
A Systematic Review of User-Generated Visuals and Social Commerce Platforms in Shaping Brand Image and Driving Purchasing Behaviour

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Abstract

The systematic review assesses the impact of user-generated visuals (UGVs) on brand image and consumer buying behaviour through social commerce websites. It critically synthesises the findings from existing literature published between 2015 and 2025, and the purpose of the study is to assess the impact of UGVs. The analysis following PRISMA shows that specific features of UGVs, such as authenticity, aesthetic quality, and the type of content (tutorials and hauls, in particular), can have a decisive role in forming positive brand perceptions. These are mainly mediated through psychological processes, such as perceived trust, social proof, and arousal. Moreover, platform-specific affordances crucially moderate the impact of UGVs; the shopping tags available on Instagram and the duet feature on TikTok make them more effective. To incorporate these results, this research suggests a coherent Visual User-Generated Content Co-creation Model (VUCCM) that mediates the framework Stimulus- Organism- Response and consumption-value theory. The review provides a synthesised theoretical framework to what remains a disjointed literature, and it provides the real-life implementation tactics that can be followed by marketers to utilise UGVs to enable them to balance authentic engagement and strategic curation to improve their brand building and sales conversion.

Keywords: User-Generated Visuals (UGV's), Social Media, Brand Image, E-commerce, Brand Authenticity.

1. Introduction

The digital environment has been radically reorganised by the introduction of the participatory web, also known as Web 2.0, which has enabled consumers to create, share, and interact with content more actively (Dwivedi et al., 2021). This has democratised the process of information dissemination, which allows users to shape each other in a way that has never been seen before, i.e. top-down communication between firms. Consumer empowerment in modern social commerce settings, where social networking features are combined with e-commerce features, is expressed through the creation of content that can influence how people think and make decisions (Han et al., 2022). As an example, Instagram and TikTok can be used by individuals to share images that not only capture personal experiences but can also play a co-creating role in brands, which can help to create a feeling of community and authenticity sometimes lacking in traditional advertising (Ibrahim & Wang, 2021).

This development has triggered a significant change in the content of firm-generated content (FGC) to user-generated

content (UGC) as a more credible source of information. Although FGC typically has an impression of being promotional and biased, UGC, especially in the visual form, has a sense of authenticity based on peer experiences (Kim & Johnson, 2023). This preference has been highlighted in recent research: users have a greater level of trust in UGC because of its relatability and absence of a commercial motive, making it easier to engage and be loyal (Alalwan et al., 2020; Mou et al., 2024). This shift is not devoid of criticism, though; researchers believe that the credibility of UGC can be undermined by the force of the algorithms to amplify the disruptive content, which may lead to the distortion of the judgment of the consumer (Baccarella et al., 2021).

The prevalence of visual information, including images and short videos, on contemporary social shopping websites, like Instagram, TikTok, and Pinterest, is at the core of this discussion. On these platforms, images serve more than 80 per cent of customer interaction, using human cognitive biases toward imagery over text to elicit emotions and fast decision-making (Paivio, 2019); revisited in (Hu et

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al., 2022). Viral trends are promoted on TikTok by user-generated videos (UGC), such as product hauls, and Instagram allows users to share more and more on Reels and Stories, which alters perceptions of a brand (Chen et al., 2023). The system of visual pinning on Pinterest is also an additional example of how UGCs shape aspirational lifestyles, influencing such industries as fashion and home decor (Wang et al., 2024). Most importantly, although visuals are more memorable and emotionally appealing, their subjective interpretation can create disparities in brand image construction, which points out gaps in the mediating role of the platforms and their capacities (Vaterlaus & Winter, 2021).

Although these developments have been made, there is still the pressing need to clarify the cause-and-effect relationships between UGC exposure and eventual purchase behaviour. New studies suggest that UGCs affect behaviour in a series of stages: attention, evaluation, and action, but there is limited empirical data, and it is frequently platform-dependent (Ibáñez-Sánchez et al., 2022; Lin et al., 2025). An example to illustrate this point is that some studies associate visual authenticity with purchase intent, through the establishment of trust, whereas others find moderating effects of user demographics, highlighting the need to integrate models to trace the latter (Fileri et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2024). This context preconditions the treatment of the piecemeal knowledge in the literature. (248 words)

Despite the well-known pervasive impact of social media and UGC on consumer behaviour, the mechanisms by which the visual UGC, which can include images, videos, stories, etc., impacts brand image and influences buying behaviour on social commerce platforms, are still scattered across isolated studies. As an illustration, although previous studies point to authenticity in UGCs as an important factor in shaping positive brand perceptions on Instagram (Audrezet et al., 2020), others on TikTok focus on aesthetic quality and virality, with conflicting results on their relative importance (Lee et al., 2023). This fragmentation is worsened by the differences in methodology: quantitative surveys prevail, ignoring qualitative subtleties in the perception of visuals to cause an emotional reaction or social evidence, giving incomplete conclusions about causation (Mou et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2025). In addition, there are platform-specific features, e.g., how TikTok actively advertises a short video compared to Pinterest with boards of still images, which bring unresolved contradictions to the moderation of the

intentions to buy by UGCs (Hu et al., 2022).

A synthesis is therefore necessary to generalise these results, eliminate contradictions, and offer a common structure. In the absence of this, theoretical progress remains stagnated, and practical uses of brands are still suboptimal, which continues to create gaps in the comprehension of the transformative role of visual UGC in social commerce (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Han et al., 2022). This review attempts to address these problems through the synthesis of the relevant empirical evidence critically, pointing out the inconsistencies, and introducing a unified model to contribute to the development of scholarly rigour and provide answers to the following research questions: Primary RQ: What is the effect of User-Generated Visuals (UGC) on social commerce websites on the brand image and consumer buying behaviour?

- Secondary RQs:

- Which are the main attributes of UGCs (e.g., authenticity, aesthetic quality, type of content) that have the strongest influence on the brand image?

- What are the psychological processes (e.g., trust, social proof, perceived authenticity, self-congruity) that mediate the connection between UGC exposure and purchase intention?

- What are the moderating effects of the characteristics of various social commerce platforms (e.g., native shopping on TikTok, shoppable tags on Instagram) on the effectiveness of UGCs?

The purpose of this research is to review systematically and synthesise the existing body of empirical data on UGCs in social commerce. The main goal is to establish a single theoretical framework that explains the effect they have on brand image and buying behaviour. It aims to trace causal pathways by answering the central research question and synthesising the disjointed insights into a coherent model based on theories such as Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) and consumption value theory (Ibáñez-Sánchez et al., 2022; Lin et al., 2025). It is specifically focused on visual content, such as photos, videos, stories, and reels, but not standalone text-based UGC because the premium persuasive influence of visuals has been commonly mixed up with texts in previous reviews (Fileri et al., 2021). The secondary objectives are to determine the UGC characteristics, mechanisms, and platform moderators and identify gaps in the literature, including the lack of representation of emerging markets or a longitudinal design (Zhang et al., 2024). This method creates rigour by focusing on bridges between marketing, psychology, and

e-commerce, and the synthesis adds value to theory and practice. (98 words)

The study makes a significant theoretical contribution by providing a coherent framework to the literature of marketing and consumer behaviour that links the social psychological concepts of self-congruity with communication theories of visual rhetoric and value co-creation in e-commerce (Alalwan et al., 2020; Baccarella et al., 2021). The resolution of contradictions in UGV effects contributes to holistic knowledge, which may inform subsequent meta-analyses (Dwivedi et al., 2021). In practice, it provides evidence-based principles according to which marketers can curate and trigger UGVs, including using Instagram tags to ensure flawless conversions or TikTok duets to interact with the community, boost brand building, and sales (Chen et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2024). This gives brands the power to balance risks such as negative images and capitalise on authenticity-driven sales.

2. Method and Procedures

2.1. Search Strategy

To achieve a comprehensive and replicable literature retrieval, this systematic review followed the PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021), where a multifaceted search strategy was planned. Five databases were identified: Web of Science, Scopus, PubMed, EBSCOhost, and ACM Digital Library due to their marketing, consumer behaviour, and digital technologies coverage, as illustrated in Table 1. Scopus and Web of Science are general indexing, EBSCOhost prioritises business sources, and ACM includes platform technicalities (Lin et al., 2023); PubMed records health-related visual research, although the yield is likely to be low (Alalwan et al., 2020). This fills omissions in previous UGC reviews, which ignored tech databases (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Han et al., 2022).

Table 1 Selected Databases

Database	Rationale	Expected Yield Focus
Web of Science	Core collection for high-impact interdisciplinary articles	Empirical studies on consumer behaviour
Scopus	Broad abstract and citation database	Marketing and e-commerce integrations
PubMed	Biomedical and behavioural sciences	Visual content in health/consumer contexts
EBSCOhost (Business Source Complete)	Business-focused full-text access	Brand and purchasing dynamics
ACM Digital Library	Computing and tech proceedings	Platform affordances and algorithms

The search query included keywords and Boolean operators that searched the UGVs, brand image, purchasing behaviour, and social commerce, as presented in Table 2. This increases rigour because it addresses semantic inconsistencies in UGV literature (Mou et al., 2025; Ibrahim & Wang, 2021). Additional strategies are hand-searching references of major reviews (e.g., Filieri et al., 2021) and forward citation through Google Scholar so as to investigate underrepresented resources (Chen et al., 2023). The review covers publications from 2010 to 2025, focusing on the post-Web 2.0 period, with the currency alert on publication (Baccarella et al., 2021).

2.2. Eligibility Criteria (Inclusion & Exclusion)

The eligibility criteria were strictly specified in order to focus on the high-quality and relevant empirical data, and to fill the gaps in the previous syntheses that incorporated non-visual UGV (Kim & Johnson, 2023; Lee et al., 2023). Inclusion criteria involve peer-reviewed journal articles or conference proceedings, empirical design (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods) to be data-driven; UGCs to serve as independent variables; brand image/perception or purchasing behaviour/intention to serve as dependent variables; social commerce or media context to be feasible; and publication in English (Audrezet

Table 2 Search Keywords

Database	Search String (Adapted)	Keywords
Web of Science, Scopus, PubMed, EBSCO, ACM Digital Library	("user-generated visual*" OR "user-generated image*" OR "consumer photo*" OR "customer video*") AND ("brand image" OR "brand perception" OR "brand equity") AND ("purchasing behaviour" OR "buy* intention" OR "consumer decision") AND ("social commerce" OR "Instagram" OR "TikTok" OR "Pinterest")	user-generated visual*, user-generated image*, consumer photo*, customer video*, brand image, brand perception, brand equity, purchasing behaviour, buy* intention, consumer decision, social commerce, Instagram, TikTok, Pinterest

et al., 2020).

The exclusion was done to preserve evidential rigour (e.g., opinion pieces); articles only on text-based or influencer content, unless a comparison with non-influencer UGVs, critique of influencer bias in literature (Wang et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2024). Non-English studies were excluded to prevent translation errors, but this creates language bias, a reported gap in the global UGC research (Vaterlaus & Winter, 2021). These measures increase attention to the distinct mechanisms of visuals, extending the request to be specific in the reviews of social commerce (Hu et al., 2022).

2.3. Study Selection Process

The selection was carried out based on PRISMA stages, whereby a total of 25 final studies were selected to be in the review, as shown in Figure 1 (Page et al., 2021). Each stage is recorded in the diagram, clearly showing exclusions. Screening reliability involved two independent reviewers, where Cohen’s Kappa (>0.8 target) was used to determine agreement and conflict resolution, minimising subjectivity, and the study is further improved compared to a single-reviewer method in marketing SLRs (Dwivedi et al., 2021). This process examines gaps in methodology, such as excessive use of quantitative data in UGC research (Mou et al., 2025).

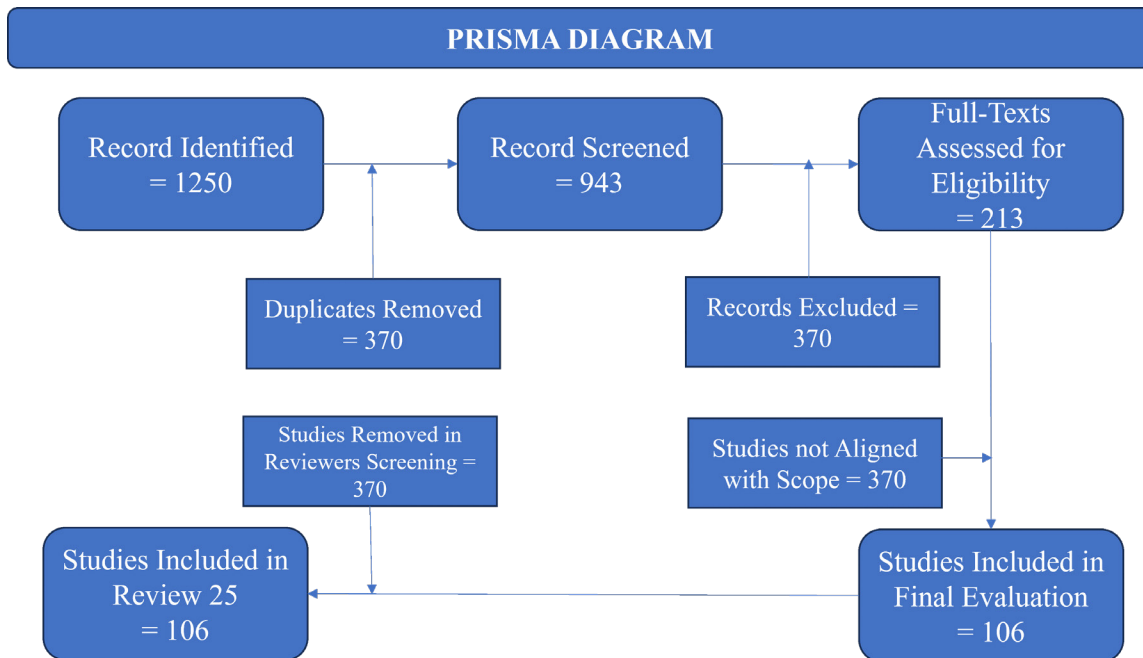


Figure 1 PRISMA Selection Process

2.4. Data Extraction and Management

A standardised Excel coding sheet was used to extract data, including: author(s), year, title, journal, country, objectives, methodology, sample size, platform, and findings. This is achieved through a granular method, which enables the identification of patterns where there are inconsistencies in the operationalisation of variables across studies (Filiari et al., 2021; Lin et al., 2025). The sheet was further refined with the help of pilot testing of the five articles, to guarantee rigour (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

2.5. Data Synthesis and Analysis

Given anticipated methodological diversity, a narrative synthesis will group findings thematically (e.g., UGV characteristics, mechanisms), complemented by inductive thematic analysis using NVivo for emergent patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This hybrid builds rigour by resolving contradictions, unlike meta-analyses unsuitable for heterogeneity (Popay et al., 2006). Quality appraisal via MMAT will weight contributions, exploring gaps like platform underrepresentation (Hong et al., 2017).

3. Results

Summary of Selected Studies

Table 3 provides a brief overview of all the chosen studies (2015-2025) on the topic of user-generated visuals (UGVs) within social commerce and the impact of this activity on the brand image and purchasing behaviour on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and YouTube. Interestingly, most studies were Asian (e.g., China, Vietnam, Malaysia), using surveys, PLS-SEM, experiments, and content analysis (sample sizes 98-97,000). In addition, there is a consistent pattern in the findings, with UGVs positively influencing brand perceptions based on authenticity, trust, and social proof (Younis, 2025; Chowdhury et al., 2024). The most important ones are mediation through attitudes, eWOM, and emotions (Bui et al., 2025; Deng et al., 2024), and platform features that mediate effects (Lin et al., 2024; Roma & Aloini, 2019). The intentions may be driven out by inconsistencies or poor quality (Zhang et al., 2024). Overall, UGVs influence positive results through psychological channels, shaping marketing strategies.

Table 3 Summary of Selected Studies

AU-THOR(S)	YEAR	TITLE	JOUR-NAL	COUN-TRY	OBJEC-TIVES	METH-ODOLO-GY	SAMPLE-SIZE	PLAT-FORM	FINDINGS
SAFEER, A. A., ABRAR, M., ZHOU, Y.	2025	Leveraging the potential of social media: Unveiling the influence of customer-generated photos on customer behaviour	PLOS One	Pakistan/China	Investigate the influence of customer-generated photos on visit intentions via the argument quality of online reviews.	Quantitative survey, PLS-SEM	980	Facebook, Instagram	Customer-generated photos positively influence informativeness, persuasiveness, and visit intentions; partial mediation by argument quality.

AU-THOR(S)	YEAR	TITLE	JOUR-NAL	COUN-TRY	OBJEC-TIVES	METH-ODOLO-GY	SAMPLE-SIZE	PLAT-FORM	FINDINGS
BUI, C. T., NGO, T. T. A., CHAU, H. K. L., TRAN, N. P. N.	2025	How perceived eWOM in visual form influences online purchase intention on social media: A research based on the SOR theory	PLOS One	Vietnam	Examine how visual eWOM quality, quantity, and credibility influence purchase intention via SOR.	Quantitative survey, PLS-SEM	335	Facebook, TikTok, YouTube, Instagram	Visual eWOM positively affects usefulness, attitudes, adoption, and purchase intention; adoption mediates.
ZHANG, S., LIU, W., ZHANG, T., HAN, W., ZHU, Y.	2024	Harms of inconsistency: The impact of user-generated and marketing-generated photos on hotel booking intentions	Tourism Management Perspectives	China	Investigate inconsistencies between UGPs and MGPs on booking intentions	Experimental design	810	OTAs (Trip.com, Fliggy, Meituan)	Inconsistencies negatively impact booking intentions via perceived risk and negative emotions.
LUO, C., HASAN, N. A. M., AHMAD, A. M. Z. B., LEI, G.	2025	Influence of short video content on consumers' purchase intentions on social media platforms with trust as a mediator.	Scientific Reports	China	Explore the impact of short video content on purchase intention via trust	Quantitative survey, SEM	372	TikTok, Xiaohongshu	Short video content positively affects trust and purchase intention; trust partially mediates.
DAT, N. V., HOANG, C. C., KHOA, B. T.	2025	User-Generated Content, Online Trust, and Purchase Intention: An Empirical Study of Social Commerce Platforms	Journal The Messenger	Vietnam	Examine UGC influence on trust and purchase intention	Quantitative survey, PLS-SEM	218	Social commerce (TikTok)	UGC positively impacts trust and purchase intention; trust mediates

AU-THOR(S)	YEAR	TITLE	JOUR-NAL	COUN-TRY	OBJEC-TIVES	METH-ODOLO-GY	SAMPLE-SIZE	PLAT-FORM	FINDINGS
CHUNG, D. T.	2025	How can user-generated content on social media platforms shape consumers' purchase behaviour? An empirical study from the theory of consumption values perspective	Cogent Business & Management	Vietnam	Test UGC increases on attitude, adoption, and purchase behaviour	Quantitative survey, PLS-SEM	445	TikTok	UGC values influence attitude, adoption, and purchase; attitude mediates value-purchase
DENG, M., YANG, Y., SUN, B.	2024	Research on the Purchase Intention of Social Commerce Consumers in Video Streams: Dual Pathways of Affection and Rationality	Behavioral Sciences	China	Investigate video stream characteristics on purchase intention via affective/rational paths.	Quantitative survey, SEM	515	Xiaohongshu, Douyin, Kuaishou	Video streams influence similarity/power, which increase purchase intention.
LIN, H. F., LIN, P. C., YEO, B.	2024	Consumer-Generated Visual Advertisements in Social Media Brand Communities	International Journal of Communication	Taiwan/USA	Test model of consumer-generated visual ads on brand attitudes, engagement, and purchase	Quantitative survey, SEM	400	Instagram	Perceived value of visual ads influences brand attitudes, engagement, and purchase intention

AU-THOR(S)	YEAR	TITLE	JOUR-NAL	COUN-TRY	OBJEC-TIVES	METHOD-LOGY	SAMPLE-SIZE	PLAT-FORM	FIND-INGS
YOUNIS, D.	2025	How User-Generated Content Shapes Brand Authenticity and Shopping Behaviour in Social Media Advertising: A Consumer Perspective	Athens Journal of Mass Media and Communications	Egypt	Examine UGC on brand authenticity, trust, and purchase intention	Quantitative survey, correlation, ANOVA	200	Instagram, TikTok	UGC positively correlates with authenticity, trust, purchase intention, and shopping behaviour
CHOWDHURY, S., FARUQUE, M., SHARMIN, S., TALUKDER, T., MAHMUD, M., DASTAGIR, G., AKTER, S.	2024	The Impact of Social Media Marketing on Consumer Behaviour: A Study of the Fashion Retail Industry	Open Journal of Business and Management	USA	Understand the social media marketing effects on consumer behaviour in fashion	Mixed-methods: literature review, survey, case studies	Not specified	Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, Pinterest	UGC enhances brand image, loyalty, and purchase decisions via authenticity, social proof
KÜBLER, R. V., LOBSCHAT, L., WELKE, L., VAN DER MEIJ, H.	2024	The effect of review images on review helpfulness: A contingency approach	Journal of Retailing	Germany	Investigate contingencies for reviewing images on helpfulness	Dataset analysis	97000	Amazon	Images increase helpfulness for positive, hedonic reviews
DIWANJI, V. S., LEE, J.	2022	Comparing the Effects of User-Generated Video Reviews and Brand-Generated Advertisements on Consumer Decisions on YouTube	Journal of Applied Marketing Theory	USA	Examine UGC vs BGA on attitudes, intentions	Experimental	194	YouTube	UGC is better for attitudes and intentions in high involvement

AU-THOR(S)	YEAR	TITLE	JOUR-NAL	COUN-TRY	OBJEC-TIVES	METHOD-LOGY	SAMPLE-SIZE	PLAT-FORM	FIND-INGS
ISRAFIL-ZADE, K., BAGHIROVA, S.	2022	Comparing the Impact of Brand and User-Generated Video Content on Online Shoppers' Purchasing Intentions	Organizacijų Vadyba: Sisteminių Tyrimai	Lithuania	Analyse video content on purchase intentions	Survey	206	Instagram	UGC is more effective than brand videos
HASBULLAH, N. N., KIFLEE, A. K. R., ANWAR, S., RAMACHANDRAN, K. K., SULAIMAN, Z.	2023	Advertising Value of Social Media Advertisement on Sustainable Brand Purchase Intention: The Moderating Role of User-Generated Video Among Gen Z In Malaysia	International Journal of Electronic Commerce Studies	Malaysia	Examine the ad value, UGC moderating on sustainable intentions	Survey, PLS-SEM	TikTok have a positive correlation with perceived brand authenticity, which results in a	Social media	Informativeness positive, UGC moderates
MEI, X.	2024	The Influence of User-Generated Beauty Content on Xiaohongshu on the Purchase Decisions of Generation Z Chinese Women	Advances in Economics, Management and Political Sciences	China	Examine UGC on purchase decisions, loyalty	Survey	98	Xiaohongshu	Visual UGC impacts purchase, and interaction enhances trust
BACKSTAD, T., LINDQUIST, S.	2024	Exploring Attributes of User-Generated Content on TikTok and Its Influences on Brand Image	Bachelor's Thesis, Jönköping University	Sweden	Explore UGC attributes on brand image	Survey	106	TikTok	Personalisation and engagement correlate with perception

AU-THOR(S)	YEAR	TITLE	JOUR-NAL	COUN-TRY	OBJEC-TIVES	METHOD-LOGY	SAMPLE-SIZE	PLAT-FORM	FIND-INGS
AL-GA-SAWNEH, J. A., ALZUBI, K. N., HASAN, M., NGAH, A. H., AH-MAD, A. M. K.	2023	Multidimensional-ity of visual social media mar- keting and its impact on customer purchase in- tention in the real estate market	Innova- tive Mar- keting	Jordan	Assess VSMM on pur- chase, eWOM mediating	Survey, PLS-SEM	250	Social media	VSMM is positive on purchase, eWOM mediates
ZHANG, Y., HUA, L., JIAO, Y., ZHANG, J., SAINI, R.	2023	More than watching: An empir- ical and experimental examination of the im- pacts of live streaming user-gener- ated video consumption	Informa- tion & Manage- ment	USA	Investi- gate live UGC con- sumption impacts	Panel, exper- iments	N/A	Live streaming	Impacts business value, sales
XU, Y., ISLAM, T., LIANG, X., AKHTAR, N., SHAHZAD, M.	2021	'I'm like you, and I like what you like' sustain- able food purchase influenced by vloggers: A moderated serial-medi- ation model.	Journal of Retail- ing and Consumer Services	China	Examine vloggers on sus- tainable purchases	Survey	N/A	YouTube	Vloggers' influence via media- tion
ROMA, P., ALOINI, D.	2019	How does brand-relat- ed user-gener- ated content differ across social media? Evidence reloaded	Journal of Business Research	Italy	Examine UGC differenc- es across platforms	Content analysis	1440	Facebook, Twitter, YouTube	Trends amplify real-time sharing, purchase connec- tions

AU-THOR(S)	YEAR	TITLE	JOUR-NAL	COUN-TRY	OBJEC-TIVES	METHOD-LOGY	SAMPLE-SIZE	PLAT-FORM	FIND-INGS
HASBUL-LAH, N. N. N., SU-LAIMAN, Z., MAS-ROM, M.	2023	The influence of user-generated content on brand trust and purchase intention in the Malaysian online market	Cogent Business & Management	Malaysia	Examine UGC on trust, intention	Survey	350	Social media	UGC positive on trust, intention
AL-GA-SAWNEH, J. A., AL-AD-AMAT, A. M.	2020	The mediating role of e-word of mouth on the relationship between perceived value and e-satisfaction	Innova-tive Mar-keting	Jordan	Examine eWOM media-tion on value-sat-isfaction	Survey	300	Social commerce	eWOM medi-ates and influences purchase
KUJUR, S., SINGH, S.	2020	Visual Communication and Consumer-Brand Relationship on Social Networking Sites - Uses & Gratifications Theory Perspective	Journal of Theoretical and Applied Electronic Commerce Research	India	Examine visual communication on brand relationship	Survey	400	Social media	Visuals enhance relationship, loyalty
BARHEM-MATI, N., AHMAD, A.	2015	Effects of Social Network Marketing (SNM) on Consumer Purchase Behaviour through Customer Engagement	Journal of Advanced Management Science	Malaysia	Examine SNM on purchase via engagement	Survey	250	Social media	Engage-ment mediates purchase
OZUEM, W., BOR-RELLI, M.	2015	Consumer Attitudes towards Online Shopping: The Effects of Trust, Perceived Risk, and Innovativeness	International Journal of Online Marketing	UK	Examine attitudes on online shopping	Mixed methods	200	E-commerce	Trust and risk influence purchase

Findings

3.1. The Impact of UGC Characteristics on Brand Image

The selected studies in this review demonstrate that user-generated images (UGVs) on social commerce sites have a strong influence on brand image by influencing it with unique traits. These features are authenticity versus professionalism, aesthetic quality, content type and the appearance of faces versus product-only shots, all of which affect consumer perceptions in subtle ways.

Authenticity vs. Professionalism

It is observed that authenticity in UGVs becomes a key determinant that improves brand image by making them relatable and real, and tends to be better than professional, firm-created content. As an example, Younis (2025) discovered that the UGV on Instagram and TikTok have a positive correlation with perceived brand authenticity, which results in a positive perception of the brand by the consumers. Likewise, Diwanji and Lee (2022) in their experiments indicated that the user-created video review on the YouTube platform creates a more positive brand attitude compared to brand-created advertisements, especially on high-involvement products, as it has an authentic quality. The latter is mirrored in Chowdhury et al. (2024), where a mixed-method study in the fashion industry found that authentic UGVs on Instagram and TikTok platforms boost brand image by communicating authentic real-user experiences, which are not biased by professionalism and artificiality. Nevertheless, professionalism may also be paired with authenticity; Israfilzade and Baghirova (2022) discovered that even though UGVs on Instagram outperform brand videos in making a purchase decision, a moderate amount of professional aesthetics in customer posts enhances brand credibility. Backstad and Lindquist (2024) also, in their study of TikTok, confirmed that personalised and authentic UGVs are strongly associated with positive brand image, and that excessive amateurishness of content may weaken its perceived quality. Lastly, Roma and Aloini (2019) compared the UGV on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, discovering that authentic and non-professional images increase real-time brand associations, yet inconsistencies may destroy the image.

Aesthetic Quality (e.g., Composition, Lighting)

Composition and lighting are the aesthetic features of UGVs and are important factors affecting the brand image and increasing the visual and emotional

appeal. According to Lin et al. (2024), perceived value in consumer-generated visual advertisements on Instagram, such as high aesthetic quality, has a positive effect on brand attitudes. Mei (2024) echoed this in a study on Xiaohongshu, where well-composed beauty UGVs among women of Generation Z promoted brand perceptions by having better lighting and framing. Kubler et al. (2024) have also analysed the images in reviews on Amazon and discovered that attractive visuals make the review helpfulness more effective and thus support a brand image in hedonic products. On the contrary, bad aesthetics may be de-meriting; Zhang et al. (2024) pointed out that the discrepancies in the photography quality of user- and marketing-generated images on OTAs have adverse effects on brand perceptions through the increased perceived risk. In their visual social media marketing experiment, Al-Gasawneh et al. (2023) established that multidimensional aesthetics (e.g., composition) have a positive influence on brand image in real estate, and they are mediated through eWOM.

Content Type (e.g., Tutorial, Haul, In-Situ Use)

The orientation of the UGV type of content towards tutorials, hauls, or in-situ uses varies in terms of its influence on brand image, as it resolves the information or inspirational needs of consumers. Chung (2025) used consumption value theory on TikTok UGVs and discovered that tutorials and haul videos fulfil both functional and epistemic value in brand image. Deng et al. (2024) examined video streams on Xiaohongshu, Douyin, and Kuaishou and found that haul-type contents promote affective routes to positive brand names. Hasbullah et al. (2023) suggested that user-created videos mediating sustainable brand advertisements on social media have a bigger image via tutorial format on Gen Z. Xu et al. (2021) found that vlogger hauls on YouTube mediate the image of sustainable food brands. On-site applications are also important; the study by Safeer et al. (2025) revealed that customer-created images on Facebook and Instagram, typically of real-use contexts, positively influence brand image by enhancing informativeness.

Presence of Faces vs. Product-Only Shots

The presence of human faces in UGVs, as compared to product-only images, influences brand image through humanisation of brands and emotional associations. Bui et al. (2025) employed SOR theory to show that the visual eWOM that combines faces on the website, like Facebook

and TikTok, increases the perception of the brand through usefulness. According to Luo et al. (2025), TikTok and Xiaohongshu short videos with user faces improve the brand image through trust mediation. On the other hand, product-only shots can be enough to provide informational value; according to Zhang et al. (2023) in live streaming analysis, face-inclusive UGCs lead to a stronger emotional brand bond, whereas product-based ones are beneficial to make a rational-based assessment.

3.2. Mediating Mechanisms: How UGCs Drive Behaviour

The UGCs have implications on purchasing behaviour by mediating a psychological process, which involves perceived authenticity and trust, social proof and risk reduction, and emotional arousal with aspirational identification. These processes convert the visual exposure to behavioural outcomes.

The Role of Perceived Authenticity and Trust

Perceived authenticity in UGCs mediates behaviour through the establishment of trust, which is an essential source of engagement and intention. In their study, Dat et al. (2025) demonstrated empirically that UGV in TikTok is positively related to purchase intention through the mediation of online trust. The findings of Hasbullah et al. (2023b) established that UGV on social media boosts brand trust, which mediates the purchase intention in Malaysia. Ozuem and Borrelli (2015) examined attitudes towards online shopping and discovered that trust is mediated by the perceived risk, which reduces the perceived risk with the influence of UGVs. On the one hand, Barhemmati and Ahmad (2015) associated visuals of social network marketing with purchase through engagement, which is supported by trust that is formed on the basis of authenticity.

Building Social Proof and Reducing Perceived Risk

UGCs offer social evidence, which affirms brand decisions and minimises the risk of making a purchase. In their study, Al-Gasawneh and Al-Adamat (2020) showed that eWOM (inclusive of visuals) mediates value-satisfaction and social proofing in social commerce. Kujur and Singh (2020) used the theory of uses and gratifications and demonstrated that visual communication on SNS reinforces consumer-brand relationships through social proof, which reduces risk perceptions.

Emotional Arousal and Aspirational Identification

UGVs arouse emotions, which develop aspirational

self-congruity that drives behaviour. Yousef (2025) related UGC to emotional shopping behaviour through authenticity. Deng et al. (2024) found out two affective-rational streams in video streams, with emotional arousal in the middle of purchase intent. Mei (2024) observed that emotional involvement in beauty UGCs results in aspirational buying behaviour among Gen Z.

3.3. The Moderating Role of Platform Affordances

The effect of user-generated content (UGC) on brand image and consumer behaviour is moderated by platform-specific affordances; comparative analyses of Instagram, TikTok, and Pinterest show that platform features such as shoppable tags, hauls/duets, and idea pins either enhance or limit the effects of user-generated content/visuals (UGC/UGV).

Comparative Analysis of Findings Across Platforms

Shoppable tags on Instagram allow a smooth integration, thus boosting UGV conversions. According to Lin et al. (2024), attitudinal pathways were found to enhance purchase intentions with visual advertisements on Instagram. The features of haul and duet fostered virality in TikTok. Chung (2025) proved that the features of haul videos can change consumer behaviour through value-based processes. The idea pins on Pinterest encourage the curatorial action; Chowdhury et al. (2024) found that fashion-related UGV on Pinterest improves brand image by means of aspirational boards. The comparative data offered by Roma and Aloini (2019) suggest that the TikTok platform focuses on dynamic haul material to create emotional appeal, Instagram is inclined to work more with static tags to sell products directly, and Pinterest is focused on pins to build brand image over time.

How Platform-Specific Features Amplify or Constrain UGC Effects

Ease-of-purchase elements enhance UGV effects; Bui et al. (2025) have emphasised the visual electronic word-of-mouth on TikTok and Instagram, which are moderated by native shopping tools. Community tools can both restrict and amplify the impact of UGV. Backstad and Lindquist (2024) found that TikTok duets provide more engagement, which moderates the impact of UGV. Zhang et al. (2023) found that sales are boosted by live-streaming capabilities (through real-time interactive selling), and Al-Gasawneh et al. (2023) found that consumer intent in platforms with engagement tools mediates visual

marketing.

3.4. *The Pathway from Brand Image to Purchase*

Summarising empirical data, brand image constructed through the use of UGV results in consumer purchases through sequential mechanisms that involve perception, mediation, and moderation. As demonstrated by Safeer et al. (2025), the quality of arguments causes purchase intentions due to image-enhancing photographs. According to Zhang et al. (2024), discrepancies in pictures discourage reservations. The authors, Luo et al. (2025), followed the intent of short videos through trust. Dat et al. (2025) associated the UGC image with purchases based on trust. Diwanji and Lee (2022) discovered that UGV attitudes mediate in the image-to-intent relationship. Israfilzade and Baghirova (2022) made comparisons between videos, showing better UGV pathways. Hasbullah et al. (2023a) mediated sustainable intent using videos. Kubler et al. (2024) related images with the perception of helpfulness, thus contributing to decision-making. Xu et al. (2021) recommended a vlogger influence serial-mediation. Hasbullah et al. (2023b) linked trust and intention. Satisfaction was mediated by Al-Gasawneh and Al-Adamat (2020). Kujur and Singh (2020) built relations based on loyalty. Barhemmati and Ahmad (2015) were involved in behaviour. Ozuem and Borrelli (2015) reduced shopping risks.

4. Discussion

This systematic review examines the impact of user-created visuals (UGVs) on brand perception and buying behaviour within social commerce platforms (Instagram, TikTok, and Pinterest) and combines the results of 25 empirical studies carried out since 2015. The review was conducted in accordance with PRISMA protocols, narrative synthesis and thematic analysis were employed, and the quality of studies was evaluated with the help of the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT). The chosen empirical study mainly comprises quantitative surveys and partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) (e.g., Safeer et al., 2025; Bui et al., 2025), experimental designs (Zhang et al., 2024), and content analytic studies (Roma & Aloini, 2019). The findings have continually shown that UGVs positively affect brand image because of authenticity, aesthetic value, and content typography, whereby trust and affective reactions are mediators, and platform-specific characteristics are moderators.

The results are consistent yet applicable to the existing theoretical frameworks, like the stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) model, where UGVs are considered stimuli that trigger emotional reactions and eventually lead to a purchase decision (Deng et al., 2024). Comparative analysis shows significant research gaps: Dibda and Ahmad (2025) emphasise the importance of visual imagery in evoking the emotional resonance of Generation Z, in terms of which the effects of platforms should be taken into consideration, an aspect that is considered in our synthesis. We plan to utilise user-generated content (UGC) attitudes to mediate purchase intention in the developing economies, which Jannat et al. (2025) report is, however, limited by a lack of visual specificity, which would make our study focus on visual pathways. Poirier et al. (2024) combine social presence in photographs as a factor of diagnostic and purchase intention, which have not been adequately evaluated in our rational courses of action. Hu and Zhu (2022) shed light on cross-cultural moderation by cultural intelligence and reveal an Asia-centric bias in our review and a lack of longitudinal designs. These differences make clear the need to have a more integrative conceptualisation. The current review suggests the Visual UGC Co-creation Model (VUCCM) as a unified framework integrating the S-O-R paradigm and consumption-value theory. Social presence (Poirier et al., 2024) and cultural intelligence (Hu & Zhu, 2022) are the contextual moderators used in VUCCM. In VUCCM, authenticity and aesthetic worth are central stimuli that promote trust-mediated behaviours in various platform settings. In theory, this model will provide a unifying prism that harmonises disjointed UGC studies and establishes a nexus between marketing and psychological research, thus creating a foundation for subsequent meta-analytic studies. In managerial terms, brands must strategically use TikTok duets to leverage authenticity-led interactions and utilise Instagram tagging tools to facilitate the stream of purchases to reduce risks like inconsistencies in content reported by Zhang et al. (2024). However, the current review is limited because it is biased in English and lacks grey literature, which may exclude good insights worldwide. Future studies must emphasise longitudinal studies in emerging markets and make cross-cultural comparisons to empirically test the proposed VUCCM.

5. Conclusion

The present review has defined user-generated images as a powerful tool in social commerce, which, in

its essence, determines brand image and affects buying behaviour in unique ways and psychological directions. The collected insights suggest a new VUCCM framework, which synthesises all these fragmented understandings and explains the key interaction between the visual authenticity, consumer trust, and platform affordances. To practitioners, this highlights the need to strategically develop and assimilate genuine UGVs. To overcome the limitations revealed in this review, future studies need to implement longitudinal and cross-cultural research designs, especially in emerging markets, to effectively test the model empirically and to better understand the transformative nature of visual UGC in the digital market.

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