email or during the recorded interview you acknowledge that you have read, understood and willingly agreed to the following terms:

1. The interview will be recorded in format. Securely stored in a digital environment accessible only by the research students and supervisor to ensure confidentiality.

2. While we may refer to your name in our research materials, we fully respect your choice if you prefer anonymity; in cases we will omit your name and any identifying information from the study.

3. Please note that participating in this research is entirely voluntary and does not entitle you to any form of compensation.