

Exploring the Impact of Source Credibility on Coffee Purchase Intention Through Attitude Toward UGC: A Study on Xiaohongshu

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Abstract

This research explores the influence of source characteristics (credibility, expertise, and homophily) of user-generated content (UGC) on consumer attitudes and purchase intentions on the Xiaohongshu, a leading social media and e-commerce platform in China. Data were collected from 384 respondents aged 18-44 who had previously viewed coffee-related user-generated content, employing a purposive sampling approach. The data were analyzed using a structural equation modeling (SEM) approach with SmartPLS 4.0. The results demonstrate that consumer attitudes towards UGC are highly influenced by source credibility, expertise, and homophily, leading to favorable purchase intentions. Specifically, source credibility exerted the most significant influence on attitude, succeeded by source expertise and homophily. And the associations between these source characteristics and purchasing intention were mediated by attitudes. The findings suggest that the source characteristics of UGC are critical in influencing consumer behavior, which has significant implications for content creators and social media marketers. Enhancing the trustworthiness, expertise, and homophily of UGC can positively influence consumer attitudes and drive purchase intentions for brands. This study enhances the comprehension of consumer behavior within social media platforms, specifically regarding the coffee sector, and broadens the applicability of the Uses and Gratifications (UGT) and Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) theories.

Keywords: social media, Xiaohongshu, source credibility, purchase intention, user-generated content

1 Introduction

Social media platforms (SMPs) have fundamentally reshaped the way of consumers interact with information, form attitudes, and make decisions. In the past, consumers were passive recipients of information; however, they are now active participants in shaping the purchasing behaviours of others. This transformation has had profound effects across industries worldwide (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Platforms like Xiaohongshu, also known as Rednote, have become essential to the decision-making process for Chinese consumers. Approximately 37% of users rely on product recommendations and reviews from the platform to guide their purchasing decisions (Tocanan, 2024). Sharing UGC, such as personal consumption experiences, is a common activity on the platform (Hu et al., 2019; Lin et al., 2020).

User-generated content (UGC), encompassing reviews, ratings, photographs, and videos, has emerged as the cornerstone of customer involvement on social media. This material significantly shapes customer attitudes and purchasing choices owing to its authenticity and peer impact (Roma & Aloini, 2019). Prior research indicates that the reliability of content sources markedly affects consumers' perceptions and purchasing inclinations (Hovland et al., 1953; Ohanian, 1990; Muda & Hamzah, 2021). On SMPs, such as Xiaohongshu, over 95% of the content is generated by ordinary users rather than influencers. This has led to increasing scrutiny of how such content gains credibility and persuades others (Yan et al., 2018; Dwivedi et al., 2021; Khan, 2022; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020).

The rapid growth of the Chinese coffee market provides important context for exploring how UGC influences consumer behavior. Statistical data indicates that China's coffee consumption is growing at an annual rate of 15%, far outpacing the global average of 2% (People.cn, 2022). Against this backdrop, Xiaohongshu has had a significant impact on consumers' coffee purchasing decisions (Xiaohongshu, 2022). The "2022 Beverage Industry User Insights Report" from

Xiaohongshu reveals that 80.5% of users rely on the platform for beverage-related recommendations. However, there is still a dearth of study on the precise function of UGC in the coffee sector, especially with relation to customer behavior, despite the market's explosive growth (Ibrahim et al., 2022). Therefore, the way UGC influences coffee purchase intentions on platforms like Xiaohongshu remains a crucial issue that warrants further exploration.

Source credibility is a key driver influencing consumer attitudes (Chang & Wu, 2014; Filieri, 2015). Previous research on source credibility has primarily focused on influencer-generated content or celebrity endorsements. These studies generally found that dimensions such as source expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness, and homophily all have a beneficial impact on consumers' propensity to engage in purchasing (Muda & Hamzah, 2021; Todd & Melancon, 2018).

Existing studies consistently affirm that source credibility significantly affects consumers' attitudes and purchase intentions (Febriane et al., 2023; Hu et al., 2019), most research has focused on marketing outcomes, particularly influencer or celebrity-generated content, while studies on user-generated content (UGC) by ordinary users remain relatively sparse (Qian & Mao, 2023). Additionally, there is still disagreement over the relative significance of the different aspects of source trustworthiness, even though their influence on consumer behavior is recognized (Ismagilova et al., 2020). This inconsistency may arise from differences in platform characteristics, user demographics, and content diversity (Febriane et al., 2023).

In particular, research on source credibility in specific industries, such as the coffee sector, where the use of UGC is increasingly prevalent, is still limited (Yoon & Kim, 2016). On platforms like Xiaohongshu, UGC is often generated by ordinary consumers' personal experiences, rather than prominent influencers. This raises a crucial question: how do users perceive and trust content in the absence of an established reputation? This study seeks to address this gap by analysing the impact of the three dimensions of UGC source credibility—Source Trustworthiness, Source Expertise, and Source Homophily—on consumers' attitudes towards coffee-related UGC and their purchase intentions on the Xiaohongshu platform. Furthermore, it examines the mediator's function of consumer attitudes in the correlation between these aspects of source credibility and purchase intentions.

This research will enhance both theoretical and practical comprehension. Theoretically, it will deepen our knowledge of how UGC affects consumer behavior in certain industries, like the coffee industry, and offer fresh perspectives on how source trustworthiness shapes consumer sentiment on sites like Xiaohongshu. Practically, this study will offer valuable insights for UGC creators, brand marketers, and platform operators, helping them enhance the credibility of UGC, thereby fostering consumer trust and improving purchase intentions.

2. Review of Literature and Development of Hypotheses

2.1 Source Credibility Theory

Source Credibility Theory provides a significant paradigm for comprehending how consumers interpret and assess the reliability of information sources. The theory, initially suggested by Hovland et al. (1953), seeks to elucidate the reasons behind the varying persuasiveness of different sources and the impact of source characteristics on communication efficacy. This theory posits that source credibility consists of two primary dimensions: expertise and trustworthiness. The dimensions serve as the main criteria employed by audiences to evaluate the trustworthiness of a source (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Manfredo & Bright, 1991). Later, the theory was extended to include additional dimensions, such as attractiveness and homophily, to further enrich its applicability (Ohanian, 1990; Filieri et al., 2018).

Source credibility directly influences audiences' attitudes toward the information, their judgment of its reliability, and their subsequent behavioral intentions. Consumers are more inclined to respond positively to information and incorporate it into their purchasing decisions when they perceive the source as credible, expert, and relatable (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Manfredo & Bright, 1991; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020).

In the context of SMPs, Source Credibility Theory has been widely applied to explain consumer evaluations and behavioral responses to UGC. Research has shown that source credibility is an important factor influencing consumers' attitudes and trust toward UGC (Ukpabi & Karjaluto, 2018). When consumers encounter large amounts of UGC on social media, they often view source credibility as a key consideration in judging the value of the information (Dou et al., 2012), relying on this dimension to assess the reliability and practical value of UGC (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Mauri & Minazzi, 2013). Studies further indicate that when consumers view the source of UGC as credible, their trust in the information increases, leading to a higher likelihood of taking action based on it (Aladwani & Dwivedi, 2018; Khan, 2022).

Source credibility has been categorized into several dimensions to address its complexity in the context of social media and UGC. Ohanian's (1990) three-dimensional model, encompassing credibility, expertise, and attractiveness, serves as a widely utilised framework for assessing the credibility of celebrity endorsements and social media influencers. These dimensions have been widely applied in consumer behavior research and have been shown to significantly impact purchase intentions and brand attitudes. However, in the context of UGC from ordinary users, Hovland's (1953) model of expertise and trustworthiness is more applicable, with some studies suggesting the inclusion of homophily as a

further dimension (Filiari et al., 2018). This extension makes the Source Credibility Theory better reflect the complex behavioral patterns of ordinary consumers on social media.

Previous research has established the significance of source credibility in social media contexts; however, much of the literature primarily addresses celebrity endorsements or social media influencers (Febriane et al., 2023; Muda & Hamzah, 2021; Todd & Melancon, 2018). Research regarding source credibility in UGC for ordinary users is still relatively sparse (Qian & Mao, 2023). The evaluation of content credibility by consumers on platforms primarily driven by UGC, such as Xiaohongshu, and the subsequent impact of these evaluations on purchase intentions remain underexplored areas of research. Additionally, discrepancies exist in the research concerning the relative significance of various dimensions of source credibility (e.g., trustworthiness, expertise, homophily) and their functions in different contexts (Febriane et al., 2023; Hu et al., 2019). The identified differences present significant opportunities for further research.

2.2 Source Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness constitutes a fundamental aspect of Source Credibility Theory, indicating the extent to which an information source is regarded as honest, fair, and reliable (Erdogan, 1999). On SMPs, trustworthiness is a critical factor in the consumer decision-making process (Ukpabi & Karjaluto, 2018). Previous research indicates that consumers are more inclined to integrate information into their purchasing decisions when they view the source as trustworthy (Hill et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2020). Content exhibits greater trustworthiness enhances consumers' perception of the authenticity of the information, thereby reducing uncertainty caused by information asymmetry (Aladwani & Dwivedi, 2018; Filiari et al., 2018). This suggests that UGC with higher trustworthiness is more probable to affect consumers' attitudes and promote purchase intentions.

Nevertheless, certain research (e.g., Onofrei et al., 2022; Rungruangjit, 2022) have not identified a direct correlation between source trustworthiness and purchase intentions, potentially due to the omission of mediating elements such as attitudes. This research establishes a complete mediation mechanism of attitudinal factors, thereby clarifying the divergent manifestations within this causal pathway, and advancing an innovative analytical lens for interpreting the reciprocal dynamics between source trustworthiness and consumer decision-making intentions. Specifically, source trustworthiness influences consumers' attitudes, which then impacts purchasing decisions.

In the consumer decision-making process, trustworthiness enhances the acceptance and credibility of information. Research has shown that trustworthiness not only affects consumers' acceptance of the information but also directly impacts their attitudes toward the product or service (Hwang et al., 2018). A notable correlation exists between consumers' judgment of UGC's trustworthiness and attitudes in the digital realm. Trustworthiness helps reduce perceived risk for consumers. When consumers consider the information source reliable, they have higher confidence in the authenticity of UGC content, thus reducing uncertainty in their purchase decisions (Verma & Dewani, 2020). For instance, studies have found that UGC credibility on the TripAdvisor platform positively impacts consumers' attitudes toward this content (Ayeh et al., 2013). Furthermore, Choi and Lee (2017) validated the positive effects of UGC credibility on emotional and cognitive trust through online experiments in social media contexts.

In studies focusing on specific product categories, the impact of trustworthiness on consumer attitudes has also been validated. For instance, studies on electronic products (Wu & Lin, 2017) and cosmetic products (Febriane et al., 2023) revealed a significant positive correlation between trustworthiness of UGC and consumers' attitudinal responses. This indicates that when individuals view the content source as fair, honest, and trustworthy, they are likely to develop more favourable attitudes toward the UGC.

In the context of the Xiaohongshu platform, when consumers browse coffee-related UGC, a perception of fairness and honesty in the content creator can lead to the formation of more favourable attitudes towards that content. Such attitudes not only contribute to the effectiveness of content dissemination but also strengthen consumers' trust in other content on the platform. This study puts forth the following hypothesis:

H1: Trustworthiness has a positive effect on consumers' attitudes toward coffee-related UGC on the Xiaohongshu platform.

2.3 Source Expertise

Source expertise pertains to the way consumers view the knowledge, skills, or professional abilities that an information source holds within a specific domain (Ohanian, 1990). Expertise significantly influences consumer decision-making, as individuals are inclined to trust sources regarded as possessing specialized knowledge and experience in a specific domain (Al-Emadi & Yahia, 2020). As a signal, expertise not only enhances the persuasiveness of the information but also makes it easier for consumers to accept such information as a basis for decision-making (Erdogan, 1999; Verma & Dewani, 2020).

In social media research, expertise has been shown to be a key factor influencing consumers' acceptance and attitude toward information. Muda & Hamzah (2021) pointed out that consumers are likely to regard an information source as

an expert as long as they believe the source has sufficient knowledge about the relevant product. Rungruangjit (2022) found in a study on broadcasting live online shopping platforms in China that the expertise of the information source significantly affects consumers' purchase intentions through the mediator of parasocial interaction. Additionally, studies have indicated that the expertise of the source on social e-commerce platforms plays a crucial role in establishing trust, which further impacts purchase intentions (Hu et al., 2019).

The impact of expertise is notably substantial within particular consumer segments. Millennials, who typically gather product and service information via the internet and SMPs (Cooley & Parks-Yancy, 2019), frequently consider the expertise of social media influencers as a significant element in choosing their sources of information (Shin & Choi, 2021). Consequently, customers are inclined to trust individuals regarded as specialists in a specific field and display a more favorable disposition toward their material (Braunsberger & Munch, 1998). This competency enhances both the authority of the information and the trustworthiness of the information source (Febriane et al., 2023).

On SMPs, particularly those dominated by UGC like Xiaohongshu, expertise in the source can significantly impact consumer attitudes toward UGC. When consumers recognise a content creator's knowledge, they are more inclined to accept the information conveyed by that creator and show a more positive attitude. This positive attitude not only increases the perceived relevance of the content but also enhances the effectiveness of information dissemination.

Thus, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H2: Expertise has a positive effect on consumers' attitudes toward coffee-related UGC on the Xiaohongshu platform.

2.4 Source Homophily

Homophily, originating from McGuire's (1968) model, pertains to consumers' judgements of the similarity between themselves and other users regarding wants, preferences, expectations, and lifestyle while browsing UGC (Filieri et al., 2018). Consumers are more likely to accept the information when they see the source as possessing similarly traits, leading them to believe that the information corresponds with their tastes and wants. Similarity not only helps enhance the credibility of the information but also influences consumers' attitudes and purchase decisions.

Research has shown that, in contrast to celebrities, consumers frequently show more attraction to highly credible content shared by ordinary users (Schouten et al., 2019). This is because the lifestyles of ordinary users are closer to consumers', increasing their sense of involvement and belonging with UGC, which helps them make more confident purchase decisions (Wang, 2021). Homophily also affects the depth of consumers' information processing. Studies have found that when consumers perceive higher similarity with the information source, they are more willing to engage deeply in processing the information (Onofrei et al., 2022).

When consumers recognise a significant similarity with the information source (such as a reviewer or content creator) in terms of interests, attitudes, and preferences, recommendations from these sources are more persuasive (Ismagilova et al., 2020; Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). This perceived homophily not only increases consumers' trust in the source of information but also correlates positively with the overall trust in the platform (Shan, 2016).

On SMPs, individuals generally place their trust in those whose interests and values resonate with their own because such similarity reduces uncertainty and resistance during the information acceptance process (Cheng et al., 2021; Silvia, 2005). Research indicates that when consumers recognize similarities between their own consumerism and values and those of vloggers, they are more inclined to establish an emotional bond and cultivate a favorable perception of the vlogger (Ladhari et al., 2020).

Additionally, according to social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), individuals often evaluate their own attitudes in relation to those of others. When they perceive a high degree of similarity in interests, values, or experiences with the information source, they are more inclined to believe that their needs and preferences are also similar (Filieri et al., 2018). The observed homophily enhances consumers' trust in the source and fosters a more favourable attitude towards UGC (Ruef et al., 2003; Onofrei et al., 2022).

Empirical studies have validated the beneficial influence of source homophily on consumers' attitudes. For instance, Ismagilova et al. (2020) discovered that when consumers recognise greater similarity with the information source, their trust in UGC significantly increases. On the Xiaohongshu platform, especially for coffee-related UGC, homophily may play an important role. When consumers browse coffee-related UGC, they often focus on the content creator's consumption preferences, lifestyle, and the fit with their own needs. Consumers are more inclined to cultivate a favorable perception of the content when they see that the content creator's interests coincide with their own.

Thus, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H3: Homophily has a positive effect on consumers' attitudes toward coffee-related UGC on the Xiaohongshu platform.

2.5 Attitude toward UGC and Purchase Intention

The attitudes of consumers are essential in forecasting their intentions to make purchases. According to Ajzen (1989), attitude refers to an individual's overall evaluation tendency toward something, which manifests as either a favorable or unfavorable disposition. In the context of social media, consumers' attitudes toward User-Generated Content (UGC) refer to their overall evaluation of the content shared, often characterized as a positive or negative emotional tendency (Fu et al., 2015). As a key element in digital marketing, consumers' attitudes toward UGC are often considered a leading factor that influences their behavioral intentions, particularly in the purchase decision-making process (Yusuf et al., 2018).

Compared to Marketer-Generated Content (MGC), UGC is more attractive to consumers due to its authenticity, relevance, and interactivity. UGC is more likely to evoke emotional resonance and trust from consumers, thereby enhancing their acceptance of the content and further driving their purchase intentions (Goh et al., 2013). Consumers generally view UGC as more closely aligned with their personal needs, especially because feedback from other users allows them to access more genuine and relevant content, leading to more informed purchase decisions.

Research has shown that a positive attitude greatly enhances the chances of consumers accepting information and incorporating it into their purchasing decisions (Zhang et al., 2019; Mir et al., 2013). In this process, attitude typically exerts a direct influence on behavioral intentions, particularly on purchase intention (Mosavi & Ghaedi, 2012; Jain, 2020). From the analysis presented, the subsequent hypothesis can be formulated:

H4: Consumers' attitudes toward UGC have a positive effect on coffee purchase intention.

In previous studies, attitude has been widely used to predict behavioral intentions and has been found to be a key antecedent factor for purchase intention (Zhang et al., 2019; Mir et al., 2013). According to Fishbein and Ajzen (1975), attitude is one of the strongest predictors of behavioral intentions and plays a controlling and mediating role (Yusuf et al., 2018). In conjunction with the S-O-R model, the attitudes of consumers towards UGC, which represent fundamental emotional and cognitive reactions, not only have a direct impact on purchase intentions but also serve as a crucial mediating factor between the stimulus (the three dimensions of source trustworthiness) and the response (purchase intention) (Pop et al., 2023). For example, research shows that consumers' attitudes toward blog recommendations mediate the relationship within information credibility, perceived benefits, and purchase intention (Ing & Ming, 2018); similarly, attitudes toward UGC mediate the connection among perceived credibility and intention to act (Mathur et al., 2021). Furthermore, Pop et al. (2023) discovered how online reviews indirectly drive purchase intention by shaping consumers' attitudes, further confirming the universality of attitude as a mediating variable in UGC contexts. Thus, attitude is an indispensable core variable in understanding consumer behavior.

Specifically, attitude toward UGC serves as a mediating factor among the three core components of source credibility and purchasing intent. First, trustworthiness enhances customers' confidence and perception of the authenticity of user-generated material, increasing the likelihood of a favorable attitude and subsequently boosting purchasing intention (Hwang et al., 2018). Second, expertise, by enhancing the authority and persuasiveness of UGC content, helps consumers more easily accept and identify with the publisher's viewpoint, which significantly strengthens consumers' attitudes toward UGC (Hu et al., 2019). Finally, the concept of homophily emphasises the shared interests, values, and needs between consumers and publishers, fostering emotional connections and a feeling of belonging. This dynamic increases the likelihood of consumers developing a favourable attitude towards the content, which in turn affects their intention to make a purchase (Ayeh et al., 2013). In light of the preceding analysis, the subsequent hypotheses are proposed:

H5a: Consumers' attitude toward UGC mediates the relationship between source trustworthiness and purchase intention.

H5b: Consumers' attitude toward UGC mediates the relationship between source expertise and purchase intention.

H5c: Consumers' attitude toward UGC mediates the relationship between source homophily and purchase intention.

In summary, this study constructs a conceptual framework for the research based on Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) and the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model (as shown in Figure 1). Uses and Gratifications Theory provides the theoretical foundation for exploring how consumers obtain information and satisfy needs from UGC on SMPs, emphasizing the role of consumer initiative (Katz et al., 1973). Meanwhile, the S-O-R model provides a structural framework for understanding the connection between source credibility, attitude toward UGC, and coffee purchase intention (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). This model posits that the dimensions of source trustworthiness, expertise and homophily, as external stimuli (Stimulus), influence consumers' emotional and cognitive states (i.e., attitudes toward UGC, Organism), thereby triggering the final behavioral response (coffee purchase intention, Response). By integrating UGT and the S-O-R model, this study provides a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms through which UGC influences consumer behavior on SMPs.

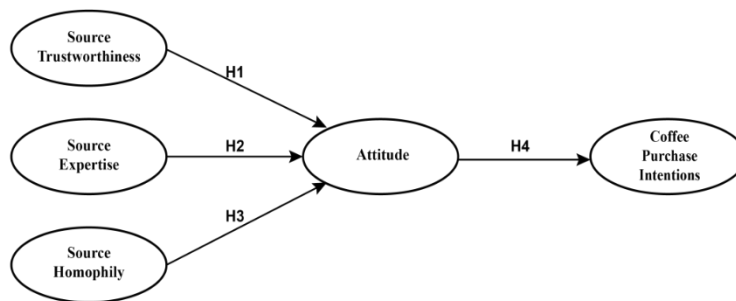


Figure 1. Research framework

3. Research Method and Data Analysis

The study's data collection took place in Beijing, a city renowned as a representative of coffee consumption in China and often referred to as the "City of Coffee Innovation" (Shanghai Creative Industries Promotion Association et al., 2024). The target population for this study comprised Xiaohongshu users aged 18 to 44 who had previously browsed or searched for coffee-related UGC. Given the lack of a clear user list, the study employed non-probability sampling to select a representative sample. The research team employed purposive sampling within self-operated communities in coffee shops to collect data.

The study utilized a self-administered questionnaire that was disseminated online through the "Wenjuanxing" platform. The cover page of the questionnaire clearly explained the research objectives and emphasized issues related to data protection and privacy, ensuring that respondents' personal information would only be used for academic purposes. Additionally, two screening questions were included in the questionnaire: 1) Do you have a Xiaohongshu account? 2) Have you ever browsed coffee-related UGC on Xiaohongshu (content generated by non-official accounts)? These screening questions ensured that the respondents met the characteristics of the target population.

A pilot test was conducted to ensure the reliability and validity of the scale before the formal distribution of the questionnaire, resulting in the collection of 30 responses. The pilot test results enabled the team to enhance the questionnaire content, minimising potential misunderstandings and ensuring data accuracy.

The study used scales developed in prior research to measure the variables. Specifically, source trustworthiness was measured using items based on the works of Ohanian (1990) and Rungruangjit (2022), the expertise scale was adapted from Muda & Hamzah (2021), the homophily scale referenced Onofrei et al. (2022). The attitude toward UGC scale was inspired by Aych et al. (2013) and Muda & Hamzah (2021), and the purchase intention scale was derived from Chakraborty (2019), Lin & Shen (2023), and Zhao et al. (2020). All measurement items were evaluated utilizing a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). After screening and verification, a total of 384 valid questionnaires were gathered for subsequent data analysis.

3.1 Sample Characteristics

First, we analyzed the demographic data of those surveyed using SPSS software. Table 1 indicates that, of the 384 respondents, 57.6% were female and 42.4% were male. This gender distribution aligns with the user demographic structure of the Xiaohongshu platform and the gender ratio of coffee consumers. Regarding age distribution, the largest group of participants was aged between 26 and 30, accounting for 39.3%. Overall, individuals aged between 18 and 35 made up the majority of the sample, indicating the preeminent position of young consumers in the coffee market. Regarding educational attainment, approximately 46.6% of respondents held a bachelor's degree, while 36.5% had a college degree or below. In summary, the sample population of this study is primarily composed of young, female, and highly educated individuals, which is highly consistent with the characteristics of users on SMPs and coffee consumers.

Table 1. Respondent Profile

	Characteristic	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	163	42.4
	Female	221	57.6
Age	18-25 years old	67	17.4
	26-30 years old	151	39.3
	31-35 years old	87	22.7
	36-40 years old	52	13.5
	41-44years old	27	7
Highest Level of Education	High School and less	31	8.1
	Diploma/certificate	140	36.5
	Bachelor's degree	179	46.6
	Graduate degree and higher	34	8.9

3.2 Measurement Model Assessment

The analysis of the data for this study was conducted using SmartPLS 4.0, applying Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) path analysis to evaluate the measurement model and the structural model. PLS-SEM is adept at managing complex models, multiple latent variables, non-normal data, and providing accurate mediation effect analysis (Hair et al., 2011; Henseler et al., 2014). Therefore, PLS-SEM was considered the ideal tool for conducting this study.

Table 2. Construct validity

Constructs	Items	Factor Loadings	Cronbach's Alpha	CR	AVE
Source Trustworthiness (ST)	ST1: I think the person who contributes coffee-related UGC on Xiaohongshu is sincere.	0.827	0.763	0.863	0.678
	ST2: I think the person who contributes coffee related UGC on Xiaohongshu is trustworthy.	0.836			
	ST3: I think the person who contributes coffee related UGC on Xiaohongshu is reliable.	0.807			
Source Expertise (SE)	SE1: I think the person who provides coffee related UGC on Xiaohongshu is experienced in coffee products.	0.796	0.770	0.867	0.685
	SE2: I think the person who provides coffee related UGC on Xiaohongshu is knowledgeable in coffee products.	0.837			
	SE3: I think the person who provides coffee-related UGC on Xiaohongshu is qualified to offer coffee advice.	0.849			
Source Homophily (SH)	SH1: I think the people who post coffee-related UGC in Xiaohongshu have the similar preferences as I do.	0.845	0.786	0.875	0.700
	SH2: I think the people who post coffee-related UGC in Xiaohongshu have similar values as I do.	0.829			
	SH3: I think the people who post coffee-related UGC in Xiaohongshu have the similar experiences as I do.	0.835			
Attitude toward UGC (ATT)	ATT1: I experience positivity when watching coffee-related UGC on Xiaohongshu.	0.824	0.860	0.900	0.642
	ATT2: I feel good watching coffee-related UGC on the Xiahongshu.	0.808			
	ATT3: Viewing coffee-related UGC on Xiaohongshu is worthwhile.	0.795			
	ATT4: Compared to other platforms, I believe browsing coffee-related UGC on Xiaohongshu is wise.	0.794			
	ATT5: I like watching coffee-related UGC on the Xiaohongshu.	0.784			
Purchase Intention (PI)	PI1: Xiaohongshu coffee related UGC has changed my perception towards coffee products.	0.816	0.869	0.905	0.656
	PI2: Xiaohongshu coffee related UGC is more effective in stimulating my purchase desire compared to other platforms.	0.794			
	PI3: Xiaohongshu coffee related UGC helps me decide which products I am likely to buy.	0.804			
	PI4: I usually refer to Xiaohongshu coffee related UGC when purchasing coffee.	0.830			
	PI5: Xiaohongshu coffee related UGC guide me to consider the products that I am likely to obtain.	0.805			

Note: All loadings are statistically significant at $p < 0.001$ (two-tailed).

The evaluation of the measurement model commenced with the verification of the reliability and validity of the measuring equipment via internal consistency and convergent validity (refer to Table 2). In this study, the Cronbach's α values for all constructs ranged from 0.7 to 0.9, demonstrating good internal consistency (Hair et al., 2019). Composite reliability (CR) also exceeded 0.7 for all constructs, further confirming the high consistency among the latent variables

(Hair et al., 2017; Henseler et al., 2015). Convergent validity was used to assess the consistency of different indicators measuring the same latent variable. The factor loadings for all constructs were greater than 0.708, meeting the required standard and ensuring that each observed variable effectively explained its respective latent variable (Haji-Othman & Yusuff, 2022). Additionally, the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values for all constructs surpassed 0.5 (Hair et al., 2020), demonstrating that the latent variables successfully accounted for the variance in their observed indicators.

Additionally, we evaluated discriminant validity using the Fornell-Larcker criterion and cross-loadings to ensure the conceptual independence of the latent variables and avoid excessive overlap between them (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Ab Hamid et al., 2017; Rasoolimanesh, 2022). Table 3 presents the Fornell-Larcker correlation matrix, and the results show that the square root of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for each latent variable exceeds its correlation with other latent variables, thereby satisfying the Fornell-Larcker criterion (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Hair et al., 2014). Furthermore, the cross-loading results presented in Table 4 indicate that all observed variables have higher loadings on their respective latent variable than on any alternative latent variable (Chin, 1998; Rasoolimanesh, 2022). These results confirm that the model in this study possesses strong discriminant validity.

Moreover, we evaluated multicollinearity using the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) (Kroll & Song, 2013; Yoo et al., 2014). The VIF quantifies the degree to which regression coefficients are inflated due to collinearity among predictor variables, reflecting the strength of linear relationships and multicollinearity in the model. Results shown that the VIF values for all components in this analysis were under 3, hence verifying the absence of multicollinearity in the model (Hair et al., 2011; Kock & Lynn, 2012; Hair et al., 2019).

Table 3. Discriminant validity- Fornell-Larcker criterion

Construct	ATT	PI	SE	SH	ST
ATT	0.801				
PI	0.567	0.810			
SE	0.458	0.462	0.828		
SH	0.462	0.510	0.417	0.837	
ST	0.590	0.538	0.385	0.519	0.824

Abbreviations: ST=source trustworthiness; SE=source expertise; SH=source homophily; ATT=attitude toward UGC; PI=purchase intention.

Table 4. Discriminant validity- cross-loading

Construct	ATT	PI	SE	SH	ST
ATT1	0.824	0.459	0.356	0.396	0.493
ATT2	0.808	0.488	0.408	0.384	0.478
ATT3	0.795	0.445	0.321	0.350	0.466
ATT4	0.794	0.457	0.402	0.390	0.456
ATT5	0.784	0.417	0.343	0.328	0.469
PI1	0.463	0.816	0.359	0.428	0.445
PI2	0.457	0.794	0.386	0.380	0.404
PI3	0.470	0.804	0.342	0.393	0.460
PI4	0.485	0.830	0.405	0.452	0.477
PI5	0.416	0.805	0.379	0.410	0.385
SE1	0.369	0.397	0.796	0.337	0.275
SE2	0.373	0.359	0.837	0.337	0.343
SE3	0.395	0.391	0.849	0.360	0.336
SH1	0.401	0.450	0.350	0.845	0.458
SH2	0.384	0.439	0.332	0.829	0.436
SH3	0.374	0.389	0.365	0.835	0.406
ST1	0.476	0.467	0.331	0.464	0.827
ST2	0.506	0.472	0.312	0.430	0.836
ST3	0.475	0.389	0.308	0.388	0.807

Abbreviations: ST=source trustworthiness; SE=source expertise; SH=source homophily; ATT=attitude toward UGC; PI=purchase intention.

3.3 Structure Model Assessment

Path coefficients were utilized in the assessment of the structural model to quantify the estimated impact of one variable on another, with values spanning from -1 to +1 (Hair et al., 2019). A greater absolute value of the route coefficient indicates a stronger influence between variables (Ringle et al., 2012). This study employed the Bootstrapping method

for statistical significance testing, analyzing the t-values and p-values of the path coefficients to assess the validity of the hypotheses (Gefen et al., 2000; Hair et al., 2019).

All of the path hypotheses were found to be statistically significant based on the findings of the Bootstrapping analysis (Table 5). Specifically, the path coefficient for H1 (ST→ATT) was $\beta = 0.425$, with a t-value of 9.135 and $p < 0.01$, indicating a significant positive effect of source trustworthiness on UGC attitude. The path coefficient for H2 (SE→ATT) was $\beta = 0.235$, accompanied by a t-value of 5.049 and $p < 0.01$, showing a significant effect of source expertise on UGC attitude. H3 (SH→ATT) had a path coefficient of $\beta = 0.144$, with a t-value of 3.14 and $p = 0.02$, confirming a significant influence of source homophily on UGC attitude. In the relationship between ATT→PI, the path coefficient of UGC attitude on purchase intention was $\beta = 0.567$, with a t-value of 14.802 and $p < 0.01$, supporting H4. Regarding the indirect effects, the path coefficients for H5a (ST→ATT→PI), H5b (SE→ATT→PI), and H5c (SH→ATT→PI) were $\beta = 0.241$, $\beta = 0.133$, and $\beta = 0.082$, with t-values of 7.26, 4.772, and 2.966, and p-values of < 0.01 , < 0.01 , and 0.03, respectively. This indicates that source trustworthiness, expertise, and homophily significantly influence purchase intention through attitude. The results corroborate the hypotheses of this study, affirming the causal linkages and path effects amongst the latent variables investigated.

Prior to evaluating the path coefficients, we examined the framework's explanatory capacity (R^2) and predictive power (Q^2). As shown in Table 6, the R^2 value for Attitude toward UGC is 0.424 with a Q^2 value of 0.268, and the R^2 value for Purchase Intention is 0.321 resulting in a Q^2 value of 0.207. The model accounts for 42.4% and 32.1% of the variance, respectively, indicating strong predictive efficacy for user attitude and purchase intention. Therefore, the model shows high effectiveness in explaining the relationships between latent variables and predicting outcomes.

Table 5. The path coefficients and Hypotheses testing

Hypothesis	Path	Path coefficient	Standard deviation	T-Value	P-Value	Decision
H1	ST→ATT	0.425	0.046	9.135	0.000**	Supported
H2	SE→ATT	0.235	0.046	5.049	0.000**	Supported
H3	SH→ATT	0.144	0.046	3.14	0.002	Supported
H4	ATT→PI	0.567	0.038	14.802	0.000**	Supported
H5a	ST→ATT→PI	0.241	0.033	7.26	0.000**	Supported
H5b	SE→ATT→PI	0.133	0.028	4.772	0.000**	Supported
H5c	SH→ATT→PI	0.082	0.028	2.966	0.003	Supported

Note: ST=source trustworthiness; SE=source expertise; SH=source homophily; ATT=attitude toward UGC; PI=purchase intention.

** $p < 0.001$.

Table 6. Results of R^2 and Q^2

Endogenous latent construct	R^2	Q^2
Attitude toward UGC	0.424	0.268
Purchase Intention	0.321	0.207

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study explored how source characteristics (trustworthiness, expertise, homophily) of UGC on the Xiaohongshu platform effect on consumer attitudes and their subsequent coffee purchasing intentions. The findings indicate that source trustworthiness, source expertise, and source homophily all have significant effects on attitudes, with attitude serving as a mediator between source characteristics and purchase intention. This discovery not only supports previous research but also reinforces the significance of source characteristics in shaping customer behavior within the social media context of Xiaohongshu.

Specifically, source trustworthiness had the strongest effect on consumer attitudes ($\beta = 0.425$). When users perceived the content creator as more trustworthy, they were more likely to form a positive attitude. Previous studies have confirmed this, such as Mumuni et al. (2019), who identified source trustworthiness as an important driver of consumer attitudes. Additionally, Ayeh et al. (2013) and Verma & Dewani (2020) found that trustworthy information sources significantly enhance the consumer attitudes toward UGC on social media and e-commerce platforms. The studies reinforce our findings regarding Xiaohongshu, indicating that trust enhances users' likelihood of accepting and believing in the authenticity and value of information, subsequently resulting in favourable evaluations of brands or products (Erdogan, 1999). Therefore, trustworthiness emerges as a key factor in driving changes in consumer attitudes. Brands and content creators should focus on enhancing the trustworthiness of UGC and the sincerity of content creators to improve consumer attitudes and ultimately boost purchase intention.

Source expertise also significantly influenced consumer attitudes ($\beta = 0.235$). Unlike source trustworthiness, source expertise primarily affects users' cognitive depth of the content. Previous studies indicate that consumers exhibit a higher tendency to trust content creators with relevant professional backgrounds (Lou & Yuan, 2019). This effect is particularly pronounced in industries like consumer electronics and food and beverages, with Ayeh et al. (2013) pointing out that users with experience, skills, and professional knowledge enhance the authority of the content, thereby improving consumer attitudes. While some studies argue that the expertise of content creators might not be directly apparent in UGC (Wu & Lin, 2017), Muda & Hamzah (2021) note that consumers will regard content creators as experts if they perceive them as having sufficient relevant knowledge. However, other studies have drawn different conclusions. For example, Febriane et al. (2023) found that professional knowledge did not significantly impact consumer attitudes, possibly due to platform or product category differences. Smith et al. (2012) and Roma & Aloini (2019) also suggested that expertise might not be as influential as expected in certain platforms or specific product areas, especially in information dissemination contexts where consumer attitudes might be more influenced by other factors. Therefore, while the findings of this study reflect a significant effect of source expertise, the impact might vary depending on platform characteristics, industry categories, and audience perceptions. This study further emphasizes the importance of content creators' expertise in shaping consumer attitudes on the Xiaohongshu platform. Although source expertise exerted a lesser effect on purchase intention compared to trustworthiness, it still had some influence (Miranda et al., 2021). Therefore, content creators should concentrate on boosting the knowledge and professionalism of their material or highlight their experience to enhance the content's impact. This provides practical guidance for brand marketing on Xiaohongshu, especially regarding the enhancement of content expertise.

Source homophily had a smaller effect on consumer attitudes ($\beta = 0.144$), but it was still statistically significant. Source homophily typically refers to users' sense of identification with the content creator in terms of interests, values, life experiences, or lifestyles. In this study, while the impact of source homophily on consumer attitudes was less pronounced than that of trustworthiness and expertise, it nonetheless contributed to attitude formation. Previous research has shown that source homophily can strengthen consumers' sense of identification and belonging, thus promoting a positive attitude toward UGC content (Leite & Baptista, 2022). Additionally, Cooley and Parks-Yancy (2019) noted that users show greater trust and positive attitudes toward information from individuals who are similar to themselves. The user base on Xiaohongshu exhibits clear commonalities in interests and lifestyles, which provides new insights for brand marketing. Source homophily can enhance users' emotional identification, making consumers more likely to accept recommendations from creators with similar backgrounds. Brands can collaborate with influencers or users who closely resemble their target audience, thereby improving the relatability and trustworthiness of the content.

Moreover, this study explored the mediating role of attitude in the relationship between source trustworthiness, source expertise, source homophily, and purchase intention. The results show that attitude played a significant mediating role, indicating that the trustworthiness, expertise, and homophily of UGC creators influence purchase decisions by affecting attitudes (Leite & Baptista, 2022; Miranda et al., 2021). This finding is consistent with studies on other platforms (e.g., Tripadvisor, Facebook, YouTube), highlighting the importance of attitude in SMPs (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Saleem & Ellahi, 2017; Wu & Lin, 2017; Ayeh et al., 2013). Nonetheless, certain research (e.g., Onofrei et al., 2022; Rungruangjit, 2022) failed to establish a direct correlation between source trustworthiness and purchase intention, potentially attributable to their omission of attitude as a mediating component. This study demonstrates that attitude serves as a full mediator, offering a comprehensive understanding of consumer behaviour, especially within social media contexts, where it significantly influences purchase decisions. Therefore, brands should optimize UGC content and creator characteristics to better influence consumer attitudes and enhance purchase intention.

This study makes two primary contributions. This research enhances the theoretical understanding of how user-generated content source characteristics on SMPs, such as Xiaohongshu, affect consumer attitudes and purchase intentions, while empirically confirming the mediating role of attitude in this relationship. It extends the application of UGT and S-O-R theory in the context of social platforms. This research offers guidance for brand marketing, indicating that enhancing the quality of UGC and the trustworthiness, expertise, and similarity of creators can improve consumer attitudes and purchase intentions, thereby strengthening brand influence and market performance.

This study offers significant insights into how source characteristics affect customer behavior on Xiaohongshu, however it has certain drawbacks. The study's sample primarily comprised individuals aged 18 to 44 and was confined to Beijing, potentially limiting the generalisability of the results to other regions or demographic cohorts. Future research should incorporate a wider and more diverse sample, encompassing users from various geographic locations and age groups, to improve the external validity of the findings.

This study also did not investigate potential moderating variables, including gender, age, or user expertise, which could significantly affect the relationship between source characteristics and consumer attitudes and purchase intentions. Investigating these variables may yield additional insights into the engagement of various consumer segments with

UGC. Furthermore, subsequent research could investigate platform variances, analyzing the impact of source attributes on customer behavior across various social networking platforms, such as Weibo or Douyin (TikTok). Finally, the role of information quality and brand image could be explored as additional factors that might influence consumer engagement with UGC and their purchase decisions.

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Authors contributions

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