A Study of User-Generated Content and the Shift Toward Natural Food Products

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Abstract **-** This study examines how User-Generated Content (UGC) impacts consumer purchase intention, particularly in the context of natural food products. This study combines the Elaboration Likelihood Model and Theory of Consumption Values to analyze the significant factors that impact consumers' purchase intention for UGC-recommended natural food products. The data was collected from 224 eligible respondents and analyzed using the partial least square structure equation modeling (PLS-SEM) method. The findings show that UGC's argument quality and the product's social value are significant factors that build trust for consumers to choose the UGC-recommended product. This study provides theoretical and practical implications for various food system stakeholders and policymakers.

Keywords: ***User-generated content; Consumption value; Elaboration likelihood model; social media***

INTRODUCTION

Consumer sharing has emerged as a significant and prevalent trend. Web 2.0 technologies made it easy to share text, images, videos, and ideas online. This shift has led to the emergence of User-Generated Content (UGC), a new information creation and organisation paradigm. User-generated content (UGC) includes text, images, videos, and other forms of content which is created by the users and uploaded to websites (Geng & Chen, 2021). Users willingly express their opinions about brands and items they have encountered on social media platforms (Wang et al., 2021).

UGC has been used in various contexts over social media platforms, including travel and tourism, e-commerce, and health (Ayeh et al., 2013). Social media and specifically UGC offers exponential opportunities to gain knowledge about sustainable and natural food products while supporting the growth and advancement of all food system stakeholders (Fatemi et al., 2022). Consumption of natural food products is one of the most frequently employed strategies for individuals who wish to reduce their carbon footprint (Chakraborty et al., 2022). However, there is a dearth of studies exploring the factors that persuade users to buy UGC-recommended natural food products. Drawing upon the theory of consumption values and the elaboration likelihood model, this study aims to address this gap and answer the following research question:

RQ1. What are the UGC-related and product-related factors that persuade consumers to buy the UGC recommended natural food products?

Conceptualization & Theoretical Underpinnings

The Elaboration Likelihood Model of Persuasion

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) developed by Petty & Cacioppo (1986) uses two different routes to evaluate communications from target companies i.e. "the central route" and "the peripheral route". In the central route, the message is the primary influence on the consumers' information processing behaviour. Whereas in the peripheral route, the source of the content impacts the way consumers process brand-related messages (Diwanji & Lee, 2022).

Theory of Consumption Value (TCV)

The TCV theory explains that "consumer choices are influenced by five distinct values: conditional, functional, emotional, epistemic, and social value" (Sheth et al., 1991). According to this theory, "consumers' preferences for specific products are influenced by their associations with each of these five values" (D. Choi & Johnson, 2019). The study uses the functional value, emotional value, and the social value out of the five consumption values to gauge customers' perceived value (Sweeney & Soutar, 2001) because when it comes to the intention and behavior of purchasing products, epistemic and conditional values are viewed as less important (Sweeney & Soutar, 2001).

Hypothesis Development

Source Credibility

Source Credibility is described by Petty & Cacioppo (1986) as "the extent to which information from the source is perceived as believable, trustworthy, and reliable". The two major dimensions of source credibility, trustworthiness, and expertise (Ayeh et al., 2013a; Pornpitakpan, 2004) are highly relevant to UGC. Highly credible source information is likely to be seen as trustworthy and can increase consumers' purchase intentions in terms of natural foods. Hence, we hypothesize that:
H1: Source credibility positively influences consumer trust in UGC.

Argument Quality

"An argument is a deliberate action undertaken to convey an idea to persuade or influence others" (Sussman & Siegal, 2003). Users can meticulously examine the arguments that are incorporated into health information and assess its usefulness. Furthermore, argument quality may function as a trust signal, as it is indicative of the integrity and ability of other members (Oliveira et al., 2017). Users may perceive uncertainty and be unable to implement the information provided by other members when they lack trust in them. Hence, we hypothesize that:
H2: Argument Quality positively influences consumer trust in UGC.

Functional value

The functionality of a product or service is a major factor that influences trust (K. Choi et al., 2019). The establishment of trust is impacted by factors such as quality, pricing value, and various other dimensions related to functional value (Yue et al., 2017). Watanabe et al., (2020) discovered that functional values directly influence customer trust. Thus, we hypothesize that:
H3: Functional Value positively influences consumer trust in UGC.

Emotional value

Emotional value refers to "the perceived utility acquired from an alternative's capacity to arouse feelings or affective states" (Sheth et al., 1991).Various Past studies have proved the significant impact of Emotional Value on Trust (Amin & Tarun, 2021; Chakraborty & Dash, 2023; Watanabe et al., 2020). The emotional aspect of consumption values has led to the creation of trust between individuals as well as organizations (Chakraborty, Siddiqui, & Siddiqui, 2022). In the case of natural food products, consumers feel gratified when they tend to believe that they are contributing to their health, and environmental safety and reducing carbon footprints (Chakraborty & Dash, 2023). Hence we hypothesize that:

H4: Emotional Value positively influences consumer trust in UGC.

Social Value

Social value refers to the "perceived utility acquired from an alternative's association with one or more specific social groups" (Sheth et al., 1991). Previous studies have identified various factors like social norms, influence of peer group, opinion of the reference group, and social pressure that play significant roles in modifying the decision-making process in consumers (Amin & Tarun, 2021). Literature hints that an attitude toward environmental sustainability, which can influence the perception of social responsibility, may promote sustainable consumption (Straughan and Roberts, 1999). The social value provided from the eco-friendly nature of natural products builds trust towards them. Hence, we hypothesize that:
H5: Emotional Value positively influences consumer trust in UGC

Trust

Trust is the consumer's confidence in the fair and kind behavior of others, while also acknowledging the potential hazards associated with such interactions (Kim, 2008). The trust of consumers is crucial when it comes to food consumption, as food is directly linked to the welfare of the customer. The establishment of customer trust in food consumption is a multifaceted process, and one method to cultivate this trust is by the use of labelling or marking on food packaging (Cristina et al., 2019). The trust of consumers in the natural-food industry has become increasingly important for consumption, as consumer awareness continues to grow (Chakraborty, Siddiqui, & Siddiqui, 2022; Watanabe et al., 2020). So, we hypothesize that:
H6: Trust positively influences purchase intention.

Research Methodology

The researchers used quantitative methods to study users' responses toward UGC-recommended natural food products. The purposive sampling method was employed for the data collection process. Responses were evaluated using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). 386 people participated in our study out of which the final data consisted of 224 high-quality responses that met the survey criteria. The study used PLS-SEM analysis, which is reliable for studying complex interactions between multiple factors (Almarzouqi et al., 2022)**.**

Sample and data collection

The study used a survey method for data collection. A total of 386 questionnaires comprising two sections (A&B) were circulated. Section A consisted of two questions. First, whether the respondent is an active social media user and how much time they devote to it. Second, has the respondent come across UGC promoting natural food products? All those people who used social media platforms for at least an hour and came across UGC promoting natural food products proceeded to section B. Section B comprised questions related to UGC and the product-related factors. 301 filled questionnaires were received back. The

questionnaires with incomplete and straight-line responses were rejected. The final sample for our study comprised 224 respondents, the demographic profiles of which are represented in Table1.

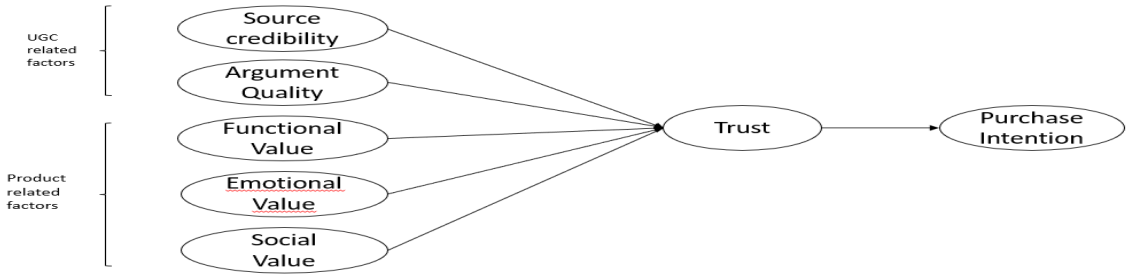

Figure 1: Research Model

Table 1: Demographic characteristics			
Characteristics	Categories	No. of respondents	%
Gender	Male, Female	127, 97	56.70, 43.30
Age Group	18-25	71	31.70
	26-35	89	39.73
	36-45	43	19.20
	46-55	17	7.59
	56 & above	4	1.78
Education	Completed high school	52	23.21
	Completed diploma	21	9.38
	Completed bachelor's degree	50	22.32
	Completed master's degree	78	34.82
	Completed doctorate (PhD or equivalent)	23	10.27
Monthly Income	Less than 40,000 INR	149	66.52
	40,001–60,000 INR	43	19.20
	60,001–80,000 INR	13	5.80
	80,001–100,000 INR	6	2.68
	100,001 and more INR	13	5.80

Source: Author's own creation

Measurement Model

Prior to testing the structural model, the convergent and discriminant validities of the scale were examined using the smartPLS 4 software. According to Hair et al. (2019), the factor loadings of all the items must be higher than the threshold limit of 0.708 and the composite reliability values must be within the prescribed limit of 0.7 to 0.95. According to Table 2, all the items demonstrate satisfactory loading on their respective factors, and the composite reliability values were well within the prescribed limits. Hence, internal consistency for the model was established. Discriminant validity was assessed using the Heterotrait-

Monotrait (HTMT) criteria which states that the values must be below 0.9 (Gold et al. (2001) to establish discriminant validity. The values presented in Table 3 demonstrate satisfactory discriminant validity.

Table 2: Convergent Validity				
Constructs	**Factor loadings**	**Cronbach's ∝**	**C.R.**	**AVE**
Source Credibility (SCB)		0.932	0.941	0.830
SCB1	0.909			
SCB2	0.937			
SCB3	0.911			
SCB4	0.886			
Argument Quality (ARG)		0.848	0.860	0.688
ARG1	0.885			
ARG2	0.781			
ARG3	0.777			
ARG4	0.869			
Functional Value (FV)		0.865	0.866	0.712
FV1	0.818			
FV2	0.850			
FV3	0.835			
FV4	0.872			
Emotional Value (EV)		0.823	0.864	0.737
EV1	0.761			
EV2	0.899			
EV3	0.908			
Social Value (CV)		0.952	0.957	0.874
SV1	0.947			
SV2	0.942			
SV3	0.904			
SV4	0.946			
Trust		906	0.908	0.781
TR1	0.849			
TR2	0.922			
TR3	0.893			
TR4	0.870			
Purchase Intention		0.882	0.889	0.739
PI1	0.875			
PI2	0.875			
PI3	0.853			
PI4	0.835			

Source: Author's own creation

Table 2: Discriminant Validity							
	ARG	**EV**	**FV**	**PI**	**SCB**	**SV**	**TR**
ARG							
EV	0.858						
FV	0.798	0.887					

PI	0.837	0.899	0.814				
SCB	0.736	0.830	0.785	0.759			
SV	0.802	0.893	0.846	0.781	0.753		
TR	0.832	0.895	0.887	0.830	0.741	0.867	

Source: Author's own creation

Structural Model

Partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) analysis examined several principal factors to determine the significance and weakness of latent component correlations. PLS bootstrapping procedure was adopted on the recommended 10,000 bootstraps (Hair et al., 2020). We addressed multicollinearity by using VIF which yielded all the values below 5 (Sarstedt et al., 2017) showing that no multicollinearity exist. The model fit index SRMR for the estimated model was 0.078 which was less than 0.08 threshold (Hair et al., 2020). The explanatory power was assessed using R^2 values. The R^2 was 0.756 for trust and 0.559 for Purchase intention. In social sciences the R^2 values above 0.2 are considered relevant (Rishi et al., 2024). Path coefficients p-values determined the statistical significance of the estimated paths. All route coefficients p-values except source credibility (β=0.018, $p>0.05$) were less than 0.05, indicating significant relationships (Hair et al., 2019). The trust showed the highest significance (β=0.747, $p<0.001$) towards purchase intention followed by the social value (β=0.292, $p<0.001$) and functional value (β=0.265, $p<0.001$) leading to trust. All this data is shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Structural Model Assessment

Hypothesis	Original sample (O)	Sample Mean	STDEV	T statistics	P values	Supported
SCB -> TR	0.018	0.015	0.048	0.369	0.712	No
ARG -> TR	0.168	0.163	0.055	3.052	0.002	Yes
FV -> TR	0.265	0.267	0.05	5.343	0.000	Yes
EV -> TR	0.221	0.226	0.064	3.457	0.001	Yes
SV -> TR	0.292	0.293	0.058	5.042	0.000	Yes
TR -> PI	0.747	0.749	0.032	23.096	0.000	Yes

Source: Author's own creation

DISCUSSION

The main objective of the study was to identify the significant factors that impact purchase intentions for UGC-recommended natural food products. The findings of the study reveal that trust significantly impacts consumer purchase intention. Further, social value is the most significant factor that help build trust towards

UGC-recommended products (Zhuang et al., 2024). This highlights that consumers are more likely to trust content for products that meet their values of social wellbeing. Another significant factor is the functional value of the product which means the consumers are influenced by the perceived benefits and practical information provided through UGC, which enhances their understanding of product efficacy and health benefits (Díaz et al., 2020). Further, emotional value also significantly impacts trust, which means consumers feel gratified after using healthy and eco-friendly natural food products. The similar results were shown in previous studies (Watanabe et al., 2020). The argument quality also proved to be a significant

factor as people believe that strong and convincing arguments which are based on facts and knowledge were important to form trust in content and thus form purchase intention for the product (Onofrei et al., 2022). However, Source credibility came out to be an insignificant factor indicating that people do not form trust for every content creator. Credibility may vary for different sources. Similar results were drawn in past studies (Onofrei et al., 2022).

IMPLICATIONS:

Theoretical Implication

This research significantly enhances the theoretical comprehension of consumer purchasing behavior. It addressed the need for a unified model for social media user-generated content and the adoption of natural food products. Numerous studies have examined social media and user-generated content; however, few have empirically investigated the factors influencing purchase intention for natural food products (Fatemi et al., 2022). No prior research has integrated the elaboration likelihood model with the theory of consumption value to construct a comprehensive model for consumer purchase intention. The analysis provided an extensive perspective on key factors that will facilitate the promotion of natural and healthy food products through social media platforms in developing economies.

Practical Implication

This study sheds light on how UGC influences consumers' decision-making and buying habits for natural products. The findings depict that the industries promoting natural food products must go for improving UGC's argument quality rather than going for credible sources as arguments build trust towards UGC's recommended products. Furthermore, users of the UGC-recommended product who recognize its value should be solicited to produce UGC-based reviews of the product. Discounts or incentives must be offered to them for this purpose. The product should provide multiple values, including functional value related to cost-effectiveness, emotional value associated with user satisfaction from natural products, and social value concerning users' perceptions among peers while utilizing the product.

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