

“From Likes, to Buys”

Examining Gen Z’s Trust in UGC Marketing in the Beauty Industry – a Qualitative Research

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Abstract

Background: In the era of digitalization, social media platforms like TikTok have become important channels for marketers aiming to reach younger audiences. User-Generated Content (UGC) and Brand-Generated Content (BGC) represent two distinct advertising strategies used on these platforms. Understanding how Gen Z perceives and trusts these different types of ads is essential for optimizing marketing efforts.

Aim: This research aim is to unveil the underlying mechanisms of trustworthiness in UGC ads on TikTok compared to BGC ads and how Gen Z perceives these, while focusing on the beauty industry.

Method: Focus groups were conducted with Gen Z TikTok users, who are interested in the beauty industry, to share their thoughts on UGC ads in terms of trustworthiness.

Results: The findings indicate that Gen Z users predominantly trust UGC ads more than BGC ads. Key reasons include the perceived authenticity, relatability, and transparency of UGC ads. Conversely, BGC ads are often viewed as staged and less trustworthy. Factors such as the creator's authenticity, the relatability of the content, and the transparency regarding product usage significantly enhance the trustworthiness of UGC ads.

Conclusion: The study concludes that for brands to effectively engage Gen Z on TikTok, they should leverage the authentic and relatable aspects of UGC while maintaining transparency. Although BGC ads are valued for their quality, incorporating more genuine elements can increase their trustworthiness. Future research should explore these dynamics across other social media platforms and larger, more diverse samples to validate these findings further.

Keywords: TikTok, Gen Z, User-Generated-Content (UGC), Brand-Generated-Content (BGC), advertisements, trustworthiness.

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1 Introduction

In an era characterized by digital connectivity and social media usage, marketing processes have changed drastically. Of the 5.35 billion people who use the internet, 5.04 billion are users of social media platforms (Statista, 2024). This enormous number indicates the importance of these platforms. Social media contributes to society in forms that were not possible before. Everyone is connected to each other no matter the age, gender, or location. Users can communicate with each other even though they have never met before. The importance for behavioral sciences has increased since it displays a crucial part of many people's everyday life. According to Ellison & Boyd (2013), social media can be defined as web-based communication platforms that are defined through three different characteristics. The platform "1) has uniquely identifiable profiles that consist of user-supplied content, content provided by other users, and/or system-level data; 2) can publicly articulate connections that can be viewed and traversed by others; and 3) can consume, produce, and/or interact with streams of user-generated content provided by their connections on the site." (Ellison & Boyd, 2013, p.9).

Especially Gen Z, which are people born between 1995 and 2010 (Krakow University of Economics & Dolot, 2018) are active on platforms such as TikTok (short-video based platform) (DataReportal, & Meltwater, & We Are Social, 2024). People belonging to Gen Z often use social media platforms as "digital places" to share their lives and experiences in their environment (Appel et al., 2020). Hence, it is no surprise that marketers turned these platforms into channels for them to communicate with consumers through advertising (Appel et al., 2020).

Especially, TikTok, which counts to one of the biggest social media platforms worldwide, is a platform in which the majority of users is composed of young people belonging to Generation Z, which is why this will be the target group of this study (Statista,

2024). It is a platform on which users can share and create short video clips, with around 1.562 billion monthly users (We Are Social, DataReportal, & Meltwater, 2024).

Additionally, besides personal content of TikTok users, this platform can function as a marketing channel. Within the realm of social media marketing, several marketing concepts exist. One of the most popular ones is UGC marketing. For this research, user-generated content (UGC) will be defined as any brand or product-related content in form of a photo or video created by a social media user which is intended by professional marketers (Cheng, E., & Khan, N., 2017). Furthermore, UGC is often labeled as electronic word of mouth, which refers to consumer-generated product reviews shared on the brand's website or social media account, aiming to assist other customers in their purchase-related decisions (Diwanji & Cortese, 2020). Especially, the beauty industry often makes use of this strategy, since it enables the customers to directly see the usage of the product.

The counter piece to UGC would be brand-generated content (BGC). As the name indicates, different from UGC, BGC is created by the brand itself in a professional way, which is mostly featured in social media ads, with the effect of greater profitability for social media experienced users (Kumar et al., 2016).

Due to the growth of online shopping, especially in the beauty industry, UGC is a favored method by marketers to increase their relationship with customers, as the majority of people want to know how products perform before actually purchasing something (Abraham et al., 2022). Therefore, user-generated content is a beneficial concept for both the customer and the marketer. Given its status as one of the largest industries worldwide, the beauty sector holds significant impact in TikTok's user-generated content landscape (Liu, 2023). Combining that with the fact that Gen Z dominates the majority on TikTok, it creates the scope of this research.

No matter the marketing strategy, all of them aim to increase sales. Previous research shows that user-generated content marketing builds trust and therefore, has an effect on the user's purchase intention (Cheng, E., & Khan, N., 2017). Different sources state that trustworthiness leads to purchase intention. For this study, it will be defined as the extent to which a possible customer is willing to and intends to purchase the product in the future (Pavlou, 2003). However, the underlying mechanisms are unknown. Hence, to efficiently increase the effectiveness of UGC, it is crucial to understand how trustworthiness is built up

To unveil the underlying mechanisms of trustworthiness in UGC advertisements, this paper aims to fill the research gap of why users trust in UGC, and which aspects content creators include that build trustworthiness. Studies suggest that different consumer sectors should be examined. Research on UGC has not been done in the beauty sector. Since the beauty industry is one of the largest industries globally and therefore, takes up an enormous portion of user-generated content (Szecsei, 2022), this paper will focus on the beauty industry and aims to answer the following research question: *Why do Gen Z TikTok users trust User Generated Content Advertisements more than Brand Generated Content Advertisements in the beauty sector?*

In order to get an in-depth insight as well as nuanced and detailed results into how trustworthiness is built up in UGC ads and why certain aspects are trusted, the following sub questions were posed:

Sub questions:

- 1. Which aspects increase the trustworthiness of UGC ads on TikTok in the beauty industry compared to BGC ads?*
- 2. Why do Gen Z TikTok users trust certain aspects of UGC ads in the beauty industry?*

To answer these questions qualitative research is conducted. With the help of focus groups, the underlying mechanisms of trustworthiness in UGC videos will be revealed.

This paper will first explain the concept of UGC advertisements, trustworthiness in UGC advertisements, and Gen Z on TikTok. After the theoretical framework, the method and research design are described. Subsequently, the participants and sampling method will be unfolded, as well as the data analysis. Finally, the results will be carefully summarized and interpreted.

2 Theoretical framework

This theoretical framework dives into the concept of user-generated content and brand-generated content ads to become an overview of already existing research. Besides that, the concept of trustworthiness will be explained as well as the connection to Gen Z and TikTok.

2.1 Gen Z and TikTok

The generation born between 1995 and 2010 is called Gen Z, which is the focus of this study (Krakow University of Economics & Dolot, 2018). It is the first generation, that grew up with the internet and social media. Through a variety of unforeseen events, this generation had to adapt to the shift of both the school system and their everyday lives moving onto the internet amidst the COVID pandemic (Stahl & Literat, 2023). Hence, the internet and especially social media play an immense role in the lives of Gen Z.

Most of the social media (SM) platforms were established in the early 2000s, which is why it is impossible for people belonging to Generation Z to imagine a life without it. The importance of each SM platform has changed a lot over time. While Facebook was the market leader for several years, new platforms addressed different target groups. TikTok is one of them. While platforms like YouTube aim for users to watch longer videos, TikTok focuses

solely on short entertaining videos, which allows users to create and share their videos and aims for user-generated content (Feldkamp, 2021). Especially, in times of social distancing, TikTok became immensely popular (Xu et al., 2019 as cited in Feldkamp, 2021). Only in the first half of 2020, where the pandemic began, TikTok generated more than 600 million downloads worldwide (Statista, 2024). The majority of users belong to generation Z, while more than 50% of the users is under 35 (Statista, 2024). Feldkamp (2021) summarizes the main driving forces of UGC on TikTok as self-expression, self-enhancement, and self-actualization, which aligns with the content on this platform, where users express their thoughts and identity.

Through multiple factors, Gen Z is also referred to as a “protest-generation” (Stahl & Literat, 2023). Due to many socio-political shifts (e.g. modern family situations, gender identity, sexuality), Gen Z wants to embrace their identities and is known for being generally more open to topics like mental health and sexuality, that is the reason they want to change norms in society (Stahl & Literat, 2023). Hence, it is no surprise that TikTok is popular in this generation. Social media functions as a channel for young people to mobilize and activism, but on the other side there is much room for toxicity and cyberbullying (Vitelar, 2019 as cited in: Stahl & Literat, 2023). Nevertheless, social media, especially TikTok, can be seen as a window into Gen Z’s minds.

Besides expressing thoughts and feelings, TikTok is also used as a marketing channel. Gen Z is the next generation to go into the workforce and consequently earn their own money, hence brands saw their chance to use TikTok for advertisements. Through adapting to viral trends, companies have the opportunity to gain attention aimed towards their products (Feldkamp, 2021). To go viral on TikTok, it is important to stay up to date with the trends and reaching the right audience. Therefore, the algorithm aims to show videos to the target audience on the “For-you-page” (Feldkamp, 2021). The main success of TikTok can be

attributed to the “hyper-personalized algorithm”, which enables users to only see content they are interested in (Feldkamp, 2021).

2.2 The concept of UGC advertisements

In times of digitalization, marketers have to develop new ways of reaching the right people. Accordingly, multiple different strategies were adapted and newly developed. The rapid growth of social media platforms such as TikTok suggested shifting advertising onto social media platforms. Therefore, UGC displays an opportunity to reach the younger generations (Stahl & Literat, 2023). Nevertheless, there are many differences in social media advertisement types. Not every brand-related post on social media equals UGC ads. There is no fixed definition of user-generated content but (Yu & Kerdpitak, n.d.) cited Zhao Xiangyu et al. (2012, p.3), who summarized the characteristics of UGC into the following six aspects: “1) uneven content quality, 2) extremely wide coverage of content, 3) fast and short cycle of content release, 4) different content credibility, 5) users who upload content need to bear certain legal risks and 6) need many users to participate.”

UGC can occur in multiple formats such as reviews, ratings, photos, or videos, but this study focuses on videos and photos created by social media users intended to promote and review a product while concentrating on TikTok. The posts can vary abundantly in their type of content, such as reporting on their real-life experiences and trying to motivate possible customers to try the product. Due to the fact that the content is not professionally produced by the company itself, Gabelaia (2023) states that user-generated content builds trust, increases customer engagement and loyalty and therefore, significantly influences the brand awareness. Nevertheless, the effectiveness was not proven, thus, further in-depth research on the target audience and the relation of UGC and purchase intention is suggested (Gabelaia, 2023).

The concept of user-generated content marketing should not be mixed up with influencer marketing. While both strategies consist of a video or photo on social media platforms, where a person voices their opinion on a product, UGC is centered on ordinary social media users (Santos, 2022). Besides that, influencers post the content on their own SM pages, while UGC is posted on the brands pages. The difference between influencer marketing and user-generated content marketing can be explained by the “author” of the content (Santos, 2022). The effect of those concepts differs a lot, since the content of influencer marketing becomes popular because of the popularity of the persona, while the same content by a UGC creator would mostly get a smaller audience, due to their visibility on the platform (Suh et al., 2010: as cited in Santos, 2022). Nevertheless, UGC creators can be as relevant as well-known personas and play an important role in the world of social networking and “may be as valued as celebrities when authoring content” (Phua et al., 2020: as cited in Santos, 2022, p.11).

Besides user-generated content, BGC is often used. As the name already indicates, brand-generated content marketing (BGC) is content generated by a brand. Djafarova & Bowes (2021, p.2) defined brand-generated content as “brand-initiated marketing communication shared directly through its social media pages”. Compared to user-generated content, it is produced professionally with higher quality. This form of marketing is widely used on Instagram and is often shown as ads between stories or posts. Poulis et. al (2019) found that BGC positively impacts purchase intention, with a greater effect on social media experienced consumers. Other studies found that both BGC and UGC have a positive effect on purchase intention, while UGC affects the consumer's trust in the brand and usefulness of the product as well (Diwanji & Cortese, 2020).

2.3 Trustworthiness, UGC, and BGC

Trust as a concept plays a role in various areas. Therefore, the definition of it can vary as well. Depending on the situation, trust can be defined differently. Jones (2002, p.226) argues that out of multiple definitions, a core concept can be identified as follows: *“trust is the outcome of observations leading to the belief that the actions of another may be relied upon, without explicit guarantee, to achieve a goal in a risky situation”*. Other studies state, that trustworthiness is the “objective quality governing the degree to which” the situation can be relied on (Bailey et al., 2002). Therefore, applying these definitions to UGC, trustworthiness is the extent to which a user relies on the content shown in a video created by a UGC creator.

Several research studies have already been conducted about UGC and whether customers trust it more than BGC. Gurjar et al. (2022) found that usefulness and reliability have a significant effect on trustworthiness of UGC as well as the source of the content. It has to be noted, that the mentioned study solely focused on tourist websites and therefore, looked at written reviews rather than social media content. Due to social media platforms’ increase in popularity, the number of user-generated content has risen compared to the amount of content generated by the brands themselves. Hence, UGC functions as an informal communication channel between consumers which can be highly influential (Diwanji & Cortese, 2020).

2.5 Summary

To sum everything up, UGC ads are produced by users, while BGC ads are generated by the brand themselves. These ads can differ in their quality and content, which can impact the trustworthiness and are often shown on TikTok. Gen Z is deeply associated with social media, specifically TikTok, and is, therefore, a very significant target group for UGC marketing. TikTok’s personalized algorithm and trend-driven content make it a powerful tool for reaching and engaging this generation.

However, specific aspects of how trustworthiness is built up in UGC ads is still unclear. Thus, this research aims to get in-depth insight into why Gen Z TikTok users trust in UGC ads. Therefore, focus group sessions were conducted, which will be explained in the following section.

3 Methods

3.1 Research Design

For this study, a qualitative research method was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of the underlying mechanisms of building up trustworthiness in user-generated content advertisements on TikTok and why Gen Z users trust UGC more than brand-generated content marketing. Qualitative research aims to further investigate quantitative data (Boeije, 2009), which is the scope of this study. Additionally, this approach facilitates an understanding of participant's experiences, perceptions, and behavior, which is difficult to reveal with quantitative methods (Barroga et. al, 2023). Since previous research focused on the differentiation of UGC and BGC and which is more trusted, it is crucial to further investigate the reasons behind trusting in UGC, aiming to understand the perceptions of Gen Z TikTok users.

Furthermore, focus groups were conducted within this study. In focus groups, the informative source is a group where interaction between participants is intended (Acocella, 2012). The advantage of this approach is that it delivers detailed information in a short amount of time. Besides that, the interaction between participants facilitates the consideration of concepts and processes that are normally not consciously thought about (Acocella, 2012). Hence, it is a fitting method to unveil why users trust in UGC, since trusting someone is rather an unconscious response than a mindful decision (Jones, 2002).

3.2 Procedure

Before the focus groups were conducted, every participant gave oral informed consent, with all the important information about this study. They were told the topic as well as the aim of this research. Additionally, at the beginning of the focus groups, the topic and aim were explained further. It was explained to the participants that all given information would be recorded and anonymized as well as solely used for this research and deleted afterwards. Next to that, it was explained that the participation is completely voluntary and can be stopped at any point throughout the session. Subsequently, the discussions took place.

The researcher recorded each focus group session with a phone and stored all data on a password secured One Drive file, which was connected to a university account. All raw data was deleted directly after finishing the research.

First, all participants were shown 4 examples of UGC and BGC on TikTok (see Appendix D). Hence, everyone knew exactly what kind of advertisements were to be discussed during the session. For the examples, 4 different beauty products were chosen, where each was presented as a UGC and BGC ad, to clearly show the difference between them.

Finally, the discussions began. Whereby, the researcher functions as a moderator during the sessions. To maintain a “group discussion” rather than a “group interview” (Acocella, 2012), the moderator proposes a discussion topic. Hence, the participants can interact with each other and the emphasis lies on the interaction between the participants and not between the moderator and the participants. As preparation, the researcher developed a list of open-ended questions, which can be adjusted during the focus groups (see Appendix B). Based on the “answers” of the participants, the next topic/question was proposed.

According to Powell et. al (1996) research, where focus groups are used, needs to have between 5-10 sessions to get sufficient results. Due to time limitations, five focus groups were

conducted where the first session functioned as a test round. Afterward, the questions were adjusted to maintain a better discussion flow for the next participants.

3.3 Participants

In order for a focus group to deliver qualitative outcomes, it is crucial to look at several aspects. Each focus group should consist out of 4-6 participants, to make sure that a discussions evolves, but at the same time, no participants are overlooked (Guest et al., 2017). For this research, a total of 5 focus groups were conducted, where the test session consisted out of 4 participants and the remaining 4 sessions out of 5 participants. Thus, 24 participants were included (n=24). Furthermore, 3 sessions were held in English (see Appendix B) and the remaining 2 were completed in German (see Appendix C), since the participants were more confident in German and to avoid any language barriers. The participants should share the same interests but should not know each other well, to facilitate honest discussions (Acocella, 2012). By choosing participants with equal interests, a discussion will evolve more naturally and the avoidance of people who know each other well encourages the collection of different points of view (Acocella, 2012).

Table 1

Participants and Demographics

Focus Group	Participant	Age	Gender	Nationality	Education
1	Participant 1	22	Female	German	BSC Communication science
	Participant 2	22	Female	German	BSC Psychology
	Participant 3	22	Female	German	BSC Communication science
	Participant 4	23	Female	Ecuadorian	BSC Communication science
2	Participant 5	22	Male	German	BA Social work

	Participant 6	23	Male	German	Apprenticeship as an industrial clerk
	Participant 7	24	Male	German	Apprenticeship as production mechanic
	Participant 8	23	Male	German	Apprenticeship in finance
	Participant 9	22	Female	German	Apprenticeship as dental technician
3	Participant 10	23	Male	German	Apprenticeship as retail salesman
	Participant 11	22	Female	German	Apprenticeship in Healthworks
	Participant 12	23	Male	German	Apprenticeship as industrial clerk
	Participant 13	23	Female	German	BA Human Resources
	Participant 14	22	Male	German	MSC Business consulting and digital management
4	Participant 15	24	Female	German	BA Architecture
	Participant 16	25	Female	German	BSC Communication science
	Participant 17	22	Female	German/Turkish	BSC Communication science
	Participant 18	24	Male	German	BSC Communication science
	Participant 19	24	Female	German	BSC Communication science
5	Participant 20	23	Female	German	BA Architecture
	Participant 21	23	Female	German	BSC Communication science
	Participant 22	22	Female	German	BSC Communication science
	Participant 23	26	Male	German/Turkish	MSC Communication science
	Participant 24	23	Female	German	BSC Communication science

3.4 Sampling

For this study, each participant had to meet several requirements. Everyone has to belong to Gen Z and has to be active on TikTok, which is defined as a minimum of one hour

per week for this study. Besides that, they should be interested in the beauty industry and were already exposed to UGC ads on TikTok.

Participants were gathered by using a non-probability sampling method. Hence, the sampling was selected based on non-random criteria. To find enough participants meeting the mentioned requirements, convenience sampling was used (Etikan, 2016). Hence, students of the University of Twente were asked to participate as well as people from the researcher's environment. If the contacted people met all requirements and wanted to participate, the people were assigned to a focus group. The researcher made sure to assign participants to a session in which they did not know each other too well, to avoid any bias.

3.5 Analysis

The last step of the data collection is the analysis. Whereby, the recorded audio files of the focus group sessions were transcribed with the Amberscript software. Thus, the name and any personal information were deleted after the process of transcribing. Afterwards, the data was analyzed with the program ATLAS.ti. Thence, all the data was read by the researcher several times, to make sure the content is familiar.

Afterwards, the coding process started. The researcher made use of inductive coding (Skjott Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). Hence, several main codes and additional sub-codes were developed while analyzing the data. When new patterns and information were detected, a new code was added (Skjott Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). Thus, seven code groups were developed which are: *TikTok Usage*, *UGC*, *BGC*, *Trustworthiness*, *Content Characteristics*, *Improvement*, and *Purchase Intention* (see Appendix E).

To answer the research questions regarding which aspects contribute to trustworthiness in UGC ads on TikTok compared to BGC ads, and why Gen Z finds these

aspects trustworthy, seven main codes were developed (see Appendix E). The results were primarily derived from the analysis of these codes and their sub-codes. The first one is *TikTok Usage*. This code consists of two sub-codes. *Screentime* refers to the amount of time the participants spend on the TikTok app, on average. The second one is *Motivation*, which describes the reasons why a person uses TikTok, for example, for entertainment purposes. These codes helped to develop an understanding of the participants' TikTok usage, to get an overview of the participants' behavior and if it has an effect on the aspects that play a role for the participants in terms of trustworthiness in UGC ads.

Secondly, the code *UGC* was established. Hereby, two sub-codes were used. *Pro* and *Con*, whereby *Pro* coded the participants' statements that they have more trust in UGC ads on TikTok than BGC ads and *Con* the reasons why they do not trust these kinds of ads. This code helped to identify the overall opinion of the participants about trustworthiness in UGC ads.

Table 2

Codebook Example UGC

<i>Code</i>	<i>Sub-codes</i>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Example</i>	<i>Krippendorff's Alpha</i>
UGC	2.1 <i>Pro</i>	Refers to a positive opinion of UGC ads on TikTok	"So I also really like those more (UGC) because it just feels more casual, I guess."	0.844
	2.2 <i>Con</i>	Refers to a negative aspect of UGC ads on TikTok	"Um, and I really dislike when it's very scripted."	

The third code group is *BGC*. Again, the sub-codes are *Pro* and *Con*, where *Pro* refers to trusting BGC ads more than UGC ads, and *Con* describes the reasons for not trusting them.

To identify the aspects that build up trust, the fourth code was developed: *Trustworthiness*. It helped in classifying the aspects that the participants need in order to trust the ad, as well as the reasons why these aspects are trusted. Hence, six sub-codes were used such as *Authenticity, Relatability, Transparency, Creator, Brand & Product* and *Need of product*. All these sub-codes investigated reasons to trust UGC ads and why these aspects lead to trustworthiness.

Accordingly, the fifth main code *Content Characteristics*, examines all aspects of the content itself to build trust. Thus, seven sub-codes were developed: *Visuality, Creativity, Informative, Entertainment, Simplicity, Attention Grabbing, and Application of Product*. Consequently, all aspects of the content that build trust can be explained as well as the reasons for trusting them.

The sixth main code is *Improvement*. This code is divided into *Improvement_UGC* and *Improvement_BGC*. Both refer to the participants ideas for improvement to increase the trustworthiness of both UGC and BGC ads on TikTok.

The last code group is *Purchase Intention*. This code was derived from different statements that the participants gave, regarding their intention of purchasing a product based on UGC ads on TikTok. Therefore, three sub-codes were developed. *Intent to buy* refers to the intention of purchasing the advertised product featured in the UGC ad. The second one is *Consideration*, which describes the consideration of buying the product in the future. The last one is *Influence*, which represents the unconscious influence of the UGC ad in future decision-making processes regarding product purchases. It has to be mentioned that this code does not directly contribute to answering the research question, but many participants added information about their purchase intention, subsequently this code group was added.

Table 3*Codebook Example Purchase Intention*

<i>Code</i>	<i>Sub-codes</i>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Example</i>	<i>Krippendorff's Alpha</i>
Purchase Intention	7.1 Intent to buy	The participant mentions to immediately have the intention to purchase the product	<i>"I saw the UGC ad of the dark spot serum, and thought "I would actually like to have that" "</i>	0.916
	7.2 Consideration	The participant considers purchasing the product in the future	<i>"I would really think more about that oil, maybe I'll get it"</i>	
	7.3 Influence	The TikTok ad influences the participant purchase decisions in the future	<i>"I think I do it more unconsciously and also when I see the product multiple times, it influences me next time I'm in a shop"</i>	

Lastly, an intercoder agreement was done, to ensure the reliability of the codes. Hereby, another student coded approximately 20% of the collected data based on the codebook (see Appendix E), to ensure a high level of reliability of the codes. Afterwards, ATLAS.ti calculated a Krippendorff's Alpha of 0.825, which means that there is strong and reliable agreement among the coders, which enhances the credibility and validity of the findings. This measure was chosen since it "adjusts for the possibility of agreement occurring by chance, providing a more accurate measure of the true agreement among raters" as well as

it being more robust than the Cohens Kappa, and why it should be used for more nuanced coding schemes to maintain validity (Stewart, 2024).

Based on this coding scheme, multiple results were detected and analyzed. The next section summarizes the results from the focus group sessions regarding how Gen Z pictures the trustworthiness in UGC as opposed to BGC advertisements on TikTok.

4 Results

4.1 *TikTok Usage*

4.1.1 *Screentime*

To get a general understanding of the TikTok habits of the participants, the average screentime of the TikTok app was collected. The majority of participants (n = 19) stated that they use TikTok daily of whom ten spend up to one hour on the app and nine more than one hour. The remaining participants (n = 5) elaborated to only use TikTok between one to three times a week, but if they use it, they spend multiple hours on the app.

“Yeah. So I would say like once a week or twice a week, but then intensely like I get stuck like two hours. Um, but yeah, but in between I got some periods where I’m like for months, not on the app.”

Additionally, two of them disclosed that their TikTok usage depends on their current situation and workload.

“I mean for me I used to use it daily for multiple hours. But now with my bachelor thesis, I use it a lot less.”

4.1.2 Motivation

Regarding the motivation for using TikTok, different reasons were mentioned. Some participants mentioned multiple reasons, but the main ones are entertainment (n = 10) and recipe inspirations (n = 8).

“I use it for entertainment purposes and even like a search engine. Because I can look up recipes and like hotspots for the places I go and food spots and yeah.”

Besides that, procrastination (n = 4), travel inspiration (n = 2), beauty tips (n = 1), search engine (n = 4), and working purposes (n = 1), were discussed. Additionally, one participant reported that the content they watch, does not necessarily depend on their motivation of using TikTok, but more on the content the algorithm suggests them.

“And I also use it for entertainment purposes, for trends, for recipes, search engine, everything, just whatever the algorithm recommends. Yeah.”

4.2 UGC

4.2.1 Pro

At the beginning of the focus groups, the participants were shown four examples of UGC and BGC ads. Based on that, they were asked if they trust UGC more than BGC ads. The majority (n = 22) thought that UGC ads were more trustworthy.

The reasons for trusting UGC ads on TikTok more than BGC ads will be explained with the help of the next codes.

4.2.2 Con

Even though, the majority of participants (n = 22) trust more in UGC ads, they remarked aspects that decrease the trustworthiness. The aspect that was mentioned the most (n = 9), was that the UGC creators are getting paid.

“Because now I know they're getting paid and they're not recommending it because they actually like it.”

Another reason is, that some creators seem to be fake, which often goes along with gaining followers. Additionally, some UGC ads seem to be scripted (n = 7), which also results in not trusting it.

“And the more they got famous and things, they're like, they even change personality. They're more fake, but they know even how to fake more.”

4.3 BGC

4.3.1 Pro

Only two participants preferred BGC ads over UGC ads in terms of trustworthiness. The mentioned aspects that lead to trustworthiness are the amount of money that is invested into these ads and the professionalism of the brands, as well as the quality and creativity.

“I think in general in the BGC, I like the quality of it, and I like I feel like sometimes in those ads there's a lot of creativity behind it. “

4.3.2 Con

Since the majority (n = 22) did not prefer ads generated by the brand, many reasons were mentioned, as to why they lack trustworthiness. The main reasons are that BGC ads often seem to be staged (n = 5), fake (n = 5), and not relatable (n = 5).

The participants elaborated that BGC ads often seem to be staged, due to the content. Since those ads are always scripted and acted, the trustworthiness of them decreases. Additionally, customers know that the brand solely mentions positive aspects of the advertised product, to sell as much as possible. This leads to the ads seeming to be fake. Thus, the overall trust of BGC ads is very low.

“I don't like it that it's higher quality actually because for me it really shows that it's staged and it's something really fake. So, you really see the environment. It's not something like every day, something natural. It's just, okay, you're here so we can advertise the product and you really see, like I feel like they also might just say something fake because they just really want to sell the product”

Next to that, the people featured in the ads, are often models and seem to be perfect. Hence, many people can not identify themselves with such persons. Consequently, they cannot relate to the ad, leading to not trusting in the use of the product, since the feeling arises, that the product is for a different target group.

“for example in the BGC ads that we watched, what kind of people were in them. Models like that, really pretty people, that's not authentic and not comprehensible. That's just the way it is. You immediately think “okay, these are such pretty people, such attractive people, they use these products”. That again implies that only people like that can buy it”
(translated)

Other reasons that were discussed to not trust BGC ads are that the ads are not modern (n = 2), too obvious (n = 3) and exaggerated (n = 3). Two participants mentioned that brands are often behind trends and do not go with the time. Accordingly, the ads are often not modern, therefore, not targeting Gen Z.

“a disadvantage of BGC is just that it's so not modern. So they don't really adapt to how we are living right now and not at all. And you say, it reminds you of the ads that you saw as a kid. And that's actually should not be the case because actually it's like 20 years later.”

Besides that, they often are too obvious. Some participants mentioned that ads in general annoy them because they often interrupt the content they want to see. Two participants voiced that mentioning the brands name too often throughout the ad, it becomes

too evident: *“So I think we already mentioned, like when the name is too many, too often mentioned, like it's too obvious that it's a commercial.”*

The last noted reason for not trusting BGC ads is the content being too exaggerated. This aspect goes along with the staged characteristics of it. The language as well as the content of the ad often displays an exaggerated scenario, which does not represent the reality, why possible customers do not trust them.

“Well, what I don't like about brands, I'll say, is when they exaggerate the video. That tends to stop me from trusting them or makes me skip further than if it's a bit more natural, let's say” (translated)

4.4 Trustworthiness

The following section describes the aspects that lead to higher trustworthiness in UGC ads, as well as the reasons for it.

4.4.1 Authenticity

One main reason for trustworthiness in user-generated content is authenticity. The asked persons gave multiple reasons for an ad being authentic. The most discussed aspect (n = 7) is seeing that the creator used the product in their daily life for a long time. This can be displayed by showing empty bottles of the product or a used product instead of a brand-new one. Hence, the viewer gets the impression that the creator is truthful, leading to higher trustworthiness. Additionally, the video should show the progress of the product. For example, by giving before and after pictures.

“For UGC I would say it's more about them trying the product for a longer time and they record their progress. Like what changes. [...] Like if they actually show me like four months ago, I was like this, then like this. [...] like a real before and after.”

Nevertheless, the displayed progress has to be realistic. In order for the ad to be trustworthy, one participant mentioned that the before and after results have to be believable.

“Yeah, I would trust it so far, if the before and after is not too extreme. Like an anti-pimple thing and the before and after is, that she had severe acne and after there aren't even scars, I wouldn't believe that.”

Additionally, the creator should know what they are talking about. When giving insights into the use of the product and naming advantages of it, the ad seems to be authentic. The participants (n = 2) disclosed that they only trust an ad if they have the feeling that the person has extensive knowledge of the product. This can be achieved through mentioning aspects that extend the information on the packaging. For example, one participant voiced: *“When they talk about a concealer and they say that the application is better with a brush instead of a sponge, yeah, then I would know they actually use it”* (translated).

4.4.2 Relatability

The majority of the participants (n = 19) trust an UGC ad when the video is relatable. The most mentioned (n = 9) way for an advertisement to be relatable is about the look of the creator. If the creator has the same features as the viewer, it facilitates to relate to the person and therefore, increases the trustworthiness. One participant mentioned that she trusts the ad more when she can see that the product works on a person with the same features as her. For example, the participant elaborated: *“when I see a person and I see she has a similar hair type like me, or she has a similar skin type [...] like similar attributes like me. Then I think, okay, maybe the product could work well for me because I think nowadays people seek more for individual products that will work for them, because we know not every product is good for everyone, because that simply can't be the case.”*. Additionally, the content becomes more relatable when the creator is not flawless or has the same problem as the TikTok user. Five

participants stated that they relate more to a person when seeing imperfections. Consequently, they get the feeling that the creator is ‘a normal person’ like themselves, which leads to higher trustworthiness.

“I think she looked more like a model than a normal person. And I think, like, it would convince me more if I see. Okay, she looks like a normal person that I could also see like when I walk on the street.”

Besides that, it demonstrates that the product works the intended way.

Another way to achieve relatability is by demonstrating a real case scenario. Three participants unveiled that they can relate to natural scenarios, which seem realistic. For example, one participant described an UGC ad where the creator put on sunscreen and went running, to show that the sunscreen protected her skin. Hence, the participant could relate to her, since she could imagine herself in the situation, which increased the trustworthiness of the ad. Next to that, the location can have the same effect, for example: *“filming it really at their home and you can see some cozy things in the background”*.

4.4.3 Transparency

Transparency is another aspect that leads to trustworthiness. Nine participants disclosed that transparency is one of the main reasons to built up trust. They mentioned that it can be difficult to identify whether a creator is transparent or not, but there are some ways to show it. One of them is naming the disadvantages of the product. While the majority of ads solely present the advantages and benefits of the product, illustrating disadvantages increases the credibility of the creator. It does not necessarily have to be a negative point of the product itself; it could also be about the target group of the product. For example, *“if they mention this might not work for people with sensitive skin.”*

Another way is to be transparent with problems. Two participants mentioned that creators should not hide problems and be truthful about them. For example, creators could show their skin irritations and tell their experiences with their problems. Hence, the trust in the ad increases.

4.4.4 Creator

The creator of the UGC ad plays an important role when it comes to trustworthiness. Several participants (n = 7) discussed that the way the creator talks plays a role in order to trust them. The creator should talk freely and should use an appropriate style of language. Additionally, the tone of the voice is important as well. One participant mentioned that a calm voice is preferred, but it depends on the product and brand.

“I perceive for example, L'Oreal more as like calm settled”

Besides that, six participants argued that knowing the creator increases the trustworthiness of the ad. When seeing a creator multiple times and knowing their content style, the user develops a relationship to them, which makes them trust the ads more easily. Additionally, two participants stated that they have to know a creator in order to trust the ad.

4.4.5 Brand & Product

Multiple participants (n = 8) disclosed that the trust in an ad depends on the brand and product. If they know the brand beforehand, they trust the ad more easily. Thus, the perception of the brand is very important for the trustworthiness of the ad. Additionally, if the product is already known and liked by the participant, the trustworthiness of the ad increases as well.

“And then for the Got2be, um, the eyebrow gel, I have that one. So, I literally used that this morning. So, I was like, I love that.”

4.4.6 Need of Product

Twelve participants revealed that the need of a product unconsciously influences their trust in an UGC ad as well. When needing a product, they pay more attention to ads in general. Therefore, they trust ads more easily, since they are looking for a product. Nevertheless, the motivation for needing a product can vary from actually needing a new product to the intention of changing a product in their beauty routine.

“I think there's always a lack of something in your beauty routine or something that you then are like, okay, I feel convinced because I'm not that satisfied with the product before. So, I feel that also depends. “

4.5 Content Characteristics

4.5.1 Visuality

Visual aspects of the content can build trust as well. Multiple participants (n = 7) remarked that for UGC ads, the quality of the video is fundamental. Thus, the video quality should not be too professional but still adequate. It should be different to professional ads generated by brands, to immediately note the difference. Additionally, it seems real and accessible to everyone. It can be recorded with a phone, but the voice quality should be good.

“I think still have good quality. It should not be uh, to professional setup, so it can be a good phone but if it's too blurry or something, it's also maybe content you would not want to look at.”

Besides that, the lighting and editing of the content is vital. The video should be recorded in daylight or with other sufficient lighting sources. Two participants added that the video should not have too many cuts, for aesthetical reasons, as well as for reliability. Too many cuts, show that the video is majorly edited which results in less trustworthiness, due to a lack of realness and relatability.

“The lighting there was actually in front of the window, which was even more relatable.”

Other participants (n = 2) pointed out that they prefer when subtitles are added. Hence, the video can be watched without sound when being in the public. Furthermore, the videos should not be too long, because the attention span of TikTok users is often limited. If the video is too long, many people will skip faster. Overall, the content can only be trusted if the videos are completely watched and therefore have to be *“aesthetically pleasing”*.

4.5.2 Creativity

In order to watch the whole video, the content has to be creative. Nearly every participant (n = 18) highlighted that due to the number of ads they are daily exposed to, the content has to stand out and therefore, be creative. Ergo, the creator should think about the concept of the video. Six participants disclosed that the use of trends is an efficient way of designing the content interesting. For beauty products, trends like *“Get ready with me (GRWM)”* or showing *“their skincare routine”* are efficient ways to design the content creatively.

Besides that, four participants disclosed that the way the product is presented is fundamental. Through nice shots of the product within different locations and backgrounds the video becomes aesthetically pleasing. Additionally, there is not always the need for the creator to speak in the video.

“She didn't even speak but it still was the product that spoke for us. “

If the product is self-explanatory and the creator shows the use of it within different scenarios, the content can still be informative according to the participants. Moreover, the content should be dynamic in order to be engaging.

4.5.3 Informative

The majority of participants (n = 19) brought up that the amount of given information plays a significant role in trustworthiness. Therefore, a balance of mentioning important aspects without it being too much input, has to be found. Thus, the creator should get to the point quickly, to still have the attention of the users. One participant mentioned that especially for “*advanced products*” the amount of information is crucial. For example, for skincare products, the creator could name the main ingredients and highlight for which skin types it is applicable. Thus, the viewer knows what to expect from the product and if it works for them. Accordingly, the trustworthiness of the creator and the ad increases.

Another aspect that contributes to trustworthiness of the ad is the comments section of the ad. One participant stated: “*sometimes I check out the comments and then I do trust, like the comments.*”. Hence, the content of the comments, can help to convince the users of the ad and therefore, trusting it more.

4.5.4 Entertainment

To ensure that TikTok users fully watch a user-generated ad, the content should be entertaining. Besides the already listed creativity aspects, the participants came up with another point to create entertaining content. The use of fitting background music and trending sounds is important for four participants.

“Yes, I think the music is also decisive to some extent, so maybe it's current music or something that people are liking or that's currently trending” (translated)

The use of trending TikTok sounds and music, can help to ensure that the whole video gets attentively watched.

4.5.5 Simplicity

In contrast to creativity of the content, UGC ads can be simple depending on the advertised product. Ten participants disclosed that simplicity can be beneficial in some cases. For example, if the product is very simple and there is only one way to use it, the creator does not have to elaborate on that.

“Because sometimes it's just like a simple product as the hair oil, for example. There's just like one way to use it maybe, or like two ways.”

Besides that, three persons elaborated that they like it, when the ad is similar to normal TikTok videos. Hence, they would be more drawn to watch the video, if they do not recognize the ad immediately as an ad.

4.5.6 Attention Grabbing

The main part of the participants (n = 20) highlighted the importance of attention-grabbing. Since TikTok ads are normally very short, the ad has to grab the viewers' attention within the first seconds. Therefore, a catchy hook is beneficial. One participant mentioned that the topic of the ad should be clear within the first 2 to 3 seconds. Catchy phrases or surprising elements could help to achieve that.

“I do like a good hook in a sense of "you need this in your life". Like "this is the product that will change something" or like something really catchy, like you said, maybe something weird, maybe something very unique or, maybe even good music or a very pretty aesthetic something. I think that just catches your eye in the first few seconds and that makes me want to continue.”

Another technique to grab the user's attention, is to define a problem and directly proposing the solution to it. For example, one participant noted that the definition of a

problem leads to higher attention when they have the same problem. Thus, it resonates with higher trustworthiness.

“They mentioned a problem at the beginning [...] and then they immediately provided a solution. That resonated with me, so I thought I'd give it a try.”

Next to that, three participants stated that storytelling can grab attention as well. The UGC creators could incorporate the product into a fitting story. With a clear story line, the users are more drawn to follow the content.

“it's more about the storytelling nowadays other than the product. If their story is like interesting [...], I would love to hear it. I hear about it even though it's not related to me at all. I would be like, oh, that's funny. And then I will continue.”

4.5.7 Application

For nearly half of the participants (n = 10), the application of the product should be included in the ad in order to be trustworthy. The advantage of it is that they believe the creator that they actually use it when showing the application on themselves. Besides that, the user directly knows how to use the product. Especially, for beauty products it is beneficial to see the way of application as well as how it looks on different people, to get an impression of it. Thus, the viewers' trust in the ad and product increases.

“And for the sunscreen, [...] I could just see an immediate glow on her face. And I was like, her skin looks so good, I want the same. And that's kind of what, like, got me.”

4.6 Improvement

At the end of the focus group sessions, the participants were asked if they have any improvement ideas for UGC ads. They remarked that all the already mentioned aspects should be followed to ensure an appealing and trustworthy ad. Besides that, one participant

mentioned that UGC creators should always be up to date with trends and be innovative with their content.

4.7 Purchase Intention

The data collection gave additional information about the effect of UGC ads on purchase intention. Therefore, nice participants mentioned that the main effect of UGC ads on their purchase intention is unconscious. Thus, they do not immediately buy the product featured in the ad, but it influences their decision-making for the next purchase.

“But I would say that if you were walking through the store and I saw a good advertisement and then I happened to see the product in the store, I would be more likely to go for the product I saw in UGC ads.”

Besides that, it has to be noted that a bad experience with a product, can negatively influence future purchases. For example, one participant disclosed that she bought a product solely based on an UGC ad and was disappointed by it. Accordingly, she mentioned being more careful about what she purchases, due to her negative experience with it.

5 Discussion

5.1 Main findings

This study aimed to unveil the underlying mechanism of trustworthiness in UGC ads on TikTok in the beauty industry, with a focus on Gen Z. Thus, the following research question was posed: *“Why do Gen Z TikTok users trust User Generated Content Advertisements more than Brand Generated Content Advertisements in the beauty sector?”*. In order to get in-depth information about this topic, the following sub questions should help to get extensive answers:

1. *Which aspects increase the trustworthiness of UGC ads on TikTok in the beauty industry compared to BGC ads?*

2. *Why do Gen Z TikTok users trust certain aspects of UGC ads in the beauty industry?*

Generally, the outcomes of this research align with Djafarova & Bowes (2021) that UGC is more trusted than BGC ads, which lines up with the results that 22 out of 24 participants preferred UGC over BGC ads.

To answer the first sub question regarding which aspects increase the trustworthiness, the main codes *Trustworthiness* and *Content Characteristics* gave an in-depth insight into why Gen Z TikTok users trust user-generated content ads more than brand-generated content ads in the beauty sector.

Hence, it was found that perceived authenticity and transparency increases the trustworthiness. Bailey et al. (2002) already stated that trustworthiness is associated with transparency and honest communication. This can be achieved when creators show the long-term use of a product with realistic before and after results, provide knowledgeable insights, and show everyday usage. Additionally, trust can be strengthened when creators disclose disadvantages and show transparency about issues as well as designing the content naturally and not too scripted or staged. Gabelaia (2023) supports these aspects by emphasizing the positive effect of real-life use and honest reviews on trust.

Another reason for trust is relatability. Many participants indicated that relatable content featuring creators with similar attributes or problems positively influences the trustworthiness of the ads. These findings align with Phua et al. (2020) and Stahl & Literat (2023) who highlighted UGC's authenticity and relatability as a key to trustworthiness.

Phua et al. (2020, p.11) mentioned that UGC creators “may be as valued as celebrities when authoring content”, which can be supported by this research. Gen Z prefers when the creators speak naturally with an appropriate use of language and tone. Especially, creators,

that are known by the users, are trusted more as well as familiar brands and products.

Moreover, the participants are more likely to trust ads for products that they need.

Regarding the second sub question about why users trust certain aspects, the participants mentioned that authenticity and relatability leads them to believe the ad more and therefore, trusting it. Especially, relatability helps the users to identify with the creator, which gives them the feeling of being directly targeted by the product, which is why the trustworthiness increases for the ad as well as for the product.

Content characteristics can increase trust as well. An adequate, but not overly professional video quality, good lighting, minimal editing, and subtitles were remarked as visual aspects that contribute to higher trustworthiness of the ad, as well as balanced and concise information. Hence, the ads seem to be more realistic and made by an ordinary person, which can help the users to trust the ad more since they do not directly identify the video as an ad, but rather as content from a normal TikTok user.

To ensure that TikTok users watch the UGC ad instead of skipping it, the creator has to grab the viewers' attention. Hence, catchy hooks, problem-solution formats, and storytelling can be used. Besides that, the creativity and entertainment of the content is fundamental. Therefore, the use of trends, music, dynamic ways of presenting the product, and aesthetically pleasing shots, is beneficial. Nevertheless, simple and straightforward content is favored by the participants, if the product is uncomplicated, while for others the application should be demonstrated to build up trust. Thus, the users stick to the video, which is crucial in order to build up trust.

Consequently, the preference for UGC ads among Gen Z can be interpreted based on their social media habits and cultural context. Gen Z grew up with social media platforms and values content that feels genuine and personal. UGC ads often feature real-life experiences

and reviews from ordinary users, which resonate more with Gen Z's desire for authenticity and relatability. Therefore, the immediacy and perceived credibility of these ads enhance their trustworthiness.

5.2 Limitations and further research

Although, this study is the first to examine the specific aspects of building trust in UGC ads on TikTok among Gen Z users, there are some limitations that have to be considered. Firstly, the sample size is relatively small and is very homogenic in terms of nationality, which may not fully represent the broader Gen Z population. Hence, future research should expand the sample size and diversity of the participants, to gain further insight.

Additionally, the focus on the beauty industry may limit the generalizability of the findings to other sectors. The same applies for the nationality of the participants since the majority are German. Besides that, this study does not cover content variability. UGC and BGC content quality and style across different ads might impact the findings. Future research could also examine the effectiveness of mixed-content strategies that combine UGC and BGC.

Regarding the procedure of data collection, the participants could be influenced by the opinions of others in the focus group session. Therefore, different techniques could be used in the future, or complete strangers should discuss with each other.

5.3 Practical Implications

The implications of these findings are significant for marketers aiming to target Gen Z on TikTok. Thus, they should encourage genuine user reviews and long-term product use to build up trust. Besides that, brands should consider humanizing BGC ads by incorporating relatable elements and reducing the staged and scripted atmosphere, in order to increase their

effectiveness. Additionally, by incorporating elements of authenticity and relatability, such as behind-the-scenes content or collaborations with relatable influencers, the brand could positively influence the trustworthiness.

Another implication could be for UGC creators. Based on the findings they should maintain transparency, authenticity, and engaging presentation is key to building and sustaining trust with Gen Z.

By interpreting these findings, we gain insights into how Gen Z perceives different types of ads and what drives their trust and engagement. This understanding can inform more effective marketing strategies on platforms like TikTok

Table 4

Do's and Don'ts for trustworthy UGC ads on TikTok

Do's	Don'ts
<p>Be authentic:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Show that the product is used in daily life by showing empty or already used packages/bottles - Shown progress has to be realistic - Include before and after pictures - Naming advantages and tips 	<p>Don't pretend:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Do not show brand-new packages of a product - Do not advertise products that do not fit to you
<p>Be relatable:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Be natural and showing flaws - Present the product in real case scenarios - Talk freely and naturally - Use an appropriate style of language and tone 	<p>Don't seem fake:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Do not try to be perfect - The content should not be too staged - The content should not be too scripted
<p>Be transparent:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Name disadvantages - Be truthful about the usage and effect of the product 	<p>Don't lie:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Do not lie about the function of a product to increase your sells

Design the content nicely:

- Film the content in a natural environment (e.g. at home)
- Make use of natural and good lighting
- Use subtitles

Don't be like everyone:

- Do not remake the same video multiple other creators already did

Be creative:

- Use trends
- Use trending background music and sounds
- Edit the video creatively

Don't be too professional:

- Do not edit the content too professionally
- Do not have too good quality (professional camera set-up)

Be entertaining:

- Use catchy hooks
- Find an unique style

Be informative:

- Be concise, giving important information on the product
-

Note. These aspects can help UGC creators as well as marketers when developing their briefings for UGC creators

6 Conclusion

This study explored the trustworthiness of User-Generated Content (UGC) versus Brand-Generated Content (BGC) advertisements on TikTok, with a particular focus on Gen Z's perceptions. The results show that Gen Z users generally trust UGC ads more than BGC ads due to the authenticity, relatability, and transparency associated with UGC. Despite this preference, some participants expressed concerns about the credibility of UGC when creators are compensated or when content appears scripted.

The findings suggest that for marketing strategies to be effective on TikTok, brands should leverage the trust-building elements of UGC, such as showing long-term use and realistic outcomes, engaging relatable creators, and maintaining transparency about product

limitations. Additionally, while BGC ads are valued for their quality and professionalism, they need to incorporate more genuine and relatable aspects to build trust with Gen Z.

The study also highlighted the significant impact of TikTok usage patterns and motivations on the effectiveness of ads. The diverse reasons for using TikTok, ranging from entertainment to information seeking, underscore the need for versatile and engaging content.

In conclusion, this research provides valuable insights into the factors that influence Gen Z's trust in advertising on TikTok. Marketers and brands should focus on authenticity, relatability, and transparency to effectively engage this demographic and enhance the impact of their advertising efforts. Future research should expand on these findings by exploring other social media platforms and involving larger, more diverse samples to further validate and enrich the understanding of Gen Z's trust in digital advertising.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Literature log

Date	Database	Search string	Total hits	Remarks
26.02.2024	Scopus	“UGC” AND “trustworthiness”	22	2
		“UGC” AND “purchase intention”	49	3
		“UGC” AND “BGC”	2	2
04.03.2024	Scopus	“Gen Z” AND “TikTok”	25	1
		“Brand-generated content” AND “marketing”	11	4
02.04.2024	Scopus	"purchase intention" AND "social media" OR "UGC"	1.406	2
	Scopus	"purchase intention" AND "social media" AND "UGC"	24	2
	Scopus	"Purchase intention" AND "UGC" AND "Trust"	14	1
10.05.2024	Google Scholar	“Focus Group” AND “Size”	6160000	3
	Google Scholar	“Qualitative research” AND “Sampling” AND “Coding”	2650000	5

	Google	“Qualitative research” AND	5870000	2
	Scholar	“Sampling”		
30.05.2024	Google	“Qualitative research” AND	4370000	3
	Scholar	“Coding”		

Appendix B: Focus Group Guide: English Version

1. Introducing myself and explaining what this research is about

First of all, I will quickly introduce myself, I am Gina, 22 years old and doing this research for my bachelor thesis. With this study I want to investigate how trust is build up in UGC ads on TikTok compared to BGC ads and how Gen Z perceives it. Therefore, I am focusing on the beauty industry but the outcomes can probably be applied to other industries as well.

For the ones that never heard of UGC before, it stands for user-generated content and in this case user-generated ads for beauty products. The opposite of UGC s than BGC, which stands for brand-generated content. The main difference is that BGC is professionally produced by a brand while UGC is produced by users.

2. Oral informed consent

Before actually starting, the participation is completely voluntary and you can quit at any point throughout this session if you want to. Besides that, everything will be audio recorded and solely used for this study but everything will be anonymized and deleted afterwards.

Do you all understand and agree to the terms?

3. Demographics

First, everyone can shortly introduce themselves, mentioning their name, age, study program and the gender you identify with.

- How old are you?
- What gender do you identify with?
- What is your educational level?
- What is your nationality?

How often do you use TikTok and what is the main content that you are watching?

4. Showing the UGC and BGC examples

Now I will show you some examples of UGC and BGC ads, for everyone to know what exactly we are talking about.

Afterwards we will start taking about it.

Questions:

Now I will ask you questions and it would be great if everyone says something to each question and in the best case scenario a discussion evolves between you. So don't see it as a regular interview and more like a group discussion.

1. Which one of the ads would you trust more?
 - Why do you trust that ad more?
 - What would you improve in the other ad to make it more trustworthy?
 - What do you like and dislike about the ad?
 - Would you say this ad convinced you to buy the product? If so, why?
 - Is trustworthiness important for you in order to be convinced by the product and if so, why?
 - (Could you give a statement to this ad (your opinion about it)?)
2. When you see a UGC beauty ad on TikTok, what aspects influence your trust in the product or brand?
 - Have you ever purchased a beauty product based on an UGC ad on TikTok? If so, what made you trust that ad?
 - Have you ever purchased a beauty product based on a BGC ad on TikTok? If so, what made you trust that ad?
 - What can a UGC creator do for you to trust them?
3. Why does this aspect increase the trustworthiness for you?
 - What makes you trust this aspect?
 - Can you motivate your answer?
 - Can you elaborate on that?
4. In what ways do you think UGC creators can improve their TikTok content to make it more appealing and trustworthy to Gen Z users?

Appendix C: Focus Group Guide: German Version

1. Ich stelle mich vor und erkläre, worum es in dieser Studie geht

Zunächst einmal werde ich mich kurz vorstellen, ich bin Gina, 22 Jahre alt und mache diese Studie für meine Bachelorarbeit. Mit dieser Studie möchte ich untersuchen, wie das Vertrauen in UGC-Anzeigen auf TikTok im Vergleich zu BGC-Anzeigen aufgebaut wird und wie die Gen Z dies wahrnimmt. Daher konzentriere ich mich auf die Schönheitsindustrie, aber die Ergebnisse lassen sich wahrscheinlich auch auf andere Branchen anwenden.

Für diejenigen, die noch nie von UGC gehört haben: UGC steht für nutzergenerierte Inhalte und in diesem Fall für nutzergenerierte Anzeigen für Schönheitsprodukte. Das Gegenteil von UGC ist BGC, das für markengenerierte Inhalte steht. Der Hauptunterschied besteht darin, dass BGC professionell von einer Marke produziert wird, während UGC von Nutzern erstellt wird.

2. Mündliche informierte Zustimmung

Bevor es richtig losgeht, muss ich sagen, dass die Teilnahme völlig freiwillig ist und Sie die Sitzung jederzeit abbrechen können, wenn Sie möchten. Außerdem wird alles aufgezeichnet und ausschließlich für diese Studie verwendet, aber alles wird anonymisiert und anschließend gelöscht.

Haben Sie das alle verstanden und sind damit einverstanden?

3. Demografische Daten

Zunächst kann sich jeder kurz vorstellen, indem er seinen Namen, sein Alter, seinen Studiengang und das Geschlecht nennt, mit dem Sie sich identifizieren.

- Wie alt sind Sie?
- Welchem Geschlecht gehören Sie an?
- Welches ist Ihr Bildungsniveau?
- Welche Nationalität haben Sie?

Wie oft nutzen Sie TikTok und welche Inhalte sehen Sie sich hauptsächlich an?

4. Zeigen der UGC- und BGC-Beispiele

Ich werde Ihnen nun Fragen stellen, und es wäre schön, wenn jeder etwas zu jeder Frage sagt und sich im besten Fall eine Diskussion zwischen Ihnen entwickelt. Sehen Sie es also nicht als ein normales Vorstellungsgespräch, sondern eher als eine Gruppendiskussion.

1. Welcher der Anzeigen würden Sie mehr vertrauen?

- Warum vertrauen Sie dieser Anzeige mehr?
- Was würden Sie an der anderen Anzeige verbessern, um sie vertrauenswürdiger zu machen?
- Was gefällt Ihnen an der Anzeige und was nicht?
- Würden Sie sagen, dass diese Werbung Sie überzeugt hat, das Produkt zu kaufen? Wenn ja, warum?

- Ist Vertrauenswürdigkeit für Sie wichtig, um von dem Produkt überzeugt zu werden und wenn ja, warum?

- (Könnten Sie eine Aussage zu dieser Werbung machen (Ihre Meinung dazu)?)

2. Wenn Sie eine UGC-Schönheitsanzeige auf TikTok sehen, welche Aspekte beeinflussen Ihr Vertrauen in das Produkt oder die Marke?

- Haben Sie jemals ein Schönheitsprodukt aufgrund einer UGC-Anzeige auf TikTok gekauft? Wenn ja, warum haben Sie dieser Anzeige vertraut?

- Haben Sie schon einmal ein Beauty-Produkt aufgrund einer BGC-Anzeige auf TikTok gekauft? Wenn ja, warum haben Sie dieser Anzeige vertraut?

- Was kann ein UGC-Ersteller tun, damit Sie ihm vertrauen?

3. Warum erhöht dieser Aspekt die Vertrauenswürdigkeit für Sie?

- Was bringt Sie dazu, diesem Aspekt zu vertrauen?

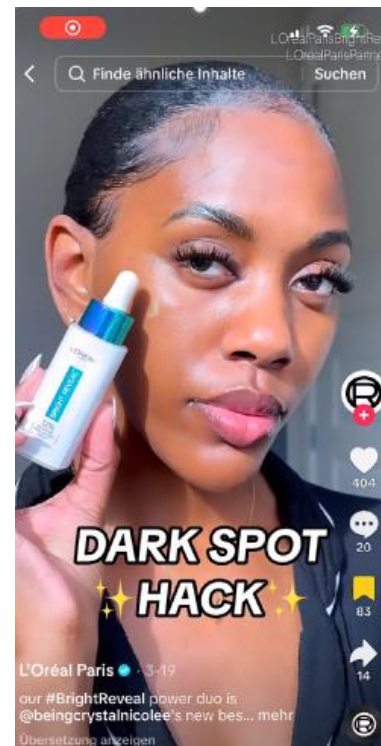
- Können Sie Ihre Antwort begründen?

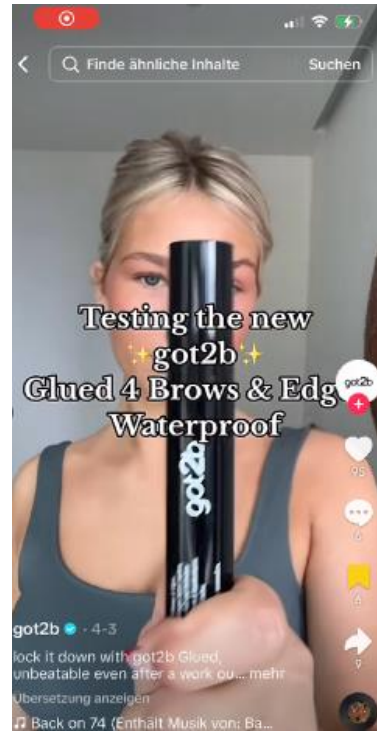
- Können Sie das näher erläutern?

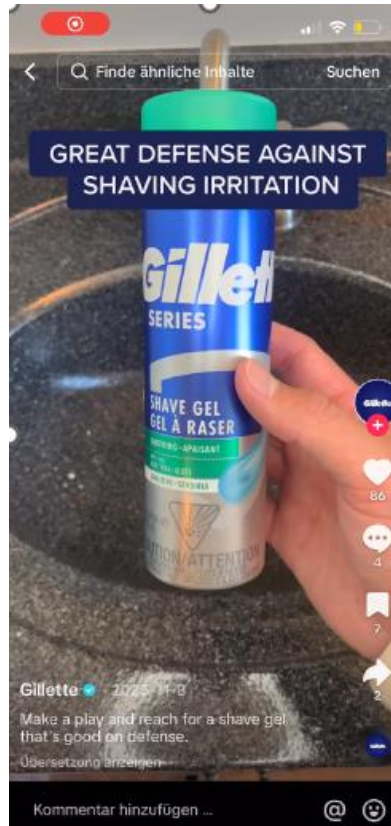
4. Was denken Sie, wie UGC-Ersteller ihre TikTok-Inhalte verbessern können, um sie für die Generation Z attraktiver und vertrauenswürdiger zu machen?

Appendix D: UGC & BGC ads examples

The BGC ads are left and the UGC ads are on the right. Every ad is a video, and the participants were shown the whole videos.







Appendix E: Codebook

<i>Code</i>	<i>Sub-Codes</i>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Example</i>	<i>Krippendorff's Alpha</i>
1. TikTok Usage	1.1 Screentime	Refers to the average screentime of the TikTok app	<i>"I probably use it like three times a week"</i>	0.844
	1.2 Motivation	Refers to the motivation to use TikTok	<i>"and basically just for entertainment I'd say."</i>	
2. UGC	2.1 Pro	Refers to a positive opinion of UGC ads on TikTok	<i>"So I also really like those more (UGC) because it just feels more casual, I guess."</i>	0.844
	2.2 Con	Refers to a negative aspect of UGC ads on TikTok	<i>"Um, and I really dislike when it's very scripted."</i>	
3. BGC	3.1 Pro	Refers to a positive aspect of BGC ads on TikTok	<i>"In order to be convinced, I first have to see a professional ad, otherwise I would think it could be trash" (translated)</i>	0.842
	3.2 Con	Refers to a negative aspect of BGC ads on TikTok	<i>"Sometimes you feel like you know that they are paid to do it."</i>	

4. Trustworthiness	4.1 Authenticity	Refers to trustworthiness built up in TikTok ads through authenticity	<i>“for me, it's just when they're authentic and I believe that they use it, I trust them if they can make it seem like it”</i>	0.885
	4.2 Relatability	Refers to trustworthiness built up in TikTok ads through relatability	<i>“Yeah, I think you also kind of need to relate to the creators because, for example, she was like "okay, this is a black person. I'm also a black person and I can trust her with her opinion about that". “</i>	
	4.3 Transparency	Refers to trustworthiness built up in TikTok ads through transparency	<i>“Make it as natural and transparent as possible. Not maybe too many cuts, but as I said, it always depends on the product and how much you really want to talk about it.”</i>	
	4.4 Creator	Refers to trustworthiness built up through attributes of the UGC creator.	<i>“If the person in front of the camera is some kind of supermodel, I directly don't believe the explained problem”</i>	
	4.5 Brand & Product	Refers to trustworthiness built up through already	<i>“I think it also depends on if you know the brand</i>	

		knowing the brand or product featured in the ad, beforehand	<i>beforehand or the product”</i>	
	4.6 Need of the product	Refers to trustworthiness built up through needing a product or looking for a new product	<i>“It depends on the person if they need something or I think it's rarely the case that you're not looking for something, and then you see an ad and do like "oh my God, I need it". I think there's always a lack of something in your beauty routine or something that you then are like, okay, I feel convinced because I'm not that satisfied with the product before. So I feel that also depends”</i>	
5. Content Characteristics	5.1 Visuality	Refers to the visual aspects of the ad itself	<i>“It has to be well edited.”</i> (translated)	0.884
	5.2 Creativity	Refers to the creativity of the ad itself	<i>“They have to have something, that I don't skip the video, just be different”</i> (translated)	
	5.3 Informative	Refers to the amount of information that is given in the ad itself	<i>“And content wise I would say that I would prefer for the UGC ads when they really talk in the video and</i>	

		<i>give information about the product”</i>
5.4 Entertainment	Refers to the entertainment factor of the ad itself	<i>“And I also like the, the second and the third one way more because like more TikTok video, but it's a hidden ad, let's say it that way. Yeah.”</i>
5.5 Simplicity	Refers to the ad being simple	<i>“But if you can, like, show off the product without much talk, I don't mind.”</i>
5.6 Attention grabbing	Refers to the ad grabbing someone’s attention through something	<i>“I think the attention span is so small for a lot of people right now, me included. So if I see a video where it's like "oh this product is amazing" or "run to Sephora" or something like you mentioned, and it's always like "oh, okay, I have to watch it"”</i>
5.7 Application of Product	Refers to the person in the showing the application of the product	<i>“So when people use it and show you that it works“</i>

6. Improvement	6.1 Improvement UGC	Refers to improvement ideas for UGC ads on TikTok	<i>“Don't make it seem scripted.”</i>	0.960
7. Purchase Intention	7.1 Intent to buy	The participant mentions to immediately have the intention to purchase the product	<i>“I saw the UGC ad of the dark spot serum, and thought “I would actually like to have that” “</i>	0.916
	7.2 Consideration	The participant considers purchasing the product in the future	<i>“I would really think more about that oil, maybe I'll get it”</i>	
	7.3 Influence	The TikTok ad influences the participant purchase decisions in the future	<i>“I think I do it more unconsciously and also when I see the product multiple times, it influences me next time I'm in a shop”</i>	

End