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USER-GENERATED CONTENT VERSUS TRADITIONAL DIGITAL ADVERTISING: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THEIR EFFECTIVENESS ON ENGAGEMENT AND PURCHASE BEHAVIOR ON SOCIAL MEDIA

VERÓNICA CHÁVEZ TORRES[1], AXEL VELASCO CHÁVEZ[2] ADA ROXANA TORRES DE ACEVEDO[3] & GUILLERMO GUZMÁN CANO[4]

[1]School of Business, Universidad Popular Autónoma del Estado de Puebla (UPAEP)
https://orcid.org/0009-0009-7182-9565

[2]School of Software Engineering, Universidad Popular Autónoma del Estado de Puebla (UPAEP) Puebla, Mexico

[3]School of Business, Universidad Católica de El Salvador
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3261-1028

[4]School of Business, Universidad Popular Autónoma del Estado de Puebla (UPAEP)
https://orcid.org/0009-0009-2596-1207

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the comparative effectiveness of user generated content (UGC) versus traditional digital advertising on social media, focusing on its impact on two strategic digital marketing variables: engagement and purchase behavior. Given the limited evidence that directly contrasts both content types under equivalent metrics, a mixed methods study with a nonexperimental, cross sectional design was developed, based on content analysis of posts published on Instagram and TikTok by beauty and consumer brands (Maybelline New York, Pantene, and Secret). An analysis matrix was built to register quantitative variables (likes, comments, shares, and views) and qualitative variables (narrative style, format, and perceived authenticity) across a sample evenly distributed between both content types. Results show that UGC generates predominantly qualitative engagement, expressed through extensive comments, statements of preference, and explicit purchase intent, whereas traditional advertising produces more quantitative and superficial interaction, concentrated in quick reactions. Engagement is also found to act as a bridge between content type and purchase behavior, and the effectiveness of each format largely depends on each brand particular digital strategy. The study concludes that UGC and traditional advertising are not mutually exclusive strategies but complementary ones, and offers practical implications for content planning in digital environments.

Keywords: User Generated Content, Digital Advertising, Engagement, Purchase Behavior, Social Media, Digital Marketing.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Digital transformation has structurally redefined the communication dynamics between brands and consumers. The consolidation of Web 2.0 led to a transition from a one way communicative model toward an interactive environment in which users not only consume information but also actively participate in its production and circulation (Fernández Castrillo, 2014). This shift gave rise to the prosumer phenomenon, a figure that plays a central role in the symbolic construction of brands within digital environments.

In this context, user generated content (UGC) emerged strongly, understood as material created by consumers, communities, or independent creators who share experiences, opinions, or narratives related to products and services (Naem & Okafor, 2019). Unlike traditional advertising, characterized by corporate control of the message and its explicit persuasive intent, UGC tends to be perceived as more authentic and closer to the audience, which can influence the credibility of information and consumer decision making (Schaefer, 2019).

Several studies have analyzed the impact of digital content on strategic variables such as engagement, understood as the level of emotional, cognitive, and behavioral interaction a user develops with a brand (Godey et al., 2016), manifested through observable indicators such as comments, shared content, reactions, and saves. The study by Mariscal Reyes et al. (2025), focused on the Hallyu phenomenon in Mexico, shows that content generated by fans amplifies cultural narratives and acts as a mechanism of social validation, confirming the role of UGC in motivating experiential consumption.

Meanwhile, traditional digital advertising remains a central tool within marketing strategies, grounded in strategic planning, message control, and audience segmentation (Chaffey & Ellis Chadwick, 2016). However, contemporary literature suggests that the effectiveness of advertising messages increasingly depends on their capacity to generate interaction and perceived relevance within digital communities (Schaefer, 2019).

Despite these advances, the literature review reveals that most studies analyze UGC and traditional advertising independently. Few studies directly contrast both content types under equivalent engagement and purchase behavior metrics, which makes it difficult to draw solid conclusions about their relative effectiveness. This absence of integrated comparative models, combined with the tendency of existing studies to focus on specific sectors or to rely on predominantly qualitative methodologies, limits the generalization of available findings.

Accordingly, this research is oriented toward answering the following general question: how does user generated content, compared with traditional advertising content, influence engagement and purchase behavior of users on social media? From this question, the following specific questions are derived: (a) are there significant differences in the levels of engagement generated by both content types; (b) are there significant differences in the purchase behavior

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of users exposed to each content type; (c) what is the relationship between the level of engagement and purchase behavior; (d) does engagement mediate the relationship between content type and purchase behavior; and (e) does the effectiveness of content type vary according to user characteristics or digital context.

The general objective of this study is to comparatively analyze the effectiveness of UGC versus traditional advertising content on social media, evaluating its impact on engagement and purchase behavior.

Specifically, the study seeks to (1) identify the differences in engagement levels generated by each content type, (2) evaluate the impact of content type on purchase behavior, (3) analyze the relationship between engagement and purchase behavior, (4) determine whether engagement acts as a mediating variable between content type and purchase behavior, and (5) propose an explanatory model to understand these relationships within digital environments.

Based on the above, the following hypotheses are proposed: UGC generates significantly higher engagement levels than traditional advertising (H1); UGC influences purchase behavior more significantly than traditional advertising (H2); there is a positive and significant relationship between engagement and purchase behavior (H3); engagement significantly mediates the relationship between content type and purchase behavior (H4); and this relationship varies significantly according to user characteristics and digital context (H5).

Addressing this problem is relevant both theoretically and practically. Although studies exist that analyze the influence of UGC on brand perception and purchase intention (Mariscal Reyes et al., 2025), few integrate a direct comparison between UGC and traditional advertising within the same analytical model under equivalent metrics. In this sense, this research contributes to the consolidation of analytical frameworks that integrate behavioral dimensions and digital interaction metrics within a single evaluative scheme, and offers evidence that can guide strategic decisions related to campaign design and the incorporation of UGC into commercial strategies.

2.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Digital Marketing and Content Typologies

Digital marketing can be understood as the transformation of marketing practices through the use of digital technologies and data to create, communicate, and deliver value throughout the purchase process, integrating channels, analytics, and automation (Kannan & Li, 2017). Its evolution has been shaped by technological changes, including the internet, search engines, social media, mobile devices, and artificial intelligence, as well as by shifts in consumer behavior, which have favored strategies centered on interaction, personalization, and performance measurement (Chaffey & Ellis Chadwick, 2016). With the expansion of Web 2.0,

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consumers stopped being passive receivers and became active participants, while the mass adoption of smartphones made digital marketing ubiquitous, intensifying competition for attention and the use of data and automation (Kannan & Li, 2017).

Within this ecosystem, two content typologies coexist with distinct logics. Traditional digital advertising refers to advertising actions developed by brands through paid formats controlled by the organization itself, distributed across websites, search engines, social media, or video platforms (Tauro, 2023), and it retains features of the classic communication model: message control, centralized planning, and a predominantly one way character (Correa, 2021). Its main advantage lies in the ability to segment audiences and measure results through indicators such as impressions, clicks, and conversions (Chaffey & Ellis Chadwick, 2016), although in highly participatory environments it can face challenges related to perceived authenticity and credibility.

UGC, in turn, refers to any digital content, including reviews, photographs, videos, posts, or comments, created and voluntarily shared by consumers themselves (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Its development is closely linked to Web 2.0, which allowed users to move from being information consumers to becoming active content producers, favoring more participatory and decentralized dynamics. Several studies have shown that this type of content tends to be perceived as more authentic, credible, and trustworthy than advertising produced directly by brands (Cheong & Morrison, 2008), and it is closely related to the concept of electronic word of mouth (eWOM), that is, the diffusion of opinions and recommendations about products through the internet, with a strong impact on the formation of attitudes and purchase behaviors (Hennig Thurau et al., 2004).

This participatory dynamic can be partly explained through the concept of the prosumer, introduced by Toffler (1980) to anticipate that technological development would allow consumers to take an increasingly active role in production and communication processes. With the expansion of the internet and social media, the prosumer has become a central actor in the digital ecosystem: users not only consume content generated by brands or media outlets, but also produce reviews, opinions, and recommendations that influence other consumers, transforming marketing communication from a one way model into an interactive one (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010).

2.2 Engagement and Consumer Behavior in Digital Environments

Engagement has gained great relevance in digital marketing because it allows explaining the level of interaction, participation, and involvement that users develop with a brand in digital environments. From an academic perspective, it is defined as a psychological state that arises from interactive and co creative experiences between consumer and brand, manifested through cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions (Brodie et al., 2011). The cognitive dimension relates to attention and interest, the emotional dimension to affective bonds, and the behavioral

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dimension to observable actions such as sharing or recommending content (Dessart et al., 2015). In digital marketing, higher engagement levels tend to be associated with greater visibility, interaction, and loyalty, in addition to influencing trust, perceived value, and purchase intention.

Online consumer behavior, in turn, comprises the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral processes that individuals experience when searching for, evaluating, acquiring, and using products or services within digital environments, incorporating particularities such as immediate access to information and constant comparison among alternatives (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Within this process, the social information available online, such as comments, ratings, and recommendations, proves especially influential in shaping opinions, which connects again with the eWOM phenomenon (Hennig Thurau et al., 2004).

Digital purchase behavior constitutes a specific phase of this process, centered on decisions and actions related to the acquisition of products or services, and it includes information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision, and post consumption experience (Kotler et al., 2021). Purchase intention, understood as the probability or willingness of a consumer to acquire a product in the near future, functions as an indicator that allows anticipating actual purchase behavior (Ajzen, 1991), and on social media it is influenced by digital interaction, access to information, and the social influence of other users (Hajli, 2014).

2.3 Relationship Between UGC, Engagement, and Purchase Behavior: Prior Empirical Evidence

Recent literature supports the existence of an interconnected relationship among digital content type, engagement, and purchase behavior. Bao (2025), in a study on social commerce platforms, found that UGC positively influences consumer trust and that trust, in turn, increases purchase intention. Along the same line,

Zakaria et al. (2024) demonstrated that perceived usefulness and trust in content mediate the relationship between UGC and purchase intention on social media, while Lv et al. (2024) showed that UGC can generate positive emotions toward brands, increasing the probability of developing purchase intention.

In a complementary way, Haider et al. (2025) found that interaction with content generated by other consumers significantly increases the level of participation and engagement with brands, which can influence purchase behavior. Taken together, this evidence suggests that engagement can function as a mediating variable between UGC and purchase behavior: exposure to user generated content increases consumer participation and involvement, which can subsequently translate into greater intention to acquire products or services. However, as noted in the introduction, few studies directly compare this dynamic with the one generated by

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traditional advertising under equivalent conditions, which constitutes the gap this research seeks to address.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Approach, Type, and Design

This research was developed under a mixed methods approach, integrating the quantitative analysis of digital metrics with the qualitative interpretation of content on social media (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The quantitative component focused on metrics such as the number of interactions, views, and user participation, while the qualitative component allowed examining elements such as narrative style, level of authenticity, and content structure.

In terms of purpose, the study is applied, since it seeks to generate knowledge useful for decision making in digital marketing strategies (Hernández Sampieri et al., 2014). It is also classified as descriptive, because it characterizes the behavior of digital content based on engagement metrics; comparative, because it analyzes differences between two content typologies; and correlational, because it seeks to identify the relationship between content type and variables such as engagement and user interaction.

The design is nonexperimental, since the variables were not manipulated but observed in their natural context within digital platforms, and cross sectional, since the analysis was carried out on content published during a determined period, corresponding to the first four months of 2026.

3.2 Population, Sample, and Variables

The population consisted of brand content posts on social media, specifically on Instagram and TikTok, where content generated both by users and by brands themselves is disseminated. The sample was selected through nonprobabilistic convenience sampling, considering posts that met the following inclusion criteria: published on TikTok or Instagram, related to brands or products, clearly classifiable as either UGC or traditional advertising, and with visible metrics such as likes, comments, and views. A sample of between ten and twenty posts was analyzed, evenly distributed between both content types, which allowed comparisons and basic statistical analysis with sufficient representativeness for the exploratory purposes of this study.

The independent variable was the type of digital content, UGC versus traditional advertising; the mediating variable was engagement, understood as the level of user interaction with the content; and the dependent variable was purchase behavior, understood as the actions or predisposition of the user toward acquiring products.

3.3 Data Collection Technique and Instrument

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The technique used was digital content analysis (Krippendorff, 2018), which allows systematically examining the characteristics of content published on social media. The instrument consisted of a content analysis matrix designed to register, for each post, quantitative variables (number of likes, comments, shares, and views) and qualitative variables (content type, format, narrative style, presence of storytelling, and perceived naturalness or authenticity).

Table 1. Operationalization of Variables

Variable	Dimension	Indicator	Measurement
Content type	Classification	UGC / Advertising	Nominal
Engagement	Interaction	Likes, comments, shares	Quantitative
Engagement	Reach	Views	Quantitative
Purchase	Intention	Comments showing purchase intention	Qualitative / quant.

Note. Author elaboration.

3.4 Data Analysis Techniques

Quantitative analysis consisted of comparing metrics between content types and identifying differences in engagement levels. Qualitative analysis was oriented toward interpreting content style, identifying narrative patterns, and evaluating characteristics associated with engagement. The integration of both analyses allowed identifying not only which content type generates greater interaction, but also the reasons that explain this phenomenon.

As a methodological complement, a digital benchmarking analysis was incorporated for three brands in the beauty and consumer sector, namely Maybelline New York, Pantene, and Secret, selected through purposive sampling considering their active presence on Instagram, evident use of UGC and advertising content, and the availability of visible metrics. This analysis allowed observing, in a real context, how the study variables actually manifest.

4.0 RESULTS

The following section presents the findings of the comparative analysis carried out on UGC and traditional advertising posts published by the three selected brands.

4.1 Maybelline New York

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The UGC content analyzed was characterized by showing a real product use experience, with a spontaneous style close to the everyday language of users, and a low level of professional production consistent with the characteristics of this content type described in the literature. In contrast, traditional advertising content showed a high level of production, with a polished aesthetic, professional editing, and a structured message centered on product attributes.

In terms of observed metrics, UGC content showed a higher proportion of comments relative to the number of views, reflecting greater audience involvement through statements of purchase intention such as needing to try the product, and statements of preference such as calling it a favorite, as well as longer contributions in which users shared their experience with the product. In contrast, traditional advertising content showed more limited interaction, mostly consisting of emojis or brief comments. These results suggest that both content types are not mutually exclusive but complementary: UGC strengthens credibility and interaction, while traditional advertising reinforces visibility and brand recognition.

4.2 Pantene

In the case of Pantene, the audience exposed to UGC content did not simply consume it, but actively participated by validating the shared experience, asking questions, or expressing their own opinions, resulting in

deeper engagement along the emotional and cognitive dimensions. This type of content also tended to activate social proof processes, in which users interpreted the creator experience as a trustworthy reference for their own purchase decision.

Traditional advertising content, on the other hand, followed a more direct scheme oriented toward capturing attention within the scrolling environment through an impactful visual presentation, a clear product display, and an emphasis on its benefits. However, the audience tended to behave more passively, with likes outnumbering comments. In terms of metrics, UGC showed a significantly higher proportion of comments than traditional advertising, with explicit statements of purchase intention such as planning to buy the product, and statements of preference such as describing it as a regular part of their routine, which reinforces the participatory and conversational nature of this content type compared with the more passive character of traditional advertising.

4.3 Secret

The analysis of the Secret brand showed a more moderate overall level of participation compared with the other two brands, both in UGC and in traditional advertising, suggesting a lower intensity of interaction regardless of content type. Nonetheless, relevant qualitative differences were identified: in traditional advertising content, interaction concentrated on functional questions such as asking where to purchase the product, indicating a predominantly

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informational interest, while in UGC content, although less frequent within the brand strategy, positive evaluative comments predominated, such as expressions of strong approval of the product. The limited use of UGC within this brand digital strategy could be associated with the lower qualitative interaction observed.

4.4 Comparative Synthesis

Consistently across the three brands analyzed, UGC content tended to generate a higher level of qualitative interaction, manifested through longer comments, statements of preference, and explicit purchase intention, as well as active user participation through the exchange of experiences. Traditional advertising content, in turn, showed predominantly quantitative interaction, concentrated on views and quick reactions, with a more limited capacity to generate conversation, although it played a relevant role in building brand recognition and positioning.

Table 2. Comparative Summary of Results by Content Type

Dimension	UGC	Traditional Advertising
Engagement type	Qualitative: comments, purchase intention	Quantitative: likes, views
Visual production	Low, spontaneous	High, professional
Strategic function	Credibility and conversion	Visibility and recognition

Note. Author elaboration based on the analysis of the three brands studied.

5.0 DISCUSSION

The findings obtained allow answering the research questions proposed. First, clear differences are observed in the engagement levels generated by both content types: while UGC generates engagement of a qualitative nature, expressed through meaningful comments and conversation, traditional advertising generates more superficial engagement, concentrated on quick reactions. This pattern is consistent with the literature that attributes to UGC a greater perception of authenticity and closeness (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Cheong & Morrison, 2008), which would favor its capacity to generate deeper interactions.

Second, the results suggest that UGC influences purchase behavior more directly, to the extent that comments associated with this content type more frequently include explicit statements of purchase intention. This evidence is consistent with previous research linking UGC to

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consumer trust and the reduction of uncertainty during the evaluation of alternatives (Bao, 2025), as well as with studies that identify perceived usefulness and trust as mechanisms that mediate this relationship (Zakaria et al., 2024).

Third, the data support the idea that engagement functions as a bridge between content type and purchase behavior, in line with the mediating role documented by Lv et al. (2024): exposure to UGC appears to increase consumer participation, which in turn can translate into a greater willingness to acquire the product. However, given the nonexperimental and cross-sectional design of the study, this relationship should be interpreted as an observed association rather than a causal relationship established through statistical testing.

Finally, the analysis by brand shows that content effectiveness depends not only on its format but also on each organization particular strategy. The case of Secret, with a more moderate participation across both content types and limited use of UGC, suggests that the mere availability of this format does not guarantee higher interaction levels unless it is consistently integrated into the brand digital strategy. This finding is practically relevant, as it points to the fact that incorporating UGC requires deliberate and sustained implementation rather than merely occasional presence.

Taken together, the results suggest that UGC and traditional advertising should not be understood as mutually exclusive strategies, but as complementary elements within a comprehensive digital marketing strategy: while the former strengthens credibility, interaction, and influence over the purchase decision, the latter reinforces visibility and brand positioning, fulfilling distinct functions depending on the stage of the marketing funnel in which the consumer is located.

6.0 CONCLUSIONS

This research comparatively analyzed the effectiveness of user generated content versus traditional digital advertising on social media, considering its impact on engagement and purchase behavior. The results show that UGC tends to generate engagement of a qualitative nature and a more direct influence on purchase intention, while traditional advertising produces more quantitative engagement, primarily oriented toward visibility and brand recognition. It was also found that engagement can operate as a mechanism connecting content type with purchase behavior, and that the relative effectiveness of each format is conditioned by each brand specific digital strategy.

From a practical standpoint, these findings suggest that brands seeking to strengthen meaningful interaction and conversion should prioritize the systematic incorporation of UGC within their content strategies, without abandoning the use of traditional advertising for visibility and positioning purposes. From a theoretical standpoint, the study provides comparative evidence that helps narrow the gap identified in the literature between approaches

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that address UGC and traditional advertising in isolation, and proposes an analytical scheme linking content type, engagement, and purchase behavior that could be replicated in other sectors.

The study presents limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. The size and type of sample, obtained through nonprobabilistic convenience sampling, restrict the generalization of the results; the analysis focused on a specific set of variables, without delving into factors such as product type or prior brand trust; and the dynamic nature of digital platforms, whose metrics and algorithms evolve constantly, may affect the temporal stability of the findings. In addition, the study was carried out within a specific geographic and cultural context, which limits the direct extrapolation of the results to other markets.

Future research could expand the proposed model by incorporating larger samples and longitudinal or experimental designs that allow establishing more robust causal relationships, as well as exploring the role of additional moderating variables, such as user characteristics, product type, or industry sector, to strengthen the external validity of the findings presented here.

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