

When Everyone Can Be a Marketer: Factors and Attributes of User-Generated Content That Affect Brand Awareness, Brand Perceptions, and Buying Behaviour

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1 Introduction

With the prevalence and use of social media platforms, many companies have started to utilize them in order to engage with customers and even encourage user-generated content about their products. User-generated content is not a new phenomenon, however the use of it has become increasingly more important as there has been a power shift from marketers towards consumers with the use of user-generated content. Consumers are able to share their reviews, opinions and recommendations on social media platforms and have created trends that are selling out products and have allowed small new businesses to become viral hits. Traditional marketing efforts are losing their power to social media marketing and because of this, the utilization of social media in marketing is extremely important.

Companies can utilize user-generated content in a variety of ways. Some of these include cost-effectiveness as it is typically less costly than creating branded content. Additionally, user-generated content can increase search engine optimization because it provides fresh and relevant content that search engines favour.

Previous literature indicates that user-generated content increases brand awareness, brand perceptions and consumer buying behaviour. Despite this, there is still little literature regarding what specific factors and attributes of user-generated content affect the three concepts of brand awareness, brand perceptions and buying behaviour. Because of the aforementioned power shift from marketers towards consumers, it is important for companies to know specifically what factors and attributes of user-generated content affect these three marketing concepts in order to use user-generated content strategically in their marketing efforts and utilize user-generated content to the best of their knowledge. Furthermore, this research aims to expand on the existing literature of user-generated content in social media marketing and with these factors and attributes create a more comprehensive understanding of the powerful marketing tool.

This thesis aims to research the factors and attributes of user-generated content that affect young adults' brand awareness, brand perceptions, and buying behaviour. As there is not much prior research on this specific topic, the research was carried out as qualitative research and data was collected through holding semi-structured expert interviews targeting young adults that are familiar with social media platforms and understand the meaning of user-generated content. After interviews analysis, presentation and discussion of results will follow, including limitations and suggestions for future research.

2 Literature review

In this chapter, the current literature that is available on the topic of user-generated content, specifically the definition, prevalence, and the possible factors and attributes that affect brand awareness, brand perceptions, and consumer buying behaviour will be discussed. As the term, “user-generated content” is also known as consumer-generated media and conversational media, these key terms were also used when searching for existing literature.

2.1 User-generated content in a nutshell

The phenomenon of user-generated content, also known as consumer-generated media, and conversational media, is not recent as the term dates back more than 20 years ago. Furthermore, with the growing importance of social media, the term and its meaning are not only evolving but transforming as well. Despite this, no single definition of user-generated content is agreed upon. Due to this reason, it is important I share two definitions of it, one from approximately ten years ago and one within today’s standards, in order to be able to review the current literature on the topic and to expand on the existing literature accurately.

According to Östman (2012), despite there not being any clear definition of user-generated content, it is possible to identify two features that make the term distinct. First, user-generated content involves amateur production of original content or altering and editing existing content. The content needs to be created by someone that does not gain any monetary nor other types of benefit for it, as they are an amateur. Second, it involves sharing the content with others by posting it on a website, personal blog, or a social media platform. (Östman, 2012).

Moreover, Santos (2022) defines the key terms involved in user-generated content and forms a definition for the term that is updated to today’s standards. This definition of user-generated content is proposed as “any kind of text, data, or action performed by online digital systems users, published and disseminated by the same user through independent channels, that incur and expressive or communicative effect either on an individual manner or combined with other contributions from the same or other sources.” (Santos, 2022). Essentially, user-generated content includes all content published on a social media platform by an amateur.

There are many definitions for user-generated content available, all of them differing slightly but essentially focusing on the two aspects of there being a creator and the possibility that the content can be shared. The content must be created by a user and shared on a platform to which others can interact with it.

2.1.1 Prevalence of user-generated content in social media

Consumers nowadays have the task of assessing marketer-generated content as well as user-generated information in a range of different forms. (Mikalef, Sharma, Pappas, & Giannakos, 2021). Essentially consumers are bombarded with content coming from everywhere around them. According to O’Hern and Kahle (2013) the user-generated content that is created by consumers represents a profound shift of power from firms to consumers. In recent years, the traditional standard of marketing has been challenged by new business models and technologies that transfer significant power to consumers. O’Hern and Kahle (2013) argue that we are moving into an era of customer empowerment in which consumers are increasingly able to directly influence marketing outcomes by contributing their own user-generated content. Consumers are able to create any type of content of any brand they choose and reach millions of people in a matter of minutes.

When we are discussing user-generated content, it is important that we distinguish the term from influencer-generated content. Essentially influencer-generated content is content that is produced by “influencers” – creators who are key opinion leaders and have established likeable personalities by regularly creating content. Influencer-promoted ads enjoy significantly higher engagement in terms of consumer liking and commenting than that of brand-promoted ads. (Lou, Tan, & Chen, 2019). Technically in the broad sense of the term, influencer-generated content falls under the category of user-generated content, however we can also make a distinction between these two terms based on the prior definition. Influencer-generated content is differentiated from user-generated content, as influencers can be thought of as “specialists” of some topic, instead of amateurs as previously stated in the definition. Despite being seen as more positive than brand-promoted ads, influencers who post sponsored content can lose trust, and are not seen as authentic. (Coco & Eckert, 2020). Moreover, sponsored content can lead to a more negative brand attitude than user-generated content. (Müller & Christandl, 2019). User-generated content, however, can be considered authentic as the creator does not get any monetary benefit from posting the content. This authenticity increases trust both in the creator and the content that is created.

Colicev, Kumar, and O'Connor (2019) discuss how user-generated content is perceived mostly positively, suggesting that brands can benefit from user-generated content by encouraging consumers to participate in its creation. Additionally, user-generated content has an informative and persuasive effect on consumers and can increase trustworthiness. (Colicev, Kumar, & O'Connor, 2019).

Overall social media is growing in importance and has transformed the way people consume content and are aware of current topics and trends. Proving the importance of social media, we can look at the number of users on these platforms. In 2022 Instagram had 1.35 billion users worldwide and the number is only predicted to grow. By 2025, the number of Instagram users will account for over 30% of global internet users. (Statista, 2023). Instagram's newest competitor, TikTok, is not far from these statistics, as the number of users on TikTok in 2023 is a little less than a billion. All published amateur content on these two platforms falls under the term "user-generated content" as defined in the previous section. Other huge social media platforms are i.e., Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn.

2.1.2 Factors and attributes of user-generated content

As user-generated content is defined as content created by amateur users and content published on social media, factors and attributes of social media content can be analysed as factors and attributes of user-generated content. When defining factors and attributes, the two terms tend to overlap a lot, however there are some identifiable differences. Schreiner, Fischer, and Riedl (2021) discuss seven different factors of social media content, which are topic, component, length, interactivity, shared and original content, timing, and position.

The topic of the social media post includes the theme of the content, such as posts about specific events and ongoing trends. The component explains the media of the post, which are images, text, emojis, videos, and links. Length is about the extensiveness of the post. Aspects such as the visual height of the text, and the number of minutes in a video can be considered. Interactivity focuses on actively calling on interactivity. For example, requests to share and follow. A factor of a social media post is also the originality of it. To be more specific, whether the creator made the content or took it from somewhere. Timing is related to the specific timing of the post. This can be the day, time, or season the post was made. Lastly, the position is a factor in social media posts. For example, what is the position of the content on the feed of the user. (Schreiner, Fischer, & Riedl, 2021).

Attributes of user-generated content that can be considered are participation, conversationality, connectedness, community and commonality, and openness. (Chan-Olmsted, Cho, & Lee, 2013). User-generated content is participatory and can involve two-way communication through comments and likes. Furthermore, this allows for the creation of a community through similar interests and being connected with others. The final attribute is openness to user feedback and fewer barriers for participation. (Chan-Olmsted, Cho, & Lee, 2013).

Above factors and attributes can be found in social media posts, which technically fall under the category of user-generated content. As the aim is to understand which specific factors and attributes affect brand awareness, brand perceptions, and buying behaviour, we can utilize these factors and attributes when researching what are perceived most under which marketing concepts.

2.2 Understanding brand awareness

Brand awareness is a marketing term that refers to the buyer's ability to identify the brand in sufficient detail to make a purchase (Rossiter, 2014). For example, Maybelline often scores high in brand awareness, as shown by the United Kingdom, a country in which the brand awareness of Maybelline is at 87%. (Statista, 2022). What brand awareness essentially is, is the consumer's ability to recognize a brand in the shelf of other brands.

Brand awareness is an important part of the consumer decision-making process. (Dennhardt, 2014). Consumers think about a brand when making a purchase decision within the product category of the brand. Raising consumer's brand awareness can ultimately result in increasing the likelihood that a brand will be in consideration when making a purchasing decision. Lastly, according to Dennhardt (2014), brand awareness influences the formation and strength of brand associations which make up the brand image. The strength of the presence decides how easily different kinds of information become attached to the brand (Dennhardt, 2014). Essentially brand awareness can increase brand perceptions, thus result in a positive purchasing decision.

2.2.1 How user-generated content affects brand awareness

Brand awareness is important because it can lead to increased positive brand perception and a favourable purchasing decision. As brand awareness is created in every touch point that the consumer has with the brand, a social media presence is a powerful tool for raising

brand awareness. The more actively consumers engage with the social activities of a brand, the higher and more positive the consumers' awareness of the brand is (Dennhardt, 2014).

When looking at factors and attributes that raise brand awareness for example visual cues are important when trying to attract online attention. (Mikalef et al., 2021) This indicates that the factor of component of the user-generated content is an important factor in raising brand awareness. (Screiner, Fischer, & Riedl, 2021).

2.3 Understanding brand perceptions

Brand perception is the sum of consumers' sentiments, experiences, and opinions about a good or service combined to form their brand perception. (Mandagi, 2022). In other words, brand perception is how the consumer views and feels about the brand. Brand perception and brand image are often used interchangeably as they essentially can explain the same phenomenon. According to Mandagi (2022), brand perceptions can come from a variety of sources. These include consumer experiences, marketing communications, and through word of mouth. Essentially, any kind of information that is encouraged with the brand name can become linked to the brand name in memory and thus become part of that brand's image. (Romaniuk & Sharp, 2002).

Brand perceptions are shaped by multiple different aspects such as experiences and feelings. Enhancing and creating a good online presence and a positive brand perception is essential for a company and its brand because brand perceptions are an important part of consumer buying behaviour and the consumer journey.

2.3.1 How user-generated content affects brand perceptions

According to Mandagi (2022), previous studies have documented the link between social media influencers and brand perceptions. Influencer-generated content, as well as the influencer's credibility, attractiveness, and similarity to followers, have a positive impact on followers' trust in the influencer's posts, which shapes their perception. Positive brand perception is created as long as the creator is found authentic. However, as soon as the post is sponsored, it creates a negative brand perception due to a lack of trust. (Müller & Christandl, 2019). Moreover, the creators' likeableness is an important factor in creating a good brand perception.

Consumers' perceptions of brands on social media are shaped by what they see, hear, and experience. This is also found by Schivinskia and Dabrowskia (2014) as they state that

user-generated social media communication has a positive influence on both brand equity and brand perception. Moreover, both brand equity and brand perception are shown to have a positive influence on purchase intention.

2.4 Understanding consumer buying behaviour

Consumer buying behaviour includes a decision-making process that includes various steps before making the actual purchase decision. This process includes steps such as recognizing a need while searching for information about potential ways to satisfy the identified need. The next steps are the evaluation of alternative options to the actual purchase, and the post-purchase process, which includes the experience and evaluation of the product. (Dennhardt, 2014).

Consumer buying behaviour and its process can be looked at through the concept of a hierarchy of effects. The hierarchy of effects refers to the fixed order in which consumers perceive, process, and use advertising and other marketing communication information. First is the cognitive process, followed by affective and conative. In other words, the consumer first attains awareness and knowledge about a product while simultaneously developing either positive or negative feelings towards the product. Finally, the consumer acts either by buying or by rejecting the product. (Dennhardt, 2014). Essentially this sequence describes the order and influence of brand awareness on brand perceptions and ultimately the buying behaviour of the consumer.

2.4.1 How user-generated content affects consumer buying behaviour

Social media is shown to affect brand awareness and brand perceptions which are both related to consumer buying behaviour. Thus, social media can be a great tool for companies to enhance consumer buying behaviour positively as social media activities are directly shown to affect purchasing decisions. (Dennhardt, 2014).

Cheong and Morrison (2013) explain that consumers are likely to look for product information or recommendations before purchasing. Moreover, consumers put a high value on information and voice more trust in product information created by other consumers than in information generated by manufacturers. Trustworthiness remains the same regardless of whether the information is positive or negative. Additionally, user-generated content leads to a higher purchasing intention compared to disclosed advertisements and brand

posts. (Mayrhofer, Matthes, Einwiller, & Naderer, 2019). According to Cheong and Morrison (2013), consumers trust other end-users' opinions as they believe other consumers to convey more than just positive information about their products thus seeming more truthful.

Additionally, Arif, Aslam, and Siddiqui (2020) find that user-generated content influences and triggers customers to impulsively purchase a product, intent to purchase the product in the future, and remain engaged with the brand afterward.

2.5 The importance of understanding user-generated content

Prior research shows that user-generated content increases brand awareness, brand perceptions, and consumer buying behaviour. Moreover, user-generated content can run on a spectrum from positive to negative and involve brands and companies in the subsequent consequences. (Cheong & Morrison, 2013). When user-generated content is negative, it can have harmful implications for building and sustaining a brand's equity, an issue created by the fact that consumers consider user-generated content to be more credible than content that originates from a company.

Due to this spectrum, user-generated content is powerful and can either increase or decrease a company's brand awareness, positive brand perceptions, and consumer buying behaviour. Additionally, the power shift created by user-generated content is increasing consumers' trust in content created by other users compared to content that is sponsored or of advertising nature.

A lot of the current research focuses on how user-generated content affects brand awareness, brand perceptions, and consumer buying behaviour as well as how user-generated content is viewed in general compared to company-created content and influencer-generated content. This research aims to fulfil the gap in the literature in understanding what specific factors and attributes of user-generated content affect the three aforementioned marketing concepts both positively and negatively. The results of this research can increase the knowledge of how to create good user-generated content, and how companies can influence and use it in their marketing strategically.

Additionally, researching user-generated content brings valuable insights into consumer behaviour and marketing strategies. Some ways user-generated content can benefit companies are by being cost-effective. User-generated content is typically more cost-effective

than branded posts since companies do not need to hire content creators or pay for production costs. User-generated content can also increase search engine optimization by providing new and relevant content. Lastly, as has been mentioned before, user-generated content is often perceived as more authentic and trustworthy than branded content since it is created by real customers with no commercial agenda. Overall user-generated content can be a valuable tool for companies to build brand loyalty, enhance their marketing efforts, and increase sales. By leveraging the power of their customers, companies can create a more authentic and engaging brand experience.

3 Methods

This chapter focuses on the way the research was conducted and includes the research design, data collection method, and the method of data analysis.

This research focuses on the topic of user-generated content, and more specifically the possible factors and attributes that affect young adults' brand awareness, brand perceptions, and consumer buying behaviour. This research was conducted by holding semi-structured expert interviews, targeting young adults who have knowledge of social media, and aims to gain more in-depth knowledge and understanding of the specific factors and attributes of user-generated content that affect the three aforementioned marketing concepts.

3.1 The research design

The research design is descriptive, and qualitative research. The research question is best researched by getting detailed, descriptive answers, and could not have been thoroughly answered with a quantitative method. As the research is of explorative nature, the aim is to research perceptions and opinions.

The nature of the data is more descriptive than numerical. Due to this reason, the research question "What factors and attributes of user-generated content affect young adults' brand awareness, brand perceptions, and consumer buying behaviour" can be answered by using qualitative research methods. Subjects interviewed were chosen with a limitation of whether the subject understands and is familiar with the topic of user-generated content.

3.2 Data collection method

The data collection method consisted of holding semi-structured expert interviews. Interview questions consisted of three parts, 11 main questions, four follow-up questions, and warm-up and demographic questions, which were all compiled into an interview guide. (See Appendix A for the interview guideline). The three parts that the interview guide was divided into were brand awareness, brand perceptions, and consumer buying behaviour. To ensure the similarity in data collection and to enhance the validity of the data collection tool, all interviews followed the same interview guideline. The interviews lasted approximately from 45 minutes to an hour.

Interviewees were chosen based on their previous knowledge of user-generated content and familiarity with social media platforms. By ensuring that the interviewees had this

prior knowledge and familiarity with the concepts, the reliability of the perceptions and findings could be enhanced.

Eight interviews were conducted, everyone interviewed belonging to the target group. Some of the interviews were held via Zoom, while other interviews were held face-to-face. During both methods of interviewing, the interviewer took notes. The interview notes and transcriptions were collected under the same folder on the 16th week of 2023. See below a table of the interview partners.

Interview	Gender	Nationality	Age	Occupation
1	Male	Finnish	23 years	Customer associate
2	Female	American	27 years	Digital marketing specialist
3	Male	Finnish	28 years	Logistics specialist
4	Female	Greek	21 years	Customer care intern
5	Female	Finnish	28 years	HR Specialist
6	Male	Finnish	27 years	Entrepreneur
7	Female	Finnish	25 years	Postgraduate
8	Female	Finnish American	22 years	Marketing intern

Table 1. Overview of typeface and layout

3.3 Method of data analysis

Data was collected by taking notes during the interviews and recording audios of some interviews to be transcribed later. After each interview, the notes were edited immediately due to mistakes in spelling and personal explanations of terms. All interview notes and

transcriptions were collected under the same document and transferred to MAXQDA software, in which the interviews could be analysed. MAXQDA is a software in which qualitative data such as interviews can be analysed. In the software, interviews were gone through by creating a coding system and afterward highlighting the responses matching these codes in order to understand and analyse the data better.

This method of data analysis consisted of qualitative content analysis by Mayring (2000). The method includes a systematic approach to data analysis that follows the development and deductive application of categories in order to analyse qualitative data. To be more specific, there are two central approaches to qualitative content analysis. These approaches are inductive category development and deductive category application. The first part is the formulation of criterion definition, which is derived from theoretical background and the research question. After this, the material is worked through, and categories are created step by step. Deductive category application works with prior formulated, theoretical derived aspects of analysis, bringing them in connection with the text. The qualitative step of analysis consists of assignment of the category to a passage of text. (Mayring, 2000).

When the coding of the data was finished, the results were downloaded from the software and uploaded onto a Microsoft Word document to be further analysed. The results of the interviews were analysed with the presence of existing literature.

4 Results

In this chapter, I will present the results of the research and analyse them with the presence of existing literature and the qualitative content analysis method.

The interview guide included questions that were broader in the sense of the behaviour of social media usage and understanding of user-generated content, and those that were specified for brand awareness, brand perceptions, and buying behaviour.

4.1 Social media habits

All interviewees used social media on a daily basis and understood the meaning of user-generated content. The average time spent on social media ranged from 2 hours to 4 hours. Apps that interviewees used most often were TikTok, Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook. The app that interviewees spent most time on was TikTok. Most often these apps were used for entertainment purposes and to find out information on topics that interviewees were interested in.

4.2 Discovering new brands

When asked to describe factors and attributes that make respondents notice a brand in general, factors mentioned were for example logos, colours, names, packaging, quality, sustainability, and price. When moved to an online setting, interviewees felt that many of the factors and attributes stay the same, however, the brand personality and cohesiveness of the brand need to be more present.

Most interviewees had discovered new brands online. The brands ranged from companies in the cosmetics industry to fitness and entertainment. What specifically caught the attention of the interviewees in these incidents, was the previous interest and need for similar products, the person making the content, comments on the content, nice visuals, and good and positive reviews.

4.2.1 Factors and attributes of user-generated content that affect brand awareness

The content in general that catches the attention of the interviewees is good in quality, relevant to current trends, and has a likable creator. In addition to these, the way the content

engages with its audience is important. This is supported by existing literature as engagement with the audience is an important factor in ensuring brand awareness. (Chan-Olmsted, Cho, & Lee, 2013).

Interviewees felt that honest reviews are important when becoming aware of a certain product, and having that product stay in your mind positively. When felt as if the content being consumed is made only because it is paid, there was no interest in the brand being mentioned either. The idea that a person is being paid to promote the brand or the product caused disinterest in the whole brand, thus guiding to a negative brand perception even. Sponsored content is viewed as dishonest and can even create distrust toward the creator (Müller & Christandl, 2019). Another aspect related to honesty was the feeling of needing to be more critical in an online setting, because of being bombarded with ingenuine content online.

„I think online I am more critical towards brands and their content than outdoor or broadcast marketing for instance. We all know there is so much fake content online, so I feel like I need to be more critical here.“ [Interview 05]

Moreover, interviewees felt that there needs to be a clear and cohesive brand image that continues throughout different social media platforms in order to fully understand the brand and its message.

„In an online environment, the logo and colours are still important, but the whole brand needs to be more flashy in a way or like it needs to stand out more...and the brand needs to provide more information of them across the platforms.“ [Interview 03]

This is supported by the findings of Mikalef et al. (2018). Visuals are an important factor of user-generated content that raises brand awareness. Moreover, when having a cohesive continuation of the brand throughout different social media platforms, it will increase brand awareness as repetition of brand-related content was also seen as an important factor. Furthermore, as studied by Dennhardt (2014), the more the consumer has touchpoints with the brand, the more brand awareness is increased.

Furthermore, the creativity of the content was a factor that mattered a lot when sparking interest in a brand. If the content was aligned with the brand personality and there was a sense of community around the brand, it was said to create more awareness of the brand. The feeling of a community surrounding a brand can create trust between the creator and the viewers, ultimately resulting in more awareness of the brand and a positive perception. (Chan-Olmsted, Cho, & Lee, 2013).

„I think what makes me notice a brand is the way people talk about it, or in a way there has to be a community feel around the brand. I also think that the brand needs to have a sense of personality and the creator shouldn't take themselves too seriously...this should all be noticeable in the content as well.“ [Interview 03]

Moreover, aligned with the findings of Schreiner, Fischer, and Riedl (2021), the content needs to be relevant and include for example current trends for it to increase brand awareness. Some interviewees described situations in which they consume content that can be categorized as „trendy“.

„When I look at social media content, it has to grab my attention somehow. For example, seeing content about any ongoing trends and such, or having the person be interesting in some ways are things that grab my attention. Then, when the brand is mentioned in the video, or like the person is using something specifically, I feel like I become more aware of it and search it.“ [Interview 01]

Lastly, related to the aforementioned findings, an interesting point risen by an interviewee was the fact that in some cases they have noticed that luck matters a lot in terms of becoming viral and resulting in raising brand awareness. Participating in current trends, that tend to get a boost in visibility will increase the chance of becoming viral and increase brand awareness. This can be related to and explain the feeling of some creators being „lucky“. Moreover, an interviewee described the importance of followers related to increasing brand awareness.

„I think the followers matter the most because that way it is getting more viewers and that way possible customers. Also, if the brand can go viral with its product it will increase its recognizability.“ [Interview 08].

4.3 Experiences with user-generated content

Interviewees reported that seeing content about brands affected their perceptions of the brand both positively and negatively and was dependent on the authenticity of the person making the content and the quality of the content.

„For me, it depends on if the user-generated content looks like it was forced, so if they are getting free products in return, or if the person genuinely wanted to post it.“ [Interview 02]

„If the content is made well and has good quality then I see it as a positive thing. However, if the content is bad then the brand doesn't even stay in my mind. So, with user-generated content, it's kind of a hit or a miss. Either it's done very well, or messed up completely.“ [Interview 03]

When content seems genuine and authentic, the perception of the brand is positive as well. Furthermore, it was reported that if the person was not familiar with a brand and they would see a lot of positive content of the brand, then they would feel curious about the brand, resulting even in additional increased brand awareness.

Moreover, when asked to recall an instance with user-generated content, more than half described a positive interaction. This can indicate an overall positive attitude towards user-generated content, which is supported by Colicev, Kumar, and O'Connor (2019) as user-generated content is perceived more positively than branded posts. When describing a negative instance, an interviewee described disingenuous behaviour enforcing the notion that interviewees feel strongly about the authenticity of the content.

„A negative example is when I saw a creator reviewing a mascara and saying that it gave her eyelashes volume and length, but she received controversy when people accused her of wearing false eyelashes along with the mascara to dupe people.“ [Interviewee 07]

4.3.1 Factors and attributes of user-generated content that affect brand perceptions

The factors and attributes of user-generated content that affect brand perceptions were mentioned as enthusiasm, positive reviews, the creativity of the content, and the likeability of the creator.

Brands were perceived more positively when in the content the person showed a lot of enthusiasm for the products of the brand. The positive perception was especially enhanced when the enthusiasm was perceived to be genuine. Moreover, what specifically was being said about the product and the brand mattered as well.

“The amount of enthusiasm someone has for the brand or product, and how long they have been using the product and if others have tried it as well and have the same opinions.” [Interview 02]

The creator matters a lot in terms of the perception of the brand. The aspects that interviewees mentioned were the creator’s personality, likeability, and how they were perceived by others. The creator’s attractiveness and credibility influence the perceptions of the content and the brand overall (Mandagi, 2022). Moreover, the content that the creator makes needs to be aligned with their previous content and it should be aligned with their own online personality and “brand”.

“So, for example, if the content creator reviewing the product is a comedian on TikTok and makes sketches I would like to see the product in a funny sketch” [Interview 07]

4.4 Experiences of user-generated content influenced buying behaviour

More than half of the interviewees have bought online before and based on user-generated content. Interviewees expressed two different types of buying in these situations. Some interviewees described their instances with impulse buying and the feeling of being in a rush when buying after seeing user-generated content about a certain product. Often the price of these types of products was not perceived to be high. Moreover, the other type of purchasing was based on a prior need. There was already a need for a certain type of product before seeing the specific content, however, that was the needed push to make the purchase. In these instances, the prior need was what interviewees described as grabbing their attention of the content.

Benefits mentioned when buying based on user-generated content were trust in the creator, and their opinions and reviews. Additionally, being able to discover new brands and products that the person had no previous knowledge of was seen as the most beneficial thing.

„I think some benefits are new products that I wouldn't have known before. If a brand does user-generated content well, then even though I wouldn't buy something now, I would remember the brand later. Then perhaps, I would buy the product in-store when I would go there.“ [Interview 03].

Moreover, through user-generated content interviewees had been able to find new small businesses that they were not familiar with before. Being able to support these small businesses was seen as a great benefit of user-generated content.

„You are able to find smaller brands and support them as well relatively easily. Usually, it will still give you as a consumer a more „real“ image of the product compared to other marketing from the company itself.“ [Interview 05]

Concerns were related to false claims, buying bad products, and the creator not being trustworthy. For example, the idea that a creator is only creating content because they are sponsored was expressed as a concern as well as the poor background research before talking about a product. This was linked to a concern about buying unethical products as a content creator discusses about them without knowing how the company produces these products.

„Also, some brands are less ethical than others and I think many content creators are not doing their research before talking about the products. For example, many creators are talking about and „advertising“ [brand name] which has proved to be a super unethical company.“ [interview 08]

Furthermore, overconsuming and purchasing products one does not need was seen as a concern as well. This was linked to interviewees who were discussing about impulse buying. This is supported by previous literature as impulse buying is increased by user-generated content. (Arif, Aslam, & Siddiqui, 2020).

„I would say overconsuming impulsively products people are in no need for. I am a victim of user-generated content myself, and I have overspent money on products I did not need just because they worked on others.“ [Interview 04]

4.4.1 Factors and attributes of user-generated content that affect buying behaviour

Factors and attributes of user-generated content that were perceived to increase buying behaviour, were recommendations, the product being shown in use, and authenticity of the content.

„I have bought products based on user-generated content recommendations. What caught my attention and made me make the purchase was the fact that it was a creator I was familiar with and trusted, they seemed genuine, and the product was being shown in use as well as before and after were shown.“ [Interview 02].

When it came to making the purchasing decision, recommendations and the product being showcased mattered most. The interviewees felt more comfortable buying a product when they were able to see how it was used, what it looked like, and what the product could do. „The videos gave honest reviews on the product and tips for using them“ (Interview 05). In addition to this, being able to read other people’s opinions and comments on the content enhanced the purchasing decision. Other people’s comments, recommendations, and reviews are an important factor when creating trust and increasing the likelihood of buying behaviour. (Cheong & Morrison, 2013).

„As someone quite interested in self-care and skincare, what caught my attention was how many people shifted their routines in order to incorporate such products in them just because others seemed to have efficient results by using them.“ [Interview 04]

Finally, in many cases with the interviewees, prior need determined a lot of the buying behaviour and guided them in what brands they noticed and what content they consumed. Essentially interviewees described that the whole chain may start with the prior need of the product, as that will determine the videos that they pay attention to resulting in increased brand awareness, brand perceptions, and ultimately the buying decision.

5 Conclusions and discussion

This chapter will summarize the results into key findings, discuss the limitations of the research, and propose areas for future research.

5.1 Key findings

The factors and attributes of user-generated content that affect brand awareness, brand perceptions, and buying behaviour are similar in all three categories. Despite this, the degree to which these factors and attributes were mentioned differed based on the concept they were discussed under. Altogether the factors and attributes that affect the three concepts are authenticity, social proof (in terms of comments, what is being said in the content, and good reviews), as well as the quality of the content. These factors and attributes were mentioned under each separate marketing concept indicating that these are perceived as the most important in all three categories of brand awareness, brand perception, and buying behaviour.

For more than half of the interviewees, the user-generated content needs to be perceived as genuine and authentic. Moreover, if the content seems that it is only created because the creator is paid, it will affect specifically brand perceptions and buying behaviour negatively. The feeling of authenticity in the content was enforced if there was repetition of the product throughout several videos, instead of just one. Additionally, the content creator needs to show enthusiasm for the product and show the product in use. Before and after images and videos are important as they show the product and this way create more trust in the genuineness of what is being said and is deemed more authentic.

Creative content that is engaging will catch viewers' attention and affect all three concepts positively. This type of content will stay in mind thus resulting in an increase in brand awareness. Moreover, creative content shows that the creator has put some thought and effort into their content and is also seen as an increase in brand awareness and positive brand perceptions. The content not only needs to be creative but be of good quality as well.

Social proof, especially recommendations and engaging comments are also important factors and attributes when considering a brand or its products. Comments under the post, especially if validating what is being said are perceived as important in terms of creating

trust to make a buying decision. Moreover, the comments under the content act as a reinforcement of the content creator and validate that the opinion of the content creator is authentic.

5.2 Limitations

Some limitations of the research include the nature of self-assessment and the timeframe of the research. As the research was conducted by holding semi-structured expert interviews, the data collected was based on self-assessments. This means, that there are no definite measures for the answers and the data being collected. Based on the nature of the research question, it can be assumed that interviewees are able to answer the interview questions honestly, however, the answers are still based on self-assessments.

Moreover, the time frame of the research was exactly three months, which narrows down the possibilities for the type of research that can be conducted during the given time.

5.3 Future research

Conducting research about the vast possibilities of the use of social media in companies' marketing efforts is extremely important. Social media has allowed user-generated content to flourish, thus resulting in a power shift from traditional marketing efforts and marketers towards consumers. Consumers have more trust in content and reviews created by influencers and other users when compared to traditional marketing. Even more so, consumers lose trust in sponsored content posted by influencers increasingly pointing to the importance of user-generated content. Because of this power shift to user-generated content, it is important to understand it as much as we can in order to maximize its utilization in marketing efforts.

This research focuses on factors and attributes of user-generated content in general. For future research, it is important to understand to what extent these factors and attributes affect the three concepts of brand awareness, brand perceptions, and buying behaviour. Additionally, understanding the creation and curation of user-generated content could for example aid in understanding how companies can encourage consumers to create positive user-generated content about them and their products. For example, analysing the types of content customers create the platforms the content is posted on, and most importantly, the motivation behind the content creation.

Another future research could be the research on user-generated content demographics. This could include research on which areas of businesses are affected in which way by user-generated content. Additionally, understanding the creator demographics and the consumer demographics who are most affected by user-generated content.

Finally, it is important to conduct more research on the best way companies can utilize user-generated content creators in their marketing efforts. As authenticity is important to consumers, companies should find a way to encourage customers to create positive user-generated content about them to boost their marketing metrics thus finding a way to regain the power of marketers back.

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Appendix A The Interview Guide

Interview partners: young adults with prior knowledge and understanding of user-generated content and social media platforms.

1. Brief introduction into the interview

Framework: The thesis is realized for the international business degree (B.Sc.) as part of the curriculum. The aim of this thesis is to study the factors and attributes of user-generated content that affect young adults' brand awareness, brand perceptions, and consumer buying behaviour.

User-generated content (UGC) is identifiable by two features that make the term distinct. First, UGC involves amateur production of original content or altering and editing existing content. Second, it involves sharing the content with others by posting it on a website or a personal blog. Essentially, UGC includes everything that is published on a social media platform and can take the form of product reviews, recommendations, comments, likes, and shares that are formed either by a video, reel, image, or text.

The main question of the thesis is: What factors and attributes of user-generated content affect young adults' brand awareness, brand perceptions, and consumer buying behaviour?

This interview will be set in three sections of brand awareness, brand perceptions, and consumer buying behaviour. Information from this interview will be used in the thesis research and can be used by ESB business school and Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences. Moreover, the estimated time spent during this interview is from 45 minutes to an hour. Thank you for participating in this research.

2. Introductory questions

Before we start with questions on the actual topic:

- Could you please mention your age, nationality, gender, and occupation?
- Could you please describe your current use of social media and social media habits?
- Could you please describe your current understanding of user-generated content?

3. Brand awareness

- In general, what aspects make you notice a brand?
 - How does this change when moved to an online setting?
- Do you usually pay attention to the brands mentioned in online content? Please explain your answer.
- Have you discovered new brands from creators online?
 - Could you list some of those brands?
 - What specifically caught your attention in this online content?
- What factors and attributes do you think matter most when looking at UGC in terms of becoming aware of a brand?

4. Brand perceptions

- How does seeing UGC about a brand affect the way you view the brand?
 - What are the aspects of the content that determine this?
- From the UGC you have seen, do you remember any positive or negative instances? Please give an example.
- What factor and attribute do you think matters most when forming an idea of a brand? Please describe.

5. Customer buying behaviour

- Please describe your usual buying behaviour. For example, is it online or in person?
- Have you bought anything based on UGC? What caught your attention in the content that made you make the purchase? Could you please describe the content.
 - If not having bought anything, please imagine a situation where you would do so.
- What would be the concerns of buying based on UGC?
- What would be the benefits of buying based on UGC?

Declaration of authorship of an academic paper

I hereby declare that I have written this paper myself and used no other sources or resources than those indicated, have clearly marked verbatim quotations as such, and clearly indicated the source of all paraphrased references, and have observed the General Study and Examination Regulations of Reutlingen University for bachelor and master programmes, the specific regulations for study and examinations of my study programme, and the Regulations for Ensuring Good Academic Practice of Reutlingen University.

Neither this paper nor any part of this paper is a part of any other material presented for examination at this or any other institution.

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Sofia Rajala

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