

**User-Generated Content and Brand Engagement in the Fashion Industry**

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## **List of Abbreviations**

CBE	consumer brand engagement
CGC	consumer-generated content
eWOM	electronic word of mouth
FGC	firm-generated content
IT	information technology
SBE	social brand engagement
SMN	social media network
SMU	social media user
SNP	social network platform
SNS	social networking service
S-O-R	Stimuli-Organism-Response
UGC	user-generated content
WOM	word of mouth

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## Abstract

**Background:** The understanding and evaluation of brand engagement through social media have become topics of major interest for both academics and marketers since the birth of online networking. Despite significant levels of research, little consideration has been given to the social influence of user-generated content (UGC) in social brand engagement. The aim of the current study is to explore the social impact of UGC on social and consumer brand engagement by virtue of social media and to explore the role played by UGC in the creation of social influence for brand engagement.

**Objective:** The study looks at the types of SMUs as well as their interactions which can create, exchange and consume brand related UGC and how this leads to SBE and CBE in a fashion retail context. In doing so, it explores the social influence of such brand-related content on other SMUs, which promotes CBE in social media settings.

**Method:** The study postulates the existence of social realities as consistent with social constructivism, with multiple realities of social influence outlined on the basis of ontological relativism. To fulfil the proposed objectives, research data were gathered from 32 participants using specific inclusion criteria, purposive sampling technique and a semi-structured interview method. Thematic analysis was then used to extract four major themes.

**Findings:** The research reveals that SMUs create, share and exchange UGC for various motivational purposes, such as to achieve social responsibility, to share experiences, to stay connected and updated to share rewards and to serve as opinion leaders. Various types of UGC participants were identified with differing objectives in terms of their use of UGC. These types are passive participants, creators, criticisers, and collectors/consumers. The study uncovered many social influence factors that can increase the effectiveness of UGC. These social influence factors are social trust, content expertise, relevance and product usage.

**Originality:** The current study is the first to theoretically conceptualise “user-generated content and social consumer brand engagement” through a social constructivist epistemological and relativist ontological approach in the context of UK fashion retailing. This study differentiates social and consumer brand engagement through the application of social influence theory. On the bases of social influence theory, this research suggest that identification and internalization types of social influence can enhance social engagement. While compliance type of social influence can create consumer brand engagement on social media. The study applies and extends social influence theory in the context of social and consumer brand engagement across social media platforms.

# CHAPTER 1: RESEARCH INTRODUCTION

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## 1.1 STUDY BACKGROUND

User-generated content (UGC) transfers brand trust from one consumer to another, and the trust transfer hypothesis stipulates that trust in one individual transfers from one source to another if there is an association between the two (Herrero et al., 2015; Jin & Phua, 2014). Social media platforms are an advanced example of this process (Herrero et al., 2015; Zhang et al., 2016). These days, social media platforms provide a means through which brand trust is exchanged via UGC (Herrero & San Martín, 2017). Therefore, UGC is the communication of trust from one consumer to another (Kim & Lee, 2017; Halliday, 2016). It is important to understand why and how UGC transfers trust and who is the most important transferrer or creator of trust through UGC (Wilson et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2017; Ghose et al., 2012; Piligrimienė et al., 2015). Liu et al. (2017) conducted a study whereby consumer-to-consumer trust and consumer-to-marketer trust was found to exert a positive influence on consumer engagement with brands. This was also found to be influential with respect to brand trust (Chari et al., 2016; Steyn et al., 2011; Colicev et al., 2019). The trust itself is generated through the social influence of the UGC; social influence is “*how encouragement from groups, in conjunction with situational characteristics, affects the consumer’s uniqueness and conformity needs or induces normative conflict, which in turn affects the consumer’s behaviors*” (Sridhar & Srinivasan, 2012, p. 71). Trust can therefore lead to further brand engagement from those who trust the brand, which would generate further trust along the consumer chain (Fay & Larkin, 2017; Hong et al., 2017; Goh et al., 2013).

The pursuit of online social interactions on social media websites also leads to the sharing of information, social referrals (Becker-Leifhold, 2018), product recommendations (Ananda et al., 2019) and the sharing of one’s own brand engagement with brands (Kumar & Nayak, 2019). These variables can create social influence across social networks (Bigne et al., 2018). The intensity of social influence depends on many factors which might include culture and gender, and relationships and trust between social network members (Godey et al., 2016; Hudson et al., 2016). Social influence is said to take place when the actions and behaviours of individuals

are influenced by peers. There are three processes involved: identification, compliance and internalisation (Kelman, 1958). Identification takes place when the views of others are adopted by the individual, which results in trust (Jin & Ryu, 2019). Compliance takes place when an individual conforms to others' beliefs without agreeing or disagreeing with the validity of their statement(s) (Kelman, 1958). Internalisation takes place when the opinions of peers are adopted in order to share the same values and be part of the group (Kelman, 1958). When social influence leads to sales or brand engagement, then it can be stated that social influence has taken place regarding a specific brand (Kumar et al., 2018). The relationship between a social influencer and social commerce is marked by two of the afore-mentioned processes: identification and internalisation (Roberts et al., 2016). A study explored whether compliance is a third type of social influence in which a social media user (SMU) appears to agree with others when making a decision towards a specific brand, such as buying a brand's product (Naeem, 2019a). In other words, compliance occurs when a SMU accepts influence because he/she expects to achieve the same brand advantage. This type of behaviour develops in response to social influence with the expectation of gaining specific rewards, promotional advantage or product benefits (Naeem, 2019a).

Identification occurs when someone who is admired by others refers to a product or service, and this comes to be regarded as attractive by consumers (Jin & Phua, 2016; Naeem, 2019a). Such consumers are then motivated to engage with or buy the product or service. An example in this respect is celebrity endorsements of products or services (Goh et al., 2013). Celebrity endorsements provide the impetus for various organisations to promote their products. Celebrities have more social influence in comparison to the common public (Jin & Phua, 2016). Moreover, Seunghwan and Dae-Young (2018) observed that physical contact between people who interact in everyday life can also initiate purchase intentions through exchanging information in every day life and these physical connections are also a source of social trust on social media. This is usually called physical social contagion (Skinner, 2018). This means that the physical presence of a celebrity endorsing the product or service can initiate a positive response among consumers (Füller et al., 2013; Cheregi et al., 2018). This would suggest that the identification process triggers the creation of UGC, such as positive comments about the brand's product or service in online settings, by those

who are familiar with the celebrity (Kumar et al., 2017). The celebrity's social influence therefore increases the level of brand engagement among consumers, but we cannot guarantee that all of the brand followers will be consumers (VanMeter et al., 2018). This would suggest that brand followers exert varying levels of social influence on others in terms of brand engagement. Additionally, Naeem (2019a) indicated that industry professionals have more social influence within their social media networks (SMNs) because of their personal expertise. Moreover, if customers share their personal experience on social media, this can influence their peers to take an interest in the brand, thereby creating brand engagement (Kim & Kim, 2018; Wan & Ren, 2017). This research sets out to understand the social influence context of UGC to generate on social brand engagement (SBE) on social media. The social influence context includes the social aspects of content creators and SMUs to perceive and respond to that UGC on social media.

When a consumer initiates a discussion about a brand online, this draws the attention of other SMUs and the intensity of attention towards UGC depends on the social context between UGC creators and UGC consumers (Herrero et al., 2015; Noone & McGuire, 2014; Koivisto & Mattila, 2018). This leads to the exchange of information between SMUs. Different SMUs then become part of the exchange process whereby questions and answers as well as opinions, reviews and recommendations are exchanged between participating consumers (Micu et al., 2019; Dwyer, 2012; Moussa, 2019; Geurin & Burch, 2017). The creation of electronic word of mouth (eWOM) takes place when existing or current brand customers provide information about the product or service to their social media friends and family by placing reviews of their product experience online (Poulis et al., 2019). Furthermore, a conversation which has been started by consumers can be negative, positive or neutral and might not lead to any particular result (Kwahk & Kim, 2017; Barreda & Bilgihan, 2013). Therefore, it is important to explore which source of UGC has more social influence and significantly influences the brand engagement and purchase attention of SMUs that would generate further brand engagement through social media.

Social media platforms exert social influence, not only in the form of referrals from friends and family, but also through celebrity endorsement (Kim & Lee, 2017). People acknowledge the opinions of their friends and family as well as their favourite

celebrities on issues and topics which matter to them. These topics include brand choices (Maecker et al., 2016; Renton & Simmonds, 2017). It is therefore important to explore why some SMUs trust celebrities while others are more influenced by close friends. Many studies suggested that celebrities generate content on social media and thus exert more social influence on social media users (Jin & Phua, 2014; Hanukov, 2015; Carroll, 2009; Keel & Nataraajan, 2012; Thomas & Johnson, 2017). Wu et al. (2017) indicated that UGC emanating from celebrities on social media sites has more social influence in the context of fashion luxury brands as a unique social setting. Other studies suggested that content created by close friends is more trusted by SMUs than brand-related content, including celebrity-generated content (Chiou et al., 2014; Boerman & Kruikemeier, 2016; Liu et al., 2012). The need for peer validation most likely stems from a rise in online “likes” and “followers” that many SMUs strive towards. Many are used to reading user-generated reviews before making a purchase (Nash, 2019; Marchand et al., 2017). Indeed, Gordon (2018) found that 71% of people are more likely to make an online purchase if the product or service has been recommended by SMUs. In addition, some 84% of millennials are likely to be pushed towards making a purchase based on UGC produced by strangers who have experienced the product or service (Gordon, 2018). With this in mind, it is no surprise that so many fashion brands are centring much of their marketing strategy around Instagram and other digital avenues that demonstrably generate sales among SMUs (Jin & Ryu, 2019). Even fashion luxury brands that once shunned social media for fear of cheapening their image are adopting social media (Vasiliu & Cercel, 2015).

## **1.2 RESEARCH PROBLEM**

### **1.2.1 Social motivational factors of UGC and SMUs**

Muntinga et al. (2011) conducted a study on social motivational factors of brand engagement; they focused on three social motivational dimensions: remuneration, entertainment and information. They recommended that various social motivational aspects must be uncovered by future studies with respect to understanding the motivation to create, share or exchange brand-related content. Chi (2011) conducted a study on social motivational factors but the researcher selected only female students who were using Facebook pages. Furthermore, Chi’s (2011) research was limited to need-based features of online social capital and psychological well-being. Similarly,

Muntinga et al. (2011) conducted a study in which they selected individuals who were users of Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to test the relation of different social factor for buying decision of customers. Another study discussed several social motivational factors (i.e. entertainment, social integration, remuneration, empowerment, personal identity and information) but the findings were limited to Facebook pages (Tsai & Men, 2013). The current study has taken data directly from SMUs who use Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Flickr and WhatsApp discussion groups. The social influence of SMUs differs among different SMNs; for example, some studies found that in WhatsApp groups, people are more influenced by their friends' in these close friend groups as compare to other SMUs (Naeem, 2019a, 2019b). Furthermore, on the basis of these studies, it is important to know which source has more credibility and influence among SMUs for products and services (Naeem, 2019a, 2019b).

This research takes its orientation from Ramirez et al. (2018) by contemplating UGC as a source of social factors to enhance word of mouth (WOM) and brand engagement among SMUs. Previous research has highlighted that future studies must explore why SMUs are interested in creating UGC and how UGC can provide pre-purchase information to different SMUs as per their needs (Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Poch & Martin, 2015; Verhellen et al., 2013). Furthermore, there is a need to appreciate how consumers' experiences and thoughts can enhance SMUs' interest and social motivation and strengthen their interpersonal relationships with brands. According to Ramirez et al. (2018), the social factors of UGC, consumers' motivation to share their experiences and consumers' brand engagement are not well understood. Moreover, Ramirez et al. (2018) highlighted in their study that there is a need to understand what the different social factors of UGC and SMUs' brand engagement are. Furthermore, Ramirez et al. (2018) also recommended looking at social motivational causes of UGC that can create brand stories and WOM as key sources to create and enhance social influence in terms of SBE. Therefore, there is a need to determine who exerts social influence and how they exert social influence through the social interaction of UGC.

Consumers' brand engagement through social media is influenced by their social setting, needs, motives and goals (Keller, 2009; Felix et al., 2017). In this regard, brand knowledge is built by consumers and they develop associations as well (Hammedi et al., 2015). They also develop the motivation for developing eWOM (Habibi et al., 2014;

Abrantes et al., 2013; Relling et al., 2016). Accordingly, the behaviour of actors, relative to interaction level and communication to a large extent, is influenced by the extent of the social presence of the chosen medium (Karikari et al., 2017; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Resultantly, firms are presented with an opportunity in the shape of social media to engage with their consumers (Rosen et al., 2013). Moreover, social brand engagement (SBE) is likely to be driven by the social presence of consumers; it is critical for explore the moderating impact of social context of social presence of SMUs to generate brand through their social interaction through SMNs (Kumar et al., 2016). This is what differentiates the current research from previous research: previous research focused on SMUs' interaction in the form of UGC that created consumer brand engagement through exploration of the effectiveness of different factors like trust and reviews to generate consumer brand engagement, whereas in this thesis, the researcher intended to explore the role of interaction of SMUs that social generated brand engagement among them.

Most of the previous literature explored the impact of social media platforms from a marketing perspective: customer relationship and purchase intention (Kim & Ko, 2010), customer equity (Kim & Ko, 2012), marketing and public relations (Khang, Ki, & Ye, 2012), marketing communication frameworks (Valos et al., 2016), promotional strategies (Thackeray et al., 2008), customer purchase intention (Gunawan & Huarng, 2015), and user interactions and their impact on buying decisions (Hutter et al., 2013). However, there is little understanding regarding the various reasons SMUs create, share and exchange UGC on social media and how/why they get influenced from each other related to fashion brands. Most of the existing literature investigated the relationship between social media and fashion brands in a more general context, such as: social media impact on customer decision making (Bilal et al., 2014), personality, quality and prestige-related factors (Erdoğan & Büdeyri-Turan, 2012); usage of SMNs for brand-related content; and power of consumers as pressure on brands (Kim & Johnson, 2016). According to Gunawan et al., (2015, p., 81), understanding the motives of creating and sharing content means *“the sum of all ways in which social media platforms (SMNs) users can make use of social media related to brand awareness and purchase decision”*. This study intends to extend the literature by uncovering the motives to create, share and exchange UGC that socially generate brand engagement among famous fashion brands in the UK. Consequently, it explores



how UGC can create social influence, which is a significant predictor of social and consumer brand engagement (CBE) on social media platforms. Therefore, this study also explores the social factors behind SBE and CBE through the exchange and interaction of UGC on social media. The study will be helpful to fashion brands that wish to devise their online marketing strategies in the light of findings on the effects of UGC on SBE and CBE among SMUs.

### **1.2.2 The role of different SMUs in UGC**

It is found that some consumers use social media platforms to share their personal experiences and that product users exert more influence than other SMUs (Naeem, 2019a, 2019b). Previous studies have mentioned that disheartening customer experiences are the starting point of UGC on social media and they lead to the further generation of UGC (Grosser et al., 2019; Micu et al., 2017; Kim & Lee, 2017; Gavilanes et al., 2018; Çınar, 2018; Zhao et al., 2017). Ghosh and McAfee (2011) argued that customers preferred to watch content that answered their questions related to a brand in which they are interested, but their interest is socially created through everyday life and the social media interactions of SMUs. It is found that people do not necessarily trust all the sources of brand-related content because of the quality of brand related UGC, sources of brand related UGC, friends' experience and their own experience with that brand really matter to trust on brand related UGC (Young, 2011). For example, Henderson and Lyons (2005) indicated that opinion leaders who generate eWOM have unique characteristics and influence which are not necessarily possessed by non-leaders. Kim et al. (2012) stressed that a high volume of brand reviews does not mean that other consumers will buy the product or perceive the information to be credible. Therefore, it is important to find which sources of content are more socially influence to SMUs and there is also a need to understand the social context like source, UGC characterises, motivation of generated brand related UGC, and SMUs perception against different kinds of UGC that influence them towards different fashion brands.

UGC does not have the same social influence on different social media friends because trust and social ties differ among different friends (Sparks et al., 2013). Moreover, Bambauer-Sachse and Mangold (2011) thought that on SMNs the UGC created by close friends was trusted more than the UGC of others. Further, Lee and

Choeh (2018) indicated that the social effectiveness of UGC is strongly influenced by close social ties but the meaning of close are very subjective in nature because close ties is situational in term of social context. Naeem (2019b) indicated that some SMUs exert more social influence on others because they are known as opinion leaders; opinion leaders help to generate SBE but SBE is not enough to generate sales. This would suggest that close friends can be socially influenced and the credibility of information is important for SMUs to take buying decisions (Yoo et al., 2015; Reichelt et al., 2014; Yeap et al., 2014; Filieri & McLeay, 2014). Some studies indicated that the credibility of UGC is based on the level of trust between SMUs in physical social relationships (Hsu et al., 2011; Dou et al., 2012; Park et al., 2008; Prendergast et al., 2010; Chu & Sung, 2015). Therefore, this research explores the social context of UGC and the social context between the UGC creator, consumers and SMUs, which includes trust on the basis of social ties, credibility of content; this research therefore explores the social context in which UGC influences SMUs' perception of different fashion brands.

In previous studies on social commerce, research focussed on the changes taking place in consumer behaviour due to connections with different consumers on social media who have different experiences (Skinner, 2018; Zheng et al., 2015; Hajli, 2014). Some studies suggested that perceptions among users in relation to how others care about them creates an environment of trust between them (Liang & Corkindale, 2016; Hajli & Sims, 2015; Hollebeek et al., 2014; Harrigan et al., 2017; Chahal & Rani, 2017; Liu et al., 2019; Pancer et al., 2017). Such studies are conducted on the basis of reciprocity and the perception of SMUs regarding social networking. However, it was found that such studies did not consider the types of different SMUs with respect to the creation, sharing and exchange of UGC that would have different influence on different SMUs and why different SMUs get influenced differently? Therefore, there is a need to understand why some SMUs extensively respond to specific UGC and why SMUs react and perceive differently when they receive UGC from different or same sources on social media platforms. This research explores the social context which includes the relations between UGC creation, generation, response, consumption and UGC influence. This has implications for social brand engagement in the context of the social perspectives of creators, users and consumers among SMUs.

### **1.2.3 Social influence of UGC**

Most of these studies were conducted to explore the impact of UGC on corporate mobile media (Neal & Ross, 2018), travelling and planning (Tsiakali, 2018; Mendes-Filho et al., 2018), and as an advertisement tool on television shows (Viswanathan et al., 2018). However, less attention has been dedicated to uncovering the role of UGC as a social influence tool in the context of the consumer brand engagement in fashion industry. Limited research has been carried out to understand how UGC can generate social influence for fashion brands that would lead to consumer brand engagement and what are the social influencing factors generated brand engagement through the interaction of brand related UGC.

Researchers have argued that brand related UGC among SMUs creates more awareness about new trends and fashions (Ramirez et al., 2018; Halliday, 2016). It involves celebrities and opinion leaders as social influencers for brands. According to recent studies, there is a need to identify how UGC can generate social influence to attract, retain or push away consumers from brands (Maecker et al., 2016; Wali & Andy-Wali, 2018; Mills & Plangger, 2015; Kim & Lee, 2017; Helal et al., 2018). Such studies have highlighted that it is important to understand how UGC can encourage social interaction between brands and consumers to improve consumer–brand relationship/engagement (Kumar et al., 2016; Ukpabi & Karjaluoto, 2018). Social media platforms have become useful for creating interactive communications media for brands. However, there is little information available regarding how to create uniqueness and deliver social influence in social contexts to enhance psychological engagement with brands (Ashley & Tuten, 2015).

Estrella-Ramón and Ellis-Chadwick (2017) indicated that negative UGC damages brand engagement and has an impact on level of trust in brands. Many other studies indicated that negative comments are trusted by SMUs and these negative comments also create reliability of UGC in a consumer's mind (Haigh & Wigley, 2015; Goh et al., 2013; Jin & Phua, 2016; Xun & Guo, 2017). The limitations of such studies are that they do not focus sufficiently on the context of social influence. There is, therefore, an opportunity through research to explore the reasons behind the positive and negative social intentions of SMUs and the social impact on SMUs. It is worthwhile exploring why SMUs create negative content on social media and how UGC is differently

perceived by various SMUs. For example, previous studies highlighted that different SMUs perceive UGC influence differently; close social connections, such as friends, are considered more useful than other sources (Sparks et al., 2013; Bambauer-Sachse & Mangold, 2011). There is a need to explore the extent to which SMUs trust UGC and how UGC impacts on the social interactions of SMUs to create further content.

Even though the interactive use of social media has increased the engagement of consumers, there remains a need to investigate how CBE on social media is influenced by branded social content and creative messages (Yang & Hajli, 2016; Simon & Tossan, 2018; Carlson et al., 2019). Research was conducted to investigate FGC on social media and consumer behaviour (Kumar et al., 2016; Poulis et al., 2019; Pan et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2018). These studies, however, did not focus on the social context of SMUs to generate, share, respond, ignore and consume UGC. The social context of UGC therefore remains unexplored through research in the context of SBE. As Kumar et al. (2016) noted, further research is needed to explore how SBE is affected by responses to the UGC of other SMUs (e.g. transformative and informative). Therefore, this study is also focusing to determine the social motivational causes that can motivate SMUs to create, exchange and foster UGC that can stimulate brand engagement. By understanding the social motivational causes, the study can offer fruitful insights to brands on ways to improve their services and quality that can socially inspire SMUs to create, share and exchange positive brand stories, brand recommendations, brand reviews, brand ratings, brand shopping experiences on social media platforms that would lead to increased brand engagement through the social influence of SMUs.

#### **1.2.4 SBE and CBE**

If engagement between brands and consumers occurs in isolation, based on the experiences (both personal and physical) of SMUs, then SBE is an entirely unique social setting (Osei-Frimpong & McLean, 2018). According to Kozinets (2014, p. 10) “*We can define SBE as meaningful connection, creation and communication between one consumer and one or more other consumers, using brands*”. According to Hollebeek et al. (2014) and Altschwager et al. (2018), social acts encompassing values, language, meaning and culture create SBE. Historically, there have been

different perspectives of consumer engagement in the literature with reference to the role or presence of SBE. Scholars studying engagement acknowledged that service systems include social interactions by proposing a construct of social engagement (Calder et al., 2009) that encompasses a social dimension within the wider construct of engagement (Vivek et al., 2012). Efforts have been made to investigate the social items in relation to engagement (Gambetti et al., 2012) and the focus of firms on social factors (Algesheimer et al., 2005). However, recent developments in the literature offer a wider view of engagement and suggest that engagement is not limited to a dyadic communication between a person and a brand. Rather, it includes a network of interactions with others, and all of these aspects can socially influence brand engagement (Chandler & Lusch, 2015; Storbacka et al., 2016). Most recent studies investigated the relation between UGC and corporate marketing (Neal & Ross, 2018), consumer needs and wants (Tsiakali, 2018), consumer buying behaviour (Kumar et al., 2016), brand reputation (Goh et al., 2013), WOM (Ramirez et al., 2018), brand innovation (Merrilees, 2016), the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations of consumers (Poch & Martin, 2015), dissatisfied service customers (Presi et al., 2014) and purchase intention and UGC quality (Flanagin et al., 2014).

CBE is the engagement of consumers which is based on customers' experiences with a brand (van Doorn et al., 2010; Brodie et al., 2011). The study of SBE includes not only the psychological state of mind of consumers, but also the social engagement that occurs as a result of social exchanged brand related UGC among SMUs. The existing literature is not consistent when it discusses SBE-related dimensionality; there are different approaches which present both a uni- and a multidimensional perspective. Authors such as van Doorn et al. (2010), Sprött et al. (2009) and Verhoef et al. (2010) considered a single dimension of engagement, focusing on the behaviour shown most often by the customers. On the other hand, some studies provide a wider perspective that involves cognitive and affective dimensions (Brodie et al., 2011a). Although the literature proposes a number of different dimensions to describe consumer engagement, much of this remains conceptual (Verhoef et al., 2017; Wirtz et al., 2013; Verhoef et al., 2010; van Doorn et al., 2010; Brodie et al., 2011a). Any empirical examinations of the issue reveal inconsistencies in the nature and volume of brand engagement dimensions (Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014; Gummerus et al., 2012; Brodie et al., 2011a, 2013; Calder et al., 2013; Sprött et al., 2009).

Most researchers identify engagement with objects like services or products, companies or other entities related to companies (van Doorn et al., 2010; Bowden, 2009). Research tends to focus on consumer engagement with a brand as the result of brand efforts on social media (Wallace et al., 2014; Gummerus et al., 2012; Vivek et al., 2014). Such a perspective is understandable because of the practical imperative of understanding the direct influence of efforts that are made to attract customers (Calder et al., 2013). Nevertheless, Brodie et al. (2011b) stated that a brand or an organisation can also be greatly affected by consumer engagement with other actors in the marketplace (Schau et al., 2009).

The advance of social media in addition to the increase in social interactions among SMUs has come to mean more than just CBE (Kozinets, 2014). Many SMUs interact with brands on social media whether they are customers or not. “*SBE can happen when the brand is a celebrity, an idea, a cause, a destination, a country of origin, a nationality or even an activity or hobby*” (Kozinets, 2014, p. 10). In this sense, CBE and SBE are two different concepts relating to brand engagement. SBE can be explained as a meaningful creation, interaction and connection between one or more customers, using brands or meanings as well as images and language related to the brand (Kozinets, 2014).

Many researchers have elaborated on the concept of engagement to involve the social and active factors of brand engagement; these occur when simultaneous interactions begin between consumer and brand and SMUs (Hollebeek et al., 2014; Harrigan et al., 2017; Chahal & Rani, 2017; Liu et al., 2019; Pancer et al., 2017). Such studies focus on brand and consumer activities as a form of brand engagement on social media. One notable study was carried out by Hajli (2014, p., 137) who proposed that involving customer-to-customer “*interaction, participation, dialogue, co-creation, and sharing of brand-related values*” is of central importance. Other researchers primarily focused on how UGC affects outcomes in a market in different contexts of consumer buying behaviour (e.g. Toubia & Stephen, 2013; Lambertson & Stephen, 2016; Stephen & Galak, 2012; Laroche et al., 2012). Kozinets (2014) introduced the concept of “social brand engagement” and suggested to understand SBE using social media. Moreover, Altschwager et al. (2018) examined the role of four experiential elements (sensory, behavioural, affective and intellectual experiences) to support SBE to better

understand the moderating influence of content generated by firms and consumers. Osei-Frimpong et al. (2018) used social presence theory to test the social effects of brand presence on social media that generate SBE. However, little is understood about how UGC creates a social influence on other SMUs. Such an understanding could better illuminate the nature of SBE that is voluntarily created on social media. More research is needed to explore how UGC socially influences SMUs in terms of brand engagement rather than verify the different variables in this context. Section 1.3 presents the research objectives and research questions that arose from gaps in the literature.

### **1.3 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND QUESTIONS**

Based on the above discussion, the study has identified that limited literature is available with respect to the social context of UGC when considering brand engagement. There is limited understanding of what socially motivates SMUs to generate brand related UGC and of SMUs responses to that UGC. It is important to know the various types of UGC social participation and the social influence factors that can build brand engagement among SMUs. This study has proposed the following objectives based on above-discussed research gaps.

#### **1.3.1 Research objectives**

**1:** To critically review theories related to the impact of UGC on consumer behaviour through SMNs.

The critical review includes discussion related to UGC and its impact on consumer behaviour on social media. Additionally, this critical review highlights the importance of brand related UGC with the help of SMUs of different fashion brands.

**2:** To critically evaluate the motivations of UGC creation and the characteristics of UGC that can enhance brand engagement through SMNs.

This research objective will be achieved through answering the second research of research question, Indeed this objective will help to understand the role of UGC motivation and the characteristics of UGC that would socially influence the social

media users because of the difference in their motivation UGC and difference in characteristics of UGC.

**3:** To evaluate the importance of different social factors related to UGC that can have a significant influencing impact on different SMUs.

There is limited understanding with respect to the various social factors that can enhance brand related UGC on social media platforms. It has become important to answer why different SMUs are influenced differently by the same UGC and how different SMUs respond to the same UGC. In addition, the different social factors of UGC are critically reviewed in-depth and consideration is given to the role of UGC that can create brand engagement among SMUs.

**4:** To formulate a conceptual model and theoretical construct that would be suitable to synthesise the role of UGC in the context of brand engagement among SMNs.

There is much explicit evidence of the impact of UGC on consumers but there is a lack of conceptual construction of the social context of UGC to create SBE and CBE with different SMUs. The differences and similarities between CBE and SBE are not yet completely understood. UGC and brand engagement are conceptualised through answering the research questions stated in Section 1.3.2. Answers to the research questions will help to develop a UGC brand engagement model.

### **1.3.2 Research questions**

**1:** What is the current understanding level on the role of UGC that impact on the consumer behaviour towards a specific brand?

Through the answering of this question, researcher tried to critically review the current literature on the role of UGC that impact on consumer behaviour. Consequently, the in-depth understanding about the role of UGC and consumer behaviour help to develop appropriate theoretical framework. Additionally, the answer this question also helps to develop an appropriate theoretical understanding on the topic to explore the neglected area of the topic.

**2:** What are the different roles of different SMUs in the creation, exchange and use of UGC on social media platforms?



This question identifies the major social motivation behind the UGC that encourage SMUs to create, share and consume UGC among SMNs. The primary data provide some social-related aspects that can enhance our understanding regarding why brand-related UGC is created and consumed by SMUs on SMNs. The answer of this question helps to create understanding about the role of different SMUs in the context of UGC. The question seeks to identify the different roles of SMUs in the creation, sharing and consumption of brand related UGC on social media. Categorising SMUs in the context of their use of UGC will aid understanding of the social intentions of SMUs towards brand related UGC. The answer to this question helps to synthesise the intentions and motivations of SMUs to create, enhance, share, consume and respond to brand-related content among SMNs. An understanding of the different roles of SMUs also helps understanding of the social influence of different SMUs using their personal experiences and knowledge.

**3:** How do different factors impact on the social influence of UGC in the context of brand among SMUs?

This answer of this question tried to find the social factors those impact on the SMUs to create, share, responses and consume the UGC differently from each other. Consequently, the answer to the question helps exploration of the social factors behind the social influence of UGC among SMUs.

**4:** How does the social interaction of UGC create SBE and CBE among SMUs?

The question is answered with the help of primary data that can construct different social realities regarding the influence of UGC on SMUs. The primary data help to identify the social context of UGC to generate SBE and CBE through the lens of social influence theory; primary data supports the current study to make sense of the social context of UGC creation, sharing, consumption and response that lead to brand engagement (SBE & CBE). Consequently, findings are synthesised regarding how UGC and social interactions can increase the level of SBE & CBE among SMUs. Furthermore, the study uncovers important factors that can foster SBE & CBE among SMUs. Additionally, the answer of this question also helped to understand the whole social influence process of social media users with the link to the different social factors those play the role to create social brand engagement and consumer brand

engagement separately as a process to applying the lens of social and theory. Therefore, the final research framework presents the overall process of SBE and CBE with relation to the different social realities (social factors); this is based on a relativist ontological position. The overall model is constructed on the basis of the social meaning of UGC and the relation between different social realities that have been created; this is founded on the social constructivist epistemological position of this research. Accordingly, from a specific ontological and epistemological position, a new UGC research framework that will help practitioners to understand the social context of UGC and brand engagement through the social interaction of UGC among SMUs has been added to the literature.

The current study is the first to theoretically conceptualise “user-generated content social consumer brand engagement” through a social constructivist epistemological and relativist ontological approach within the particular context of UK fashion retailing. It can therefore help fashion brands to understand SBE that can be turned to CBE through influencing SMUs. The social context of UGC is explored to answer why, when, who and how SMUs create and consume fashion brand-related UGC on social media. Additionally, it explores how the social exchange, creation and consumption of UGC create social influence and examines the role of different UGC in fashion brand-related social influence. Moreover, the level of SMUs’ involvement through UGC in fashion is currently a major talking point (Halliday, 2016; Ramirez et al., 2018); therefore, the exploration of the social involvement of fashion brand-related UGC is timely. As such, this study explores users’ perspectives and lived experiences to understand the complex social phenomena of brand engagement through social interaction of UGC among SMUs. The study views the social phenomena of UGC creation, exchanging and consumption from the perspectives of SMUs to explore the social influence of UGC on brand engagement.

#### **1.4 RESEARCH RATIONALE**

The current study attempts to determine the various social motivational causes that can enhance the level of UGC and social influence among SMUs. The overall focus of this research is to explore the motivational factors for exchanging brand-related content on SMNs, characteristics of UGC influence, social influencing factors for UGC, and to determine the types of SMUs whose social influence on others to generate

brand engagement differs. The social motivational causes may be helpful to the design of social media marketing strategies for various fashion brands. By understanding these social motivational causes, fashion brands can use these social motivational objectives with the purpose to initiate brand stories, brand reviews, brand recommendations, brand ratings, shared personal experiences, and SBE among SMUs. Previous relevant studies also recommended exploration of other social motivational causes with respect to understanding the motivation to create, share or exchange brand-related content on social media platforms (Chi, 2011; Muntinga et al., 2011; Tsai & Men, 2013). The scope of these studies was limited to a maximum of three social networking platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. However, the current study has set a minimum inclusion criterion for participants, which is that they regularly use at least three platforms, with the intention to take views of UGC use on the many new social networking platforms that are highly used by youngsters, opinion leaders and celebrities, such as Instagram, Flickr, Twitter, WhatsApp and others. SMUs' usage of more SMNs may lead to more involvement in the generating, sharing and exchange of UGC among their social circle on social media platforms.

Ghosh and McAfee (2011) argued that customers love to see UGC that can address their concerns related to products and services. Another study highlighted that not all sources of brand-related content necessarily have social influence for customers (Young, 2011). There are many sources of UGC such as experts, opinion leaders, brand channels, celebrities, friends and social circle. However, there is limited understanding about which sources of UGC have more influence and which sources of UGC have less influence for SMUs. It is important for fashion brands to know which sources of UGC exert greater social influence on SMUs so that they can target UGC that has more social influence and which can generate SBE and CBE among SMUs. The present study contributes by exploring those channels and sources which can bring the relevant UGC specifically to the social circle of a consumer or community.

This research explores how the social influence of UGC on social media significantly creates brand engagement. The best way to integrate this influence still needs to be discovered. In order to contribute to this, the current study provides a guide as to how to manage the social influence of UGC on social media for creating brand engagement regarding fashion brands within the UK. As the major focus of this research is to

explore the social influence of UGC and its impact on brand engagement, there is a need to understand the UGC and social context on social media where the social influence occurred. Therefore, the motivation of UGC, type of SMUs, source of UGC, credibility of UGC and quality of UGC are important characteristics of UGC that need to be explored. Additionally, there are some social factors that have an effect on the impact of UGC: social ties, homophily, interpersonal relations and social trust among creators and consumers of UGC on social media. Therefore, it can be said that the literature has helped to synthesise the concept of UGC in the context of the social impact on SMUs that creates SBE and CBE among other SMUs.

SBE can be related to the self-image of consumers whereby they identify themselves as belonging to a particular group (Hammedi et al., 2015; Escalas & Bettman, 2005). SBE represents a social act in the absence of boundaries which enables the participants to engage in social interactions with other consumers and brands. Laroche et al. (2012) and Kozinets (2014) defined SBE as creation, connection and communication of the brand's story between consumers and firm utilising brand-related images, language and meanings through the social networking site of the firm. In such associations, SBE involves interdependence among consumers and brand and the commitment of the consumer to engage with the brand. This motivates consumers to share their experience of the brand, integrate in expressing the brand and identify the brand as part of themselves (Hammedi et al., 2015). In this regard, it is imperative to establish the critical elements that influence the way consumers deal with brands through social media (O'Brien & Toms, 2010).

There are limited studies conducted on SBE in the context of UGC. Some researchers attempted to empirically evaluate SBE by testing different aspects of consumers towards SBE (Altschwager et al., 2018; Osei-Frimpong et al., 2018). Altschwager et al. (2018) conducted research in which the role of four factors regarding SBE was determined, namely, behavioural, sensory, intellectual and affective experiences. However, the researchers did not explore how the content generated by SMUs motivated the SMUs to produce further content or how such content influences SMUs, leading, thereby, to SBE and CBE. By continuing the study of Osei-Frimpong and McLean (2018), the aim of the current study is to explore the social impact of UGC on SBE by virtue of social media and to explore the role played by UGC in the creation of

brand engagement on social media. Brands are increasingly focusing on engaging with their consumers with the help of information technology (IT) (Hajli, 2014). However, the focus of previous research has been on evaluating the effect of UGC on the results of the market from various perspectives (Laroche et al., 2012; Toubia & Stephen, 2013; Stephen & Galak, 2012). Furthermore, Osei-Frimpong and McLean (2018) emphasised conducting research on SBE as there is dearth of research in this area, indicating a research gap. Kozinets (2014) observed that it is vital to explore SBE to who UGC create, how it has been created and how it has influence on SMUs? Why same UGC influenced differently on SMNs? Therefore, the focus of the current research is on the social influence of UGC with respect to fashion brand engagement on social media; it explores the social context of UGC that generates brand engagement through the social exchange of UGC among SMUs.

The current study focuses on explaining how the fundamentals of social influence theory are applicable in the context of brand engagement on social media platforms. In this way, this study intends to make a contribution to business practices, theory and existing literature. It has been found with the help of previous literature that the precise impact of social influence in the context of SBE and CBE has not yet been thoroughly explored. The increasing popularity, interest and attraction of UGC as a source of social influence have made this area of study very relevant and interesting. Many topics in this field have been studied to date, but it is observed that all these studies focused mainly on purchase decision influence, influence metrics, WOM, online reputation and management, mobilisation and influence on sales. However, how all these factors can create brand engagement through the social interaction of SMUs in the form of UGC is still unexplored in the existing literature.

The informational influence of social contexts relates to customers' tendency to make an informed decision with the help of credible resources, such as opinion leaders and experts. Normative influences on the other hand, align with the expectations of close friends, family members and other people (Bearden et al., 1989; Lord et al., 2001). Thus, the current study uses social influence theory to explore the role of UGC in terms of creating brand engagement over social media. Brand-oriented consumer–consumer relationships may vary depending on the level and type of brand endorsement: from small endorsements such as negative critiques, to large

endorsements such as recommendations and appreciations. Variation in this relationship may also depend on the amount of creative work carried out by consumers, from simply “liking” to organising campaigns and creating lengthy videos; however, each major or minor contribution to UGC increases the influence of UGC on other SMUs. It pays to consider why some people like certain UGC but do not like other UGC, and why different UGC has different social influence over SMUs. It also pays to understand why and how the social influence of UGC creates brand engagement through the social interaction of SMUs.

## **1.5 RESEARCH CONTRIBUTION**

Existing studies on a variety of different online communications view UGC as a very diversified and wide research topic, particularly in the marketing literature (Dhar & Chang, 2009). The first and most important stream of literature has investigated how UGC, particularly eWOM and online consumer reviews increase market performance and sales (Kim, et al., 2019; Goes et al., 2014; Roy, et al., 2017; Zhu & Zhang, 2010; Zhao, et al., 2019; Horii, et al., 2019; Li, et al., 2019; Chiu, et al., 2019; Lee, et al., 2020). They have also examined how UGC stimulates the purchase intentions of consumers (Goh et al., 2013; Zhang, et al., 2019; Williams, et al., 2017; Bulut, & Karabulut, 2018; Zhang, et al., 2017; Zhao, Yang, Narayan, & Zhao, 2013).

The second stream examines the behavioural factors which are linked to UGC creation. This stream is more closely related to the current study. Contributions to this stream have focused on the key aspects that influence content creation and sharing. These aspects include the features of UGC content, and user behaviour (such as incentives) and how these impact the brand (Berger, 2014; Berger & Milkman, 2012; Muntinga et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2012; Toubia & Stephen, 2013). Much of the literature in this particular stream has simultaneously examined two or more aspects such as the impact of content characteristics on consumer behaviour (Kitirattarkarn, et al., 2019; Yoo, et al., 2019; Amato, et al., 2019; Chen, et al., 2019; Yoo, et al., 2019; Kim & Song, 2018; Chen & Berger, 2016; Liu-Thompkins & Rogerson, 2012).

The prime focus has been on user behaviour and the literature has predominately examined the motives of users to create content (Halliday, 2016; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Ho & Dempsey, 2010; Muntinga et al., 2011; Mazzucchelli, et al., 2018; Toubia & Stephen, 2013). Amongst the core motivations for content generating and

sharing are the expressing of personal identities (Muntinga et al., 2011; Acuti, et al., 2019; Knoll, & Proksch, 2017; Nadkarni & Hoffman, 2012; Narangajavana et al., 2019; Sihi, & Lawson, 2018; Seidman, 2013;; Spates, et al., 2020; Vilnai-Yavetz & Tifferet, 2015) entertainment and enjoyment (Muntinga et al., 2011; Nishimura, et al., 2018; Antón, et al.,2019), belonging to certain community and connecting to other people (Muntinga et al., 2011; Makarenkov, et al., 2019; Pan, et al., 2018; Nadkarni & Hoffman, 2012; Druedahl,et al., 2019; Ballatore, & Sabbata, 2020; Vilnai-Yavetz & Tifferet, 2015;), empowerment (Muntinga et al., 2011; Labrecque, 2014), and altruism (Reimer & Benkenstein, 2018). These studies stopped short of exploring how the different types of motivation behind UGC creation can influence other SMUs to embrace brands as a form of social brand engagement. According to Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004), both monetary incentives and social interactions can motivate consumers to engage in online communication. Another study suggested that incentive is an integral aspect of buying decisions, which represent the next level of social brand engagement across social media (Naeem, 2019). Therefore, this research explores the motivation behind fashion related UGC creation, and how different motivational factors can socially influence other SMUs to engage with fashion brands.

The third stream focuses on the features of content. The majority of studies have focussed on the provision of UGC information quality, and quantity and looks at its impact on potential customers (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Chen, et al., 2019; Li, et al., 2019). Though previous literature on eWOM has primarily focused on the quantitative features of UGC (like ratings and volume), more recent studies have identified that some qualitative aspects of content (such as readability, sentiment) have more predictive power than quantitative characteristics (Ghose & Han, 2011; Yim, et al., 2020; Zahra, et al., 2019; Wang, et al., 2019; Patwardhan, et al., 2018; Bao, 2017;Goh et al., 2013). Moreover, emotional content appears to provide great potential for diffusion (Liu, et al., 2017; Berger & Milkman, 2012; Melumad, et al., 2019; Akpınar & Berger, 2017; Mingione, et al., 2020) so that content has some educational value and represents useful information which the customer can access and which can impact on buying decisions (Estrella et al., 2017; Liu-Thompkins & Rogerson, 2012; Bilro, et al., 2019; Klostermann, et al., 2019). This results in well-written, interesting and interactive content (de Vries et al., 2012; Chen & Berger, 2016; Moussa, 2019). According to Luarn, Lin, and Chiu (2015), content appear to have a

strong impact on online “brand engagement” in the sense that high interactivity and medium vividness results in higher brand engagement. Likewise, Packard and Berger (2017) explicitly endorsed UGC language and suggested this is more persuasive in terms of increasing purchase intentions. The key features of “brand-related UGC” that Smith et al., (2012) have identified are more closely associated with this study. These features vary across different social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, YouTube. There is a need to explore how these different types of UGC amongst different SMNs can socially influence SMUs to embrace fashion brands.

Lastly, the researchers have examined the association of UGC with context whereby UGC is created and shared and asserted the importance of market, product, socio-cultural and technological context in establishing UGC effectiveness, diffusion and creation. The key drivers that contribute to UGC propagation include product type (i.e. search versus experience), social norms within the community, the method of content acquisition (social media channels, websites), website reputation (recommendation source type) and information direction (Assaker, 2020; Berger & Schwartz, 2011; Wang, & Li, 2017; Chen & Berger, 2016; Kozinets, et al., , 2010; Vernon, 2017; Schweidel & Moe, 2014; Senecal & Nantel, 2004; Ana, et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2012). It has been observed that UGC diffusion crucially depend over various aspects of users` network where content is generally shared, for example, network connectivity, network size, tie strength and centrality (Liu-Thompkins & Rogerson, 2012; Susarla, Oh, & Tan, 2012; Katona, et al., 2011; Toubia & Stephen, 2013 Rajamma, et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2012; Chen, et al., 2019; Toubia & Stephen, 2013; Ana, et al., 2016; Goldenberg, et al., 2009). In addition to this evidence, relevant with role and relevance of context within UGC, fast development of communication technologies and social networking has motivated the inquirers to re-consider or further explore the impacts of technological contexts wherein UGC is created (Assaker, 2020; Campbell, 2013; Gupta, et al., 2018; Scuotto, et al., 2017; Gensler et al., 2013; Hervas-Drane, 2015; Yildiz Durak, 2019; Katona et al., 2011; Pontes, 2017; Schweidel & Moe, 2014; Sartas, et al., 2018). Ghose and Han (2011), for example, have provided important insights into UGC consumption and creation in mobile Internet context. Moreover, Berger (2014) examined this aspect from relatively broader perspective by considering how technological development contributes to shaping eWOM. There are number of emerging technology-related factors that may strongly influence UGC creation such



as communication type (ephemeral versus permanent content, photo/video versus text), location and timing, mobility, social presence, cost/effort of mobile-mediated communication and audience size (Berger, 2014; Ghose & Han, 2011; Schweidel & Moe, 2014; Smith et al., 2012). Significant differences might exist closely relevant with this point and may evolve across different social media channels in contexts of available supporting functionalities for UGC diffusion and creation. This may, in turn, determine various socio-culture environments bringing about different behaviours, preferences and norms (Papacharissi, 2009; Schweidel & Moe, 2014; Smith et al., 2012). Our contribution may thus, be framed on relationship amongst all sub-streams of existing literature to explore the motivation behind the UGC creation, the process of UGC generation, creation, consumption and role of UGC characteristics create social and consumer brand engagement specifically through social interaction of UGC through everyday life of SMUs.

The theoretical contribution of this research is that it extends social influence theory by revealing differentiation between social brand engagement and consumer brand engagement through social generated UGC on social media. Therefore, this research represents an effort to explore the social influence of UGC using the lens of social influence theory. Consequently, the motivations, characteristics and process of UGC creation and consumption have been examined through the lens of social influence theory based on an analysis of UGC. Additionally, this is the first study to clearly differentiate the social influence of brand engagement and consumer brand engagement using social influence theory. This represents a further theoretical contribution of this research. The practical contribution of this research is that it clearly presents the social brand engagement, and consumer engagement models separately in the contexts of the social influence of UGC which is socially created through social media. A better understanding of the social context of UGC and its social influence could help marketers to successfully create social brand engagement amongst social media users to create new opportunities. Additionally, understanding social brand engagement and consumer brand engagement could help marketers to successfully manage their social marketing efforts to create, increase and promote brands. This could further trigger social engagement with social media users through the creation, exchange and consumption of brand related UGC.

## **1.6 INQUIRY OVERVIEW**

The first chapter of this study comprises an introduction to the study background. The next chapter sets out the research problem based on an identified research gap. Based on limitations to conceptual theories in relation to brand engagement and UGC, the current chapter develops a set of research objectives and research questions. A discussion of the rationale is presented and the extent to which it makes a contribution to knowledge is also identified.

The second chapter presents a literature review to examine the role of UGC and brand engagement on social media. The chapter conceptualises UGC in a social context and reviews the taxonomy of UGC. It then critically reviews the relative implications for the various impacts of UGC on SMU behaviours when engaging with brands. This chapter also provides a deep understanding of the impact of UGC on consumer behaviour in different contexts. Crucial here, is consideration of brand trust, buying intentions, purchase decisions and sources of information that would create brand engagement. Sources of UGC are also discussed to understand why people create UGC on social media. Furthermore, the critical discussion also considers the social aspects of UGC to understand why and how SMUs respond to UGC on social media. A discussion of the social factors in relation to UGC is also presented to understand the social influence of UGC on other SMUs. The influences discussed include social ties, interpersonal relations, trust and homophily. The discussion provides a clear basis for understanding the social aspects of UGC and how these influence SMUs. The literature review further discusses the social ties between UGC creators and SMUs in terms of the validity of UGC. The concepts of trust and celebrity are used to frame a discussion of the quality of UGC. Thus, the quality of UGC is also discussed to understand the impact of different characterises of UGC on SMUs. Furthermore, the role of UGC in creating brand engagement is also discussed. The literature review contributes towards the conceptual framework which is based on social influence theory and the overall literature review.

The third chapter of the study identifies the research design. It justifies the philosophical foundations of the research and identifies and defends the paradigmatic perspective that is selected on the basis of considering alternative paradigms. The chapter also discusses the implementation of each individual philosophical and methodological choice. It compares qualitative and quantitative research

methodologies before identifying a qualitative approach as appropriate for the current study context because a qualitative research method aligns with the relativist ontological and social constructionist epistemological position of this research. This chapter also discusses the key limitations associated with the work. The chapter introduces a case study to illuminate the social impact of UGC on brand engagement. It provides a brief introduction to the pilot study that was conducted prior to data collection. Moreover, sample size, sample selection and the methods of data collection are all identified and justified in this chapter. Finally, ethical considerations are discussed in this chapter.

The fourth chapter of the study presents a discussion of the rationale for choosing thematic analysis as a method to analyse the acquired data. This method is defended as the most appropriate data analytical approach for this study. After conducting interviews with respondents regarding the role of UGC in the fashion industry from a brand engagement perspective, the chapter analyses interviewees' responses. Four major themes are constructed from these responses. The chapter answers the research questions in detail. Based on the interview findings, this chapter identifies four themes that explain the role of UGC in the UK fashion industry. These themes take account of the source of UGC, types of SMUs, context quality, influence factors for UGC and motivational factors for exchanging brand-related content, content creators and social influence as well as the quality influence of UGC. After discussing the different applications of the interview findings, the chapter proposes a multichannel consumer typology.

The resultant conceptual framework generated by this study is presented in the fifth chapter. This conceptual framework is titled the "Research Framework" and it addresses the third research question and last research objective. The chapter also includes a synthesis of the major findings based on the impact of UGC on brand engagement. This synthesis combines the reasoning set out in the literature review with the primary research findings of four major themes. The chapter also discusses the reasoning behind the research framework which is linked back to the literature and primary data findings of Chapter four in the form of four major themes.

The sixth chapter of the study presents a conclusion and summary of how the research has contributed to practice and theory. Some salient managerial applications are also

considered in this chapter. The limitations of the study are also presented to suggest how scholars can expand upon the model in future research projects. Additionally, reflection is performed throughout the whole research process.

## **1.7 SUMMARY**

This chapter provides an overview of the project as a whole. Here, the research gaps this study looks to address are identified, along with the corresponding aims and objectives of this particular study. Moreover, the background and rationale of this research project is also discussed. An outline of this chapter is provided below:

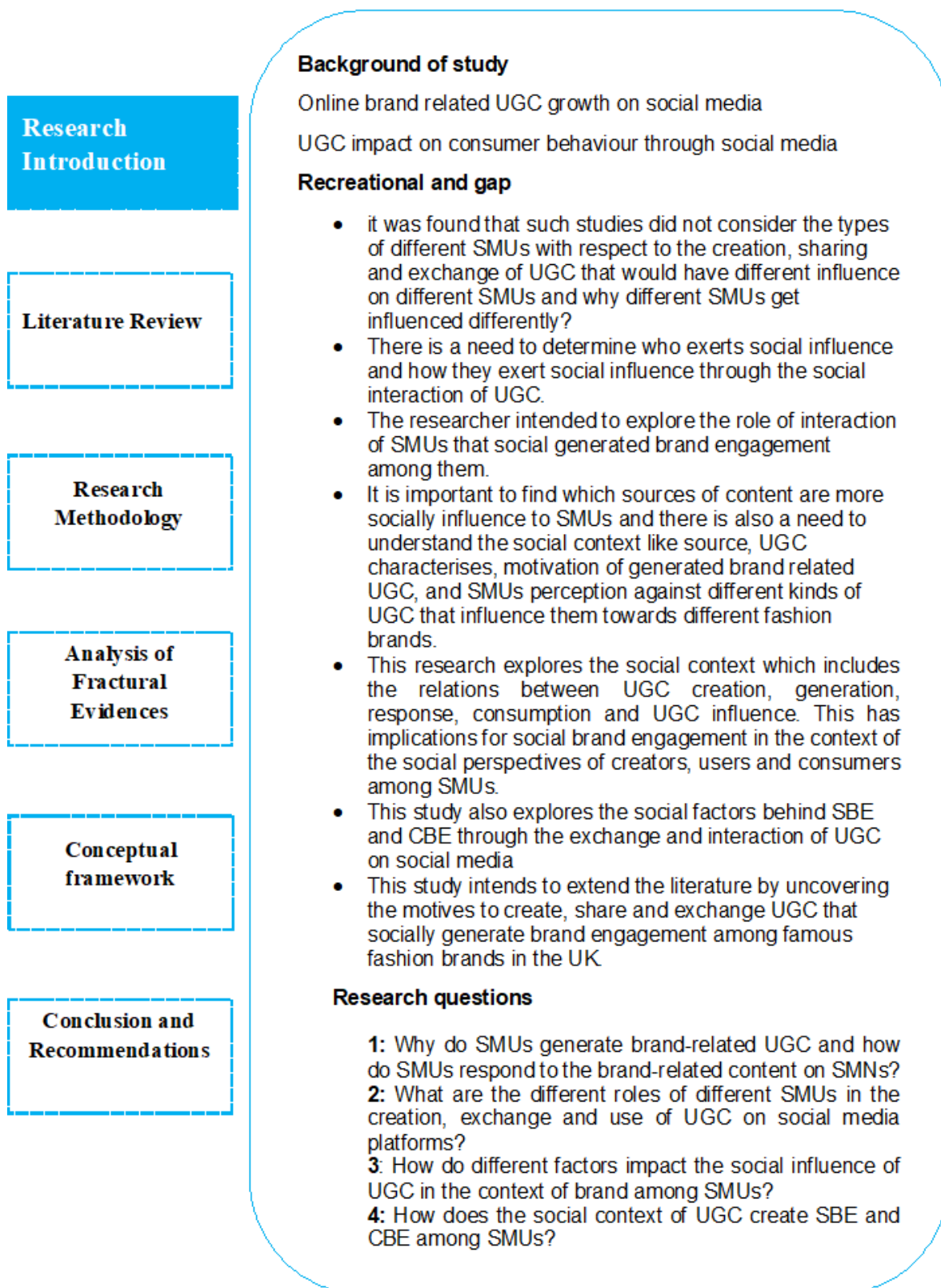


Figure 1-1 Thesis progression: User generated content and brand engagement

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

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### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides a critical review of the existing literature regarding UGC and brand engagement on social media. The primary aim of this review is to find working definitions of key concepts that reappear in the subsequent chapters of this thesis, as part of the exploration of how UGC impacts other SMUs' engagement with brands, products and services. In the first section, the relevant technical material is critiqued in an attempt to work towards an understanding of what constitutes UGC—and perhaps, as importantly, what does not constitute UGC. Then, the discussion turns to the online platforms on which UGC is published and the similarities and differences between them. It is also necessary to touch briefly here on the evolving concept that is publishing in the digital age. Through this process the parameters of this study will become increasingly clear. After that, literature related to sources of information (including celebrity endorsement) as it pertains to UGC, along with that concerning the impact of UGC on consumer behaviour and its importance for marketers, is analysed. An exploration of the relative implications for various impacts of UGC on SMUs' behaviour towards brands is also conducted. This in turn provides the basis for an overview of the frameworks of understanding used in research regarding the influence of UGC on other SMUs. In particular, the themes of information quality and credibility, tie strength, homophily, interpersonal influence and trust are appraised. Finally, the review considers research published on brand engagement, particularly as it relates to UGC. The focus begins to narrow here, with attention cast on studies that deal with brand engagement and the impact of UGC in the fashion sector. It is in the gaps in this literature, in particular, that this thesis finds its potential contribution to the growing body of research that exists on brand engagement and UGC. The major elements of the theoretical framework that has emerged from this review of the and social influence theory land other material are then finally summarised at the end of the chapter.

## **2.2 TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF UGC**

The advent of the internet has brought new capabilities that have in turn transformed social communications and human behaviour to a great extent (Ozuem, Pinho, & Azemi, 2016). The internet has now become omnipresent which means that it is easy for users to share content with other users; the content delineate things such as product desires, transaction-based experience and buying intentions (Ozuem, Pinho, & Azemi, 2016). UGC was conceptualised in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century with the development of the more participative and dynamic Web 2.0 (Charlesworth, 2014). The advent of Web 2.0 brought dramatic changes to the internet, such as greater openness, sharing and participation, which revolutionised online social interactions. Now, internet users can not only create but also share personalised content rather than simply using already existing material (Ozuem, 2004; Papathanassis & Knolle, 2011). Sometimes, Web 2.0 is also named the “participative web”; however, it does not represent a new era per se. Accordingly, Web 2.0 is only a propensity, trend or learning and no more (Wilson et al., 2012).

Among the various new opportunities provided by these developments, UGC is one that evolved rapidly following the advent of Web 2.0; there has been an increasing level of users’ participation in terms of content generation (Valcke & Lenaerts, 2010). The growing popularity of UGC among users is mainly because it allows users to create text, video, audio and other content and then share it with others on platforms such as personal blogs, YouTube, Facebook and Twitter (Ma et al., 2009; Ramirez et al., 2018). Moreover, modern mobile devices have much better camera capabilities that have increased the creation and sharing of videos and images online, both in terms of scope as well as influencing others on social media (Kim et al., 2010; Naab & Sehl, 2017). Users can access such UGC through “apps” or websites. Content can be textual, videos, images, comments, usernames, likes, “hearts” votes and profiles (Hernández et al., 2018). However, UGC does not include adverts as an example of content (Melumad et al., 2019). A literature review revealed that users’ voluntary contributions are a key element of UGC (Liu et al., 2017). Moreover, paid adverts also do not meet this criterion.

Simply speaking, UGC refers to content published over social networking sites or content which is publicly accessible through social media, which is not created by paid professionals but by unpaid amateurs. Moreover, such content must also exhibit some creative effort and originality (Roma & Aloini, 2019). From a marketing perspective, UGC refers to content related to brand and is created by individuals who have no official connection with said business or brand (Kumar et al., 2018). There are many forms of UGC, such as podcasts, blogs, forum posts, wikis, images, photos, updates, reviews and videos (Barefoot & Szabo, 2010; Thomsett-Scott, 2014). The most popular content-based sharing site is BuzzFeed: a renowned forum that showcases UGC (Smith & Zook, 2011; Koivisto & Mattila, 2018). Brands' official websites, community websites, the personal web pages of users, third-party websites and social media pages are other platforms where UGC can be shared (Narangajavana et al., 2019). According to Smith and Chaffey (2012), online communities serve as platforms where SMUs interact with their family members, friends and others about a wide range of topics (Willis, 2018) through the creation and sharing of texts, videos, pictures and other related material (Kurian & John, 2017; Kumar et al., 2016; Jin & Phua, 2016).

Although UGC still has no universally accepted single definition, there are some definitions that have been extensively used by researchers (Davis, 2015). Firstly, content must be published online; if not, then it would not qualify as UGC (Jin et al., 2018). Secondly, content must display originality and innovation (i.e. must appear as creator's own work) (Wagner et al., 2018). Thirdly, it should be generated without any reward (i.e. unpaid content). Confente et al. (2019) referred to UGC as content that is voluntarily created by a person outside professional practices and routines. The content that meets these three criteria will be regarded as UGC.

UGC can be shared by end users of an online service or website (Sterne, 2010). However, UGC includes content generated by online service subscribers or members rather than the content generated by the website or online service itself (Herrero et al., 2015). Conversational media – an alternative term for UGC – is often referred to as consumer-generated media (CGM) (Stareva, 2014) and user-created content (UCC) (Poulis et al., 2019; Rodgers & Thorson, 2017; Dodson, 2016); though these terms appear different, they describe the same thing. In related technical material, UGC can be further defined as media generated on account of a contribution made through



online technologies like Web 2.0. However, content can be considered UGC if the general public use these technologies to create and publish content (Mendes et al., 2018; Smith & Chaffey, 2012).

Thus, the content created by unpaid contributors is termed as UGC which may include videos, blog posts, pictures, testimonials and discussion boards (Bao, 2017). As UGC is produced online, it is easy to upload and share it with friends and family via social media (Brown, 2012). The content generated as well as shared by unpaid contributors or fans qualifies as UGC (Scholz et al., 2018; Odden, 2012). From a marketing perspective, UGC refers to content produced by influencers, consumers, social media fans and followers who support or follow a specific brand (Carvão, 2010; Akehurst, 2009; Tirunillai & Tellis, 2012). Businesses then use this content – in the form of video, images, third party-created social media posts, podcasts, wikis or blogs – on their social media pages and websites for brand promotion (Powell et al., 2011). UGC, as it sounds, is the content produced by users or consumers rather than the company itself (Scott, 2015).

The creation of UGC is a consequence of content generated by users, users' friends and friends of friends in the form of video, audio, blogs, digital images, extracted arguments from posts, blogs and other forms of media contributions through social media or online networking sites. Statista (2017) stated that the photos created by millennials and product reviews are a common form of UGC as they both constitute 29% of UGC. The trend of producing UGC is much higher than that of publisher-created content (Dodson, 2016).

Thus, UGC refers to media produced and then shared by online users (Fox et al., 2018). According to the Interactive Advertising Bureau (IAB), UGC must have potential to cultivate the conversation by engaging people in it (Liu, 2019). As marketing tends to involve the general public as users, UGC has now been termed as consumer-generated content (CGC) and peer-created content – beyond typical industrial classification (Schaffer et al., 2013).

Publishing activity involves the preparation and distribution of selected matter in graphical and written form (Lee et al., 2019). Generally, the matter is available in newspapers, books and magazines; however, UGC never comes under the said

purview (Cheregi et al., 2018; Sheldrake et al., 2011). Publishing traditionally refers to printed material, but electronic books and online newspapers are also considered publishing although they do not necessarily require printing (Evans, 2012). However, some works are only available online, such as valuable and rare historical publications (Roberts et al., 2016). Thus, technological advancements have transformed the definitions and ideas of publishing by merging the digital and physical realms. However, regarding UGC, published content means the content produced and shared on social media and other networking sites instead of content published in printing or physical form (Cheregi et al., 2018). This raises the need to conceptualise publishing under the new conditions that emerged with the dawn of social media. Now, publishing should be understood more deeply as the distribution of information to people (Mahoney & Tang, 2016).

Focusing on the public indicates that users can create content without having a specific receiver for their UGC in mind (Agesta et al., 2011). An unlimited and vast audience can access the online content. If content is accessible to a limited public audience that indicates that content creators address a limited audience without explicitly specifying particular receivers. Further limitations are added by platforms, such as requiring registration prior to reading or reviewing (Brake, 2014). If only registered users can access the content, even then this content qualifies as UGC because everyone is invited to register, although the audience is confined to registered users.

Thomsett-Scott (2014) sub-divided limited public into “unknown limited public” and “known limited public”. “Unknown limited public” does not include only known people as the audience. The audience of “known limited public”, on the other hand, has no specific receiver but its audience is confined to known persons only. For example, content sharing in a community of close friends on social media is an important and clear example of interaction with known limited public (Kim & Kim, 2018). From this, it is indicated that concept of the known-limited public is similar to private to some extent (Barefoot & Szabo, 2010); however, the two concepts are not the same in the context of UGC. Moreover, private communication never comes under the umbrella of UGC. Various examples that encompass private communication include transmitting messages on a group or individual basis through platforms such as Viber, WeChat,

Imo, WhatsApp and email. Thus, the transmission of content through SMS, email, instantaneous messages, telephone calls, written letters and faxes falls beyond boundaries of UGC (Barefoot & Szabo, 2010). However, communication taking place at some private levels shows some resemblance to activities taking place over social media. Social networks, for example, allow the general public (users) to generate and share content which is then shared with the limited public through private messages. Thus, drawing clear boundary lines between them is very difficult, however, one thing that is common to social media is that content creators never develop and share the content with a limited audience (Smith & Zook, 2011). If they want to address an unlimited audience, reach is gained but intimacy is lost.

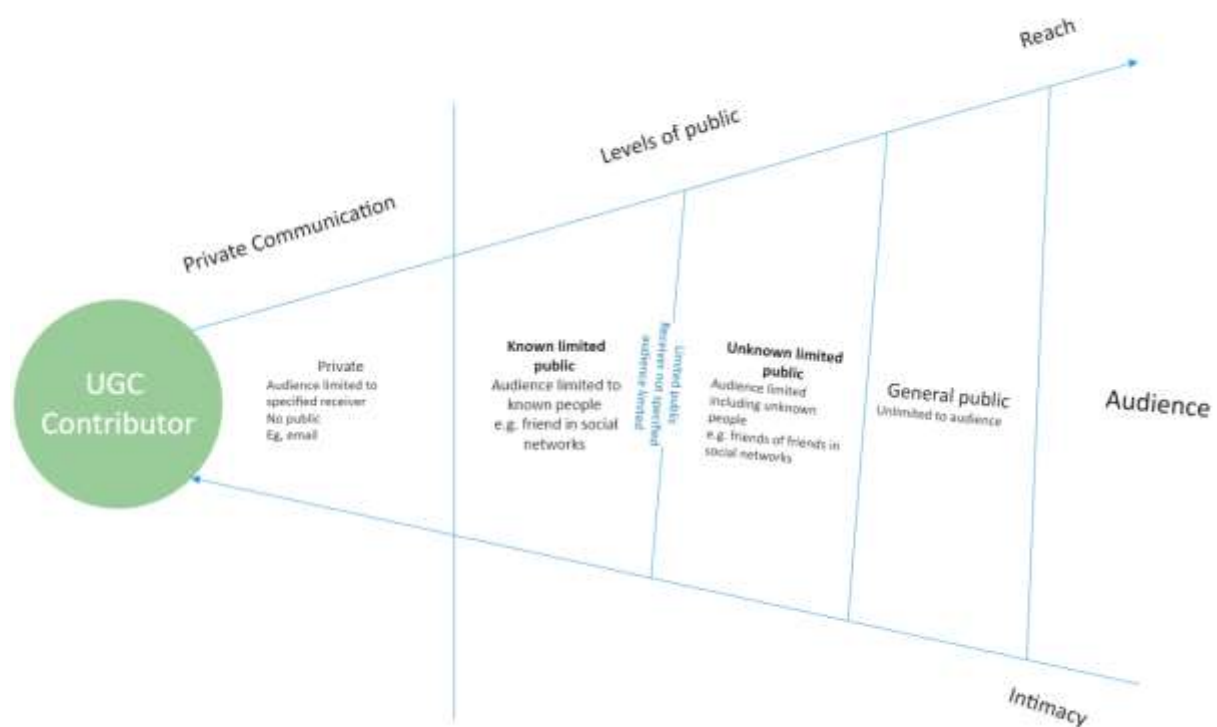


Figure 2-1 Reach-intimacy model

Figure 2-1 represents the communication levels in both public and private contexts (Evan, 2012). This figure highlights the features with respect to different levels of intimacy as well as the varying context of reach. An adaption of this phenomenon to generate content by the public can replace the concepts of sender-receiver both at

audience and contributor levels (Wan & Ren, 2017). Under such a model, users are considered contributors who publish the messages, no matter whether they have participated in content generation or not. Regardless of their involvement in content generation, contributors on social media are viewed in the capacity of authors (Evan, 2012). Here, reach refers to the number of individuals who receive the message. The contributor intends to limit the audience as less as possible, so that message will gain maximum potential in terms of reaching the audience. This, however, results in lower intimacy. The reach-intimacy model demonstrates familiarity with, involvement of and access to the general public in creating user content. As this model takes private communication into account (typically not considered UGC), it needs some adaptations (Evan, 2012).

As UGC is content generated and published by users on social media, content creators neither possess any copyright nor require permission for the publication. However, the content generated by companies on social media platforms is often known as FGC (Odden, 2012). Users, in the case of FGC, may be skilled or unskilled individuals. In this particular context, users do not need to act in a corporate or professional capacity. Regarding UGC, this research does not consider content generated by firms on social media to be UGC. The literature considers users to be individuals who use social media networking sites (Powell et al., 2011). This research used URLs as identifiers to search out web pages on different search engines instead of seeking out specific content. However, this does not resound with the idea of UGC as a web page because UGC not only carries just one URL, but it also carries countless entries contributed by different authors (Scott, 2015). UGC, in the social media context, is the smallest unit of contribution that a single author makes at a particular time. However, collaboration-based generated content includes contributions from many authors (Brown, 2012). While brand own product or service rating and customers on their own social media pages face tough time from the (Simon, 2016). UGC is generally inexpensive because users contribute it on social media without any charge. Supplying content can be rewarding if it is recognised (Marine-Roig & Anton Clavé, 2016). Moreover, content having the potential to inform or entertain is viewed as real data supplied by users who were not inspired by other channels (Susarla et al., 2012).

The unit of content produced by a single user is staple data and metadata. Staple data on content is provided by core data information whereas metadata is based on information corresponding to the core area (Chung, Han, & Koo, 2015). While constituting UGC, metadata involves expert opinions, author ranking within society and publication date. In this regard, an expression obtained via a single click is regarded as UGC, such as thumbs up comment on YouTube, “plus one” rating on Google and recorded “likes” on Facebook. Score ratings of other users on the basis of content units produced by users are often called peer ratings (Lu & Stepchenkova, 2015).

To summarise the above discussion, UGC refers to media that are crafted by end users or consumers and are easily accessible to others through websites, social media or industry databases (Roberts et al., 2016). UGC may include audio, image or visual-based files, such as video clips, photographs, GIFs or audio recordings and written material such as forum posts, reviews and blog entries. In other words, UGC is material produced and then publicised online outside marketing practices (Adler & Sillars, 2011). Though there are different forms of UGC, the most common and relevant are consumer-generated reviews and recommendations in relation to brand engagement (Sheldrake & Sheldrake, 2011). However, differentiating UGC from marketer-generated content is very important (Webster et al., 2014).

### **2.3 TAXONOMY OF THE DIFFERENT PLATFORMS USED FOR UGC**

The advent of the internet has made customers the most important authors of brand stories because the internet provided them with opportunities to easily share content online through dynamic social media and networking sites (Seadle & Greifender, 2014). As each form of UGC influences consumers differently, there is a need to better understand the platforms because they are the places where consumers interact with UGC (Pan & Zhang, 2011).

There is an increasing trend among customers to provide online reviews or feedback about products they purchased from particular company or brands (Stoking & Ozuem, 2018). In this regard, social media – internet-based platforms – facilitates the flow of decentralised content created by users via public memberships (Abrahams et al., 2012). Social media is a group of different online applications and networks that is

based on the technology and ideology of Web 2.0. Resultantly, social media allows users to generate and exchange content online (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 60). As social media involves acquiring real-time feedback, facilitating discussions, building up customer relationships and reviewing content online, it is also known as a content-producing network (Rodriguez et al., 2012). Moreover, social media also allows user communities and networks to increase their online presence (Ozuem, Howell, & Lancaster, 2008). According to Abrahams et al. (2012), social media has made propagation of information easier than earlier and facilitates the decentralised flow of content among users. There are, however, many other platforms that allow users to provide their views about products. Thus, discussing various online platforms in terms of differences and similarities for UGC is very important. It is also noteworthy that all online platforms have their own unique features that enable content and UGC sharing (Williams et al., 2010; Toder-Alon et al., 2018).

There are three forms of UGC in the online environment. Firstly, there is social media UGC that exists on social media sites like Reddit, Google+, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Instagram, YouTube, Tumblr, Facebook, Wikipedia and Twitter. Secondly, there is UGC by online communities; this UGC is generated when these communities review and rate products. Zagat, TripAdvisor, Yelp, OpenTable and google business rating are various examples of these online communities. Consumers commonly use OpenTable, Yelp, Zagat and TripAdvisor to share their experiences and express their opinions about a purchased product and service (Leibtag, 2014). Thirdly, there is UGC produced on third-party websites (e.g. eBay and Amazon) and corporate websites. According to many studies, consumers rely more on UGC as a trustworthy source of information than information created by marketers (Seadle & Greifender, 2014). However, investigating the influence of UGC in different online environments is very important because UGC on instant message networks (WeChat, Imo, WhatsApp, Viber), third-party sales websites (Amazon, eBay) and on corporate websites is different in nature.

For this purpose, it is important to firstly define what social media comprises. Charlesworth (2014, p., 9) stated "*what is understood by social media is still open to some debate*", though in general it might be said to be a "*collective term for the various social network and community's sites including such online application as blogs,*

podcasts, reviews and wikis". Based on this definition, online communities such as Reddit and social media sites such as Facebook are different examples of SMNs. In terms of their usage, both types of SMNs are used for not only reviewing and rating products but also for socialising with family and friends (Han & Myers, 2018). In contrast, online communities like OpenTable, Yelp, Zagat and TripAdvisor are only used for reviewing and rating products. Obviously, this is the main difference in their scope and function.

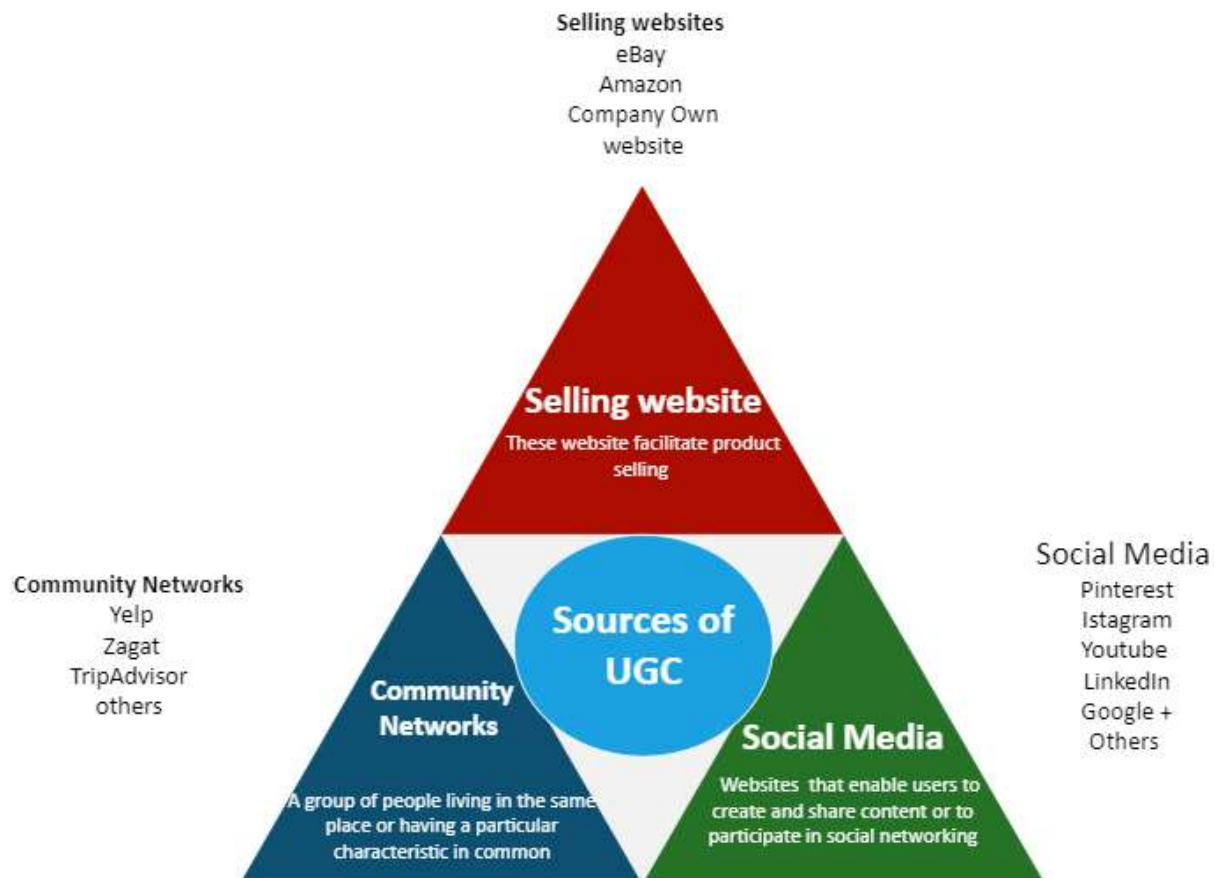


Figure 2-2 Pyramid of UGC sources development by author

Third-party selling websites, such as eBay, Amazon and corporate websites, are other platforms for UGC (Chen & Lurie, 2013). However, here the question arises whether to consider third-party and brands' websites as examples of SMNs for UGC generation. A website that allows users to add content but does not allow them to control that site is called a social media website (Han, 2018). According to this definition, it is virtually impossible to distinguish between community websites, brand websites and third-party sales websites. As this definition considers all mentioned

online environments as examples of social media, it very important for the current research to arrive at a specific understanding.

Based on some facts it is generally assumed that social media existed long before the digital revolution (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2016). Initially, the discussion and online networking sitting on social networks were used to connect communities of likeminded individuals who shared their views on every type of issue from latest trends and politics to how to cultivate tomatoes in the best manner (Charlesworth, 2015). However, both location as well as communication technologies available at that time strongly restricted these connections (Ryan, 2017). Previously, people could discuss products, brands or organisations only with their close friends, family and associates (Ryan, 2017; Estrella-Ramón & Ellis-Chadwick, 2017). But the advent of digital technology totally eliminated all these restrictions (Charlesworth, 2014). People in the digital environment can instantly disseminate UGC throughout the world through tablets, watches, PCs, laptops and mobile phones (Dodson, 2016; Zhang et al., 2016; Davis, 2015).

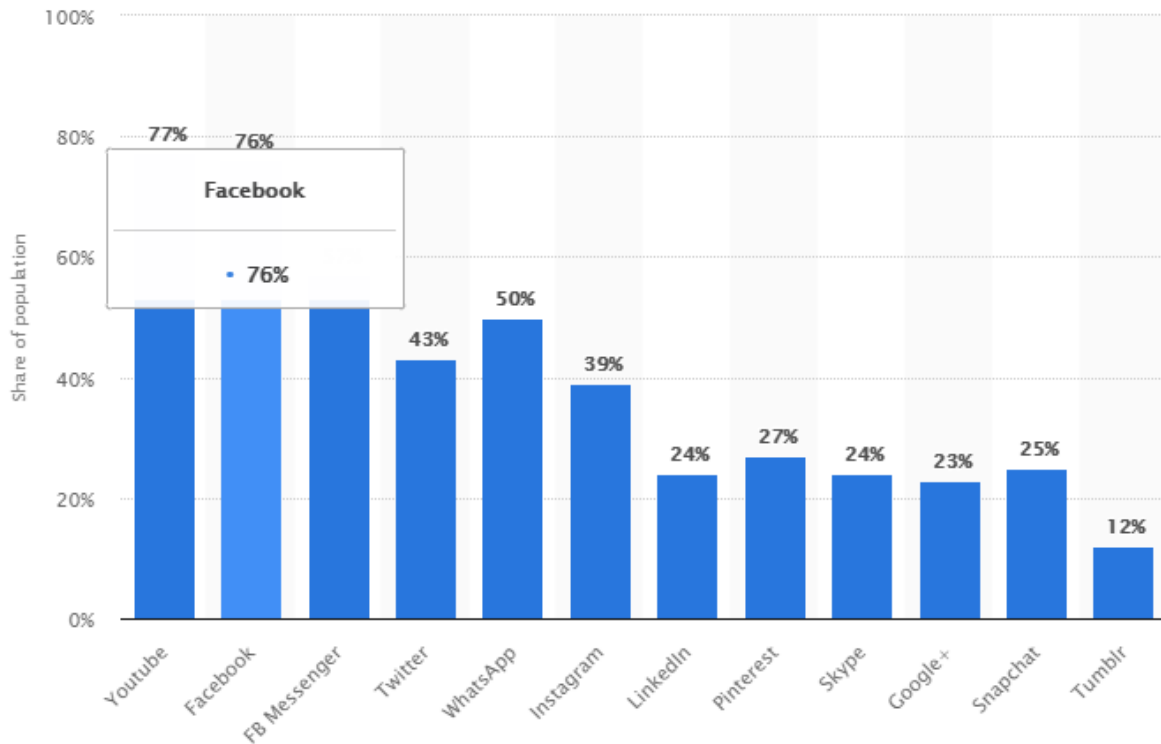
This definition of social media does not consider UGC produced in the form of reviewing and rating products on brands' websites and community websites as examples of social media enabling UGC. However, discussion in traditional social circles is not restricted to a specific topic; whereas eBay, Amazon, Zagat, TripAdvisor and Yelp only allow people to review and rate products. That is why this research has not considered third-party selling websites, corporate websites and community websites as examples of social media for the purpose of this research. According to Estrella-Ramón and Ellis-Chadwick (2017), social media websites like Facebook, YouTube and Twitter allow people to freely communicate as well as share their experiences and views regarding anything. Thus, this research only considers UGC produced on social media websites like Facebook and Twitter.

There are different definitions of social media that offer contradictory and sometimes mixed views about how UGC on social media differs from UGC on community and corporate websites. By associating social media websites with digital technology, Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) described social media as a set of various internet-enabled applications building on the foundation based on the ideology and technology of Web 2.0. Moreover, these internet-based applications allow users to create and



exchange UGC. Naeem (2019a) also defined social media in a Web 2.0 context as a group of open-sourced interactive and user-controlled online applications used to expand the market power, experience and knowledge of people as participants in business and social processes. Furthermore, these applications support the creation of informal communities of users and facilitate the flow of ideas and information by allowing creation, editing, refining, disseminating and sharing of informational content in an efficient manner (Evans, 2012; Zhang et al., 2016; Schaffer et al., 2014; Agresta et al., 2011). This definition though, considers third-party websites (Amazon, eBay), social media websites and corporate websites as examples of UGC but does not consider these platforms as examples of social media UGC. Based on this fact, this research has not considered third-party selling websites (such as eBay and Amazon) and community websites (OpenTable, Yelp, Zagat and TripAdvisor) as social media websites for the purpose of this research.

Statista (2018) reported that social media has penetrated the UK only through social websites (figure 2-3 for reference). This study excluded corporate websites, community networks and third-party websites from the social media UGC context because they restrict users' discussions (Figure 2-3 exhibits a pyramid of UGC sources) and it only considers social media websites in this regard. Twitter, Facebook and Pinterest are the most prominent examples of this type of social media as they are mostly based on or work entirely on UGC. Though classified websites, product rating and reviews websites and online forums are also based on UGC, they are not considered examples of social media UGC in this research. This has been decided on the basis that these forums greatly restrict or even do not allow user discussions.



*Figure 2-3 Penetration of top social media networks in United Kingdom as of third and fourth quarter 2017*

UGC is the medium of communication through which experienced consumers can exchange views with other (often less experienced) consumers regarding a product or service (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). As noted, there are many different types of UGC: Facebook status updates, tweets on Twitter, uploading a video on YouTube, product reviews by consumers on consumer website, and so on (Muniz & Schau, 2007; Dhar & Chang, 2009). Much of the UGC on social media is related to brands. As such content can significantly influence consumers' opinions about said brands, it is an issue of great importance for marketers (Risselada et al., 2018). UGC nevertheless takes on different characteristics in different social networking services (SNS). Consequently, research shows different SNSs have different types of influence on SMUs (Human et al., 2018).

Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are the most popular SNSs. Each of these platforms amplifies different kinds of content (Herziger et al., 2017). For instance, people using Twitter, a micro-blogging site founded in 2006, can give short quick updates in text form. The posts may also include pictures and/or a hyperlink (Naaman et al., 2010);

however, most content on this platform remains textual. A tweet, moreover, can be private or public depending on the creator's sharing preferences. Existing research involving Twitter users has focused on their online behaviour and norms (Boyd et al., 2010), their reasons for posting content on Twitter (Jansen et al., 2009; Java et al., 2009), along with issues of self-presentation (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). Tweets are generally meant for sharing information, news, complaints, opinions and details about particular things or situations. Brand-related content is also produced and shared on the platform. Research has shown that though 19% of tweets made on Twitter are brand-oriented, in about half of these the focus is not on the brand itself (Jansen et al., 2009).

Facebook was launched in 2004 as a social networking website. Users of this platform can create an e-profile which can be linked with the equivalent profiles of friends and other associates. Thereafter, they are able to share their photos, personal information, videos, hyperlinks, texts and so on with both known-limited and unknown-limited audiences (Adetunji et al., 2017). Facebook users can also participate in various activities such as writing on a friend's wall, creating groups, making discussions and "liking" pages. Facebook thus enables its users to communicate and share information with others. Existing research on Facebook has generally focused on the behaviour patterns of users (Papacharissi, 2009), reasons for usage of the platform (Ellison et al., 2007; Debatin et al., 2009), in addition to issues related to how people self-represent on Facebook (Labrecque et al., 2011; Tong et al., 2008; Papacharissi, 2009; Zywica & Danowski, 2008). There is nevertheless a significant gap in the literature in terms of research that takes into account the brand-oriented behaviour of people on the platform (Zang et al., 2010). One of the aims of this study is to begin to fill that gap.

YouTube was launched in 2005. The platform enables its users to share videos online on the website and paste and share the hyperlinks of those videos to other websites. Users can establish their e-profiles on YouTube and subscribe to other users to see videos from them as well. Although the site holds accounts of professional videographers (Kruitbosch & Nack, 2008), user-generated videos receive the most comments (Burgess & Green, 2009). Researchers have studied the structure of the website, its regulations and overall culture (Burgess & Green, 2009; Benevenuto et al., 2008; Snickars & Vonderau, 2009). User behaviours have also attracted interest.

One of these is self-presentation, particularly in relation to “DIY celebrities”; that is, everyday people who have nevertheless proven capable of using UGC to attract significant numbers of followers (Lange, 2008). Researchers have also researched the content available on YouTube (Kruitbosch & Nack 2008; Cha et al., 2007). In terms of brand-oriented content, existing research shows videos usually include reviews on brand products, demonstration of usage, how to creatively use the product, unpacking the items, satire and storytelling (Pace, 2008; Blythe & Cairns, 2009; Colicev et al., 2018).

Another feature that is gaining prominence on social media is the “location” sharing feature, whereby the user can share their location when uploading content (Wang, 2013). This feature works especially well with smartphones, as a result of which users are increasingly sharing their locations together with the content, they upload from places such as malls, supermarkets, pubs, touristic venues and special events. Research suggests this brings credibility and reliability to the content shared by the user (Wang, 2013; Verhoef et al., 2017; Yavuz & Toker, 2014; Wilken, 2014). There is also a feature of “check-in” on various social media applications which enables users to share with other users the place where they are presently eating or enjoying time. This helps them to attract recommendations from other users and to connect with friends who are nearby (Wang, 2013; Pagani & Malacarne, 2017; Yavuz & Toker, 2014). As a result of such features, new business opportunities become available to marketers since they are able to identify the priorities of the customers and the WOM taking place on social media (Pagani & Malacarne, 2017). Due to geo-location functionalities, users are able to know each other’s locations in real time (Van Dijck, 2011).

Furthermore, as a consequence of geo-location posts on social media, marketers are also able to identify consumers’ location-specific brand preferences (Mutum et al., 2018). This informs marketers about the locations where more consumers are inclined towards the brand. Furthermore, if the brand is not present in that location this feature is helpful in identifying the location the brand can target next. As such, social media becomes a tool for marketers to engage customers (Pagani & Malacarne, 2017). Moreover, Yavuz and Toker (2014) highlighted the enhancement of value as the prominent motive to share location on social media. Their research showed that

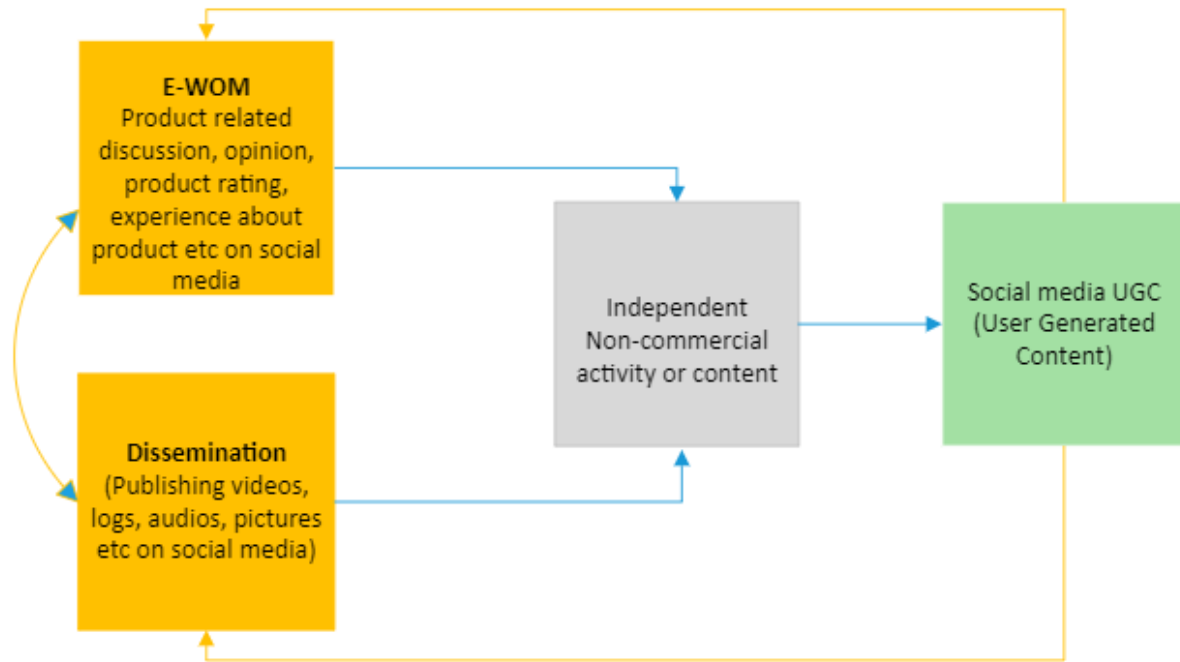
although one of the motives of users sharing their location is the need to socialise, another prominent motive is the desire to impress peers and enhance the importance of self before others. This highlights a significant aspect of “check-in” behaviour among consumers, which is to impress others. It reflects themes of identity construction, self-presentation, extroversion and narcissism (Wang & Stefanone, 2013). Marketers need to understand such phenomena in order to target products to segments of consumers who would be attracted to them (Wang, 2013; Kim, 2016).

However, it is essential to understand the types of channels on social media to discern the kinds of opportunities that come with each channel. The reasons for sharing locations differ between the types of social media platform due to two major factors (Kim, 2016). Firstly, social media has evolved differently with respect to location-based services. For example, Facebook offers such services so that people can find nearby places of interest and connect with people nearby (Wilken, 2014; Kim, 2016; Yavuz & Toker, 2014). YouTube does not offer a location-based service, however, and the user can only mention his or her location in a video (Yavuz & Toker, 2014). Twitter, on the other hand, lets users share their locations so that they can quickly inform their followers about their current location. Since the website consists of micro-blogging, a person can quickly invite recommendations from other users. Moreover, the users share their locations on social media to enhance their social value (Yavuz & Toker, 2014). Yavuz and Toker (2014) suggested in light of this there is a need to understand the motives and intentions of SMUs to create, respond to or share UGC on social media that would socially influence other SMUs.

The discussion above shows that Twitter, YouTube and Facebook embody different types of content and that each platform has unique features of its own and its own online culture. These sites are visited by users with different objectives and reasons for interaction (Irimiás & Volo, 2018). Each site *prima facie* looks different from the others, but all three types can host brand-oriented reviews and UGC (Jin & Phua, 2014). Due to the different characteristics of each of these websites, the UGC on these sites can differ in form and thus impact consumers’ behaviour differently in different circumstances (Liu et al., 2017). This review of the literature nevertheless shows there is a need to further probe these issues in relation to brand-related content in particular.

## **2.4 SOURCES OF BRAND-RELATED UGC**

Research shows evaluations regarding the source of information play an extremely important role in terms of the willingness of receivers to accept a message (Chiou et al., 2014; Boerman & Kruikemeier, 2016; Liu et al., 2012). The most common source of brand-oriented UGC is “friends” on social media. Such content is more likely to be accepted by others precisely because they consider it to have come from a trusted source. Moreover, though Moscovice’s (1985) research took place in a traditional offline context, the results can be applied to social media because individuals both on- and off-line tend to be positively influenced by messages coming from someone they identify as being like them. Andsager et al.’s (2006) findings were consistent with this: a message conveyed by a peer or close friend is likely to have a more compelling impact on a consumer than a message originating from a commercial source. Existing research is thus clear in demonstrating that consumers’ buying behaviour is strongly influenced by their friends, as friends are perceived as a trustworthy source of information regarding a particular product or service (Wang et al., 2012; Goodrich & Mangleburg, 2010). Indeed, Klena and Puleri (2014) argued that, aside from traditional marketing, friends are regarded as the most significant influence on the buying behaviour of consumers. As high as 60% of the people surveyed in their research agreed that friends’ posts on social media had at least some influence on their buying behaviour (Klena & Puleri, 2014). In short, consumers come across UGC in their social circle as a result of experiences shared by their friends and family. Existing research on eWOM has shown that people are influenced by UGC that is shared by those found in their personal and physical social circle and such people influence their buying behaviour (Wang et al., 2012).



*Figure 2-4 eWOM electronic word of mouth, UGC user-generated content*

eWOM refers to the sharing of experiences and opinions by consumers on social media about companies, brands, products or services (Wang et al., 2013; Cadario, 2015; He & Wen, 2015) see figure 2-4. However, controlling the negative impact of eWOM is a hard task for marketers (Xue & Zhou, 2010). With the advent of social media, eWOM conversations are not controlled or regulated by marketers, although marketers can explore customer notions and are free to generate content through eWOM conversations (Sun, 2013; Kim et al., 2013; Crutzen et al., 2009; Yoon & Han, 2012; Feng & Papatla, 2012). This research therefore underlines the importance of eWOM for marketers.

Consumers are also likely to be influenced by the UGC shared by celebrities on social media, particularly on Twitter (Greenberg, 2009). Users on Twitter are likely to be influenced by what celebrities share (Jin & Phua, 2014). Helal et al. (2018) indicated that fast fashion customers are more influenced by their close friends and family friends compare to celebrities. While, celebrities are thus another influential source of brand-related UGC (Wood & Burkhalter, 2014). In the 1990s, celebrities were people who were widely admired by the public but difficult to access (Childers & Rao, 1992). However, with the advent of social media, famous individuals became more accessible to fans; fans can now follow celebrities' accounts across different platforms (Gautam

& Sharma, 2017). In turn, celebrities are increasingly sharing their experiences about different products and services on social media with their fans. They also share their opinions about different issues. Research has revealed that half of Twitter content comes from only 0.05% of the Twitter population, which includes celebrities and the media representatives of organisations (Wu et al., 2011). Fans consider the celebrities they follow to be trustworthy sources of information. Accordingly, celebrities play the role of opinion makers on social media and marketers are more and more interested in drawing eWOM from celebrities (Gautam & Sharma, 2017).

Even though the role of celebrities as endorsers of products has not been thoroughly researched with respect to UGC, their role in advertising has been widely documented as influential in terms of effective message reception (Amos et al., 2008). Existing research has highlighted the significance of celebrity endorsement in the success of various products and services (Choi & Rifon, 2012). Baines et al. (2017) indicated that it is the identification process which underpins the success of celebrity endorsement. In other words, fans tend to identify themselves in line with their favourite celebrities and consequently follow their recommendations uncritically (Jin & Phua, 2014). This is why celebrities are regarded as influential endorsers, particularly when promoting value-expressive products related to physical attraction (Choi & Rifon, 2012).

Smartphones, meanwhile, have given rise to more than just text-based messaging due to the wide variety of content that can be shared through smartphones, such as videos, pictures and video calls (Du Plessis, 2017). This has enabled users to share content. For example, if someone has had a bad experience at a hotel, they can simply upload a video or picture about it (Presi et al., 2014). The majority of such videos are not made or posted with any particular commercial interest in mind. Indeed, many video producers of CGC make such videos either to help other consumers and/or simply for entertainment purposes (Wang & Li, 2016). However, the publishers of such content may sell advertising space to accompany UGC and CGC content and can therefore attract the attention of other consumers (Munar & Jacobsen, 2013). If SMUs promote a brand on the basis of their own experience of using it, then this constitutes an example of citizen marketing in which the brand itself is unable to control the content and information being shared online (Ransbotham et al., 2014). Social media presents a viable example of content development in the form of videos, product reviews and



blogs in diverse formats as well as other types of media. People utilise these diverse forms of UGC to support their buying decisions (Yadav et al., 2016). The literature thus shows that UGC represents an important source of information.

Brand-oriented UGC represents content which is created with reference to a brand and is intended to be brought to the notice of other users as well (Tang et al., 2014). Research shows it provides useful information to consumers who are in the process of arriving at a decision about buying products or services (Yadav et al., 2016). An eMarketer (2016) report highlighted that 80.7% of internet users in the USA regard product reviews by other consumers as an influential source of information for arriving at purchasing decisions. Indeed, the importance, relevance and influence of UGC related to brands are increasingly enabling potential customers to take decisions about brands (Munar & Jacobsen, 2013). Moreover, it is also worth noting that UGC, particularly that documenting negative experiences, can often lead to further generation of UGC (Grosser et al., 2019; Micu et al., 2019; Kim & Lee, 2017; Gavilanes et al., 2018; Çınar, 2018; Zhao et al., 2017). The effectiveness of both positive and negative UGC will be further discussed in the next section regarding the impact of UGC on SMUs.

In summary, research shows the influence of UGC also depends on the person who generates it. Social media has enabled users to generate and share content with each other. Access to UGC is easier among those who are in the social circle of SMUs so it has more influence in social circle (Ransbotham et al., 2012). This is also referred to as eWOM and brings people together who share the interests of those within their personal network (Yadav et al., 2016). Consumers are also increasingly being exposed to UGC shared by celebrities on their social media pages. Twitter is increasingly becoming a platform for celebrities to share information about what they like or dislike (Ransbotham et al., 2012; Munar & Jacobsen, 2013). Existing research has shown that posts by celebrities can influence followers, even if the content is brand-related content (Choi & Rifon, 2012). However, the extent to which such posts influence consumers who are making a buying decision and the extent to which brand perceptions are affected are somewhat unexplored. To fill this gap, this study examines the relative effectiveness of celebrities' and friends' posts on social media in relation to perceptions of brands (Ransbotham et al., 2012).

## **2.5 MOTIVATION OF UGC**

The literature also sheds light on the motivations underlying the creation of UGC amongst social media users. One of the main reasons social media users create UGC is to express their personal identity. Other reasons include the need for social interaction, the desire to spread information, and the pursuit of entertainment (Muntinga, et al. 2011). However, despite attempts to highlight motivations among social media users in terms of creating UGC, less is known about the effects of UGC behaviour. One of the initial attempts in this regard was made by Christodoulides (et al. 2012) who created a conceptual model of UGC and conducted empirical tests to examine the positive impact UGC has on brand equity in the context of brand awareness, brand loyalty, and perceived quality. The findings of previous research show that UGC increases brand equity as it attracts more consumers to engage with the brand, or in brand-related communication. As such, they are motivated to buy from particular brands (Algharabat et al., 2020; Dwivedi et al., 2019; Gupta, et al., 2018).

Van Doorn et al. (2010) observed that the engagement behaviour of customers represents the manifestation of their behaviour about a brand. Brodie (et al. 2013) observed that the discussion by customers in online brand communities can serve to enhance the brand reputation as they try to define their personality with the usage of the brand. Gummerus (et al. 2012) observed that the engagement behaviour of customers in online brand communities create the perception about the brands in the eyes of other customers. Hollebeek (et al. 2014) observed that customer's engagement behaviour on social media represent brand engagement. Hollebeek & Chen (2014) argued that brand engagement can involve both the positive and negative UGC.

Even though the literature is in line with the current research i.e. the extent whereby consumer partakes in UGC defines the likelihood of his buying behaviour, but this has not quite expressly been explored previously (Scuotto, et al., 2017). Majority of the research on UGC focused on the decision-making of the consumer and took into account the effect of e-WOM e.g. whether the customer reviews online increase the search for the product, increases sales (de Vries, et al. 2012). Chen (2011) investigated the marketing variables by taking into account UGC whereas Blazevic (et al. 2014) developed a scale for evaluating the potential of social interaction. Gensler (et al. 2013) observed that UGC represents storytelling about a brand.

However, there is dearth of literature exploring the effect of UGC on creator. Etgar (2008) had argued that there are several potential benefits in sight when a person engages in co-creating. These benefits can be extrinsic in nature or intrinsic. Intrinsic ones include excitement, benefits of play, and seeking variety; whereas extrinsic ones include material benefits which result from expressing self. There could also be social benefits such as highlighting the social status of a person before others and associating with likeminded people (Yildiz Durak, 2019). Such are the benefits which give rise to UGC by the consumers who then engage in a goal oriented UGC. This behaviour has also been studied under different theories related to goal. For example, goal-setting theory provided that UGC by consumers influences the future behaviour of other consumers particularly when the UGC gives rise to a particular goal (Pontes, 2017). The goal-based model developed by Osselaer & Janiszewski (2012) provided that consumers evaluate the advantages they gain from consuming the product or service and set the goals accordingly. This model aligns goals and benefits with each other. Furthermore, the extent whereby a goal is set and pursued by an individual depends on the extent whereby the goal remains in his memory following consumption (Gupta, et al., 2018). Therefore, the researcher argues that the UGC activates the goals of the consumers which then influences SMUs towards a brand (Assaker, 2020). Therefore, are following major motivation behinds the UGC generation and sharing on social media.

Self-presentation represents the efforts of people about conveying a particular identity and image about self to other people (Zywica & Danowski, 2008). This effort can also be seen among people when they choose a brand or product (Belk, 2013). The existing literature on the subject showed that self-presentation among people is quite visible when they generate user generated content (UGC) on social media platforms such as Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, Facebook (Misoch, 2014). The researcher adds that the more visually rich features added recently in social media platforms have also given new ways to people to express themselves about their self while creating UGC. There is support for this argument in literature such as by Shinal (2018), Pollard (2017), and Thompson (2017).

One of the underpinning elements of any relationship include the sense of belongingness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). This element has also been argued in favour of social media usage that it is this element which brings people to social media

to express their sense of belongingness about people and brands (Berger, 2014). The social media users are able to express this sense of belonging with other users online including not only with respect to their relationship with people but also with brands (Labrecque, 2014). Another prominent feature of social media is the word-of-mouth as the content generated on social media is by the users more than the corporate world (Kim, & Song, 2018).

Social media is also used as a platform for personal branding, i.e. users present their profiles on social media in such a way as to reinforce their self-identity (Yoo, et al., 2019). This reflect through the content they share online on social media and the likeminded people they interact with online on social media (Hollenbeck & Kaikati, 2012). Social media users are engaging in such content creation which they believe align with their personality and expresses their identity. This also includes talking about certain brands and their products online on social media to depict their identity. Brands are used as a symbol of identity by social media users to convey meaning of self to others (Labrecque, et al. 2014).

Furthermore, consumers sharing their perceptions about brands online convey the perceived meaning of such brands thereby co-creating, and sometimes re-creating the meaning of online brands on social media (Amato, et al., 2019). This they do to express their identity as reflecting from their preferred choice of brand. The traditional theory on interaction by Markus & Wurf (1987) argued that social interactions shape people and the self-concept among people dictates their participation and manner of participation in social environments (Mazzucchelli, et al., 2018). They then communicate in such a manner and share content with each other which provides support to their identity so that they can manage the perception about themselves in the eyes of others (Sihi, & Lawson, 2018).

Social media platforms are built on the idea of free and independent exchange of UGC (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). There are two main functions of social media such as self-presentation and social presence. The social media as a communication platform has increased the awareness among people due to free flow of information among people (Pongpaey, et al. 2017). Social presence represents the varying extent of closeness and the salience of an entity which the media creates. This includes textual, visual, and acoustic content (Cui, et al. 2013). This entity can take the form of a brand, a

celebrity or a politician (Jin & Ryu, 2020). The brands strengthen their social presence when they post messages related to their products and services online on social media (Wang & Qiao, 2020). Luxury brands are generally found to prefer simple visuals to convey the desirable association of their products in a luxurious way amongst those who are already familiar with the brand (Lee, et al. 2018). Wang & Qiao (2020) observed with respect to young Chinese consumers that they relate luxury brands with youthfulness, aspirations, and significant social presence. Due to this reason brands ensure their presence on social media to engage such consumers.

Meanwhile, the social presence gives rise to the desire to self-presentation. This is in line with the social media's social dimension. Self-presentation does not just represent compiling different contents about self but represents people's desire to maintain their image among other people (Jin & Ryu, 2020). Self-presentation may also be regarded as personal branding whereby one presents himself as a brand to the world so that he is perceived in a certain way (Scolere, et al. 2018). Due to this reason, people on social media are carefully curating and managing their digital image before the world at large to strengthen their image about self in the eyes of others. This can then be seen in the form of consumers' self-concept whereby they align themselves with such brands who they think better defines them and how they should be perceived by others (Escalas & Bettman, 2005). Bernritter (et al. 2016) argued that consumers perceive brands as having personalities of their own and they then choose such brands which they think align best with their personality. This has also been regarded as possessing human characteristics which dictate the brand symbolism which the consumers perceive as meeting their self-expression needs. The consumers of luxury brands are highly conscious of this brand symbolism as they use such symbolism for conveying the cultural, social, and ideological meanings related to their self-concepts (Escalas & Bettman, 2005). Bernritter (et al. 2017) observed that consumers tend to establish relationship with brands on the basis of symbolic meaning which the brand conveys.

Therefore, the social media accounts of the brands are handled by brands in such a way to convey and preserve that particular symbolism which is associated with the brand to be communicated to the public accordingly (Wang & Qiao, 2020). Further, the brand must also optimize brand symbolism so that the brand image is presented before target audience in such a manner that the audience aligns itself with the brand (Jin & Ryu, 2020). This also requires the brands to take into account the self-

presentation needs of their target audience and address those needs. Studies also showed that the brand image also significantly influences the buying behaviour of consumers as they tend to align their image with that of the brand (Godey, et al. 2016). Therefore, self-presentation must be catered to by the brands on priority basis as it attracts the customers towards the brand (Spates, et al., 2020).

## **2.6 IMPORTANCE OF UGC FOR MARKETERS**

Marketing messages are effective and persuasive if they can positively influence the buying behaviour of consumers and trigger purchasing decisions (Van Noort et al., 2012). Berthon et al. (2008), for instance, observed that travel videos influence viewers to travel to the places shown. Since it is difficult to measure actual behaviour, the focus of this study is, instead, on the intended consequences of behaviour, including the social willingness to forward and share UGC. Simply put, when brand-related UGC is effective it can result in positive responses from consumers. This leads to favourable attitudes towards the brand and a greater likelihood of complying with suggestions made in such UGC. The person who provides the UGC, moreover, is also one of the factors in its effectiveness (Steffes & Burgee, 2009). Marketers can enhance current levels of transparency and trust in brands by embracing UGC, even when negative.

The authenticity of brand-related UGC does not, however, rely only on the fact that it is user-generated; as crucial is that the UGC is unpaid and serves the purposes of marketing brands (King et al., 2014; Weber & Henderson, 2014). This renders UGC a version of online WOM marketing, although the content is not necessarily generated with the intention of promotion, particularly because modern internet users are increasingly cautious about marketing messages (Armstrong & Kotler, 2014). A satisfied consumer at a restaurant can generate voluntary posts about their experience on, for example, Instagram. Brands can then take advantage of this UGC, though it remains necessary for the brand to be aware of response strategies to address both positive and negative customer feedback. However, research shows that feedback on social media would not exert equal influence on different SMUs (Charlesworth, 2015). Thus, there remains a need to explore how UGC stimulates customer behaviour in different contexts.

There are two ways in which information shared on social media is effective. First, such information creates eWOM, thereby influencing the buying intentions of consumers (Cheng & Krumwiede, 2018). Second, it also helps the brand to enhance its products and services in the light of the feedback it receives (Hamouda, 2018). In the context of e-commerce, social media represents a powerful tool for generating eWOM and influencing consumers' perceptions of products and services (Ye et al., 2010; Kuan et al., 2014; Phang et al., 2013). Furthermore, Doh and Hwang (2009) observed that although eWOM has a significant influence on consumers' valuation of products, in instances where all eWOM messages are positive the credibility of the product may suffer because consumers question the authenticity of these reviews. This is particularly the case with fashion products, because these are more related to cultural and ethnic values. In addition, Park et al. (2009) found that sometimes brands pay for reviews to be posted on their website to increase the positive responses to their website, but this too may negatively affect reliability in customers' eyes. This is one of the main reasons why UGC shared by friends and family on social media is considered more reliable by consumers. Extant research on the subject also shows consumers are likely to perceive eWOM which comprises a mix of positive, negative and neutral reviews as authentic (Peltola & Makinen, 2014; Carr et al., 2015; Rathore et al., 2018; Marion et al., 2014; Roberts & Piller, 2016). Online reviews are found to be influential on 67.7% of the purchase decisions made and are trusted as personal recommendations by 84% of shoppers. There is still a need to explore this in a specifically UK fashion context, however, as this study will do.

The impact of eWOM on consumers' behaviour has been debated for some time; however, that eWOM influences buying behaviour has been proved by many researchers (He & Bond, 2015; Gu et al., 2013). Further, WOM has become more influential as a consequence of the opportunities social media provides for sharing information (Stoel & Muhanna, 2016). Online conversations on social media significantly influence brand awareness (Tang, 2017) and consumer buying decisions (Feng & Papatla, 2011; Shao, 2009; Lu et al., 2014). This is because these conversations refer to particular brand names, products or services (Chern et al., 2015). About one in five posts on Twitter reference specific brand names (Luo et al., 2016).

eWOM conversations are given high importance because users are exposed to the views of their family, friends and friends of friends. These views are very effective for creating eWOM and encouraging communication between people about brands, products or services. Zhang et al. (2015) recognised eWOM as a largely influential marketing tool of consumer behaviour (Liang & Corkindale, 2016; Lee & Wu, 2015). Research underlines that it has gained prominence as a consequence of the frequency and widespread use of the internet (Moore & McFerran, 2011; Zhou & Duan, 2015; Eelen et al., 2017).

The sales of movies are also influenced by the volume and valence effects of UGC. The literature shows internet users were influenced by the reviews shared online by people who had watched the movie (Dellarocas et al., 2007). Moreover, Duan et al. (2008) highlighted enhanced levels of WOM about movies can be ascribed to box office sales – UGC aids this. The impact of online WOM is therefore akin to that of the “awareness effect” (Li et al., 2017). However, it is also important to note that there is a difference between higher sales and higher ratings (Kim, Lee, & Elias, 2015). Significantly, Dellarocas et al. (2007) found that the fact that a movie was rated higher did not create any persuasive effect on other users. In other words, online reviews inform other viewers about the quality of a movie, but do not influence others to watch the movie unless other users have generated content to this effect. Moreover, Liu (2006) observed that the volume of sales with respect to a movie was found to be influenced by the views that watchers shared online with other online audiences. This means that UGC as a source of information was more persuasive than UGC as a source of rating, which is another important piece of information for marketers.

The impact of eWOM was observed to be significantly affected by sources in terms of competence, trustworthiness and similarity (Fay & Larkin, 2017). More interestingly, Naeem (2019ab) showed about 68% of customers trust recommendations posted by other consumers on social media. This percentage has now increased by 11.5% from the time the survey was first carried out in 2007. This is a huge increase when compared with traditional advertising and WOM (Naeem, 2019b). Furthermore, it is possible to systematically analyse the UGC of customer-to-customer online reviews (Gao et al., 2015). More common and simpler ways of measuring online feedback can be achieved by measuring the frequency of reviews based on buyer/seller ratings in



eBay or “likes” on Facebook (Floyd et al., 2014). The most important benefit of this type of measuring is that it allows large quantities of user-generated data to be captured, which can be analysed systematically to measure the possible impact of eWOM (Pfeffer et al., 2014; Kim et al., 2013).

Recent research has highlighted the usefulness of eWOM in terms of UGC in regard to predicting individuals’ behaviour and characteristics (Dodson, 2016; Zhou & Duan, 2015; Chern et al., 2015). According to Sun (2013), “likes” on Facebook help to predict different individuals’ attributes, such as sexual orientation, political and religious affiliation and ethnicity (Cadario, 2015). This information helps to map out the five factors model of individual personality (Zhou & Duan, 2015) that is popular with marketers. Moreover, UGC is used to map out and describe social networks to highlight the ability of these data to predict trends in the behaviour of groups (Chern et al., 2015). This could help a marketer with product co-creation, product development and customer relationship management (Dodson, 2016).

Research also demonstrates that eWOM is regarded as a better source of information if it comes from the friends and family of the consumer rather than from a company’s sponsored sources (Brown et al., 2007; Munnukka et al., 2015; Mazzarol et al., 2007). eWOM has increased due to the increase in the reach of internet-based platforms (Cheung et al., 2009; Rehman et al., 2016). However, there is a difference between eWOM generated from social media and eWOM generated from other sources. Social media enables people to encounter eWOM from people they know, such as friends and family, whereas other internet sources promote anonymous eWOM (Aslam et al., 2018; Moran & Muzellec, 2014; Kozinets et al., 2010). Therefore, consumers increasingly use social media platforms to acquire knowledge about brands unfamiliar to them (Goodrich & de Mooij, 2014; Baird & Parasnis, 2011; Schivinski & Darbowski, 2016; Naylor et al., 2012). Social media is regarded as a useful forum for generating reliable eWOM (Erkan & Evans, 2014; Canhoto & Clark, 2013; Toder-Alon et al., 2014; Knoll & Proksch, 2015). Existing researchers have found a positive relationship between buying intentions and eWOM on social media (See-To & Ho, 2014; Iyengar et al., 2009; Wang et al., 2012; Wallace et al., 2009). There is, however, still a need to further investigate how and why eWOM on social media is more effective as compared

to other review websites and how customers perceive the credibility of eWOM in different circumstances.

Research does show that the effect of eWOM is split it into two levels: the individual level and the market level (Cheung & Thadani, 2012). The latter mainly focuses on the market performance of the firm and eWOM. Studies by Xie et al. (2016), Xun and Guo (2017), Mishra and Satish (2016) and Bao et al. (2016) offer evidence that eWOM valence and volume are highly related to stock prices and product sales. For instance, Dellarocas et al. (2004) observed the impact of movie reviews on the box office during the first week of revenue as well as at an overall level. According to Matute et al. (2016), book sales are positively influenced by positive reviews on social media. Individual levels of analysis of eWOM mainly target the buying intentions of customers. Mishra et al. (2018) identified that online review content can be very influential in terms of changing customers' perceptions and attitudes. All this information is crucial for marketers to understand when using UGC to develop brand awareness and generate sales.

A study conducted by Sen and Lerman (2007) found that consumers often regard negative reviews as dishonest. However, this is true only in respect of hedonic products; it is not the case with utilitarian products where such reviews are considered to be useful and are considered to simply describe the quality of the product (Wilson et al., 2012). Moreover, Duan et al. (2008) observed that consumers' perceptions can be affected by negative reviews even in the case of hedonic products such as movies. It is the volume and not the valence which is considered to be the predictive element for box office revenues. These findings are also somewhat similar to other research results. An experiment revealed that a central information processing route was taken in high involvement conditions by participants and the influential element in this regard was the strength of the review (Broeck et al., 2017). In low involvement conditions, by contrast, the length of review and the quantity of reviews were the determining factors (Park et al., 2007; Lee, 2009).

It has also been demonstrated by other researchers that positive reviews by consumers are valuable to readers or buyers as compared to negative comments by consumers; this is because the former highlights the necessity of evaluation of the product further (Li & Zhan, 2011; Forman et al., 2008; Mudambi & Schuff, 2010). A

study conducted in the context of the hotel industry showed that positive reviews by consumers online are more effective as compared to negative feedback (Tsao et al., 2015). A similar study showed that when ratings and positive social media reviews are considered together, the rate of bookings for the hotel increases (Sparks & Browning, 2011). Chevalier and Mayzlin (2006), however, observed that the impact of one negative rating was stronger than the impact of a five-star rating. Research thus shows positive opinions might improve consumers' likelihood to buy, while negative reviews can also discourage potential customers from purchasing (Presi et al., 2014). An examination of the intensity of valence suggests there is a significant amount of research within the marketing field on the negativity effect (Tsang & Prendergast, 2009). It has been claimed by Wang et al. (2017) that negative reviews are much stronger and more influential as compared to positive reviews (Munar et al., 2014; Ransbotham et al., 2012). Therefore, negative reviews are capable of influencing customers more than the positive reviews; negative reviews are more helpful for product development (He et al., 2013). These contradictory findings are important for marketers to be aware of and suggest further research is needed.

Modern consumers are empowered by social media to express their dissatisfaction with products or services. There are also websites which represent a step further and house those reviews that instead of showing displeasure with a "bad" product or service have taken an "anti" step or boycott measures. Such information can be influential for consumers who are considering purchasing a product or service (Krishnamurthy & Kucuk, 2009). Moreover, negative feedback can affect the reputation and image of the company in the eyes of consumers, particular in terms of online consumers. Liang and Corkindale (2016) observed that when too much negative opinion exists about something in social media it tends to influence the opinion of other SMUs because people like to align themselves with a majority (Krishnamurthy & Kucuk, 2009). Furthermore, Chern et al. (2015) observed that consumers take negative UGC to be reliable data on social media as they think this feedback is provided by other consumers on an experiential basis (Lu et al., 2015; Tang, 2017; Stoel & Muhanna, 2016; Feng & Papatla, 2011).

Quantitative product rating data can identify how much a product is liked by consumers, but it does not provide sufficient information to identify the success or

failure of a product. By contrast, text reviews offer more information as to the thoughts and experiences of consumers (Simon, 2016). The opinions and viewpoints of customers influence their decisions to purchase (Simon, 2016). In terms of the impact of eWOM on sales of products, researchers prefer numeric ratings generated by users (Smith et al., 2012). Recently, text mining techniques have been developed to dig deeper into qualitative, textual and verbal information from online reviews. These have added to a shared understating of the effects of WOM on sales (Schulz et al., 2012).

The length of the review was also found to positively influence consumers (Zhou & Duan, 2015). The personal expertise of the customer did not add to the credibility of the review according to Zhou and Duan (2015). Moore and McFerran (2011) observed in the light of empirical data that an important role is played by eWOM in the decision-making process of consumers. Consequently, the opinions of consumers represent a significant element to be taken into consideration with respect to eWOM. Despite the fact that conceptual models of Zhou and Duan (2015) and McFerran (2011) highlighted only three out of five elements included, source, quality of content, reliability of source, types of content, information credulity, social ties between content generator and content receiver, their study is nevertheless related to this research as these elements represent the credibility of eWOM amongst consumers. Increasingly, consumers these days use social media platforms to evaluate information about products before buying the products (Lee & Wu, 2015). However, Kim et al. (2012) argued that a high volume of reviews does not necessarily mean that other consumers will buy the product or perceive the information to be credible; this view is also of importance to marketers. Moreover, Li et al. (2017) argued that UGC is increasing with the passage of time; therefore, there is a need to focus on the quality and credibility of content. He and Bond (2015) observed that if the credibility of the brand is higher in the eyes of the customers, then it translates into a higher number of sales. Similar results were observed by Yan and Du (2016). Additionally, Hsu et al. (2013) found brand credibility transforms into brand loyalty and this is a cyclical process. The strength of social media can be estimated so that the pictures shared on Instagram by for example Nike or by its consumers can be regarded as more powerful than brand advertisements (Young, 2011). This review of the research underlines the importance of UGC for marketers. Still, as we shall see below, there are some important challenges to be considered.

### **2.6.1 Information quality and credibility**

The relationship between the buying intentions of the consumer and the usefulness and credibility of the information (Tamoah and Acquaye, 2019) they receive has been studied by Chiang and Jang (2007) and they stated that information credibility is directly linked with information quality, quantitative, source of information and trust between information provider and receiver. Moreover, Xia and Bechwati (2008) also found a positive relationship between the buying intentions of the consumer and the usefulness of information (Liu & Zhang, 2010). Information adoption on the other hand represents the usage of information by the consumer in actually purchasing the product (Cheung et al., 2009). Consumers who actively engage in eWOM and adopt it are likely to exercise their buying intentions. However, marketers should understand that different platforms result in different information adoption processes (Cheung et al., 2009; Fang, 2014). Furthermore, Owusu et al. (2016) observed that although online purchasing decisions are affected by UGC, and Yamoah, et al., (2015) indicated that its effectiveness on consumers correlates with how credible the considered information is.

Reviews posted online act like a “sales assistant” in that they inform customers about the pros and cons of different products and services. Such reviews can be utilised for forecasting sales (Chen & Xie, 2008; Chern et al., 2015; Moon et al., 2014). Moreover, Chevalier and Mayzlin (2006) noted that online consumer reviews should be credible to be influential. Their credibility may be questioned, however, as some websites offer remuneration for reviews. Roberts (2015) discussed the steps taken by Amazon in terms of legal action taken against those who posted feedback for money on the website. There are certain features which relate to the credibility of UGC. These include the comprehensiveness, length, quality of argument, valence, style of review and relevance of content (Li & Zhan, 2011; Cheng & Ho, 2015; Filieri, 2015; Liang et al., 2014; Schindler & Bickart, 2012). As we have seen, however, it is crucial that UGC is the work of an unpaid amateur; this is what makes it credible, but at the same time might have a negative impact on quality, which is not much discussed in the literature.

There are six elements which underpin information quality. These are understandability, relevance, adequacy, reliability, usefulness and scope (Lee & Choeh, 2018). Moreover, Lee and Choeh (2018) also identified four elements relevant

to the standard of the system. These are that the delivery system should be usable, hyperlinked, entertaining and interactive. Moreover, Negash et al. (2003) found that the effectiveness and quality of web-based customer support systems were dependent primarily on information quality. They believed that information quality comprises timeliness, accuracy of information, entertainment value and upgrading. System quality represents access and interactivity. Additionally, Ayeh et al. (2013) observed that credibility is fast becoming a relevant factor with the increased amount of UGC on social media. Furthermore, Chen et al. (2011) observed that the credibility of information is of high importance with respect to UGC. Credibility is associated with other aspects such as the standard and the effect of information, that is, high-quality information positively influences purchasing intentions. From this review, we see there is a developed body of research.

Traditional studies of shopping can also provide insights relevant to non-traditional online environments. Here too the credibility of information emerges as an important factor in terms of influencing consumption patterns (Wathen & Burkell, 2002). Therefore, the credibility of customer reviews is an important factor in the buying decisions of customers, with King et al. (2014) claiming that customers trust their peers' and friends' reviews on social media to a greater extent than other sources. Moreover, Sussman and Siegal (2003) proposed that the adoption of information and information usefulness represent the perception of consumers that the information they found helps them to evaluate products or services (Cheung et al., 2008). Existing research thus shows that the buying decisions of people are influenced by views shared by their friends, but close friends have more influence (Liu et al., 2011; Shao, 2009). This is called referent power and describes a situation in which people like to identify with popular views held by their friends (Williams et al., 2010). It is supplemented by reward power whereby people believe that by sharing popular views they are rewarding each other (Yamoah, et al., 2014). Further, coercive power also underpins this idea in the sense that people believe they are rendered socially isolated if they go against the popular view (Barreda & Bilgihan, 2013). All this points to a complex relationship between information quality and credibility, where the information that is most socially influential may not always be the information that is accurate. Brands could be liked or disliked not on the quality of their product or service, but on account of extraneous social concerns (Yamoah, et al., 2014).

In summary, existing research highlights the positive relationship between the buying intentions of consumers and the credibility of the information they find on a brand's own website and/or product review platforms. Furthermore, the reliability of reviews is a major concern of customers because the reliability of SMUs is situational (Hsu & Tsou, 2011; Dou et al., 2012; Park et al., 2007; Prendergast et al., 2010). Due to the widespread use of the internet, anyone can create eWOM. Consequently, questions have also been raised about the credibility and quality of information for consumers (Yoo et al., 2015; Reichelt et al., 2014). The quality of information implies the strength and truthfulness of the message embodied in the information (Yeap et al., 2014; Filieri & McLeay, 2014). Moreover, Park et al. (2007) observed that the buying intention of the consumer is influenced by the reviews found on online shopping platforms and social media. However, since eWOM taking place on social media is less anonymous compared with eWOM on websites, the information is likely to be seen as more credible. Whether it is also of better quality is unclear.

### **2.6.2 Tie strength**

Tie strength is an important theme in research on social networking and WOM propagation (Brown & Reingen, 1987). Tie strength represents the intensity of the bond between members of a particular network or community (Mittal et al., 2008). Granovetter (1973) stated that social ties can either be strong or weak. Strong ties are those taking place between a person and her or his family or friends, as these are a person's close relationships. A person draws substantial emotional support from these relationships (Pigg & Crank, 2004; Dey, et al., 2019). Weak ties exist between a person and his or her other social relationships (e.g. workplace colleagues or acquaintances with whom he or she interacts) (Pigg & Crank, 2004; Yahaya, et al., 2015). Additionally, Brown and Reingen (1987) found that weak ties provide bridging at macro level for information provision, whereas strong ties provide bridging at micro level for reference.

Apart from the venues of traditional marketing, the factor which most influences people are that of friendship. This influences the decisions of people through the power of social media especially (Zeng et al., 2016). Nearly 60% of consumers noted that their buying decisions were influenced by friends' posts on social media (Diffley et al., 2018). However, it is important to distinguish between active friends and close friends. Close friends enjoy influential power with respect to each other, and they also interact

with each other more frequently than with active friends (Nikfarjam, et al., 2015). Further, close friends have reciprocal relationships with each other (Malthouse et al., 2016; Ni, 2019; Bapna, & Umyarov, 2015). They are likely to share their feelings and experiences more closely, more openly and more frequently with each other (Merrilees, 2016). Close friends are also likely to share promotional messages with each other. The intensity of relationships is higher and better in close friendships and that is why people attach importance to information passed on by close friends (Kamboj & Sarmah, 2018; Oestreicher-Singer et al., 2015). Thus, research shows that those who are close friends have a profound impact on the buying behaviour of consumers (Liu et al., 2017).

The primary reason for this difference of impact is the difference of intimacy between close and active friends. Close friends communicate frequently, have a long history of relationship, have intense attachment and often share their views as compared to active friends who only meet on an occasional basis (Arora, et al., 2020; Choi et al., 2017; Singh, & Soniya. 2018; Park et al., 2018). However, Park et al. (2018) indicated that celebrity-generated content is followed by fans in a similar though not identical way. There is therefore a need to understand in more detail these differences: how different kinds of UGC impact different customers. Existing studies have shown there is a higher willingness among consumers for sharing and forwarding those messages that originated from their friends than messages which came from commercial sources (Chiu et al., 2007). However, more work is required, particularly in terms of how tie strength relates to celebrity endorsements and endorsements of other influencers/opinion formers.

Furthermore, the debate regarding the impact of less anonymity on social media also has interesting implications from a tie strength perspective. Some researchers believe that anonymity enables a person to say what they genuinely want to say without the fear of attracting criticism; nevertheless, the reader may not perceive the anonymous review to be entirely genuine due to the hidden identity of the writer (Goldsmith & Horowitz, 2006). Anonymity is also considered to be a significant element in securing more eWOM over the internet (Byrum, 2019). The same is not the case with social media platforms, as people tend to believe those whose identities are visible on social media (Gillin, 2007; Chu & Choi, 2011; Wallace et al., 2009). A number of researchers



also found that eWOM is more influential on the buying decision of a consumer if it comes from friends and family, but the major source of eWOM is from unknown people on social media (Park et al., 2007; Moran & Muzellec, 2014; Chu & Choi, 2011). However, no universal conclusions have yet been drawn from this as it relates to tie strength (Park et al., 2007; Moran & Muzellec, 2014; Chu & Choi, 2011). Nevertheless, eWOM has been found to be influential on consumers even if it comes from those who are not friends and/or family of the consumer (Elwalda et al., 2016; Alhidari et al., 2015). Given this gap in the literature, there is a need to understand why and how different sources of eWOM affect customers' behaviour differently from the perspective of different kinds of tie strength.

### 2.6.3 Homophily

SNS homophily is another concept which needs further investigation in research regarding eWOM. Homophily is the phenomenon of the extent to which individuals with similar attributes interact with each other and accept each other's point of view (Rogers & Bhowmik, 1970). Extant research studies show that friends' and family's socio-demographic attributes tend to be similar to one's own socio-demographic attributes, including attitudes and beliefs (Gilly et al., 1998; Festinger, 1957). People tend to socialise with those who have similar characteristics; this is known as social homophily (Mouw, 2006). Two individuals who share similar attributes are also likely to engage in interpersonal communications (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1954). Resultantly, such individuals share more information, more often, and tend to believe the authenticity of the information they share with each other (Rogers & Bhowmik, 1970; Rogers, 1995; Howard et al., 2016). The reason behind this is that similar attributes contribute to an ease of communication, therefore, homophily can facilitate information exchange in consumers' external searches (Price & Feick, 1984). Therefore, those consumers who have a high level of perceived homophily contribute more influential eWOM (Geissinger et al., 2018).

Research shows positive responses from consumers can be generated by brand-oriented UGC (Ryan, 2014). It is clear from the literature that celebrities and close friends are very important in getting brand-related UGC recognised among consumers on social media (Göbel et al., 2017). Thanks to their physical attractiveness, celebrities might even be more compelling than close friends (Kowalczyk et al., 2016). Yet it is

still debatable whether one is better than the other in promoting different kinds of products (Dhar & Wertenbroch, 2013). The effectiveness of both these UGC sources with respect to utilitarian products can be evaluated on the basis of motives inferred by the consumer underlying the brand-oriented UGC. As per attribution theory, when consumers are exposed to a persuasive message, they want to look into why that message is being delivered to them (Eagly & Chaiken, 1975). Similarly, consumers on social media when exposed to a persuasive message are keen to find the reason they are exposed to that message. They are also interested in identifying the motive of the source sending the message (Lu et al., 2014). There are usually two motives behind the promotion of a consumer-centric message: monetary gain and information sharing (Hennig et al., 2004); the same can be said about UGC on social media. The motive of information sharing suggests that the sharer is interested in spreading the information to other users and consumers to inform them about the usefulness of a product or service (Lee, 2017). The motive of monetary gain suggests that the sharer is interested in spreading information to gain financial compensation for spreading that message (Hennig et al., 2004). Therefore, there is also a need to understand the motivations of a person sharing UGC on social media and how the UGC influences other SMUs.

Despite the diverse range of information available on the internet, consumers are able to choose the subjects on which they want to receive information and the groups they wish to be a member of in virtual communities (Best & Krueger, 2006). Wang et al. (2008) investigated whether different mechanisms of evaluation are utilised by users when they discover information about health on a website, as opposed to on a discussion forum online. They found that the factor which plays the most prominent role in determination of credibility of information and influences the others positively is homophily. In the context of SNS, similar demographic attributes such as education, age, race and gender are extremely influential elements (Solman, 2007). Research clearly shows recommendations given by other consumers strongly influence the buying behaviour of consumers as compared to recommendations from commercial sources. This is even more the case where there is a strong degree of homophily (Dhar & Chang, 2009; Cheong & Morrison, 2008; Riegner, 2007).

#### 2.6.4 Trust

Another important construct in social networking is trust among social media friends or users. This represents a person's willingness to place reliance on the information forwarded to them by someone in whom they have confidence (Moorman et al., 1993). Numerous studies have highlighted the important role played by trust in the exchange of information and integration of knowledge as it enables individuals to justify and evaluate their decision(s) to provide or obtain information useful for them (Pigg & Crank, 2004).

Attribution theory is an important tool in understanding how message receivers attempt to discern the motives and trustworthiness of content creators (Kelley, 1983). In online environments, trust is regarded as an essential feature underpinning the successful sharing of information among community members (Jarvenpaa et al., 1998; Ridings et al., 2002). Interestingly, Mangold and Faulds (2009) observed that social media is perceived by consumers as an information source which is reliable, particularly with regard to brands, because they receive information on social media from other real-life members. Due to typically high levels of trust among close friends, consumers are likely to perceive UGC from them as being driven by a desire to share information. Research indicates UGC from celebrities, meanwhile, is more likely to be viewed as concerned with monetary gain (Chern et al., 2015; Albert et al., 2017). This is because celebrities are known for undertaking paid promotion projects (Tang, 2017). Thus, consumers are more likely to view celebrity endorsements and messages as paid promotions instead of experiential and trustworthy information (Chern et al., 2015; Albert et al., 2017). Moreover, outside the specific context of social media, Stafford et al. (2002) also observed a general trend for consumers to find the opinions of other consumers more reliable and trustworthy than those of celebrities (Luo et al., 2010).

Communications have traditionally come to consumers from retailers or manufacturers who want to portray their offerings in a positive manner (Kozinets et al., 2010). Consumers have nevertheless increasingly grown sceptical of conventional advertising (Ring et al., 2016). Consequently, customer information emanating from friends and family on social media has become highly valuable and trusted. eWOM recommendations have been found to be considered especially trustworthy (Hu et al., 2011). Some studies even noted that buyers will sometimes focus more on customer

reviews of products than professional reviews (Charlesworth, 2014). The concept – found in psychology – of social proof is useful here, in that people note and copy the actions of others based on the assumption that they possess more knowledge about the situation (Brown et al., 2007).

The effect of UGC can be divided into three parts: valence, volume and dispersion. Volume concerns the effect UGC has on readers due to the number of times a post has been shared (Dellarocas et al., 2007). Valence represents the positive likelihood and negative probabilities that emerge as a result of UGC. Dispersion represents the sharing of information across the web on the basis of UGC, in terms of the probability and long-term effect of UGC (i.e. whether or not it will be shared often by other users online). The most common approach taken by researchers has been to focus on the valence and volume effects of UGC despite the fact that the dispersion effect is of equal significance, particularly as it relates to trust.

Opinion formers are always interested in discussing their experience about products and services with others (Myers & Robertson, 1972). Opinion formers are involved in a form of social leadership and are socially active, which empowers them to influence others instead of being influenced by others (Hamzehei et al., 2019). However, even though opinion leadership is about interest, knowledge and discussion, it does not significantly depend on innovative behaviour or social leadership (Li et al., 2016). Any person can assume the role of an opinion maker (Litvin et al., 2008). However, WOM has a relatively small influence on people's buying decisions compared with the influence of eWOM. The reason behind the greater impact of eWOM on people rather than that of traditional WOM is due to eWOM's unique features (Peng et al., 2018). A study conducted by Henderson and Lyons (2005) indicated that eWOM opinion leaders have unique characteristics not possessed by non-leaders. There is a high level of enduring involvement found among eWOM opinion leaders as they possess exploratory behaviour, innovativeness and self-perceived knowledge as compared with non-leaders (Kim & Lee, 2017). Further, they also possess exceptional computer skills and have used the internet for longer durations as compared with non-leaders (Kim & Lee, 2017). What determines their influence more than anything, however, is the extent to which their followers view them as trustworthy.

A situation might arise in which the ratings of products are positive, but feedback is negative. In such an instance, the viewer comes across both positive and negative UGC of the product (Schlosser, 2011). However, viewers are more likely to rely on comments than on ratings as they know ratings can be easily manipulated. As Park and Park (2013) observed, biased evaluations of products are likely to take place in instances involving heterogeneous products as compared to homogeneous products. Furthermore, Lin and Xu (2017) applied social distance theory in the context of UGC and eWOM and observed that there is a cross-cultural impact of trust. Furthermore, Kim et al. (2012) found the relationship between the quality of UGC and the value of UGC determines which particular type of UGC influences the adoption of UGC by other consumers. Kim et al. (2012) observed that elements that characterise UGC are firmly related to the emotional, operational and social values of UGC. Their findings also showed that the emotional and functional values of UGC are crucially significant elements for the adoption of UGC.

#### **2.6.5 Interpersonal influence**

Existing research shows that interpersonal influence is positively related with the buying intentions of the consumer as a result of eWOM (Chiou et al., 2014). Interpersonal influence is a social element that plays a significant role in influencing consumer decision making (Chahal & Rani, 2017). Further, interpersonal influence is also positively related with the adoption of technology by an individual (Liu et al., 2019). Relevant literature has identified two dimensions of interpersonal influence: informational influence and normative influence (Pancer et al., 2017). Normative influence represents the tendency to conform to others' expectations, norms and values (Burnkrant & Cousineau, 1975). Informational influence on the other hand, represents the tendency to accept information from other knowledgeable people and to accept their guidance about products or service selection (Deutsch & Gerard, 1995; Bearden et al., 1989).

Therefore, the susceptibility of an individual to interpersonal influence is another element which is very significant to the discussion regarding the effectiveness of eWOM on SNSs (Shriver et al., 2013). The eWOM behaviour of users on SNSs is driven by both informational and normative influences (Yang et al., 2016). Individuals under informational influences possess a higher need to acquire information and

guidance than those who possess superior knowledge and experience while searching for products or services (Aiello et al., 2017). Consumers under normative influence, by contrast, are the ones seeking social approval from others by entertaining an experiential view about products or services (Goh et al., 2013). As a result, they are likely to seek the opinion(s) of those who are in their social networks. This demonstrates the social and interpersonal influence of much eWOM (Zeng & Wei, 2013). People on SNSs regard their social contacts as an important source of information on a product or service (Susarla et al., 2012). The engagement of consumers in eWOM is therefore governed by their susceptibility to both informational and normative influences (Narangajavana et al., 2009).

## **2.7 THE ROLE OF SYSTEM DESIGN OF SOCIAL MEDIA NETWORKS**

System design can be defined as the interface interactivity and compatibility of a system for creating interactions with users. Considering the context of UGC and social media (Ning, & Khalifa, 2012; Tariq, et al., 2014), it can be argued that the system design of social media is all about compatibility and the interactivity of the system (social media) with social media users (Sun, & Hsu, 2012; Nah, et al., 2019). Therefore, this section discusses the system design and the state of social media in the context of UGC creation and consumption through social interactions amongst social media users. In order to create collaborative UGC (user generated content), it is important to attract contributors in sufficient numbers (Yang, & Yecies, 2016). If contributors increase in number, then energy and effort dedicated to generating content also increases and, in turn this provides a wider range of abilities and knowledge for content generation. This can produce a highly valuable collaborative UGC platform (Kim, & Song, 2018; Foutz and Jank 2010, Zhang, et al., 2019). The large numbers of participation of SMUs is also based on the features of the social media networks (Reyes et al., 2020).

Consistent with saying “too many cooks spoil the stew”, when contributors exceed in number, they will negatively influence UGC by reducing its value. Simply speaking, when contributors grow in number, marginal value associated with additional contributors tends to decrease whereas coordination and cognitive costs of new contributions increases (Jalali, & Papatla, 2016). The participants who contribute to co-creation of UGC are more likely to encounter information overload because they

always try to respond to and make a sense of others' contribution (Baur, & Baur, 2017). From consumer perspective, information overload due to increasingly asked questions by consumers not only slows down the processing speed but also reduces the choice quality and likelihood of making a final decision (Osei, et al., 2016). Information overload in computer-mediated settings can negatively influence ability of group to effectively organise the information (Hiltz and Turoff 1985; Valcke, & Lenaerts, 2010). Similarly, increasing amount of information, within collaborative online settings, reduces participation, lowers contributor effort, decreases the probability that longer contributions (particularly that are potentially highly valuable) are read (Rajamma, et al., 2019), and shortens the contributions since participants try to lessen their relative cognitive load (Zeng, & Wei, 2013). There are number of contributors on social media channels that are increasing in number day by day and thus can attract large number of users within short time period (Kane, 2011).

Based on this rationale it is suggested that curvilinear relationship exists between content value and number of contributors. The generated UGC is most valuable when large numbers of participants are attracted for sustained production, but not much as it results in information overload particularly for contributors (Kundururu, 2018). There is considerable amount of literature that empirically support this type of curvilinear relationship of number of participants with outcomes in collaborate groups on social media (Oh and Jeon 2007). We can also observe similar relationships in typical organisational settings. Moderate-sized organisations, for example, have greater ability to get the most out of new markets as compare to large and small sized organisations, as small firms have inadequate resources for innovation whereas large firms becoming too rigid and bureaucratic (Haveman 1993). New members within work groups introduce highly diverse perspectives and extra coordination cost that makes it hard for entire group to reach at consensus (Oestreicher-Singer et al., 2017). Software development team, for example, needs resources in sufficient amount so that they can achieve their targets, however, addition of more members in a delayed or troubled project can further compound the delays (Brooks 1975) by enhancing coordination costs due to new members (Espinosa et al. 2007).

### **2.7.1 Network Embeddedness**

One of the most important resources for collaborative UGC is the knowledge and energy that contributors provide through direct participation. Previous research,

however, highlights the importance of the role of “social capital” in “intellectual capital” development (Gu et al. 2008). Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) defined social capital as “the sum of the actual and potential resources embedded within, available through, and derived from the network of relationships possessed by an individual or social unit” (Nahapiet and Ghoshal 1998, p. 243). According to marketing researchers, social capital plays an important role in the development of effectual governance relationships (Gu et al. 2008) and the generation of customer solutions (Nandzik, et al., 2015; Liu, et al., 2019). In the case of production, social capital is usually referred to as “network embeddedness” – the connection level of a project or a person with other projects or people within the network (Grewal, et al., 2019). However, network embeddedness in the case of collaborative UGC is referred to as the connection level of a particular aspect of content as it relates to other content via content creating networks. According to Liu, et al., (2019) the collaboration of UGC on social media is dependent on major factors, which include social media user contexts, and the technological context of social media. Therefore, according to Liu, et al., (2017) the interactivity of different social media networks and features of different networks can create different opportunities for social media users to create collaboration amongst firms and other users.

Interactions, flows, relations, and proximities are different network ties that may leave mediating impact on social capital (Sparviero et al., 2019). Social capital can be best exemplified with case wherein collaborators work on a certain project and create a collaborative UGC as it enables the users to easily access available network resources both through indirect and direct interactions with others in that network (Bolton, et al., 2013). Moreover, a participant may have exposure to valuable network resources (e.g. relevant references or content, how to effectively manage the conflicts within collaborative settings and effectual presentation styles – even when the participant is not familiar with the individual from whom the contributor obtained this knowledge (Watkins, & Lewis, 2014). Moreover, contributors also learn other contributors` reputation as ineffective or effective collaborators either by simply monitoring their contributions or through working on some other combined projects, without directly interacting with other contributors (Jönson, & Jönsson, 2015).

If collaborative UGC is strongly embedded in contributor-content network, the contributors would have more access to resources and knowledge exchanged and



combined in other collaborative projects (Lin 1982). Though knowledge and information are primary resources of collaborative UGC, however, social capital tends to increase these resources in terms of their value by providing opportunities for exchange and combination of knowledge that already exists (Nandzik et al., 2013). The knowledge that contributors acquire while working on different projects can be transferred, exchanged and combined with knowledge that is contributed by other within network (Ghose, & Han, 2011). If these contributors have strong connection with others in collaborative settings, they will have better access to available resources and information within network. Resultantly, sources of UGC will be much improved to which these contributors actually contribute. By having access to available knowledge and information sources within network enables the contributors to transfer the knowledge which they acquire while working on some other UGC sources in combination with their personal experiences, thus create new knowledge (Ricard, et al., 2018). Such ability of transforming existing knowledge and information to create new one increases the overall value of both contributors and also that of acquired information and knowledge. Likewise, better task performance is based on experience and knowledge (Hassanpour, et al., 2019), of social media user Takehara, et al., (2017) higher social capital enables the contributors to efficiently identify valuable information and then transform it into some useful formats (Cohan, et al., 2017), transfer relationships amongst content items to make them more informative (Amato, et al., 2018), and provide more inclusive information (Díaz-Faes et al., 2019). Therefore, as part of our discussion the collaboration of social media networks based on the social capital of the social media user and the capacity of indirection and collaboration of social media networks.

Aforementioned ideas are in line with latest social capital approaches that include associations with shared creations like relationships amongst software development team members through collaborative projects (Mossberger, et al., 2013). Moreover, Oh et al, (2004) observed a positive association of network embeddedness with production value and workgroup performance (Hao, et al., 2016). Network embeddedness is equally important both in offline (Uzzi 1997) and online (Jiang, 2019) settings. In addition to allowing access to available knowledge and information resources in other collaborative UGC sources, network technological embeddedness

also enables the contributors to apply these resources and enhance the content value to which the contributors contribute in context of brand related UGC.

## 2.8 THE ROLE OF UGC IN BRAND ENGAGEMENT

It was in the 1960s that the concept of brand engagement started to emerge in marketing literature as part of investigations into consumers' purchasing behaviours (O'Casey, 2004; Evrard & Aurier, 1996; Martin, 1998). Over the past 15 years, the concept of brand engagement or CBE has become a staple of brand strategy discussions (Graffigna & Gambetti, 2015). Brand engagement has become recognised as a dynamic, multifaceted, unpredictable and mutable phenomenon (Gambetti & Graffigna, 2010; Graffigna & Gambetti, 2015). Table 2-1 highlights some of the different characteristics of brand engagement found in the literature.

*Table 2-1 Different characteristics of brand engagement*

C	Brand engagement definition
Keller (2001)	Brand engagement is recognised as a social component generating positive relationships between consumers and brands.
Brodie et al. (2011)	Consumer brand engagement is a motivational condition derived from co-creative and interactive positive experiences between individuals and brands.
Hollebeek (2011a)	Customer brand engagement is explained as context-dependent. Individuals' motivational and brand-related state of mind is caused by brand interactions based on a certain level of emotional, cognitive, and behavioural connections.
Hollebeek (2011b)	Customer brand engagement represents a certain level of emotional, cognitive and behavioural investments and interests in particular brands.
Roberts and Alpert (2010)	Consumer brand engagement is sometimes considered the highest form of loyalty or emotional attachment between individuals and brands.
Libai (2011)	Consumer brand engagement includes all types of behaviour that strengthen the relationship between consumer and brands.
Gambetti et al. (2012)	Brand engagement is recognised as a composite of social and experimental dimensions in brand-related interactions.

Goldsmith (2012)	Brand engagement is explained in terms of the emotional ties that link brands and consumers.
Allen et al. (2008); Goldsmith (2012)	Brand engagement is an outcome of cognitive and emotional states induced by brands. These emotional and cognitive states may in turn be generated by brand-oriented UGC.
Hollebeek et al. (2014, p., 152)	Brand engagement is defined as “a consumer’s positively valenced cognitive, emotional and behavioural brand-related activity during, or related to, specific consumer/brand interactions”.
Gambetti et al. (2015)	Consumer-brand engagement is a brand effort to get closer with consumers, building strong relationships with them while gaining an attention and preference for specific brands.

Most of these definitions centre on the idea that brand engagement is the cognitive, physical and emotional relationship between a consumer and an organisation/brand (Patterson et al., 2006). Similarly, Vivek et al. (2012) noted that the interaction between a consumer and the offers of the organisation constitute brand engagement. Brand engagement, moreover, should not be confused with consumer engagement. Consumer engagement relates to the interactive relationship between the focal object, consumers, and the accrued perceived value from the interaction (Mollen & Wilson, 2010; Brodie et al., 2013).

In terms of UGC, brand engagement can take place through social interactions rather than interaction between organisations and consumers (Harrigan et al., 2017; Chahal & Rani, 2017; Liu et al., 2019; Pancer et al., 2017; Yang et al., 2016). Moreover, Hollebeek (2011) argued that interaction needs to be considered the step before brand engagement, in that it provides the foundation for brand engagement. In effect, interaction is the starting point for brand engagement. Therefore, this research explores brand engagement beyond the limitation of buying products and services, as it relates to the influence of UGC.

Research also suggests recent technological advances in social networking in the form of social media CBE take place through SNSs where further SMUs engage in UGC (Scholz et al., 2018). The involvement of consumers has been regarded as the level of interest among individuals and their personal relevance regarding a focal object/decision in terms of one’s goals, values and self-concept (Mittal, 1995;

Hollebeek, 2011; Zaichkowsky, 1985). Therefore, involvement is composed of intrapersonal processes and their relationship with the products of the brand (Mittal, 1995; Hollebeek, 2011; Zaichkowsky, 1985). It can be asserted that consumer involvement represents the interest of the individual and his/her personal relevance to a particular object rooted in that person's basic values, goals and self-concept in regard to other SMUs (Simon & Tossan, 2018). It has been shown in this literature review that customer involvement with created UGC is also based on different factors such as personal interest, social ties with creators, credibility of information and homophily between content creators and SMUs (Carlson et al., 2019; Casagrande et al., 2019; Schivinski et al., 2016; Schultz, 2017).

Just as in the case of consumer involvement, different disciplines have also shed light on consumer engagement (Saks, 2006; Salanova et al., 2005; Harter et al., 2002; Kahn, 1990). Marketing research, for instance, is increasingly focusing on the concept of consumer engagement (Bowden, 2009). This concept is being put forward as of paramount significance to consumer involvement (Brodie et al., 2013; Hollebeek, 2011). Both concepts share an important characteristic – intrapersonal processes – whereby consumers interact with a product due to their unique behaviour patterns and desire to fulfil a personal objective (Spratt et al., 2009; Patterson et al., 2006). Both these concepts have also been observed to drive consumer loyalty, commitment, trust and consumer satisfaction (Brodie et al., 2013; Yamoah, 2014). Hollebeek (2011), moreover, observed that engagement and involvement are paramount sources of relationship quality which together are a prerequisite for customer loyalty. These types of research nevertheless ignore the social engagement of SMUs on social media that would lead socially engaged SMUs to connect with brand consumers.

Since social media and, with it, the sharing of information have become widespread, they provide the context for reviewing ideas of consumer engagement because consumers increasingly utilise social media platforms to share information with each other about brands (Lee & Choeh, 2018). Social media represents a platform whereby people socialise in virtual environments and tend to discuss what is important to them, which may also include their experience with different brands (Feng & Liu, 2018). Therefore, internet users who participate in social media are regarded as engaged socially. As McShane et al. (2019) observed, social engagement represents a

response to social stimuli which results in interactive participation among individuals. The basic feature of this type of engagement is associated with interconnectedness and the personal relevance to a person (Bambauer-Sachse & Mangold, 2011). Individuals who interact on social media are also interconnected with one another as they discuss their personal interests and social ties with other users online (Hollebeek, 2011). It may also be stated that users who interact with each other not only do so for personal reasons but also because of their self-concept, goals, trust, homophily and values (Van Doorn et al., 2010). Therefore, the different online activities of a person such as web-posting, blogging and writing should be regarded as an individual's manifestation of engagement that would further impact other SMUs towards UGC (Jin & Phua, 2016; Ho-Dac et al., 2013; Pan & Zhang, 2011; Wilson et al., 2017).

In a digital context, Mollen and Wilson (2010) highlighted brand engagement as the commitment of users to brands in a virtual environment, such as social media, whereby they play an active role with respect to the brand in communicating its value (Bento et al., 2018). Moreover, Brodie et al. (2013) observed that engagement in a virtual environment is based on experiential and interactive processes with respect to particular goods. Their findings also showed that brand engagement may differ and that the level of intensity of engagement, in particular, varies from time to time. This variance in engagement intensity challenges the traditional concept of engagement as being static. Indeed, Liu et al. (2017) indicated that the level of social and brand engagement of SMUs is variably dependent on the relationship and trust found between UGC creators and UGC consumers.

The literature is thus experiencing a switch in thinking. Consumer engagement with respect to brands is now being regarded less as a static phenomenon and more as a dynamic concept involving multiple layers. In this regard, engagement not only seems to be changing but also the engagement source seems to be evolving in a continuous manner (Wiertz & de Ruyter, 2007). The traditional understanding of consumer engagement is also changing due to multiple platforms being available to consumers to express their experience and opinion about brands (Brodie et al., 2013). Modern-day consumers are interconnected on social media, so they are able to share their personal experiences with each other on a first-hand basis (Liu et al., 2018). This then provides a lucrative basis to study social media where people are not only

interconnected but also contribute to the reputation of a brand, thereby influencing other people's perceptions (De Valck et al., 2009). Since this is taking place continuously, it has thus turned this process into a dynamic one (Tuškej & Podnar, 2018). Although consumer engagement has also been studied in other contexts, the dynamic nature of social media and consistent availability of platforms to continue to co-create has turned the role of UGC on social media into a lucrative opportunity for research (Nolan et al., 2007).

The fact that engagement is not static but instead varies from time to time may contribute to customer loyalty. Hollebeek (2011) also pointed out that the relationship between engagement and loyalty is curvilinear. On this basis, four different individual archetypes of brand engagement may be identified: apathists, activists, exits and variety seekers (Lin et al., 2018). Apathists have a high level of brand loyalty but a low level of brand engagement; activists have a high level of engagement and a high level of loyalty; exits have a low level of brand engagement and a low level of loyalty and therefore tend to exit the brand; variety seekers have high brand engagement but they have low brand loyalty because they always want something new (Hollebeek, 2011). This indicates that brand engagement is not static but rather a variable multidimensional phenomenon that has emotional, cognitive and behavioural aspects to it (Hollebeek, 2011; Brodie et al., 2013). In this regard, the need for information on the part of an individual represents the initial point of engagement. There are also sub-processes involved in this process such as learning, sharing, socialising, advocating and co-developing (Brodie et al., 2013). Moreover, Algharabat et al. (2019) indicated that social content sharing on SNSs is not under the control of the brand. Therefore, the SMUs can share both positive and negative content on SNSs that would impact differently on different SMUs (Tuškej & Podnar, 2018; Lin et al., 2018). It has also been discussed in the literature review above that the social influence of UGC depends on information quality, credibility, social ties, homophily, trust, social relation, and the interpersonal influence between creator and users. Therefore, brand engagement on social media is not static in nature. Instead, it occurs within a dynamic social influence context (Geissinger & Laurell, 2016; Solem & Pedersen, 2016; Geissinger & Laurell, 2016).

A definition of the type of engagement discussed above is “*a psychological state which takes place due to co-creative and interactive experiences with a focal object or an agent*” (Hollebeek et al., 2014, p., 155). A general framework was provided by Brodie et al. (2011) to elaborate the relationship between engagement and UGC. The pivotal point here is the experience which provides a foundation for brand engagement (Calder & Malthouse, 2016). Moreover, when the individual’s experience with a brand is totally aligned with his or her personal goals and objectives, high engagement takes place (Muntinga et al., 2011; Vivek et al., 2012; Higgins & Scholer, 2009; Hollebeek et al., 2014). It is believed, therefore, that a particular stance in consumer UGC will be highly engaging if the experience generated with the brand aligns with the personal goal of the consumer. Therefore, the focus of this thesis is to explore whether a greater extent of participation in UGC leads to greater brand engagement.

The elaboration likelihood model highlights the reason behind engagement influencing future behaviour (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). People collect information and then act in accordance with it, and their own beliefs and thoughts also guide their way (Pentina et al., 2018; Schivinski et al., 2016). Such processing depends on the ability and motivation of the person to align it with personal goals. The effectiveness of such messages is increased when they are actively processed in this manner as they influence the buying behaviour of the individual (Cacioppo & Petty, 1983). Elaboration plays a central role in the advertising of a product or service. UGC-oriented promotions are able to catch consumer attention due to the elaborative nature of the message given in the advertisement. When UGC appears on social media it highlights the benefits of the brand for other consumers (Sparks et al., 2016; Matzat & Snijders, 2012). Therefore, the aim of the current research is to go beyond the mere demonstration of the effectiveness of UGC promotions. Rather, the research aim is to explore the social influence of UGC on SMUs in relation to SBE. That is, this research aims to explore the social context in which SMUs are influenced by other users’ content. Consequently, there is a need to conceptualise the overall relationship between UGC and CBE on the basis of this literature review.

## **2.9 SENTIMENT OF CUSTOMERS` DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT**

Digital engagement amongst customers is a key dependent variable, which can be conceptualised as the valence or tone (positive or negative) of customer comments in

relation to brand-related pages over social media. This is a response to firm-generated content surrounding specific brand-consumer interaction. In particular, there is a focus on user comments posted on brand-related pages on social media in reaction to posts by organisations. This is consistent with the idea of the efforts of companies to assist with customer-firm interactions (Gill, Sridhar, and Grewal 2017). Comments which are interactive in nature and are neither incentivised by companies nor commercially motivated are also key (Baker, Donthu, and Kumar 2016). Moreover, consumer comments that are under the control of firms (such as buyer testimonial posted by firms) (Colicev et al. 2018), content that is incentivised by companies ((Ayeh, Au, & Law, 2013). Online trust can only be developed when trust, integrity and benevolence are perceived as favourable by the consumer (Hsiao, Chuan-Chuan et al., 2010). Interpersonal trust that develops between trustor and trustees Facebook friends is described as trust over Facebook (Lu, Zhao, & Wang, 2010). Mayer et al., (1995) describe benevolence as the extent to which trustees want to help out the trustor, albeit the trustee does not necessarily have to be caring even when their actions are not associated with any extrinsic reward. Benevolence on SNS, refers to the belief that individuals providing information are interested in the well-being of his/her friends and want to be caring (See-To & Ho, 2014). Therefore, on Facebook, when trustors expect their friends to help or support them, they are more likely to trust their friends. The extent to which there is a perception that trustees adhere to ethical principles and morals is termed integrity (Colquitt, Scott, & LePine, 2007). Integrity, on SNS, refers to the belief that the individual providing the information is honest (Dickinger, 2010). In the context of Facebook, trustors are more likely to trust their Facebook friends if they consider them to be honest and sincere (Hsiao et al., 2010). The domain-specific competencies and skills of trustees that enable them to affect trustors are collectively known as ability (Mayer et al., 1995).

Over last decade, marketing literature has extensively used the concept of user engagement and has defined this term in number of different ways (e.g., Brodie et al. 2011; Hollebeek et al. 2014). Additionally, consumer engagement has received great attention in the growing research on social media. Consumer engagement, as defined by Akin to Barger et al. (2016), is a sum of all measureable interactions consumers undertake over social media while responding to brand-specific content. Following operationalization of customer engagement proposed by Barger et al. (2016), we draw



on our conceptualisation in which we include various consumer actions like reacting, sharing, commenting and liking brand-related content over different social media platforms. We believe that these distinct engagement actions represent various levels of customer effort and commitment. We further argue that the methods driving choices of consumer engagement are also different.

**Like:** Though the most famous engagement action on Facebook is “likes”, but yet they are regarded as lowest possible engagement action. Generally, liking to represent an acknowledgement and attitude towards the provider of content, page, and/or content itself. Liking is a reflexive, virtually effortless and instantaneous action as it involves the users to provide just one click (Swani et al. 2017). Viewer of brand-related content on Facebook would normally read the message of brands and would click “Like button”, if applicable. Like action in such situation would be a sign of support for brand and content of brand. We thus argue that BRC is primary reason behind liking content of brand instead of self-presentation as liking content of a brand symbolizes the receiver-sender connection. Thus, we can say that liking is an engagement action that is driven more by sender-focused motives as compare to receiver-focused ones (Figure 2 for detail). Liking brand content is a simplest gesture that is more supportive for certain brand and conveys relationship of someone with that brand instead of purely self-motives i.e. self-presentation. Liking brand content is also little fitting to someone`s self-interest as it offers less exposure to become visible to others.

**Comments:** Commenting, while comparing with liking, involves additional steps. While commenting, the viewer has to follow the following steps: (1) click on “Comment button”, (2) type a suitable response, and (3) click again in order to finally post his/her response. The viewer on Facebook would normally read original post of brand at first and then read all successive Comments by others on brand`s original post in order to determine average response. As these extra steps require additional comprehension and efforts therefore it is argued that Commenting is highly reflective as compare to liking and thus requires additional cognitive resources (Swani et al. 2017). Contrary to Likes, Commenting builds up two-way communication between receiver and sender where such communications may change or add meaning of brand` original post (Swani and Milne 2017). These kinds of interactions symbolise a deeper receiver-sender connection. In case of Commenting, the consumers are also allowed to write and post their own thoughts about the given topic, indicating their knowledge,

credibility as well as consumer concerns. In addition to someone's association with the brand, engagement via commenting is also driven by self-motives i.e. self-presentation (Figure 2). We can say that commenting is an engagement action that is driven both by receiver-focused and sender-focused motives (Figure 2 for detail). Moreover, commenting on original brand posts establishes relationship between consumer and brand, which is then broadcasted to other people within consumers' network through Facebook News Feed. Commenting is thus believed to be driven not only by consumer-brand relationships but also by self-presentation.

**Share:** Through "Share button", the users are allowed to either share senders' original content or insert personalised message in others' content prior to share on their timelines providing maximum exposure. While sharing content over Facebook, the users are available with two options: (a) simply repost original message, (b) include personalised message. Resembling with "Like", simply sharing the content with no annotation may seem reflexive and passive. Resembling with "Comment", adding on a personalised message may appear more reflective and thus may require additional cognitive resources. On Facebook, only "Share" is an engagement action that allows the consumers to share the content across the users' network with a single click of "Share button", signalling greater visibility of someone's activities to other users as compare to Comment or Like. Based on such high visibility and greater exposure of content shared, it is argued that instead of brand-serving, self-serving is primary motivation behind content sharing (Berger 2014). There is increasing trend amongst users to share such content that appears to elevate someone's self-presentation and desired identities in others' eyes (Berger 2014; Labrecque et al. 2011). Thus, sharing is an engagement action that is driven more by receiver-focused motives as compare to sender-focused ones. Sharing is believed to be primarily driven by self-presentation instead of brand relationships because it is all about self instead of brand.

## **2.10 CONCEPTUALISATION OF THE SOCIAL INFLUENCE OF UGC AND BRAND ENGAGEMENT**

Previous studies have been critically reviewed to find the gaps in knowledge that this research can help fill (see Appendix 1 for a detailed summary of current literature). The study has given details of prior studies that have attempted to uncover the linkage between UGC and pre-purchase intention, consumer motivation, sales, product information and recommendation, source credibility, consumer choice, consumer

perception, consumers' intention and attitude, consumer response, consumer engagement, perceived customer value, online purchasing, consumers' need, consumer empowerment, WOM, brand purchase intention, brand loyalty and brand equity. This has been necessary to provide a foundation for developing a conceptual framework that can help us understand the social influence of UGC and its impact on brand engagement.

There is still no consensus on a comprehensive definition of consumer engagement because the context of engagement is different in different psychological and social circumstances (Leeflang et al., 2011; Brodie et al., 2011). According to Chan et al. (2014), there are three distinctive perspectives regarding the definition of consumer engagement. First, some consider consumer engagement to be the manifestation of a consumer's behaviour towards the offering of a company, whether that is in terms of helping others, sharing information or WOM activities (Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014; van Doorn et al., 2010; Kumar & Pansari, 2016; Habibi et al., 2014). According to the second definition, consumer engagement is a psychological process that elaborates the core mechanism when repeat or new consumers show their loyalty (Bowden, 2009). In the third definition, consumer engagement implies the psychological state that is a result of an interactive experience with a pivotal company, brand or other customers. This can be identified by three dimensions: behavioural, emotional and cognitive (Hollebeek et al., 2014; Brodie et al., 2011; Patterson et al., 2006; Vivek et al., 2012). Out of these primary perspectives, the most comprehensive view is the conceptualisation of consumer engagement in terms of a psychological state and three dimensions. This has become a widely accepted view recently (Abdul-Ghani et al., 2012; Brodie et al., 2011). However, all of these definitions are based on consumer' psychological behaviour. Coelho et al. (2016) indicated that fashion products engagement on social media is more social rather than psychological. Moreover, Kozinets (2014) indicated that social engagement is different from CBE because although there are many SMUs, they are not customers of a brand; their social engagement with that brand only happens because of their friend's engagement on social media.

For instance, consumer engagement is defined as a *“psychological state that occurs by virtue of interactive, co-creative experiences with a focal agent/object (i.e. a brand)*

*in a focal service relationship*" (Piligrimienė et al., 2015, p. 458). According to Bowden (2009, p. 65), consumer engagement is a principal process that subsequently leads to loyalty, it is a: "*psychological process that models the underlying mechanisms by which consumer loyalty forms for new consumers of a service brand, as well as the mechanisms by which loyalty may be maintained for repeat purchase consumers of a service brand*". However, Cengiz (2017) claimed that the purchasing of fashion brands is a social process rather than a psychological process because fashion in every cultural is a social communication; therefore, the purchasing of fashion is different from the purchasing of other products. Such studies concerning psychological brand engagement are more focused on consumer cost and benefits that would lead towards brand engagement and how consumers behave towards their brand. However, these studies lack understanding of the social aspects of consumer engagement, such as social media, which are likely to generate engagement on social media.

Although considerable attention has been given by researchers to the elements of "engagement" across different disciplines, the concept has also seeped into marketing literature but only relatively recently (Leeflang et al., 2011; Brodie et al., 2011). Engagement is regarded as a promising concept in marketing literature; it is expected to give explanatory and predictive insight into consumers' behavioural outcomes, such as brand loyalty (Pham & Avnet, 2009; Avnet & Higgins, 2006; Schau et al., 2009).

Firstly, different concepts related to engagement have been identified, such as customer engagement (van Doorn et al., 2010; Brodie et al., 2011) and community engagement (Algesheimer et al., 2005). The multiple facets of engagement as a concept represent the nascent developmental stage of the concept in marketing. Nevertheless, in current research, the main focus is on SBE rather than CBE. Therefore, the discussion will focus more on SBE in the context of the social influence of UGC.

Secondly, engagement also represents a state of motivation (van Doorn et al., 2010) which takes place due to the focal interactive experiences of an individual with a particular agent (Hollebeek, 2011). This is recognised as the principal key element in online offerings (Sawhney et al., 2005; Malthouse & Hofacker, 2010; Shankar & Batra, 2009). The key theme of engagement in the literature includes consumers and customers, but other aspects may include brand engagement, organisational

activities, offerings and/or organisations (van Doorn et al., 2010; Patterson et al., 2006). Less attention has been paid to the social engagement of SMUs in respect of their social influence on each other rather than as a result of brands' own activities on social media. Consequently, the concepts of SBE and customer engagement reflect different themes even though there may be some similarities between them. The SBE concept is the one used in this research. It is rooted in the nature of fashion products and SMUs' engagement with brands as a result of the social influence of social media.

Thirdly, research shows that engagement is a multidimensional concept which comprises emotional, cognitive and behavioural dimensions (Hollebeek, 2011a). Calder et al. (2009) identified eight dimensions of 'online engagement', but Mollen and Wilson (2010) reduced these to just three dimensions: experiential value, sustained processing and instrumental value. This research is more related to consumer social behaviour regarding UGC on social media and fashion brand engagement. For this reason, this research will focus only on social media brand engagement which included SBE and CBE, the definition of social media has been specified above in the form of the UGC source pyramid (Figure 2-3).

Fourthly, engagement holds a central position in the nomological arrangement of focal conceptual relationships (Brodie et al., 2011). Engagement is conceptually distinctive from other concepts such as consumer involvement and customer satisfaction, both of which are altogether different from consumer engagement. Customer satisfaction is the overall evaluation by customers of the performance of the product or service to date (Gustaffson et al., 2005; Johnson & Fornell, 1991). Customer satisfaction differs from customer engagement in the sense that it is the result of customer engagement (Brodie et al., 2011). The focus of customer engagement as opposed to satisfaction is on the cognitive, behavioural and emotional dynamics of the consumer during particular brand interactions on social media (Valaei & Nikhashemi, 2017). Therefore, this research will deal with SBE on social media when asking how satisfied and dissatisfied customers intend to generate content on social media and how such content then influences other SMUs' engagement with specific fashion brands. Therefore, this research is an extenuation of customer satisfaction-social intention towards content generation and the impact of UGC on other SMUS. The research

explores both the satisfaction and dissatisfaction of customers' social impact on the SBE of other SMUs.

Fifthly, a number of engagement scales have been identified by different researchers in marketing (Sprott et al., 2009; Calder et al., 2009). The researcher here perceives experience as a distinct concept, as similarly viewed by Lemke et al. (2011). Brakus et al. (2009) referred to this earlier in their research as well as stating that brand experience does not involve a motivational state compared with brand involvement, and, as such, no emotional relationship is involved in brand experience compared with brand involvement (Simon & Tossan, 2018; Carlson et al., 2019). Although social media influences SBE, the effect would be the result of the social context of UGC creators and SMUs (Casagrande et al., 2019; Schivinski et al., 2016; Schultz, 2017). So, this research is exploratory and investigates consumers' social emotional involvement in increasing the social engagement of their friends with a fashion brand. As the major focus of this research is to explore the influence of UGC on brand engagement on social media, there is a need to explore the impact of UGC on brand engagement in a social context rather than a psychological behavioural context. Although many studies have been conducted on social media and consumer engagement, the focus of these studies was on brand interaction on social media with relation to consumer engagement.

Previous literature from a UGC perspective has explored how brand-oriented UGC can increase motivation, interest, purchasing intention, WOM, positive intention and business performance (Daugherty et al., 2008; Dhar & Chang, 2009; Mir & Ur-Rehman, 2013; Ye et al., 2011). There are major two streams of these studies as shown in Appendix 1; the first stream of studies views UGC from different consumers' perspectives while the second stream of study views social media as a digital marketing platform to study social media in the different contexts of customers. From the first stream of studies, Flanagin et al. (2014) and Noone and McGuire (2014) investigated the relation between UGC and pre-purchase intention, others investigated consumer motivation (Daugherty et al., 2008), sales (Dhar & Chang, 2009), product information and recommendation (Cheong & Morrison, 2008), source credibility (Jonas, 2010), consumer choice and perception (Dwyer, 2012), consumers' intention and attitude (Mir & Ur-Rehman, 2013), consumer response (Kim,

2014), consumer engagement (Ashley & Tuten, 2015), perceived customer value (Ozuem et al., 2016), online purchasing (Bahtar & Muda, 2016), consumers' need (Timoshenko & Hauser, 2018), consumer empowerment (Montecchi & Nobbs, 2018), WOM (Ye et al., 2011), brand purchase intention (Flanagin et al., 2014), brand loyalty (Ozuem et al., 2016) and brand equity (Hallgren et al., 2018). Earlier studies also provided several conceptual frameworks based on how UGC influences decision making and product sales (Dhar & Chang, 2009; Tang et al., 2014), what UGC is and what it is not (Christodoulides et al., 2011), how UGC is focused on customer value (Ozuem et al., 2016), how UGC influences consumers' online product purchase intentions (Bahtar & Muda, 2016), UGC based on consumer culture theory (Halliday, 2016), UGC based on identity theory, self-expansion theory, selective attention theory, use and gratification theory (Ashley & Tuten, 2015), and how UGC develops purchase intention, and functional and hedonic brand image (Adetunji et al., 2017).

According to Tsai and Men (2017, p. 3), "*social media communication is not only interactive but also participatory, collaborative, personal, and simultaneously communal, which provides an avenue for firms to engage with customers and build 'meaningful relationships'*". In this way, social media plays a mediating role in consumer–brand relationships in terms of brand engagement. For this purpose, this study has adopted Brodie et al.'s (2013, p. 107) definition of customer engagement, "*a multidimensional concept comprising cognitive, emotional, and/or behavioural dimensions, and plays a central role in the process of relational exchange where other relational concepts are engagement antecedents and/or consequences in iterative engagement processes within the brand community*". However, a firm's consumer–brand relationship practices and customer brand engagement both require some degree of commitment from consumers (Hudson et al., 2016). Brand engagement is a multidimensional construct (including behavioural, social and psychological dimensions) but this research considers the social context of brand engagement on social media. Thus, it is important for organisations to not only capture the strategic objective of brand engagement but also to improve customer relationships, eWOM, brand knowledge and brand usage intentions (Abrantes et al., 2013; Habibi et al., 2014; Hollebeek et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2012).

The role of values in the consumption process is very important and these values play a vital role in social media interactions in the context of fashion brands (Haq et al., 2014). Solomon, and Rabolt (2009, p. 113) defined value as “*a belief about some desirable end-state that transcends specific situations and guides selection of behaviour*”. People tend to wear trendy clothes in order to describe the social status they have and to reveal their professional position. They seek to impress their peers and others (Lawry et al., 2010; Ananda et al., 2019; Carizani & Marques, 2018; Wolny & Mueller, 2013; Park et al., 2018) and to differentiate self-status from other people (Li et al., 2012; Loureiro & de Araujo, 2014). Social values thus relate to what others speak about and how they participate in the various levels of society, communities and groups (Wiedmann et al., 2009). Moreover, social values also have some association with social influence, and this is reflected through interactions between customers in-store, or between customers and salespersons (Zhang et al., 2014). Customer behaviour and perceptions are also influenced by social contexts; in particular, customer behaviour and perceptions of hedonic products are subject to normative and informational influence (Wakefield & Stone, 2004).

Socio-technological changes enable firms to understand how an individual makes sense of themselves, others and the whole world (Veitas & Weinbaum, 2017). Consequently, many firms have incorporated the metrics of social media into their consumer relationship management and marketing communication activities with the aim of efficiently reaching and engaging with customers (Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Malthouse et al., 2013). In this regard, firms should focus on gaining a better understanding of influences on customers’ participation in electronic brand engagement (Baldus et al., 2015); this is because it increases firms’ potential to improve brand performance through eWOM (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Hollebeek et al., 2014). There is a growing trend among firms to engage with their customers through IT (Hajli, 2014). However, the main focus of some previous studies was on determining the impact of UGC on market outcomes from different perspectives (Laroche et al., 2012; Stephen & Galak, 2012; Toubia & Stephen, 2013). Moreover, Osei-Frimpong and McLean (2018) called for research that would enhance understanding about the impact of social media presence on SBE along with the moderating impact of consumer commitment.



There are few studies on SBE. Some empirical examinations of SBE have been carried out in order to test various consumer aspects of SBE (Osei-Frimpong et al., 2018; Altschwager et al., 2018). Research by Altschwager et al. (2018) examined the role of four experiential elements (sensory, behavioural, affective and intellectual experiences) in regard to SBE and the moderating influence of content generated by firms and the commitment of consumers. However, their research did not explore how FGC motivated SMUs to produce more content or how this type of content would influence SMUs, leading to CBE as well as SBE. Given this gap, Kozinets (2014) suggested there is a need to explore SBE in the context of social media. Therefore, this research focuses on the social influence of UGC on fashion brand engagement on social media.

Based on social comparison theory, Loureiro et al. (2017) investigated how individual vanity and social influence affect the passion of consumers for fashion products, and particularly clothes and other accessories. They examined how exhibitionist tendencies play a mediating role with respect to this relationship. They stated that the impact of social influence on consumers' intentions to purchase clothes and other fashion accessories is based on individual vanity amid other variables. Moreover, exhibitionist tendencies play a mediating role in relationships between self-expression WOM and consumers' passion for fashion. However, a limitation of their study is that it only identified the extent to which social influence is important in affecting consumers' social intention (passion) towards fashion. It overlooked how eWOM is created through social influence on social networking platforms. It also overlooked why some are influenced by celebrities whereas others are influenced by close friends. This suggests that social comparison theory is not sufficient to explore the social influence of UGC among SMUs.

By using social presence theory, Osei-Frimpong and McLean (2018) examined firm–consumer SBE in their study. By examining this issue from this particular perspective, they highlighted the role of social media presence as well as the moderating impact of FGC, with a major focus on the role of FGC in creating SBE. Osei-Frimpong and McLean's (2018) research referred to SBE as a modern concept of brand engagement. However, the main focus of Osei-Frimpong and McLean's (2018) study was on examining the effectiveness of exchange of FGC on social media. Osei-

Frimpong and McLean (2018) focused on FGC to create SBE, which aligns with previous studies of using social media for brand engagement. Through continuing the study of Osei-Frimpong and McLean (2018), the present study aims to explore the social impact of UGC on SBE through social media, and the focus of the present study is to explore the role of UGC in creating SBE on social media.

Loureiro et al. (2017) state that social comparison theory is beneficial to evaluate how individual vanity and social influence affect the passion of consumers to buy fashion products. Chae (2017) and Eom et al., (2019) argue that the advent and rise of social media has increased social comparison, as more people want to look attractive and upload their pictures using fashion brands to show their social status and create influence in their networks. However, social comparison also raises the potential for bias, the maintenance of self-esteem, and a desire to look more attractive. Social comparison in fact promotes selfie culture and social status (Chae 2017; Eom et al., 2019). Wearing luxurious fashion brands is an example of people who are involved in social comparison. They only want to look towards up rather than downwards. Jin et al. (2019). Social presence theory can be used to understand how social media has created the ability to interact with others to exchange relevant information. The advent and rise of social media has created greater social presence as people can post comment, upload audio, and high quality video with facial expressions (Jin et al., 2019). However, both social comparison and social presence theories only provide some understanding regarding how people can generate content through social media. These theories do not provide any understanding about how UGC influences others, and which people share UGC in relation to fashion brands to drive purchase decision making.

According to self-determination theory, *“authenticity involves an individual's engagement in intrinsically motivated behaviours—those that emanate from a person's innate desires and passions”* (Audrezet et al., 2018, P. 3). Self-determination theory is more focused on individual motivation and choices towards fashion brand purchases. However, the present study is focused on how people create and exchange UGC which can influence social and consumer fashion brand engagement. Self-determination theory is unable to provide any understanding with respect to why people generate UGC and how people are influenced externally by it. Further, it sheds

no light on which external social sources can influence the purchase behaviour of SMUs. Therefore, the present study utilises social influence theory because it can provide an understanding of how various social motivational causes can engage SMUs in the creation, exchange and use of UGC through social media platforms. Furthermore, social influence theory also provides an understanding of how SMUs are influenced by individual sources and groups. It identified the specific sources that can lead towards social and consumer fashion brand engagement.

Little attention has thus been given to how brand-related UGC can increase levels of brand engagement on social media platforms. There is a gap in understanding UGC as a source of social influence to enhance brand engagement. It is important to uncover how social influence can help generate brand-related UGC as well as improve motivation, interest, purchase intention, WOM and brand engagement. Also, little attention has been paid to uncovering the influence of UGC as a source of social influence for brand engagement, especially in the context of UK fashion clothing brands. Limited research was conducted to explore the influence of UGC using social influence theory. Furthermore, there is no literature available that has utilised a practical epistemological approach to uncover, develop and explain the relationship between UGC, social influence and brand engagement. Finally, there is limited research on UGC, social influence and brand engagement in the context of UK fashion brands.

Valuable information on customer behaviour in relation to fashion brands is relatively limited (Cho & Sung, 2012; Tang, 2017; Tang et al., 2014). Some studies explored the impact of valued information on the motivational effectiveness of brand-owned websites (Huang et al., 2010), brand image creation (Tang & Jang, 2014) or the performance of brand-owned websites (Cho & Sung, 2012). Some studies explicitly explored how perceived information value influences user behaviour to generate brand-related content, particularly in terms of reviewing the interactive websites of hotels. Huang and Benyoucef (2015) argued that the extent to which eWOM sources influence consumer behaviour depends on the level of consumers' perceptions of the value of content published by these sources. Moreover, Filieri and McLeay (2014) identified that consumer perceptions about the value of content in online reviews strongly predict their tendency to book accommodation on the basis of these

information sources. However, the limitations of these studies are twofold. Firstly, they belong to different industries and consumer behaviour differs when buying different products. Secondly, these studies did not explore how social motivation influences consumer UGC, or how UGC socially influences SMUs to share UGC. They did not explore how the social impact of UGC influences SBE for fashion products. Therefore, this study focuses on the social influence of UGC creation and the consumption of social media.

Social influence is a broad concept because it is derived from the work of many thinkers; the concept includes the social communication theory of Paul Lazarsfeld and the diffusion of innovation theory of E.M. Rogers. Initially, social influence theory is presented within social communication theory. Paul Lazarsfeld and his colleagues highlighted the importance of informal communication as a prime factor to influence mass media during the 1940s and 1950s. It is often claimed that Kelman (1985) is the seminal analyst of the issue of normative social influence. Normative social influence is about the influence of norms on individuals. According to Kelman (1995), this can be broken down into three sub-types: identification, internalisation and compliance. Compliance is when individuals accept the opinions of other people because they hope this will result in favourable reactions. It is thus helpful in understanding how SMUs can be influenced by UGC created and liked by others. Identification refers to how individuals maintain desired relationships by accepting the opinions of other people. This helps us understand how some individuals maintain their social influence on others. In the sub-type of internalisation, the influence of norms is strongest when individuals accept the opinions of other people both publicly and privately (Kelman, 1995). Internalisation's social influence element would be helpful in studying the impact of the majority opinion (eWOM) of groups of SMUs on individual SMUs.

Informational social influence occurs when individuals accept advice or information from others whom they may not previously have known as a colleague or a friend. This kind of social influence particularly relates to social media where UGC is the most important form of information that influences individuals socially (Yadav et al., 2017). Common examples of informational social influence may include product return decisions, eWOM, brand trust generated as a result of online brand reviews and brand trust generated by customers about a product that can influence consumers' buying

behaviour (Kwahk & Kim, 2017). Online customer reviews may change the beliefs and attitudes of consumers and thus influence their behaviour engagement with a brand. Such engagement inspires tendencies that go beyond buying and other market-relevant activities (Lee et al., 2017; Xun & Guo, 2017). Consumers in this context thus often serve as brand advocates (Ting et al., 2017). A consumer acts as a subject who becomes engaged with the object via experience and interaction (Varkaris & Neuhofer, 2017). The object can be a brand, service, a product or an entity, such as an organisation. Firms therefore need to understand how their activities and efforts reverberate with consumers (Duan & Dholakia, 2018). Resultantly, consumer–brand relationships have become the main focus of many engagement studies (Kwon et al., 2017).

Based on social influence theory one can explain how people’s interaction with each other can affect their individual actions (Yang et al., 2016). The most indicative and discernible aspect of consumer dedication towards a brand community is behavioural engagement (Liu et al., 2018). According to Geissinger and Laurell (2016), social influence theory can explain the processes from real world to online social networks. The explicit data (UGC) contained by online social networks on edges and nodes enable researchers to conduct extensive analysis (Rossmann et al., 2016). Thus, social influence created by social media has become an interesting topic as it provides great opportunities for underlying study of consumer engagement through UGC found on social media. The concept of consumer engagement in this broad context, moreover, explicitly takes more account of consumers’ interactive brand-related dynamics (Xun & Guo, 2017). According to Brodie et al. (2011, p.,260), the customer engagement concept represents “*a psychological state that occurs by virtue of interactive, co-creative customer experiences with a focal agent/ object (e.g. a brand)*”.

The gap which exists in the literature is therefore going to be addressed by the current study with the help of a unique conceptual framework that integrates social influence theory, which is based on the close relationship between UGC on social media and consumers’ brand engagement (Ting et al., 2017) and media gratification perspectives (Neirotti et al., 2016). The intention is to evaluate various benefits that can be derived from consumers’ UGC in order to create consumer–brand engagement (Duan et al., 2016). Additionally, by considering consumer–brand interactions as a type of brand

investment (Koch & Benlian, 2015), the current study will explore how the social influence of UGC can create and favour consumer–brand engagement. The concept of brand engagement is itself focused on building and maintaining strong relationships between brands and consumers through shared values, rewards, experiential content, brand stories and brand-related interactions (Gambetti & Graffigna, 2010). A few studies have looked at UGC in the context of brand engagement as a one-dimensional concept (Libai, 2011; Roberts & Alpert, 2010) and others as a multidimensional concept (Allen et al., 2008; Hollebeek, 2011b; Goldsmith, 2012). Only 10 studies were found that addressed UGC and brand engagement context. These studies focused on a different dimension of consumer behaviour, however.

Ashley and Tuten (2015) dealt with branded social content and consumer engagement in an exploratory study (content analysis based on a sample of content from 100 brands). The concept of SBE was conceptualised by Kozinets (2014). Altschwager et al. (2018) conducted research on the SBE of university students but the study focused only on student events engagement. Osei-Frimpong and McLean (2018) conducted a quantitative investigation of FGC and SBE in the services sector. However, their study was not about fashion brands; their study focused on FGC and brand engagement. Therefore, their study was very limited in terms of understanding UGC and SBE in the fashion industry. Kim and Johnson (2016) used the S-O-R consumer response model to test the relation between UGC, consumers' brand engagement, eWOM behaviour and potential brand sales. Viswanathan et al. (2018) conducted a study regarding FGC, social media engagement and live television shows. Carlson et al. (2019) used social exchange theory to explain the relation between customer engagement and customers' sharing intentions. However, none of these studies explored the social influence of UGC on SBE on social media. Therefore, this study looks at UGC as a source of social influence for brand engagement. The study adopts the social dimensions of brand engagement for further analysis. According to Gambetti et al. (2015), little literature is available on the social dimensions of brand engagement. The social dimensions include multiple interactions, positive social relationship, dialogue, co-creation, participation, brand stories, openness between consumer and brand, brand-related content and values (Gambetti et al., 2015).

## **2.11 UGC CONTEXT OF FASHION INDUSTRY**

Clothing is a form of self-expression as once claimed by popular American fashion designer, Marc Jacobs (Guadagno et al., 2008). Clothing provides clues as to our personality and “what you wear reflects who you are” (Guadagno et al., 2008). Based on this view, there are countless fashion-conscious people who have an online presence on social media. Communication and blogs on social media have become influential source that influence consumer purchasing decisions (Wadera & Sharma, 2018; Priya, 2017). Social media platforms particularly persuade online users to purchase specific fashion products (Bhatia, 2019). Fashion buying behaviour is different than buying behaviour in relation to all other goods. Fashion is a big status (Haq et al., 2014) that reflects personal image (Rehman et al., 2017). Fashion products reflect a person’s social and economic status (Jain & Khan, 2017) and fashion consumers are influenced by the social and economic classes of others on social media (Esteban et al., 2018). Fashion consumers are influenced by their close social context (Navarro et al., 2018). Fashion is also communication (Valaei & Nikhashemi, 2017) and is related to ethnicity (Jain et al., 2015) so this study will also try to gather evidence if fashion is related with ethnicity. Fashion impacts on social influence in terms of buying fashion products (Iran et al., 2017) and fashion brand selection is based on cultural background (Auf et al., 2018). Cook and Yurchisin (2017) indicated that fast fashion customers are influenced by high profile stakeholders on social media. Therefore, this study considers the social influence of UGC on SMUs with implications for brand engagement through social media.

Bloggers and other active SMUs are generally considered significant as they have imagination, artistic talent, diverse interests, intelligence, curiosity and open minds (Wu et al., 2015). However, a generic statement cannot be applied to fashion consumers because different fashion consumers are influenced by different social circumstances. According to Festinger’s (1954) social comparison theory, if individuals are unable to evaluate themselves objectively, they make comparisons between themselves and others that would socially involve them in fashion products. Social comparison theory proves true while studying conspicuous consumption in the context of luxury products (Mussweiler & Ruter, 2003; Wang et al., 2012) while fast fashion customers are influenced by likeminded peers. Valaei and Nikhashemi (2017) indicated that the Y generation are only influenced by the same generation on social

media in the context of fashion products; the buying behaviour of Generation Y is influenced in complex ways on social media. Moreover, fashion consumers tend to make comparisons between themselves and opinion leaders as they persuade them to purchase specific fashion products (Vasiliu & Cercel, 2015). The role of SNSs and blogs in spreading eWOM and creating social influence is very significant (Mitchell et al., 2012). Previous literature has overlooked how social influence affect consumers' perceptions of fashion. Mitchell et al. (2012) argued that passion for fashion is created in social contexts rather than psychological contexts. This research aims to fill these gaps in research by exploring the impact of UGC. It considers this impact from the perspective of individual and social influence as they relate to SBE with fashion products.

Consumers' buying behaviour in terms of fashion products is different from purchasing automobiles, booking airline tickets and purchasing books (Jung et al., 2014). Moreover, consumers' purchases of non-cultural products are made on the basis of their psychological involvement, whereas fashion products are bought on the basis of social interaction (Cook & Yurchisin, 2017), cultural meaning (Navarro et al., 2014), social status (Esteban et al., 2018) and communication (Becker, 2018). That is why fashion consumers tend to socially influence the creation and consumption of UGC in a way that varies from other products. The definition of fashion clothing involvement made by O'Cass (2004, p., 127) is "*the extent to which a consumer views the related fashion [clothing] activities as a central part of their life*". Thus, the literature cannot provide a comprehensive framework through which the social involvement of UGC in the fashion industry of the UK can be increased with respect to the social influence of UGC. This study explores how UGC on social media as well as how the social influence of UGC motivates users to generate more UGC. It looks at how the social influence of UGC can influence SBE. This research therefore explores the role of UGC in creating SBE for fashion brands on social media.

Large numbers of fashion-conscious people have an online presence on social media. Communication and blogs on social media have become very influential sources that affect consumers' purchasing decisions (Wadera & Sharma, 2018; Priya, 2017). Research finds that they persuade users to purchase specific fashion products (Bhatia, 2019). Valaei and Nikhashemi (2017) identified the impact of Generation Y



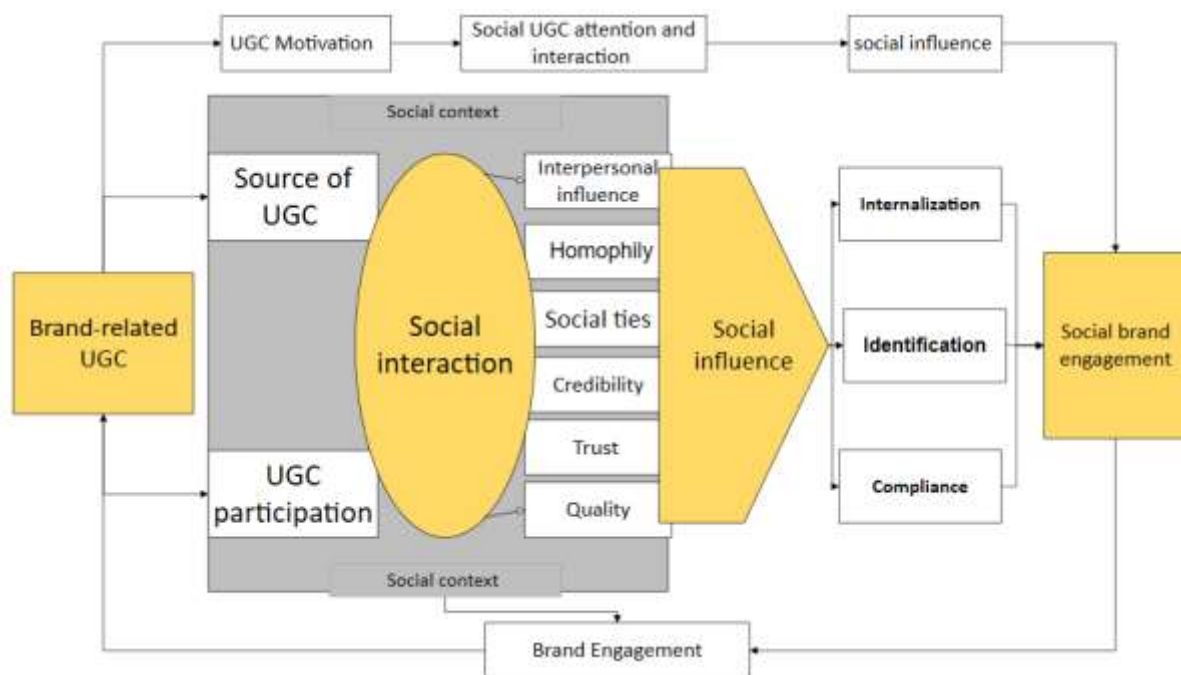
consumers' buying behaviour. Shephard et al. (2016) used the theory of symbolic interaction to investigate consumers' shopping involvement behaviour among Hispanics. Nash (2019) used consumer decision-making process theory to investigate the impact of social media on consumers' buying decisions through new trends on social media, whereas Jin and Ryu (2019) investigated the impact of celebrities' content on Facebook on students' fashion purchasing habits. Such studies are helpful in understanding the role of social media in the fashion industry.

It is important to note that fashion customers' buying behaviour differs from the buying behaviour for other goods. Reasons for this include that fashion reflects personal image (Rehman et al., 2017), fashion products reflect social and economic status (Jain & Khan, 2017), fashion consumers are influenced by the social and economic classes of others on social media (Esteban et al., 2018) and fashion consumers are influenced by their close social context (Navarro et al., 2018). Therefore, there is a need to explore the social and cultural meaning which influences SMUs towards fashion brands. According to Easterby-Smith et al. (2015), cultural and social meaning can be explored through enquiry adopting a qualitative approach. However, all fashion industry-related studies conducted on psychological consumer behaviour appear to favour quantitative research methods. By contrast, this study focusses on the more subjective socio-cultural aspects of UGC, such as social ties, trust, homophily and interpersonal influence of UGC in terms of influencing other SMUs towards a particular fashion brand.

### **2.11.1 Social context and characteristics of UGC**

This study uses the concept of customer engagement (Pansari and Kumar 2017) in order to get a theoretically sound ground for development of conceptual framework. Furthermore, a study build on relevant research with prime focus over the idea of consumer engagement initiatives (Gill, Sridhar, and Grewal 2017). In context of customer engagement, it is found that (a) there is strong association between customers' negative/positive firm-related or brand-related experiences and negative/positive affective positions; (b) affective states of customers will then affect their digital engagement for the company (Pansari and Kumar 2017), that is captures through sentiment, (c) through the effective management of information environment wherein customers and firms interact, firms can affect sentiment of digital engagement

of customers as in case of engagement initiatives of their customers. Alternatively speaking, the firms through their activities over social media can increase customers` knowledge on a brand or reinforce their positive experiences with a brand whenever questioning bad experiences (Van Doorn et al. 2010). In this way, the firms can enhance sentiment of customers` digital engagement. In consistent with literature connecting customer sentiment with purchases (Goh, Heng, and Lin 2013; Baker, Donthu, and Kumar 2016), we also investigate how sentiment of digital engagement of customers acts as key marker. After conceptualising our main variables, we describe the potential relationships on basis of drawings from “customer engagement theory” and supporting opinions from research on firms` social media usage to drive digital engagement of customers (Gill, Sridhar and Grewal 2017) and affect their mindset metrics (Colicev et al. 2018).



*Figure 2-5 Conceptual framework. UGC user-generated content and brand engagement*

The major objective of this research is to develop a contextual framework that can illuminate social brand engagement and consumer brand engagement through the influence of UGC over social media networks. Based on the above literature, there are three major factors in relation to UGC that need to be explored. These are the social context (i.e. source of UGC, participation, motivation) and social factors that can create

social influence on social media platforms. The second row of figure 2-5 identifies the salient social factors (i.e. trust, quality, credibility, social ties, interpersonal influence, homophily). Consequently, understanding the role of UGC motivation can help shape the social context of UGC creation and consumption in the context of both social and consumer brand engagement. Additionally, this framework can clarify the social influence of UGC in the form of three major factors (i.e. identification, internalization, and compliance) which have been identified using social influence theory. Based on social influence theory, the social context of UGC is explored in the context of identification, internalisation and compliance which is why this framework is helpful to understand the theoretical contribution and practical contribution of the study. The major advantage of this framework is that it identifies various primary data questions and it also helps users to analyse data in the context of social influence theory. It considers the social context which is developed through a literature review in terms of this research.

As it has set above that there is need to understand the social interaction of UGC, which includes the creation, generation and consumption of UGC. The relationship between the buying intentions of a consumer and the usefulness and credibility of the information they receive has been studied by Chiang and Jang (2007). The most common source of brand-oriented UGC is “friends” on social media. Such content is more likely to be accepted by others precisely because they consider it to have come from a trusted source. The literature also discussed that the credibility of the UGC is based on that UGC itself and the source of the UGC. There are six elements which underpin information quality: understandability, relevance, adequacy, reliability, usefulness and scope (Lee & Choeh, 2018). The second major aspect of UGC credibility is stoical tie strength, which is an important theme in research on social networking and WOM propagation (Brown & Reingen, 1987). Granovetter (1973) stated that social ties can either be strong or weak; therefore, there is also a need to understand the role of social ties in brand engagement because of the effects of the credibility of the UGC on the social influence of the UGC on SMUs’ engagement with a brand. The characteristics of UGC are also considered in order to understand the social influence of UGC. There are certain features of UGC which relate to the credibility of the UGC; these include the comprehensiveness, length, quality of argument, valence, style of review and relevance of content (Li & Zhan, 2011; Cheng

& Ho, 2015; Filieri, 2015; Liang et al., 2014; Schindler & Bickart, 2012). There is also the relevance of the content to consider, which depends on the UGC creator and the uses of the UGC; therefore, there is also a need to understand the intention of the creator and the uses of the content, which has been explored by previous literature.

SNS homophily is another concept which needs further investigation regarding the social influence of UGC on a brand. Homophily refers to the extent to which individuals with similar attributes interact with each other and accept each other's point of view (Rogers & Bhowmik, 1970). Extant research studies show that the socio-demographic attributes of friends and family tend to be similar to one's own socio-demographic attributes, including attitudes and beliefs (Gilly et al., 1998; Festinger, 1957). It has been discussed that homophily and social ties are major sources of trust, therefore, another important construct in social networking is trust among social media friends or users. This represents a person's willingness to place reliance on the information forwarded to them by someone in whom they have confidence (Moorman et al., 1993). Moreover, the literature review also identified that interpersonal influence is positively related with the buying intentions of the consumer as a result of UGC exchange on SMNs (Chiou et al., 2014). Interpersonal influence is a social element that plays a significant role in influencing consumers' decision making (Chahal & Rani, 2017). Therefore, on the basis of the literature review, trust, strength of social ties, UGC credibility, UGC quality and interpersonal influence are considered major contextual elements of SBE. Therefore, on the basis of the literature, the following theoretical framework (Figure 2-5) has been developed that will be the focus of the primary data collection to explore the topic in depth from participants' perspectives.

The current study focuses on explaining how fundamentals of social influence theory are applicable in the context of brand engagement (SBE & CBE) on social media platforms. In this way, this study intends to make a contribution to business practices, theory and existing literature through improving understanding of the UGC creation, consumption. The creation and exchange of UGC can enhance social influence which can enhance social and consumer brand engagement. It has been found with the help of previous literature that the precise impact of the social influence has not yet been thoroughly understood in the context of social and consumer-brand engagement. The increasing popularity, interest and attraction of UGC as a source of social influence

has made this area of study very relevant and interesting. Many topics in this field have been studied to date, but it is observed that all of these studies focused mainly on purchase decision influence, influence metrics, WOM, online reputation and management, mobilisation as well as influence on sales. However, how all these factors can create social and consumer engagement is still unexplored in the existing literature therefore present study aims to address this research gap.

This research is therefore going to explore how the social influence of UGC on social media significantly creates brand engagement. The best way to integrate this influence still needs to be discovered. In order to contribute to this discovery, the current study provides a guide on how to manage the social influence of UGC on social media for creating brand engagement regarding fashion brands within the UK. As the major focus of this research is to explore the social influence of UGC and its impact on brand engagement, there is a need to understand the UGC and social context on social media where the social influence occurs. The source of UGC, and the credibility and quality of UGC were found to be important characteristics of UGC. Additionally, there are some social factors that influence the impact of UGC; these include social ties, homophily, interpersonal relations, and trust among creators and UGC consumers on social media. Therefore, it can be said that this literature review has helped to synthesise the concept of UGC in the context of the social impact it has on SMUs that creates brand engagement among other SMUs.

In summary, brand engagement is a multidimensional construct (including behavioural, social and psychological dimensions). This research considers the social context of brand engagement on social media. Kozinets (2014) noted that advances in social media and in the social interaction of users over the internet meant that consumer engagement has become more than just social engagement, because many SMUs interact with brands on social media despite not being customers of that particular brand. Hence, the researcher is stimulated to examine these kinds of autonomous brand engagement produced through the independent communication and social interaction of SMUs. Thus, the study explores consumer engagement beyond just the psychological state of mind of a consumer, to include the emotional, active and physical experiences of consumers with a brand.

There are few studies on SBE. Some empirical examinations of SBE have been carried out in order to test various consumer aspects of SBE (Osei-Frimpong et al., 2018; Altschwager et al., 2018). Research by Altschwager et al. (2018) also examined the role of four experiential elements (sensory, behavioural, affective and intellectual experiences) in regard to SBE and the moderating influence of FGC and the commitment of consumers. However, their research did not explore how FGC motivated SMUs to produce more content and how this type of content will then influence SMUs, leading to CBE as well as SBE. Given this gap, Kozinets (2014) suggested there is a need to explore SBE in the context of social media. Therefore, this research focuses on the social influence of UGC on fashion brand engagement on social media.

## **2.12 SUMMARY**

The aim of the literature review was to improve understanding of the concept of the impact of UGC on SMUs in different contexts, which would in turn lead towards brand engagement on social media. To achieve the aim of the literature review to explore the UGC and brand engagement in depth. Figure 2-4 Illustrates the progression of DBA thesis after the literature review.

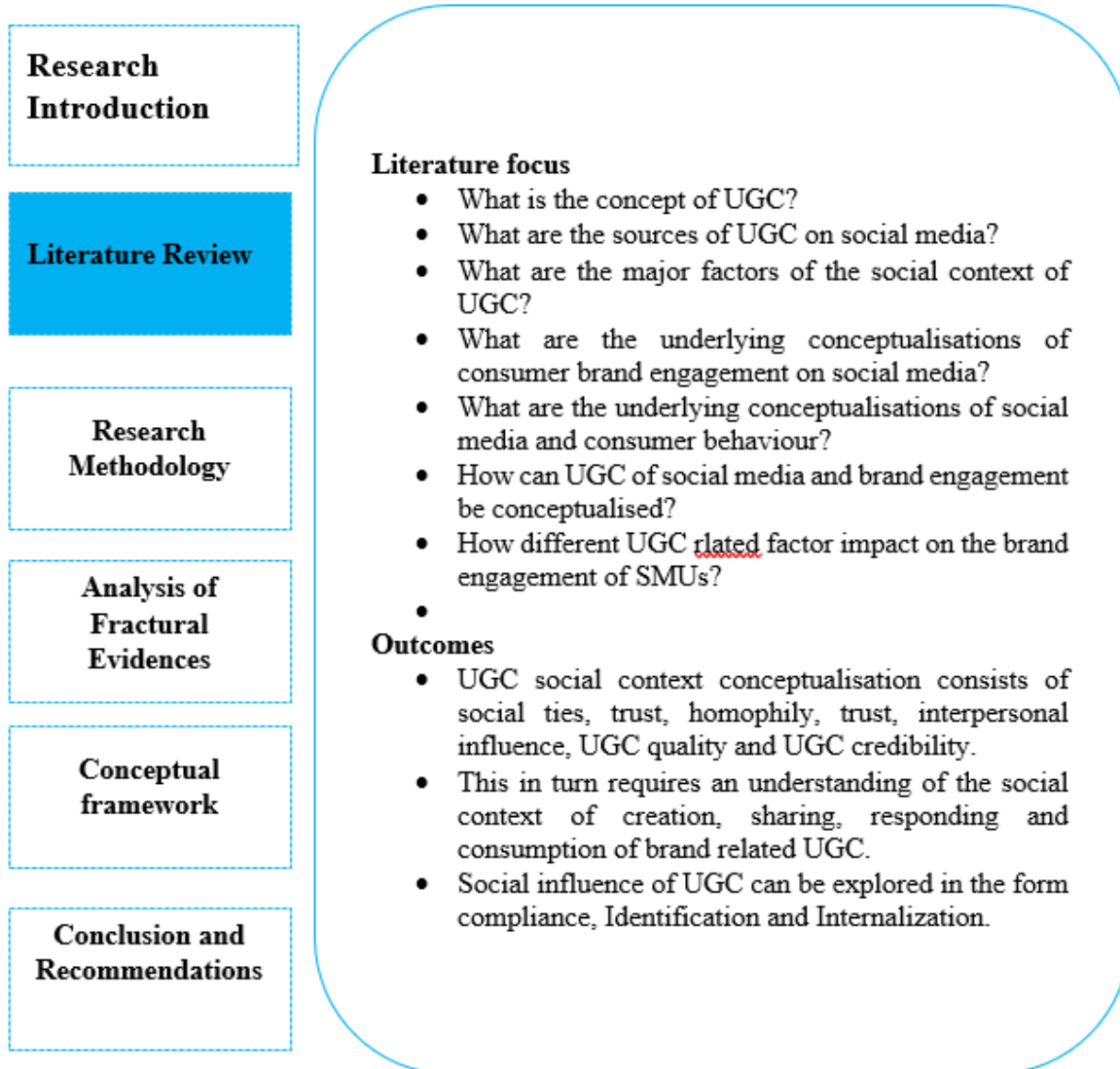


Figure 2-6 Thesis progression; UGC user-generated content and brand engagement

## CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

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### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

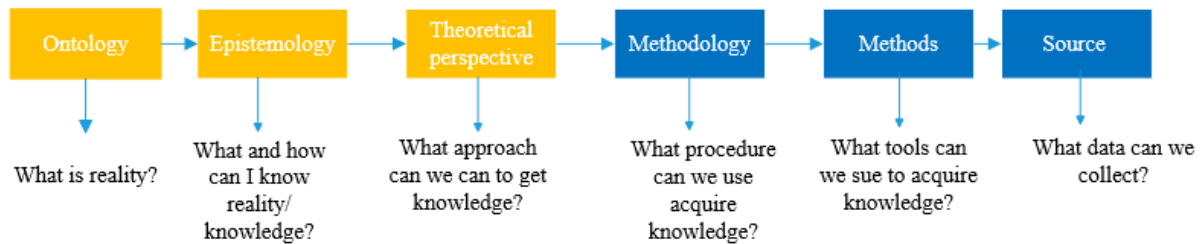
The previous chapter conceptualised UGC and brand engagement. It examined the different elements of SMNs and a number of social influence concepts. The impacts of these concepts on interpretations of brand engagement were also examined. Furthermore, the literature review examined the distinctive nature of social media and multiple types of social media interactions in relation to brand engagement. The underlying aim of the current chapter is to present the methodological composition of the study. First, it examines the different paradigmatic assumptions underpinning SMNs in terms of their social influence on brand perceptions. The chapter also sets out the philosophical position related to the researcher's own values and it identifies the governing research objectives. The chapter then explores and defends the decision to carry out qualitative research as a suitable methodological approach. An exploratory research aim is then identified, and the chapter then briefly justify qualitative research method, inductive research approach, data collection and analysis. Then, the chapter offers a justification for decisions in relation to sample selection, sample size and data collection methods. Next, the of the current study is presented, and the quality of the research undertaken is scrutinised. The chapter explains how the research approach challenges the dominance of positivism in order to contribute new knowledge to the field of research in the context of multichannel service quality. Finally, reflections on some ethical considerations are described.

### 3.2 RESEARCH PARADIGM

A research paradigm is "*the set of common beliefs and agreements shared between scientists about how problems should be understood and addressed*" (Kuhn, 1962, p., 94). According to Saunders et al. (2016), a research methodology is directed by the philosophical position of the researcher. The research philosophy represents the underlying assumptions about the perspective of the researcher in terms of how they view the world and approach research problems (Donley, 2012). Such assumptions underpin the research methods and research strategy which the researcher chooses in order to conduct research (Crowther & Lancaster, 2012). Moreover, Walliman (2010) observed that the choices the researcher makes about their research strategy



not only influence the manner in which research is conducted, but also the outcomes of the research. Moreover, McNeill and Chapman (2005) argued that the main issue is not how philosophically well informed the research is, but how well the researcher can reflect on the philosophy whilst conducting research. In other words, what matters is how well the researcher conducts the research in line with the chosen perspective and approach.



*Figure 3-1 Elements of research methodology*

The debate regarding ontology and epistemology is unavoidable in the context of discussions about research philosophy. This debate often discusses the contrasting ideas of positivism and social constructionism in social science (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015). Even if one accepts the argument forwarded by Walliman (2018) that research methods are secondary to questions related to axiology, ontology and epistemology; one must remain mindful that choosing either social constructionism or positivism can lead to unrealistic results.

Ontology involves a debate concerning the nature of reality (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015). This debate is relevant in terms of the assumption's researchers make about the manner in which the world operates. One of the central ontological ideas is objectivism (Quinlan et al., 2019); objectivism implies that the social world exists independently of social actors (Hammond & Wellington, 2013). The philosophy of realism holds that reality is independent from human beings (Ember & Ember, 2009). As such, a realist ontological position is not suitable for this research. This philosophy supports the scientific approach for the development of knowledge. Realism has been divided into two groups: critical and direct (Pickering & Griffin, 2008). Direct realism is usually referred to as naive realism and describes the idea that "what you see is what you get" (Pickering & Griffin, 2008). In other words, direct realism sees the world through personal human senses. On the other hand, critical realism argues that the

images and sensations of the real world are experienced by humans; therefore, their view must be taken into account (Guthrie, 2010).

Realism also represents the assumptions which one brings to an empirical investigation (Gergen, 2001). However, in the current situation, such assumptions are related to ontology and how the world works (Matthews & Ross, 2010). Realists assert that there are a number of underlying processes, causes, entities and structures which give rise to the observations we make about situations around us, including those in the social and natural world (Walliman, 2006). The concept holds that it is scientifically appropriate to constitute hypotheses and theories about underlying causes to arrive at explanations in respect of what is being observed (Saunders et al., 2016).

From the perspective of relativism, it is believed that racial discrimination and social class are experienced and defined variously by different people (Adams et al., 2014). The extent to which this is the case also depends on the race or class to which one belongs, and the country in which one is living (Margolis & Pauwels, 2011). Therefore, on the basis of relativism and ontological positioning, there are many realities in the context of how UGC directs social media users towards a specific brand. Olokundun (2017, p., 694) conducted a study to identify cultural roles in social media marketing and noted that the “...results show that all determinants are not equally suitable for enhancement of number of likes, comments and shares. More specifically, vivid and interactive brand post determinants enhance the number of likes. Furthermore, interactive brand posts enhance the number of comments while vivid brand posts enhance number of shares. Moreover, impact and intensity vary across different cultures” (Olokundun et al., 2017, p. 694). Therefore, the intensity of UGC on social media and the intensity of the social influence of UGC varies across different sets of circumstances. Nearly 60% of consumers note that their buying decisions were influenced by friends’ posts on social media (Bonhommer et al., 2010) while it is also evident that celebrities and experts can enhance brand engagement (Naeem, 2020). So these different social realities in relation to buying fashion brands are directly aligned with relativism and social constructionism. However, it is important to distinguish between active friends and close friends. The definition of socially constructed knowledge which is embedded within the multi-realities of social interactions of social media users is key. As discussed in the literature review, close

friends enjoy influential power with respect to each other, so they also interact with each other more frequently than with their friends. Further, close friends have reciprocal relationships with each other (Malthouse et al., 2016; Wagner et al., 2018) while it has been stated by Confente et al., (2019) that some social media users are more influenced by celebrities than their close friends. There are therefore multiple realities behind the social influence of UGC towards specific brands which is why social constructionism is useful for this research. Social relations have meaning in the context of UGC and brand engagement which is more aligned with social constructionism.

As stated earlier, epistemology represents the study of the nature of knowledge. It involves studying the manner of enquiry in the social as well as the physical world (Fellows & Liu, 2015). Epistemology is the study of the theory of knowledge; how we know things and what we know about them (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015). Epistemology has also provided a foundation for an ongoing debate among social scientists about how research should be conducted (Cohen et al., 2011; Andrew & Halcomb, 2009). The two prominent yet contrasting views in this regard comprise social constructionism and positivism (Quinlan et al., 2019). Although various philosophical assumptions can be ascribed to both of these positions, there is no single philosopher who subscribes to one position in its entirety. This creates a situation which demands one position or the other (Saunders et al., 2016). Epistemology offers two major perspectives. The first is objectivism versus subjectivism and the second perspective is positivism versus social constructionism (William, 2000). Social constructionism and positivism represent two different philosophical views. Each philosophy adheres to a unique assumption and position compared to the other. Both epistemological positions take different ideas from one another (Reason & Bradbury, 2008).

Objectivism questions the nature of the social world and suggests it exists independently of social actors. Subjectivism critiques how social phenomena are created by the perceptions of those influenced by it (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Subjectivists believe that the social world and social actors exist because of each other. Social phenomena come into being due to the perceptions and resultant actions of social actors who are concerned about existence (Cassell et al., 2017).

Subjectivism, on the other hand attaches importance to the views of those who are impacted by a situation; the situation can be understood by taking into account the views of those who are influenced by it (Willig & Stainton, 2017). Therefore, concepts such as racial discrimination and social class can be regarded as real phenomena (Williams & Vogt, 2011). The topic of this research should arguably not be treated as a separate entity because social influence is significantly attached to the context of different social networks on social media. In addition, personal values and cultural values are attached to the research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). There is therefore a need to explore how different people are influenced by others within online SMNs, and to understand why some are influenced by a specific brand. This involves exploring the different realities and social influences of UGC authors on SMNs who engage with a specific brand. Such an approach is suited to subjectivism and aligns well with the practical-base perspective epistemology as shown in Table 3-1. Moreover, Orlikowski (2000) indicates that “*knowledge is not regarded as a discrete entity/object that can be codified and separated from people*” (Hislop, 2009, p. 34). This would suggest that knowledge is a subjective matter rather than an objective reality.

*Table 3-1 Practice-based epistemology point views on knowledge*

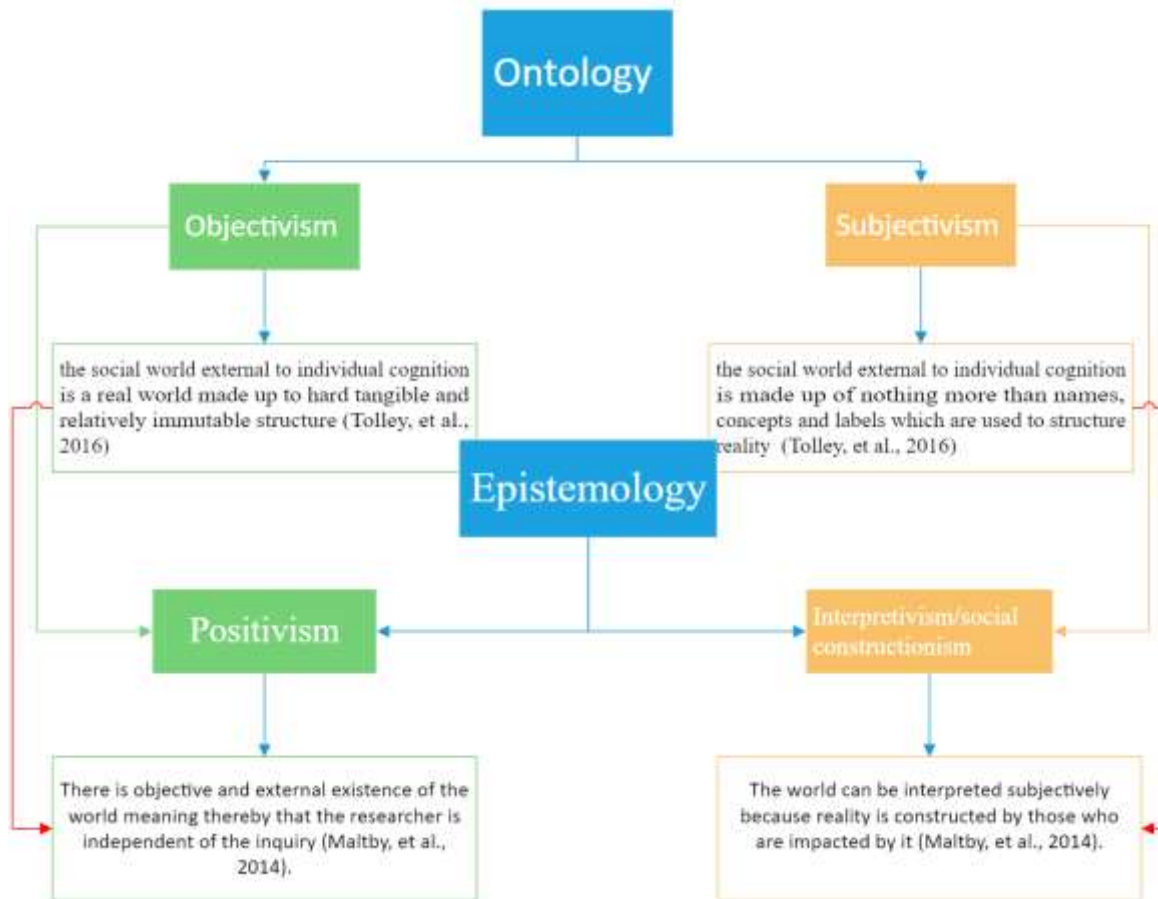
<b>Characteristics of knowledge form practice based epistemology</b>	
<b>1</b>	Knowledge is embedded in practice (Schultze, and Stabell, 2004).
<b>2</b>	Tacit and explicit knowledge are inseparable (Scarborough, 1999)
<b>3</b>	Knowledge in embodied in people (Empson, 2001a).
<b>4</b>	Knowledge is social constructed (Cook and Brown, 1999).
<b>5</b>	Knowledge is cultural embedded (Hislop, 2008).
<b>6</b>	Knowledge is contestable (Werr and Stjernberg 2003).

The subjectivist view attaches supreme importance to the views of those who are affected by the situation being studied. This means that the actions of social actors are of paramount importance based on a subjectivist view (Sloan & Quan-Haase, 2017). These social phenomena are constantly being revised as a result of a continual process which is taking place, as the views and actions of those affected by it are constantly being recorded or observed (Bradbury, 2015). Moreover, Margolis and Pauwels (2011) believed that it is imperative to take into account the views of social

actors to make sense of the situation in which they find themselves (Williams et al., 2011). This idea is associated with the social constructionist approach whereby it is believed that reality is best constructed by those affected by it (May, 2002). This notion follows the interpretivist approach in that subjective meanings need be explored to motivate the actions of social actors so that the researcher is able to understand reality (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Reality in social constructionism is regarded as socially constructed. Relativism and subjectivism align well with social constructionism as noted in Table 3-2 (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

Close friends communicate frequently and share tacit histories. They are intensely and emotionally attached and often share their views. This contrasts with the nature of active friends, who only meet on an occasional basis (Choi & Megehee, 2014; Ryu & Han, 2009; Ryu and Feick, 2007; Park et al., 2018). Previous studies indicated that celebrity-generated content is followed to a greater degree by luxury brands on social media (Park et al. 2018; Jin, & Ryu, 2019; Jin & Ryu, 2020). There is therefore a need to understand the various customer types that react to various types of UGC in different social contexts that mean there would be multi realities of social influence which is called relativism ontology. Existing studies have shown that there is higher willingness among consumers to share and forward messages that originate from their friends as compared to messages which emanate from commercial sources (Chiu et al., 2007; Gilal et al., 2018; Naeem, 2019). Which is another reality of social influence from the close friends at the same time it is subjective social phenomenon this would suggest that there is no singular approach to understanding the research subject and there are multiple realities that could be suitable for this research based on relativism. A relativist ontological position is therefore adopted for this research to identify the different realities of UGC as a form of social influence in multi realities. Therefore, there is no single reality which can be discovered universally in marketing because most marketing practices are situational. Instead, there are various perspectives on this matter. It is assumed, based on a relativist position, that various observers hold different positions (Williams & Vogt, 2011). Moreover, May (2011) argued that truth varies from one place to another, and from one time to another. A relativist ontological position is therefore appropriate to explore the different realities behind the social influence of UGC on social media to create brand engagement based on different perspectives.

As this research sets out to study a situation involving customers, each customer is likely to have a unique view of UGC and a unique view of brands and social influence. In such an instance, it would make sense to take into account the views of all customers to understand how they are socially influenced through UGC on social media. It is also important to understand which factors they are influenced by. Each individual perceives a unique situation when engaging with brands. Relevant here is some knowledge of the circumstances of both the influencer and influenced person on social media. The literature notes that celebrities have more social influence over others as compared to the common public. This is why various organisations promote their products through celebrities (Jin & Phua, 2014; Jin, & Ryu, 2019; Jin & Ryu, 2020). Moreover, Seunghwan and Dae-Young (2018) observed that physical contact can also initiate a purchase intention. This idea has been referred to as physical social contagion (Liu et al., 2017). Smith et al. (2012) believed that professionals and experts in UGC have more influence regarding technical products than non-technical products and brand engagement through social media. This would suggest there are different social realities in various contexts that can lead to higher or lower levels of social influence. The variable is the impact of UGC in terms of creating brand engagement on SMNs. A subjectivist ontological position is therefore considered appropriate for this research and this aligns well with social constructionism as shown in Figure 3-2.



*Figure 3-2 Ontology and epistemology link*

Fashion consumers are influenced by their immediate social contexts (Navarro et al., 2018). Fashion is also a form of communication (Valaei & Nikhashemi, 2017) and is related to ethnicity (Jain et al., 2015). There are therefore many social and cultural meanings involved in buying and influencing fashion brands. This would suggest that social constructionism is a suitable epistemological strategy to create knowledge on the selected topic. Various situations therefore have different impacts on customers. Different meanings can be drawn from the same situation. The actions of some may be regarded by others as meaningful when they find themselves in a similar situation. This enables an understanding of the motives and intentions of customers engaging with UGC on social media. As such, a subjectivism/practice-based epistemological perspective is adopted for this research. The major philosophical element of this thesis is subjectivism/practical in nature based on the nature of the research. The major difference between objectivist, subjectivist and practice-based perspectives is identified in Table 3-2.

Social constructionism believes that reality is constructed socially (Denzin & Lincoln, 2014). Therefore, social constructionism is an appropriate epistemological position to take because social constructionists believe that reality can be constructed in many ways by multiple numbers of people, and there is no singular version of reality (Hammersley, 2013). Concepts such as culture, gender and race represent social constructs (Jackson & Shaw, 2001). Moreover, Xun and Guo (2017) argued that brand expertise can be knowledge-oriented and experience-oriented to generate creative/innovative content. Mosteller and Poddar (2017) indicated that expert opinions are observed as valuable on social media, and expertise highlighted by participants sharing content about fashion products is also influential. However, social ties also strongly influence buying decisions for fashion products. Celebrity social proof arises when a product is endorsed by a celebrity who has a fan following (Kuo & Hou, 2017). Therefore, it is clear that social constructionism is an appropriate epistemological philosophy to apply to identify the cultural and social meanings attached to UGC and user responses towards specific brands in different contexts. Table 3-4 highlights the major differences between social constructionism and positivism on the basis of their contrasting characteristics. Moreover, social constructionism also fits with the relativist ontological and subjective/practice-based epistemological approach. Therefore, its philosophical alignment is one of the major reasons why it has been chosen for this research. As Easterby-Smith et al. (2015, p. 53) noted, *“it is clear that there is link between epistemology, axiology and ontology, with positivism fitting with realist ontologies, and constructionism fitting with nominalism and relativism”*.

*Table 3-2 The major differences between objectivist, subjectivist and practice-based perspectives*

Objectivist	Subjectivist/practice-based perspectives	Author
Knowledge derived from intellectual process	Knowledge is embedded in practice  Knowledge/doing inseparable	Denzin and Lincoln (2011)



Knowledge is disembodied entity/object	Knowledge is embodied in people  Knowledge is socially constructed	Denzin and Lincoln (2011)
Knowledge is objective “fact” (based on positivist philosophy)	Knowledge is culturally embedded  Knowledge is contestable  Knowledge is socially constructed	Lapan et al. (2011)
Explicit knowledge (objective) privileged over tacit knowledge (subjective)	Tacit and explicit knowledge are inseparable and mutually constituted	Taylor et al. (2014)
Distinct knowledge categories	Knowledge is multidimensional	O’Gorman et al. (2015)

The above position has been adopted for this research because of the different interpretations each person attaches to the social influence of UGC. These interpretations shape engagement with specific brands. Such a philosophical lens provides insight into the motives of those that are influenced by UGC. Each SMU therefore has a unique motive for taking different actions through the social influence of UGC. There is therefore a need to understand the social content of UGC creators and to appreciate the perspectives of UGC consumers. American fashion designer, Marc Jacobs once claimed that clothing is a form of self-expression (Guadagno et al., 2008). Clothing provides clues to our personality and “what you wear reflects who you are” (Guadagno et al., 2008). Based on this view, there are countless fashion-conscious people who have an online presence on social media. Communication and blogs on social media have become influential sources of data that influence consumer purchasing decisions (Wadera & Sharma, 2018; Priya, 2017). Fashion is a social

status (Haq et al., 2018) that reflects personal image (Rehman et al., 2017). Fashion products reflect personal social and economic status (Jain & Khan, 2017) and fashion consumers are influenced by the social and economic classes of others on social media (Esteban et al., 2018) therefore, understanding of the fashion related product influence is subjective in meaning because there are social and cultural meaning attached with the social influence regarding fashion products.

As stated above, epistemology is the study of the nature of knowledge and the manner of enquiring into the social and natural world (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015). It involves studying the theories of knowledge. There are two contrasting views bound to epistemology: positivism and social constructionism (Elder-Vass, 2012). The philosophical approach of the social scientist is linked to the manner in which they enquire about the social world. Positivism represents an objective approach, and social constructionism represents a subjective approach (Gill, 1886). The primary difference between positivism and social constructionism is that positivism is based on scientific methods or scientific enquiry, while social constructionism is not (Hammersley, 2013). Social constructionism is based on interpretations of different experiences to make sense of a situation as set out in Table 3-3. Moreover, Easterby-Smith et al. (2015) indicated that subjectivism aligns with social constructionism/interpretivism while positivism aligns with objectivism. Therefore, the rationale for selecting social constructionism is that social and cultural meanings are significantly central to the social influence of UGC on SMU. In addition, social constructionism also aligns with subjectivism. The major difference between social constructionism and positivism is described in Table 3-3.

*Table 3-3 Characteristics of social constructionism and positivism SBE social brand engagement, SMU social media user, UGC user-generated content*

Positivism is a philosophical stance which places emphasis on gaining knowledge through measurable means. Knowledge, in a sense, is considered to be based on scientific enquiry (Willig & Stainton Rogers, 2017). Social constructionism on the other hand believes that knowledge or reality is constructed socially (Willig & Stainton,

	<b>Social constructionism</b>	<b>Positivism</b>
<b>Nature of reality</b>	Socially constructed, multiple meanings of content creating, sharing, using, collecting and consuming	Objective, tangible, single
<b>Goal of research</b>	Understanding, weak prediction to social influence of UGC on SBE	Explanation, strong prediction
<b>Focus of interest</b>	What is specific, unique and deviant? Yes, this research focuses on the specific: the role of the social influence of UGC in SBE	What is general, average and representative
<b>The observer</b>	Is part of what is being observed. Yes, the researcher is able to understand the hidden meaning during the data collection	Must be independent
<b>Human interest</b>	Are the main drivers of science. Yes, SMUs interest towards UGC is major driver of SBE	Should be irrelevant
<b>Concept</b>	Should incorporate stakeholder perspective. Yes, SMUs are major stakeholder so SMUs' points of view are collected in depth	Need to be defined so that they can be measured
<b>Research progress through</b>	Gathering rich data from which ideas are induced, which is inductive process	Hypothesis and deductive
<b>Unit of analysis</b>	May include the complexity of whole situations. Yes, there is complexity of the factors of social influence so social influence theory has been used to synthesise the UGC social consumer engagement model	Should be reduced to simplest terms
<b>Generalisation through</b>	Theoretical abstraction. Yes, UGC social influence has been produced in the result of this research	Statistical probability
<b>Sampling required</b>	Small numbers of cases chosen for specific reasons. Yes, a small number of SMUs have been selected to conduct in-depth enquiry	Large number selected randomly
<b>Knowledge generated</b>	Meanings Relative (time, context, culture, value bound) Yes, researcher tried to understand the social, cultural, language and personal values related to meaning involvement in UGC	Laws Absolute (time, context and value free)
<b>Desired information</b>	What some people think and do, what kind of problems they are confronted with, and how they deal with them. Yes, researcher tried to understand what SMUs think to share, consume, respond and to generate content on social media and how the UGC creates social consumer brand engagement through social interaction of UGC among SMUs	How many people think and do a specific thing, or have a specific problem

2017). This means that both positivism and social constructionism are philosophically opposed. It is therefore imperative to highlight the differences between the two approaches (Denzin & Lincoln, 2014). Positivism is considered to be next to empiricism since, based on this approach, facts are considered to be measurable

(Lancaster, 2005). Facts that can be measured legitimate a form of scientific enquiry. Based on positivism, subjective views are not ascertained. Positivism therefore represents an epistemological stance whereby true knowledge comprises sensory information (Hammond & Wellington, 2013). Figure 3-3 underscores the major differences between positivism and social constructionism (Naeem & Khan, 2019).

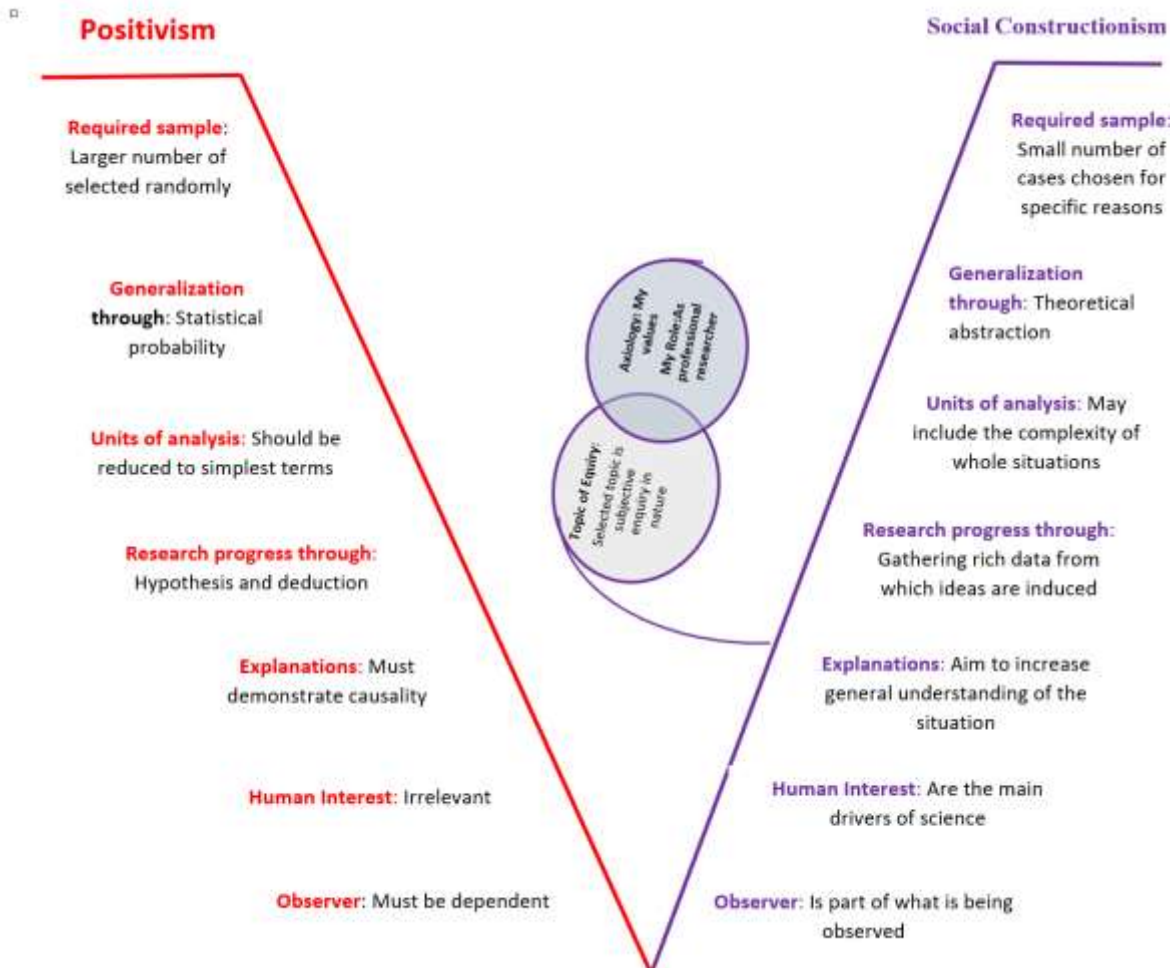


Figure 3-3 Differences between social constructionism and positivism

The central feature of positivism is that the social world exists externally. This implies that the properties of the social world can be measured externally (i.e. through objective means). Positivism does not leave any room for the subjective ascertaining of properties (Saunders et al., 2016). This means that intuition, reflection and sensation are of little value to positivism. A relativist ontological and subjectivist/practice-based philosophical position is considered to be more appropriate for this research (Blaxter et al., 2010). As such, positivism can be rejected. Positivists believe that knowledge is created on the basis of observation and measurement

(Carey, 2017). Positivism is also based on the assumption that reality can be assessed objectively since true knowledge only exists when it can be verified empirically (Seale, 2007). Empirical verification represents the external or objective ascertainment of reality (Tracy, 2013). Moreover, Cassell et al. (2017) observed that the belief that positivism represents the best way of enquiring into the social world was a reaction to metaphysical speculation. Saunders et al. (2016) argued that the central feature of positivism is the belief that the social world can be measured in the same way as physical phenomena. The results obtained from observing and measuring facts are regarded as universal. However, the results of the social influence of UGC on social media are situational because the social impact of social influence varies by circumstance. It would not therefore be appropriate in this research context to generalise about the social influence of brand-related UGC on social media. Therefore, the positivist philosophical position is rejected as a suitable approach for this research.

Knowledge based on positivism is formalised by employing various variables which are then subjected to tests (see Figure 3-3). These tests are conducted to verify hypotheses. As a result of such tests, the hypotheses are either confirmed or rejected (Ember & Ember, 2009). Reality based on a positivist approach can be determined externally. For positivists, knowledge corresponds to truth. A statement, for positivists is regarded as true if it passes external tests. Based on positivism, empirical verification is utilised to determine the validity of truth or knowledge. The results obtained are regarded as general principles which can be applied in similar situations (Quinlan & Zikmund, 2015). In contrast to a relativist ontological and subjectivist philosophical position, it is clear that positivism does not align with subjectivism, because subjectivists believe that knowledge cannot be treated as separate/external. Indeed, Dawson (2000, p. 14) believed that “*tacit knowledge remains intrinsic to the people and only people have the capacity to act perfectly*”, which is another reason to reject positivism in this research.

Social constructionism by contrast, takes account of the way people make sense of reality (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, 2010, 2014). Reality is constructed by taking into account the experiences of those who are influenced by it. Social constructionism is one of the approaches which Habermas (1970) regarded as belonging to interpretive

methods (Howitt & Cramer, 2017). If we consider “*the practice-based nature of knowing/knowledge assumes that knowledge develops through practice: people’s knowledge develops as they conduct activities and gain experience*” (Hislop, 2005, p. 31), then it is clear that a social constructionist philosophical position is appropriate to this research. Such an approach supports a subjectivism/practice-based epistemological position. Additionally, Hislop (2005, p. 32) indicated that “*the epistemology of practice-base argues that all knowledge is social constructed in nature, which make it somewhat subjective and open interpretation and inspirable from the values of those who produced it*”. Therefore, a social constructionist epistemological position is appropriate for this research because it is more aligned with a practice-based epistemological approach to propose some recommendations for marketers.

The idea behind social constructionism is that social reality is determined by people and, as such, subjective interpretation is of paramount significance (Shaw & Gould, 2001) and is relevant to the subjectivist philosophy. There are therefore clear arguments in favour of adopting this position. Since reality is constructed by people, objective measurements hold no importance for social constructionists (Cowan, 2009). Therefore, objectivism and positivism are accepted as irrelevant to this research because there is not any single reality of the social influence of SMUs toward a brand through social exchange of UGC. The task of the social scientist is not simply to collect facts, but to realise and highlight the difference between the meanings and constructions of the same situation by different people (Ember & Ember, 2009). People reflect on the social influence of UGC differently. In other words, UGC that is encountered has different social influences over the various people that come into contact with it in the same group. Individuals reflect uniquely on the same situation, and this is an example of social constructionism. Since the focus of social constructionism is on what people think and construct as reality, social constructionism holds with the view that people make sense of brand engagement in unique ways. The social constructionist believes that meaning is attached to language, body language, culture, race and gender, therefore social constructionism “*appreciates the different conceptions and meaning that people place upon their experience and the focus should be on what people, individually and collectively are thinking and feeling and attention should paid to the way they communication with each other whether verbally*

*or non-verbally*” (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015, p. 52). Therefore, a social constructionist philosophical position is considered appropriate because this research explores how brand-related UGC on social media exerts social influence collectively and individually on SMUs. It explores how different users are influenced and examines the circumstances under which users are collectively influenced.

A subjectivist view holds that social phenomena are better constructed by acknowledging the views of actors in a given situation. (Saks & Allsop, 2013). Moreover, Saunders et al. (2016) observed that it is imperative to study situations in detail to understand them in their entirety. The same approach is true of the interpretivist philosophy, (i.e. reality can be better interpreted by understanding the views of those who are found in the situation being studied). The meanings formed by social actors are studied using an interpretivist philosophy in accordance with a subjectivist approach (May, 2011). As indicated by Colicev et al. (2019), the intensity of the social influence of UGC also depends on the credibility and reliability of the UGC itself. There is therefore a need to understand the situation entirely, rather than to simply study it objectively. Guha et al. (2018) indicated that the perceived quality and reliability of UGC depends on the overall social context in which UGC is generated and consumed. There is therefore a need to understand the social context of UGC to appreciate its social influence. As Liamputtong (2010) indicated, social constructionism also attaches significance to the views of those who are impacted by a situation. All stakeholders in a similar situation involving UGC have different social influences on all other SMUs. It then becomes important to study the views of such persons to make sense of the situation (Ananda et al., 2019).

*Table 3-4 Ontology, Epistemology and methodology*

<b>Ontologies</b>	<b>Realism</b>	<b>Internal realism</b>	<b>Relativism</b>	<b>Nominalism</b>
<b>Epistemology/ Methodology</b>	<b>Strong positivism</b>	<b>Positivism</b>	<b>Constructionism</b>	<b>Strong constructionism</b>
Aim	Discover	Exposure	Convergence	Invention
Starting points	Hypothesis	Propositions	Questions	Critiques
Designs	Experiments	Large surveys: multi cases	Cases and surveys	Engagement and reflexivity
Data types	Numbers and facts	Mainly number with some words	Mainly words with some numbers	Discourse and experiences
Analysis/ interpretation	Verification/ falsification	Correlation and regression	Triangulation and comparison	Sense making understanding
Outcomes	Confirmation of theories	Theory testing and generation	Theory generation	New insights and actions

From the objectivist point of view, knowledge is taken to be a commodity which is possessed by people who can be employees, customers or stakeholders of an organisation (Matthews & Ross, 2010). Objectivism believes in an objective assessment of the world (i.e. it holds that reality exists objectively, and that subjective views do not construct reality) (Guthrie, 2010). If an objectivist point of view is taken into account, then knowledge is found in textual form and language is considered to have objective meaning (Hislop, 2009). Moreover, McAdam and McCreedy (2000) observed that knowledge represents truth, and from an objectivist's point of view, it represents a commodity which can be quantified, and thus measured. This leads to the derivation of general principles and forms the crux of the positivist and realist philosophies. The discussion above suggests that marketing theories are situational, and the outcomes of different principles have varied outcomes; therefore, objectivism is not considered appropriate for this research. In the context of practical philosophical perspectives, Hislop (2005, p. 28) suggested that *"from the practical base perspective, knowledge is not regarded as discrete entire/object that can be codified and separated from the people. It is also preferring, knowing is inseparable from the human activity"*. Therefore, objectivism is rejected on the basis that practical perspective/subjectivism is best aligned with a relativist ontology and with social constructionism (see Figure 3-



4). I have synthesised the relations of epistemology and ontology in the form of an Eggs model (see Figure 3-4), it is found that there is overlap between practice-base epistemology and social constructionism; in addition, these practice-based and social constructionism epistemological positions are aligned with subjectivism and relativism (Naeem, 2019c) see Figure 3-4, which is another reason for the selection of social constructionism for this research.

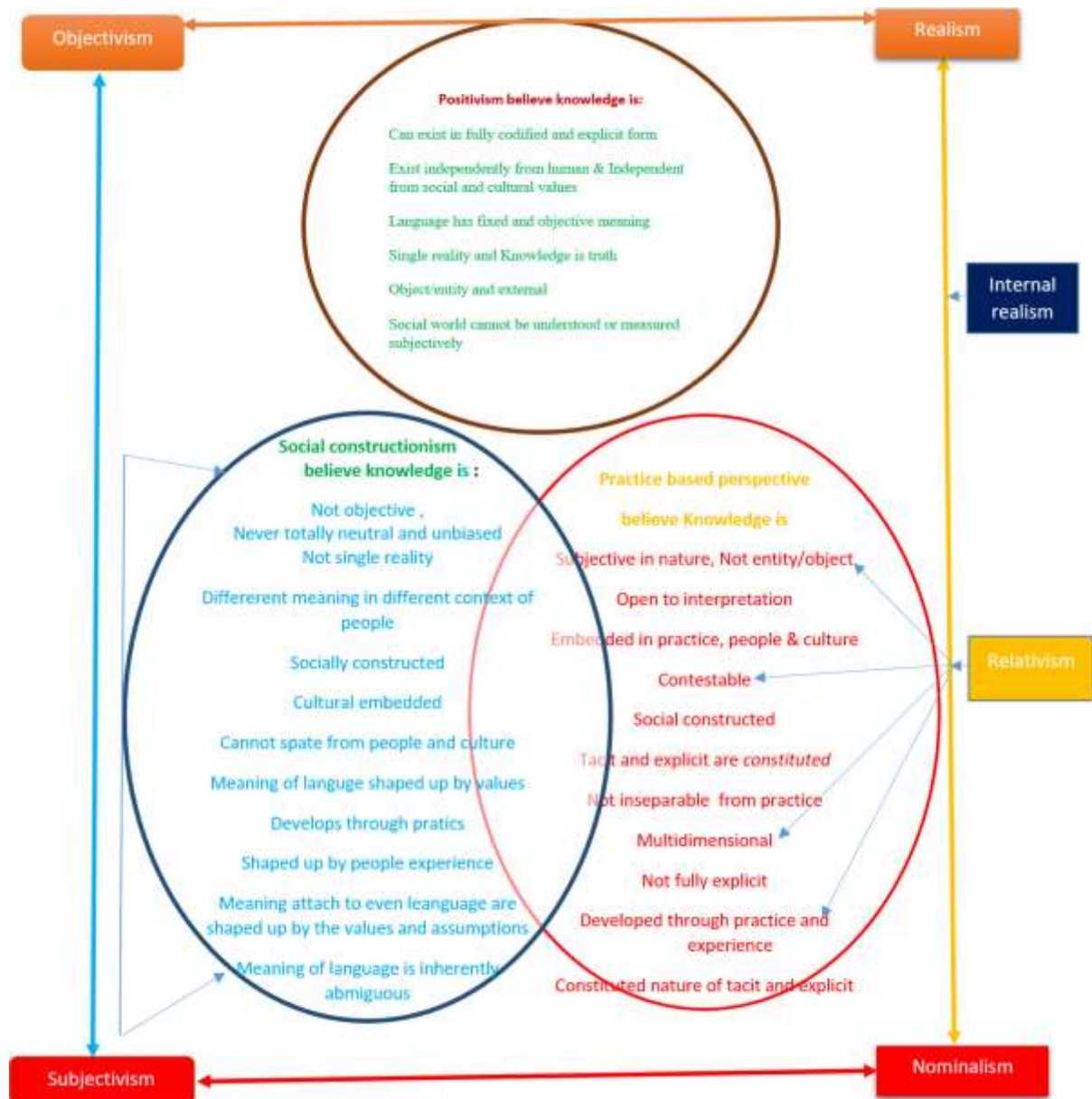


Figure 3-4 Eggs model of the relations between subjectivism, social constructionism and relativism

Practice-based knowledge cannot be isolated from the people who possess it. It is imperative to consider the views of those who possess such knowledge (Walliman, 2006). Therefore, the social influence of UGC in terms of brand engagement cannot be studied as an object, or through common principles and theories. As such, “...*reality*’ is not objective and exterior but is socially constructed and is given meaning by people in their daily interactions with others” (Easterby-Smith, 2015, p. 52). This study sets out to identify how people are socially influenced by UGC in their daily interactions with others on social media. The aim is to develop a practical framework of UGC and brand engagement for social media marketers and practitioners. Frost (2011) observed that instead of perceiving knowledge as something which people possess, it is better to look at knowledge as something which is practiced. Again, the case for a subjectivist philosophical position for this research is clear. As Travers (2001) indicated, knowledge in the business world carries different meanings in different situations and this offers an objectivist view of knowledge. Hislop (2005, p. 29) believed that “*the practice-based perspective instead views knowing and the development of knowledge as occurring on an ongoing basis through the routine activities the people undertake*”. Therefore, from a practice-based perspective, a subjectivist philosophical position is useful to understand the social influence of UGC in terms of brand engagement. Subjective meaning is central to this pursuit, as is the subjectivist idea that there are multiple realities that are possible based on a relativist position. Moreover, Dawson (2000) endorsed the definition of knowledge provided by Karl-Erik as a capacity to act. This capacity to act considers a broad range of elements in a situation whereby decisions can be effective. Computerised systems do not possess this capacity to act, as it is uniquely possessed by human beings (Liamputtong, 2010). This is because different situations require different actions to be taken, which is why an objective approach based on general principles is not considered a productive approach for understanding the social influence of UGC in relation to brands. Therefore, the subjectivist philosophical position is adopted for this research.

There are numerous debates in the social sciences concerning the difference between the positions of relativism, realism and nominalism. Researchers in the social sciences are concerned with the behaviour of people, the manner in which they act, and the motives of acting in particular situations, as compared to the role of inanimate objects

(Liamputtong, 2010). This gives rise to a serious question about which of the approaches, methods and assumptions of the natural sciences can be used in social sciences (Matthews & Ross, 2010). The answer is perhaps based on the topic of enquiry and the preference cast by individual researchers (Dawson, 2009). In addition, Easterby-Smith et al. (2015, p. 49) stated that “*the answer depends both on the topic of enquiry and the preferences of the individual researcher*”. The researcher’s values have therefore been discussed in the last chapter of thesis which offers a discussion of reflexivity.

### **3.3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

Social constructionism is aligned with exploratory research design (Crowther & Lancaster, 2012). The research design enables the researcher to collect evidence and data for the sake of research with little available time and money. There are four categories in which the research purpose can be grouped (Ember & Ember, 2009). These are description, exploration, diagnosis and experimentation. Descriptive research is concerned with describing the characteristics and functions of the research problem (Gomm, 2008). An exploratory research design which is flexible is regarded as more appropriate as it enables the researcher to achieve their objectives within the flexible boundaries of the research (Hammersley, 2013). The aim of exploratory research is the provision of insight, understanding and exploration into the issue which the researcher has identified (Frost, 2011). Therefore, exploratory research design is employed for this research because the aim is to explore SMUs’ opinions and thoughts as to the role of UGC in SBE. Table 3-5 justifies the selection of exploratory research design (Travers, 2001; Cowan, 2009).

Figure 3-5 Exploratory and descriptive research design

	EXPLORATORY RESEARCH	DESCRIPTIVE RESEARCH
<b>Meaning</b>	This research enables the researcher to probe into a matter so that the issue can be formulated more clearly for investigation in future Yes, the researcher is able to set the social influence of UGC in the context of social brand engagement.	This type of research is concerned with exploring and explaining the group or individual situation
<b>Objective</b>	The ideas and thoughts are being discovered in this type of research The thoughts and opinion of SMUs are synthesised in the context of social influence	Functions and characteristics are being described
<b>Overall design</b>	The overall design is flexible in nature Yes, overall flexible design with relativist ontological position of this research gives the opportunity to develop UGC social brand engagement by creating links between different social influence factors	The overall design is rigid in nature
<b>Research process</b>	Unstructured process	Structured process
<b>Sampling</b>	Sampling technique comprises non-probability sampling generally	Sampling technique comprises probability sampling
<b>Statistical design</b>	No pre-planned design exists for analysis	Pre-planned design for analysis

UGC user-generated content and exploratory research design

Considering the overall nature of the topic as well as the ontological, axiological and epistemological positions, there is a link between the philosophical position and the research design (see Figure 3-6). The major objective of this research is the exploration of social realities attached to UGC which have a social influence on other SMUs within the network. Therefore, an exploratory research design is considered appropriate for this research. The basic aim of exploratory research is probing into matters so that maximum insight can be gained for precise investigation in future (Matthews & Ross, 2010). Such an approach is therefore adopted for this research. Indeed, the approach is appropriate since the focus of the researcher is to discover thoughts and ideas about the particular subject matter (Pickering & Griffin, 2008). This type of research is suitable for studies which are flexible in order to take into account various aspects that relate to the central issue (Matthews & Ross, 2010).

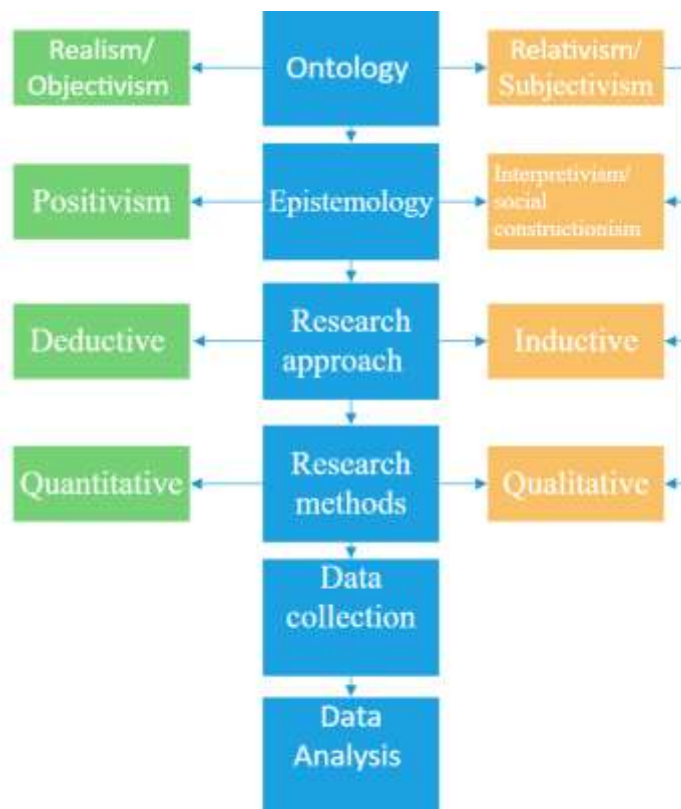


Figure 3-6 Philosophy and methodology developed buy author

The adopted research philosophy represents a perspective of viewing the world. This underpins an approach towards a research strategy and research methods (Maruyama & Ryan, 2014). This means that research methods are influenced by research philosophies (see Figure 3-5. The extent to which a researcher is clear about the theory at the beginning of their research highlights significant questions about the research design (Sloan & Quan-Haase, 2017). As shown in Figure 3-5 qualitative research methods are best aligned with social constructionism/subjectivism and relativism because qualitative methods examine opinion and thoughts through a cultural lens. Research methods can broadly be categorised into qualitative research and quantitative research methods. However, these are not entirely distinct, and they overlap in some areas (Hammersley, 2013). Table 3-6 describes the major differences between qualitative and quantitative research methods and justifies the selection of qualitative research for this research.

Table 3-5 Qualitative and quantitative research methods

Qualitative Methods	Quantitative Methods
<p>Data collection in qualitative methods involves focus groups, documentary reviews and in-depth interviews. Semi-structured interviews are being conducted for this research</p>	<p>Structured interviews, surveys, and observations. The data collection generally involves statistical and numerical data collection</p>
<p>Theory is generated following the inductive approach. UGC social consumer brand engagement has been developed through this research</p>	<p>For testing pre-specified concepts, the deductive process is employed. Further, hypotheses are also tested by employing a deductive process</p>
<p>It is subjective in nature as it involves describing the problem and gaining insight into the problem by collecting the views of those who are facing the problem. Subjectivist epistemological position is being taken to develop knowledge through the SMUs' opinion and thoughts</p>	<p>It is objective in nature. It involves an objective assessment of the situation. This includes empirical verification of the phenomenon being studied.</p>
<p>Text oriented. The whole research enquiry has been done in text form</p>	<p>Statistics and numbers oriented</p>
<p>In-depth information is collected as it is exploratory in nature. Exploratory research design has been employed to collect in-depth data on different factors of social context of social influence of UGC</p>	<p>Less in-depth but results can be generalised</p>
<p>Data collection comprises semi-structured and unstructured techniques. Semi-structured interviews are being conducted</p>	<p>Response options are fixed</p>
<p>Tests are not statistical in nature. No statistical tests being done, indeed social influence theory structure is used to develop final UGC social consumer brand engagement model</p>	<p>Analysis is conducted by employing statistical tests using different frameworks and models of tests</p>
<p>Can be reliable and valid. The skill and rigour of researcher is of relevance. As the analyses of these data are based on the skills of the researcher; the researcher's values and background were reflected in this research that would improve the reliability and validity of the research.</p>	<p>It is largely dependent on the instrument or device employed for measurements</p>
<p>Time is not incurred much during the planning phase; it is incurred during the data analysis phase</p>	<p>Time expenditure is heavier during the planning phase. The analysis phase</p>

	involves less time expenditure
Less generalisability. Research does not produce any generalisation; indeed this research explored the social context of UGC to create social consumer brand engagement on social media	Results can be generalised
Source: Maruyama and Ryan (2014); Sloan and Quan-Haase (2017); Hammersley (2013). <i>UGC</i> user-generated content and qualitative research	

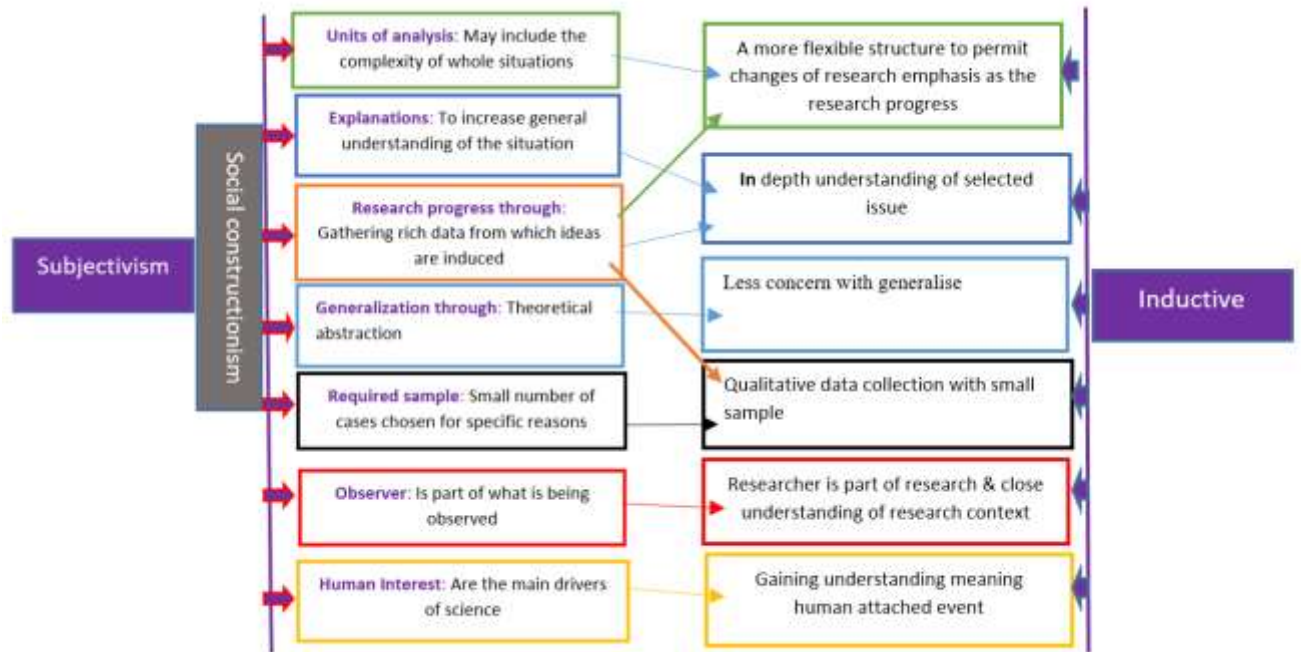
In quantitative research, problems are quantified by giving them numerical values which are then tested and transformed into useable statistics. In quantitative research, opinions, attitudes and behaviours are quantified (Blaxter et al., 2010). Data are collected from larger sample populations. In quantitative research, measurable data are collected, and data collection processes are structured (Shaw, 2010). Quantitative data collection involves various types of surveys such as paper, kiosk, online and mobile surveys (Liamputtong, 2010). Other approaches include longitudinal studies, online polls, website interceptors and systematic observations. In quantitative research, data are quantified (Gomm, 2008). This enables the researcher to generalise results. The results are generalised for entire populations of interest. Attitudes and opinions are quantified in this type of research so that they can be tested (Margolis & Pauwels, 2011). As stated above, this research explores a problem in hand and no theory or hypotheses were tested. Quantitative methods are therefore irrelevant for this research.

Table 3-6 Research approach, research methods and tools

	Concepts associated with quantitative methods	Concepts associated with qualitative methods
<b>Type of reasoning</b>	<b>Deduction</b> Objectivity Causation	<b>Induction</b> Subjectivity Meaning
<b>Type of question</b>	Close ended questions Outcome-oriented	Open ended questions Process-oriented
<b>Type of analysis</b>	Numerical in nature Statistical inference	Narrative in nature Constant comparison
<b>Source: (Margolis &amp; Pauwels, 2011)</b>		

As Table 3-7 shows, subjectivism supports qualitative methods of the type used in this research. Qualitative research involves interpretive approaches towards subject matter (Quinlan & Zikmund, 2015). Based on this type of research, the role of the researcher is to make sense of the situation by taking into account the views and opinions of those who are involved with the situation (Hammond & Wellington, 2013). As such, the researcher plays an active role in interpreting the situation. Qualitative research enables the researcher to understand the social reality of brand-related UGC on social media by ascertaining the views of those who are impacted by brand-related UGC. Therefore, in qualitative research, groups and people are studied in their natural context. The approach followed in this type of research is exploratory in nature. Additionally, qualitative research methods are also best aligned with inductive research as shown in Figure 3-6 This justifies the selection of inductive research for this study. In addition, the inductive approach is best matched to subjectivism and social constructionism which is another reason to use inductive research (see Figure 3-7).





*Figure 3-7 Social constructionism, subjectivism and inductive research approach developed by author*

There are two different types of research approaches which are induction and deduction. Deduction is primarily related to positivism as it aims to test theory, whereas induction relates to social constructionism as it aims to generate theory (Saunders et al., 2016). However, there are also areas where both approaches overlap (Edwards & Holland, 2013). Table 3-8 describes the major differences between the two research approaches and justifies the selection of an inductive research approach.

Table 3-7 Inductive and deductive research approach

Major differences between deduction and induction approach	
Deductive approach	Inductive approach
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Scientific enquiry is involved</li> <li>• Research progresses from theory towards empirical verification</li> <li>• The variables are drawn and the relationship between them is determined</li> <li>• Data collection is quantitative in nature</li> <li>• Controls are applied for ensuring data validity</li> <li>• Concepts are operationalised to ensure clarity of definition</li> <li>• Data collection is structured</li> <li>• Researcher is independent of the research</li> <li>• Sample size is larger</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understanding is gained about the meaning which humans attach to events (yes, this research gains an in-depth understanding about human social attachment and influence of UGC)</li> <li>• The research context is closely understood (yes, the researcher tried to understand the context of social influence of UGC very closely)</li> <li>• Data collection is qualitative in nature Qualitative research method is being employed to understand the social and cultural meaning attachments of UGC</li> <li>• The data collection is less structured in nature (yes, the data is in less structured, so the research creates the links between different social factors to develop final conceptual framework)</li> <li>• The researcher is part of the research (yes, researcher conducted semi-structured interviews and data analyses and presentation are based on the researcher's skills and capabilities)</li> <li>• Generalisation is not made (yes, no generalisation is made)</li> <li>• Theory is produced on the basis of reviewing other theories (yes, UGC social consumer brand engagement theory has been developed)</li> <li>• Research progresses towards theory generation (yes, this research progress towards theory generation)</li> <li>• Data collection comprises semi-structured and unstructured techniques (yes semi-structured interviews conducted with social media users)</li> </ul>
Most suitable with positivism and objectivism	<p>Most suitable with subjectivism, practice-based perspective and social constructionism</p> <p>Yes, an inductive research approach is being used because social constructionism and subjectivism is philosophical position of this research.</p>

UGC user-generated content

The inductive approach is concerned with realising the context in which things happen. It is focused on making sense of the context in which humans labour their actions. That is why, based on this type of approach, even a small sample size suffices for studying a context to make sense of a situation (Matthews & Ross, 2010). Inductive reasoning was seen as more useful in this sense as compared to deductive reasoning (see Table 3-8). The inductive researcher begins by taking into account specific measures and observations (Adams et al., 2014). Further, the researcher formulates theory on the basis of observing and understanding the situation, and on interpretations ascribed to situations. This is another reason for the selection of an inductive research approach. Williams et al. (2013) indicated that deductive research methods are best for testing theory. Whilst this research does not test theory it develops a theory and so inductive research is employed. To reflect on the research objective and background, it is clear that this research is based on observations and on researcher practice as a marketing practitioner. Therefore, on the basis of practice-based observations, it can be argued that brand-related UGC on social media exerts social influence on SMUs. This creates an impact on users' feelings and attachment towards specific brands. In addition, the researcher also believes that there is no universal law or theory to understand the social realities of UGC in the context of social influence as an outcome of brand engagement. Therefore, there is a need to explore this social phenomenon, which is why an inductive research approach has been selected for this research. From the above discussion it can be concluded that there is a link between particular research philosophies and research methodologies. As such, Figure 3-8 has been developed to illuminate the links between the different characteristics of the philosophies and methodologies discussed.

# Of Course It's Not Really that Simple

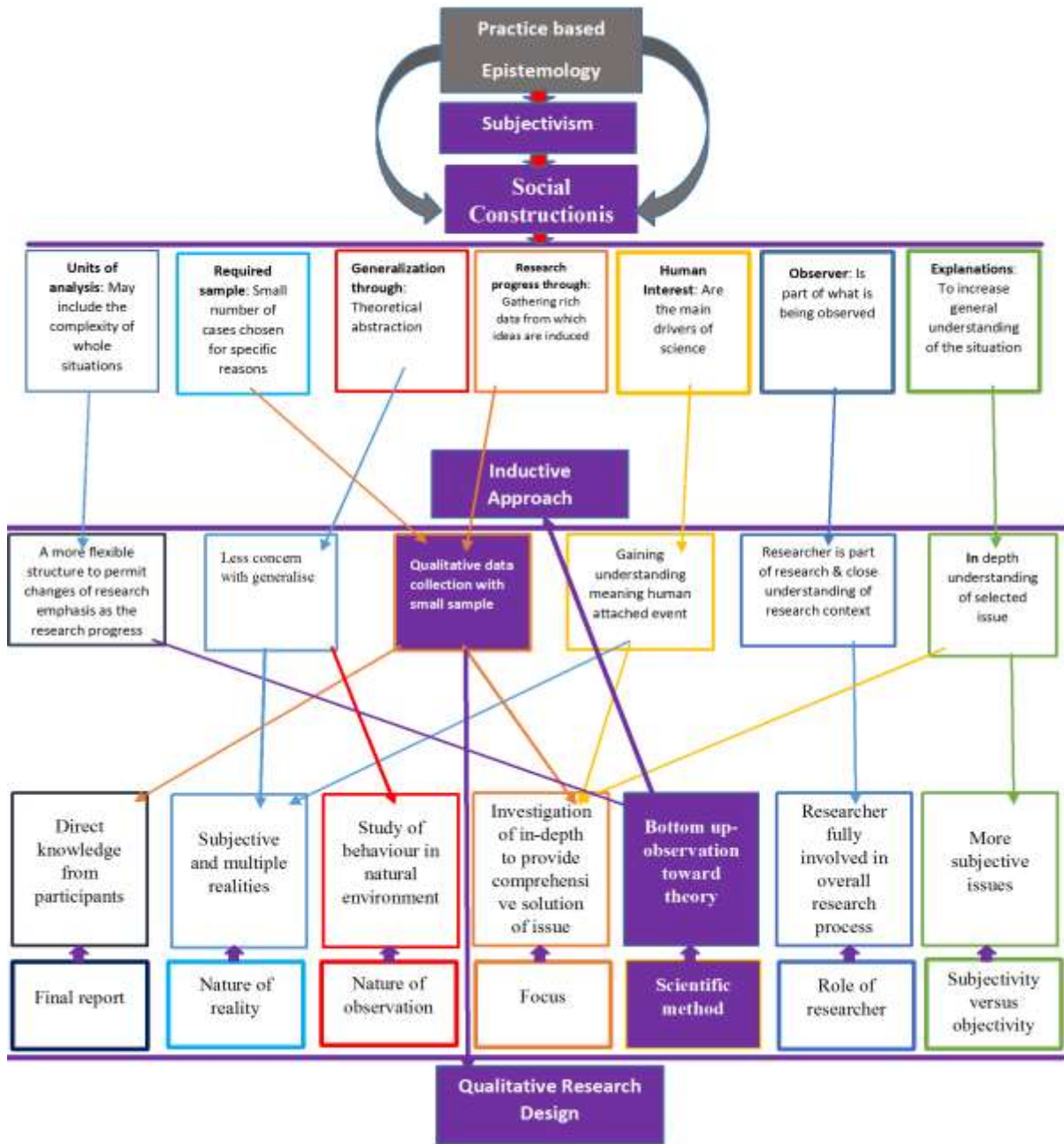


Figure 3-8 Methodology of research

As Figure 3-8 shows, social constructionism/subjectivism aligns with an inductive approach and qualitative research is typically used to gather data to explore the multi social realities behind the social influence of SMUs towards specific brand through social interaction of UGC in their everyday life . As there are mighty realities needed to explore therefore qualitative research method is best line to explore the mighty

realities of UGC social context towards social brand engagement and consumer brand engagement. In qualitative research, the researcher explores a particular phenomenon. The researcher is able to gain insight into the situation and develop ideas on the basis of their understanding. This is developed by taking into account a range of subjective views as illustrated in the above Figure 3-8 (Frost, 2011). This approach best matches the philosophical position of this research. Qualitative research is also employed to uncover the opinions, thoughts and trends of brand-related UGC in the context of social influences towards brands. This means the facts can be probed and it acknowledges that reality is constructed by SMUs on SMNs. The methods of data collection in qualitative research comprise semi-structured or unstructured techniques (Fellows & Liu, 2015). Some common methods for collecting data in qualitative research include focus group discussions, observations and interviews. The size of the sample in this type of research is usually small (Cassell et al., 2017). Therefore, semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants and open-ended questionnaires were undertaken to gather data.

Qualitative research is considered to be interpretive and creative, and therefore useful for social constructionism philosophies. In this type of research, researchers do not build their understanding by testing hypotheses (Willig & Stainton, 2017), instead they focus on generating theory on the basis of different theories; the researcher prepares a conclusion by reviewing existing theories (Dawson, 2000). Different techniques can be employed in qualitative research to make sense of data, such as grounded theory, content analysis, discourse analysis and thematic analysis (Cohen et al., 2011). Thematic analysis was employed as an analytical approach in this research. In qualitative research, an exploratory research design is common. The findings of this qualitative research are not conclusive in terms of the nature of the social influence of UGC. Qualitative research involves exploring and generating theory (Patton, 2015). This provides the rationale for decision making and is not aimed at generating conclusive results. Qualitative research involves gaining insight into a situation on the basis of which a decision can be recommended (Maruyama & Ryan, 2014).

### **3.4 CASE STUDY OF UGC AND BRAND ENGAGEMENT**

The current study has efficiently availed itself of the benefits of adopting a case study as

its research strategy. According to Yin (1994), if the background and lines concerning a phenomenon are not clear, then adopting a case study as a research strategy is important to thoroughly investigate the matter in a real-time situation. Though there are many studies that have compared like studies with the aim of making this phenomenon clear from a SBE perspective, they did not focus on CBE in response to a brand's own social media strategies. Thus, it is very crucial to have deep insights into this phenomenon and complete understanding of the relationship between SBE and social CBE. As the current study aims to explore the social impact of UGC on social CBE from SMUs' perspectives, considering a case study as a research strategy is very useful in this regard. In parallel with social constructionism, it is generally considered that a case study is the most appropriate research strategy particularly when meanings given to an object (as UGC as well as social CBE in this study) by subjects (SMUs) need to be explored.

However, a case study offers a weak experimental design because it is a unique research strategy which is designed only for a specific circumstance (Gomm, 2008). According to some researchers, case studies provide a comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon from individuals' perspectives, particularly for those who are knowledgeable and have a clear understanding of the research area through personal experiences (Ozuem et al., 2018). This study is a cross-sectional study that examines the views of those SMUs who are active users. Their opinions will enable the researcher to clearly explain the phenomenon as well as uncover the cultural and social meanings these users give to UGC.

When adopting a case study as a research strategy, the very first step is to outline the detail of the case under examination (Ozuem et al., 2008). Hammersley (2013) in this regard suggested one should clearly present the research question. In the current research case, the main question is "How are fundamental concepts, classes and theorised causal links revised so that social influence theory can also account for SBE?" Basically, this question refers to understanding UGC in a social context where the social interaction of SMUs leads to the creation of social CBE. This research aims to address following research question:

**1:** What is the current understanding level on the role of UGC that impact on the consumer behaviour towards a specific brand?

**2:** What are the different roles of different SMUs in the creation, exchange and use of UGC on social media platforms?

**3:** How do different factors impact the social influence of UGC in the context of brand among SMUs?

**4:** How does the social interaction of UGC create SBE and CBE among SMUs?

The answer of these questions aimed to develop new theory/framework pertaining to social CBE setting. This question logically conceptualised how the social influence of UGC creates social CBE about fashion brands within the UK. Following the principle of examining cause–effect relationships, this research investigated how UGC acts as a source to create “social CBE”. In this regard, this research selected an explanatory case study to not only refine the existing theory but also to extend knowledge on the role of UGC social influence to generate brand engagement on social media

A case study generally does suit a specific phenomenon and importance is, in fact, given to natural settings where phenomena are likely to occur (Quinlan & Zikmund, 2015; (Yin, 2014). In other words, case studies are specified for those situations which are not naturally subjected to manipulation (Quinlan, 2011). Based on this argument, comprehensive observations by practitioners could be considered genuine efforts to develop a theory through taking a case study of a specific phenomenon. Therefore, I am considering UGC social influence to generate brand engagement as case study because it is a: (a) modern concept of brand engagement is SBE; (b) CBE, social CBE and social engagement are three different aspects of brand engagement on social media; (c) by adopting various market strategies, UGC can develop brand engagement on social media; (d) this study considered experiential knowledge related to UGC to generate social and consumer brand engagement on social media. It is generally argued that mutual cultural values and experiential knowledge facilitate the researcher to have deeper insights into a given social phenomenon (Saunders et al., 2016). Moreover, case studies allow the personal experiences of a researcher to be embedded in social constructivism (Saunders et al., 2016). As much of the intention of this research was to make practical and theoretical contributions, the researcher used his personal working

experience as a digital marketing advisor in the UK which is a complete overview of the case study in hand.

### **3.5 SAMPLE SELECTION**

By virtue of sampling, the researcher is able to deduce information about the particular population on the basis of the results derived from a subset of that same population without the need to investigate every individual forming part of the population (Saunders et al., 2016). When the number of individuals is reduced for survey purposes, it reduces the workload and increases the time required and the increase cost efficiency of the study as the researcher only surveys those who belong to the population (Saunders et al., 2016). When a sample is chosen, regardless of the method, it is imperative that the individuals forming part of the sample are actually representative of the population (i.e. they must be drawn from the population and not from the outside) (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015). There are different techniques for selecting a sample from a population. Two widely used approaches are probability sampling and non-probability sampling. Probability (random) sampling begins with a complete sampling frame of all eligible individuals from which a sample is taken. In this way everyone forming part of the population has equal probability of getting chosen and the generalisability of the results is made easier (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015). Probability sampling can be time consuming as well as expensive as compared to non-probability sampling. In non-probability sampling the researcher does not begin with a complete frame of sampling, and thus some individuals may not be given the chance to be selected (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015). As a consequence, the sampling error effect cannot be estimated and there is a prominent risk of ending up with a sample that is non-representative and thus non-generalisable (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015; Saunders et al., 2016). This method of sampling is cheaper and easier to use and is generally used for generating a hypothesis in exploratory research.

Nevertheless, a coherent selection of cases is imperative for deriving the findings of the current study about the impact of UGC on brand engagement in the context of social media with respect to fashion retailing. The technique utilised for sample selection is purposeful sampling in accordance with Patton's (1990) suggestions. Patton (1990) emphasised that the importance of samples in qualitative research is based on information richness in a particular sample. Patton (1990) enlisted various



strategies for purposeful sampling from information-rich individuals. Patton (1990) recommended choosing a strategy which is highly valued for certain desired results. Table 3-9 summarises types of non-probability sampling and their associated advantages and risks.

*Table 3-8 Non-probability sampling methods*

Convenience sampling:	Convenience sampling is arguably the easiest sampling method due to selection of participants on the basis of their availability and interest in taking part in the survey (Howitt, 2019). Useful results can be derived but the results may be biased due to differences in opinion of participants versus non-participants and as such the sample may not be entirely representative of characteristics, such as gender and age. Nevertheless, all non-probability methods of sampling carry the risk of volunteer bias (Tracy, 2013).
Quota sampling:	This sampling method is usually used by marketers. Interviewers are given particular quotas for recruitment. Ideally the quotas selected would represent the population (Taylor et al., 2015). Although this carries the benefit of being a straightforward process and probably representative too, it may not entirely represent the population in terms of all characteristics (Lapan et al., 2010).
Snowball sampling:	This method is usually utilised when the investigator is researching hard-to-reach groups. Existing subjects are asked to nominate those subjects that fall into the same population category (Taylor et al., 2015). This process proceeds until the desired sample size is reached and, as such, it is called snowball sampling. Snowball sampling may also be used when the frame of sampling is not easy to identify. However, by choosing acquaintances and friends of subjects who are already being investigated, there is also a risk of selection bias (Paley, 2017).
Purposive sampling:	This is also referred to as subjective or selective sampling as it rests on the researcher's judgement in terms of who is asked to

	<p>participate. Thus, initially the researcher may select someone suitable that meets certain needs or characteristics (Carey, 2012). This is both cost efficient and time efficient. However, it also carries the risk of volunteer bias and due to its general nature it is prone to errors of purpose on the part of the researcher. Purposive sampling, also referred to as judgemental sampling, or subjective or selective sampling, is a type of non-probability sampling whereby the researcher exercises his or her judgement while selecting the members of population to partake in the study (Willig &amp; Stainton, 2017). This method of sampling requires the researcher to possess knowledge beforehand about the purpose of the study so that eligible participants can be chosen. This method of sampling is selected when the aim of the researcher is to access a specific subset of a population because all participants chosen fit a particular profile (Seale, 2007).</p>
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Purposive sampling is being used for the selection of the participants and the following inclusion and exclusion criteria have been employed for the selection of the participants. Patton (1990) suggested that defined inclusion and exclusion criteria ensure that information-rich cases are selected. Therefore, four exclusion and inclusion criteria were set as shown in Table 3-10 was inserted.

*Table 3-9 Inclusion and exclusion criteria*

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Capacity to contract	18+ years of age	Under 18
Experienced in user-generated content on social media	Experienced in sharing or reading and watching, experience about bought fashion items, sharing their views on friends'	Less than 3 times sharing on social media in past year.

	<p>brand wearing, for more than 3 times last year.</p> <p>Or</p> <p>Reading and sharing offers, promotion and sales information on social media at least twice in past year.</p>	
Brand engagement on social media about appraising, sharing and criticising fashion-related content	Getting information from social media friends to purchase at least twice under the influence of social media	Sharing own shopping experience and fashion brand-related content on social media.
Total accounts on social media	Using social media frequently in daily life and holding accounts on three social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or YouTube	Less than three social media platforms

Firstly, only those people who possessed a full capacity to contract in the current study were selected. People in the UK have the capacity to contract when they reach the age of 18. Therefore, those aged below 18 were not selected. Secondly, customers who possessed experience in appraising and sharing fashion content on social media were selected. The involvement of users who are experienced on social media by sharing and appraising media at least three times had higher chances of providing rich

information. Less experienced prospects were dropped from the study so that information richness could be maintained. Thirdly, it was imperative for the results of this study that participants had influenced friends in terms of creating or sharing fashion-related posts. This was important because the concept of brand promotion is utilised widely by brands to encourage SMUs through such promotions to generate brand engagement (Colicev et al., 2019). By including customers who possess experience of over two multichannel retailers the credibility of data was increased.

Fourthly, it became clear during the pilot study that those who possessed less enthusiasm about fashion should not be included in the study. Two out of three pilot participants regarded themselves as less enthusiastic about social media even though they used social media regularly. That is why the fourth criterion had to be established to filter out those who were not enthusiastic about social media. This was done by including only those who were present on at least three different social media platforms. Participants who were not present on at least three different social media platforms could be regarded as less valuable because they did not possess sufficient information about UGC on social media related to fashion. The rationale for the sample size is presented below along with a discussion of the methods of data collection and analysis adopted. The respondents have been approached by using the social and professional ties of the author of this study. The researcher has good social connections with many friends who use fashion brands targeted in this study. These friends referred the researcher to their friends as well as office colleagues who met the set inclusion criteria of this study.

In this research, purposeful sampling was employed as participants were chosen on the basis of their buying experience of fashion products. The purposive sampling is also known as heterogeneous sampling because it allows to select diversified respondents such as males and females, social, cultural, and professional backgrounds with respect to generate different and rich realities on social brand engagement and consumer brand engagement using social influence through social media platforms. The maximum variation of sampling (i.e. heterogeneous/judgemental) allow us to target those participants for this study which having the knowledge about proposed research questions of this study. For example, this study has set inclusion criteria as well as targeted the respondents who are

professionals, students, housewives, consultants, males and females so that this study can generate rich interpretations using the same context. Inductive approach support to develop theoretical model or theory by extracting rich insights from small number of participants as well as increased the involvement of researchers. Boddy (2005a; 2005b) believed that a sample size of 25-30 is sufficient for the purpose of qualitative inquiry. Thus, a sample size of 30 or above would require serious justification in qualitative research, which is why this research is based on a sample size of 32 participants. This number represents the data saturation point. As highlighted earlier, researchers developed the concept of data saturation to identify the limits of sample sizes. This is the point where no new data comes to light.

### **3.6 PILOT STUDY**

There are some major questions which arise from reflecting on the research strategy of the current research. For example, what if the interview questions are not sufficiently clear to participants? What if they were led in another direction by the question? What if the questions were not in line with the goals of the research? Therefore, the researcher considered it vital to undertake a pilot study (Gomm, 2008). Participants in the pilot study were chosen on the basis of existing inclusion and exclusion criteria, and, in particular, they were to be experienced and involved in content related to fashion on social media and “experienced in buying at different fashion brands in the UK”. These criteria were taken into account with respect to conducting a pilot study so that participants met the same criteria as participants in the “live” research.

During the interview, some participants acknowledged that social media often had an impact on their intention to buy products other than fashion items. Finally, it came to light that such participants regarded themselves as interested in the content shared by their friends on social media about their shopping experience. Some participants also indicated that they used group chat features to inform friends about their shopping experiences and to share media relating to fashion products through Instagram, Facebook and Snapchat. On the basis of the results of the pilot study, another criterion was introduced to the main study: “high enthusiasm for fashion”. It was found during the pilot study that two participants only used one SNS; therefore, a minimum of three SNS accounts were included in the inclusion criteria.

In qualitative study, pilot interviews are usually conducted to achieve two aims: setting the potential criteria for research participants; and understanding and refining the interview guide, specifically selecting and refining interview questions (Majid et al., 2017). Furthermore, Majid et al., (2017) have argued that the purpose of pilot interviews is to check the questions in the original setting as well as do some practice before starting the original interviews. According to researchers, a pilot study offers useful understanding about the procedures of a full-scale study regardless of the research paradigm (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003); in fact, it is useful to address potential practical issues as well as useful for testing the constructed questions (Majid et al., 2017). Castillo-Montoya (2016) highlighted that a pilot interview can enhance the effectiveness of interview protocols by improving the quality of interview questions. Based on this discussion, the present study conducted four interviews with the purpose of improving interview protocols as well as understanding what modifications will be required with respect to social, cultural and local contextual meanings as per respondents' points of view. Based on a discussion with four pilot study participants, the research questions are reviewed, improved and approved by the supervisor.

### **3.7 SAMPLE SIZE AND RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS ANONYMITY**

The number of participants in any research is the criterion which determines the extent to which the research significantly contributes towards theory generation. The total number of participants selected for the study is referred to as the sample size. Different published resources have highlighted the standard methods for selecting sample size to ensure the sample represents the population (Walliman, 2010). The case is more complex for qualitative research than quantitative research. Patton (1990) argued that in qualitative enquiries it is not the methodological rules which underpin the research but the purposeful strategies. The literature on research methods that speaks to sample selection in qualitative research states that selection is based on the nature of investigation. Patton (1990) indicated that there are no universal rules for selecting sample size for qualitative research. Sample size is based on what the researcher wants to know, the reason behind conducting the research, what the researcher believes is useful, what would be contributory towards credibility, and what can be done with the resources and time available (Patton, 1990). Walliman (2018) argued that the broader and deeper the analytical unit, the smaller the sample size should be

to generate a hypothesis. Cohen et al. (2011) indicated that different research can be legitimate even though the sample size is small. She argued that the researcher can finish collecting data when different categories reach a saturation point. Categories saturate when the collection of data no longer returns new information or insight into the subject matter (Smith, 2010). Therefore, it is not possible to assess the final number of interviews that are required in advance as saturation needs to be achieved. Saunders et al. (2016) observed that, on average, 32 participants were chosen for qualitative surveys in different qualitative researches. They observed that this number of participants could be regarded as sufficient to achieve legitimate research (Walliman, 2018).

Boddy (2005b) argued that the choice of research philosophy and selection of sample size are interrelated. This has also been highlighted by Onwuegbuzie & Leech (2005). Lincoln & Guba (2000) argued that sample size is directly related with the approach taken by the researcher e.g. positivist approach involves larger sample size as such samples have to be subjected to testing. However, positivist approach is related to quantitative approach, whereas social sciences researchers increasingly opt for qualitative approach as well but may take inspiration from positivist approach in qualitative methodology (Boddy, 2005a). When such an approach is taken by the researchers then the sample size even in qualitative studies may be bigger than that is usually taken in qualitative studies. Generally, the sample size in qualitative studies is small because it just has to be representative of the population of study. Nevertheless, if qualitative sampling sufficiently represents the population then it is not necessary to increase the sample size e.g. Gordon & Langmaid (1990) suggested drawing a grid to identify whether each gender and age is represented in the sample. Stake (2000) also suggested taking the grid approach to identify the suitable sample size.

Different researchers indicated different sample size for qualitative studies. For example, Sandelowski (1995) argued that a sample size of 10 is sufficient for a qualitative inquiry whereas Creswell (1998) argued that sample size should at least be 20 and up to 30. However, there is no universal evidence in this regard to suggest the universal sample size for qualitative studies. In such a situation the sample size is set to the limit when data saturation becomes evident. This is discussed later; first the approach taken by different researchers towards sample size is explained.

Marshall et al. (2013) argued that sample size of 20 is sufficient for a research following grounded-theory approach. Marshall (et al. 2013) also argued that the maximum size of sample should be 40 for the similar type of research. They also pointed out that in qualitative studies the sample size of 20-30 is sufficient to generate rich data for the researcher, particularly in case study research method. However, Marshall (et al. 2013) also acknowledged that US researchers generally take a larger sample size whereas British researchers usually take a smaller sample size in account. Sandelowski (1995) argued that the reason behind smaller sample size in qualitative studies is to enable cases-oriented and deep analysis which is otherwise not possible when large sample size is taken into account. Sandelowski (1995) further argued that in-depth understanding and analysis is not possible if the researcher takes a large sample size into account in qualitative inquiry. Sandelowski (1995) argued that a sample size of 50 respondents is a large sample for qualitative study as it would affect the quality of analysis and in-depth understanding. Guest (et al. 2006) argued that different qualitative researches would require different sample size but on average data saturation is reached at 12. Mason (2010) also reiterated the same that a sample size of 10-12 is sufficient for a qualitative research. Boddy (2005a; 2005b) highlighted their experience when they were asked to conduct in-depth interviews with 1000 respondents as part of qualitative inquiry in marketing research. Boddy (2005a; 2005b) argued that a sample size of 1000 is a huge sample which would not generate meaningful insight in a qualitative inquiry. They argued that such a huge sample size would not generate meaningful insight in qualitative research. Boddy (2005a; 2005b) believed that a sample size of 25-30 is sufficient for the purpose of qualitative inquiry. Thus, a sample size of 30 or above would require serious justification in qualitative research, which is why this research is based on a sample size of 32 participants. This number represents the data saturation point. As highlighted earlier, researchers developed the concept of data saturation to identify the limits of sample sizes. This is the point where no new data comes to light.



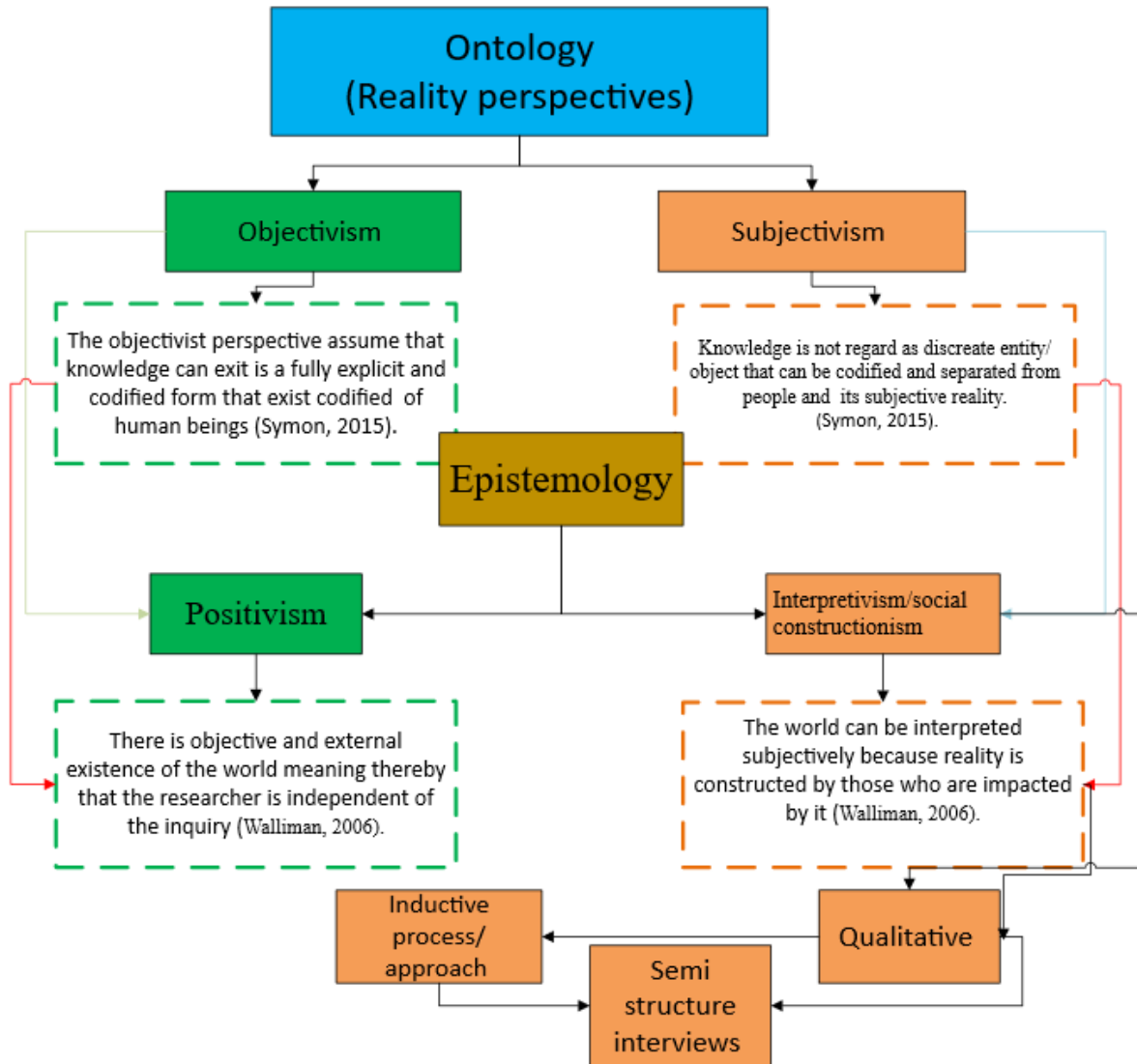


Figure 3-9 Link between ontology, epistemology and methodology developed by author

The sample size in the current study comprised 32 participants who took part in in-depth interviews (see table 3-11). The selection of a small sample is justified due to limited understanding about UGC in SBE and limited understanding of the social context of UGC which includes social ties, quality of information, homophily, social credibility and reliability. The current study focused on understanding UGC social and brand engagement phenomenon in detail; therefore, the focus of these interviews was to get participants' points of view on their motivation to create, generate, share, consume and ignore brand-related UGC on social media. Additionally, it also tried to understand under which type of social circumstance the UGC led them towards a specific fashion brand and why. To ensure a positive outcome for the study it was

important to collect the points of view of various participants with different experiences to understand the trust, homophily, credibility, source of UGC, quality and social ties role of UGC influence on the SMUs. Variation was noted in terms of the effect of content, the characteristics of the creator and the level of social influence with respect to fashion brands.

*Table 3-10 Interview participants*

It has become an important issue for researchers to anonymise research participants' personal identities because maintaining their anonymity is a key ethical aspect, especially when they are under pressure from an authority (Grinyer, 2001). Snyder (2002) argued that the responsibilities of qualitative researchers are increased compared to quantitative researchers because they are more involved in dealing with the confidentiality of research data as well as the anonymity of participants' personal identities. According to Saunders et al. (2015), anonymity should be considered a kind of confidentiality with the purpose of hiding the research participants' identities. Saunders et al. (2015) highlighted that the idealised view of anonymity means that the research participants should not be traceable from the results. Scott (2005) stated that many researchers are agreed that the primary researcher (i.e. only one person is able to access and see research participants' information) should know who the research participants are; to ensure the research participants' anonymity their identity must not be traceable by definition (Scott, 2005). Similarly, David, (1992) defined anonymity as there should be no technique for anyone (including the primary researcher) to trace back the research participants' personal identities. Ummel and Achille (2016) stated that researchers are considered main gatekeepers to hide their participants' identities otherwise researchers' responsibility can be challenged. Researchers provide a guarantee of privacy to research participants by offering a safe context so that they can share their secrets without fearing for their anonymity rights (Ummel & Achille, 2016).

Anonymity can be considered the best way to maintain confidentiality during data reporting (Snyder, 2002). Researchers have argued that anonymity means researchers have two priorities: maintaining the integrity and value of research data and enhancing the protection for research participants' personal identities (Saunders

et al., 2015; Scott, 2005). There are many famous studies available in which it is confirmed that participants' personal information will not be shared so that they can

No	Age	Gender	Active social media account	Active instant messaging apps	Occupation	Education
1	18–25	M	3	2	Student	Bachelor's degree
2		F	3	2	Student	Bachelor's degree
3		M	2	3	Professional	CMI level 7
4		M	2	1	Business owner	GCSE
5		F	2	3	Professional female	ACCA
6		M	1	3	Office worker	Bachelor's degree
7		F	3	2	Housewife	Bachelor's degree
8		M	5	3	Student	Bachelor's degree
9	26–35	M	1	3	Professional worker	Master's degree
10		F	2	2	Student	Bachelor's degree
11		M	4	3	Marketing consultant	Master's degree
12		F	1	4	Housewife	Bachelor's degree
13		M	2	4	Student	PhD (continue)
14		F	2	3	Mom	Bachelor's degree
15		F	2	2	Housewife	Master's degree
16		M	3	1	Business owner	Master's degree
17		F	2	1	Student	Bachelor's degree
18		M	1	1	Marketing consultant	Master's degree
19		F	1	2	Professional women	Master's degree
20		F	1	3	Business owner	Master's degree
21		M	1	2	Business consultant	Master's degree
22		M	2	1	Office worker	Master's degree
23		F	2	3	Housewife	Master's degree
24		F	3	3	Housewife	Bachelor's degree
25	36–45	F	3	2	housewife	Bachelor's degree
26		F	3	1	Marketing consultant	Master's degree
27		M	1	2	Housewife	Bachelor's degree
28		M	1	3	Marketing consultant	Master's degree
29		M	1	4	Business owner	Master's degree
30	46–55	M	1	3	Professional worker	Master's degree
31		F	3	3	IT professional	Master's degree
32		M	2	3	Office worker	Master's degree

share information freely and their anonymity is not compromised during the reporting of their answers (Lelkes et al., 2012). Crow and Wiles (2008) highlighted that researchers can change the research participants' personal identities, such as occupation and gender, with the purpose of maintaining their anonymity during the reporting of demographic features in research data. According to David (1992) personal identifiers are, but not limited to, addresses, names, e-mail addresses, photographs, IP addresses, government ID and phone numbers. Researchers believe that it is a major challenge for researchers to address the challenges with respect to hiding the personal identifiers of participants, such as place, people names, cultural and religious background, social enshinships, occupation and other personal information that can identify the identity of research participants (Saunders et al., 2015).

Research participants share key information about themselves, as well as people from their social circle, in the belief that their personal information will not be disclosed (Saunders et al, 2015; Ummel & Achille, 2016). Corden and Sainsbury (2006) argued that researchers can use gender and age groups to help ensure that information about their research participants cannot be traced back. Based on the above detailed discussion on anonymity, I believe that participants' anonymity is not only limited to research data and questions, but also includes the meeting information with the participant. Therefore, overall, participants were categorised on the basis of their age groups to ensure their anonymity and to ensure their reported interviews could not be traced back accurately.

### **3.8 SEMI-STRUCTURED IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS**

Semi-structured interviews involve some pre-determined questions as observed by Fellows and Liu (2015). The interview questions are attached in Appendix 2. Semi-structured interviews were conducted because they are considered to increase conversation as compared to structured interviews (Adams et al., 2014). Since the aim of the researcher was to gain in-depth understanding about the impact of fashion related UGC on consumers, the choice of semi-structured interview is justified. The average duration of interviews was between 25 and 45 minutes. Fellows and Liu (2015) suggested limiting the interview to less than one hour to maintain concentration levels.

The interviewer personally invited interviewees to take part in the research who met the criteria for interview. Two documents were sent to these participants: a consent sheet (appendix 3) and a participant information sheet (Appendix 4). Upon receiving the consent of the participants, they were asked to indicate a preferred location for the interview. The choice regarding the location of interview is significant due to its effect on the outcome of the interview. The literature suggests that location plays a pivotal role in the comfort of the participants in an interview (Saunders et al., 2016). Participants variously chose preferred time-out areas and canteens as well as offices as interview venues.

The interviewees were informed that the interviewer would be recording the interview. Moreover, notes were also collected to summarise key statements. The researcher also observed the body language of the interviewees during the interview process. In order to understand the perception of participants, their verbal and non-verbal communications were noted (Cassell et al., 2017). The interview questions were designed for analytical purposes so that each question related to a research question as suggested by Willig et al. (2017). Direct involvement in the process increased experiential knowledge about the topic being investigated. Furthermore, since the interviews were semi-structured in nature, some *ad hoc* questions were introduced where it was felt necessary to further understanding.

Bo (2015) argued that social constructivists use language with the purpose to communicate and understand social phenomena rather than focusing on representation. In critical epistemology or social constructionism, language is used to construct meaning rather than putting a mirror on reality (Alvesson, 2003). Language is used with the purpose to understand the social environment, meanings and interests of people; therefore, people usually copy usages and expressions of thought from each other (Bo, 2015). Lakoff (1987) highlighted that we use cognition, meaning and language to capture the subjective realities of thoughts about the social world so that we can get appropriate knowledge. To understand language, it is important to understand the social interactions with the environment which can build human perceptions (Bo, 2015). Furthermore, researchers argued that language is usually used with the purpose of finding a collection of intentions of a social community as well as individual-to-individual social connections and interactions (Bo, 2015).

Chomsky (2013) revealed that selection and use of language is done with the purpose to exactly derive the meanings from the expression of different thoughts. A purpose of language is to accurately capture the interests and thoughts of people who shared the information (Palmer, 1981). According to Welch and Piekkari (2006, p. 435) *“Language is another dimension of the ‘localness’ of an interview which has been neglected by the literature on qualitative methodology and international business”*. Social constructionist conceptualisation is based on interviewee and interviewer meanings which they produced through the interview process (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). Furthermore, Holstein & Gubrium, (1995) highlighted that an interview should be considered a “search-and-discovery mission” with the purpose to get accurate and precise information from research participants. Interviews are conducted with the purpose to gather inter-relation (Kvale, 1996) as well as context-specific data is an effort of interviews to explore the hidden meaning attached with words (Mishler, 1986). According to Auer and Di-Luzio (1992), the context and language are not fixed, therefore, the purpose of using specific language and context is to understand the meaning of social conversations rather than produce predefined conventions and understandings. Therefore, language selection is done by the speaker because the purpose is to understand the contextualisation of society (Briggs, 1986; Duranti, 1997). According to Welch and Piekkari (2006), it is very important to select the right language for interviews as it can provide ease and the most accurate interviewee responses. According to Rubin and Rubin (1995, p. 173), *“use of the interviewee’s native language is potentially a powerful route to acceptance and an indicator of one’s willingness to enter into the world of the interviewees”*.

Based on above discussion regarding selection of language, interviews were conducted in the interviewees native language (i.e. Urdu) as well as English with the purpose of capturing and interpreting contextualisation of subjective realities, local context, social interactions and conversations, accurate and precise information, exact meanings and interests of people, social facts, norms, values and rules. The major reason to conduct some interviews in Urdu was that researcher own first language is Urdu and the participants’ first language is Urdu; therefore, it was quite convenient to conduct interviews in our first language. In this study, 17 interviews were conducted in the researcher’s native language (i.e. Urdu) while the remaining 15 interviews were conducted in English. The choice of language aligned with researcher social

constructionist epistemological position because as a social constructionist researcher major intention was to understand the social, cultural and language-related meanings attached to UGC which create social influence on SMUs. The researcher of this study translated these interviews because the researcher was involved throughout the interviews with the purpose to understand, transcribe and interpret social, local and cultural meanings. On the basis of epistemological position, the researcher has to be fully involved in the entire research process and try to understand the direct and indirect meaning of the words and language; therefore, while translating the interviews I tried to draw the exact meaning of the discussions, which is why the quality of these interviews is a bit higher than other interviews.

### **3.9 DATA ANALYSIS**

Thematic analysis has been employed for data analysis and the overall themes were structured using different codes. It is therefore useful to begin defining the meaning of the codes to contextualise the data analysis process. In qualitative research, a code refers to a short phrase or word that symbolically allocates an evocative, summative, salient and/or essence-capturing attribute to a part of visual or language-based data (Saldana, 2009). However, the data may consist of participant observation field-notes, interview transcripts, drawings, documents, journals, videos, photographs, artefacts, e-mail correspondence, Internet sites and literature amongst other. Therefore, coding is commonly used when applying thematic to analyse the data of different sources collectively. Coding, as described by Charmaz (2014) provides a “critical connection” to data collection to draw out meaning. The code, in the context of semiotics, is related to how symbols are interpreted in their particular cultural and social contexts. While analysts choose the codes, some codes can possibly appear metaphoric (speech where phrase are applied); however, most are non-metaphors (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). Moreover, Lakoff & Johnson, (2003) note that codes and sub themes have the same meaning in qualitative data analyses. Therefore, subthemes are preferred as a terminology over codes. Moreover, Saldana, (2016) argued that the phrases which are identified as code by the author are based on the researcher’s own understanding of the research and social phenomenon. Therefore, all of the codes/sub themes are selected on the basis of researcher own understanding about the research, but

these sub theme have been selected to deliver commonly used key words to describe the data. “In qualitative data analysis, a code is a researcher-generated construct that symbolizes or translates data” (Vogt, Vogt, Gardner, & Haeffele, 2014, p. 13). Thus, code attributes to all datum the “interpreted meaning” for the later purposes of categorization, pattern detection, proposition or ascertain development. This helps the researcher to build up a theory as part of the analytical process (Saldana, 2016).

According to many qualitative studies, the first step within thematic analysis is to identify “codes for themes”. This is a misleading advice as terminology waters may get muddled through this recommendation (Lakoff, & Johnson, (2003). A theme is something that is generated as a result of analytical reflection, categorization and coding and not something that is coded in itself. This is discussed in the section headed “Theming the Data”). The coding phrase is based on the researcher own understanding about the data and research requirements (Saldana, 2009). The differences, as explained by Rossman and Rallis (2003.p., 282) can be understood if we: “think of a category as a *word or phrase* describing some segment of your data that is *explicit*, whereas a theme is a *phrase or sentence* describing more *subtle and tacit* processes”. Rossman and Rallis (2003) indicated that the selection of a phrase to create themes and sub themes is based on the researcher’s own understanding of the data which could be developed on the basis of explicit data-in-hand, and an overall tacit understanding about the topic and the research process. Therefore, Auerbach, & Silverstein, (2003) drew attention to the importance of reflection to improve the validity and transparency of qualitative data to generate theory.



### 3.9.1 Pattern in the data

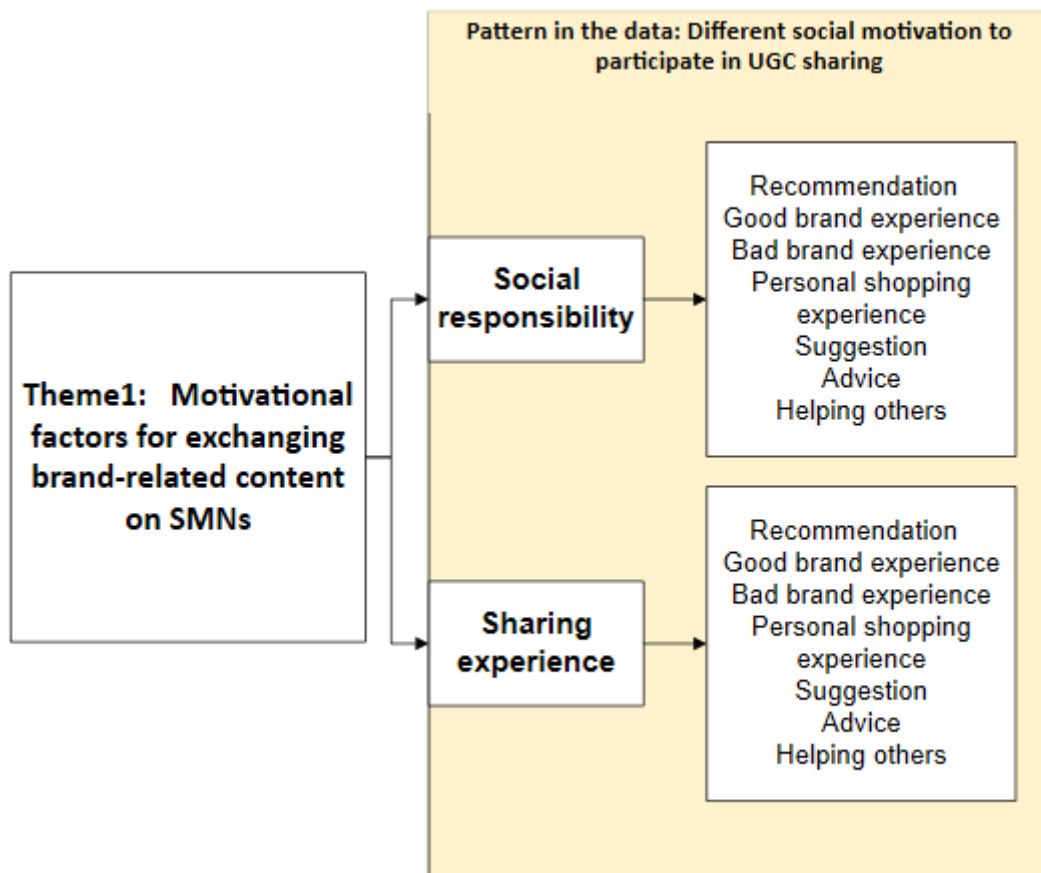


Figure 3-10 Example of patterns/keywords, sub themes and theme

A repetitive consistent or regular occurrence of data and/or actions that appear twice or more is called a pattern (key words). Patterns can inform sub-themes. “At a basic level, the pattern concerns the relationship between unity and multiplicity. A pattern suggests a multiplicity of elements gathered into the unity of a particular arrangement” (Stenner, 2014, p. 136). Therefore, sub themes are developed after looking for patterns in data which is also supported by similar key words in different quotations of the participation. The figure 3-2 is an example of fist theme with two sub-themes only which shows an example of a pattern in data. The pattern identifies key words which are repeated by the participant. This pattern has therefore informed the key words in this thesis. There are a number of key words, but each has a similar meaning and so each belongs to the same sub theme as identified in the figure above. A sub-theme has been decided on the base of specific relevant pattern (key words) form the participation’s quotations. Qualitative researchers consider that patterns belong to

different sub themes as “stable indicators of humans’ ways of living and working to render the world “more comprehensible, predictable and tractable” (Stenner, 2014., p. 143). Therefore, the different patterns within the data reveal that how social media users experience and share UGC on social media in theme (see example figure 3-9). Saldana, (2016) stated that, as patterns demonstrate importance, habits and salience in the daily lives of humans thus become one of the most trustworthy evidences for qualitative study findings.

Through patterns, qualitative researchers can confirm their descriptions of the “five Rs” of humans: relationships, roles, rules, rituals and routines (Merriam, 2014). Moreover, qualitative inquirers can solidify their observations into an effective interpretation of meaning by discerning these kinds of trends (Patton, 2015). Therefore, this thesis focuses on how social media users influence on each other. It examines the different roles of the various SMUs in terms brand engagement. It also explores how different rituals and routines amongst social media users generate brand engagement through UGC. These routines were also helpful to categorize the overall data into the first theme of “motivational factors for exchanging brand-related content on SMNs”. These were based on the rituals and routines of SMUs in the context of sharing UGC on social media. The second theme is based on the different role of SMUs in the context of UGC, and third theme is based on human relationships. The fourth theme summarises the patterns, and qualitative descriptions in relation to the “five Rs. This theme explains how the different rules of UGC sharing can influence brand engagement. Therefore, the five Rs proved helpful to categorize the data into different themes and sub themes that would lead to generate theory/framework on the base of these themes with see figure 3-9 for the process of the generating theory from key word to concepts which is presented by Richards and Morse (2007).

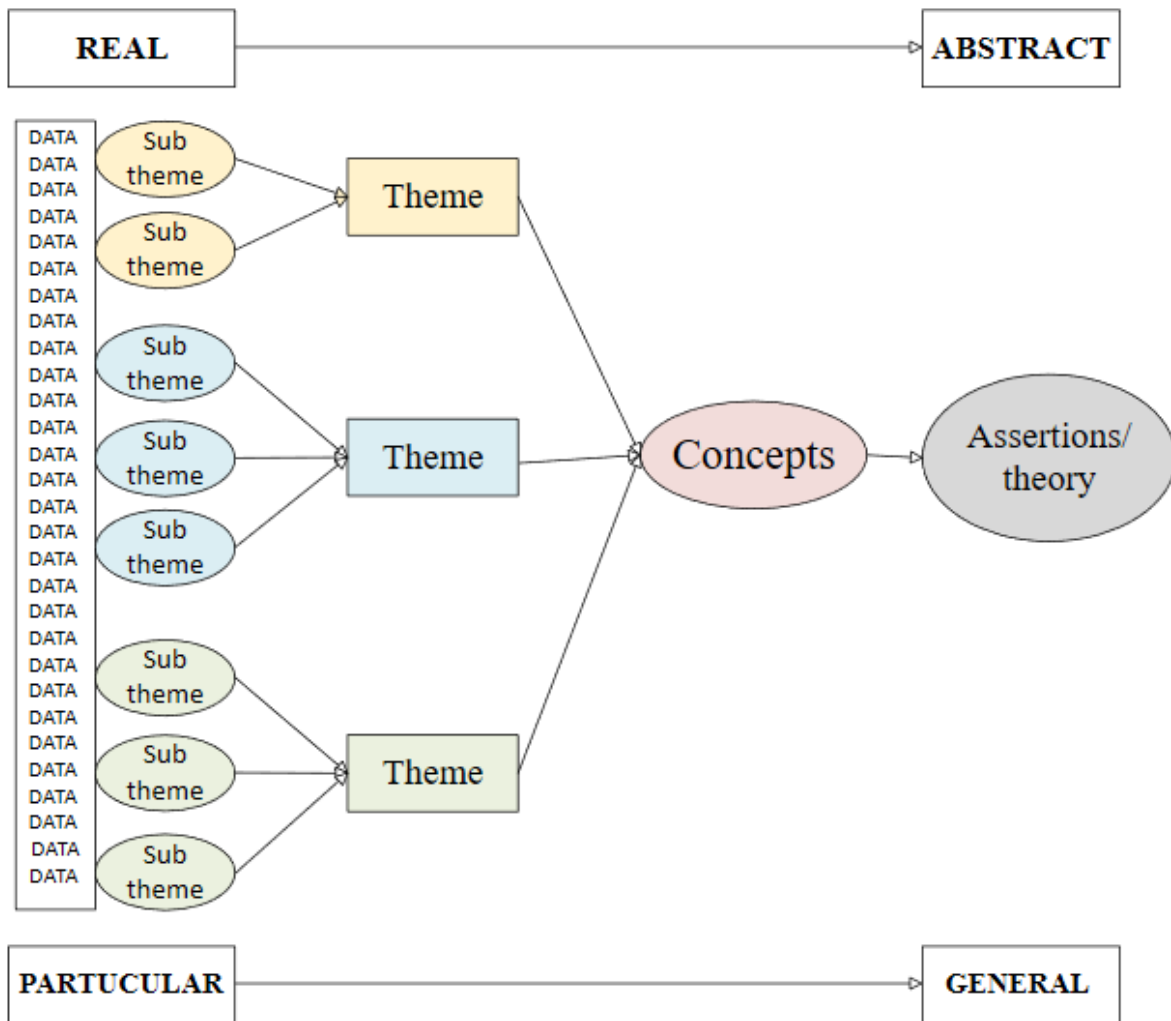


Figure 3-11 A streamlined codes-to-theory model for qualitative inquiry

In seeking to understand regularity and patterns, there are some important caveats that should be taken into consideration (Saldaña, 2009). For example, in the case of idiosyncrasy (a kind of pattern) patterned variation may appear in the data (Agar, 1996). In addition to taking into consideration what respondents talk about, we also categorize and code the data by considering our own reflective professional research, and our own understanding about the nonverbal meaning of the data of participants. Therefore, qualitative researchers begin the process of data analysis during the data collection process (Agar, 1996). For example, all of the participants may share their own experiences and personal perceptions about UGC influences, but attitudes, beliefs, values and the experience of each individual participant regarding UGC in the context of different circumstances may. Janesick, (2011) stated that in searching for patterns to categorise coded data, qualitative researchers sometimes group things,

not only because they are exactly same or look alike, but because these things also share some common meaning – even if that commonality paradoxically involves differences (Janesick, 2011). Therefore, this analysis look beyond the 5 Rs to better understand the data during the data collection and analysis processes, in order to present data that will help me to report clear research findings. In this sense, the pattern/key words selection and relation with different sub themes is based on researcher own understanding and based on an interpretation of the direct and indirect meanings of these key words/words.

According to Saldana, (2016), there are various perspectives on coding decisions. Therefore, it is very important to decide which is the most appropriate coding method for any given study. According to Clarke, (2005), coding should not only be prefaced but also be accompanied with very careful reading and/or rereading of data, because it is both the coding system and one`s subconscious that develop connections leading towards flashes of deep insight (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). Therefore, Saldana, (2016) suggests two cycles of coding to improve the quality and meaning of data. The overall thematic analytical approach was developed across two cycles in terms of magnitude. The data that were coded in first cycle ranged from single letters through complete paragraphs to full text pages. It also took account of the flow of numerous moving images (De Chesnay, & De Chesnay, 2014; Saldana, 2013). Therefore, holistic coding was employed during the first cycle because holistic coding is an attempt “to grasp basic themes or issues in the data by absorbing them as a whole [the coder as ‘lumper’] rather than by analyzing them line by line [the coder as ‘splitter’]” (Dey, 1993, p. 104). Based on this preparatory method, a specific unit of the data is approached prior to starting a more detailed categorisation of the coding process via the first and second cycles. Using holistic coding, after an initial review of a massive amount of data by applying holistic codes “all the data for a category can be brought together and examined as a whole before deciding upon any refinement” (Dey, 1993, p. 105). For example, whole data were coded as “source of UGC”, “characterises of UGC” and “factors of social influence” within the study. I have realized and identified different motivational factors behind SMUs to generate UGC and I also tried to name some coding on the base of why, when and how people generate content? Therefore, the first cycle of the data analysis was based on researcher own understanding about the data through keeping in mind the research questions and objectives. As researcher of

this study is already working as social media marketing consultant, I have in depth understanding about the role of UGC for brand engagement so that professional experience also helps me carry out holistic coding to do coding/assignment different sub themes and themes of the data at first cycle through using holistic coding.

Moreover, Dey, (1993) suggests that holistic coding could be used during the data collection process based on the level of participation, types participants, quotation relevance, and the relevance of the meaning of different quotations. This, first stage research is based on organising relevant quotations onto different pages and naming them with relevant phrases or complete sentences (Richards,& Morse, 2007) therefore, during the data collection process I started to do coding on the basis of types of participants, and their intention towards the data. Also, of relevant were their role in UGC, the intensity and interest of their participation, their role as influencers and influenced SMUs their demand for UGC and their social intentions towards the data. Therefore, the first cycle of data analysis helped me to identify the different reasons for sharing UGC as well as the role of different social media users in UGC. It shed light on the reasons why some are influenced. In other words, it helped me to understand why people get influenced. The first cycle of data analysis not only proved helpful for coding. Indeed, it also proved helpful to categorise the data into different themes. During the second cycle of data analysis, instead of coding datum line by line for analysis immediately after preparation of interviews notes or transcripts, reading and rereading of data corpus was considered a more meaningful investment of cognitive energy and time. The aim was to develop a much clear and bigger picture (Richards, 2009). As Dey (1993, p., 110) suggested, “time spent becoming thoroughly absorbed in the data early in the analysis may save considerable time in the later stages, as problems are less likely to arise later on from unexpected observations or sudden changes in tack”. Therefore, I developed holistic coding at the early stages based on researcher own professional experience and understanding about the data. This took place during data collection phase and I had to rely on some notes which I made during interviews. Therefore, the first stage of holistic coding helped me to generate some sub themes and themes and I also categorize these themes into different types which include SMUs related, UGC characteristics, and influencing factors. Holistic coding is useful when the researcher already knows what to inspect within the data and/or how to chunk related text from wide topic areas. Indeed, “*this is*

*a very first step to see what is there*" (Bazeley, 2007, p. 67). In such cases, if the researcher has less time for analytical work and/or has a large amount of data then holistic coding is an appropriate approach as it saves time. Such a coding process can take place during the data collection process (Saldana, 2009). Therefore, holistic coding proved timesaving for me through using researcher own professional experience to assign different sub themes/codes and themes to the relevant data at first stage of the analyse cycle.

Data are, in fact, not coded but recoded. It is not necessary to use any of six coding methods during the second cycle of coding. The coding process employed was similar to "eclectic coding". Using the first cycle coding method to record data was sufficient to condense or tighten the number of categories and codes into a compact set required for analysis (Saldana, 2016). Based on whatever first cycle method of coding is selected, and how initial data analysis is developed, the researcher will decide whether or not to proceed to "second cycle" coding. If the second analytic process is coupled with a categorizing and coding process, this will lead to relatively higher-level concepts, themes, theory and assertions (Richards, 2009). A major aim of this research was to formulate a conceptual model and theoretical construct that would be suitable to synthesize the role of UGC in the context of brand engagement among social media networks. Therefore, I intended to carry out second cycle coding to categorize the overall data into different themes with relevant sub themes and patterns.

Theoretical and/or categorical organization from array of your "First Cycle" codes direct toward the more specific coding on the base of relevant key words within the data which is why codes or themes can reduce or extended at the second cycle of data analyses (Saldana, 2009). However, some of the methods profiled in this section may occur not only during the initial stages, but also during subsequent coding periods. The "First Cycle" codes (as well as the coded data associated with these codes) are basically reconfigured and reorganised to finally develop a more select, but smaller list of relatively broader themes, categories, assertions and/or concepts (Bazeley, 2007). It is important to note that the number of overall codes with every successive coding cycle should decrease rather than increase. Therefore, it is essential to reduce the number of sub themes that would become more meaningful to

generate the required framework. The figure 3-11 clearly illustrates how sub-codes and codes are finally transformed into sub-categories and categories, which then lead towards major concepts or themes. These eventually progress into new theory or assertions. In terms of second cycle coding, a vast range of original analytic detail is reorganized and condensed into a single set of main themes. As Janesick, (2011) claims, the creation of patterns/key words and sub themes is based on the researcher's own understanding about the data (see table 3-12). During the second stage of analysis, the researcher also tries to create a relationship between the sub themes and themes which is carried out during the second coding cycle. Saldana, et al., (2016) state that themes are the different meaningful categories of the data, and these categories further lead to the generation of theory or research frameworks. Elaborative coding is employed during the second cycle of coding. Richards and Morse (2007) indicate that elaborative coding is more flexible where the aim is to adopt an inductive process to create relationships between patterns as well as sub themes and themes through interpretation and the researcher's own elaboration. This reasoning is based on his/her understanding and observation of the data (see figure 3-12 below from data to theory generation).

*Table 3-11 Final themes and sub themes*

No	Theme	Number of sub theme of each theme	Sub themes
1	Motivational factors for exchanging brand-related content on SMNs	1	Social responsibility
		2	Sharing experience
		3	Staying connected & updated
		4	Reward sharing
		5	Opinion leader
2	Types of social media users	1	Passive
		2	Content creators
		3	Content critics
		4	Content collectors/consumers
3	Influence factors for UGC	1	Social trust
		2	Content Expert
		3	Relevance
		4	Product user
4		1	Excellency of content
		2	Content credibility

	Content characteristics influence	3	Consumer and brand-oriented content
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As compared to the first cycle coding method (s), the second cycle method (s) of coding is a more advanced method for reanalysing and reorganizing data which is coded via the first cycle (Saldana, 2016) therefore, the second cycle of condign came up with final and specific 4 themes and sub themes as shown in table 3-12. According to Morse (1994, p. 25), each of them requires the researcher to link “*seemingly unrelated facts logically, of fitting categories one with another to develop a coherent meta-synthesis of the data corpus*”. Prior to assembling the categories, it is necessary to record that data so that more accurate phrases or words can be discovered to inform initial codes. Merging these we code together creates conceptually similar themes and this is a useful means to assess infrequent codes in order to assess their utility across the entire coding scheme (Lewins & Silver, 2007, p. 100). This means that the data can be categorised into four themes. Additionally, the four themes were also discussed and approved by the supervisors. Nvivo was also used to carry out a second cycle of coding to categorize the overall data into four different themes and sub themes/codes. Manual analysis was also carried out at this stage to understand the data better and to create new words based on patterns in the data.

The second cycle of coding sought to develop a sense of what the conceptual, and thematic codes were (Saldana, 2016). Once researcher coded data, I transitioned the codes by applying second cycle coding methods several times. At the same time, a substantive amount of insightful and intuitive analytic thinking was maintained and then multiple analytic approaches to data analysis were employed. After successfully completing these steps, I was left with 4 key categories, concepts or themes (see table above 3-12).



### 3.9.2 From data Coding to final theorizing

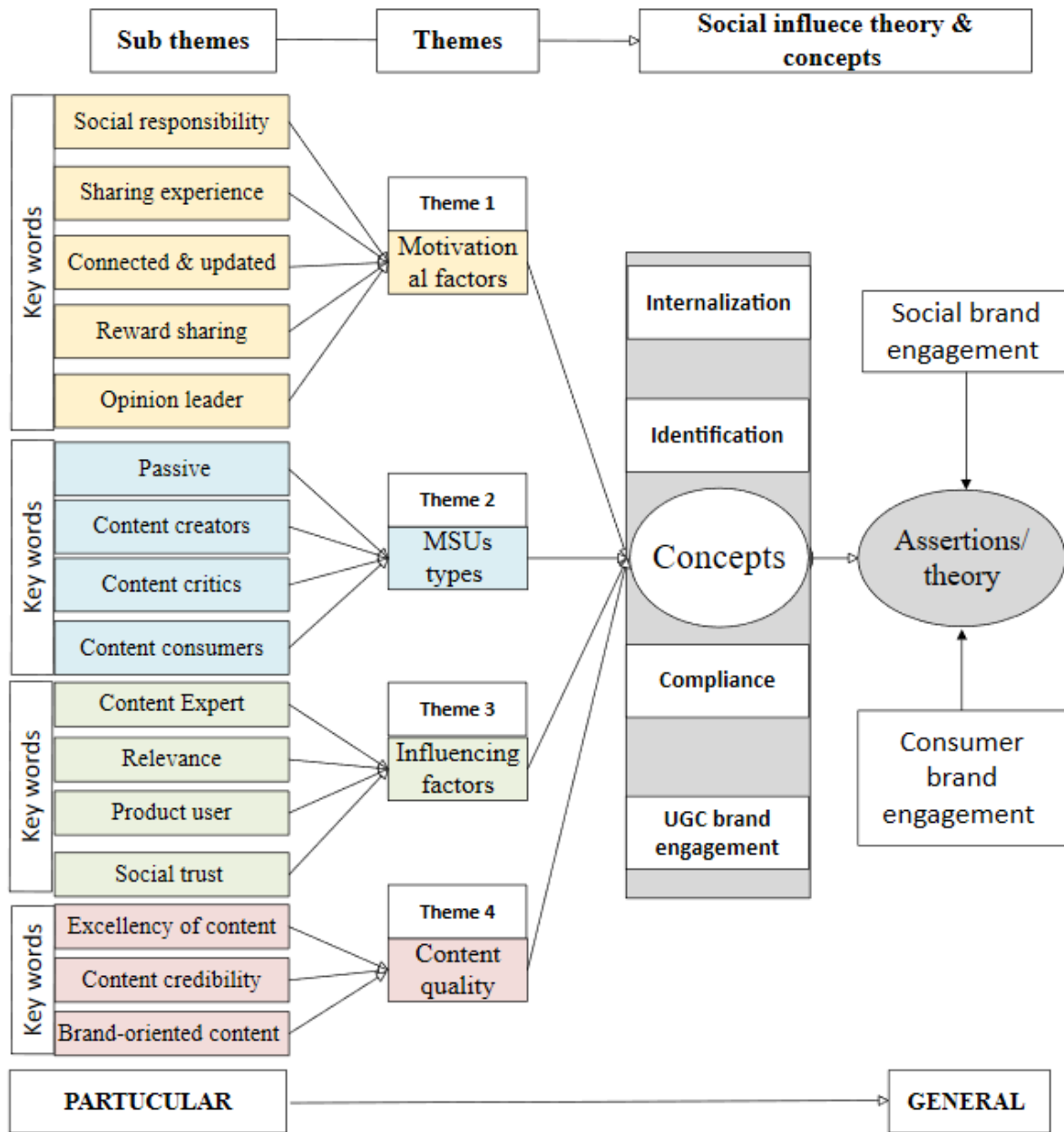


Figure 3-12 A streamlined codes-to-theory model of this thesis

Using theoretical coding methods, sub themes were progressed towards a core or central category to build a final framework or theory (Travers, 2013). Theoretical coding is, however, not a single approach that can be used for the development of a theory or framework (Bryman, & Burgess, 1994). I created some discussion with reference to each sub theme and themes to illustrate how and why the highlighted themes and sub themes related to brand engagement. Hesse-Biber, (2017) indicated that the relationship between different themes and sub themes is based on the

researcher's own understanding of the data, and the researcher must adopt any theory or framework to structure the overall themes into concepts and theory. Therefore, I used social influence theory to inform the final research framework. As per Saldana's (2016) opinion, there are three key characteristics of a social scientific theory. It controls and predicts actions via an "if-then" logic. It explains how or/and why something occurs by describing its cause (s). It provides guidance for, and insights into how to improve social life (Saldana, 2016). However, actual process of reaching theoretical development are messier and much complicated than illustrated. Categorizing, as Richards and Morse (2007) clarify is a way of shaping a diverse form of data (Richards, 2009). As Dey, (1993) suggests, in the case of the extension of any theory or application of theory in context, researchers could use theory to structure the final framework. Therefore, I tried to explain how and why data were formed into codes in order to clarify issues related to internalization and compliance. The analysis proposes how UGC creates social brand engagement and brand engagement differently, while the overall final framework is based on the themes and sub theme shown in the figure below. The categories/themes were refined further into subcategories (sub themes). After comparing these major categories with one another and consolidating them in multiple ways it was possible to transcend the "reality" of the data towards theoretical, conceptual and thematic dimensions in the form of a final research framework.

### **3.10 RESEARCH TRUSTWORTHINESS AND RELIABILITY**

Shenton (2004) argued that for decades the issue of accepting the quality of qualitative research has been debated. If positivist terminology is employed then terms such as validity, reliability and generalisability are key; then, the quality of qualitative studies may appear affected. Qualitative studies set their own standards. However, the preference to conduct qualitative research into UGC means it is vital to understand the research quality of such data. It is therefore necessary to compare positivist concepts with qualitative ones. A comparison of qualitative and quantitative methods is provided in Table 3-13.

Table 3-12 Comparison of qualitative and quantitative methods

Terminology in quantitative research	Meaning	Terminology in qualitative research	Meaning
<b>Reliability</b>	That the results remain consistent despite repetition over time (Kirk & Miller, 1986 cited in Blaxter et al., 2010)	Trustworthiness (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Seale, 1999)	Dependability, credibility, transferability and confirmability (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011)
<b>Validity</b>	Truthfulness of the results of the research; testability of construct validity (Tracy, 2013)	Credibility and rigour (Lincoln et al., 2011; Carey, 2012)	Applying methods in a sound manner (Lincoln et al., 2011)
<b>Generalisability</b>	The extent to which the findings of the research can be applied to other samples and populations (Cassell et al., 2017)	Theoretical and naturalistic transferability (Stake, 1978)	Understanding the specific, and generalising it in other contexts (Saks & Allsop, 2013)

Positivists widely apply the concept of reliability. In the context of quantitative research, this implies that a study can be repeated if its results are accurate as accuracy tends to remain the same when similar methods are being applied (Golafshani, 2003). For results to be reliable they must be consistent over time. However, in qualitative research, the concept of reliability means the universal acceptance of results is not an objective of study because the purpose in such research is to develop an in-depth understanding about a situation instead of generating and measuring explanations as is the case with quantitative research (Saks & Allsop, 2013). Furthermore, researchers have confirmed that exploratory studies are conducted to bring new ideas; therefore, results cannot be repeated over time like quantitative studies (Saks & Allsop, 2013). In qualitative research, the concept which is highly relevant is that of “trustworthiness”. There are four variables of “trustworthiness”: dependability, credibility, transferability and confirmability (Denzin & Lincoln, 2014). Nevertheless, trustworthiness is always

circumstantial and is not universally exclusive (Seale, 1999). In this study the issue of trustworthiness is addressed below.

### **3.10.1 Establishing Trustworthiness within Qualitative Research**

Through trustworthiness, the researchers can not only persuade the readers but also themselves that their findings are valuable and worthy of consideration (Denzin & Lincoln, 2014). In order to refine the idea of trustworthiness, Denzin & Lincoln, (2014) introduced the confirmability, dependability, transferability and credibility criteria parallel to conventional criteria of quantitative assessment of reliability and validity. Almost all are familiar with the procedures of how to fulfil trustworthiness criteria, even the ones who have distinctions in ontology and epistemology, because they rely heavily over methodological techniques and arguments (Stake, 1978). Regardless of recent addition of flexible and expansive quality markers within qualitative research, we have decided to use easily recognised, widely accepted and original Lincoln and Guba`s (2014) proposed criteria for the demonstration of trustworthiness in this study. Above mentioned trustworthiness criteria as best choice for those researchers who concerned more about usefulness and acceptability of their studies for multiple stakeholders. After making brief discussion on these criteria of trustworthiness which included credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

**Credibility:** According to Lincoln and Guba`s (2014), creditability of any study can be determined only when readers and co-researchers can recognise the experience they had confronted with. The term creditability reflects the extent to which respondents` views fit with researchers` representation of these views (Carey, 2012). In this regard, Lincoln and Guba`s (2014) proposed variety of techniques useful for addressing creditability such as persistent observation, prolonged engagement, researcher triangulation and data-collection triangulation. In order to increase the creditability, these researchers recommended debriefing the peers about how to keep external check over research process and examine referential adequacy to check out preliminary interpretations and findings against collected raw data (Tracy, 2013). operationalization of creditability is possible through member checking process wherein interpretations and findings are tested with research participants (Lincoln and Guba`s 2014). Therefore, direct quotation has been used in the data analyses addition to that some important keywords have been related to the codes/sub-themes phrases

that further lead towards categorization of data into different themes and concepts. Additionally, the interpretation and presentation of the data into concepts and assertion have been done through applying the use of social influence theory which also increase the credibility of this research. Moreover, the whole analyses process has explicitly presented as figure 3-13 below that would improve the credibility of this research.

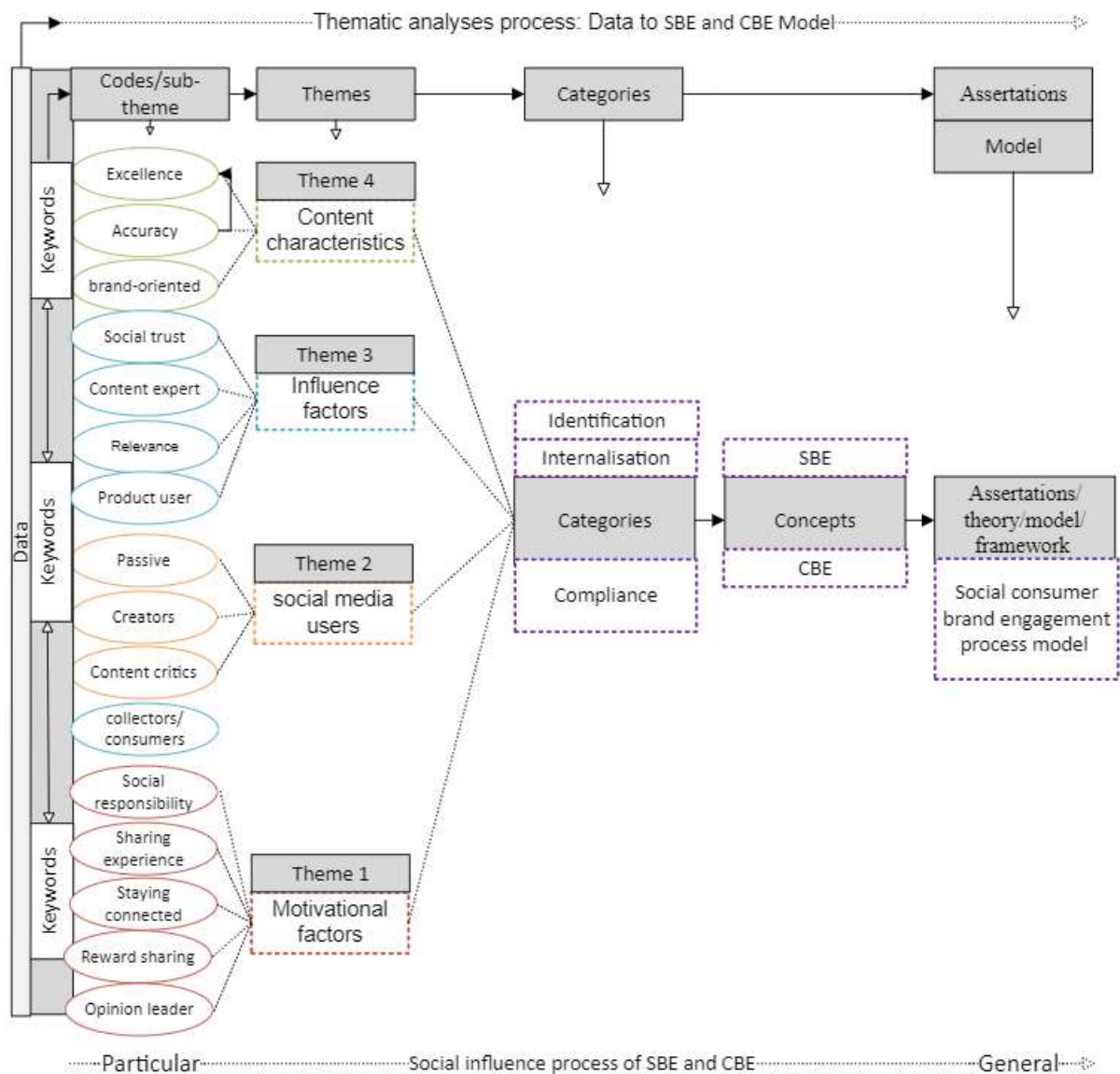


Figure 3-13 Data analysis process

**Transferability:** In case of qualitative research, transferability only concerns to “case-to-case transfer” (Cassell et al., 2017). Knowing the sites want to transfer research findings is though not possible for researchers; however, they are responsible to provide rich descriptions in order to enable those to judge transferability who aim at transferring findings to own sites (Lincoln and Guba`s 2014). Therefore, to ensure the

transferability of the research there are rich justification and information of the selection of specific research methods and specific research possible position have been provided that will increase or improve the transferability of this research. As it has been shown in figure below that the theoretical framework of this research is based on the data review and social influence theory has been used to develop the theoretical framework of this research. Additionally, the classical position of this research has been taken on the base of research objectives, questions and research aim. Consequently, a selection of different research methods and tools have been selected on the base of the classical position of this research and research aim. Therefore, the rich explicit presentation of the whole research would improve the profitability of this research. As it has shown in figure below

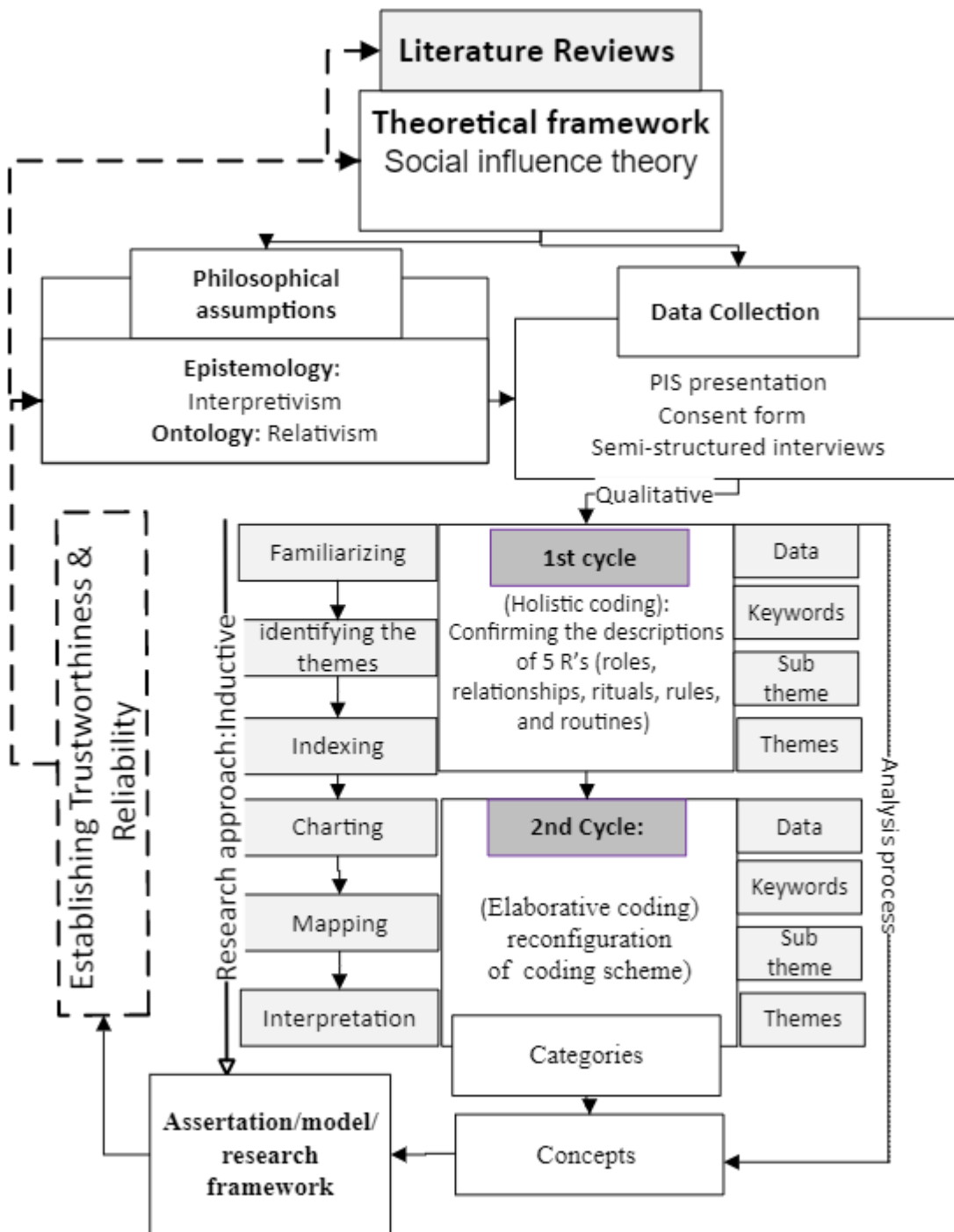


Figure 3-14 Research process

**Dependability:** Dependability can only be achieved when researchers ensure that entire process of their research is clearly documented, logical and traceable (Lincoln and Guba's 2014). If the readers can better examine the entire research procedure, they will also be in a position to better judge its dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). If the research process can be audited, we can say that it demonstrates the dependability (Tracy, 2013). As it has been discussed above that the whole data

collection, analysis, presentation and complete research process has been explicitly presented that could improve the dependability of this research.

**Confirmability:** For Confirmability of a study, it is important for researchers to establish that their findings and interpretations are derived clearly from data. For this, researches are required demonstrating how they reached at interpretations and conclusions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). According to Blaxter et al., (2010), researchers should include markers (e.g. reasons for analytical, methodological and theoretical choices) in entire research process in order to enable the readers to better understand why and how they have made the decisions. Denzin & Lincoln, (2011) proposed that researchers can establish the confirmability only when they have achieved dependability, transferability and creditability. As dependability, credibility, and transferability of this research has been achieved that would lead to the achievement of confirmability of this research.

The research was conducted within the guidelines set by the University of Worcester in the *Handbook of Research Ethics* and some additional topics were addressed to meet the university's ethical standards and avoid a conflict of interest. Saunders et al. (2016) also highlighted the significance of meeting ethical standards to maintain the trustworthiness of the research. Triangulation was employed as an essential tactic of investigating different evidence sources as suggested by Yin (2014). Case study-based research is becoming synonymous with triangulation even though it has classically been regarded as a soft form of research (Yin, 2014). Therefore, the current study utilised single technique to generate data: in-depth interviews with 32 cases. Both techniques are helpful in describing what the participants possess in common with respect to a particular phenomenon (May, 2002). The personal reflection has been done in the last chapter of this thesis, reflection discussion is explained whereby the professional and personal background of the researcher is revealed alongside the details of the research process and the potential for bias. The research limitations are also discussed as 6.6 section of chapter 6 in line with what Frost (2011) suggested. Research validity in quantitative research implies the extent of accurate measurement of the concept (Travers, 2001). Such positivistic meaning does not apply in the social world where the perspectives are multiple in nature among different audiences (Shaw & Gould, 2001). Cowan (2009) proposed criteria for the assessment of credibility, such as taking into account the place of evidence in interactive processes between the



interviewer and interviewee. Cowan (2009) also considered the intended effort or utilisation, and the audience in respect of the project that is being assessed and evaluated.

Liamputtong (2010) highlighted the concept of rigour while explaining validity in qualitative research. Liamputtong (2010) argued in favour of rigour in the application of methods. Liamputtong (2010) also suggested that it is important to seek the consent of the community and to ensure sound reasoning which is rigour-defensible and plausible. In this way the author and the reader can interpret and frame the interpretive study (Lincoln et al., 2011). Patton (1999) observed that rigour is a concept that contrasts with validity in qualitative research. Patton (1999) introduced the concept of technical rigour to explain negative cases and rival explanations and to keep data contextual. Patton (1999) also believed that technical rigour is fundamental to the credibility of research. In this research, credibility is addressed through a detailed description of the processes of research and by means of coherent conclusions.

Quantitative studies involve drawing inferences from results which can be generalised. In positivist terminology, generalisation means the extent to which the findings of the research can be applied to other samples or populations (Gomm, 2008). Three different positions of qualitative researchers in terms of generalisability can be combined: the purpose of qualitative research is not to generalise as the research is seen as an exploration of a phenomenon (Quinlan & Zikmund, 2015); the understandings from qualitative research cannot be generalised compared to quantitative studies (Carey, 2012); qualitative research may be generalised in the same way as quantitative research because what matters is the development of understanding which can be used in other situations. It is also important to use the knowledge acquired as a result of undertaking a qualitative study.

It is important to realise that knowledge itself is a part of generalisation instead of a scientific deduction from something (Saks & Allsop, 2013). In this study, May's (2002) approach is followed. May (2002) recommended that case studies can be generalised to theoretical understandings and not to populations. In this way, the case study does not involve a sample, and in conducting a case study, the goal of the research is the generalisation of theories not the enumeration of statistical frequencies. The participants in the current study expressed their personal views about brand

engagement and buying in a fashion context. The data are collected from different professional and non-professional sources. For example, this study included marketing consultants, business owners and professional employees who shared the social context and views for brand engagement. Furthermore, the study also included non-professionals such as housewives, mothers and some students. Therefore, it can be argued that data are collected from multiple sources and this contributes to the creditability and validity of results as suggested by Aslam et al. (2018a, 2018b). This research also follows certain ethical protocols to enhance the quality of research.

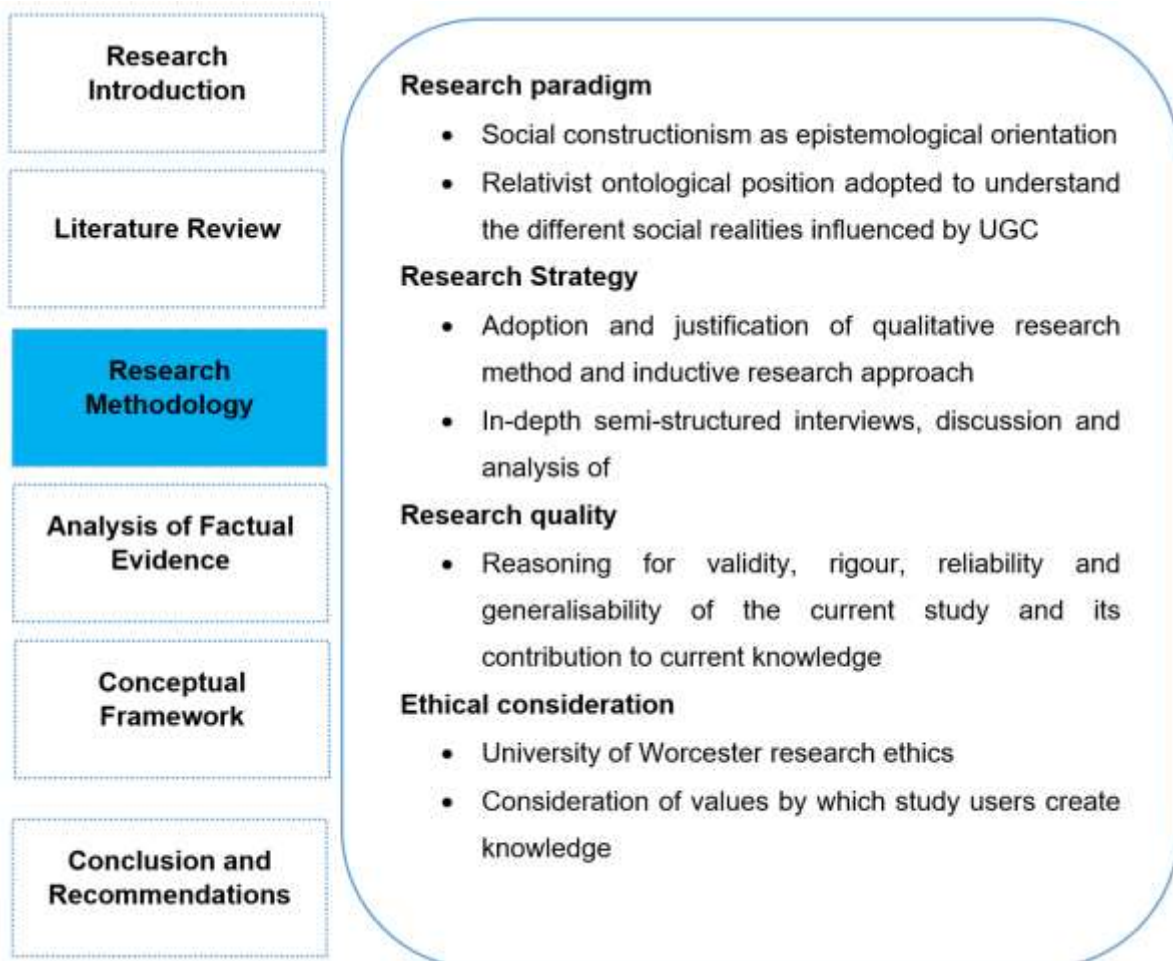
### **3.11 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

There are two issues involved in adhering to ethical research in qualitative studies: the application of ethical protocols introduced by universities, and the value whereby knowledge is created by the researcher (Sunders et al., 2016). Therefore, this research was conducted within the ethical guidelines of the University of Worcester as enshrined in its *Handbook of Research Ethics*. The focus of the research in the current study is on the effect of UGC on SMUs with respect to brand engagement with fashion brands in the UK. The information collected by the researcher during in-depth interviews was utilised to develop an understanding about the attitudes, experiences and opinions of customers in relation to UGC. The participants were selected according to the criteria mentioned above. The key ethical consideration in this regard was that only those participants were selected who consented to taking part in the interview. They were fully informed about the objectives of the research and the purpose for which the interviews were conducted.

Since the participants were selected from the workplace of the researcher and in a private environment, certain other ethical considerations needed be addressed too, so that conflicts of interest could be avoided. The issues addressed in this regard included the voluntary participation of interviewees whereby they were informed that they could withdraw entirely at any stage of the interview. Their identities were kept entirely confidential and organisations were not informed about who participated. The participants were informed about the publication of the interview and told that the interviewer and the researcher were the same person.

### 3.12 SUMMARY

This chapter outlines and justifies the research design for this study. First, the justification of the study's paradigmatic perspectives is outlined. A social constructivist epistemological and relativist ontological approach has been adopted for this project. As this study explores the cultural and social multi-realities of UGC social context and CBE of fashion retail in the UK, a qualitative research method best aligns with the philosophical position of this research to explore the social context of UGC where social CBE has occurred through social media. This chapter also discusses and justifies the use of case studies, sampling, data collection, sample size and data analysis in this research. Moreover, the quality of the research is also discussed here. The following is an outline of the chapter.



*Figure 3-15 Thesis progression; UGC user-generated content and brand engagement*

## **CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS OF FACTUAL EVIDENCE**

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### **4.1 INTRODUCTION**

The previous chapter comprised comprehensive discussion regarding the adoption of a research design for the current study. Based on the research design, it has been concluded that the philosophical positions of subjectivist ontology and constructionist epistemology can give a better understanding regarding how UGC affects brand engagement in the context of fashion brands. Moreover, also highlighted in the previous chapter was the selection of embedded investigative research paradigms and qualitative research design to reveal how UGC influences brand engagement with a fashion brand based on diverse perspectives as well as the real-time experiences of consumers. This chapter focuses on the responses obtained and analysed from interviews with the customers of UK-based fashion brands in particular; it provides answers to the first and second research questions: How does UGC influence brand engagement of fashion brands? and What determines the perception of UGC for the customers of fashion retailing?. By explaining various coherent themes, this study elaborates selected participants' perceptions of UGC. The chapter discusses the different implications using respondents' interview findings as well as presenting a consumer typology based on involvement and available income levels (i.e. both are key drivers for consumer heterogeneity).

### **4.2 RATIONALE FOR A THEMATIC ANALYTICAL APPROACH**

In the present study, thematic analysis has been performed with the purpose of analysing qualitative data. The diverse range of thematic analysis approaches has been discussed in previous literature (Boyatzis, 1998; Fereday, 2006). The current research uses a structured data analysis method to analyse the interview data in order to make sense of data acquired. Moreover, thematic analysis helps the researcher to analyse exploratory and deductive interviews. It also helps the researcher search for themes or patterns in codes which are assigned for different interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For this study, I found that qualitative interviews are the most appropriate method to obtain answers to the proposed research questions from different perspectives. Using such interviews, the researcher can obtain new insights based on social phenomena because qualitative interviews allow the participants to

reflect upon the different unique reason(s) based on different subjects and perspectives (Folkestad, 2008, p. 1). Moreover, key informants – using the sampling strategy adopted for the study – are the most critical success factor because they offer insights into selected phenomena and suggest the sources of contrary or corroborative evidence (Yin, 1994, p. 90).

The thematic analysis approach was chosen as the analysis method in this current study. Thematic analysis is a widely used, commonly accepted, qualitative data analysis approach, which is generally used to analyse recorded interviews. For research interviews, researcher constructed a conceptual frame using thematic analysis, following the theoretical positions of Braun and Clarke (2006), who proposed thematic analysis as the best method to identify, analyse and report themes or patterns within the context of qualitative data. This method has been selected for the current study because its *“rigorous thematic approach can produce an insightful analysis that answers particular research questions”* (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 97). Additionally, this approach facilitates the researcher investigating the interview data from two different perspectives: from the coding-based and data-driven perspective in an inductive way, and from the perspective of the research questions to check the consistency of the data with research questions as well as checking whether the data provide enough information or not.

The identification of themes or patterns was the most significant consideration of this research. The term ‘theme’ refers to something that captures the main idea related to collected data with respect to research questions. Moreover, to some extent themes reflect meaning or patterned responses in a given set of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 8). Remaining consistent during the theme-determining process is the main requirement at this stage. According to Bazeley (2009, p. 6), themes are only important if they are connected in such a way as to produce an explanatory model or a coordinated picture. While reporting the results, “describe, compare and relate” is a three-step simple formula to be followed. Moreover, Braun and Clarke (2006) described that there are two ways through which patterns or themes in data can be identified: the first is a bottom-up inductive approach (citing Frith and Gleeson, 2004), and the second is a top-down deductive or theoretical approach (citing Boyatzis, 1998; Hayes, 1997). In this regard, Thomas (2003, p. 2) stated that the inductive approach

primarily intends to allow the researcher to draw research findings from significant, dominant or frequent themes or patterns inherent in collected data, without imposing structured methodological restraints. Thomas (2003) further added that the inductive approach can be adopted for three key purposes: the first is to condense varied and extensive raw data into a summary or brief format, the second is to clearly link research objectives with summary findings derived from collected data and the third is to develop theory or models of given structures of processes or experiences that are observed in raw data. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), bottom-up and top-down processes interact with each other to some extent; this research has demonstrated a particular interest in determining the themes that are affected by the theoretical construct of the impact of UGC on the brand engagement of fashion brands.

According to social constructivist epistemology, the process of inductive thematic analysis should be adopted in the current research for the interpretation of research data (Boyatzis, 1998), so that the impact of UGC on brand engagement in the fashion industry can be better understood from participants' perspectives in the context of their own words (Ozuem, Thomas, & Lancaster, 2015, p. 6). As UGC is a mental phenomenon, appropriately analysing human perceptions is very important so that a proper meaning can be given to a human's social environment. In this regard, the researcher acts as a pluralist in the current study as: (a) he directly involves participants in voluntarily sharing their experiences and views and they take part as participants in this study; (b) interviewed participants are guided and accompanied through interviews as well as through direct involvement. The researcher developed interview questions based on both experiential and theoretical knowledge and adopted semi-structured interviews to fully explore vividly recounted experiences and to collect the richest data; furthermore (c) the inductive research approach was adopted to conduct data analysis that would lead to developing a new model or theory. The inductive approach is usually adopted for data analysis if data are not aligned with existing conceptual models or frameworks. Furthermore, extensive field research was conducted for this study (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It was found that the themes identified had little relationship with the interview questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The themes, however, were inextricably linked with the data collected (Patton, 1990). This means that the thematic approach applied to the current study is basically data driven (Boyatzis, 1998).

The guidelines presented by Braun and Clarke (2006) were followed to conduct data analysis with the aim of recognising the data collected through interviews. Successive interviews require retrieving valuable insights iteratively. For this purpose, the researcher closely examined interview transcripts and undertook initial analysis immediately after conducting the interviews. The author generated initial codes after successfully carrying out nine interviews. Repeatedly used words were filtered through NVIVO software and were grouped in thematic codes. Once 32 interviews had been conducted, it became necessary to thoroughly read the interview transcripts in order to gain a better understanding of the contexts within which certain words were used by the participants. After revising the preliminary codes, they were grouped, based on a thematic map. A total of 147 terms which seemed relevant to this study were identified, based on the respondents' comments. Themes that were developed in the next phase were then checked for both external heterogeneity and internal homogeneity (Patton, 1990). It was revealed during this procedure that there were different terms that participants had used related to UGC (such as friends' feedback, likes, WOM, experiences or views) as well as to brand engagement. Themes were generated for each of the UGC elements, user perspectives, user types and social context between content creators and influenced SMUs. Ultimately, the interpretation of the respondents' reviews on UGC social influence on fashion brands generated four major themes: motivational factors for generating and exchanging brand-related content on social networking platforms (SNPs), types of social media users, influential factors for UGC, and content characterises influence. Each theme has been supported with existing literature that would strengthen the validity of the concept. The theme details are set out in the form of the following tables (Tables 4-1 to 4-4).

### 4.3 MAJOR THEMES

#### 4.3.1 Motivational factors for exchanging brand-related content on SNPs

*Table 4-1 Motivational factors for exchanging brand-related content*

Themes	Definition	Sub-themes	Keywords
Source of content generation on social media	Reasons behind SMUs generating/sharing content	1) Social responsibility	Recommendation Good brand experience Bad brand experience Personal shopping experience

			Suggestion Advice Helping others
		2) Sharing experience	Good expertise Sharing is caring Dishearten Emotional connection Unique experiences Initiate recommendation Mutual benefits Happy Satisfied Time saving Money saving
		3) Staying connected & updated	Latest shopping Enhancing fashion brand knowledge Specific brands Help in decision Avoiding risk Events Shopping with friends
		4) Reward sharing	Discount voucher Saving resources Affordable Surprise Social event Shopping Shopping experience
		5) Opinion leader	Friends want to know Optimal decision making Expert recommendation Personality influence Friends encourage Exchanging shopping experience with friends

### 4.3.2 Types of SMUs

Table 4-2 Types of social media users

Themes	Definition	Codes	Keywords
UGC participants	Different SMUs who create	Passive	Trust on direct communication Busy housewives Lack of writing skill Not active users



content and respond to content on social media, informing others by text, photo, videos and emotions		Fear of trolls and insults Shy to exchange content
	Content creators	Awareness Information exchange Strong influencers Personal experience Crowd wisdom Initiate recommendation Optimal purchase decision Socially responsible Sharing habits Caring in sharing Family group Specific dress Caring
	Content critics	Dishearten shopping experiences Creating awareness Social responsibility Negative reviews Sub-standard quality Saving resources Warn others
	Content collectors/ consumers	Role of online local communities Positive word of mouth Content gathering Brand reviews Brand's official page followers Content sharing is learning Believing in sharing Proving best rating Trusting influencers Credible information Trustworthy contents Time consuming Lengthy content More trust on instant messaging Information capture Looking for updates and news Active user Discount information Information about jobs To know about deals

### 4.3.3 Influence factors for UGC

Table 4-3 Influence factors for UGC

Themes	Definition	Sub-themes	Keywords
The social ability of UGC to influence the behaviours of SMUs towards a specific fashion brand		Social trust	Trusting family Trusting friends' opinions Strong social ties Well-known among friends Sharing own experience Connected people Friends' recommendations Faithful friends Experiences shared by close relation(s) Regular friends' updates
		Content expert	Ability to advise on fashion Awareness of colours Knowledge about sizes Relevant interest Language expertise Picture alteration and sharing skills Confidence
		Relevance	Specific brands Fast fashion Influencers Influenced by celebrities Someone likes me Peer reviews Same lifestyle Economic condition Housewives Profession
		Product user	Proof for purchase Personal user experience Warning to others Saving others money Help in buying Recommendation/Suggestion Positive word of mouth Negative word of mouth

#### 4.3.4 Content characteristics

Table 4-4 Content characteristics

Themes	Definition	Sub-theme	Keywords
Content characteristics influence	The degree of excellence of UGC attributes to	Excellence of content	Sharing personal experiences Mixture of audio, video and text High-definition video Fashion trends Brand cost and benefits offered

	attract existing and targeted customers to reach a high level of fashion brand engagement	Accuracy of UGC	Number of likes Positive/negative feedback Number of viewers Number of tweets/retweets Recommendations Crowd opinion Authenticity Validity Quality content Meaningfulness Celebrities UGC user experiences Close sources Recommendations from brand users Positive word of mouth UGC preciseness Followed by celebrities
		Consumer and brand-oriented content	Incentive-based contests Job designation Social status and needs Discount offers Brand popularity Brand personality Argument-building

#### 4.4 MAJOR THEMES REFLECTING UGC SOCIAL INFLUENCE ON BRAND ENGAGEMENT

##### 4.4.1 Motivational factors for exchanging brand-related content on SNPs

The source of information plays a pivotal role in getting a message accepted by the readers (Chiou et al., 2014; Boerman & Kruijemeier, 2016; Liu et al., 2012). The most noticeable source for brand oriented UGC is “friends” on social media. Friends constitute the social circle of a person and their presence on social media is compelling for getting their view accepted. Offline relationships are equally compelling in an online environment (Ellison et al., 2007).

*Table 4-5 Definitions of motivational factors for exchanging brand-related content*

Motivational factors	Definition
Social responsibility	People usually love to create posts or exchange product information in the sense of support of others.

Sharing experience	People share their bad or good brand-related experiences.
Staying connected and updated	People exchange information and they feel connected through social media.
Reward sharing	People usually exchange information about promotional deals on those brands which they usually cannot afford in normal days.
Opinion leader	Opinion leaders are specific personalities who have a high level of information; their voluntary purpose is to share information; SMUs think they are credible.

#### 4.4.1.1. Social responsibility

A 35-year-old housewife when interviewed about why she was interested in creating and exchanging UGC related to fashion brands commented:

*“My social group always takes an interest in sharing their views about what they have experienced with apparel brands of their choice. If someone wants pre-purchase information about a brand, they are always ready to share the reasons why to purchase it or not. They believe that it is our social responsibility to help all others in order to save their resources and time”.*

A 25-year-old female professional stated:

*“Once I experienced a famous apparel brand differently from what they have promised at time of purchasing. Though that sub-standard product was taken back from me by store manager with great apologies, I felt that it is my social responsibility to share my bad experience to help others with this apparel brand on Facebook, particularly my friends, to protect their interest. I felt that I should advise my friends to not waste both their resources and time to purchase and return sub-standard products”.*

A 40-year-old female marketing consultant shared her thoughts:

*“Universally, it is known that failure in the provision of services is unavoidable. Even the world's best service providers sometimes make serious mistakes while delivering services. Social media has made it possible for consumers to share their good and bad experiences with others. If people share their unsatisfactory experiences on social media, this can badly damage the sales growth and reputation of a brand. However, I can save costs and time due to shared experiences of people on social media”.*

A 27-year-old housewife spoke about motivational cause to generate UGC:

*"I always take a deep interest in reading experiences of online communities from comments section of YouTube and Facebook. These comments act as a true direction, as people voluntarily share their experiences with the intention of fulfilling their social responsibility to protect others' interests. You can make an accurate purchase decision based on shared experiences".*

A 33-year-old housewife described the role of local online communities in creating and exchanging UGC among targeted consumers:

*"I am a member of different local community Facebook groups. These groups help me in determining what apparel brand is best and when specific items of my interest should be purchased. My local communities inspire me a lot because they feel it their social responsibility to share both negative and positive experiences. Sharing these experiences saves travel costs, interest and the time of others".*

A 46-year-old professional male worker argued:

*"I always love to share the best deals offered by my favourite fashion brand. By doing this, I get information through different reactions of people towards such deals and decide whether to purchase the product or not. Generally, neutral people possess lot of information as they realise that it is their responsibility to share the content about what is wrong or right for their family members, friends to friends".*

A 28-year-old male student provided his views on motivational reasons behind exchange of fashion brand-related content:

*"I always try to share my positive experiences of an apparel brand with my friends on Facebook and Twitter. By creating online recommendations, I love to create win-win situations for both my favourite apparel brand and my friends. By doing this I feel that I have completed my social responsibility of helping others particularly when they really need it for buying".*

The above 28-year-old male student also added:

*"I believe that sharing product information is kind of caring of others".*

A 24-year-old male student has the following views about motivational factors for creating UGC related to fashion brands:

*"I have observed that Facebook, WhatsApp groups and other online social media platforms not only encourage interactive communication but also foster service reviews regarding apparel brands across the UK. I... always interested in sharing and exchanging views about brands that I like most. Myself... sometimes feel that it is my social responsibility to share the reason(s) why I have selected a specific brand for buying".*

According to the points of view of the participants above, the first important factor to generate brand-related content is social responsibility. Participants believe that they are socially responsible in helping each other. Therefore, social networking users ask for fashion brand recommendations, such as which brand is in trend, appropriate, affordable, durable and accessible easily. Other SMUs share their experiences such as the pros and cons of a brand or what a certain brand promised and what consumers experienced. Most of the participants think that they are socially responsible by sharing their brand experiences with others because it can save time, money, journeys and other resources. Furthermore, creating brand stories about good and bad experiences may be useful for optimal decision making. A few participants argued that bad brand experiences can identify how a specific brand are unable to deliver the promised quality and it can save others from the purchase of that specific brand. When SMUs share and exchange information, they may modify the existing message by using their personal fashion brand experience.

#### **4.4.1.2. Sharing experience**

A 33-year-old rich businessman shared his thoughts regarding how UGC helped him to make a brand purchase decision:

*“I believe that ‘sharing is caring’ because people share all good and bad purchasing experiences with others which creates a sense of caring for their friends”.*

A 46-year-old professional male worker argued:

*“I think we are sharing is caring and I believe that as customers our advice is helpful to help others”.*

A 35-year-old male business consultant stated in the context of inspiring factor for exchanging UGC:

*“I usually visit the official pages of my favourite brands on Facebook to get information about their products. They immediately responded to my post and provided me with valuable pre-purchase information. I share these experiences with my local communities and friends so that they also come to know how to make purchases”.*

A 45-year-old male marketing consultant said:

*“Modern customers are so busy that they have no time to explore information for selecting the best brand. That is why they tend to socially connect with others to get*

*latest information about brands of their interest. Online groups on social networks act as the best platforms where people can connect and exchange information with each other without time and physical restrictions”.*

A 28-year-old male marketing consultant had the following views:

*“Currently, social media has become the most appropriate tool for customers to acquire the latest information about a particular brand or product. I used to post my comments on Facebook to get local community groups' recommendations whenever I want instant help. Through exchanged information, I can increase my social connections both with community members and brands”.*

A 47-year-old female IT professional shared her thoughts regarding how UGC helped to take effective decisions:

*“Recently, people started too much interest in sharing their views about which fashion brand is the best choice and effective for others and even for them. I think this is time saving, mutual benefits for all of us and it also increases our knowledge of fashion. In my view, sharing information can increase the sense of social responsibility in me because it motivates me to voluntarily share my experience and views about brands that I have been using for ages”.*

The same 47-year-old female IT professional also revealed an experience regarding how an apparel brand deceived her on Black Friday:

*“I purchased many deals on Black Friday from some of my favourite brands of apparel. But I was really shocked and got panicked to find that these products were substandard, and they took a long time when I returned these products to that brand store. Filling in the claim application also took a lot of my long time. This experience was really bad for me and I shared it on Facebook with my social community”.*

A 35-year-old housewife had the following point of view:

*“I personally believe that the sense of the responsibility and awareness among the public can be enhanced through information sharing. Once I decided to avail myself of a deal given on Black Friday based on good WOM about that apparel brand among the public. But after sharing my intention about this purchase among my close friends on Facebook, I found that many of them had negative opinions about the brand because they had had bad experiences with that brand after using it”.*

The second reason for sharing brand-related experiences is that people have expertise as well as emotional connection with brands; therefore, these experts and emotional connections motivated them to share their experiences with others. These emotional experiences such as happy, satisfied or disheartened motivated them to create brand stories with the purpose to share their experiences. Findings reveal that people usually love to get information from those who have good expertise or

experience related to fashion brands. A participant revealed that sharing is caring because it created a sense of responsibility with the purpose to highlight information about those brands which meet expectations for many years. While another participant revealed that sharing is caring because it is helpful to know the good and bad experiences of customers. Other respondents highlighted that they usually share their experience because they are emotionally attached and engaged with fashion brands. Furthermore, it creates the sense in society that information sharing is caring. For example, if customers are dissatisfied with the customer service, quality, price, and brand features, then they are more likely to create a story with the purpose of informing others about how a brand played on their hopes and how the brand failed to deliver. Negative experiences on social networking platforms can inversely influence the brand engagement of existing and future consumers as well as fashion brands' profitability rates. In particular, if dissatisfied customers create negative brand stories on social media, more people can view the information provided and it is also possible that content may become viral. On the other hand, those consumers who are satisfied with a brand can share their satisfaction among family members, friends, friends of friends and virtual communities.

#### **4.4.1.3. Staying connected and updated**

A 24-year-old male student said:

*"I am more likely to ask my friends and even friends of my friends about pre-purchase information on WhatsApp, Twitter and Facebook groups. Based on the information my friends provide me, I can decide the best purchase within my circumstances such as travelling, time, like budget and other things".*

A 40-year-old female marketing consultant responded thus:

*"My connection with my beloved brand is very strong. I frequently post my comments and views in online advertisements and address others' concerns. I love to follow online ads and official page as they act as a source of learning about people's likes and dislikes and new fashion. This also increases pre-purchase information and social engagement among the targeted audience".*

A 25-year-old professional woman said:

*"I use social media for updating my knowledge about luxury brands as per my job, so it helps me in buying decision".*

A 35-year-old housewife argued:



*"I prefer to share WOM, experiences, recommendations and service reviews about clothing brands. Through this, I can generate more social connection to engage and information on interesting brands. People sometimes share how to save money, time and effort by buying favourite brands at economical prices from the nearest store".*

A 24-year-old housewife said:

*"Many times, I collect info about latest sale event and children's clothes, so it enhances my information for buying decision".*

A 28-year-old male marketing consultant had the following views about how UGC helped him to make an optimal decision:

*"In my opinion, shared information can increase knowledge about making the right selection. I have observed on Facebook that the majority of the people ask which fashion brand should be selected within available price range. After reading such information, I tend to purchase that product even though I had no intention of buying it".*

Experiences shared by a 26-year-old female student:

*"My friends' comments on online social networking sites are highly valuable for me as these comments contain useful information about which clothes and shoes are in fashion and economical. Their sharing information habit in WhatsApp and Facebook groups motivates me also to share my experience of using specific apparel brands. This type of sharing acts is social engagement with friends and information before purchasing your favourite brands".*

The third reason to share brand-related content is to stay connected and updated about those fashion brands which are receiving attention on social networking platforms (i.e. maximum likes, positive brand reviews, personal recommendations to others, and positive WOM on the brand's official pages). It has been revealed that connected participants more frequently share their activities (latest shopping trends, events, new fashion deals, friends gathering and shopping together). Social media platforms are famous for creating, sharing and exchanging fashion brand-related information. For example, there are many virtual communities such as open and private groups which share information (i.e. the best deals and special sales) related to fashion brands. Therefore, participants believe that social media is the best platform to stay connected regarding those fashion brands which attract an individual, a group and celebrities. Furthermore, SMUs can search likes, enquiries, consensus, and consumer interests related to fashion brands which may increase brand engagement and emotional attachment.

#### 4.4.1.4. Reward sharing

A 34-year-old housewife described the motivational role of discounted vouchers for her and others:

*“When I get a reward like a discount voucher for online shopping, I quickly share it with my family and friends on social media – that would ultimately create more discount vouchers for my friends”.*

A 33-year-old mom shared:

*“We have a shopping WhatsApp group to exchange shopping experiences of trusted friends that help to buy good kids’ clothes”.*

A 26-year-old female student shared why she is motivated to shared brand-related content:

*“Many times, I have created recommendations for my friends with the purpose to share which brands are at economical prices and become affordable for them”.*

A 40-year-old female marketing consultant shared her unique experience about UGC:

*“Sometimes, any offer or social event can enhance the intensity to create posts and share with social network though social media. For example, many times I have seen on social media where people shared that they went shopping and surprisingly got a special discount. They were so excited after receiving that discount therefore they shared these stories with their social network”.*

A 25-year-old male office worker stated:

*“We always share best deals and discounted vouchers which help to buy cheap products and save resources”.*

A 35-year-old housewife has the following point of view:

*“Sharing best offers to purchase our fashion brands always helps us in saving our money as we purchase things at highly discounted price... my friends also create posts and share with me whenever they have anything useful related to those fashion brands which are affordable”.*

A 23-year-old male student said:

*“I have close friends’ group on Facebook where we share shopping deals on special sale days like Black Friday and Boxing Day. It helps us to buy affordable brands”.*

A 40-year-old mom stated:

*“My friends share discounted sales like 50% or 70% off for shopping. These discounted deals help to take best buying decision for children’s shopping”.*

The fourth motivational reason for generating and exchanging brand-related content is because reward sharing can multiply the level of information about shopping experiences as well as special sale days (e.g. Black Friday and Boxing Day), special sales offers (e.g. 50% and 70% off) and affordability as per financial resources. The participants have shared that the use of social media helps to gather information about best affordable brands, which can save their resources and help select the best buys for them. It is found that when people created posts for sharing experiences, sometimes other SMUs, who had no intention to purchase, purchased that brand due to information shared with them. Sometimes, people created posts when any brand was at discount and it has become affordable for their friends. The findings of this study highlight the fact that participants shared UGC on social media because their friends also shared fashion trends, shopping tips, discount vouchers and other activities. Furthermore, sales, discount vouchers or special deals can enhance affordability for those who cannot afford these fashion brands with their average incomes. By exchanging shopping experiences, they want to guide their friends regarding how they can save their resources and time.

#### **4.4.1.5. Opinion leader**

A 29-year-old male student stated:

*“I have bought from some brands for many years and I love to share my shopping experience because my friends want to know the right brand choices”.*

A 23-year-old male student said:

*“I always make smart choices about selection of brands, so my friends encourage me to guide them for selecting relevant brands”.*

A 31-year-old female business owner shared how she gets brand information from Ms. M.:

*“Mostly, I prefer to get information from Ms. M. in a friends WhatsApp group about a specific apparel brand of my interest. As a marketing manager for a famous brand, she always shares good experiences with that brand as she has been wearing it since*

*childhood. The advice and information she provided always useful for my friends and family members”.*

A 24-year-old male private business owner shared how Mr G. has influenced his purchase decisions:

*“One of my best friends Mr G. has 20 years’ experience in the clothing industry. He always posts discounted prices or new deals of famous apparel brands. He recommends some specific brand with reasons why this brand is best for others. All my friends love to follow, read and exchange his provided information about apparel brands. We consider him as an influencing person in purchase decision making for wearing brands”.*

A 28-year-old male marketing consultant has the following views about how virtual communities contribute to enhancing brand engagement:

*“Brand social engagement opportunities have increased due to the creation of virtual communities. Customers frequently share their views and experiences on social media platforms that negatively or positively influence the buying intentions of others. I have searched for and shared many bad and good experiences about different fashion brands across SN platforms. Shared experiences create positive or negative images of apparel brands in customers' minds. SN platforms, shared experiences, online communities and online advertisements have enhanced my buying intentions”.*

A 34-year-old housewife described the role of promotional and sales deals to create and exchange UGC among targeted consumers:

*“I think people are interested in sharing their opinions about products and services on their Facebook and WhatsApp groups. Their opinions on brand-own pages, discounted deals and promotional deals help always in decision making related to purchasing a specific brand. I search such official pages and ads on social media networks. By doing this, I can get enough information necessary to make an appropriate decision about purchasing a brand”.*

In response to an additional question, the 34-year-old housewife stated:

*“While making purchasing decisions, I always prefer to follow different celebrities, opinion leaders, experiences and endorsements of other people. My purchasing intention becomes stronger if I observe a large number of positive reviews, shared information and experiences on social platforms (such as Twitter and Facebook)”.*

A 26-year-old male professional worker said:

*“We always share best deals, discounted offers which help to buy cheap products and save money”.*

A 31-year-old male marketing consultant said:

*“I have working experience of a famous brand therefore my friends always ask me before buying decision because they take me as an expert related to that brand”.*

The fifth motivational reason to enhance brand-related content is the role of opinion leaders among online social media groups. In this theme, there are two types of participants: the first type, who shared how they generated posts for others because their social network wants help in buying decisions; and the second type is those who connect to opinion leaders because opinion leaders have expertise and higher levels of knowledge which may be helpful in buying decisions. The first group of people shared that their social network (i.e. friends) encourages them to give their experiences because it helps their social network to make the right brand choices as well as save resources. The second group of people shared that they love to take recommendations from experts or by following the comments of opinion leaders on social media. These experiences are helpful to take optimal purchase decision.

People want to access brand recommendations from those who are physically known, trustworthy and have experience of the fashion industry. There are some participants who act as opinion leaders or have leading roles in content-sharing. Therefore, to remain as opinion leaders in their social circle, they love to share their shopping experience with their friends, friends of friends, and virtual community. Participants have highlighted that they are strongly influenced by experts who have relevant experience and a high level of information, which can create engagement with a brand. The findings reveal that some participants unintentionally purchase fashion brands after reading a recommendation from experts and other influencers.

#### **4.4.2 Types of SMUs**

As discussed in the literature review, there are different types of SMUs. Therefore, this section is aimed at highlighting the role of SMUs as content creators and consumers. As referred to in related literature, sharing brand experience with close friends is preferred to sharing brand experience with active friends (Choi et al., 2017). Therefore, in the interview details given below, I tried to understand the role of SMUs in the context of fashion brand-related content. Table 4-6 summarises types of SMU based on the researcher's own understanding as a social constructionist researcher. The

interpretation of the data as a social constructionist researcher is based on the researcher's own understanding of the data. Moreover, the interpretation is based on the level of the researcher's own involvement in the research, qualifications, cultural background and professional experience (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015).

*Table 4-6 Definitions of types of social media user*

Types of social media user	Definition
Passive	They do not actively reply and do not actively create their own content, but they view and simply like or tweet shared content.
Content creators	These are SMUs who create and share, or exchange brand-related content.
Content critics	Content critics are customers who are dissatisfied with their purchase in relation to what a brand promised before they purchased.
Content collectors/ consumers	These participants are interested in organising and aggregating brand-related content. This type of participant is not only interested in UGC but is also actively involved in sharing it with others.

#### 4.4.2.1. **Passive**

A passive type of social networking member may be influenced by brand-related content, but they do not actively reply, create or participate in any discussion.

A 45-year-old housewife shared her experience:

*"I have accounts and am able to read information on Facebook and Twitter. But I am unable to write to ask for information related to brands in which I am interested. Commonly, I discuss on the telephone with my friends who have good awareness regarding which apparel brand is best and offered at economical prices. Sometimes, they share information on WhatsApp group which is significant and helpful to make a purchase decision".*

In response to another question, the 45-year-old housewife shared her experience:

*"I am a very busy housewife because I have to look after my little kids; I have purchased famous well-known brands since becoming an adult. I am also an active member, but I am not a good searcher and writer to do search or to write on social media. I often feel shy to write freely because people are involved in trolls and insults. I just love to read the information on Facebook groups and sometimes I also*

*find information about my favourite clothing brands. I am happy that most of the time people are satisfied with the brands that are the best choices for me, it means my choice is good so I don't like to write on social media".*

A 33-year-old housewife had the following point of view:

*"I visit Facebook and YouTube to see shared pictures, audio, videos and written contents. Although I am not involved and too shy to exchange content, I am strongly involved with my favourite brands through the views of marketers and consumers. I believe that social media provides an opportunity to engage with those brands in which anyone is interested so I can see how many of my friends or people are liking anything".*

To an additional question the 33-year-old housewife replied:

*"I love to see brand comments that attract, but I have trust in direct communication that comes from friends and I am not an active user on social media".*

A 33-year-old mom shared:

*"Sometimes I feel shy to share my experience because I have not perfect writing skills and, as a busy housewife, I also have little time for this".*

The above participants' views reveal the role of UGC in the participants' exchange of fashion brand-related content as well as in enhancing social and brand engagement through social networking platforms. Those SMUs who have a high level of trust in direct communication seem passive. In the passive category, people are less likely to share and pass comments on the shared UGC. However, it does not mean they never share or like the content, it means they are less actively involved in sharing and participating in discussion. On the other hand, some respondents have highlighted that they do not have perfect writing skills. One of the participants shared that she is afraid of trolling and insults because of her imperfect writing skills. Housewives have responsibilities at home and with their children, which limits their capabilities to create and exchange brand-related content. It is also found that some participants are too shy to create and exchange UGC, especially in the context of online social media groups. This type of social networking member may be influenced by brand-related content, but they do not actively reply, create or participate in any discussion related to fashion brands.

#### **4.4.2.2. Content creators**

Content creators are SMUs who create, share or exchange fashion brand-related content.

A 33-year-old professional woman described her experiences regarding how online networking sites contribute to the creation and sharing of UGC:

*"I have joined many online local community groups (public or private) on Facebook. These groups are constructed based on gender status, cultural dress, religious dress and people's interest. For example, being a Muslim, I prefer to cover my whole body and wear a veil or scarf on my head. It is not easy to find religious clothes in locations nearby in the UK. However, these female groups actively produce related content: which brand has the best quality veil or scarf, durability, economical price and customer service. I always share my good or bad experiences especially whenever anyone asks for brand reviews/recommendations from me. I believe... this online Muslim community group enhances our social engagement with people as well brand engagement with traditional and cultural dresses".*

A 31-year-old male marketing consultant said:

*"Due to my profession I am known as a strong influencer and socially responsible; a person who explains the positive/negative of brands for right buying through social media".*

A 25-year-old female student shared why she is motivated to exchange fashion brand-related content:

*"I always really love to share pictures, videos or content related to brands with my friends, friends of friends, family members and online local community on Facebook. Most of the time, I am the first person to share useful information with others and people acknowledge and appreciate my efforts. Whenever I post material, people love to share my brand experiences regarding whether that apparel brand is worth buying or not. Based on the exchange of information, we are in the best position to decide whether we buy that brand or not".*

A 26-year-old male professional worker said:

*"My friends have strong social connections with store managers and employees; they also have awareness of how to get information related to the best online deals. Most of the time, people show their trust in shared deals and appreciate their positive efforts for society. Sometimes someone asks for pre-purchase information, which they then create posts about why or why not that brand is good for them. I think... these friends are trustworthy for me because they have a good image in society, they talk more logical, they are closer to me and they have been physically known to me for many years".*

A 28-year-old male student described how his friends create posts sharing their experiences with fashion brands:



*"I am really impressed by my friends because they always love to share their own experiences of different brands voluntarily in WhatsApp and Facebook groups. Sometimes they share people's thoughts about brands which are highly liked/disliked by social crowd. They also do too much shopping, so they create posts about both good and bad things of famous apparel brands, which is always helpful for me to take optimal purchase decision based on cost and benefit analysis.*

A 28-year-old male student described also added that

*I think we are socially responsible by protecting the resources of others. I was so impressed with information exchanging habits therefore I also start to create posts about my experiences related to brands and other things. I think... WhatsApp and Facebook groups offer an opportunity to enhance experiences-sharing habit which can create fruitful conversation as well as good engagement and connection with friends, society and brands".*

A 46-year-old professional man said:

*"I worked a few years with famous brands, so my links want to share my personal experience for selection of brands; I believe my sharing helps other for right decision".*

A 35-year-old housewife described her experiences on social networking sites:

*"We have a common family group on Facebook and WhatsApp. Many times, family members exchange information about what they wear (clothes and shoes) to social events. Sometimes, I also create content to share with others about which famous brands are on sale, at discounted prices, or what the best deals are in local stores. Sometimes we share content which is mostly liked and accepted by the crowd on social media.*

This 35-year-old housewife also added that

*In my opinion, our common group plays an important role because all the sources are credible, and their shared experiences are without vested interests or they are to help each other. Sometimes, unconsciously, I purchase shoes and jeans when my cousin shares her personal pictures in which she looked stunning".*

A 25-year-old male professional said:

*"I love to create posts and share brand information because I have lot of information about brands. My close links want to see my recommendations for right brand purchase".*

The second and most important type is the content creator. The participants shared how they and others either create posts or exchange the posts of others on social media platforms. People (participants and known persons from their social network) shared that their shared messages are also shared by others and ultimately it increases the exchange of information as well as engagement with brands. The first

group of participants shared that people know their professions and knowledge therefore they are known as strong influencers for brand buying. The second group of participants shared that they joined social media groups where close and other people frequently create posts which increase the level of information exchange and help with buying decisions.

Many participants shared that they are involved in information exchange (i.e. creating posts and receiving posts based on their personal experiences) related to those brands in which they are interested. For example, a participant highlighted that he/she is actively involved in sharing pictures, videos or content related to brands with friends, friends of friends, family members and online local community on Facebook. A few participants argued that they are involved because they want to enhance the overall wisdom of the crowd by sharing data about a specific brand with others. Another participant shared that she has a group on Facebook and WhatsApp in which they share and ask for recommendations about clothes and shoes for their joint family or social events. It is found that people have a common group in which they create content to share about which particular brands are available on discount in a particular local store.

Findings highlighted that content creators are those SMUs who operate voluntarily in online groups and exchange brand-related content. They can be experts and opinion leaders who have plenty of relevant working experience and can initiate brand recommendations based on extensive knowledge. Influencers create and share relevant material by giving information support; and, finally, there are friends or friends of friends who feel that it is their social responsibility to guide others properly so that they can save their resources.

#### **4.4.2.3. Content critic on social media**

Content critics are customers who were dissatisfied with the product or service they received in comparison to what a brand promised before they purchased it and what was delivered to them, or what they negatively experienced.

A 33-year-old male business owner had the following point of view:

*“I like a few favourite brands and frequently purchase them from nearby stores. But, on Black Friday and Boxing Day, I always notice that I am unable to get jeans and shoes after wasting a whole day queueing. One of the reasons is that everyone wants to purchase famous apparel brands but on lowest prices”.*

33-year-old male business owner also added that

*“My sizes are not available because the stores are out of stock. On the other hand, when I successfully purchase a single item then I find that the quality of the brands is sub-standard compared to what is sold on regular days. I share these experiences with all local community members through social media so that they can save their resources especially on Black Fridays and Boxing Days”.*

A 24-year-old housewife described the motivational role of discounted sales for her and others:

*“I purchased jeans at discounted prices from a top apparel brand, but these jeans did not perform compared to what they promised in the advertisement. After four months, the colour had faded, and they became uncomfortable to wear. Luckily, that brand again offered the same deal, with the same promise as well as discounted prices. I took this chance... Then I took pictures, uploaded them to the advertisement, and shared my bad experience so people also knew what they promised and what they delivered. Many people appreciated my post and said how I had saved them money. I also shared that many times to give lesson to company and to help people. I tried to contact the company, but they did not cooperate as given in words in the advertisement”.*

A 46-year-old professional male shared:

*“Once I purchased a brand which wasted resources, so I shared this heartbroken experience with my social links to create awareness”.*

A 39-year-old male business owner shared his thoughts regarding economical prices and affordability issues:

*“Once I heard the local branch of my favourite brand had closed because they did not achieve their sales targets. I was shocked and shared this news on my Twitter account. Then I find and realise the extent to which people are frustrated due to higher prices or low levels of affordability. Although I can afford things, the majority of participants complained about prices because they are able to purchase larger quantities at the same prices. Now, I have to travel to another city whenever I have to purchase my favourite apparel brand”.*

A 45-year-old housewife said:

*“Once I purchased a brand from discounted sales, unfortunately it is the worst buy, so I told my friends to save their resources”*

A 28-year-old a male student expressed his opinion about e-commerce business:

*“Some time ago, I placed an online order with famous brands. But I was not satisfied with the stuff and the quality they sent to me. I registered my complaint after wasting a lot of time on the phone and sending emails. Although they have replaced that clothing item, I think ... I wasted my time and money on shipping costs. Then, I also shared my negative brand review rating on the official website as well as on sponsored ads on Facebook. I have cautioned all friends and future consumers regarding the quality of the goods, waste of time, and shipping cost risks using social media platforms”.*

A 47-year-old female IT professional worker stated:

*“The previous year I purchased a well-known brand from Boxing Day sale, but it gave me the worst use experience, so I warn others to save resources”.*

The critics are those individuals who are frustrated or furious about brands (e.g. brand quality, price, complaint-handling procedures, differences between information shared and what customers experienced, and customer services). The critics are different from content creators in the sense that the critics create posts to share their own stories about disheartening experiences, whereas content creators do not specifically share disheartening experiences but rather they create content because they have unique shopping experiences (i.e. satisfied, happy, emotional attachment, motivated, recommend and help others) and expertise about specific brands which have made them strong influencers in their social network. Critics are those who have purchase receipts, correspondence emails, pictures of clothes and shoes, and logical reasons which can inspire or demotivate existing and future consumers. For example, participants noticed that special sale promotion days (i.e. Black Friday and Boxing Day) have sub-standard products and therefore they created critique posts on social media with the purpose to save others from a sub-standard brand. Another participant argued that the online order of a brand created a negative experience of brand quality; therefore, that participant created posts on social media so that others are warned from that brand.

#### **4.4.2.4. Content consumers or collectors**

Content consumers or collectors are interested in organising and aggregating brand-related content. After doing this they can share it with friends and other SMUs, or they can use it for their personal purposes. This type of participant is not only interested in UGC but is also actively involved in sharing it with others.

A 28-year-old male student shared experiences regarding how social networking sites contribute to enhancing awareness of fashion brands:

*"I follow the official pages of my favourite brands on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube videos. I have subscribed to these pages to get new updates, promotional information, new trends or deals. Whenever I receive information which I find may be attractive, I also share it with my friends, family members and crowd. Sometimes my friends share consensus of overall crowd about the brand. I believe sharing is learning and caring as well, because I am very able to gather extensive information about my favourite apparel brand because people also have their own experiences and love to discuss what happened".*

In the context of inspiring factor for exchanging fashion brand-related content on social networking platforms, a 35-year-old male business consultant stated:

*"Live chat facilities on Facebook and WhatsApp have created more brand awareness and responsiveness in the apparel industry. Most of the time my favourite brand shares brand-related content on social media and on my mobile sim regarding what brand new features or services they have introduced. I'm also impressed that the staff of my favourite fashion brand on Facebook are so quick to help customers, respond to enquiries in no time, and address the problems they relate at the earliest opportunity. Therefore, many friends and crowd share positive word of mouth on Facebook groups regarding how timely and effectively handled their concerns are".*

A 25-year-old male professional provided his thoughts regarding how online apps help to share fashion brand content on social media:

*"There are several apps which are frequently used by people to find which brands are offering the best rates and quantities. Sometimes, active members on social media take a screenshot of those offers and share the attractive part with an audio message in online networking groups. It is useful to know the crowd knowledge on social media. Most of the time in the audio they show their happiness regarding why they love to buy goods or share information about a brand at discounted prices. They organise the content and enhance awareness among virtual communities".*

A 25-year-old female professional commented regarding brand reviews on social media:

*"Although I love reading the discussions regarding brand-related content where people argue positively or negatively about brands, I do not like to participate actively in discussions because these are lengthy, and due to my tough work schedule... I have limited time and family responsibilities. However, the information exchanged offers diverse and very good experiences that's enough to gain pre-purchase information and decide which good brand is offering what consumers expect and which brands do not".*

A 33-year-old mom has the following point of view:

*“Whenever I have to purchase a brand of apparel, before purchasing...I check the pre-purchase information. I go to the online pages on Facebook and company websites to read the brand reviews and ratings information. Although I do not participate, I am able to get maximum information about costs and a benefit analysis related to the brand in which I am interested”.*

A 27-year-old housewife shared her experience:

*“I am member on different social networking sites like.... Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and WhatsApp. Sometimes, I visit these networking sites to capture information related to my interest. Many times, people recommend amazing and good clothing deals to others, but I also take benefit from information given and I buy items required for me and my family at economical prices or deals. I am confident that these social networking sites enhance our engagement as well as our purchase decisions”.*

Experiences shared by a 25-year-old female student regarding why influencers are not trustworthy include:

*“Brands invest heavily in people like politicians, celebrities, socialites, opinion leaders or influencers. Therefore, I do not always agree with the content shared by these influencers on social media such as Twitter and Facebook. Even some employees hide their work identities and share stories about their brands. Although I usually read the comments regarding those apparel brands in which I am interested, most of time I do not have enough time to start discussions using social media platforms”.*

A 33-year-old male office worker had the following point of view:

*“I think Facebook and Instagram are becoming part of my life because whenever I need them, I can get all the information related to my interests by joining different groups and communities. You know that.... People recommend jobs, brand sales, and everything related to everyone's lives. I recommend my friends and family members to join and casually these social networking platforms gain social engagement and other interests”.*

These participants are interested in organising and aggregating brand-related content, but after organising the content they can share it with friends, or they can use it for their own purposes. The content collectors of social network users have good awareness and skills to edit or upload texts, audios, videos, screenshots and other material related to fashion brands. They edit and curate the information for their friends, family members, online local community and others. They gather and assemble knowledge related to fashion brands by following purchasing apps as well as social media platform marketing tools (i.e. sponsored ads, official pages on social media, advertisement ads and other updates). They participate in sharing information

such as online deals, discounted prices, best offers and other benefits. Because other participants acknowledge and appreciate their efforts, they have high reputations in public and they enhance the social engagement of SMUs on social networking platforms. It is found that the crowd knowledge may be increased by seeing audios and videos related to SMUs experiences about brands. Sometimes collectors have purchased and experienced fashion brands so their shared experiences can create brand engagement among people. On the other hand, some participants stated how they shared the information to gather more brand reviews and experiences so that they and other SMUs can save their time, costs and journeys by placing online fashion brand orders as well as availing themselves of the option of free delivery.

These participants are not only interested in UGC, but they are also actively involved in sharing it with others. However, they only trust credible content or content shared by a reliable source. For example, they believe that people acting as stakeholders in fashion brands can be trusted as sources (friends or family members) who are physically known and trustworthy for them. Sometimes SMUs are stakeholders of brands and have fake accounts and content related to a brand, so their shared content is not reliable. In the light of the interview responses given above, it can be stated that participants prefer to stay connected through social networking sites, so they do not undergo bad experiences while shopping. Some interviewees mentioned that influencers may be brand ambassadors or may be taking money for brand endorsement, so they cannot be relied upon for apparel brand recommendations.

This section discussed the activities and intentions of different SMUs towards UGC, but it is still necessary to understand why some SMUs are influenced by others, and how some UGC has influence but not always.

The findings reveal that the participants are more interested in finding sales, discount vouchers, deals or economical prices, because they are decision makers for their families, such as children or partners. By joining a specific social media group(s), they try to get information which can save their resources. For example, there are many virtual communities, such as open and private groups, which share information (e.g. the best deals and special sales) related to fashion brands. Therefore, participants believe that social media is the best platform which must be joined by their friends and

family members so that they can get information about their interests whenever they need.

#### 4.4.3 Influence factors for UGC

There are different influence factors discussed by different participants that impact on their behaviour towards a fashion brand (see Table 4-7).

*Table 4-7 Influence factors definition*

Social influence factors	Definition
Social Trust	People usually perceived brand-related content to be highly trustable and valuable for decision making when it is shared by their faithful friends and family members rather than by brand channels of advertisements on social media platforms.
Content Expert	People usually more influenced by content from experts because experts are expert at generating attractive content.
Relevance	People usually love to follow those social influencers who have relevant demographics, profession, lifestyle and economic condition and who can provide relevant information that may be helpful in taking optimal purchase decision.
Product user	These people usually love to share their own good or bad experience of a specific brand; on the other hand, social media users are also interested to know about actual product users' experience.

##### 4.4.3.1 Social trust

Social trust is considered a major element which needs to be discussed while conceptualising the decision of consumers to rely on eWOM. Trust represents the willingness of people to place their reliance on the message they receive from a person in whom they have confidence (Tang, 2017).

A 35-year-old housewife shared her experiences:

*"I tend to rely on the recommendations of my friends, particularly about shopping for my kids. I have a group on WhatsApp of my friends which include nine of us. So, when we are going to buy something, we share our experiences with each other and exchange information. This helps us save time and money for my own shopping and for my kids, especially because now we are more concerned about the kids".*

35-year-old housewife also added that



*"I don't trust on online shared coupon or codes of discount; I believe more on my close friend who buy for their kids"*

A 47-year-old female IT professional worker stated:

*"I love to get friends' recommendations because close and true friends recommend only those brands which are best for us. I do not believe other influencers which are not known to me".*

A 26-year-old female student explained about friends' information in brand-purchasing decisions:

*"I only trust my close friends and I like friends who give an honest opinion about fashion brands on social media. You know some people don't give much attention to your needs so there is not point to getting their opinion. My close friends mean the friends with them I have very close physical interaction, like we see each other once or twice a week, so I think physical connection is a connection of trust and reliability of shopping advice".*

Here follow the views shared by a 34-year-old housewife regarding why she prefers to accept brand recommendations from already known sources:

*"I personally believe that an advertisement of a brand is created by the brand itself, so it has less influence on me and people. Therefore, I only consider advertisements to be a source which provides information. However, recommendations are only perceived when the information comes from trustable friends or family through social media because they know me and we know them; or information coming from those who have experienced the product by paying for it from their wallets".*

34-year-old housewife also added as

*"I also don't believe on paid on social media; I just believe to my friend who are like me by money and social thing"*

A 45-year-old housewife said:

*"I don't have trust in brand information which is shared by other than my close friends because there are paid influencers too".*

A 40-year-old mother has the following point of view:

*"When I plan to buy something new for my kids, because kids require more than us, I first check recommendations from my friends, or I go to purchase items produced by the brand from which my friends have already purchased because I can trust only my close friends, more than friends on Facebook. Because, my close friends are very honest with me and I believe that, especially my family friends".*

40-year-old mother also added that

*“Most of time get information from the friend when that share about different offers when they buy”*

A 25-year-old professional male stated:

*“Social media has connected people with their friends and family, and this has enabled us to share our experience about the product with them so that we can save time and money”.*

A 39-year-old male business owner said:

*“We always share our fashion shopping with close and true friends. It’s increased information about new fashion brands that takes our attention and connection with right brands”.*

A 33-year-old male office worker stated:

*“I have a big list of friends on social media, but I don’t trust all of them...especially in terms of shopping for fashion products. Because, it takes advice from someone who is like me.... In terms of money, age, choice.... well I can say I mostly trust my peers, some colleagues and some close friends. I know them, they are very trustable, and they have known me very well for a long time”.*

A 24-year-old housewife stated:

*“I am strongly linked with my true friends who share brand experiences for right selection of affordable brands. I do not believe brand advertisements or shared experiences from unknown sources”.*

A 33-year-old professional woman said:

*“We also share pictures of the products we buy because I work and we don’t have much time to spend on selection of products. So, it’s a quick way to get information for buying rather than to have a bad experience first. Therefore, I tend to rely on the information which I derive from such faithful friends. I prefer not to try the product on my own; instead, I tend to accept the recommendation of someone who has already tried it. So, I can say as a professional lady, social media is best for me to save my time to buy good things”.*

33-year-old professional woman also added as

*“I like to get buying information from people who already have experience with that brand”*

People trust the brand-related information they receive from their social circle, such as close friends and family members, compared with the information they come across from different channels of brand advertisements. Brand information from a close friend is recognised as more faithful and credible compared with that from social media

friends. Additionally, it is also apparent that friends shared brand content considered reliable and credible compared with brand-generated content. The brand-related information received on social media from friends and family is also believed by the receiver in comparison with the information received from advertisement channels. Participants said that they usually prefer those brand recommendations which they receive from their friends and family using social media platforms. They believe that the brand information which SMUs receive from their close friends who have brand experience is considered more authentic and reliable than the information provided through brand advertisements. Most respondents believe that social media has provided a platform to people for sharing their views and experience with friends and family about brands. Further, people are less likely to believe a paid advertisement which may be generated by celebrities and other influencers.

#### **4.4.3.2 Content expert**

The expertise of any person or source represents his or her ability to make valid assertions based on the level of knowledge, skill and experience (McCracken, 1989). This implies the extent to which the communicator is perceived as expert for providing accurate information or attracting others towards specific subjects (Howland et al., 1953).

A 25-year-old male professional clarified why a friend's expertise is more trustworthy:

*"Fashion for me like product and not about the appearance and the quality of the product as it feels on my skin. This is the reason that I make the effort of sharing my experience with my friends. I also like to take and keep the recommendations of my friends who possess a strong sense of brand compression, colour selection and price. Therefore, I am keen to follow recommendation of X and Y friends before I go shopping for a new brand".*

A 34-year-old housewife had this to say regarding uploading and sharing fashion brand content:

*"Although I personally feel shy about displaying my pictures in different clothes on social media, a friend of mine (X) is really good at uploading her pictures on social media in different dresses".*

A 39-year-old male business owner said:

*"I think the expertise of sharing and making things for different friends is something special. My friends A, B and C are more active and competent customising the*

*pictures along with well-written description. Therefore, their shared things always get more likes and comments than my posts”.*

39-year-old male business owner

*“As I said my friend are good to take share something so I like these thing but its not mean I must buy these things”*

A 35-year-old office worker argued that:

*“I always take pictures of the events I attend but I don’t share those pictures online on social media because I am not as skilled as my friend X with sharing pictures in a way to attract friends and family. Therefore, I always share in a group of close friends, who then give their views on that fashion brand”.*

A 35-year-old housewife made the following comment:

*“You know...The kids’ clothing differs in size and fitting from one brand to another. For example, brand X has a different size for a three-year-old kid compared with brand Y. Which is why I like to seek the opinion of my friends on Facebook instead of going through the hassle of finding it on my own. It is very hard to buy and return clothing because it takes time; so, as a mother, it is very easy for me to take my friends’ advice before buying anything for kids”.*

In a response to an additional question, the 35-year-old housewife also said:

*“My close friend has relevant clothing field experience as well as being a native English speaker. He also has really good awareness regarding sales, prices, deals and colour schemes because he has been working for my favourite brand for the last many years. Therefore, his personal recommendations are important to me as well as to my other friends”.*

A 25-year-old male student explained his experiences thus:

*“One of my friends is really keen on taking his picture in different clothes of different brands or he customises such pictures with good language on Facebook and Instagram, which attracts us when he shares information about such brands. I believe he knows the fashion and at the same time he knows how to take the picture and edit these pictures. He always gets more attention on social media among friends”.*

A 46-year-old male professional expressed the following opinion:

*“I am not really an expert at comparing or judging the price, but my friends X and Y are really expert in shopping and know how much should be spent on a shirt, a pair of trousers and suits, so I always seek their advice. They even share their shopping on Facebook and Instagram which I find more trustworthy and attractive than friends of friends or brand advertisements on social media”.*

46-year-old male professional

*"You know many experts attract you to like their share product picture I like many time but it's not mean buy everything what I like on Facebook"*

A 55-year-old male office worker remarked:

*"I really like to take advice from X, one of my friends, because he is really close to me , also same like, and he knows best what I need and how much I can spend so I really like his sharing fashion posts on Facebook and SnapChat".*

According to the participants, some people are not only recognised among their friends and family, but also in the eyes of other SMUs, because of their rising popularity due to their content generation expertise which engages and attracts others. The views of the participants showed that some friends on social media may have high levels of influence among their groups of friends as well as being regarded as content experts by these friends. These friends commonly take pictures with fashion dresses and share with their social network through social media. Therefore, their expertise and experiences may not only influence their friends and family but also other people on social media. For example, expertise including the selection of brand colour, price, size and trend are the most common aspects mentioned by participants. In the light of the interview responses cited above, it can be stated that housewives prefer to stay connected through social networking sites so that they do not face a bad experience while shopping. Furthermore, they tend to seek each other's brand recommendations in selecting children's garments with the purpose of saving time and money when shopping.

It is found that the friends of participants have taken, edited and uploaded pictures of themselves in different dresses and shared these with their friends on social media platforms. Some participants highlighted that their friends have better shopping experiences and expertise; these friends love to take pictures of their purchase brands and share them frequently on social media with details about the prices and quality of products. Findings have shown that technical expertise in customising the brand pictures online also proves appealing for SMUs. It has also been found that a good quality picture or video positively influences the audience. Participants have stated that sharing attractive pictures or audio must be included in the message of the content generators related to brand recommendations. Additionally, language skills, such as well-written and organised brand posts, are identified as attractive because of content

writing and title, and an interesting mixture of pictures and videos supports the enhancement of brand engagement. Therefore, the researcher summarises that brand awareness, language, suitability of colour and size, and technological expertise of customising and taking pictures are considered significant characteristics as well as influential for SMUs.

#### **4.4.3.3 Relevance**

It is clear from the discussion above that celebrities and close friends are crucially significant for getting UGC recognised among consumers on social media. The reason behind this is that similar attributes contribute to the ease of communication; therefore, homophily can facilitate information exchange in consumers' external searches (Price & Feick, 1984). Those consumers who have a high level of perceived homophily contribute more to eWOM and enable others to make choices (Geissinger et al., 2018). This section describes the participants' points of view on the effect of relevance on the influence of UGC on SMUs.

A 35-year-old housewife had the following point of view:

*"I really like to share my kids' shopping with my friends because they also have kids. So, this way, we give and get recommendations from each other which help us to save time and hassle buying kids' clothes".*

A 25-year-old female student stated:

*"I am a student and prefer to get recommendations from those friends who are the same age, have the same level of economic condition, and other similarities. My friends prefer to purchase those fashion brands which are durable as well as available at economical prices".*

The same 25-year-old female student also added some more detail:

*"I am really interested in following and taking advice from someone who is really like me and a person with whom I interact physically five days a week, like my classmates. I usually communicate and interact more with my classmates five days a week, so, their recommendations, views and reviews on social media really matter to me because of our physical interaction and they have relevant information".*

A 35-year-old male business consultant shared:

*"I follow influencers because I love their pictures related to fashion lifestyle because they are really expert in this field. I use them as an inspiration for what I want to buy and wear and look like. I know many trusted brands because I never go for cheap brands, so there's no need to worry about quality – influence is a good source of knowledge about fashion products".*

A 35-year-old male business consultant provided additional detail:

*"If a brand involves a controversial personality as an influencer to promote it, it would shift my interest away from the brand because I really believe many times that influencers have less knowledge compared with my expert friends, so it is better to listen to my close friends because they have relevant information".*

A 26-year-old male professional worker said:

*"I am a professional and I love to choose specific and fast fashion therefore I love to take my peers' suggestions for brand buying".*

A 55-year-old male office worker had following opinion:

*"When I come across recommendations given by influencers whom I know, I am likely to see the information as credible. As a follower of attractive personalities, I love to buy the luxury brands which are extensively used and shared by my favourite personalities".*

*A 45-year-old male business consultant stated:*

*"Value does not necessarily mean the cost of the product but what it is worth. It is not good value to buy a £15 pair of trousers with a zip and uneven seams. Those clothes which tend to fall apart after a few washes are also not the best buy. That is why customers actively seek recommendations from their friends and family about brand promotions, sharing details of their purchases, and the price they paid for the brand item. However, before this they consider the quality of the product to better determine how much it is worth".*

45-year-old male business consultant also added

*"You know many people follow many brands, but they buy which is for them, so people like many thing on social but not buy all of these thing"*

A 27-year-old housewife said:

*"I am a busy housewife and on a tight budget, so I ask the family shopping suggestions from my friends who have same lifestyle and budget".*

A 28-year-old male PhD student stated:

*“I think all of us are bound to a social circle, like, I am a student so every day I have more interaction with my classmates than with my relatives or Facebook friends; so, my classmates' views, recommendations and suggestions matter to me because I believe that fashion is also communication which usually done in our classmates”.*

*A 33-year-old male business owner shared his thoughts:*

*“I follow some celebrities in fashion because they know much about fashion that inspires me, and I feel encouraged when I look to them for my lifestyle and demographics. Celebrities are even fashion movers in the fashion industry so have advanced news and trends of fashion products. I would like to know the brands through their eyes so I can say celebrities are trend setters”.*

Relevance is linked to similarities in people's demographics, profession, lifestyle or economic condition that make it more possible for them to initiate brand recommendations to those who share their demographics, profession, lifestyle or economic condition. For example, housewives and moms loved to take suggestions from their friends who have the same economic condition and better information about brands, whereas some people loved to follow celebrities because they thought that their lifestyle is ideal for them. In this way, celebrities and influencers have more influence to create endorsements for brands. Participants also pointed out the social reputation of the influencers and explained that they are likely to be believed if they discuss their own experience rather than promote specific brands. Participants also mentioned that when they come across a recommendation from an influencer, they only regard it as trustworthy and credible because of their familiarity with the influencer and brand reputation in the market.

Fashion clothing by certain brands is more affordable compared with some other brands. Students', housewives' and office workers' relevance can also be identified because of their greater physical interaction with each other. Thus, there are some common groups, among groups of consumers on social media, whose influencers are active people involved in the quality, quantity and price aspects of different brands. The main target audience of fashion brands is students, which is why they offer student discount rates. Such people are also active users of social media and actively share their experience with a brand on social media, and store websites can be integrated in different social media channels without disturbing the overall appearance of the post.

#### **4.4.3.4 Product user**



A 26-year-old female student shared:

*"I share proof on social media so that people know how brands are not fulfilling what they promised and what I experienced".*

A 33-year-old male business owner stated:

*"Once I purchased on Black Friday but I was frustrated by the quality of the product, so I shared negative words as advice to others".*

A 47-year-old female IT professional stated:

*"I purchased deals on Black Friday but I lost my money and time, so I returned this product and recommended others to not buy".*

A 33-year-old male office worker said:

*"I believe in buying experience if consumer shares proof of purchase and suggestion about either to buy or not".*

45-year-old male business consultant also added

*"You know that at the time buying people more believe on them who already having that product"*

A 27-year-old housewife said:

*"I believe to get brand use experiences from many close friends as they are always involved in buying those brands which match my style, budget and choices".*

A 33-year-old professional woman said:

*"I know there are frauds and fake reviews about many brands but if a consumer shares proof of purchase and discussion then it is helpful for buying".*

A 35-year-old housewife stated:

*"I always follow the product user experience because they shared their real experience after spending money, time and cost and these are beneficial for buying".*

In a reply to a question the 35-year-old housewife added:

*"I am more likely to get product experiences of my friends because they are fair, loyal and sincere to give best shopping tips which always help me for buying".*

In this theme, participants have shared why they shared their personal brand experience with the purpose to suggest/recommend others for brand buying. Another group of participants told that they are influenced by brand user experience, especially

when they shared proof of purchase and made suggestions, because there are large numbers of fake reviews on the internet. Some participants shared that they purchased brands on special deals days, but they were frustrated by the quality of product; therefore, they created negative WOM to advise others as well as saving money and resources. Some of the participants confirmed that they want to take experiences of their multiple close friends because they are known and sincere about advising on the right brand selection. They shared that they follow product user experience because it provides valuable information as well as being helpful in buying decisions.

#### **4.4. Content characteristics influence**

According to Agichtein (2008), there are three ways to evaluate content quality: the accuracy of UGC, the usage of UGC and the relationship between users and an enterprise. It is generally assumed that the relationship between source and source credibility is moderately affected by technical quality and it may differently affect users' generated videos as compared with organisation-generated videos (Agichtein, 2008). Gronroos (1984) is a pioneer researcher who identified various types of service quality, such as technical and functional quality. According to Gronroos (1984), technical quality can be defined as the experience which consumers received when the services, were delivered to them. According to De-Keyser and Lariviere (2014), technical quality has a significant impact on customer attention and happiness especially if the channel is credible among the targeted customers. Agichtein (2008) argued that technical quality (i.e. what is actually delivered) is a significant element of content quality because it can lead to either positive or negative consumer behaviour. Technical quality means an ability and excellency of UGC to save, modify, and exchange across SMNs (Ozuem & Azemi, 2017). Organisation-generated videos mostly display "series of scenes shot" with richly sequenced syntactic structure, the best visual quality and rich audio (Milliken et al., 2008). This section discusses the participants' perceptions of content quality regarding fashion brands. Table 4-8 highlights Content characteristics influence definitions.

*Table 4-8 Content characteristics influence definitions*

Content characteristics influence	Definition
Content excellence	Exceptionally good UGC in an appropriate and attractive form: audio, video, graphic and picture formats.
Accuracy of content	Accuracy of content can be defined as the closeness, correctness or preciseness of UGC as per SMUs' points of view.
Relationship between brand and consumer	People usually love to purchase some specific brands which match with their personality as well as fulfilling their social status, needs and formality of their job designation.

#### 4.4.3.5 Content excellence

A 28-year-old male student said:

*“Although I like high-quality videos in which brand users share their experiences, very close friends’ advice is more helpful for buying”.*

A 23-year-old male student stated:

*“The brands pages give new fashion trends and people share cost and benefits in those pages, but my multiple close friends’ recommendations are necessary for buying”.*

A 33-year-old professional woman had following point of view:

*“I love fashion brand information like fashion trends when it produces users’ sharing their personal experience of my favourite brands, brand cost and benefits offered and so on, particularly when it is about using apparel brands as different fashion brands have different features, such as degree of comfort, durability, colour choices and brand reputation, prices and attraction for people. If UGC contains information like what the brand features are and whether consumers are satisfied with the features supplied, then it means that content has excellence for me”.*

A 29-year-old male student said:

*“I always make rational choices for brand buying so I like to see audio or video content which gives consumer experiences which helps in buying”.*

A 55-year-old male office worker stated:

*“If videos are interesting, such as about how to get useful tips about fashion, like old shoes to shine again, how to polish shoes or how to remove a stain from a suit, then we pay little attention to the length of such informational videos. But my favourite brands’ videos, brand popularity on social media and user experience on social media also attract me. One of the reasons to open these types of video is that we have been*

*wearing shoes and suits for many years and want to maximise like and their usage to avoid new expenditure”.*

A 24-year-old male business owner commented as follows:

*“I love to see informational videos created by users about selection of different fashion brands as they direct us how to purchase branded clothing products with minimum use of time, cost, risk and other effort. However, many times I skip the videos of maximum 5 minutes videos related to my favourite fashion brand because I cannot spend my precious 20 minutes watching fashion-related videos. I generally open those videos that take only two to three minutes as well as personal experiences that are easy to read and understand”.*

A 45-year-old male marketing consultant said:

*“I do not believe in personal experiences of unknown consumers and general videos as I want to see content from my close relations. I believe in close links like friends and family compared to unknown product users”.*

Many participants shared the view that high-definition videos about fashion brands increase their level of information but do not influence them to buy brands. Most participants are agreed that they want to take recommendations/suggestions from their close sources. They think that personal brand experiences using a mixture of video, audio and picture formats are eye-catching for getting pre-purchase information. Furthermore, they shared the fact that they love seeing lengthy fashion brand informational videos in which consumers explain how brands' delivery exceeds their expectations. It is found that participants are more likely to watch videos that have total time duration of around two to three minutes. On the other hand, it was found that they do not have enough time to see videos that have time duration of five to 20 minutes; therefore, brand-related content must be summarised and short because people have to divide their time between work, family, education, shopping, sleep and entertainment. Some participants stated that they preferred to see those videos and pictures which can explain how we can maximise the estimated life and use of clothing brands.

#### **4.4.3.6 Accuracy of content**

According to a 39-year-old male business owner:

*“High resolution videos with a mixture of text and images cannot accurately determine the content quality of fashion brand-related content. If any consumer provides a comparison (using images and audio) regarding what the promised*

*features of a fashion brand are and what the user's experiences are, with logical reasoning, it means the content is highly accurate for me".*

A 24-year-old housewife shared her view:

*"Many times, my favourite celebrity has shared pictures of her favourite brand for Twitter comments. As a result, many followers have given their views regarding linkage between her personality and brand personality. I think... it is the best way to determine accuracy because that celebrity has millions of followers and her posted comments are followed and replied to by the majority".*

A 40-year-old female marketing consultant said:

*"In my local virtual communities, there are many stories regarding brand popularity and reputation. These stories have a positive word of mouth and closeness for me, such as how Brand N fulfils individuals' needs, wants and demands. People think that they have variety because they offer shoes for office work, exercise and home".*

A 39-year-old male business owner said:

*"I believe the user experience of my closely connected friends and family members because they share accurate information for selecting right brand as per my budget. I believe my multiple close friends more than unknown crowd".*

A 47-year-old female IT professional worker said:

*"The high numbers of reviews, likes, tweets, and viewers attracts me towards a brand because it means the brand is popular and has maximum social media user attraction".*

The same respondent shared further detail (a 55-year-old male office worker):

*"I open lengthy videos based on the number of tweets, likes and quantity of UGC, but the length of videos and length of content is really important for me because I don't want to open long videos and long writing, which is just time waiting, as I get an idea from the number of user opinions and recommendations about a specific fashion brand.*

55-year-old male office worker also added that

*"If I find a high number of likes, tweets and retweets, and positive word of mouth about that fashion brand, then it means brand content has high accuracy for me, but I also really like to share incentives or discount offer content with my friends".*

A 35-year-old male business consultant stated:

*"Social media represents a good opportunity for looking into the daily clothes my friends wear for different occasions; therefore, celebrities are one of the major*

*sources of fashion information and knowledge about the product because people really want to know what they should wear and how their life is”.*

A 24-year-old male private business owner shared his thoughts:

*“I always try to place weight on legitimacy, which plays a central role in this. I believe that the big problem with influencers who fail to attract large audiences is they have lack of legitimacy. You know that...they focus more on making money than supplying trustworthy reviews”.*

A 45-year-old mom had the following opinion:

*“I believe that many customers are also paid by third parties for writing reviews which appear neutral but are still beneficial for the brand so that higher product ratings can be gained on brand pages and sites, and this is the reason I am not ready to believe the ratings’ websites. I think it is good to check the accuracy of brand information from different social media platforms and close sources before buying”.*

A 26-year-old female student shared her opinion:

*“We always want to know the content credibility of influence in fashion, so I am very ...very keen on reading the descriptions on YouTube to check whether it is a sponsored blog or not. Well, I think influencers’ videos start discussions on social media, so comments from the influencers’ shared content are more meaningful for me. Many times, I cross-check the accuracy of information on different social media platforms before buying”.*

A 31-year-old female business owner asserted:

*“I love to share my own experiences about fashion products with very closely connected friends and family, especially once my shopping bags are full, because all of us inform each other whenever we have sales, special offers or good prices and brands anywhere. This way we help each other to save money and purchase from good brands. I always keep in mind the dates of offers which is why my friends expect me to share these types of information with them”.*

A 24-year-old male student said:

*“For me it is really easy to check the credibility of a brand because I can compare the likes on the brand’s page on Facebook and Twitter and check the recommendations by users of the brand on Instagram. So, it gives me a clear idea about the authenticity of the brand recommendations online on Facebook so we can say social media also provides credibility of the information”.*

A 55-year-old male office worker had the following point of view:

*“I never read longer blogs and I don’t like to read long comments too, because reading them is boring and time-wasting and mostly these types of blog writers are paid by the brands, I know very well. Some of my friends write very long*

*explanations. It would not be interesting for me if someone explains it in a long video or text because I like smart and short content”.*

55-year-old male office worker also added that

*“A long video or content means they are the kind of person who has their own interests, social ties, or they are free so much they can spend a long time on social activities, otherwise nobody is free that much to make videos. So, shorter, more meaningful and quality content on social media is credible for me”.*

A 35-year-old housewife had the following point of view:

*“The fashions we wear now have changed due to social media. I like to share my shopping and dresses with close friends online as it also influences my friends' shopping way because they really like to listen to me talking about my shopping for clothes. I am always well dressed, and I also spend much more than my friends, so they take my opinion because shopping is like my hobby”.*

A 25-year-old female student explained why she prefers to avoid brand recommendations:

*“I don't take any brand recommendations seriously on social media if a brand's own page is shared by my friend(s). Well, I don't believe in posts which are not commented on by social media users with likes or are shared by my close friends because there are many paid influencers on social media that create positive word of mouth, but for me paid influencers are nothing because I believe more in my close friends and classmates”.*

A 50-year-old male office worker contended:

*“Although in our social circles we tend to care about the reviews from the crowd who have more knowledge and wisdom, we still believe the ones forwarded by our close friends, so crowds of our friends really influence me and I believe more when my friends recommend something”.*

A 55-year-old male office worker contributed as follows:

*“I am greatly inspired by my closely networked friend who always shares very high-definition videos with latest fashion trends. So, He is famous among our groups due to his expertise in producing high-quality videos and pictures and presenting his own views about various fashion brands”*

55-year-old male office worker also added that

*“My friend always makes very high-definition video which attracts me and my friends. Most of the time our friends agree with his shared accurate experiences, so*

*his shared content quality is perceived as highly influential and relevant in our group and I really like a mixture of audio, video and text”.*

A 39-year-old male business owner shared why he prefers to take multiple views about fashion brands:

*“It is not sufficient for me if only two or three of my friends recommend something. The quantity of comments in the recommendation of something is of significance for me, as I believe that an abundance of views is better than merely a small number from a few friends. I believe in crowd opinion rather than to believe in some people”.*

The second theme explained how accuracy of brand-related content is an important factor to create high content quality which also name as Content characteristics. Accuracy of content is increased when there are more shares, tags, views, likes, tweets/retweets or WOM from a crowd for a brand as well as from close sources, such as close friends. Participants confirmed that a high number of reviews, views, tweets, likes, tags and shares attract them because it means the brand is popular among people, which increased the accuracy of content for them. It is found that content novelty, ease of forwarding, popularity and other various aspects of UGC leave a strong impact on consumers. A participant further added that the main quality features of UGC include forwarding capacity, attractiveness and how many times a post gets likes from users. Some participants shared that they are more likely to get a recommendation from their close sources because it increases their confidence that their close sources have already had accurate personal experiences with brands. Participants shared that they connected with virtual communities, celebrities and close sources to gather accurate and up-to-date information about brands.

They believe that there are many paid influencers on social media and their shared UGC has no significant impact on participants' behaviour towards brands. They have shared that if the content has been shared by multiple close friends then it has more influence on their purchase intention. A majority of participants considered a recommendation/suggestion from their social circle, such as close friends, to be credible UGC. It is found that consumers can share credible content because their shared experiences or comments are based on personal experiences. Additionally, many participants revealed that they are highly influenced when one of their close friends shares disheartening brand experiences on social networking platforms. Therefore, it can be asserted that UGC about a brand can be negative in nature due



to the differences between what the brand promises and what the consumers experience. These shared experiences can lead to the creation of negative eWOM on various social media platforms. UGC on social media is perceived to be more credible by consumers compared with product reviews or ratings websites. According to the interview participants, UGC on social media by a person influences his/her peers' views about a particular brand or product. Therefore, it can also be stated that UGC credibility also rests on the relationship between the UGC creator and the reader. Physical contact between the two enhances the credibility of the content generated. A reader may also be influenced by an abundance of views whereas two or three comments may not influence the reader at all, so some SMUs believe crowd views, but SMUs are more inclined if more people from their friends' list comment and recommend a product.

#### **4.4.3.7 Relationship between the brand and the consumer**

A 33-year-old mom said:

*"I love to search discounted or any incentive brand offers because my budget is limited so I select cheap brands as per my social needs".*

A 33-year-old housewife had following point of view:

*"My favourite fashion brands normally organise many incentive-based things like posts, video. on social media platforms. In this case, we have to discuss the pros and cons of the brand. Then they will decide which thing is the best and award a prize to the winner. A brand offers many incentives for brand users who accurately determine the benefits and areas for improvement. I think... the best way to get brand reviews is from those who have personal experiences with a fashion brand".*

A 40-year-old mom told me:

*"I never want to spend much time or amounts of money purchasing luxury or famous fashion brands, although I am interested in such brands but only on some specific days in a year. For example, I love to search for pre-purchase brand-related information such as discounted prices, available colours and sizes with relation to other brands. If luxury brand content has this type of information, then it addresses my needs and it is easy for me to make a purchase decision".*

A 25-year-old male professional shared his point of view:

*"For a long time, I have dreamed of having a highly paid job and wearing a three-piece suit by brand A on the first day of my new job. Now wearing this suit feels to me like my dream has come true. I am truly engaged with the fashion brand A in the*

*UK; a long time ago I got information about this brand when I was watching a video on how to tie a tie”.*

A 24-year-old male student had the following point of view:

*“I feel that my personality is linked with a brand personality. I think that as per my social status, brand N personality is the only match. Furthermore, I have seen that several of my rich, close friends have described what brand N is in their eyes on social networking sites. The comments they provide are inspirational for me, so I strongly engage with brand N”.*

A 31-year-old male marketing consultant stated:

*“At my wedding, I dressed up in a tuxedo with a bow tie that I had previously seen in a video shared by a celebrity T almost a year previously on his Facebook, so I selected the tuxedo based on that particular video because I was inspired by celebrity T's wedding and wanted to look the same”.*

A 35-year-old male business consultant stated:

*“My job designation is professional, so I love to wear as per my social and professional needs and status therefore I wear popular brands which are known by everyone”.*

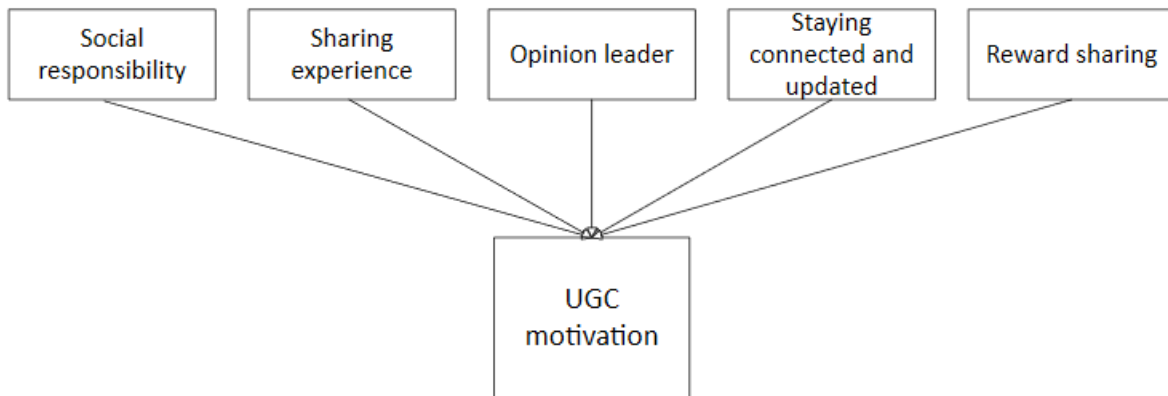
Brand personality, brand popularity, brand choices and brand preferences are some of the factors which can increase people's engagement with fashion brands. For example, a participant shared that he has social status and only the personality of brand N matches with his social status needs. Another participant shared that he dressed up using a tuxedo with a bow tie because he was inspired by a celebrity who used this dress at a wedding and shared picture on Facebook. The participants shared opinions that if a brand is popular among their close friends, then their engagement and intention to purchase is increased. The participants shared that they love to find those brands which fulfil both their social and professional needs. They shared that if consumers are satisfied with the brand features offered and post positive WOM, they search for further information, such as affordability, special discounts, colour schemes and sizes. Some participants shared that they are more likely to search the incentive-based offers which can fulfil their social and economic needs.

#### **4.5 DISCUSSION**

This section discusses the major codes for each theme that lead towards the findings for each theme. As the major objective of this research is to synthesise UGC social

influence for brand engagement, the discussion will identify the major social influence factors of UGC in different contexts.

#### 4.5.1 Motivational factors for exchanging brand-related content



*Figure 5-4-1 Motivational factors for exchanging brand-related content*

The first important motivation factor is social responsibility (see figure 5-1). The participants of this study believe that it is socially responsible to help each other. SMUs ask for fashion brand recommendations or suggestions, such as which brand is most appropriate, affordable, durable and easily accessible. SMUs share their personal shopping experiences, for example referring to pros and cons of a brand, or what a brand promised and what the consumers experienced. These shared experiences are helpful for other SMUs as pre-purchase information which may help to take accurate buying decision. The existing literature indicated that the use of social media enhanced the number of customer reviews of either disheartening or exciting experiences, and these experiences increased the further generation of UGC (Grosser et al., 2019; Micu et al., 2017; Kim & Lee, 2017; Gavilanes et al., 2018; Çınar, 2018; Zhao et al., 2017). By exchanging brand-related experiences, most of the participants thought that they were being socially responsible by saving others' time, money, journeys and other resources. Haigh and Wigley (2015) highlighted that social networking platforms enhance levels of awareness, levels of corporate social responsibility, social engagement, information exchange and the exchange of activities related to similar interests.

According to the participants' points of view, negative bad brand experiences may help to warn as well as advise others that they should not repeat their mistakes and try to

save their financial and non-financial resources. In particular, if dissatisfied customers create negative brand stories on social media, more people can view the information given and it is also possible that the content may go viral. Conversely, it is found that people also share excited experiences with the purpose of creating a win-win situation for their social network as well as for the brand. Furthermore, negative brand stories on social networking platforms can inversely influence the brand engagement of existing and future consumers as well as fashion brands' selling. Nyer (1997) found that negative emotions mean people are discouraged from consuming the product; therefore, they are more engaged to generate negative WOM for that product. Similarly, Yao (2014) stated that negative experiences enhance the level of motivation to create and share negative stories with the purpose of negatively impacting purchase decisions for a specific service or product. According to Naeem (2019a), the use of social networking platforms has reduced brand advertisement costs and offered many benefits in terms of information exchange, enquires about brands, positive/negative stories, two-way communication, more transactions, and social interactions among targeted customers and brands.

The second motivational reason is sharing experience that can enhance UGC exchange among SMUs about the brands in which they are interested. SMUs believe that sharing is caring, and it also creates motivation to extract more experiences of other SMUs regarding that brand. Social media has increased socialisation among brand users therefore they are able to exchange information related to a specific brand. It is found that people more frequently shared their personal experiences when they felt these shared experiences were useful for their friends, family members and community, with the purpose of optimising their purchase decisions. Recent studies stated that social media platforms are actively used by customers with the purpose of exchanging their personal experiences and these exchanged experiences may help others, such as valuable pre-purchase information which may helpful to take optimal purchase decision (Naeem, 2019a, 2019b).

On the other hand, SMUs love to share their experiences when they are emotionally connected, such as happy, satisfied or dissatisfied, after using a specific brand. These emotional connections create a motivation in SMUs to share their personal brand experiences. Moreover, it was found that these emotional experiences enhanced

motivation to create brand stories with the purpose of sharing their experiences with other SMUs. Derbaix and Van-hamme (2003) highlighted that WOM usually occurs when consumers use a product or service, then they like to share their experiences. Social media platforms are famous for creating, sharing and exchanging information related to similar interests (Naeem, 2019a). Emotional connection with a brand is one of the main motivational reasons to create or exchange brand-related content. Consciously or unconsciously, shared experiences create more information and knowledge for others; these are some of the motivational forces that may positively or negatively influence the brand purchase intentions of SMUs. Previous studies showed that an emotional connection with a brand is increased when customers are more satisfied, passionate, connected, loyal and perceive the quality as superior (Batra et al., 2008; Loureiro et al., 2012; Thomson et al., 2005). Verhagen, Nauta, and Feldberg (2013) indicated that when customers have negative experiences about any product or service then they are more like to openly share their negative experiences online with others.

The third motivational reason for UGC is to stay connected and updated. Many people exchange information in open and private groups on Facebook with the purpose of engage people and sharing information relevant to their interests, such as special sales and best deals about fashion brands. In fact, these virtual communities have increased the connections and updates of brand-related content about fashion brands. De-Valck et al. (2009) argued that virtual communities have increased information exchange as well as developed friendships among different social actors because of their common passion or interests. It is found that people prefer to share personal shopping experiences, recommendations and reviews about clothing brands, which ultimately generate a social connection with brands. For example, it is found that when customers have a strong connection with a brand, then they love official pages and discussions about brands with the purpose of either sharing or getting personal experiences. People believe that these online social platforms play a vital role in enabling them to stay connected with fashion brands by connecting individuals, groups and celebrities. Social media includes blogs, WOM information, chat rooms, brand-sponsored discussion, personal messages between customers, customer ratings and reviews, digital photos, images and audio, therefore it can be argued that social media is a new factor of promotional mix (Mangold & Faulds, 2009).

The connection between people and brands are developed by the updating of information about new fashion deals, shopping trends and new events. Also, Broeck et al. (2017) stated that social media platforms have generated strong brand preferences and created relationships with brands, people and organisations. This type of UGC is usually shared among friends with the purpose of sharing their personal experiences as well as shopping together. In fact, the extensive use of media platforms has fostered UGC creation and exchange about fashion brands. Now, SMUs can search viral brand content, such as likes, positive reviews, enquiries and common consumer interests, which can enhance consumers' emotional involvement and SBE. It is found that people love to either share or receive brand shopping experiences with the purpose of collecting information for buying. Adetunji et al. (2017) highlighted that the role of social media, such as Facebook, has become important because it has enhanced consumer engagement and connection with various brands; therefore, it can argued that it is a strategic marketing channel for communication between customers and brands.

The fourth motivational reason is reward sharing about brands. It was found that people usually love to share information about brands when they have found motivational things, such as promotional deals, affordable rates on special sale days and social events. For example, people love to share buying experiences about those brands which they purchased on either special sale days (i.e. Black Friday and Boxing Day) or special sales offers (e.g. 50% and 70% off). The exchange of experiences can be helpful in selecting the right brand with economical rates which is usually not available on normal days in a year. Findings reveal that due to their sharing habits, sometimes other SMUs, who had no intention to purchase, also purchase because of the information shared with them. People are usually motivated to share their shopping experiences because their friends as well as family members share brand-related content, such as fashion trends, promotional deals, discount vouchers at local stores and other activities. Also, Gautam and Sharma (2017) indicated that the use of social media increased social interaction, trend identification, customisation, sale events information and WOM; these factors can influence a customer's intention to purchase fashion brands. Another prominent reason to exchange brand-related content is optimal purchase decisions, which is why most participants are involved in asking for brand recommendations or experiences from other SMUs. According to Hutter et al.

(2013), social media interactions have a positive influence on brand purchases because they increase support for the completion of the purchase process.

The fifth motivational reason is the role of an opinion leader in enhancing brand-related content on social media platforms. Opinion leaders are those SMUs who try to get unique recognition by creating and exchanging brand recommendations. There are two types of person who share experiences. The first group of participants are influencers and the second group of participants are those who are influenced by opinion leaders. For example, the first group of respondents highlighted that their close friends encouraged them to relate their experiences because it helps them to make the correct brand buying decisions as well as saving them money. While the second group of people said that they love to take recommendations from experts or by following the comments of opinion leaders on social media. The findings reveal that SMUs create posts to ask for recommendations and reviews of opinion leaders because they are strongly influenced by experts who have relevant experience and a high level of information, which can create engagement with brand.

If an opinion leader or other active member continually helps others by exchanging their brand reviews, other SMUs are also more motivated to share their thinking or brand experiences with others. Jin and Phua (2016) argued that opinion leaders are always interested in discussing their experiences about products and services with others. SMUs prefer to see brand-related recommendations from opinion leaders because they have social identity, trustworthiness, are well known, as well as having relevant expertise related to fashion brands. It was found that there are many experts on social media who play a leading role in content generation and exchange related to fashion brands. A high level of enduring involvement was found among eWOM opinion leaders as they possess exploratory behaviour, innovativeness and self-perceived knowledge as compared to non-leaders (Kim & Lee, 2017). They are active social players in their social circle because they love to generate and share shopping experiences with a virtual community, close friends and friends of friends. It was also found that some participants unintentionally purchased a fashion brand after reading a recommendation from experts and other influencers. Opinion leaders are involved in social leadership and are socially active, which empowers them to influence others instead of being influenced by others (Hamzehei et al., 2019).

Muntinga et al. (2011) offered three social motivational dimensions for content generation and exchange: remuneration, entertainment and information. Muntinga et al. (2011) argued that people shared content when they found job-related benefits, emotional connection and other common interests. Furthermore, they also argued that people asked for advice and recommendations to reduce risk in their routine life decisions. Chi (2011) stated that SMUs' motivation is influenced by various factors such as trust, informative, entertainment, affection and irritation. Chi (2011) explained these users' motivations in the context of Facebook pages rather than any brand. Tsai and Men (2013) conducted a study and found remuneration, economic incentives, seeking company-related information, job-related benefits and entertainment increased user motivation. However, the present study is focussed on the context of fashion-related brands; therefore, the present study extended the existing literature by giving more details and many unique motivational reasons for exchanging brand-related content. For example, SMUs initiate brand content exchange when they feel that it is their social responsibility to share good and bad brand-related experience because it can save financial and non-financial resources; they exchange experiences because it creates benefits both for the brand as well as for SMUs; SMUs exchange brand-related experiences to increase pre-purchase information because it may be helpful in taking best purchase decision; people share discount vouchers with their family and friends on social media, which ultimately creates more discount vouchers for their social network; people asked questions of influencers, such as opinion leaders, about brands due to their unique knowledge and experience; and people connect with opinion leaders because they have information about new trends, fashion and discounted prices on brands.

Chi (2011) also explored different social motivational factors of UGC but her study only selected female students who were using Facebook pages. Furthermore, another study highlighted social motivational factors (i.e. entertainment, social integration, remuneration, empowerment, personal identity, and information) but their findings are only limited to Facebook pages (Tsai & Men, 2013). However, the present study included professional and non-professional men as well as women and their sources of motivation for UGC across different social networking platforms (i.e. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram and Flicker).



This study has revealed that there are five motivational reasons which can increase fashion brand-related content generation, sharing and exchange among SMUs. These motivational causes are social responsibility, sharing experience, staying connected and updated, reward sharing and opinion leader. In the context of social responsibility, it was found that people generate brand-related content when they have either a good or bad experience because they believe that sharing information can save time, cost and travelling time for others. In fact, information exchange creates a sense of helping each other through using virtual communities. Haigh et al. (2013) stated that corporate social responsibility can be used as a communication strategy on social media because it can positively influence the perception of stakeholders. Furthermore, they argued that corporate social responsibility, public relationship and an organisation's reputation can significantly enhance consumption of the content generated by the organisation (Haigh et al., 2013). Haigh and Wigley (2015) conducted an empirical study and found that when people read more negative posts on Facebook then people perceived that the organisation has a lack of corporate social responsibility. The present study is more focused on the consumers' perspective rather than the organisation's perspective. The current study revealed that people are socially responsible by sharing their brand experiences with others because it can save time, money, journeys and other resources. Furthermore, when people feel it is socially responsible to exchange their personal experiences, then it helps others to select brands that are appropriate, affordable, durable and easily accessible. These elements increased the sense of social responsibility to generate and exchange UGC related to fashion brands.

The second motivational factor is sharing experience. The existing literature has offered scattered evidence regarding why SMUs share their experiences (Naeem, 2019a; Yao, 2014; Verhagen, Nauta, & Feldberg, 2013), especially in relation to fashion brands. These studies are limited to offering information about positive and negative emotions as the main reasons to share personal experiences related to common interests. However, there are many new elements which can increase the motivational causes for sharing experiences specifically related to fashion brands.

The third motivation factor is that the use of social media platforms increases connections and updates between people and fashion brands. According to De-Valck

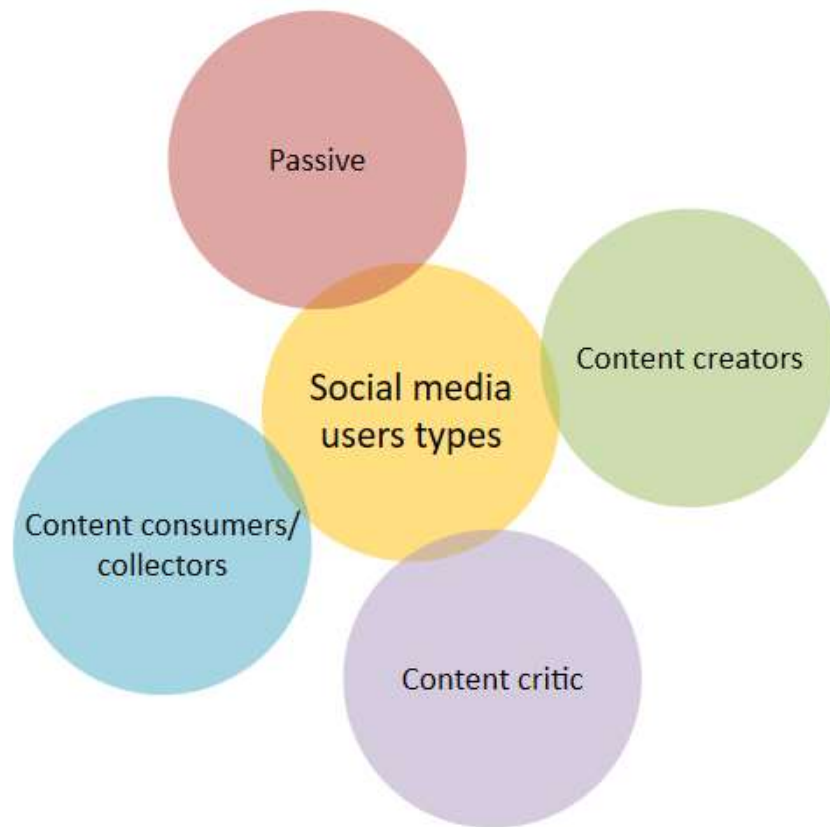
et al. (2009), virtual communities have increased connection and friendship among social actors sharing a common passion. Also, Broeck et al. (2017) found that the use of social media platforms created strong brand preferences and created relationships with brands, people and organisations. However, there is lack of information available on how social platforms play a role in creating connections and updates about fashion brands. This study found that people connect to get updates about latest shopping trends, enhanced information related to specific brands, help related to brand decisions, to avoid risks and to stay updated about events related to fashion brands in which they are interested.

The fourth motivational factor for brand-related UGC exchange is the SMUs' motive of reward sharing. The existing literature has indicated that the use of social media increased interactions, trend identification, customisation, sales events information and WOM; these factors can influence customers' intention to purchase fashion brands (Gautam & Sharma, 2017). However, there is limited information available with respect to why SMUs are involved in reward sharing from the perspective of fashion brands. The present study revealed that SMUs love to share rewards if they find motivational things which surprise them and others, such as a discount voucher or other special deals on those fashion brands which are not possible to buy on regular days.

The fifth motivational reason is the role of opinion leader with respect to exchange of UGC related to fashion brands. Prior studies have indicated that opinion leaders are socially active; therefore, they can influence others instead of being influenced by others (Hamzehei et al., 2019). This study showed that opinion leaders are active because they are physically known, trustworthy and have relevant expertise; therefore, their social circle and friends encourage them to give their recommendations so that they can take optimal decisions about fashion brands. Previous studies only focused on exploring the benefits of social media platforms in the context of seeking advice for taking best possible decision (Naeem, 2019a, 2019b), but this study explained why consumers create, exchange, acknowledge and consume UGC related to those fashion brands in which they are interested. For example, people create UGC to share their relevant expertise, personal experience, to warn others, create awareness and

tell crowd wisdom, and they believe sharing is caring as it helps others in their buying decisions.

### 5.1. Types of SMUs



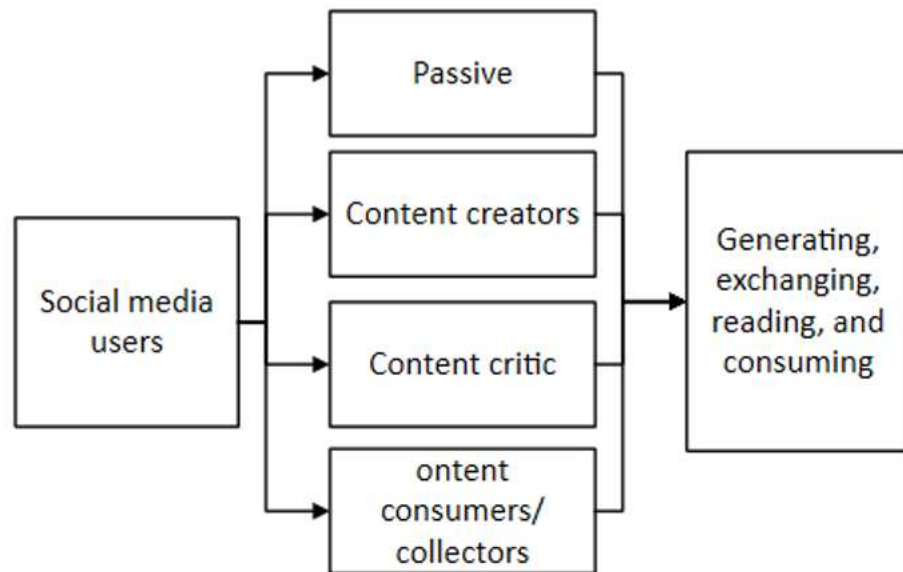
*Figure 5-4-2 Types of social users*

The first UGC participant type is passive people who do not actively create, reply, edit, share or exchange information related to brands (see figure 5-2). It is found that the passive type of SMU is limited to few social media platforms (e.g. YouTube, Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp). This definition does not mean that they never view or like brand-related content. They were unable to participate because of busy schedule, lack of confidence, lack of writing skills or were shy about replying to/exchanging brand information. In this category, few people who have high level of trust in direct communication seem passive because they are more less confident to use indirect communication tools like social media. Passive individuals are those who are less likely to exchange UGC related to fashion brands. For example, a participant revealed that she has a lower level of writing skills and she was reluctant to participate because SMUs are frequently involved in insults and trolling, especially when they find

imperfection in writing skills. Another participant revealed that she is not confident about her writing skills; therefore, she is unable to seek purchasing advice from social media platforms. Moreover, another participant shared that she is too shy while another participant is too busy with her home responsibilities to exchange UGC related to fashion brands. Although they can read about SMUs' experiences, they are not very active in visiting social media platforms.

The second UGC participant type is content creator who is actively involved in creating, sharing or exchanging brand-related content through social networking platforms. It was found that they are mostly young energetic students with a high level of education, which helps them to actively use the functions of social media platforms. It was found that they are actively involved in sharing and editing pictures, videos and other brand-related content to help their friends, friends of friends, family members and general crowd on social media platforms. It was found that they are strong social influencers who have extensive knowledge related to brands and they shared their knowledge to initiate brand recommendations as well as their social responsibility to help others in their purchase decisions.

The critics are those individuals who are frustrated with disheartening experiences with brands (e.g. related to brand quality, price, complaint-handling procedures, differences between information shared and customers' experiences, and customer services). These people have purchase receipts, email correspondence, pictures of clothes and shoes, and other evidence which can demotivate existing and future consumers. For example, participants described how they negatively experienced apparel items which they saw online and ordered. They argued that the attractiveness on the website and their actual experiences had significant differences; therefore, they created negative WOM on social networking sites because that brand wasted their time and money. Furthermore, some participants also reported that they had negative experiences concerning fashion sales on special days such as Black Friday and Boxing Day. They shared these experiences as a social responsibility with the purpose of warning others and to help them save their resources.



*Figure 5-4-3 Social user types in context of UGC*

Figure 5-3 shows the roles of SMUs in generating, sharing, exchanging, acknowledging and consuming UGC related to fashion brands. Figure 5-3 is a simple representation to show how different types of SMUs (passive, content creators, criticisers and consumers) are involved in generating, exchanging, reading and consuming content related to brands in which they are interested. The UGC participants who are more actively involved are collectors/consumers and criticisers. For example, collectors are more interested in finding sales, discount vouchers or deals because they are decision makers for their families; therefore, they consume the UGC related to fashion brands. Content creators are those who are involved in creating, sharing and exchanging content about fashion brands. Furthermore, criticisers are those people who have had either disheartening or inspiring personal shopping experiences which they generate and share with the purpose to warn and advise others. The presentation of this figure is an attempt to summarise the overall roles of UGC participants with respect to generating, sharing, exchanging, acknowledging and consuming UGC related to fashion brands.

The collectors are those participants who are not only interested in UGC, but they are also actively involved in sharing it with others. However, they only trust credible content or those shared by a reliable source, such as close friends and family members who are trustable and faithful. A participant explained that some SMUs have good awareness and skills to make, edit or upload text, audio, videos, screenshots

and other material. They collect and share the brand-related information with their friends, family members, the online local community and others. Participants have stated that they actively participate in sharing information such as online deals, discounted prices, best offers and other benefits. People acknowledge and appreciate their efforts. Therefore, they have a good reputation in public and enhance their social and brand engagement on social networking platforms. Sometimes collectors share their experiences of their purchases of brand goods, which can create brand engagement among people. On the other hand, they also share information to gather more brand reviews and experiences so that they and other people can save time, costs, journeys and other resources.

Content creators are actively involved in sharing content related to fashion brands with their friends, friends of friends, family members and online local community on Facebook. They are well known in their social circle; therefore, they can socially engage SMUs with fashion brands.

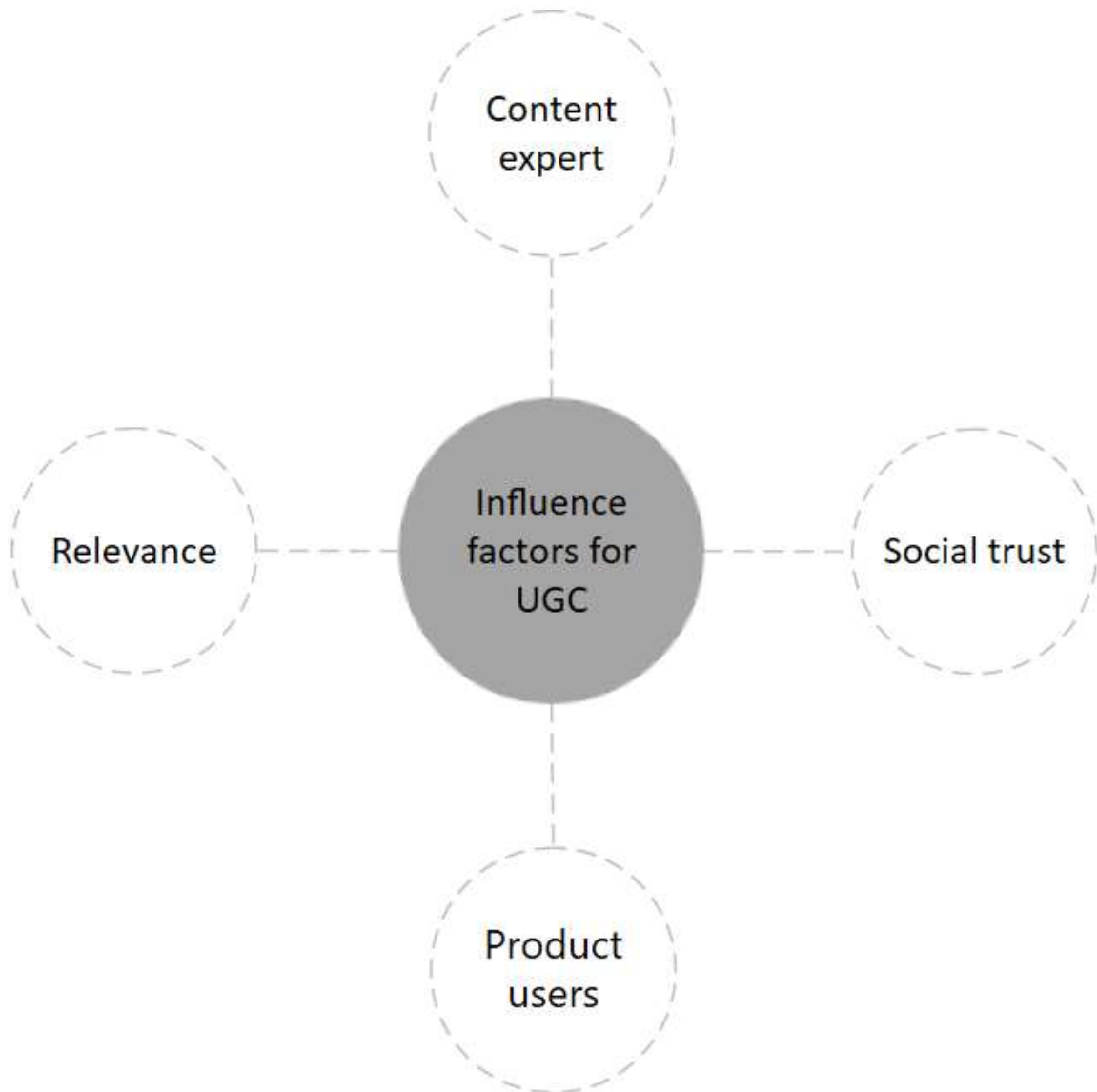
Critics is a category of UGC participants who have purchase receipts, correspondence emails, pictures of clothes and shoes and logical reasons that can inspire or demotivate existing and future consumers about fashion brands. Therefore, their personal experiences can either socially engage or disengage their social circle from specific fashion brands. A participant explained that WhatsApp and Facebook groups played an active role in enhancing brand-related experiences because sharing can create fruitful conversations as well as good engagement and connection with friends, society and brands. Another participant shared that a Muslim community group (either private or public on Facebook) enhanced social engagement with people and brands because people are now able to find cultural dresses, religious dresses and other common interests easily. Previous studies revealed that consumers who publicise brand content (e.g. especially those consumers who have purchased and experienced the brand) not only build a stronger and more appreciated identity of themselves in their networks or communities (Shankar et al., 2016; So et al., 2018), but they can also positively contribute to others' social engagement and brand engagement by giving positive WOM among SMUs (Huang & Benyoucef, 2013; Shankar et al., 2016).

Social media collectors are active members on various social networking sites and they frequently visit various platforms to capture information related to their brand

interests. They are decision makers for their family members, such as children or their partner, so they try to get information which can save their resources. They are active members but do not have enough trust and time to create, share or ask for recommendations about brand-related contents. Sometimes they do not actively participate in brand discussions, but they consume brand-related content. They actively look for information related to promotional deals, best brands, people's choices at economical prices and discounts in local stores. In conclusion, these are some of the categories which can generate, share, exchange, edit, organise and enhance brand-related content and engagement among people. If people are more engaged with brands, they can share the information with others, which can positively or negatively influence brand purchase decisions.

According to Daugherty et al. (2008), people are engaged with those UGC creators who create blogs, discussion forums, videos, pictures and audio. These creators can influence the behaviour of audience of UGC (Daugherty et al., 2008). However, this study explained that UGC creation and exchange are not only limited to creators. There are many UGC participants who socially engage with fashion brands' audiences, such as content creators, critics and collectors/consumers. Previous studies only focused on exploring the benefits of social media platforms in the context of seeking advice for taking best possible decision with respect to products or services selection (Naeem, 2019a, 2019b), but this study explained how consumers are involved in creating, exchanging, acknowledging and consuming UGC related to those fashion brands in which they are interested. For example, content creators are highly involved in sharing brands-related content with their friends, friends of friends, family members and online local community on Facebook, which helps to increase engagement with brands. Furthermore, criticisers can create logical arguments by using purchase receipts, correspondence emails, pictures of clothes and shoes, and logical reasons that can either engage or disengage SMUs from fashion brands.

## 5.2. Influential factors for UGC



*Figure 5-4-4 Influential factors of user-generated content*

There are major four types of the influencing factor which include product users, relevance of UGC or source, social trust and context experts (see figure 5-4) One of the participants said that brand advertising is considered a source of information only, but most SMUs depend more on the personal recommendations of faithful family members and friends. According to previous studies, trust in a brand is one of the main drivers to attain customer engagement and loyalty (Fay & Larkin, 2017; Kim & Lee, 2017). Most participants revealed that they trust those sources which are faithful and credible as compared to SMUs who are their ordinary friends. The findings have



highlighted that those who are faithful and credible are content generators for participants. Most interviewees highlighted that participants strongly depend on suggestions from their faithful close friends and family members with respect to brands. Previous literature has indicated that those individuals who are faithful and physically known and share their selfies on social media are more useful for engaging targeted customers with brands (Humphrey, 2013; Presi et al., 2016; So et al., 2018; Yi, Jiang & Benbasat, 2017; Liu, 2018). Participants shared that they did not try a product until their friends shared some shopping experience about that brand. So, most of these interviewees stated that their close friends, who they have known for many years, are trustable sources with respect to taking a buying decision.

According to trust transfer point of view, if an individual has a close association with a person who creates UGC, the shared content has a more positive influence (Yang et al., 2016), although current literature has suggested that celebrities and opinion leaders may have a positive influence on the purchase intention of customers (Ransbotham et al., 2012; Munar & Jacobsen, 2013). It is possible that people who are unknown may not be trusted to initiate brand recommendations compared to those who have been physically known for many years due to their honesty. In this situation, SMUs can show more faith in close friends and family members, who are physically known to them, because of their honesty as well as unique shopping experiences. These sources can initiate brand suggestions and recommendations for their close social circle. A study verified that the sharing of UGC on social media platforms is based on culture, race, gender and social context (Xun & Guo, 2017). Previous studies have also supported the precept that those individuals who are physical known, experienced and credible, such as family members or close friends, can positively influence purchase decisions for various brands (Pinto, 2015; Bacile et al., 2018).

The second major influence factor is content expertise: experts who have relevant shopping experience and are able to create, share or exchange brand-related content on social media platforms. Experts are well aware of the features of social media platforms and they use their shopping experiences to engage other SMUs. Most participants revealed that they are highly influenced by close friends who have awareness of colour selection and deals. Participants also affirmed that they love to follow the personal recommendations of close friends who have high levels of brand

information, such as appropriate brand colour, price, size, trend and economical prices. These people are considered experts due to several reasons (e.g. written skills; ability to save, edit, modify and upload UGC; better knowledge of colour schemes; high levels of awareness about sizes available; and high levels of information about prices and upcoming deals); experienced individuals exert a strong influence on others. Also, it has been found that confidence in the experts' brand-related content editing and sharing skills and their ability to effectively convey a message (e.g. language experts) may positively enhance brand engagement among SMUs. A recent study also verified that those individuals who have relevant industry experience may be considered better influencers on social media due to their personal experience or expertise (Naeem, 2019a). However, another study suggested that if consumers have personal expertise, but they are unknown in virtual communities, then they are unable to add social influence to shared UGC (Zhou & Duan, 2015).

The third influence factor is relevance of brand-related content, discussed in the literature as homophily, which is the phenomenon of the extent to which individuals with similar attributes interact with each other and accept each other's point of view (Rogers & Bhowmik, 1970). The current study found that people love to take brand-related information from those who have similar demographics, profession, lifestyle and economic condition; therefore, they can initiate brand recommendations based on their knowledge, expertise and shopping experience. According to a previous study, most companies which advertise or publish brand-related content on social media lack relevance to targeted customers (Schultz, 2017). Participants who are housewives revealed that they preferred to listen to the personal recommendations of their friends (i.e. close friends as well as housewives). For example, if a housewife purchases a fashion brand's children's garments, then she can recommend them to her close friend (e.g. another housewife who may have the same economic condition and choices).

Other participants love to follow the lifestyle and choices of celebrities because their lifestyle and personality is relevant and ideal for them. Furthermore, office workers who are mothers can easily refer to those fashion brands which are in their affordability range as well as suited to the working requirements of an office. Other participants (e.g. students) argued that they prefer to act upon recommendations from close friends (other students). One of the reasons for this is that a majority of students are looking

for fashion brands that are economical and durable. Therefore, relevance is also one of the major factors of social influence. According to Munar and Jacobsen (2013), the importance, relevance and influence of brand-related content increasingly enables potential customers to make brand purchase decisions.

The fourth influence factor is product user. Product users are those SMUs who share their personal brand experience with the purpose of initiating brand recommendations for brand buying. It was found that they are influenced by users' experiences of brands, especially when users shared proof of purchase, perhaps because a large number of fake reviews are available on the internet. Some participants shared that they purchased brands on special deals days, but they were frustrated by the quality of the product; therefore, they created negative WOM to advise others and to save money and resources. They shared that they follow a product user's experience because it provides valuable information as well as being helpful in buying decisions. Previous studies revealed that social media facilitated sharing of brand-related experiences which is helpful to take buying decisions (Dessart et al., 2015; Naeem, 2019a).

Previous studies revealed that trust in a brand is one of the main drivers to attain customer engagement and loyalty (Fay & Larkin, 2017; Kim & Lee, 2017). One study stated that trust means the willingness of people to place their trust in a message that comes from a person in whom they have confidence (Tang, 2017), but it did not provide any evidence regarding which social sources have more social influence and which social sources have less social influence for social fashion brand engagement and purchase decisions. The present study found that SMUs usually perceived brand-related content to be highly trustable and valuable for brand engagement when it is shared by their faithful friends and family members rather than by brand channels of advertisements on social media platforms. For example, one of the interviewees revealed that close friends engage with and influence their purchase decisions: *"When I plan to buy something new for my kids, because kids require more than us, I first check recommendations from my friends, or I go to purchase items produced by the brand from which my friends have already purchased because I can trust only my close friends, more than friends on Facebook. Because, my close friends are very honest with me and I believe that, especially my family friends"*.

Extensive literature has indicated that credibility of brand and social ties are some of the factors which can generate credibility in message as well as convert that credibility into brand engagement and loyalty (Hsu et al., 2013; He & Bond, 2015; Morris, 2018; Naeem, 2019a). However, these studies did not provide evidence of which source(s) of message are perceived as credible and which social ties can generate social and consumer fashion brand engagement. The present study has highlighted which social ties are considered more credible as well as able to generate SBE and CBE. From similar types of interviews about credibility, one of the interviewees provided specific information: *“Although in our social circles we tend to care about the reviews from the crowd who have more knowledge and wisdom, we still believe the ones forwarded by our close friends, so crowds of our friends really influence me and I believe more when my friends recommend something”*. It is found that when fashion brand-related content has been shared by many close friends then it has more credibility and influence on their purchase intention. Another study highlighted that a high volume of brand reviews does not mean that other consumers will buy the product or perceive the information to be credible (Kim et al., 2012).

According to a study, homophily/relevance is a factor in which individuals with similar attributes interact with each other and accept each other’s point of view (Rogers & Bhowmik, 1970). According to Schultz (2017), content shared by companies about their brand cannot generate relevance. Munar and Jacobsen (2013) highlighted that relevance is factors that can enable purchase decision. However, these studies could not highlight how social media platforms are used with respect to create relevance among consumers as well as consumers and brands. There is limited literature available with respect to how relevance/homophily can convert into SBE and CBE. There is also limited evidence about what types of individuals with similar attributes can influence decisions about fashion brands Evidence from one interviewee is: *“I really like to share my kids' shopping with my friends because they also have kids. So, this way, we give and get recommendations from each other which help us to save time and hassle buying kids' clothes”*. This interviewee revealed that one of the moms socially engaged with another mom so that both can save time as well as avoid risks during the buying of kids’ clothing. In other words, they have relevance with respect to buying kids’ clothing therefore they are socially engaged with the purpose to take optimal purchase decision.

## **4.6 CONTENT CHARACTERISTICS**

The results of this study have determined three elements (i.e. content excellence, accuracy of content, relationship between consumer and brand) which are useful to describe the influence of content characteristics for apparel brands. From the perspective of content excellence, it is found that SMUs love to see personal brand experience using a mixture of video, audio and picture formats that are eye-catching to get pre-purchase information. However, most of the study participants are agreed that high-definition videos about fashion brands increase their level of information but do not influence them for buying brands. Some participants also confirmed that they want to take recommendations/suggestions from their close sources. They should mention personal experiences, such as what the brand promised and what they experienced as well as cost and benefit analysis of that brand, which can attract a greater number of consumers to engage with that brand. Ghosh and McAfee (2011) highlighted the fact that people prefer to watch content that answers questions related to a brand.

Furthermore, participants would rather watch videos that have a two to three-minute message than a long message because they have busy schedules. It is found that brand-related content must be summarised and short because people are busy in their work, family, education, shopping, sleep and entertainment; therefore, they do not have time to watch/read long videos/messages related to brands. Previous studies have also indicated that people do not have enough time to see lengthy content related to brands, so they are more interested in selecting those videos, audio or messages which are short and which give key information in a limited period of time (Chen et al., 2011; Ghosh & McAfee, 2011). The use of high definition must be associated with new fashion trends, brand reviews and stories about brands because it is popular and maximises the level of information which is required to engage with a brand. According to Shimp (2007), information gathering from various sources with the purpose of getting authentic information may strongly influence the purchase decision of consumers. It has been established that participants love to watch videos that explain how a brand fulfils its promise regarding more benefits compared with what their expenditure.

Findings reveal that the accuracy of content for SMUs can be determined through its state of preciseness, closeness and correctness. It was found that when users share their experiences through audio, video, graphics and pictures then they get more likes, shares, views, tags, tweets and retweets, which ultimately increases positive WOM among SMUs. It is found that content novelty, ease of forwarding, popularity and other various aspects of UGC have a strong impact on consumers. High positive WOM means the content has a high level of accuracy because crowd wisdom and verification for positive brand-related experiences are included in that content. After getting the same information from multiple social networking sites, SMUs can avoid risks and take optimal decision about brand selection. Some people are more interested in finding brands that suit their social needs, status, job designation, as well as personality characteristics. SMUs believe that there are many paid influencers on social media whose shared UGC has no significant impact on their behaviour towards a brand. If brand recommendations are received from close sources, then it means both source and content are credible and accurate. It was found that marketing contests can produce high quality brand-related content across social media platforms, but the quality is also linked to the expertise of the content creators and the efforts creators make are also based on their level of engagement with a brand or their level of satisfaction. As Ho-Dac et al. (2013) mentioned, marketing contests are a useful method to maximise brand reviews and brand engagement among consumers.

The final category is relationship between consumer and brand. It is found that if consumers are satisfied with the brand's features, they are more likely to post positive WOM and they search for further information such as affordability, special discounts, colour schemes and sizes. Brand personality, brand popularity, brand choices and brand preferences are some of the factors that can increase people's engagement with fashion brands. For example, it is found that social status and the personality of brand N match with the social status needs of a SMU. Some participants have shared that they are more likely to search incentive-based offers that can fulfil their social and economic needs. Another participant shared that he wore a tuxedo with a bow tie because he was inspired by a celebrity who wore a tuxedo with a bow tie on wedding and shared pictures on Facebook. It is found that if a brand is popular among an SMU's close friends then their engagement and intention to purchase are increased. The

participants stated that they love to find those brands which fulfil both their social and professional needs.

There is limited research available with respect to which UGC quality influence can engage SMUs with fashion brands. Some studies highlighted that people are only interested to see key information in short videos (Chen et al., 2011; Ghosh & McAfee, 2011). Ghosh and McAfee (2011) highlighted that people perceive content characteristic to be high when the content can address their questions related to a brand. However, there is no evidence of which content characteristics influence factors are more valuable, especially with respect to generating fashion brand engagement. The present study has explained three factors (i.e. content excellence, accuracy of content, relationship between brand and consumer) which can generate SBE and CBE. For example, the study has found that high-definition videos cannot influence on their purchase decision while they only focused to see brand experience using a mixture of video, audio, and picture formats are eye-catching for getting pre-purchase information and making optimal purchase decisions.

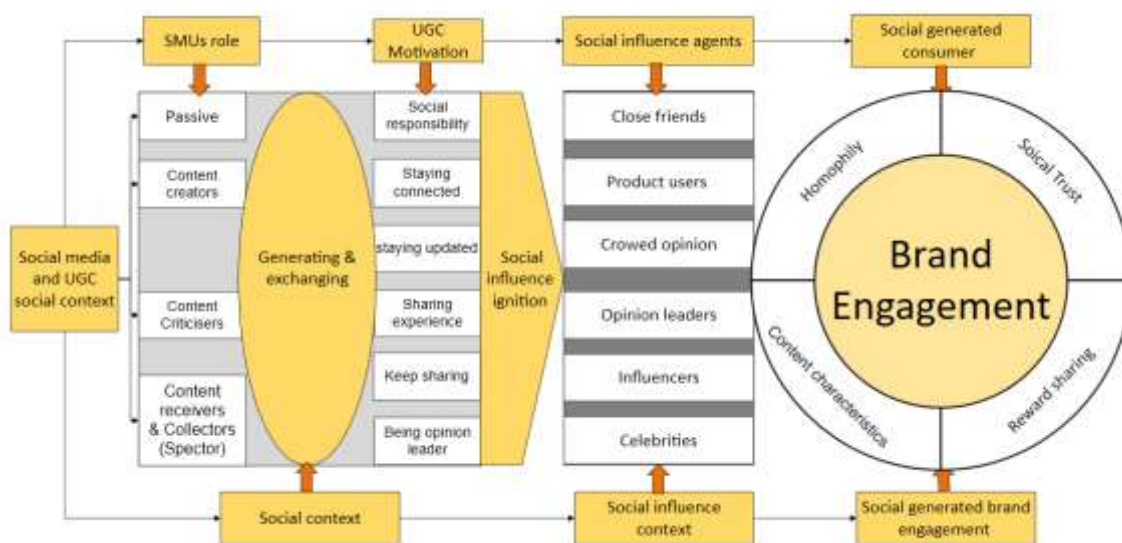


Figure 5-4-5 Social context of user-generated content and brand engagement. SMU social media user, UGC user-generated content

Figure 5-5 (social context of UGC and CBE) merges all four themes with the purpose of showing the role of SMU participants, UGC motivational causes, and social influence factors that can generate trust, relevance and social ties for enhancing brand engagement among SMUs. The results of this study have revealed that content

creators, criticisers and collectors are involved in generating, exchanging, reading and consuming UGC related to fashion brands. For example, content creators' motivation is to be socially responsible and share their personal experiences among SMUs. Content critics believe that they are being socially responsible in sharing their disheartening brand experiences among SMUs so that people can take optimal brand selection decision. Content consumers use social media to stay connected and to gather content on specific brands in which they are interested.

Content creators are well known in their social circle due to their expertise; therefore, they are able to engage their social circle with fashion brands. It is found that SMUs are more influenced by UGC from close social ties (i.e. close friends) who they perceived as shopping experts and content generation experts because of their interest in trying various apparel brands. Their expertise may help to take optimal purchase decisions because the content generated and shared by close expert friends is considered credible, trustworthy and relevant as per the social status and other needs of their friends. SMUs are more likely to perceive product user experience as more credible than brand advertisements because product users have spent their resources and gained specific experiences after using a fashion brand. Respondents stated that the credibility and accuracy of UGC related to fashion brands is low if it is not shared, tagged, liked or retweeted by the crowd. In other words, the wisdom of the crowd is useful to engage SMUs with fashion brands.

It is found that some SMUs unintentionally purchase fashion brands after reading a recommendation from content experts who are strong influencers. Influencers create and share relevant material by giving information support and there are friends or friends of friends who feel that it is their social responsibility to guide others so that they can save their resources and take optimal purchase decisions. Also, it is found that when fashion brand-related content has been shared by close social ties (i.e. multiple close friends) it has more credibility and influence on their purchase intentions. The study found that opinion leaders have a very active social role because they are physically known, trustworthy and have expertise; therefore, their social ties encourage them to give them recommendations so that they can take optimal purchase decision about fashion brands. SMUs love to follow celebrities because they think that their lifestyle is ideal for them. In this way, celebrities and influencers have



more influence to create endorsements for brands; however, although they can create social engagement, they do not create CBE because SMUs are less likely to believe a paid advertisement which may be generated by celebrities and other influencers. These SMUs are more likely to take fashion brands purchase decisions when the content is created, exchanged or confirmed by their close social ties, such as close friends and family members who are physically known, trustworthy, credible, have relevant expertise and shopping experiences, and are aware of their social and economic needs.

### **5.3. SUMMARY**

This chapter analyses and discusses participants' points of view in terms of the social context of UGC. The research seeks to understand the direct and indirect meanings of participants in the context of their UGC social interaction and social influence on each other. Through this discussion, multiple social realities emerged in relation to UGC creation, consumption, interaction and response that, in turn, engage SMUs with fashion brands. Figure 5-6 provides an outline of this chapter.

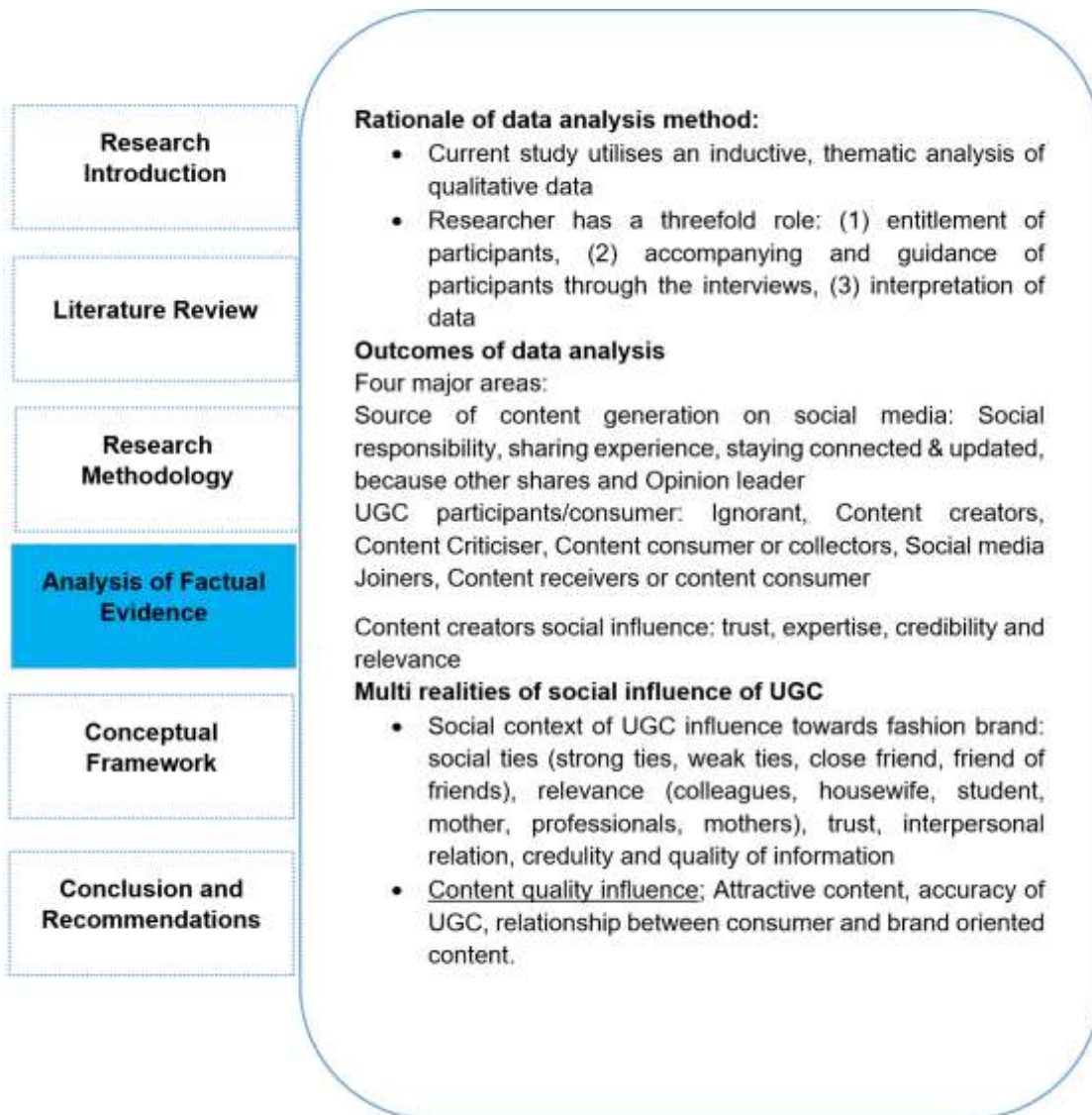


Figure 4-6 Progress of the thesis: User generated content and brand engagement

## CHAPTER 6: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

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### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

The literature review in Chapter 2 sets out a theoretical framework and synthesises the concepts of UGC and brand engagement. Concepts and issues such as content creators, content criticisers and collectors, the characteristics of content and the sources of UGC have been critically analysed in Chapter 5. A conceptual model of “user-generated content social consumer brand engagement” has been developed as a result of this chapter, which is based on social influence theory and research results. The social influence of UGC is explored and this model has been developed in the context of UGC exchanges on social media. The social interaction and UGC exchange of SMUs is also explored in a social context and consideration is given to content users. Moreover, the motivation of SMUs to generate content is also synthesised in the previous chapter. The aim of this research is to explore the impact of the social influence of UGC to create brand engagement in the context of fashion brands in the UK.

The social constructionist epistemological position, which is based on the multiple realities of the cultural and social meanings assigned to the social influence of UGC on SMUs, was considered during the construction of the model in this chapter. Therefore, a relativist ontological position is adopted to identify the link between different social and cultural realities of SMUs in the SBE & CBE of SMUs. The epistemological position of social constructionism was adopted to interpret the social influence of UGC on brand engagement of SMUs because this epistemology accepts the social, cultural, verbal and non-verbal meanings of communication. Such an approach has proven useful in attempting to understand the social context in which SBE & CBE occurs in SMUs. It respects the fact that language, culture and social norms produce knowledge in social disciplines that can help to understand the SBE phenomenon. Therefore, the research framework set out in this chapter is based on a social constructionist/subjectivist epistemology and relativist ontology. The focus of this research is to explore the social influence of UGC on CBE. Therefore, there is a need to understand social motivation and the social reasons behind content generation and sharing on SMNs that would generate brand engagement. As such, this chapter

constructs a conceptual framework specifically to illustrate the social context of UGC brand engagement on SMUs.

## 5.2 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: THE SOCIAL CONSUMER BRAND ENGAGEMENT PROCESS MODEL

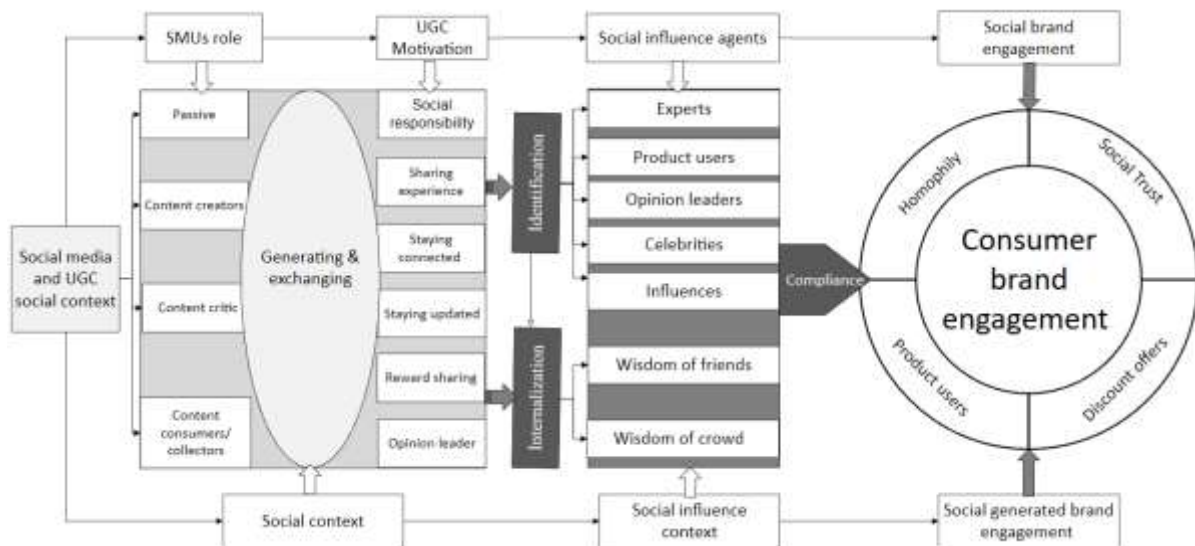


Figure 5-1 Conceptual Framework: The Social consumer brand engagement process model developed by author

According to social influence theory, there are three sub-types of influence: internalisation, identification and compliance. Chapter 4 identified that people are influenced by their faithful friends and family members while very few are influenced by individuals like influencers, celebrities, opinion leaders and experts. In other words, individuals are influenced by someone who is respected or expert. This research argues that social proof is the common factor that influences others; however, certain issues exist which affect other SMUs. As McShane et al. (2019) indicated, UGC is a source of social proof, but the meaning of social proof varies according to SMUs because some are more influenced by close friends while others are also influenced by opinion leaders, experts and celebrities. It is therefore important to take into account the social influence of persuasion which holds that social proof occurs when a particular behaviour is taken in a particular situation to the extent that we see others performing it (Smith & Zook, 2011). As such, in the case of uncertainty, people usually take inspiration from those who are around them as well as those who have better knowledge and shopping experiences, such as close friends, product users and experts. SMUs tend to regard such stakeholders as having more knowledge than them

about what is taking place and what needs to be done. Social proof is defined based on four types of SMUs in this thesis, and these are further divided into two headline types of identification and internalisation.

This research contributes to understanding UGC social interaction and exchanging through which individuals bring changes in their behaviour in accordance with demands of societal environment is called social influence towards brands. There are different types of social agents like close and faithful friends, family members, celebrities, product users, opinion leaders that generate wisdom of friends and wisdom of crowd as social proof that can create identification and internalisation influence effect on SMUs. For example, it was found that opinion leaders have professional experience, high knowledge, personal shopping experiences and social reputation; therefore, they can enhance identification influence as individual among those who are engaged with them. Findings reveal that people love to share the wisdom in their social network because it can generate other people's views which become wisdom of crowd that would be helpful to take optimal decision with respect to the brands in which they are interested. Other participants revealed that they love to cross-check brand-related content through different social media platforms so similarity in number of views also become social proof that would become social proof because it may helpful to gather the overall thoughts of different SMUs with respect to the brands in which they are interested.

It was found that SMUs are more likely to note brand-related recommendations from opinion leaders because they have social identity and relevant expertise, so, their given information is extensively followed by SMUs and is able to create social fashion brand engagement but it's not necessary all of the follower will by the brand or product that makes different in social brand engagement and consumer brand engagement. Furthermore, it is also found that if the opinion leader is part of close friends who are physically known, has relevant expertise, and is trustworthy and credible are important to take buying decision which is related to consumer brand engagement rather than just brand engagement on SMNs. Typically, people change their behaviours and attitudes in reaction to brand recommendation, suggestion, influence or action but the source of these factors also impact to take final decision; however, social influence may also appear in the form of people's perceptions about what others might think or

available social proof on social media which social influence of UGC on SMNs. Herbert Kelman (1958), a Harvard psychologist, highlighted three key forms of social influence; these are expanded and amended in the context UGC and brand engagement as follows:

1. **Internalisation:** a social influence that occurs when people privately and publicly accept and agree with a belief about a brand on social media that is expressed by the wisdom of friends (friend of friends) and wisdom of crowd as social proof on in the form of crowd opinion to influence the individuals behaviour on SMNs.
2. **Identification:** a brand social influence that occurs when people are influenced by people they respect and like because of their credibility, social status, expertise and social ties with them, for example a well-known industry expert, opinion leader, content expert, celebrity or any other influencer influenced the crowd opinion which is established as identification element of social influence. Internalisation and identification types of social influence create SBE, but these types of social influence are not enough to create CBE because the CBE is related to the buying of the product that transform common SMU to brand consumer.
3. **Compliance:** a social influence that occurs when people apparently show agreeing behaviour with others' opinions but, actually, have private dissenting opinions regarding a buying decision for a brand; therefore, this type of social influence requires strong social trust, homophily, and product user opinion to buy product, such as recommendation, suggestion and shared discounted offer by the friends, that may lead to take final buying decision, which is named as CBE in this research because buying decision found different than to create SBE.

According to this new extended social influence theory, basically two types of social influence are needed: normative social influence (our needs should be liked) and informational social influence (our needs should be right) (Robert, 2009). These needs lead people to meet the expectations of other people. In informational influence (also known as social proof), people accept information provided by others as evidence of reality as they are uncertain because of intrinsically ambiguous stimuli or because of

social disagreement about reality. In normative influence, people tend to comply with others' positive expectations (Robert, 2009). Moreover, Ozuem, et al., (2019) indicated that final product decision buying decision influenced by the social proof on social media which is embed by the expert's opinion, similarity in crowd opinion and number of people opinion like number of likes and views. Normative influence, in Kelman's (1958) typology context, results in public compliance while informational with social proof influence results in private acceptance to make buying decision but it has found through this research that buying decision requires social trust, information from relevant people (homophily), strong social ties (social trust), product users suggestions and in some cases discount offer may also facilitate the buying decision of specific brand which are important in the context of compliance social influence. Although it has been identified that compliance is also linked with internalisation and identification factors of social influence through social media that further than expedite or discourage eh CBE in the form of compliance social influence.

According to the presented model (figure 5-1), compliance occurs when people accept an influence with the hope of getting favourable reactions from others who are socially trustable, reliable, relevant (homophily), and product user or group it mean is also associated back with crowd opinion (internalization) and trusted individuals (identification). According to Kelman (1958, p. 53), "*Compliance can be said to occur when an individual accepts influence because he hopes to achieve a favourable reaction from another person or group. He adopts the induced behaviour not because he believes in its content but because he expects to gain specific rewards or approval and avoid specific punishments or disapproval by conforming. Thus, the satisfaction derived from compliance is due to the social effect of accepting influence*". This shows that compliance derives satisfaction through social influence of accepting effect of social trust, accuracy of the UGC, relevance/homophily social ties/social trust and product users. Additionally, it has also identified that some attached attach rewards also facilitate the buying decision of the SMUs which is why discount offer are also considered as compliance social influence factor. In contrast, identification occurs when people accept an influence with a desire to develop or sustain a self-defining satisfactory relationship with other individuals in other words in that case individuals social influence the crowd like celebrities, opinion leaders, industry experts, content experts or any other influencer have more social influence on more SMUs. Typically,

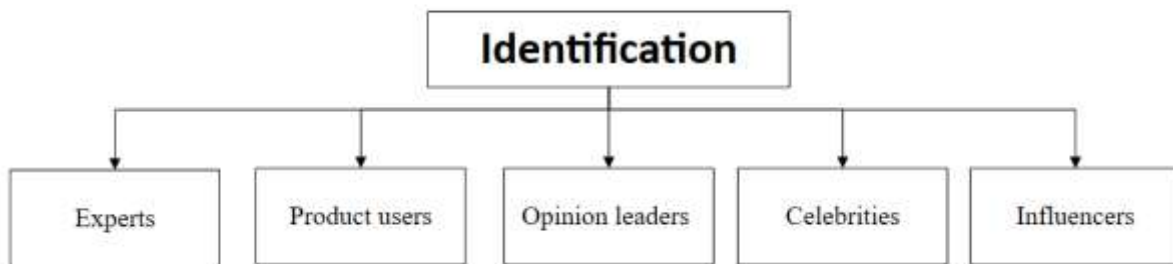
this form of social influence is known as classical identification as people in such relationships take over others' role or it may lead to the development of reciprocal role relationships through sharing, showing and communicating the same opinion and interest. People believe in changes they bring to their behaviour through identification no matter whether the content is relevant or irrelevant; they share and communicate because of the source of the UGC that like or influenced. Such behaviour is induced because of its association with required relationship and this shows that identification derives satisfaction through conforming act of social status or perception of these individuals (expert and celebrities) in mind.

Internalisation occurs when people accept an influence due to its intrinsically rewarding content of adopted ideas, actions and behaviours composed by their multiple friends, and accepted and shared by the crowd which is named as crowd opinion social media. According to Kelman (1958), the adoption of induced behaviour depends on its congruency with people's value systems; for example, if induced behaviour is considered useful to address an issue or if it appears to be congenial with their needs. Individuals tend to integrate such adopted behaviour into their existing crowd values. In internalisation, satisfaction comes from the content of newly adopted behaviour that becomes the opinion of the crowd and opinion of friends who considered the behaviour useful to address an issue or if it appears to be congenial with their needs.

Although internalisation, identification and compliance are functions of these determinants, these determinants are qualitatively different for each individual process as different social agents have different roles in social influence. Thus, the ways through which induced behaviour becomes pre-potent, a source of power of influencing agents, differs for different social agents in the process of these three social influences on SMNs. Moreover, the nature of expected influence can distinguish determinants of all these three processes. It can be argued that these processes are characterised by different and unique antecedents, involving a specific qualitative deviation of general determinants. In the case of proper antecedents, the influence may take the shape of internalisation, identification or compliance. Each individual process represents a unique characteristic pattern pertaining to internal responses (feelings and thoughts) in which people become engaged when adopting induced



behaviour of sharing, consuming and creating UGC that may create social influence towards a brand. Likewise, all these processes are also characterised by a unique set of resultant conditions, involving specific qualitative deviations in the consequent history of induced behaviour towards the UGC. Responses that would be adopted under different processes would be performed, changed and turned off under different situations and thus would have different but unique properties with relation to UGC context.



*Figure 5-2 Internalisation-related social factors developed by author*

Identification takes place when relationships are maintained by individuals according to the opinions of others. This dynamic illustrates the impact of individuals influence the crowd because crowd influenced due respect or social status of these individuals (Kelman, 1995). Thus, an individual influencing the opinion of crowd (SMUs), such as a celebrity, influencer, opinion leader or expert, generates internalised social influence among people on social media platforms. In simple terms, identification is crowd behaviour that is directed or diverted by powerful and respected individuals on social media. Expert social proof is said to exist when an expert on an industry recommends a brand by or content experts share very credible, quality and attractive UGC that many influence the crowd.

The concept of UGC expertise, which represents the perceived ability of someone to make assertions that are valid (Mahoney & Tang, 2016), is also relevant in the context of social influence towards SBE because attractive UGC influence SMUs to like or tweet the contents but not guarantee that all brand followers will be the brand customers too. This represents the qualifications of the communicator to be legitimate in providing advice that may influence the crowd (see figure 5-2 for the detail of identification social agents)

Expertise about a brand can be knowledge-oriented in relation to fashion brands, and experience-oriented to generate creative/innovative content that may effectively increase the fan following on brand pages. Expert opinions are valuable on social media, and expertise is highlighted by participants sharing content about fashion products that attract the SMUs to like, follow, tweet, views the shared content. Celebrity social proof arises when a product is endorsed by a celebrity who has a fan following which is common practice of the brand to increase fan following on brand page that might be limited to SBE. A prominent example in this regard would be an Instagram post or a Tweet by a celebrity about a brand or product to fan following on social media additionally, it also increases brand related positive UGC on social media. As, Gregoire et al. (2015) referred to six ways in which consumers can communicate across social media and share experiences of customer service failures or quality failures. Both positive and negative eWOM emerge on social media and crowd responses to such eWOM can influence buying behaviour and social engagement with fashion brands.

It has also been found that opinion leaders and experts in content sharing also have more influence on SMUs because they have more influencing power rather than a common SMU. Therefore, it can be argued that experts, influencers, opinion leaders and celebrities create *identification* social influence on SMUs because these individuals influence the crowd opinion which is called identification. The literature review also discusses the idea that some individuals have more influence on SMUs. Helal et al. (2018) provided an example of celebrities uploading personal videos and pictures in relation to fashion brands and creating updates on social media sites for their fan followers. Expert opinion leaders are those individuals who have a rich working experience in a specific field and who can provide recommendations about brands. Such stakeholders are trustworthy and well known (Chae & Ko, 2016).

Influencers are those people who produce and share content with logical support (e.g. with merits and demerits) (Martín et al., 2018). In online communities, close friends or the friends of friends are socially responsible and must properly guide others to save them time and other resources (Gautam & Sharma, 2017). The literature has revealed that the culture of taking selfies has dramatically promoted brand engagement on social media because SMUs love to like and share their favourite celebrities' pictures

(Humphrey, 2013; Presi et al., 2016; So et al., 2018; Yi, Jiang & Benbasat, 2017; Liu, 2018). People also follow and comment on styles and the lives and fashion of celebrities who are inspirational trend setters (So et al., 2018; Yi, Jiang & Benbasat, 2017; Liu, 2018; Presi et al., 2016). Therefore, it has been established that celebrities, experts, influences opinion leaders and product users create an identification social influence process on SMUs (see Figure 5-3).

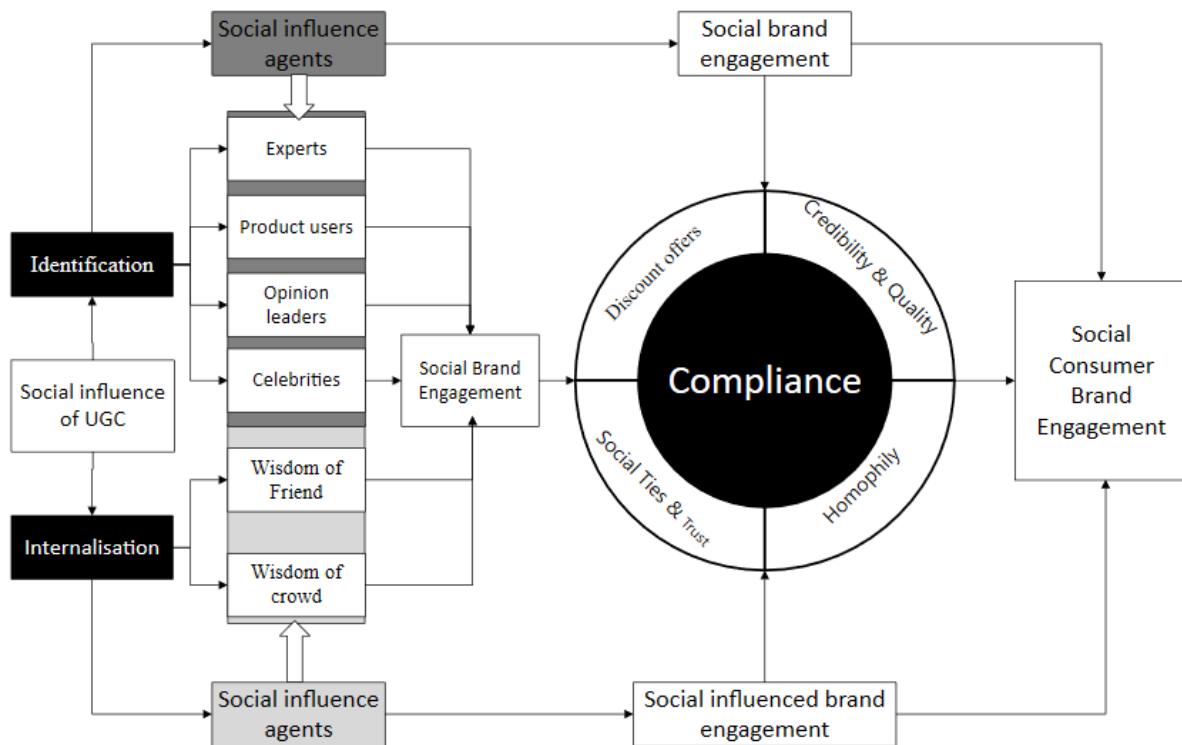
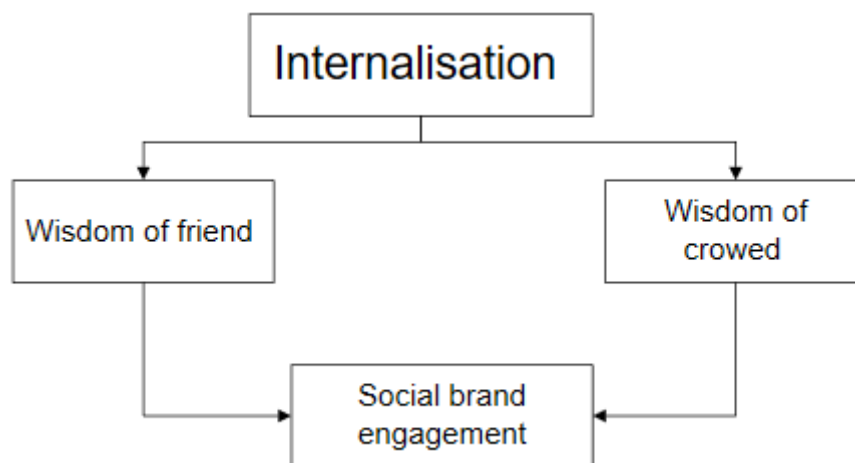


Figure 5-3 Social consumer brand engagement developed by author

*Internalisation* takes place when the individual exercises the opinion of others publicly and privately (Kelman, 1995) for example following brand page, sharing it, sharing UGC, following and openly on social media which create positive or negative numbers as social proof. In other words, individual behaviours are directed by the wisdom of crowds and the wisdom of friends (friend of friends) as a form of social proof on social media. This can change/influence consumer behaviour to share comments and like the shared content that create social brand engagement. The wisdom of the crowd is observed as social proof when a brand is endorsed by many SMUs like number of likes, tweets, and views are the common example of social proof that create social brand engagement (see figure 5-3). An example in this regard is having numerous

customers or millions of followers on social media using a brand or item create social engagement of SMUs with that brand because of the huge number of following of brand as social proof. There are many UGC videos in which a person shares his or her personal experience of using a product or service; the number of SMUs involved (measured as “likes” or views and tweets) increases the credibility and reliability of the content as social proof so some of the individuals get social engaged with brand. As mentioned above, the crowd response to UGC in friends’ social circles has a major impact on escalating the number of SMUs therefore, SUM required further or specific information to take buying decision so it has been found from the data social proof is not enough to take buying decision as internalisation influence but it has established that it creates social brand engagement through crowd opinion.



*Figure 5-4 Internalisation user generated social factors developed by author*

The wisdom of friends is also a type of social proof that occurs when people see that their friends have approved of a product. Examples of this include close friends’ experiences about using a product or service in their daily life or seeing them share their experience on social media. Such users may also exhibit cultural assimilation by using the language of the host culture while being with friends and family (Korzenny & Korzenny, 2005; Craig & Douglas, 2006; Yagmur, 2014; Laroche et al., 2009). Recommendations from social media friends, brand advertisements and celebrity endorsements may not be as influential because such types of people understand that such endorsements are often paid for by the brand. Many participants stated they preferred to take recommendations from multiple friends before brand buying. Therefore, they are accumulating the wisdom of their friends before brand buying.

SMUs are also influenced by celebrities and expert product users and opinion leaders in SMNs. It is found that some SMUs are more inclined towards the recommendations of multiple friends than unknown sources, but a high number of likes, views and tweets also encourages social engagement with a brand. The wisdom of close friends takes place as a form of *internalisation* social influence towards a brand. The *internalisation* of social influence is based on the wisdom of friends and wisdom of crowd on social media which can improve level of trust in shared UGC. Therefore, it has been established that the wisdom of friends and wisdom of crowds creates internalisation social influence towards fashion brands, which can create SBE. The SBE is limited to sharing, liking, commenting, creating and following the brand pages and friend pages, but this type of social engagement is not enough to convert this engagement to become CBE or for SMUs to strongly recommend the brand to others or friends. Therefore, compliance social influence is required to convert SBE to CBE and compliance social influence requires different social factors to create compliance or CBE as follows (see Figure 5-5).

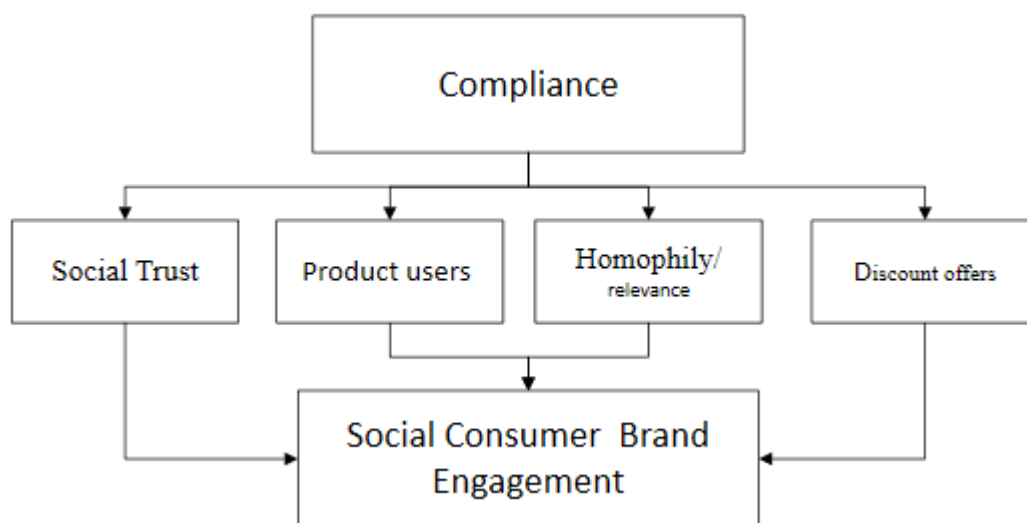


Figure 5-5 Compliance user-generated content social factors developed by authors

Compliance occurs when the opinions of others are accepted by individuals resulting in favourable actions (Kelman, 1995). Such favourable action is considered a form of consumer engagement in this thesis. In simple terms, compliance means individuals' behaviours towards specific decisions like buying decisions in relation to a specific brand. CBE occurs after SBE. Some important factors shape buying decisions and

CBE. SMU homophily is another concept of importance in this research regarding eWOM. SMU homophily is the phenomenon of the extent to which individuals with similar demographics and choices (relevance/homophily) interact with each other and accept each other's point of view therefore, homophily/relevance among SMUs may matter to take buying decision through influencing from others. This research observes that close faithful friends, family, student and colleagues tend to share socio-attributes, including attitudes and beliefs that's why these factors are important to take buying decision to become consumer of a brand which is named as consumer brand engagement in this thesis. It has also been identified that people tend to socialise with those who have similar characteristics and choices, and this is known as social homophily/relevance. The research also finds that homophily is a type of buying influencing factor that exerts social influence on SMUs. For example, housewife/mothers were found to be more influenced by each other in terms of their kids and their own fashion shopping.

The factor that most influences SMUs is that of faithful friendship which is called social trust and it is also named as strong social tied in this thesis. Strong and faithful ties have more social influence on content users, while weak ties have less influence in terms of the relevance of products and homophily. The strength of social ties represents the intensity of the bond between members of a network or community and it has been observed that social ties can either be strong or weak. The transmission of a message offline to weak relationships is problematic as acquaintances rely more on their family and close friends to transmit their messages to spread ideas (Brooks, 2019). Strong ties are created between individuals and others where close relationships exist. Weaker ties are formed with colleagues at work as well as classmates and friends of friends on social media (Choi et al., 2016). Substantial emotional support can be elicited from these relationships in different contexts. As Diffley et al. (2018) indicated, some 60% of consumers note that their buying decisions were influenced by friends' posts on social media. However, it is important to distinguish between active friends and close friends. Close faithful friends enjoy influential power with respect to each other and they may also believe as social responsibility to share their experience and extrinsic advantage like discount offers with each other that become compliance social influence to generate consumer brand engagement. It has been identified that when discount offers are shared by the product

users or product user experience are also considered as important factor in purchase decision which is why product user is considered as compliance factor. They also interact with each other more frequently than with active friends therefore, there is also more opportunities to exchange shopping related information. Further, they have reciprocal relationships with each other. Therefore, purchasing decisions among SMUs are referred to as the compliance element of social influence theory, which is created by discount offers, homophily, social trust and product user. This occurs in the context of social ties and homophily, but trust is also a considerable factor in buying decisions. Trust is situational, and for some SMUs unknow product are more trustworthy and for others, known friends who are also product users are credible. For others, homophily is more important and social ties are considered compliance factors.

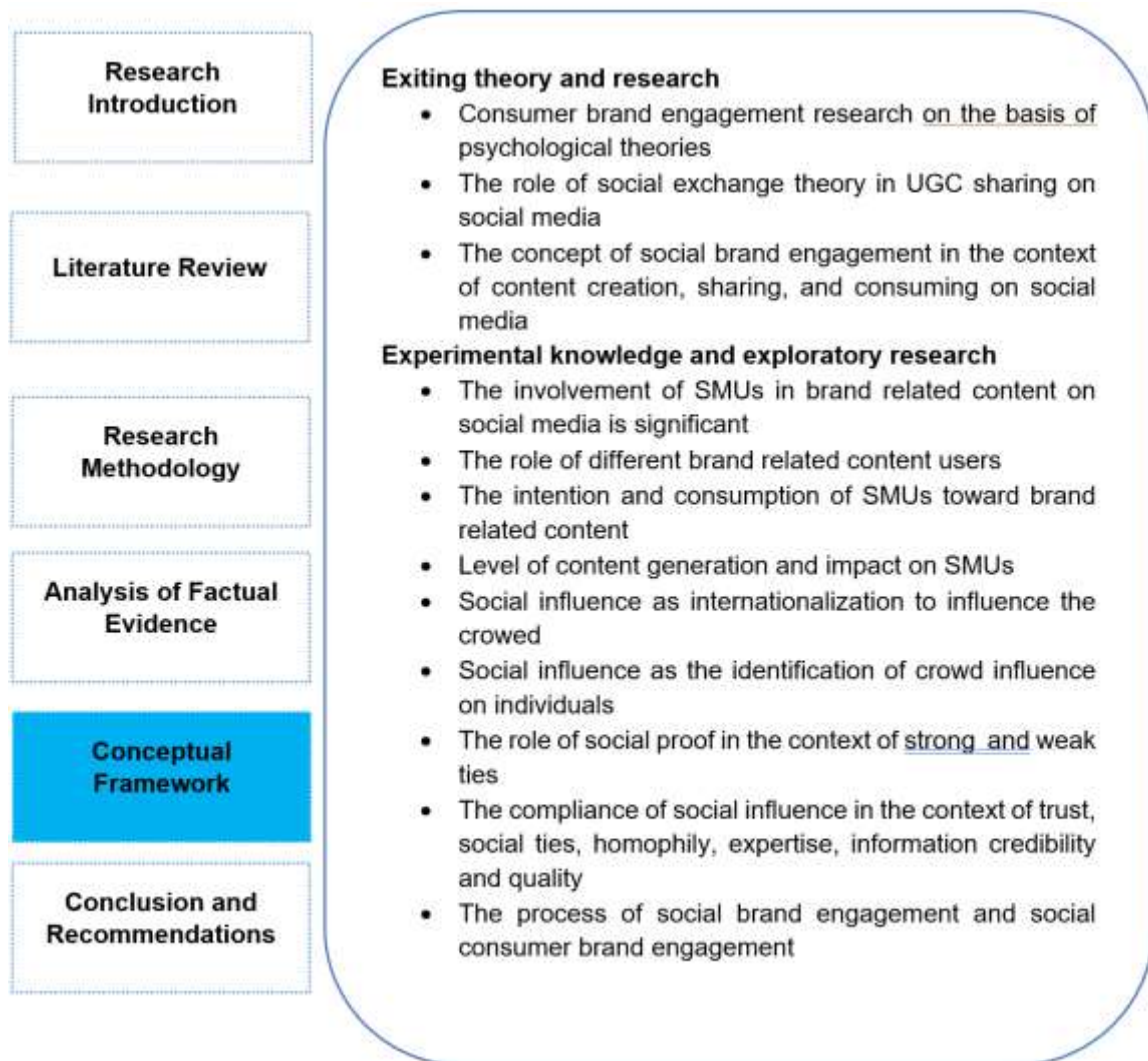
The literature review reveals that the strength of weak ties (Granovetter, 1973) on social networks is significant. Moriuchi (2016) indicated that there is an interchange and social exchange of strong and weak ties between SMUs. The previous chapter reveals that there are strong ties between members of groups of close friends and family members, and weak ties between different clusters like celebrities and ordinary friends on social media platforms therefore, week tied may create social influence but not that much significant to create consumer brand engagement because relevance of the brand is also considered important factor to take buying decision. The relevance of brand could be in term of choice, likeness, social and economic status of the SMUs. In the context of social networking, participants depend on both weak and strong ties (relationships) in order to gain exposure to their content or messages. Gensler et al. (2013) indicated that social ties are different (co-workers, close friends, family friends, colleagues, classmates and family among ties) and show high respect to all contacts we make. As identified in Chapter 4, experts, influencers and product users have more knowledge about products, so they have the ability to socially influence a crowd of SMUs in a way which is considered social proof while they have weak ties with SMUs. The social factor of homophily/relevance exists among classmates, close faithful friends, family friends and colleagues who are in routine interaction with each other which is considered as strong tie; they are aware of each other's social needs and they trust each other's brand recommendations and buying.

The connections one forms on SMNs are derived from existing social networks and therefore the information derived from these is regarded as credible as compared with information emanating from anonymous sources. This is also the reason why a high level of trust is inspired before information exchange takes place through SMNs. Moreover, since users can maintain and articulate real-world relationships through SMNs, it is easier to establish trust because of the presence of friends and family. Such an enhanced level of trust substantially contributes to a person's willingness to share shopping related information and discount offers with close friends to provide extrinsic advantage in the form of own experience or direct discount offers. The perceived trust of SMUs users in their contacts is positively related to buying decisions. It can therefore be concluded that social trust, homophily, discount offers, and product users views are major factors that can enhance CBE.

### **5.3 SUMMARY**

This chapter conceptualises UGC social CBE theory based on traditional social influence theory. Figure 6-6 summarises the chapter.





*Figure 5-6 Progression of thesis; user generated content and brand engagement developed by author*

## **CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

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### **6.1 INTRODUCTION**

This chapter discusses the contribution this research makes to the existing literature on UGC's role in SBE through social media. The research contribution is primarily based on both the latest empirical findings as well as the existing conceptual theories. This chapter discusses the social motivational causes as well as types of SMUs which are involved in generating, sharing and exchanging brand related UGC on social media platforms. This chapter also discusses which social influence factors and content quality/characteristics which included content excellence, accuracy of content and existing customer brand relation/relationship between brand and customer. elements important for SMUs with respect to fashion brand social engagement. This research, consequently, conceptualised the social influence of UGC and brand engagement in a "UGC social consumer brand engagement model". This chapter includes the conclusion of this research and the author's contribution to practice and theory, along with highlights of its managerial implications. In addition, the research limitations are also addressed. Finally, this chapter outlines future research that could be conducted on both UGC and the brand engagement field.

### **6.2 CONCLUSION**

As the one of the major concerns of this research is to understand the social context of UGC which is addressed by this study is why SMUs generate brand-related UGC and how SMUs respond to brand-related content on SMNs. It was concluded that there are five motivational causes that lead to the generation, sharing and exchanging of brand related UGC on social media platforms. These motivational causes are social responsibility, sharing experiences, staying connected and updated, reward sharing, and opinion leaders. It was found that people believed sharing is caring because it can save the resources of their social community and protect them from disheartening experiences with specific brands. Findings reveal that there are five types of the motivation behind the SMUs to share UGC which included, Social responsibility, sharing experience, staying connected & updated, reward sharing and playing opinion leader role among SMUs. Additionally, different rule played by different SMUs in context UGC so four types of SMUs have been found which included passive, content

creators, content collectors/consumers and content critics. Furthermore, their connections with these information exchange sources are helpful to know about different fashion brand related information and this information generate SBE and CBE through exchange of UGC. While, the intensity of UGC influence is based on social trust, content expert, relevance content and specifically UGC generated by product user consequently these factors named as social influential factor in this thesis. People usually love reward sharing when they find a discount voucher, economical prices and other rebates as social responsibility to share extrinsic advantages with friends or SMUs. Moreover, it has found that UGC characteristic itself have impact on SMUs which include excellence of content, accuracy of UGC, consumer and brand-oriented content to create influence on other SMUs.

The study concluded that people engage with various information exchanging sources such as social media friends, crowd opinion, industry and content experts, customers, opinion leaders and celebrities to know fashion deals, fashion trends, economical prices, availability of brands at local stores, standard of quality product and optimal purchase decision. However, it was concluded that people loved brand recommendations, shopping experiences and brand reviews from multiple close friends and family members who have close social ties and trustworthy connections, and are credible, faithful and able to initiate recommendations for purchase decision. The study uncovered how different SMUs play different roles with the purpose to create, exchange and use UGC on social media platforms. There are four types of SMUs who are involved in creating, sharing and exchanging fashion brand related UGC on social media platforms: passive, content creators, collectors/ consumers and critics.

It was found that passive consumers usually have limited time, writing skills and a lower level of interest in participating, sharing and exchanging information about fashion brands. They are shy, very busy and may have not enough confidence and writing skills to create and exchange information related to brands. On the other hand, creators have a high level of interest in content generation because they actively use many social networking platforms (e.g. Google Reviews, YouTube, Yelp, Twitter, Flickr, Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp) as well as being more energetic, younger, highly educated and knowledgeable; they help their friends, friends of

friends, family members and general crowd with respect to fashion brand selection and buying using social media platforms.

The critics are those participants who have had a disheartening shopping experience in relation to, for example, brand quality, price, complaint-handling procedures, differences between information shared and customers' experiences, and customer services. They have supporting material about their disheartening experiences which they use to create negative brand stories on social media. The collectors or consumers are those who gather brand reviews, shopping experiences and ratings from sources that are highly credible and known to them.

Other findings are related to answering how different factors impact the social influence of UGC in the context of SBE among SMUs. It was found that social trust, content expertise, relevancy and product users are very important social influence factors that can enhance brand engagement. It was found that people had more belief in close friends and family members who have strong social ties, are faithful and of known character, and who try to save the resources of their social circle with respect to fashion brand selection and purchase. The expertise of content generators like celebrities, influence and context experts can initiate brand recommendation and engagement like expertise include written skills; ability to save, edit, modify and upload UGC; better shopping experience, such as knowledge of brands' colour schemes; industry-related experience; high levels of awareness about availability of brand sizes; and high levels of information about prices and upcoming deals. However, these expertise factors may not generate brand sale. Therefore, in terms of buying decision SMUs more relying on their close friend because these close friends can initiate social influence due to strong social ties and may they have relevant shopping experience.

The results also revealed that UGC impact and quality is increased when UGC has content excellence, accuracy of content, and brand and consumer relationships. It is found that consumers believe on credible content because their shared experiences or comments are based on personal experiences. Additionally, many participants revealed that they are highly influenced when one of their close friends shares disheartening brand experiences on social networking platforms. It is found that a high number of reviews, views, tweets, likes, tags and shares attract them because it means that the brand is popular, which increases the credibility of content for them

that would encourage SMUs to like or follow the brand page. Accuracy of content is increased when a brand has a large number of shares, tags, views, likes, tweets/retweets or WOM from a crowd or close sources, such as close friends which is called wisdom of friend and wisdom of crowd which generated the brand engagement. Content in which people share shopping experiences using audio, video, graphics and so on has excellence and quality. The accuracy of content is high for participants if the UGC is precise. Finally, UGC has more social influence when it matches the social needs, social status, demographics and profession of an individual which is considered as homophily factor to take buying decision. The findings reveal that the social context of UGC and brand engagement included understanding of social motivations behind UGC, type of UGC, social influencing factors and characteristics of the UGC that would play an influencing role to create brand engagement among SMUs.

Now it is easy to answer how does UGC social context create SBE and CBE among SMUs was addressed. The “UGC social consumer brand engagement model” contributes to the existing field of social model marketing. It offers a theoretical structure of consumers’ SBE through exchanging, creating and consuming UGC on social media. As this study focused on the social influence of UGC on SMUs to create SBE, social influence theory was adopted to structure the final “UGC social consumer brand engagement model”, which was originally based on Kelman’s (1995) theory of social influence. Therefore, the social influence theory of UGC was composed of the social influence in the context of compliance, identification and internalization. The outcomes of this research are evident in the role of UGC in SBE; indeed, this research has provided a complete social context of UGC including the social influence theory factors of compliance, identification and internalisation separately with relation to two types of brand engagement which include SBE and CBE. Moreover, this research explored the concept of SBE and social CBE, therefore, social influence was explored and synthesised in line with the three factors of social influence theory.

This study established that identification and internalisation of social influences occurred on the basis of social proof. This social proof includes the wisdom and expertise of close friends and the wisdom of crowds, which create internalisation social influence as identification, while experts’ opinion, influencers, opinion leaders and

celebrities create identification types of social influence in other words it has stabled that identification social influence occurred where individual influence the crowd opinion. Moreover, internalisation and identification social influences limited to SBE, while CBE occurs through compliance social influences because the compliance factors encourage SMUs to take final buying decisions that lead to CBE. Additionally, this study also presented the compliance influence factors social trust, accuracy of content, homophily and product users. Therefore, this study explored identification and internalisation social influences related to SBE and compliance social influence factors that create social CBE on social media.

### **6.3 CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE**

The previous studies theoretical frameworks are based on diverse theories and models such as interactive advertising model (IAM), an integrative processing model of internet advertising (Williams et al., 2010), Stimuli-Organism-Response (S-O-R) consumer response model (Kim & Johnson, 2016), attribution theory (Kim & Lee, 2017) and assimilation theory (Narangajavana-Kaosiri et al., 2017). There are some studies conducted on social perspective like Pancer et al. (2017). Social exchange theory has also been used to conduct quantitative investigations of brand engagement on social media, but this study does not include the role of UGC (Yang et al., 2016). Others used social capital theory to conduct a quantitative study of brand engagement in the relationship between social media and search engine advertisement, although, again, the role of UGC in relation to this was not considered. Additionally, Simon and Tossan (2018) employed the theory of close relationships to conduct a quantitative inquiry to find the relation between brand consumer social sharing value and virtual media engagement; however, this study was explanatory in nature and overlooked UGC.

Osei-Frimpong and McLean (2018) conducted a quantitative investigation of FGC and SBE in the services sector. However, their study was not about fashion brands; their study focused on FGC and brand engagement. Therefore, their study was very limited in terms of understanding UGC and SBE in the fashion industry. Kim and Johnson (2016) used the S-O-R consumer response model to test the relation between UGC, consumers' brand engagement, eWOM behaviour and potential brand sales. Viswanathan et al. (2018) conducted a study regarding FGC, social media

engagement and live television shows. Carlson et al. (2019) used social exchange theory to explain the relation between customer engagement and customers' sharing intentions. However, none of these studies explored the social influence of UGC on SBE on social media. Therefore, this study looks at UGC as a source of social influence for brand engagement. The study adopts the social dimensions of brand engagement for further analysis. According to Gambetti et al. (2015), little literature is available on the social dimensions of brand engagement. The social dimensions include multiple interactions, positive social relationship, dialogue, co-creation, participation, brand stories, openness between consumer and brand, brand-related content and values (Gambetti et al., 2015).

Socio-technological changes enable such firms to understand how individuals make sense of themselves, others and the whole world (Roma & Aloini, 2019; Veitas & Weinbaum, 2017). Consequently, many firms incorporate the metrics of social media into their consumer relationship management and marketing communication activities with the aim of efficiently reaching and engaging with customers (Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Dewnarain et al., 2019; Foltean et al., 2019; Malthouse et al., 2013). In this regard, firms should focus on gaining a better understanding of the influences of customer participation in electronic brand engagement (Baldus et al., 2015; Matute et al., 2019). Such an understanding can increase the firm's potential to improve brand performance through eWOM (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Hollebeek et al., 2014; Kim et al., 2020). There is a growing trend amongst firms to engage with their customers through IT (Hajli, 2014; Jin et al., 2019). However, the focus of previous studies has been on determining the impact of UGC on market outcomes from different perspectives (Laroche et al., 2012; Stephen & Galak, 2012; Toubia & Stephen, 2013). Osei-Frimpong and McLean (2018) called for research that could enhance our understanding of the impact of social media on SBE along with the moderating impact of consumer commitment and FGC.

Existing studies have attempted to understand how social media helps to create brand engagement. These studies took a psychological perspective of brand engagement (Harrigan et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2019; Pancer et al., 2017; Duncan et al., 2019; Gómez et al., 2019; Osei-Frimpong et al., 2019). However, the latest technological advancements completely changed the entire media landscape (Carvalho &

Fernandes, 2018; Kumar et al., 2016; Osei-Frimpong, & McLean, 2018; Pagani & Malacarne, 2017; Pina et al., 2019), and the concept of CBE shifted from psychological CBE to social CBE. Moreover, “buzz” by consumers about the usage of social media has transformed firms’ methods of engaging with their consumers; even customer-created brands have emerged because of social media (Gómez et al., 2019; Osei-Frimpong et al., 2019; Karikari et al., 2017). Studies reported that in the previous decade, more than one billion SMUs (Anderson et al., 2016; Karikari et al., 2017) made significant contributions to changes observed in electronic brand engagement, information acquisition, usage, experiences and lifestyles of customers (Brodie et al., 2013; Chang et al., 2015; Kim, 2016).

By using social presence theory, Osei-Frimpong and McLean (2018) examined firm–consumer SBE in their study. By examining this issue from a particular perspective, they highlighted the role of social media presence as well as the moderating impact of FGC, with a major focus on the role of FGC in creating SBE. Osei-Frimpong and McLean’s (2018) research referred to SBE as a modern concept of brand engagement. However, the main focus of Osei-Frimpong and McLean’s (2018) study was on examining the effectiveness of exchange of FGC on social media. Osei-Frimpong and McLean (2018) focused on FGC to create SBE, which also aligns with previous studies of using social media for brand engagement. The present study aimed to explore UGC’s social impact on brand engagement through social media, and the focus of the present study is to explore the role of UGC in creating brand engagement on social media.

There are many theoretical contributions that are made in this study. It is the first study to theoretically conceptualise “user-generated content and social consumer brand engagement” through a social constructivist epistemological and relativist ontological approach in the context of UK fashion retailing. This study differentiates between social and consumer brand engagement with the application of social influence theory. It identifies that internalization can enhance social engagement, but that compliance influence can develop and enhance consumer brand engagement. The second contribution is that this study applies and extends social influence theory in the context of social brand engagement and consumer brand engagement through social media platforms. For example, experts, and product users, acting as opinion leaders, and



celebrities exert influence which can develop and enhance social brand engagement at individual levels. While the wisdom of friends and of crowds are all key factors at a collective level which can enhance social brand engagement. However, these factors cannot convert people into buyers. Therefore, this study identifies separate factors for consumer brand engagement such as discount offers, social ties and trust, homophily, credibility and quality. These are some of the factors which can develop and enhance consumer brand engagement. SMUs generate content based on their own social intentions and motivation.

Further, SMUs' response is based on their own social contexts which include their social intentions to share, generate, respond, or ignore content on social media. Four types of SMUs are identified: passive, creators, criticisers, and collectors so their role also have different role in brand engagement on themselves and on others. Therefore, the present study explored the SBE that occurred due to the social influence of UGC; the study presented that identification and internalisation social influence create SBE and compliance social influence creates social CBE which is the major extension of social influence theory in context of UGC and brand engagement. Therefore, the present study explored the context of the social influence of UGC that leads towards social CBE on social media. The "UGC social consumer brand engagement model" was developed; this provides knowledge of social influence processes of UGC, which creates SBE and social CBE with fashion brands on social media which is the major contribution of this research.

According to social presence theory, the presence of social media strongly influences the understanding of recipients of content they receive from senders. However, the studies of Chang and Hsu (2016) and Cui et al. (2013) did not include the social impact of UGC on SMUs. UGC encourages SMUs to actively participate in online social interactions (Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2009; McLean & Osei-Frimpong, 2017; McLean & Wilson, 2016) that are likely to maximise their participation in SBE that is generated by firms. However, undermining the importance of the role of social presence in social interactions is inappropriate because it is useful in explaining users' behaviours (Shen et al., 2010). Social presence theory primarily reveals that online-generated social content is not only informative but also enables SMUs to evaluate the content. These features attract the users to become engaged in social interactions (Chang & Hsu,

2016; Herring, 2001). From this it is clear that usage of social media is not just limited to networking with strangers and friends and sharing content such as pictures, but it also serves as a source to share experiences and have continual interactions with brands to strengthen brand–consumer relationships (Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Muntinga et al., 2011). Moreover, Tsai and Men (2017) further highlighted that communication through social media is interactive, participatory, personal, collaborative, and communal, while also enabling firms to engage with their consumers and develop “meaningful relationships” with them. Therefore, this research explores the SMUs interaction between each other that create social influence among SMUs to encourage or discourage them towards a brand.

The outcome of this study is also aligned with current literature because the construction of the final “UGC social consumer brand engagement model” was based on classical social influence theory and backed up social constructionist epistemology and relativism ontological philosophical position. Additionally, the current literature is also in agreement with the social proof (wisdom of close friends and wisdom of crowds) of SMUs as identification elements of social influence theory, and on the influence of celebrities, experts’ opinions, product users and opinion leaders on consumers’ buying behaviour. But this study has synthesised them in context of social influence theory of brand engagement. The present study constructed the social influence of these individual celebrities, content experts, product users, influencers and opinion leaders as identification social influence that influences the crowd on social media. Additionally, compliance social influence factors are linked with homophily, social trust, discount offers and product user that would play their role to generate CBE.

The creation of a link between different social factors and the major elements of classic social influence theory is based on the relativist ontology and social constructionist epistemological position of this research. The exploration of all social influence factors was based on the social constructionism/subjectivism epistemology and relativist ontology because social constructionist epistemology believes in extracting knowledge from people; therefore, the researcher tried to explore and correlate the different cultural and social meanings attached to the social influences of UGC among SMUs. There are different realities that explore socially and culturally related compliance, identification and internalisation elements of social influence theory. The

creation of connections between different social realities with these three elements of social influence theory was also supported by the current literature and participants' points of view on these social factors. The outcomes of the research contribute to the literature on the differences between SBE and social CBE in context of UGC among SMUs. Additionally, the role of UGC to create compliance, identification and internalisation social influences was explored with relation to the different UGC contextual factors which is major originality and contribution of this research. In this way, a new "UGC social consumer brand engagement model" has been added to the literature, which is linked to the classic influence theory and is aligned with the current literature in the marketing field. This research also makes a contribution to practitioners of this discipline, one that could improve their capacity to act effectively in social media marketing. The following section illustrates the practical contribution of this research.

#### **6.4 PRACTICAL CONTRIBUTION**

The first practical contribution of this study is that it develops further social media marketing strategies by exploring the concept of SBE that occurs as a result of UGC on social media. This increases the importance of UGC for social media brand engagement strategies. The present study identified four general strategies: UGC creation, co-creation, sharing and consumption, and accuracy. These strategies are necessary for SBEs that are both positive and successful. The results of this study reveal that customers (happy or disheartened) are a major source of UGC, and opinion leaders and experts were also identified as a source of UGC. It was also observed that SMUs have more social influence through UGC rather than FGC. However, FGC could be helpful to deal with dissatisfied customers and to promote happy/satisfied UGC on social media. Historically, firms have had significant issues in allowing customers to take the lead. However, if they want authentication to be successful, sometimes letting customers take the leading role is essential in social media marketing. However, brands do not have control of customers since they already take the lead in the dynamic whether brands like it or not. As connections and relationships are the foundations of SBE, it is also important to consider the two polarities of a relationship that are successful since these may provide social proof for SMUs.

The second contribution of this study also provides knowledge of different strategies to marketers; the first strategy is UGC creation. It is found that if customers are satisfied with fashion brand's quality and services, they more likely to create positive brand stories on social media so there marketers can develop advance strategies such as social proof in the form of wisdom of crowd and social brand engagement. The results of this study reveal that some customers create posts for their favourite brands because it creates a win-win situation for both the brand as well as customers therefore marketers can use the influencers or opinion leaders with their low budget to generate social brand engagement towards fashion brands. Conversely, some participants argued that they generated negative brand stories after feeling a sense of responsibility that other people should not waste their resources in buying sub-standard brands. The marketers can build proactive responsive strategies to defend their position before any angry customer's share content go viral and it can create negative influence on the social reputation of fashion brands.

UGC co-creation is second strategy that is indicated on the base of this study. Co-creation strategy refers to the use of SBE in order to take ideas from customers and use them for collaborating or co-creating their creative ventures (Piligrimienė et al., 2015). As has been explored in this research, UGC is also a source of brand co-creation, so marketers can adopt a co-creation strategy that would also create social influence and fashion brands design. For fashion brands, this can prove to be an influential tool: excitement and authenticity can be generated by finding and making use of consumer-generated ideas, which also leads to new insights into the world and experiences of consumers. For example, there are many groups on Facebook where religious, deal finder, or other types of people are connected to share, create, receive, and consume UGC. Some people like opinion leaders and influencers and they share their positive/negative experiences continually, which may help to improve the quality and services of brands. Therefore, fashion brands have to follow these social media groups with the purpose of modifying/improving brands to address customers' needs, wants and demands so that they can enhance the social and consumer engagement towards fashion brands.

The third strategy is UGC share and consume; results of this study contributed regarding how socially connected friends, friends of friends, industry experts and

opinion leaders share their experiences which can engage other persons, even when they do not have any intention to buy that fashion brand. SMUs connect with each other so that they may know which fashion brands are socially trendy or what is fashion wave. The share of UGC provides opportunity to know about which fashion brands are appropriate, affordable, durable, and easily accessible for SMUs. Some SMUs believe that UGC sharing is caring because it creates a sense of responsibility with the purpose of highlighting information about those brands which meet customers' expectations. Other SMUs believed that sharing is caring because it is helpful to know the good and bad experiences of customers as well as lead to optimal purchase decision. Findings reveal that SMUs gather brand-related knowledge with the help of various social media features, such as sponsored ads, official brand pages on social media, advertisement ads and Facebook groups, where people keep sharing information about brands that are special to them. Additionally, social proof occurs as a result of UGC consumption among SMUs, and UGC consumption happens in a social context where identification and internalisation social influence was generated. Therefore, this research suggested that marketers listen to SMUs' comments about their brand and that they should also focus greatly on SBE rather than just focusing on CBE.

UGC accuracy is the fourth strategy; findings of this study reveal that SMUs create images, likes, tweets, views, viral content, tags and other social media features that promote and influence other customers to buy fashion brands. It is found that people engage with celebrities, influencers, opinion leaders and product users with the purpose of gathering pre-purchase information which can help them to make buying decisions. Messages initiated by these influencers can attract and engage other SMUs. SMUs love to find accurate content, although consumers' experiences on different social media platforms as well as brand experiences from close ties help them to determine whether the brand is reasonable to buy. At present, visual content is found to be more shared and noticed through social media, it is crucial to keep that attraction in consideration when social media content is being created by brands. Content can be made more memorable and compelling by using graphs, screenshots, visual aids, infographics and videos; therefore, brands should facilitate the SMUs to use their brand's high-quality template content to share their emotions. Therefore, it

provides direction to marketers of fashion brand regarding to generate visual content which can engage maximum SMUs for sharing their UGC experiences.

The major practical contribution of this research is that it divided social influence into three categories: compliance, identification, and internalisation. Therefore, marketers can analyse their brand's social influence types; for example, if any fashion brand already has enough social proof in the form of identification and internalisation that can create social engagement with the fashion brand, after that the brand needs to transfer SBE into CBE. In that case, the fashion brand needs to create compliance social influence, which requires trust, homophily, social ties, content credibility and discount offers through customers on social media that may generate the CBE through social exchange of UGC. Therefore, this research also provided knowledge about different types of social influence, the process of social influence and the different roles of social factors in different kinds and stages of social CBE with fashion brands so this in depth understanding can be used by practitioners in the form of said strategies.

Overall, this study practically differentiates the SBE and CBE. This study provides knowledge to marketers regarding which are motivational factors of SBE and how it is different to CBE which is more focused area of previous literature. Results reveal that social responsibility, sharing experience, staying connected & updated, reward sharing, and opinion leader are the motivational factors therefore fashion brand marketers should design their social media strategies by considering these motivational factors as these factors can develop and enhance the level of SBE. This study has specified the different types of SMUs: passive, content creator, content criticizer, content collector/consumer so marketers can focus on these SMUs who are involved in content creation, exchange, and consume which can ultimately influence the social brand engagement and consumer brand engagement. For example, some of content creators have developed the specific group or acting as opinion leader/fashion brand experts on Facebook pages and they create, share or exchange fashion brand-related content which can enhance both SBE and CBE. So, when marketers engage these influencers by sending information updates and other customer experiences with proof then these influencers are more likely to create more accurate UGC which can lead towards brand purchase decision. This study also provided knowledge to marketers that friends and family members are most credible

social sources which can create socially credible content that can convert SBE into CBE. This study also guided to marketers that people are more socially engaged with social sources who have some common needs such as students and their budget, professionals and their wearing on job place, and children's clothing so marketers can also design their social media marketing strategies by targeting these specific people and their social networks.

## **6.5 LIMITATIONS AND AREAS OF FUTURE RESEARCH**

As this research was based on social constructionism and subjectivist epistemology, and an inductive research approach was employed, there is, therefore, a chance of weak prediction, which is the major limitation of social constructionist epistemology. The outcomes of this research developed the "UGC social consumer brand engagement model" so that, in the future, positivists could test this theory in the context of brand engagement on social media. Additionally, the structure of this model was based on the compliance, identification and internalisation elements of classic social influence theory; therefore, future positivist researchers can test the relationship between these three types of social influence with presented factors of social influence.

Moreover, different social realities are explored in the context of UGC's social influence on social CBE and the relation between these realities is based on social constructionism epistemology and the relativist ontological position of this research. There are different social realities connected to and co-related with compliance, identification and internalisation; therefore, future realist researchers can find the singular nature of realities in the context of the compliance, identification and internalisation of social influence theory. This research established: the relationship of internalisation with experts, product users, opinion leaders and celebrities; identification's relationship with the wisdom of the crowd and wisdom of friends; and compliance's relationship with trust, social ties, homophily, credibility and quality. Therefore, future researchers can test the relationships of these factors or they can form their own hypotheses related to different social factors of UGC that would lead to the generalisation of their results in the context of social influence theory. The following proposition can also be tested to summarise these determinants: the probability that social influence acceptance is a mutual function of (1) pre-potency of an induced

behaviour, (2) comparative power of stimuli (influencing agent), and (3) relative significance of expected effect. This proposition can be supported through citation of various experimental findings.

This study also explored the quality of UGC; as such, further research can test the relationship between the quality of content (video length, title words, length of writing, title) and the relationship of SBE on social media. Moreover, four types of SMUs were explored: passive, creators, criticisers, and collectors. These four types of SMUs are aligned in relation to their intention towards UGC creation and the social impact on SMUs; therefore, future researchers can test their social influence, which would generalise their research results in the context of the role of consumers' UGC in SBE. There is another limitation of this research is that this research is about the technological interaction of social media users but there are very limited evidence found from the data that whole technological interaction is limited to the system design (social networks system features) itself. Consequently, different social media users use different social networks in their own social context that is linked back to the system design like number of words, quality of content, type of content, quantity of content and socialisation feature of different networks not equally available on all social media networks. Additionally, it has also identified that the use of social media of instant social media messaging apps like WhatsApp, Imo, and WeChat, is different than the social media networks like Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram therefore I would like to recommend to the future research are to explore the overall system design in context of social interaction and usability of different social media networks to create a social consumer brand engagement.

This research was based on the social constructivist epistemological perspective, thus ethnographical research is needed to explore the "dance" between empowered consumers on social media and firms, and how attempts at social branding are taken culturally on social media; this would produce a more culturally based picture rather than to take epistemological perspectives. As the translation of messages is turned into meaningful content shared through communities, and the guidelines as well as principles for brand engagement on social media move beyond one-way communications and become more about human relationships, ethnographical research can produce different results in this context.



This research established that SBE could happen in the absence of brand-generated content, so the question that arises is what happens when a brand is mocked, resisted or completely taken over by consumers. Therefore, for future researchers, there is a need to understand how culture is influenced by media and people are empowered by social media engagement to create social change. A care and create strategy in combination should be a part of future research. Thus, it can be said that SBE is a double-edged sword that attracts consumers to come together; therefore, future researchers should explore firms' strategies for a situation when a brand is mocked, resisted or completely taken over by consumers.

Although, internalisation, identification and compliance are functions of social influence, these elements of UGC influence may qualitatively differ for each individual process. Thus, the ways through which induced behaviour becomes pre-potent, a source of power of influencing agents, differs for different social agents in the process of these three social influences on SNSs. Moreover, the nature of expected influence can distinguish determinants of all these three processes. It can be argued that these processes are characterised by different and unique antecedents, involving a specific qualitative deviation of general determinants. In the case of proper antecedents, the influence may take the shape of internalisation, identification or compliance. Each individual process represents a unique characteristic pattern pertaining to internal responses (feelings and thoughts) in which people get engaged when adopting induced behaviour of sharing, consuming and creating. Likewise, all these processes are also characterised by a unique set of resultant conditions, involving specific qualitative deviations in the consequent history of induced behaviour towards the UGC. Responses that would be adopted under different processes would be performed, changed and turned off under different situations and thus would have different but unique properties; therefore, a future researcher can test these unique properties in the context of internalisation, identification and compliance. The future researcher should also test the power of identified social agents in relation to the characteristics of the SMUs. As all of these processes mediate between a unique set of antecedents and consequents, experiments can be performed to test expected differences between these processes that try to associate the set of antecedents assumed for a given process with assumed consequents for said process. The current experiment was performed with the aim to vary the antecedent – source of power of

influencing agent – and to determine the impact of said variation over consequent conditions of performing induced response.

This research explored customer-created and SMU-created SBE, but some small brands are still not active on social media. As such, they need to understand the customer-created brand of the social media consumer-created brands concept, which is when a group of consumers takes complete ownership and ultimately usurps a brand. This happens when a brand is created by the engaged consumers, which could happen with small brands, even if these brands adopt content strategies. Füller et al. (2008) indicated the concept that creating their own brands puts the engaged consumers in the same position as other producers, creating both opportunities and challenges for the corporations' motivated consumer groups when engaged with an activity or a product to create community brands. Therefore, future researchers can conduct research to explore customer-created brands and future researchers can also explore the role of the contexts of compliance, identification and internalisation in consumer-created brands.

## **6.6 REFLEXIVITY**

Examination of personal actions and thoughts is called reflection. For practitioners, reflection means focusing on their interactions with the environment and their colleagues to obtain a clear understanding of their personal behavior (Walliman, (2010). Axiology represents one of the philosophical approaches to conducting research, whereby judgements about values are observed. Although this may include certain values that are held in the field of ethics and aesthetics, it represents a social enquiry process that is relevant to this study (Saunders et al., 2016). If researchers intend their research to be credible, their values are of paramount significance and relevance in conducting the research (Hammersley, 2013). Moreover, Sawyer et al. (2016) argued that our values play a pivotal role in providing guidance about human actions. Additionally, Margolis and Pauwels (2011) pointed out that the way researchers arrive at judgements are an indication of their values. The quality of judgement indicates the quality of the researcher's values. Furthermore, Walliman (2018) suggested that researchers should write a statement about their values concerning the topic at hand. Moreover, Heron (1996) discussed axiology and presented the idea that it is possible for researchers to state their personal values in

their own words with respect to the topic they are studying. Therefore, Figure 7-1 sets out the researcher's reflection upon his own values attached to this research.



Figure 7-6-1 The researcher's values statement developed by author

It is very important for researchers to centrally maintain this reflexivity so that they can constantly locate themselves in their work as well as constantly remain in a dialogue with stakeholders, respondents, methodologies and research practices (Quinlan et al., 2019). Therefore, as a professional researcher, I would like to reflect upon researching as a professional. As Easterby-Smith et al. (2015) put it, “*academic departments usually have their own house styles, which support and encourage particular kinds of work, whether quantitative or qualitative, and there is also much pressure on departments to prioritise their research interests. This can make it hard to find the right supervisors and examiners*” (p. 112). Therefore, the researcher observes that the academic setting of a university is also included in this reflective part, as the number of assessments for the DBA programme at the University of Worcester also has a considerable impact on the selection of topic, and selection and justification of methodology and philosophical position for this research.

The “Researching Professional” and “Research Method and Design” modules enabled the researcher to take an appropriate philosophical practice-based position for this

research. These two modules also proved helpful in justifying the philosophical-based position of this research. Further, the “Researching Professional” module increased the researcher’s knowledge of professional research and the following skills were developed through this module:

#### *Skills Developed on “Researching Professional” Module*

- Critically understand different ways of knowledge management, generation and dissemination within various working contexts and the epistemologies behind these.
- Critical evaluation of use and critical interpretation of the research related to professional contexts.
- Critically reflect on their own professional individuality, self and agency in an organisational setting, and the theories and philosophies informing the practice.
- Critical and in-depth understanding of complexities related to their professional contexts and the multiple factors that shape it.

The “Research Method and Design” module helped to form researcher practice-based epistemological and ontological position for research and proved helpful in learning how researcher professional and personal identity influences researcher philosophical position as well as choosing different the methodological components for the study. Undertaking this module was an amazing experience as it encouraged me to explain and reflect on researcher own research experiences regarding the way in which researcher philosophical position has shifted from a researcher to a practice-based epistemological position. During the “Research Method and Design” module, researchers were encouraged to share their own experiences of philosophical shifting for the project. Through the reflective practice of the initial three modules, which were also assessments on this DBA course, the researcher shifted from a researcher to a professional researcher; from a heuristic perspective of research work, this means to make clear those epistemic acts that have been developed in the midst of the inquiry process (Ember & Ember, 2009).

The researcher enjoyed the module and learned how to conduct research as a professional. As Gibbs (1988, p. 311). *“It is not enough simply to have an experience in order to learn”*. Without reflecting upon this experience, it may quickly be forgotten,

or its learning potential lost. It is from the feelings and thoughts emerging from this reflection that generalisations or concepts can be generated. And it is generalisations that allow new situations to be tackled effectively. Moreover, Hedberg (2017) indicated that learning reflective practice is very important as it allows researchers to engage in thoughtful relationships with real life and to realise one's own lived experience.

Though it is essential to have thorough knowledge about prior research, it rarely occurs that a good research idea directly derives from previous literature (Neergaard & Ulhøi, 2008). According to Easterby-Smith (2015, p. 109), "*although it is recognized that a thorough knowledge of prior research is very important, it is rare for good research ideas to be derived directly from the literature*". Therefore, researchers reflect briefly on their whole journey of researching as a professional. As Easterby-Smith (2015, p. 111) also stated, "*the relationship between students and supervisors is an obvious power dynamic, but there are many other dynamics within the academic world*". Researchers realise that the university environment directly impacts on the research because in professional research, researchers and supervisors should work in the same direction to achieve the academic and professional research objectives simultaneously, thus "*there is no particular reason why academic and practical goals should not be achieved simultaneously; indeed, we have found that many practitioners will become enthusiastically involved in theoretical debates created from the academic perspective*" (Easterby-Smith, 2015, p. 112).

This research was on an advanced social media marketing topic. According to Charlesworth (2014, p. 3), "*Social media has given marketers a way to connect with consumers in an unprecedented and revolutionary way, but the very newness of this medium is as challenging as it is exciting, particularly to those who aren't digital natives*". Therefore, the supervisor's contributions to this research was a considerable factor because the supervisor of this research has extensive research and academic expertise on social media marketing and, at the same time, the researcher also works as a social media marketing consultant so these significantly increase the reliability of the research to contribute to advances in the social marketing field. Therefore, this study required a social media native supervisor, which was arranged by the university, and which was a major indicator of the quality and achievement of academic and practical goals. According to Pink (2010, pp. 9–10), "*for too long, there's been a mismatch between what*

*science knows and what business does*"; therefore, the researcher applied a practice-based epistemological perspective to the research and tried to contribute from his own personal experience through getting maximum academic opportunities to achieve the professional and academic research objectives simultaneously. The University of Worcester's Business School, including the programme leader, all modules leaders, the Director of Study and supervisors, played their roles very well to achieve both academic and practical objectives. Moreover, the researcher's own experience in social media marketing supported the design of the best interview questions for data collection and helped to conduct in-depth interviews. At the same time, the researcher received useful feedback from his competent supervisor, who has undertaken tremendous work in the social media field. Additionally, the researcher also approached four other social media marketing consultants who proved quite helpful in obtaining rich data on this topic. Interviews were also held with these consultants to conduct an open discussion of the development mode; this discussion was undertaken individually with each participant.

## **6.7 SUMMARY**

This chapter summarises the contribution of this research to the wider field of knowledge and makes recommendations for marketers regarding how this research can help them to make better marketing decisions. Moreover, the limitations of this project and possible areas for future research are also outlined. Additionally, the researcher reflects on his own experience of this professional research, particularly in regard to how professional and academic research objectives are achieved simultaneously. The outline of this chapter is as follows (see Figure 7-2).

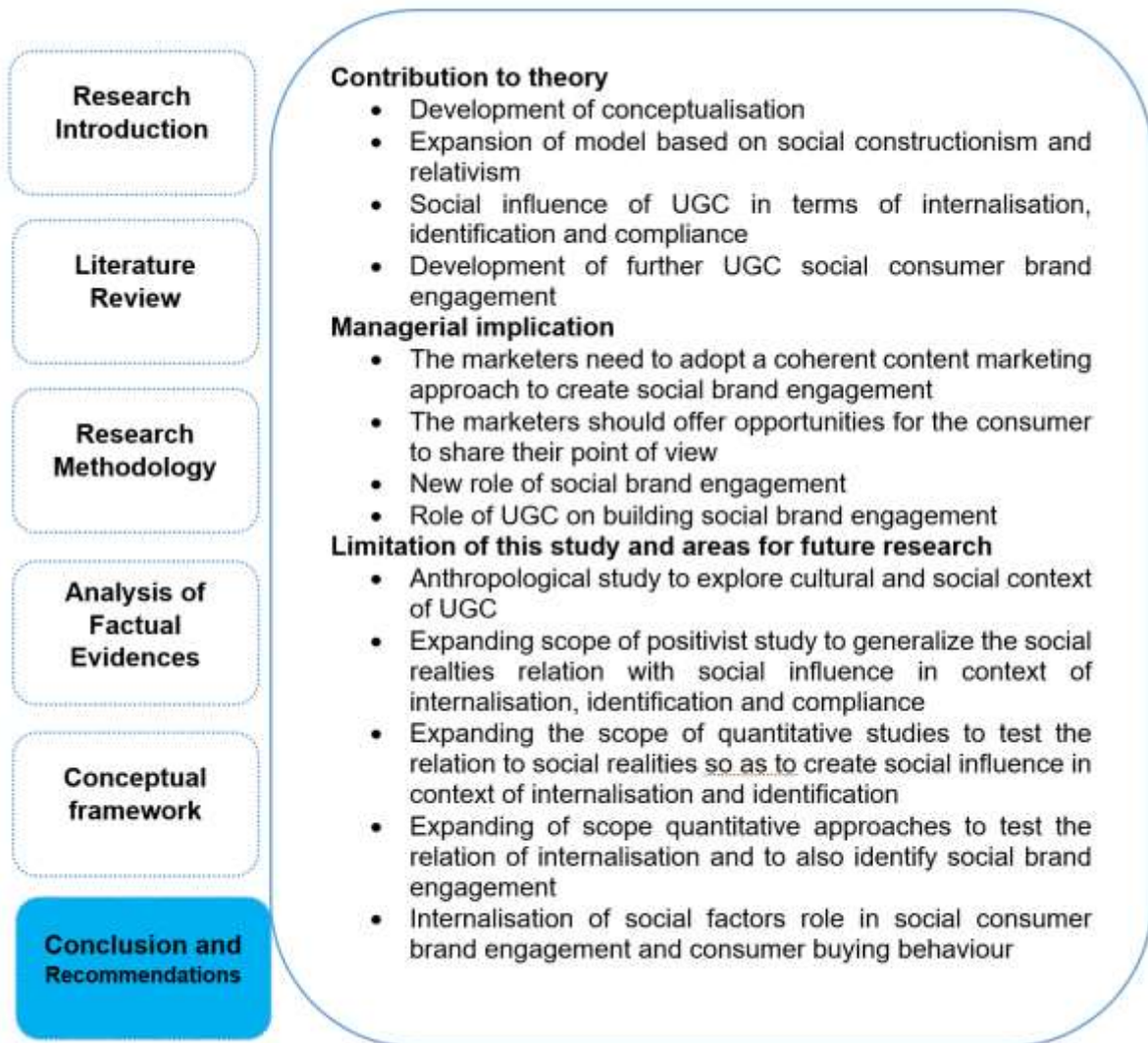


Figure 6-2 Progression of thesis; UGC user-generated content and brand engagement

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## APPENDICES

### 8.1 APPENDIX 1: LITERATURE MATRIX

No	Author (Year)	Dimensions	Industry	Perspective	Method and Sample	Theoretical/conceptual framework
1	Daugherty et al. (2008)	UGC and consumer motivations		Consumers	Exploratory study (325 sample size)	Conceptual framework base on effects application of theory (Calder, Phillips, & Tybout, 1981)
2	Dhar, & Chang, (2009)	UGC and music sales	Retail	Albums statistics	Quantitative research (Linear and nonlinear regression, sample of 108 albums)	Conceptual framework (UGC influences decision making)
3	Cheong, & Morrison, (2008)	UGC, Product information and recommendation, Consumers reliance	Mixed (Pure service and retail)	College students	Qualitative in-depth interviews (17 participants, interview method)	Offered framework based on personal influence to examine influence how consumers use the Internet for product information and purchases
4	Bonhomme et al. (2010, February)	UGC and consumer-based brand equity		Consumers	Empirical study (online survey, 201 sample size)	Conceptual model (Impact of UGC on Consumer-Based Brand Equity)
5	Jonas, (2010)	UGC on internet and Source credibility of company-produced	Mixed (Pure service and retail)	Consumers, students, and employee	Exploratory Study (survey method, sample size 120, paired sample)	Conceptual framework based on Interactive Advertising Model (IAM), an integrative processing model of Internet advertising proposed by Rodgers and Thorson (2000)
6	Williams et al. (2010)	Analyzing UGC as per customer point of view	Pure service	Consumers	structured open-ended questionnaire	Theory, X, Y, and Z
7	Ye et al. (2011)	UGC, word of mouth, and business performance	Pure service	Traveler	Empirical study	Framework based on Engel, Kollet, Blackwell (EKB) Model
8	Christodoulidis et al. (2011)	UGC and smart marketers			Literature Review (40 to 50 years studies reviewed from journal of advertising research)	Conceptualization of UGC, what is UGC and what is not and how UGC can effectively used

	Author (Year)	Dimensions	Industry	Perspective	Method and Sample	Theoretical/conceptual framework
9	Dwyer, (2012)	UGC, consumer choice, and consumer perception	Mixed (Pure service and retail)		Empirical study (Data collected from digg.com and Twitter regarding most valuable global brands)	
10	MacKin non, (2012)	UGC vs. Advertising	Mixed (Pure service and retail)	Consumers	Qualitative study (in-depth survey, 90 sample size)	
11	Wilson et al. (2012)	UGC, Motivation to post, and type of content consumer share	Pure service	young travellers and students	Empirical study (online survey, 568 respondents)	
12	Smith et al. (2012)	Comparing brand-related UGC on youtube, Facebook, and Twitter	Mixed (Pure service and retail)	Customers	Content analysis (600 posts)	Six general frameworks
13	Christodoulides et al. (2012)	UGC creation, involvement, and consumer-based brand equity	Manufacturing	Consumers	Quantitative research (Semi-structured interviews, 202 sample size)	Conceptual framework (self-brand congruity theory)
14	Ayeh et al., (2013)	UGC, online travelers' attitude, and credibility perceptions	Pure service	Travel consumers	Quantitative methods: SEM and PLS (Online survey, 661 travel consumers)	Research Model based on theory of homophily
15	Füller, et al. (2013)	Users generated brand and users innovation	Pure service	Employees	Mixed method approach (Qualitative to Quantitative methods)	
16	Mir, & Ur-REHMAN, (2013)	User generated product content and consumers intentions and attitudes	Pure service	University students	Empirical study (self-administrative questionnaire, 231 sample size)	Proposed attitudinal model (based on social impact and planned behavior theory)
17	Verhelten et al. (2013)	UGC and brand placement techniques	Pure service	University students	experimental design (Posted four videos, conducted online survey, 259 sample size)	Persuasion Knowledge Model, associative network theory, and traditional advertising theory

	Author (Year)	Dimensions	Industry	Perspective	Method and Sample	Theoretical/conceptual framework
18	Goh, et al. (2013)	User-and-marketer generated content, social media brand community, and consumer behavior	Retail	Retailer and consumer	Mixed method study (Content based, and hypotheses testing based on user-marketer interaction)	
19	Presi et al. (2014)	UGC and dissatisfied service customer	Pure service	Customers	Quantitative methods: SEM (questionnaire, 239 customers)	Conceptual framework and hypothesized effects for UGC creation and attitude towards firms response
20	Noone, & McGuire, (2014)	UGC and consumers pre-purchase evaluations	Pure service	Consumers	EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN (Online survey, 265 sample size)	
21	Tang et al. (2014)	UGC and product sales	Retail	Consumers	Application programming interface (collected consumer reviews of 39 brands)	Conceptual model based on How UGC influence product sales
22	Flanagin et al. (2014)	UGC, Information creditability, product quality, and purchase intention			Quantitative study (Survey and experiment methods, 3991 participants)	Social influence and cognitive power theory
23	Kim, (2014)	Power of consumers, brand related UGC and consumer response		Consumers	Quantitative methods: SEM (Online self-administered survey, 533 sample size)	"Model examining the influence of brand-related UGC shared via Facebook on consumer response".
24	Ashley, & Tuten, (2015)	Branded social content and consumer engagement			Exploratory study (Content analysis, sample of content from 100 brands)	Identity theory, self-expansion theory, selective attention theory, use and gratification theory
25	Wang, C. (2015)	Perceived credibility of UGC on purchase intention		Youtube users	Empirical study (Online survey, 131 sample size)	Framework based on persuasion theory, uncertain reduction theory,
26	Kim, & Johnson, (2016)	UGC, consumers brand engagement, eWOM behavior, and potential brand sales.	Mixed (Pure service and retail)	Consumers	Quantitative study (Online survey, 533 participants)	S-O-R Consumer response model
27	Chari et al. (2016)	User generated brand recommendations and consumer trust		Consumers	Set-theoretic approach using fuzzy set qualitative comparative analysis (Self-reported questionnaire, 303 sample size)	Conceptual framework based on Set-theoretic analytical method



No	Author (Year)	Dimensions	Industry	Perspective	Method and Sample	Theoretical/conceptual framework
28	Halliday, (2016)	UGC for brands, its creators and consumers	Pure service	College students	qualitative data analysis software tool NVivo9 (Used coherent analysis)	Conceptual framework based on re-conceptualized actor or peer or person. Consumer culture theory
29	Ozuem et al. (2016)	UGC and perceived customer value	Pure service	Customer and company		Conceptual model based on UGC and customer value
30	Bahtar, & Muda, (2016)	UGC, Product reviews, online purchasing		Consumers	Quantitative methods: SEM (self-administered questionnaire)	Conceptual model based on influence of UGC on consumer's online product purchase intention
31	Kumar et al. (2016)	UGC and customer behavior	Mixed (Pure service and retail)		Empirical study	Treatment effect and DID models
32	Chua, & Banerjee, (2016)	UGC, Review sentiment, and Product Type	Retail	Consumer reviews	Quantitative methods (2190 consumer reviews from Amazon)	Uncertain reduction theory
33	Owusu et al. (2016)	UGC influence on web purchasing decision	Pure service	Graduate students	Logistic regression mode (Data collected through survey, 247 students selected randomly)	"Summary framework of features of UGC that impact web purchase decisions".
34	Liu et al. (2017)	Brand-Related User-Generated Content (consumer interaction, sentiments, & re-tweets)	Mixed (Pure service and retail)		LDA and sentiment analysis (analyzed 10 million tweets)	
35	Chen et al. (2015)	Mobile UGC community applications and users reposting behavior	Pure service	College students	Empirical study (Survey data, 226 random users)	"A user reposting behavior model that explore the motivation factors for users reposting behavior in UGC communities".
36	Kim, & Lee, (2017)	Brand related UGC, Role of sponsorship and source	Pure service	College students	Online experimental design (285 sample size)	Attribution theory
37	Narangajavana-Kaosiri, et al. (2017)	UGC and tourist satisfaction	Pure service	customers	Empirical study (375 sample size)	Assimilation theory

	Author (Year)	Dimensions	Industry	Perspective	Method and Sample	Theoretical/conceptual framework
38	Adetunji et al. (2017)	UGC, Hedonic and functional brand image, and brand purchase intention	Retail	Followers of brand	Quantitative methods: PLS & SEM (Survey technique, 114 sample size)	Conceptual framework based on UGC, functional and hedonic brand image and purchase intention.
39	Bao, L. (2017, January).	UGC quality and Consumers brand attitude			Study is conducted to offer conceptual framework and hypotheses (Literature review based study)	"Conceptual framework for the impact of UGC and online brand experience on consumer's brand attitude".
40	Geurin, & Burch, (2017)	UGC via social media		instagram of six brands	Content analysis methodology (Unobtrusive method)	Conceptual framework based on Utilizing Porter's (1985) generic strategies.
41	Herrero, & San-Martín, (2017)	UGC and social networking sites (A revision of the UTAUT2)	Mixed (Pure service and retail)	Tourists	Quantitative research (Survey from 537 tourists)	Conceptual framework (Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology 2 (UTAUT2))
42	Ramirez et al. (2018)	UGC and word of mouth (WOM)	Mixed (Pure service and retail)	Firms	Bivariate measures and time series analysis	WOM conceptualization and contribution to theory of WOM
43	Montecchi, & Nobbs, (2018)	UGC and consumer empowerment	Mixed (Pure service and retail)	Managers	Exploratory study (Semi-structure interview)	Conceptualization of empowered consumer and co-innovation
44	Ukpabi, & Karjaluoto, (2018).	Antecedents of UGC utilization for travel planning			Literature Review (54 studies from 2005 to 2016)	Conceptual framework (Source, user, and content features)
45	Timoshenko, & Hauser, (2018)	UGC and customer needs	Manufacturing	Review Posts of oral care products	Convolutional Neural Network (115099 Amazon reviews, From 1996 to 2014)	
46	Mendes-Filho, et al., (2018)	UGC and travel planning	Pure service	Customers	Quantitative research (Survey from 268 tourists)	Technology acceptance Model (TAM), influential theory and theory of reasoned action

	Author (Year)	Dimensions	Industry	Perspective	Method and Sample	Theoretical/conceptual framework
47	Mazzucchelli et al. (2018)	UGC and brand loyalty	Mixed (Pure service and retail)	Consumers	Quantitative methods: SEM (Online survey, 277 respondents of Victoria and Millennials FB pages)	Conceptual model (brand loyalty intention influenced by customer trust as well as willingness to utilize Brand official pages for shopping).
48	CHEREGI, (2018)	UGC and consumer life in social media era	Pure service	Advertisement agencies	Qualitative study (Computer-assisted interview (CASI), 10 advertising agencies)	
49	Viswanathan et al. (2018)	Firm generated content, social media engagement, live tv-shows			simultaneous system of equations approach for data analysis (sample of 31 new shows on tv)	Conceptual framework based on brand actions, customer engagement behaviors (CEBs), and consumption
50	Hallgren et al. (2018)	UGC and consumer-based brand equity	Pure service	College students	Quantitative study, explanatory research approach	"Aaker's (1991) framework on the different dimensions of CBBE and Keller's (1993) definition".
51	Ghose, et al., (2012)	UGC impact on hotel booking	Hotel	Consumer	Quantitative/secondary data	consumer utility theory and characteristics theory
52	Pan, & Zhang, (2011).	Effects of product reviews on consumer product attitude, product choice, and product sale		Consumer	Qualitative	Content analysis of literature reviews
53	Yoo, et al., (2019)	Quantity and quality of user-generated content impact on user innovation behaviour		Consumer	Quantitative	user innovation theory
54	Poulis, et al., 2019)	FGC posted on Instagram impact on FGC posted on Facebook	Students	Consumer	Quantitative	Firm generate content impact on brand loyalty, brand awareness, eWOM and purchase intention
55	Jin, & Phua, (2014)	(UGC) in travel booking websites on consumers' behavioral intentions.	Traveling	Consumer	Quantitative	Warranting theory

No	Author (Year)	Dimensions	Industry	Perspective	Method and Sample	Theoretical/conceptual framework
56	Piligrimiené, et al., (2015)	Value creation and brand engagement	Books	Consumer	Qualitative	
57	Yoo, et al., (2019)	Quantity and quality of user-generated content impact on user innovation behaviour		Consumer	Quantitative	user innovation theory
58	Kwahk, & Kim, (2017).	Social media and purchase intention	Taobao	Consumer	Quantitative	Social impact theory
59	Bigne, et al., (2018)	Consumer behaviour	Airline/traveling	Consumer	Quantitative	Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA)
60	Kizgin, et al., (2018)	social media as an agent of culture change		Consumer	Quantitative	Reasoned action theory
61	Mosteller, & Poddar, (2017)	Privacy and social media engagement	Services	Consumer	Quantitative	regulatory focus theory
62	Kuo, & Hou,. (2017).	consumer-brand relationship and brand communities	Services	Consumer	Quantitative	social identity theory
63	Casaló, L. V., & Romero, J. (2019).	Word-of-mouth, Perceived support, Social media interactions	Services	Consumer	Quantitative	social exchange theory and equity theory

No	Author (Year)	Dimensions	Industry	Perspective	Method and Sample	Theoretical/conceptual framework
64	Clifton, et al., (2014)	Firm-generated brand stories, Social media's impact on brand management		Consumer	Quantitative	
65	Choi, et al., (2016)	Facebook and customer statistician	Hotel industry	Customer	Quantitative	Gratifications theory
66	Özgüven, & Mucan, (2013).	Personal traits and use of social media		Social media users	Quantitative	five-factor model of personality
67	Whaite, et al., (2018)	Personality traits and social media users		Social media users	Quantitative	Big Five theory of personality
68	Choi, et al., (2017)	Personal traits impact on social media users		Social media users	Quantitative	big five traits and social networking
69	Annisette, & Lafreniere, (2017).	Social media, texting, and personality		Social media users	Quantitative	Five traits theory
70	Schwartz, et al., (2013)	Personality, gender, and age		Facebook use	Quantitative	personality, gender, and age impact use on social media
71	Hollebeek, et al., (2014)	Consumer involvement and usage intention	Services	Consumer	Quantitative	Consumer culture theory and consumer base equity
72	Harrigan, et al., (2017)	Social media users and consumer brand engagement	Tourism	Consumer	Quantitative	consumer culture theory and consumer involvement
73	Chahal, & Rani, (2017)	Trust and brand engagement		Consumer	Quantitative	Social factors and consumer-based factors
74	Liu, et al., (2019)	Consumer engagement, Social media brand community	Services	Consumer	Quantitative	Personal engagement theory
75	Pancer, et al., (2017)	Brand engagement on social media	Services	Consumer	Quantitative	Social exchange theory
76	Dessart, et al., (2015)	Consumer engagement in online brand communities	Services	Consumer	Quantitative	Three key engagement dimensions (cognition, affect and behaviours)
77	Yang, et al., (2016)	Brand engagement on social media;		Consumer	Quantitative	social capital theory

		search engine advertising;				
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No	Author (Year)	Dimensions	Industry	Perspective	Method and Sample	Theoretical/conceptual framework
78	Kumar, & Nayak, (2019)	brand engagement and behavioral loyalty on social media	Services	Consumer	Quantitative	Brand psychological ownership (BPO) and value congruity
79	Simon, & Tossan, (2018).	Brand-Consumer Social Sharing Value on virtual media engagement	Services	Consumer	Quantitative	theory of close relationships
80	Carlson, et al., (2019)	Customer engagement (CE) relates to customers' sharing intentions	Services	Consumer	Quantitative	social exchange theory
81	Casagrande et al., (2019)	consumer, contributor or creator of content impact on brand engagement	Fashion luxury brands	Consumer	Quantitative	Contributing brand-related content
82	Schivinski, et al., (2016)	Psychometric properties, Social-Media Content and brand engagement	Services	Consumer	Quantitative	Brand Related Activities theory
83	Schultz, (2017).	Brand messages (posts) and consumer engagement	Services	Consumer	Quantitative	theory needs to account
84	Bento, et al., (2018)	Brand engagement and search for brands on social media generation X and Y	Services	Consumer	Quantitative	cohort theory
85	Kim, & Ko, (2010).	Luxury Fashion Brand's Social Media and consumer purchase intention	Luxury fashion brand	Consumer	Quantitative	social media marketing relation with Intimacy, Trust and

						Purchase intention
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No	Author (Year)	Dimensions	Industry	Perspective	Method and Sample	Theoretical/conceptual framework
86	Park, et al., (2018)	Negative effects of social media marketing on value perceptions	Luxury fashion brand	Consumer	Quantitative	Construal level theory of psychological distance
87	Helal, et al., (2018)	Negative impact on brand presence on social media	Fashion	Consumer	Quantitative	social identity theory
88	Chae, & Ko, (2016).	Customer participation on trust and customer equity	Fashion	Consumer	Quantitative	Interaction theory
89	Martín-Consuegra, et al., (2018)	Brand credibility, purchase intention and social media for fashion brand	Fashion	Consumer	Quantitative	signalling theory
90	Gautam, & Sharma, (2017)	Social media marketing impact on consumer purchase intention	Luxury fashion	Consumer	Quantitative	social media marketing impact on trust, intimacy, customer relationships and purchase intention
91	Geissinger, et al., (2018)	User-generated contents	Fashion	Fashion professional	Quantitative	Social media, Fashion Brand professional constellation and brand engagement
92	Hsiao, et al., (2019)	the impact of Business-to-Business (B2B) social media marketing on brand competition in the fashion industry	Fashion	Business to business	Quantitative	accessibility-diagnostic theory
93	Rahman, & Mannan, (2018)	Consumer online purchase behaviour and online consumer buying experience	Fashion	Consumer	Quantitative	Theory of reasoned action
94	Jin, & Ryu, (2019).	Facebook Celebrities impact	Fashion	Students/consumer		Structural equation modeling

		on student fashion buying				
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No	Author (Year)	Dimensions	Industry	Perspective	Method and Sample	Theoretical/conceptual framework
95	Coelho, et al., (2016)	The Impact of post type (advertising, fan, events, information, and promotion) on two interaction metrics: likes and comments on Facebook	Fashion	Consumer	Quantitative	Brand typologies as a source of interaction
96	Nash, (2019)	Social media impact on consumer buying decision through new trends on social media	Fashion	Consumer	Quantitative	Decision-making process (CDMP) theory
97	Valaei, & Nikhashemi, (2017).	Impact of Generation Y consumers' buying behaviour	Fashion	Consumer	Quantitative	Theory of planned behaviour,
98	Shephard, et al., (2016)	Consumer shopping involvement Hispanic behavior,	Fashion	Consumer	Quantitative	Theory of symbolic interaction
99	Osei-Frimpong, , & McLean, (2018)	Firm generate content and SBE on Facebook	Services	Consumer	Quantitative	social presence theory
100	Altschwager, et al., (2018)	University students events social engagement with social events of university	University students	Consumer	Quantitative	Social identity theory
101	Kozinets, (2014)	Social side of brand engagement on social media		Consumer	Qualitative	Conceptualization of new idea of SBE



## **8.2 APPENDIX 2: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

Q1: What you think are the most significant aspects of social media platforms when you gather pre-purchase information about fashion products?

Q2: Assuming that you want to buy a fashion product, what are the most important factors that can influence your point of view about brand and your intention towards a fashion brand?

Q3: Which social media site(s) do you generally prefer when it comes to gathering information or obtaining product reviews related to fashion brands?

Q4: Assuming that you want to buy a fashion product, who are some important individuals that can influence your decision about buying a fashion product from a social media platform?

Q5: To what extent are product reviews, brand stories, and the experiences of social media users influential on your purchase decisions in terms of fashion products?

Q6: How often have you decided to share fashion products after reading positive experiences of your friends on social media?

Q7: Suppose you find negative product reviews related to your favourite fashion product, do you still want to purchase that product or not?

Q8: How rottenly and why have you decided to gather information about the fashion product because your favourite celebrity endorses that product on social media site?

Q9: How and why times you decided to purchase a fashion product because your friends endorse that product on a social media site?

Q10: Suppose you purchased a fashion product and you liked its features, why do you want to share positive product experiences/reviews on your social network or social media platform?

Q11: Suppose you purchased a fashion product and you disliked its features; how often do you want to share the negative product reviews to your social network at social media platform?

### 8.3 APPENDIX 3: PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

#### Participant Consent Form

**Title of project: Title of Project: User Generated Content on Social Media and Brand Engagement in fashion industry**

Participant Identification Number for this study:

Name of Researcher: Muhammad Naeem

*Please initial*

I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.	<input type="checkbox"/>
I confirm that I have had sufficient time to consider whether I want to take part in this study	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand that I may withdraw my data by contacting the researcher within two months of the date of the interview.	<input type="checkbox"/>
I agree to the research interview being audio recorded	<input type="checkbox"/>
I agree to my research data including anonymised quotations being used in publications or reports and anonymised data will be kept at least until all potential papers from the thesis have been published.	<input type="checkbox"/>
I agree to take part in the study.	<input type="checkbox"/>
I have been made aware of support services that are available if I need them.	<input type="checkbox"/>
I know who to contact if I have any concerns about this research.	<input type="checkbox"/>

Name of Participant	_____
Date:	_____ Signature _____
Name of Person taking Consent	_____
Date:	_____ Signature _____

## **8.4 APPENDIX 4: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET**

### **Participant Information Sheet**

#### **Title of Project: User Generated Content on Social Media and Brand Engagement in the Fashion Industry**

I am Muhammad Naeem, a DBA (Doctor of Business Administration) student at the University of Worcester. I would like to invite you to take part in an interview for my research project on user generated content and brand engagement in the fashion industry. Before you decide whether to take part, it is important that you understand why the research is being carried out, and what it will involve. Please take your time to read this carefully and ask the researcher if you have any questions. Talk to others about the study if you wish. You have received this invitation because I value your opinion about how content created by other people on social media might have influenced your perceptions of particular fashion brands.

Participation is voluntary so please take your time to decide whether or not you would like to take part. I will wait for at least 7 days before asking for a decision. Interviews will take between 30 to 40 minutes. Anonymised data collected during the interview will be stored on a secure Google Cloud account for 10 years in line with the University of Worcester's ethical guidelines. All data will remain confidential and you will not be identified in any research proceedings. You have the right to conclude the interview at any time and withdraw your consent to participate. If you wish to have your data withdrawn following the interview, please contact the researcher within two months of the date of your interview.

Everything you say/report is confidential unless you tell us something that indicates that you or someone else is at risk of harm. We will discuss this with you before telling anyone else. The information you give may be used to compile a research report, but it will not be possible to identify you from this, or any other related documentation. The research data (e.g. interview transcripts) will be securely, fairly, lawfully and transparently used and stored for 10 years. Your information will be used as per the latest EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and GDPR law (<https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/guide-to-the-general-data-protection-regulation-gdpr/>). This law holds that data processing is lawful, fair and transparent. You are also allowed to withdraw your consent for me to retain your interview data within two months of the date of the interview.

This research is being carried out as part of a Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) at the University of Worcester. The findings of this study will be reported as part of my dissertation and may also be published in academic journals or at conferences.

Please note that this research has been approved by the University of Worcester HASSREC Ethics Committee and is being conducted under the supervision of Professor. Wilson Qzuem of the University of Worcester. If you wish to receive a summary of the research findings, please contact the researcher. Please keep this information sheet. If you do decide to take part, please contact the researcher using the details below.

*Thank you for taking the time to read this information*

Please keep this information sheet. If you decide to take part or you have any questions, concerns or complaints about this study please contact me at [naem1\\_15@uni.worc.ac.uk](mailto:naem1_15@uni.worc.ac.uk) or my supervisor Professor, Wilson Qzuem at [W.ozuem@worc.ac.uk](mailto:W.ozuem@worc.ac.uk) .

If you would like to speak to an independent person who is not a member of the research team, please contact Karen Dobson at the University of Worcester, using the following details:

Karen Dobson  
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