

Research on the Influence Mechanism of User-Generated Content on Cross-Border Beauty Consumers' Purchase Decisions

Xinni Lai¹, Qiqi Zhang¹, Rui Li¹, Xiaotong Zhong¹, Linglin Xiao¹, Tingxiong Xu², Yilin Li¹

¹ Guangdong University of Foreign Studies South China Business College, Guangzhou 510006, China

² Guangzhou College of Technology and Business, Guangzhou 510850, China

Abstract: This study explores the mechanism by which User-Generated Content (UGC) influences consumer purchase decisions in the cross-border beauty market, a sector characterized by high information asymmetry and perceived risk. Grounded in the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) theory and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), this paper reveals that UGC drives purchasing behavior through a dual-pathway mechanism: a cognitive-driven central route relying on objective product analysis, and an emotion-driven peripheral route facilitated by trust transfer and value resonance. Using case studies of representative brands, this research further identifies structural issues within the current UGC ecosystem, such as algorithmic filter bubbles, fabricated content, and consumer decision fatigue. Finally, it proposes targeted optimization strategies for platforms, merchants, and consumers to foster a healthier digital marketing environment and promote sustainable brand growth.

Keywords: user-generated content; cross-border e-commerce; beauty industry; purchase decision

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the study

Cross-border e-commerce has rapidly become a vital engine for global retail. Among various categories, the cross-border beauty market exhibits explosive growth as consumers pursue personalized aesthetics. However, beauty products are inherently experiential goods. Their effectiveness and skin compatibility are highly subjective and difficult to evaluate prior to actual usage. Combined with the spatial distance and cultural differences in CBEC, this creates significant information asymmetry and high perceived risks for consumers.

To mitigate these uncertainties, consumers increasingly rely on user-generated content (UGC) before making purchase decisions. UGC, including product reviews, unboxing videos, and tutorials on social media platforms, serves as digital word-of-mouth. Characterized by its authenticity and interactivity, UGC effectively bridges the psychological gap in cross-border transactions, making it an indispensable element in the modern beauty retail ecosystem.

1.2 Research purpose and significance

Despite UGC's acknowledged importance, a notable research gap remains in the current literature. Previous studies primarily focus on general retail categories or domestic e-commerce settings. Empirical research systematically dissecting the psychological mechanisms triggered by UGC specifically within the high-risk context of cross-border beauty e-commerce remains fragmented. Therefore, this study aims to investigate how different dimensions of UGC influence cross-border beauty consumers' cognitive states, perceived trust, and subsequent purchase decisions.

Theoretically, this research enriches consumer behavior literature within the CBEC domain by unpacking UGC's multidimensional impact on experiential goods. Practically, the findings will provide actionable insights for cross-border beauty brands, empowering them to shift from passive review monitoring to proactive UGC management. This will optimize digital marketing resource allocation, enhance consumer engagement, and drive sustainable sales growth in a highly competitive market.

1.3 Research Content and Methodology

This paper reviews the current development status of the cross-border beauty industry and User-Generated Content (UGC). Based on relevant theoretical foundations, it analyzes the content characteristics of UGC in the cross-border beauty sector. By integrating typical brand cases, the study constructs an influence mechanism model of how UGC affects consumer decision-making. It further provides an in-depth analysis of the alienation issues present in the current UGC ecosystem across the platform, merchant, and user dimensions, and subsequently proposes targeted optimization countermeasures.

Regarding the research methodology, this study primarily employs the literature analysis method and the case study method for empirical demonstration. By systematically reviewing domestic and international literature on UGC, consumer behavior, and information processing models, the theoretical foundation of this research is consolidated. Furthermore, by selecting and dissecting the most representative cross-border beauty brands in the domestic market alongside their content marketing pathways, the research conclusions are rendered more concrete and persuasive.

1.4 Research Innovations

(1) Verticalization of the Research Perspective. By focusing on the highly segmented vertical market of "cross-border beauty," this study accurately captures the high trust-threshold characteristics inherent to this category—driven by its "high average transaction value and low tolerance for trial and error" (impermissibility of trial and error). This approach ensures that the investigation into the functional mechanisms of UGC is highly targeted and industry-specific.

(2) Multidimensional Construction of the Influence Mechanism. Breaking away from traditional single-linear influence logic, this study introduces a "dual-pathway" framework. It systematically demonstrates how the objective information quality of UGC and the subjective emotional involvement (emotional involvement/engagement) function synergistically to shape the final purchasing decisions of consumers.

2. Relevant Theories and Literature Review

2.1 Definition of Core Concepts

Cross-Border Beauty Consumers: This refers to domestic consumers who purchase beauty and skincare products of foreign origin through cross-border e-commerce platforms. This group typically possesses a relatively high level of ingredient awareness and a strong willingness to explore new brands.

UGC (User-Generated Content): Distinguished from Professionally Generated Content (PGC) and Occupationally Generated Content (OGC), UGC in this study specifically refers to the text, image, or video content spontaneously created and shared by ordinary consumers or Key Opinion Consumers (KOCs) on social media platforms. Such content primarily includes product usage experiences, ingredient evaluations, and authenticity verifications regarding beauty products.

2.2 Theoretical Foundations

Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) Theory: This theory posits that external environmental stimuli (S) trigger cognitive and emotional changes within an individual's internal organism (O), which subsequently lead to a specific behavioral response (R). In the context of this paper, UGC serves as an external information stimulus that influences consumers' perceived value and trust, ultimately translating into purchase intention.

Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM): This model proposes two distinct pathways for information processing. The Central Route relies on the quality, logic, and ingredient analysis of the information itself, whereas the Peripheral Route depends on the credibility of the information source or emotional resonance. Both pathways synergistically contribute to the attitude shifts of beauty consumers.

Trust Transfer Theory: When faced with the uncertainty of cross-border products, consumers laterally transfer their trust in the UGC creator or the platform to the product itself. This serves as a critical mechanism for overcoming information asymmetry in cross-border beauty transactions.

2.3 Literature Review and Commentary

2.3.1 Current Status of International

Research In recent years, international research on UGC and consumer behavior has transitioned from the prevention of cutting-edge technological risks to the analysis of vertical scenarios and psychological motivations.

Introduction of AI Technology and Discussion on Forgery Risks. With the popularization of AI, Yang et al. (2026) explored the negative responses and decision-making shifts that occur when consumers encounter fake UGC advertisements generated by AI deepfakes, highlighting the risks associated with fabricated content[7]. 2025: Focus on Vertical Characteristics and Beauty Trust Mechanisms. Scholars have delved into specific consumption scenarios. Liu et al. (2025) forward-lookingly compared the roles of blockchain technology and traditional cues in establishing trust within cross-border beauty transactions[5]. Wang et al. (2025) analyzed the impact of UGC information characteristics on purchase intention[6], while A. M. Y. et al. (2025) affirmed the value of UGC in building trust in specialized consumption contexts[9]. Furthermore, Yongtao and Zhiqiang (2025) investigated empowerment models for creators on UGC platforms[8]. 2022-2023: Attention to Cross-Platform Comparisons and Psychological Motivations. Jia et al. (2023) compared evaluations from ordinary buyers and influencers, revealing that UGC across different platforms exerts varying impacts on sales[11]. Smriti et al. (2022)

and Jingyi (2022) confirmed that UGC enhances purchase intention primarily by stimulating psychological factors such as consumer "attitude" and "benign envy"[13][14].

2.3.2 Current Status of Domestic Research

Domestic research closely tracks the forefront of China's e-commerce development, with research perspectives shifting from the latest short-video and live-streaming ecosystems back to specific platform operations and early macro-environmental analyses.

Emphasis on Short-Video/Live-Streaming Ecosystems and Cultural Scenarios. The latest studies place greater emphasis on content formats and scenario empowerment. Xu Jingxin (2026) conducted an in-depth analysis of the actual impact of short videos and live-streaming e-commerce on cross-border e-commerce exports[2]; Wu Wei (2026) innovatively investigated the role of users' cultural perception on consumption decisions within cross-border e-commerce scenarios[1]. **Focus on Platform Strategies, Live-Streaming Discourse, and Copyright Regulations.** Liu Lisi (2025) outlined the competitive advantage strategies of cross-border e-commerce platforms[3], and Li Guangyu et al. (2025) studied the application and optimization of discourse in cross-border live streaming[4]. Regarding platform governance, Ma Guangze et al. (2024) highlighted the dilemmas faced in the copyright protection of UGC short videos[10]. **Deep Dive into Specific Platforms and Beauty Brand Analyses.** Chen Silong et al. (2022) and Zhou Jingting (2021) investigated the outbound marketing strategies of the segmented cosmetics market and specific cosmetics companies, respectively[12][16]. Chen Daozhi and Yue Liya (2021), using Xiaohongshu (Little Red Book) as a case study, confirmed the direct bridging role of UGC in user consumption behavior[15]. **Emphasis on Macro-Development Environments and Online Purchase Intentions.** Early studies predominantly examined broad industry trends. Wang Youqing (2019) specifically pointed out the macroeconomic challenges and countermeasures facing China's beauty cross-border e-commerce[17]; Chu Xu (2017) provided a preliminary analysis of the fundamental factors influencing consumers' intentions for cross-border online purchases[18].

3. Current Industry Status and Case Selection

3.1 Current Development Status of the Cross-Border Beauty Industry

In recent years, the market scale of China's retail import via cross-border e-commerce has continued to expand. With the optimization of supply chains in both bonded warehouse and direct mail models, the logistics timeliness and customs clearance efficiency of cross-border beauty products have experienced a qualitative leap. The current industry exhibits the following salient characteristics:

First, the market structure is tilting towards segmented efficacies and niche brands. With the rise of domestic "ingredient-conscious consumers" (skintellectuals), consumers no longer blindly worship international commercial mega-brands. Instead, overseas salon brands or laboratory brands containing specific active ingredients—such as the "Morning C and Night A" (Vitamin C in the morning, Retinol at night) routine, peptides, and other targeted formulations—are highly sought after.

Second, the peaking of the traffic dividend has led to a dramatic surge in customer acquisition costs. The conversion rates of traditional bidding rankings and hard-sell advertising have declined significantly. Brands urgently need to acquire traffic through low-cost, high-stickiness social media content matrices, which has directly catalyzed the prosperity of content marketing.

3.2 Overview of UGC Development in the Cross-Border Beauty Sector

In the cross-border beauty sector, User-Generated Content (UGC) has evolved from early-stage "product sharing" into a highly specialized knowledge graph. When facing products with foreign-language packaging and unfamiliar brands, consumers exhibit a strong behavioral habit of "searching before purchasing" or "cross-verifying after passive product seeding."

Current cross-border beauty UGC presents matrixed and tag-oriented characteristics. On the one hand, the depth of content continues to increase, expanding from simple tactile descriptions to full-ingredient analysis, pH value testing, and horizontal comparisons with competing products. On the other hand, the influence of negative UGC has amplified exponentially, serving as a critical firewall for consumers to circumvent the difficulties of defending their consumer rights in cross-border purchases.

3.3 Typical Cases and Platform Overview

When establishing market awareness in China, cross-border beauty brands highly rely on the dual-column feed display mechanisms and decentralized algorithms of social communities featuring images, text, and short videos. These closed-loop "community + e-commerce" platforms serve not only as the "first stop" for cutting-edge brands but also as excellent

observational samples for understanding how UGC intervenes in consumer purchasing decisions.

4. Case Analysis of Typical Cross-Border Beauty UGC Marketing and Influence Mechanisms

In the transaction context of cross-border beauty characterized by high information asymmetry, UGC has transformed from a singular information medium into the core hub driving purchasing decisions. Combining the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) theory and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), this chapter outlines the core characteristics of cross-border beauty UGC and introduces two typical brand cases to dissect its dual influence mechanisms.

4.1 Content Paradigms of Cross-Border Beauty UGC

In the cross-border beauty sector, UGC primarily presents three structural paradigms:

Hardcore Evaluation and Ingredient Analysis: Creators dissect formula concentrations by tracing all ingredients, catering to consumers' demands for in-depth cognitive understanding.

Scenario-Based Immersive Experience: Through the practical demonstration of specific skincare techniques or strong visual contrasts in makeup effects, UGC provides a "simulated trial" of the products.

Authenticity Verification and Pitfall Avoidance: Addressing the pain point of rampant counterfeit goods in cross-border commerce, UGC offers batch number queries and allergy warnings, directly targeting consumers' risk-defense psychology.

4.2 Mechanism Construction of UGC's Impact on Purchasing Decisions

Based on the ELM and S-O-R models, the drive of UGC on cross-border consumer decision-making presents a dual pathway:

Central Route (Cognition-Driven): High-quality, strictly logical, and objective UGC acts as a digital "instruction manual." By meticulously processing professional information, consumers significantly reduce their perceived functional and financial risks regarding cross-border products, thereby forming rational purchase intentions.

Peripheral Route (Emotion-Driven): The creator's identity alignment, high-frequency community interactions, and dissemination of value philosophies induce consumers' emotional involvement. Consumers laterally transfer their trust in the creator to the cross-border brand, accelerating the decision-making process through emotional resonance.

4.3 Analysis of Typical Brand Cases

To further demonstrate the aforementioned mechanisms, this section selects two highly representative brands in the cross-border beauty market, dismantling the cases from the cognitive and emotional dimensions, respectively.

4.3.1 Central Route Dominance: The Ordinary and "Ingredient Equality"

As an "ingredient bucket" brand focusing on high-concentration active ingredients, The Ordinary faced formidable "cross-border information barriers" and the "trial-and-error risks of strong formulas" when it initially entered the domestic market. It successfully broke through by relying on hardcore science-popularization UGC.

Mechanism Operation: Dimensionality Reduction Translation and Risk Front-Loading. Faced with complex chemical formulas (e.g., 10% Niacinamide + 1% Zinc), professional Key Opinion Consumers (KOCs) proactively undertook the task of "dimensionality reduction translation," converting them into straightforward usage scenarios like "oil control and brightening." Crucially, such high-quality UGC often front-loads side-effect warnings, such as "building tolerance" and "avoiding light exposure." This objective and comprehensive information disclosure based on the central route did not deter consumers; instead, it greatly enhanced the credibility of the information source, effectively hedged against consumers' functional perceived risks, and drove the conversion from observation to purchase.

4.3.2 Peripheral Route Dominance: Drunk Elephant and "Philosophical Resonance"

The premium American skincare brand Drunk Elephant champions "clean beauty." For such cross-border brands lacking offline physical counters and carrying high average transaction values, consumers' skepticism regarding the rationality of their premium pricing is the primary obstacle. Its marketing breakthrough heavily relies on the deep involvement of emotion and symbolism.

Mechanism Operation: Symbolic Interaction and Trust Transfer. Drunk Elephant's UGC frequently transcends product efficacy, emphasizing visual spectacles and lifestyle expression. For instance, a massive amount of UGC showcases the stress-relieving process of pumping and mixing "skincare smoothies," providing consumers with a strong "simulated tactile" experience and enhancing hedonic perceived value. Simultaneously, UGC texts repeatedly broadcast the brand philosophy of "non-toxic, minimalist, and rejecting appearance anxiety," accurately striking a chord with the values of young audiences. The driving force of the purchasing decision is thus transformed into an endorsement of a certain lifestyle. Through emotional

assimilation and trust transfer, consumers overcome the financial risks associated with the high unit price.

5. Existing Major Issues

Although UGC has played an irreplaceable role in empowering cross-border beauty consumption, alongside the intensification of commercial penetration, its ecological closed loop has also exposed multidimensional structural issues.

5.1 Platform-Level Issues

Algorithmic Filter Bubbles and Content Homogenization: The "collaborative filtering" mechanism of recommendation algorithms easily traps consumers in an "information echo chamber." The repetitive pushing of a single brand or ingredient reduces consumers' information acquisition efficiency. Meanwhile, the platform's review mechanism exhibits a lag in accurately identifying highly disguised "soft advertisements" (advertorials) and covert commercial posts, leading to artificial prosperity and diluting the platform's long-accumulated credibility.

5.2 Merchant-Level Issues

Traffic Backlash and Brand Equity Erosion: Some cross-border beauty merchants adopt myopic "volume-pushing" marketing strategies, employing internet water armies (astroturfing) for brushing orders and fake reviews. This forced creation of artificial UGC not only crosses legal and ethical boundaries but also triggers fierce negative backlashes once recognized by consumers. Furthermore, over-reliance on top-tier influencers for sales, while neglecting the cultivation of genuine grassroots UGC, causes brands to fall into a traffic depletion trap characterized by "stopping investment equals stopping sales."

5.3 User-Level Issues

Decision Fatigue and Irrational Herding Effect: Faced with massive and often contradictory UGC—for instance, one piece of UGC may praise an overseas serum as an "anti-aging miracle," while another labels it a "disaster for the skin barrier"—consumers, who are at an informational disadvantage, are prone to severe decision paralysis. Some consumers lack media literacy and blindly follow distorted content featuring high likes and heavy filters, inducing impulse purchases. Given the objective restrictions of cross-border goods, which generally do not support unconditional returns or entail high return costs, such decision-making errors easily lead to long-term post-sales distress and negative emotions for consumers.

6. Conclusions and Countermeasures

6.1 Research Conclusions

This study demonstrates that in the specific consumption context of cross-border beauty, which is characterized by high information asymmetry and high perceived risk, UGC has become the core hub restructuring consumers' purchasing decisions. UGC not only bridges the cognitive gap caused by physical distance by providing hardcore objective ingredients and empirical test data, but it also dismantles the trust barriers of cross-border transactions through high-frequency community interactions and emotional resonance. High-quality, highly interactive, and highly authentic UGC can significantly enhance consumers' perceived value and effectively hedge against perceived risks, thereby facilitating the finalization of purchasing decisions.

6.2 Countermeasures and Suggestions for Optimization

Platform Dimension: Restructuring the Trust Mechanism and Technological Moat. Platforms must upgrade their content identification algorithmic systems, applying Natural Language Processing (NLP) technology to accurately intercept "soft advertisements" and "astroturfing posts." They should mandate a commercial promotion interest declaration mechanism. Concurrently, platforms should optimize search weights to allocate more long-tail traffic exposure to low-like but highly in-depth, genuine grassroots reviews, thereby breaking the algorithmic homogenization filter bubble.

Merchant Dimension: Constructing a Healthy "Pyramid" UGC Matrix. Cross-border beauty brands should abandon traffic-centric dogmas and pivot towards refined word-of-mouth equity management. At the apex, professional Professionally Generated Content (PGC) or top-tier Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) should be utilized to establish brand tone and core ingredient endorsements. In the middle tier, KOCs should be deployed for authentic evaluations and scenario segmentation across different skin types. At the foundational tier, through comprehensive post-sales services and incentive mechanisms, brands should guide genuine buyers to accumulate spontaneous UGC, forming sustainable word-of-mouth compound interest.

User Dimension: Enhancing Media Literacy and Rational Decision-Making Capabilities. When evaluating cross-border

beauty UGC, consumers need to cultivate a cross-verification mindset and focus on objective evaluations with a critical perspective. They should clearly define their own skin-type requirements and detach from the emotional value brought by deceptive filters, thereby reducing the trial-and-error costs and rights-defense dilemmas associated with bandwagon purchases.

References

- [1] Wu, Wei. Research on the impact of user cultural perception on consumer decision-making in the context of cross-border e-commerce [J]. *National Circulation Economy*, 2026, (9): 13-16.
- [2] Xu, Jingxin. Research on the impact of short videos and live streaming sales on cross-border e-commerce exports [J]. *Business Exhibition Economy*, 2026, (8): 66-69.
- [3] Liu, Lisi. Research on the development strategies and market competitive advantages of cross-border e-commerce platforms [J]. *Market Modernization*, 2025, (24): 54-56.
- [4] Li, Guangyu, Han, Qiufen, Ren, Yi, et al. Research on the application and optimization path of metadiscourse in cross-border e-commerce live streaming [J]. *Comparative Study of Cultural Innovation*, 2025, 9(30): 23-26.
- [5] Liu X,Dawod Y A. When Technology Signals Trust: Blockchain vs. Traditional Cues in Cross-Border Cosmetic E-Commerce[J].*Information*,2025,16 (10):913-913.
- [6] Wang L,Liu Y,Liu X, et al. The influence of informative and normative features of social e-commerce UGC on consumers' purchase intention: the moderating effect of persuasive resistance[J].*Behaviour & Information Technology*,2025,44 (16):4065-4081.
- [7] Yang J,Lee S S. Caught in the Act: Natural recognition of deepfake UGC ad, expectancy violation and consumer responses[J].*Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*,2026,88 104535-104535.
- [8] Yongtao L,Zhiqiang M. Evaluating Digital Empowerment Models for Multi-Homing Content Creators on UGC Platforms[J].*Journal of Theoretical and Applied Electronic Commerce Research*,2025,20 (3):230-230.
- [9] M Y,V. K L,L. K W, et al. From search to support: the role of UGC in stigmatized consumers' mental health treatment journeys[J].*Journal of Services Marketing*,2025,39 (3):165-179.
- [10] Ma, Guangze, Du, Zhaoying. Dilemmas and mitigation of short video copyright protection under the UGC model [J]. *Future and Development*, 2024, 48(1): 34-38.
- [11] Jia Y,Feng H,Feng H, et al. "Customer Reviews or Vlogger Reviews?" The Impact of Cross-Platform UGC on the Sales of Experiential Products on E-Commerce Platforms[J].*Journal of Theoretical and Applied Electronic Commerce Research*,2023,18 (3):1257-1257.
- [12] Chen, Silong, Chen, Xiaoxing, Zhong, Xiaojun. Research on the cosmetics market in the context of cross-border e-commerce: A case study of "Q Cosmetics" [J]. *Modern Business*, 2022, (30): 6-8.
- [13] Smriti M,Alok T,Akanchha S. Modeling the Factors affecting Online Purchase Intention: The Mediating Effect of Consumer's Attitude towards User- Generated Content[J].*Journal of Marketing Communications*,2022,28 (7):725-744.
- [14] Jingyi D. The Impact of Positive Purchase-Centered UGC on Audience's Purchase Intention: Roles of Tie Strength, Benign Envy and Purchase Type[J].*Journal of Internet Commerce*,2022,21 (4):393-417.
- [15] Chen, Daozhi, Yue, Liya. Research on the impact of User-Generated Content (UGC) on users' consumer behavior: A case study of Xiaohongshu [J]. *Science and Technology for Development*, 2021, 17(9): 1753-1758.
- [16] Zhou, Jingting. Research on the differentiated marketing strategy of MN cosmetics cross-border e-commerce company [J]. *Investment and Cooperation*, 2021, (7): 64-65.
- [17] Wang, Youqing. Challenges and countermeasures facing the development of China's cosmetics cross-border e-commerce [J]. *Practice in Foreign Economic Relations and Trade*, 2019, (4): 34-37.
- [18] Chu, Xu. A brief analysis of the factors influencing consumers' online purchase intentions from the perspective of cross-border e-commerce [J]. *Chinese and Foreign Entrepreneurs*, 2017, (34): 76-77.

Author Bio

(1) Xinni Lai (2006–), Female, Han ethnicity, Hometown: Jieyang City, Guangdong Province. Undergraduate, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies South China Business College. Major: Digital and Media Technology.

(2) Qiqi Zhang (2005–), Male, Han Ethnicity, Xingning City, Guangdong Province, Undergraduate, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies South China Business College, Major:Internet of Things Engineering.

(3) Rui Li (2001–), Female, Han ethnicity, Hometown: Hubei Province. Master's degree, Full-time Lecturer in Digital Media, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies South China Business College. Research Interests/Specializations: UI Visual Interface Design, Interaction Design, and New Media Art.

(4) Xiaotong Zhong (2004–), Female, Han ethnicity, Hometown: Heyuan City, Guangdong Province. Undergraduate,

Guangdong University of Foreign Studies South China Business College. Major: Digital and Media Technology.

(5) Linglin Xiao (2005–), Female, Han ethnicity, Hometown: Yingde City, Guangdong Province. Undergraduate, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies South China Business College. Major: Economics.

(6) Tingxiong Xu (2005–), Male, Han ethnicity, Hometown: Foshan City, Guangdong Province. Undergraduate, Guangzhou College of Technology and Business. Major: Cross-Border E-Commerce.

(7) Yilin Li (2005–), Female, Han ethnicity, Hometown: Meizhou City, Guangdong Province. Undergraduate, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies South China Business College. Major: Digital and Media Technology.