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THE DYNAMICS OF USER-GENERATED CONTENT ON TIKTOK SOCIAL MEDIA IN RELATION TO BRAND TRUST AND UNIVERSITY CHOICE DECISIONS: THE ROLE OF BRAND AUTHENTICITY AS A MEDIATING VARIABLE

STUDI SOSIOLOGI SASTRA TERHADAP RONGGENG DUKUH PARUK DAN TRADISI DONBRET-SINTREN ERETAN: HEGEMONI PATRIARKAL, KESAKRALAN, DAN KOMODIFIKASI BUDAYA

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the influence of *User-Generated Content* (UGC) on the TikTok platform on *Brand Trust* and the Decision to Choose a Higher Education Institution, with *Brand Authenticity* serving as the mediating variable. This study employs an explanatory quantitative approach. Data were collected via an online survey of a purposive sample comprising prospective students or first-year students (aged 17–21) who actively use TikTok and interact with university-related content. Data analysis was conducted on a minimum of 250 respondents using *Partial Least Squares* (PLS)-based *Structural Equation Modelling* (SEM) with the aid of SmartPLS software. The results of *the outer model* testing showed that all indicators used in the questionnaire were valid and reliable. Hypothesis testing confirmed that *User-Generated Content* has a direct, positive and significant effect on *Brand Authenticity*, *Brand Trust* and Choice Decision. Furthermore, *Brand Authenticity* also has a positive and significant effect on *Brand Trust* and Choice Decision. Mediation analysis revealed that *Brand Authenticity* acts as a partial mediator, bridging the influence of UGC on *Brand Trust* and Choice Decisions. This study confirms that user-generated organic content on TikTok is a crucial instrument in building trust and influencing the academic decisions of Generation Z. Higher education brands that are authentically represented through UGC will find it easier to win the trust and preference of prospective students.

Keywords : User-Generated Content, TikTok, Brand Trust, Choice Decisions, Brand Authenticity, Higher Education.

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji pengaruh User-Generated Content (UGC) di platform TikTok terhadap Kepercayaan Merek dan Keputusan Memilih Perguruan Tinggi, dengan Keaslian Merek (Brand Authenticity) sebagai variabel mediasi. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kuantitatif

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eksplanatori. Data dikumpulkan melalui survei daring terhadap sampel bertujuan (purposive sample) yang terdiri dari calon mahasiswa atau mahasiswa tahun pertama (berusia 17–21 tahun) yang aktif menggunakan TikTok dan berinteraksi dengan konten terkait universitas. Analisis data dilakukan terhadap minimal 250 responden menggunakan Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) berbasis Partial Least Squares (PLS) dengan bantuan perangkat lunak SmartPLS. Hasil pengujian model luar (outer model) menunjukkan bahwa seluruh indikator yang digunakan dalam kuesioner valid dan reliabel. Pengujian hipotesis mengonfirmasi bahwa User-Generated Content memiliki pengaruh langsung, positif, dan signifikan terhadap Keaslian Merek, Kepercayaan Merek, dan Keputusan Memilih. Selain itu, Keaslian Merek juga berpengaruh positif dan signifikan terhadap Kepercayaan Merek dan Keputusan Memilih. Analisis mediasi mengungkapkan bahwa Keaslian Merek berperan sebagai mediator parsial yang menjembatani pengaruh UGC terhadap Kepercayaan Merek dan Keputusan Memilih. Penelitian ini menegaskan bahwa konten organik yang dibuat oleh pengguna di TikTok merupakan instrumen krusial dalam membangun kepercayaan dan memengaruhi keputusan akademik Generasi Z. Institusi pendidikan tinggi yang direpresentasikan secara autentik melalui UGC akan lebih mudah mendapatkan kepercayaan dan preferensi dari calon mahasiswa.

Kata Kunci : Konten Buatan Pengguna, TikTok, Kepercayaan Merek, Keputusan Pemilihan, Autentisitas Merek, Pendidikan Tinggi.

1. INTRODUCTION

The higher education marketing landscape has undergone a fundamental transformation over the past decade. In an increasingly competitive digital age, higher education institutions can no longer rely solely on conventional promotional methods such as billboards, leaflets or visits to secondary schools. Generation Z, which is currently the primary target market for higher education, is known as *'digital natives'* who are highly sceptical of traditional advertising (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2016). They are more likely to seek out information that is perceived as honest, transparent and comes from fellow users. This phenomenon positions social media, particularly short-form video platforms such as TikTok, as a crucial tool in their academic decision-making process.

TikTok has evolved from a mere entertainment app into a dominant visual search engine for young people. **User-generated content (UGC)** is a key source of information that can influence the perceptions of prospective students. Unlike *Firm-Created Content* (FCC), which is professionally produced by institutions, UGC on TikTok such as 'Day in My Life' videos as a student, unfiltered campus tours, and honest reviews of facilities offers an 'insider's' perspective that cannot be found on official university websites. According to research by Smith et al. (2012), supported by more recent research by Zollo et al. (2020), modern consumers regard UGC as more credible and trustworthy because it is perceived as lacking an aggressive sales agenda.

The main challenge facing higher education institutions today is how to build **brand trust** amidst a flood of information. Trust is the cornerstone of the education services industry, given that the decision to choose a higher education institution involves a significant financial investment and has long-term implications for an individual's career. (Delgado, Ballester & Luis Munuera, Alemán, 2001) state that brand trust arises when consumers feel confident in a brand's reliability and good intentions. In the context of TikTok, when a prospective student views organic content from current students showcasing positive experiences, this directly validates the institution's marketing promises, which ultimately strengthens *brand trust*.

However, the relationship between UGC and trust is not quite that simple. There is a psychological element that bridges the two: **brand authenticity**. Authenticity has become the new currency in social media marketing. Morhart et al. (2015) define brand authenticity as consumers' perception of a brand's honesty and consistency in upholding its values. On TikTok, the algorithm, which prioritises 'raw' and unpolished content, actually reinforces the impression of authenticity. When a university is represented through unfiltered UGC including its human side, the challenges of

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studying, and genuine social interactions prospective students perceive the institution as 'real' and not putting on a front. Fritz et al. (2017) emphasise that authenticity is a strong predictor of long-term customer trust.

The role *of brand authenticity* as a mediating variable is particularly relevant because UGC content that is too 'staged' or appears to be a disguised advertisement can actually undermine trust. Research by Fernandes & Oliveira (2024) shows that if the audience perceives content to have lost its authenticity, the positive impact of UGC is negated. It is therefore important to investigate the extent to which this perception of authenticity mediates the influence of TikTok content on trust and, ultimately, on **the decision to choose** a university. The decision to choose a university is a complex cognitive process involving information seeking, evaluation of alternatives, and final conviction (Kotler & Keller, 2016) In Indonesia, the trend of using TikTok for university branding is widespread. Many public and private universities have begun utilising student *influencers* or campus ambassadors to create content. However, there remains *a research gap* regarding how the mechanics of this short-form video content specifically influence psychological aspects such as authenticity within the Indonesian higher education sector. Most previous research has focused primarily on the retail, tourism or *fashion* industries (Goh et al., 2013; Kim & Johnson, 2016). Higher education has the unique characteristic of being *a high-involvement service*, where prospective consumers go to great lengths to avoid the risk of making the wrong decision.

Furthermore, international literature indicates a shift in consumer behaviour in the post-pandemic era. The desire to connect emotionally with institutions has grown stronger. (Lou & Yuan, 2018) explain that content on social media that is both informative and entertaining (*infotainment*) contributes significantly to brand awareness and purchase intent. In an educational context, this 'purchase intention' translates as the decision to enrol and join. If UGC on TikTok is able to authentically convey a university's identity, prospective students will feel an emotional connection that fosters trust.

Theoretically, this study is based on *Source Credibility Theory*, which states that the effectiveness of a message depends on the expertise and honesty of the information source (Hovland et al., 1953; as applied to a modern context by Flanagin & Metzger, 2008). Students who create content on TikTok are regarded as highly credible sources because they experience the reality on the ground first-hand. When this source credibility aligns with the perception of brand authenticity , the barrier of scepticism among prospective students can be broken down, paving the way for the formation of strong brand trust.

Based on the above discussion, there is an urgent need to understand the dynamics between User-Generated Content on TikTok, Brand Authenticity, Brand Trust, and decisions regarding the choice of higher education institution. This study aims to fill this gap in the literature by testing whether brand authenticity is indeed the key factor behind TikTok content's effectiveness in influencing Generation Z's academic choices. With a better understanding, higher education institutions can design communication strategies that are not only visually appealing but also possess the integrity and authenticity needed to win over prospective students amidst increasingly fierce global competition.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a **quantitative** approach with an **explanatory** *research* design. According to **Sugiyono (2019)**, explanatory research aims to explain causal relationships or influences between variables through hypothesis testing. In this context, the study will examine the effect of *User-Generated Content* (UGC) on *Brand Trust* and Choice Decisions, with *Brand Authenticity* acting as a mediating variable.

The population for this study consists of prospective students or first-year students who actively use TikTok and are exposed to content regarding a specific university.

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Sampling Technique: *Non-probability sampling* was used, employing a **purposive sampling** method. The sampling criteria included individuals aged 17–21 who *follow* or frequently interact with hashtags related to higher education on TikTok.

Sample Size: Referring to **Hair et al. (2014)**, for analysis using *Structural Equation Modelling* (SEM), the ideal sample size is 5 to 10 times the number of research indicators. If there are 25 indicators, the minimum sample size is 250 respondents.

This study involved four main variables measured using **a 1–5 Likert scale** (Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree).

User-Generated Content (X): Measured through the dimensions of information quality, relevance, and the appeal of content created by other users (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2016).

Brand Authenticity (M – Mediator): Measured based on the dimensions of brand continuity, credibility, integrity and symbolism (Morhart et al., 2015).

Brand **Trust (Y1):** Measured through the dimensions of *brand reliability* and *brand intentions* (Delgado-Ballester & Munuera-Alemán, 2001).

Purchase Decision (Y2): Measured through the stages of need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, and purchase/registration decision (Kotler & Keller, 2016).

Data were collected via **an online survey** using a structured questionnaire distributed through social media platforms. The questionnaire was designed with closed-ended questions to ensure consistency in respondents' answers. Prior to widespread distribution, **an instrument validation test** will be conducted, comprising:

Validity Test: Using *Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation* or *Factor Analysis*.

Reliability Test: Using *Cronbach's Alpha* with a minimum threshold of 0.70 (Ghozali, 2018).

Data analysis was carried out using variance-based **Structural Equation Modelling (SEM)**, namely **Partial Least Squares (PLS)**, with the aid of SmartPLS software. **Henseler et al. (2015)** state that PLS-SEM is highly effective for testing complex models with mediating variables and sample sizes that do not necessarily have to be normally distributed.

The stages of analysis included:

1. **Evaluation of the Outer Model (Measurement Model):** Testing *convergent validity* (*factor loadings* > 0.7 and AVE > 0.5) and *discriminant validity* (Fornell-Larcker criterion).
2. **Inner Model Evaluation (Structural Model):** Examining the R^2 value to measure the model's predictive power and the Q^2 value for predictive relevance.
3. **Hypothesis Testing and Mediation:** Using the *bootstrapping* technique to examine *T-statistics* and *P-values*. The mediating role *of Brand Authenticity* will be analysed using the *Specific Indirect Effects* method.

3. RESULT AND DISCCUSSION

A. Convergent Validity

1. Outer Loadings

Table 1. Outer Loadings

	X_User-Generated Content	M_Brand Authenticity	Y1_Brand Trust	Y2_Purchase Decision
X.1	0.888			
X.2	0.916			
X.3	0.899			
X.4	0.846			
X.5	0.850			
X.6	0.899			
M.1		0.745		
M.2		0.903		

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M.3		0.810		
M.4		0.873		
M.5		0.892		
M.6		0.855		
M.7		0.886		
M.8		0.810		
Y1.1			0.853	
Y1.2			0.908	
Y1.3			0.870	
Y1.4			0.849	
Y2.1				0.793
Y2.2				0.830
Y2.3				0.851
Y2.4				0.847
Y2.5				0.834
Y2.6				0.819
Y2.7				0.781

Source: Output results from Smart PLS Version 4.0, 2026

The results of the instrument validity test, based on an analysis *of outer loadings,* show that all indicators have *factor loadings* above 0.7. These values indicate that each indicator has a strong correlation with the latent construct it measures. Consequently, all indicators in the questionnaire are deemed valid and suitable for use as representations of the variables in the study.

B. Discriminant Validity

1. Cross-Loading

Table 2. Cross-Loading

	X_User-Generated Content	M_Brand Authenticity	Y1_Brand Trust	Y2_Purchase Decision
X.1	0.888	0.604	0.736	0.611
X.2	0.916	0.610	0.684	0.652
X.3	0.899	0.646	0.832	0.685
X.4	0.846	0.547	0.576	0.660
X.5	0.850	0.639	0.687	0.628
X.6	0.899	0.594	0.662	0.642
M.1	0.538	0.745	0.607	0.586
M.2	0.597	0.903	0.713	0.730
M.3	0.637	0.810	0.687	0.690
M.4	0.607	0.873	0.653	0.710
M.5	0.604	0.892	0.650	0.687
M.6	0.492	0.855	0.542	0.634
M.7	0.600	0.886	0.672	0.715
M.8	0.575	0.810	0.653	0.638
Y1.1	0.629	0.783	0.853	0.612
Y1.2	0.813	0.666	0.908	0.635
Y1.3	0.733	0.573	0.870	0.565
Y1.4	0.567	0.640	0.849	0.517
Y2.1	0.617	0.606	0.492	0.793
Y2.2	0.687	0.763	0.706	0.830
Y2.3	0.629	0.608	0.505	0.851
Y2.4	0.517	0.648	0.494	0.847

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Y2.5	0.570	0.661	0.497	0.834
Y2.6	0.596	0.666	0.617	0.819
Y2.7	0.581	0.613	0.524	0.781

Source: Output results from Smart PLS Version 4.0, 2026

The results of the discriminant validity test, conducted via *cross-loading* analysis, show that each indicator has the highest loading value on the latent construct in question compared with other constructs. These findings confirm that each indicator more accurately reflects the specific variable being measured, thereby meeting the criteria for discriminant validity. Consequently, it can be concluded that all indicators used in this study demonstrate good discriminant validity for each of their respective constructs.

2. Fornell-Larcker Test

Table 3. Fornell-Larcker

	User-Generated Content	Brand Authenticity	Brand Trust	Purchase Decision
User-Generated Content	0.883			
Brand Authenticity	0.688	0.848		
Brand Trust	0.793	0.766	0.870	
The Decision to Choose	0.732	0.797	0.672	0.823

Source: Output results from Smart PLS Version 4.0, 2026

Based on Table 3, it can be seen that the factor loadings of each indicator on the latent construct being measured are higher than the loadings on other latent constructs. This finding indicates that each latent construct meets the criteria for adequate discriminant validity ( ). In other words, each indicator better reflects the construct in question compared to other constructs; it can therefore be concluded that the measurement model is effective in distinguishing between the measured constructs.

3. HTMT (*Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio of Correlations*)

Table 5. HTMT (*Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio of Correlations*)

	User-Generated Content	Brand Authenticity	Brand Trust	The Decision to Choose
User-Generated Content				
Brand Authenticity	0.726			
Brand Trust	0.853	0.831		
Purchasing Decision	0.782	0.850	0.731	

Source: Output results from Smart PLS Version 4.0, 2026

Based on Table 5, the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) values for each pair of variables are below the threshold of 0.90. This indicates that each construct exhibits an adequate level of discrimination from the other constructs, thereby meeting the criteria for discriminant validity based on the HTMT approach. Consequently, the variance explained by a construct is greater for its own indicators than for the indicators of other constructs. It can therefore be concluded that discriminant validity, as measured by the HTMT in this study, has been satisfactorily met.

4. Average Variance Extracted (AVE)

Table 4. Average Variance Extracted (AVE)

	Average variance extracted (AVE)
User-Generated Content	0.780
Brand Authenticity	0.719
Brand Trust	0.758
Purchase Decision	0.677

Source: Output from Smart PLS Version 4.0, 2026

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Based on Table 4, the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values for all variables in this study are above 0.5. Consequently, all variables in the model meet the criteria for good discriminant validity, indicating that the measurement instruments used in this study are of sufficient quality to represent the intended constructs.

C. Reliability

1. Composite Reliability

Table 6. Composite Reliability

	Composite reliability (rho_c)
User-Generated Content	0.955
Brand Authenticity	0.953
Brand Trust	0.926
Purchase Decision	0.936

Source: Output results from Smart PLS Version 4.0, 2026

Based on the data presented in Table 6, all constructs in this study exhibited *composite reliability* values exceeding 0.70. These values indicate that each construct meets the required criteria for internal reliability. It can therefore be concluded that all variables in this research model possess a high level of reliability, reflecting strong internal consistency amongst the indicators in measuring their respective constructs.

2. Cronbach's Alpha

Table 7. *Cronbach's Alpha*

	Cronbach's alpha
User-Generated Content	0.944
Brand Authenticity	0.944
Brand Trust	0.893
Purchase Decision	0.920

Source: Output results from Smart PLS Version 4.0, 2026

Based on the data presented in Table 7, it can be seen that the Cronbach's Alpha values for all variables in this study are above 0.70. These values indicate that each construct meets the established criteria for internal reliability, whereby a variable is considered reliable if its Cronbach's Alpha value exceeds the threshold of 0.70. It can therefore be concluded that all variables in this study possess a high level of reliability, reflecting the consistency and stability of measurement across items within each construct.

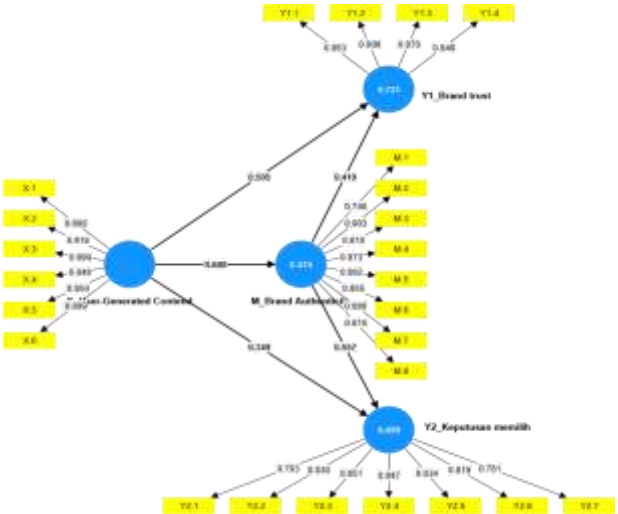

Figure 2. *Structural Model: R-Square and F-Square*
Source: Output from Smart PLS Version 4.0, 2026

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D. R-Square

Table 8. *R-Square*

	R-square	Adjusted R-Square
Brand Authenticity	0.474	0.469
Brand Trust	0.721	0.717
Purchase Decision	0.699	0.695

Source: Output from Smart PLS Version 3.0, 2025

Table 8 shows that the R-Square value for the Brand Authenticity variable falls into the moderate category, as it ranges from 0.469, which is >0.50 and <0.75. It can therefore be concluded that, in terms of partial influence, the independent variable (User-Generated Content) accounts for 47.4 per cent of the variation in the Brand Authenticity variable. Meanwhile, 52.6 per cent is influenced by other variables not tested in this study.

The R-squared value for the Brand Trust variable falls into the 'Moderate' category, as it stands at 0.721—which is greater than 0.50 and less than 0.75. It can therefore be concluded that, taken together, the independent variables (User-Generated Content and Brand Authenticity) account for 72.1 per cent of the variation in the Brand Trust variable. Meanwhile, 27.9% is influenced by other variables not tested in this study.

The R-Square value for the Sales variable falls into the Moderate category as it ranges from 0.699, which is greater than 0.50 and less than 0.75. It is therefore concluded that, in a simultaneous , the combined influence of the independent variables (User-Generated Content and Brand Authenticity) accounts for 69.9% of the variation in the Choice Decision variable. Meanwhile, 30.1 per cent is influenced by other variables not tested in this study.

E. F-Square

Table 9. *F-Square*

	User-Generated Content	**Brand Authenticity**	**Brand Trust**	**The Decision to Choose**
User-Generated Content		0.900	0.482	0.213
Brand Authenticity			0.331	0.543
Brand Trust				
The Decision to Choose				

Source: Output results from Smart PLS Version 4.0, 2026

The results in Table 9 show that the effect size of User-Generated Content on Brand Authenticity is 0.900; as this falls within the effect size category of >0.35, it can be concluded that it has a strong influence. The effect size of User-Generated Content on Brand Trust is 0.482; as this also falls within the effect size category of >0.35, it can be concluded that it has a strong influence. The effect size of User-Generated Content on Purchase Decision is 0.213; as this falls within the effect size range of 0.15 to 0.35, it can be concluded that it has a moderate influence. The effect size of Brand Authenticity on Brand Trust is 0.331; as this falls within the effect size range of 0.15 to 0.35, it can be concluded that it has a moderate influence. The effect size of Brand Authenticity on Purchase Decision is 0.543; as this falls within the effect size range of >0.35, it can be concluded that it has a strong influence.

F. Q-Square

To validate the model's predictive ability. Used when endogenous variables have a reflective measurement model. A Q-Square value is considered good if it is
>0; the higher the value, the better the model is deemed to be. This test is assessed based on the R-Square value calculated as follows:

$Q^2 = 1 - (1 - R_1^2)(1 - R_2^2)(1 - R_3^2)\ldots (1 - Rp(^2)$

$Q^2 = 1 - (1 - 0.474)(1 - 0.721)(1 - 0.699) = 1 - (0.526)(0.279)(0.301) = 1 - 0.044$

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Q2 = 0.956

The Q-Square value calculated was 0.956, or 95.6 per cent; it can therefore be concluded that the predictive value of this study is quite good, with Q-Square > 0, and that the model used can explain 95.6 per cent of the information in the research data. The remaining 4.4 per cent can be explained by factors outside the scope of this study that have not yet been tested.

G. Goodness of Fit (GoF)

This is used to assess whether the model's overall data is valid or not (a combination of the outer and inner models). This test yields a value ranging from 0 to 1; a GoF value of 0.1 is categorised as low, 0.25 as moderate, and 0.36 as high. The GoF test results are as follows:

GoF $= \sqrt{AVE} \times R^2$

GoF of M $= \sqrt{0.719} \times 0.474 = 0.584$ GoF of Y1 $= \sqrt{0.758} \times 0.721 = 0.739$ GoF of Y2 $= \sqrt{0.677} \times 0.699 = 0.688$

The results of the Goodness of Fit calculation show that the GoF value for the Brand Authenticity variable is 0.584; it is concluded that this is a high GoF value as it is greater than 0.36. Meanwhile, the GoF value for the Brand Trust variable was 0.739, which indicates a high GoF value as it is greater than 0.36. The GoF value for the Purchase Decision variable was 0.688, which also indicates a high GoF value as it is greater than 0.36. Consequently, this study concludes that the Goodness of Fit values for the Brand Authenticity, Brand Trust and Purchase Decision variables are high.

The researcher then conducted a further test using the SRMR (Standardised Root Mean Residual). It is expected that an SRMR value of < 0.08 indicates a good model fit; however, if the value is > 0.08 and < 0.1, the model is still considered acceptable.

Table 10. SRMR Model

	Saturated model	Estimated model
SRMR	0.076	0.076
d_ULS	1.864	1.886
d_G	2.801	2.804
Chi-square	1507.239	1508.932
NFI	0.644	0.643

Source: Results processed using Smart-PLS Version 4.0, 2026

Based on these calculations, it is evident that the SRMR value for the Saturated Model is < 0.08, specifically 0.076 < 0.08, whilst that for the Estimated Model is < 0.08, specifically 0.076 > 0.08. Based on the above calculations, the results of the model testing in this study indicate that the model is still acceptable, i.e. it has a good goodness of fit or Model Fit.

H. Partial Hypothesis Testing

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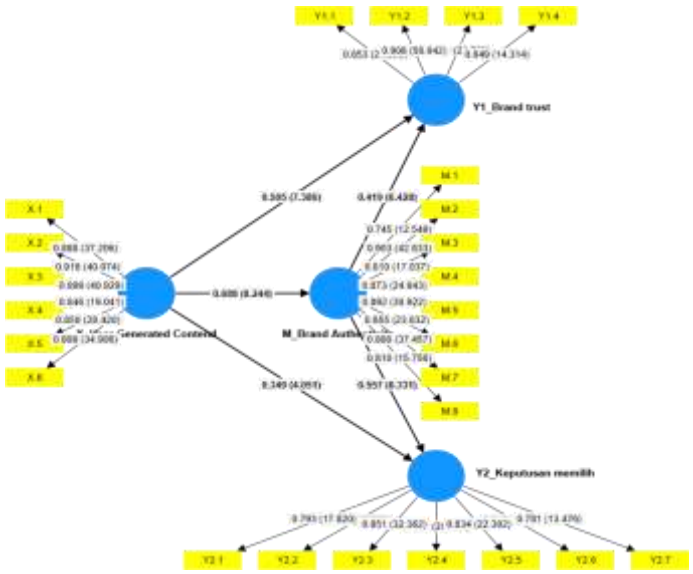

Figu re 3. Coefficient and Hypothesis Tests

Source: Results processed using Smart-PLS Version 4.0, 2026

Table 11. Partial Hypotheses

Hypotheses		Original sample (O)	T-statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P-values	Category
1	User-Generated Content → Brand Authenticity	0.688	8.244	0.000	Accepted
2	User-Generated Content → Brand Trust	0.505	7,386	0.000	Accepted
3	User-Generated Content → Decision-Making	0.349	4.051	0.000	Accepted
4	Brand Authenticity → Brand Trust	0.419	6.428	0.000	Accepted
5	Brand Authenticity -> Choice Decision	0.557	6.331	0.000	Accepted

Source: Results processed using Smart-PLS Version 4.0, 2026

Based on the results of the hypothesis tests above, the path coefficients, T-statistics and P-values have a significance level for the path coefficients as detailed in the following explanation:

1.Test of H1: The Effect of User-Generated Content on Brand Authenticity

It is noted that the sample mean for the path coefficient from the test of Brand Authenticity by User-Generated Content has a positive direction, namely 0.688, which means that User-Generated Content has a positive influence on Brand Authenticity; and if User-Generated Content increases by one unit, Brand Authenticity will increase by 0.688 units. Meanwhile, the T-statistic value of 8.244 is greater than the T-value of 1.9, and the P-value of 0.000 is less than 0.05; therefore, H1 is accepted and H0 is rejected. User-Generated Content has been proven to have a significant influence on Brand Authenticity. Conceptually, these findings can be explained by the characteristics of UGC, which generally stems from users' real-life experiences, is unscripted, and tends to be more objective. When prospective consumers access reviews, testimonials, photos or videos shared by other users, they tend to view this information as more credible than marketing communications issued by the company. This finding is also consistent with social proof theory, which states that individuals have a tendency to trust and follow information originating from fellow users. Therefore, the more positive and

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consistent the UGC content is, the higher consumers' perception of a brand's authenticity will be, as reflected in the assessment that the brand is transparent, honest, and consistent with the reality experienced by consumers.

2. Hypothesis H2: The Effect of User-Generated Content on Brand Trust

It is noted that the sample mean for the path coefficient of the Brand Trust test based on User-Generated Content has a positive direction, namely 0.505, which means that User-Generated Content has a positive influence on Brand Trust; and if User-Generated Content increases by one unit, Brand Trust will increase by 0.505 units. Meanwhile, the T-statistic value of 7.386 is greater than the T-value of 1.9, and the P-value of 0.000 is less than 0.05; therefore, H2 is accepted and H0 is rejected. User-Generated Content has been proven to have a significant influence on Brand Trust. Theoretically, these findings can be explained by the tendency for consumers to place greater trust in the experiences of other users than in promotional messages officially communicated by the company. Information originating from users is considered more objective as it is perceived to be free from commercial interests. When UGC is able to present tangible evidence regarding service quality, positive experiences, and user satisfaction levels, consumer uncertainty is reduced. From the perspective of relational marketing theory, trust is formed when consumers receive information that is consistent, credible, and verifiable. Therefore, the more UGC content that provides positive and consistent experiences, the stronger the level of consumer trust in a brand will be.

3. Hypothesis H3: The Effect of User-Generated Content on Choice Decisions

It is found that the sample mean of the path coefficient for the 'Selection Decision' test result, based on User-Generated Content, has a positive direction of 0.349, which means that User-Generated Content has a positive influence on the Selection Decision; and if User-Generated Content increases by one unit, the Selection Decision will increase by 0.349 units. Meanwhile, the T-statistic value of 4.051 is greater than the T-value of 1.9, and the P-value of 0.000 is less than 0.05; consequently, H3 is accepted and H0 is rejected. User-Generated Content is proven to have a significant influence on the Choice Decision. Conceptually, this influence can be explained by the role of UGC as a relevant source of information in the consumer decision-making process. Before making a choice, consumers generally seek information and evaluate the various available alternatives. In this context, UGC functions as a form of social proof that provides empirical evidence based on the real-life experiences of other users, thereby helping prospective consumers to understand the quality of a product or service more objectively. Furthermore, when the information conveyed through UGC is positive, consistent and relevant to consumers' needs, their level of confidence in making a decision increases. This is consistent with consumer behaviour models that identify the information evaluation stage as a crucial phase before a final decision is made. Therefore, the higher the quality and quantity of available UGC, the greater its influence in encouraging consumers to choose a particular product or service.

4. Hypothesis H4: The Effect of Brand Authenticity on Brand Trust

It is found that the sample mean for the path coefficient of the Brand Trust test result, as influenced by Brand Authenticity, has a positive direction of 0.419, which means that the Brand Authenticity coefficient has a positive influence on Brand Trust; and if the Brand Authenticity coefficient increases by one unit, Brand Trust will increase by 0.419 units. Meanwhile, the T-statistic value of 6.428 is greater than the critical T-value of 1.9, and the P-value of 0.000 is less than 0.05; consequently, H4 is accepted and H0 is rejected. Brand Authenticity is proven to have a significant influence on Brand Trust. Consumers tend to place greater trust in brands that are perceived as honest, consistent, and possessing a clear identity. Brand Authenticity reflects the alignment between the values communicated by the brand and the reality perceived by consumers. When a brand is able to demonstrate consistency between the promises it makes and the actual performance perceived by consumers, consumers will feel a sense of certainty and security in their interactions with that brand. In such circumstances, trust is established because consumers are convinced that the brand is not misleading and is capable of meeting the expectations that have been built up. Therefore, the higher the level of brand authenticity, the stronger the level of brand trust held by consumers.

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5. Hypothesis H5: The Effect of Brand Authenticity on Choice Decisions

It is noted that the sample mean for the path coefficient in the test of 'Purchase Decision by Brand Authenticity' has a positive direction, namely 0.557, which means that Brand Authenticity has a positive influence on Purchase Decision; and if Brand Authenticity increases by one unit, Purchase Decision will increase by 0.557 units. Meanwhile, the T-statistic value of 6.331 is greater than the critical T-value of 1.9, and the P-value of 0.000 is less than 0.05; therefore, H5 is accepted and H0 is rejected. Brand Authenticity is proven to have a significant influence on Choice Decision. This finding can be explained by the role of Brand Authenticity in reducing the perceived risk felt by consumers. Consumers tend to prefer brands that are perceived as authentic because they are regarded as possessing integrity, honesty and consistency in communicating and delivering on their promised values. In the context of decision-making, particularly regarding educational services which have long-term implications, prospective consumers will be more cautious and will consider aspects of credibility in depth. Brand Authenticity serves as a signal indicating that the brand is trustworthy and capable of delivering an experience that meets expectations. Therefore, the higher the level of brand authenticity, the greater the tendency for consumers to choose that brand.

I. Testing Partial Hypotheses

Table 12. Mediation Hypotheses

Hypotheses		Original sample (O)	T-statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P-values	Category
1	User-Generated Content → Brand Authenticity → Brand Trust	0.288	4.621	0.000	Accepted
2	User-Generated Content → Brand Authenticity → Purchase Decision	0.383	5.636	0.000	Accepted

Source: Results processed using Smart-PLS Version 3, 2025

1. Test H6: The Effect of User-Generated Content on Brand Trust via Brand Authenticity

It is noted that the original sample for the path coefficient in the test of User-Generated Content on Brand Trust via Brand Authenticity has a positive direction coefficient of 0.228, which means that a one-unit increase in User-Generated Content on Brand Authenticity will result in an increase of 0.228 units in Brand Trust. Meanwhile, the T-statistic value of 4.621 is greater than the T-value of 1.9, and the P-value of 0.000 is less than 0.05; consequently, H6 is accepted and H0 is rejected. This means that User-Generated Content is proven to have a significant effect on Brand Trust, mediated by Brand Authenticity. Based on the research findings, it can be concluded that the analytical model is "Partial Mediation", as User-Generated Content directly influences Brand Trust and indirectly influences Brand Trust via Brand Authenticity. In the initial stage, UGC plays a role in building perceptions of brand authenticity through the presentation of real user experiences, which are deemed more credible and objective. Once this perception of authenticity has been established, consumers then develop trust in the brand. In other words, consumers do not automatically trust a brand simply because of the presence of UGC, but first evaluate whether the content reflects the brand's authenticity and consistency. If this perception is positive, trust in the brand will be established. Therefore, the higher the quality and credibility of the UGC that reflects the brand's authenticity, the stronger its influence in enhancing Brand Trust through the mediating role of Brand Authenticity.

2. Hypothesis H7: The Effect of User-Generated Content on Choice Decisions via Brand Authenticity

It is noted that the original sample for the path coefficient from the test of User-Generated Content on Choice Decisions via Brand Authenticity has a positive direction coefficient of 0.383, which means that a one-unit increase in User-Generated Content regarding Brand Authenticity will impact Choice Decisions, resulting in an increase of 0.383 units. Meanwhile, the T-statistic value of 5.630 is greater than the T-value of 1.9, and the P-value of 0.000 is less than 0.05; therefore, H7 is

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accepted and H0 is rejected. This means that User-Generated Content has been proven to have a significant influence on the Choice Decision; the analytical model is "Partial Mediation", as User-Generated Content directly influences the Choice Decision and indirectly influences the Choice Decision via the mediation of Brand Authenticity. UGC serves as a source of information based on real-life experiences that helps prospective consumers assess a brand's authenticity. Through exposure to user-generated content, consumers first form perceptions regarding brand authenticity, which reflects the alignment between the brand's identity, values, and the reality it offers. In the decision-making process, consumers do not simply make a choice based solely on the volume of available content, but rather evaluate the quality and credibility of that content. If UGC is deemed capable of consistently representing a brand's authenticity, consumer confidence will increase and drive the formation of purchasing decisions. Therefore, the higher the quality of UGC in reflecting brand authenticity, the greater its influence in enhancing purchasing decisions through this mediating mechanism.

4. CONCLUSION

1. **User-Generated Content has a positive and significant impact on Brand Authenticity.**
   This indicates that the higher the quality and quantity of content generated by users, the stronger consumers' perception of the brand's authenticity. Content that is genuine, objective and unstaged enhances consumers' assessment that the brand is honest, transparent and consistent with the reality it presents.
2. **User-Generated Content has a positive and significant impact on Brand Trust.**
   These findings suggest that information derived from other users' experiences can boost consumer trust in a brand. User-generated content (UGC) plays a role in reducing uncertainty and increasing consumer confidence by providing credible and trustworthy information.
3. **User-Generated Content has a positive and significant influence on purchasing decisions.**
   This demonstrates that UGC is a key factor in the consumer decision-making process. The more relevant, consistent and positive the information conveyed through UGC, the greater its influence in encouraging consumers to make a choice.
4. **Brand Authenticity has a positive and significant influence on Brand Trust.**
   These findings demonstrate that brand authenticity is a key factor in building consumer trust. Brands that are perceived as consistent, honest, and true to their promises are more likely to gain consumers' trust.
5. **Brand authenticity has a positive and significant influence on purchasing decisions.**
   This indicates that consumers tend to choose brands perceived as authentic because they are deemed credible and capable of meeting expectations. Brand authenticity also plays a role in reducing perceived risk in decision-making.
6. **Brand Authenticity is able to partially mediate the influence of User-Generated Content on Brand Trust.**
   This means that, as well as having a direct influence, UGC also influences brand trust by shaping perceptions of a brand's authenticity. Consumers first assess a brand's authenticity based on UGC before ultimately building trust in that brand.
7. **Brand authenticity is able to partially mediate the influence of User-Generated Content on purchasing decisions.**
   This indicates that UGC not only directly influences consumer decisions but also does so by enhancing perceptions of brand authenticity. The higher the perceived level of authenticity, the greater the likelihood that consumers will choose that brand.

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