

SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGY AND SOCIAL VALUE AS DRIVERS OF EAT CLEAN - RELATED UGC: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how social media strategy and social value drive Eat Clean - related user - generated content (UGC), while testing the mediating role of customer engagement. Drawing on the stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) framework, the model conceptualizes social media strategy (trendy content, visual appeal, useful information, and KOL/KOC endorsement) and social value (social support, social influence, social recognition, and social presence) as key stimuli that shape engagement and, in turn, UGC contribution. Survey data were collected from 259 customers who follow or interact with Eat Clean content on social media and were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS - SEM). The results show that both social media strategy and social value positively influence customer engagement, which subsequently increases customers' intentions to create and share Eat Clean - related content. Customer engagement exhibits a significant mediating effect, highlighting the central mechanism linking platform-based stimuli to participatory brand outcomes. The study extends UGC research by integrating strategic communication and social value perspectives within a single S - O - R model. Managerial implications are discussed for designing engagement - oriented social content that stimulates sustained customer content contribution for Eat Clean brands.

Keywords: Customer engagement, Eat Clean, social media strategy, social value, S-O-R model, user-generated content (UGC).

1. INTRODUCTION

Globally, non - communicable diseases (NCDs), including cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, and obesity, have become significant public health concerns. NCDs now account for approximately 75% of global deaths, underscoring their substantial impact on public health [1]. At the same time, the prevalence of overweight and obesity is rapidly increasing, not only in developed countries but also in emerging economies. This rise is largely attributed to urbanization and the widespread consumption of ultra - processed foods. In response, consumers are increasingly transitioning from industrially processed foods to healthier dietary patterns. The Eat Clean philosophy has emerged as a consumer - driven approach that emphasizes the use of natural foods, minimal processing, and the preservation of nutritional value [2].

Alongside this dietary shift, digital media have transformed how consumers access, share, and construct knowledge about healthy lifestyles. The global wellness economy reached approximately USD 6.8 trillion in 2024, up from USD 5.6 trillion in 2022. It is projected to approach USD 9.75 trillion by 2029, with a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 7.6%

from 2024 to 2029. Within this, the Healthy Eating, Nutrition & Weight Loss segment represents approximately USD 1.148 trillion, accounting for about 17% of the total market value. This underscores the pivotal role of nutrition within the broader wellness ecosystem [3]. Within this ecosystem, the act of sharing dietary habits and meal images on social media reflects how food consumption has evolved into a means of self - expression, identity construction, and social recognition [4]. As a result, user-generated content (UGC) has become a central mechanism through which Eat Clean practices are communicated, validated, and diffused within online communities.

In Vietnam, consumer behavior has undergone a significant transformation. Approximately 78% of consumers now prioritize clean food [5], 67% actively seek healthier dietary patterns, 52% have reduced their consumption of fried foods, and 41% limit their intake of sugar [6]. Around 64% prefer clean, natural, or organic products, while 78% of young consumers turn to social media to search for nutritional information, and 70% of Gen Z prioritize products derived from natural origins [7]. In the digital environment, with 78.44 million Internet users and over 73 million social media users, Eat Clean communities are thriving, attracting tens of thousands to hundreds of thousands of members [8]. However, the challenge now lies not in the volume of content, but in sustaining customer engagement (CE), ensuring that consumers not only participate temporarily but also actively interact, share, and contribute content in a sustainable manner. Despite the widespread popularity of these communities, academic research on the mechanisms driving engagement and UGC in online Eat Clean communities remains limited, highlighting an important theoretical gap.

Theoretically, customer engagement is conceptualized as a multidimensional construct that encompasses cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components. It is approached within the Stimulus - Organism - Response (S - O - R) framework as a mediating mechanism [9]. However, previous studies have predominantly applied this framework in the context of e - commerce or digital services, where stimuli are primarily functional. In contrast, lifestyle - based content ecosystems, where consumer behavior is intricately linked to personal identity and symbolic value, remain underexplored [10]. Additionally, prior research often examines social value factors in isolation, lacking integrated multidimensional models that account for the simultaneous interaction of these values in shaping consumer cognition, emotion, and behavior, both globally and in Vietnam. Furthermore, while CE is widely recognized as a central construct comprising cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components, many studies fail to address its role as a mediating mechanism that transforms digital media stimuli into advanced consumer responses, such as user - generated content (UGC) and brand love. These limitations undermine the explanatory power of models that seek to understand the formation of behavior and brand value within online communities.

To address these gaps, this study proposes a research model grounded in the S - O - R framework to examine the drivers of UGC related to Eat Clean content on social media. Accordingly, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. How do social media strategy factors influence customer engagement in the context of Eat Clean content?

RQ2. How do social value dimensions affect customer engagement within online Eat Clean communities?

RQ3. What is the role of customer engagement as a mediating mechanism between stimuli (social media strategies and social value) and user - generated content as well as brand love?

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

2.1. Conceptual framework

2.1.1. *Eat Clean Lifestyle and Online Communities*

The Eat Clean lifestyle is widely recognized as a health - conscious dietary trend that emphasizes the consumption of natural, minimally processed foods, while limiting sugar, preservatives, and artificial additives. Rather than being a restrictive diet, Eat Clean is viewed as a nutritional philosophy that promotes balanced and sustainable eating habits aimed at improving overall health and quality of life [2]. This lifestyle prioritizes fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, lean proteins, and healthy fats, while discouraging the consumption of ultra - processed foods.

Beyond its nutritional focus, Eat Clean is increasingly associated with broader lifestyle values, including health consciousness, personal identity, and sustainable consumption. Consumers who adopt this approach often align their food choices with their personal values and long - term well - being, reflecting the role of diet not only as a physiological need but also as a means of self - expression [4]

With the rapid expansion of social media, Eat Clean has transitioned into a digital lifestyle, fostering the development of large online communities where users actively share meals, recipes, and health - related experiences. These platforms facilitate interaction, social support, and knowledge exchange, thereby contributing to the creation and diffusion of user - generated content and reinforcing engagement within these communities. Influencers such as nutritionists, fitness trainers, and Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) or Key Opinion Consumers (KOCs) further shape behavioral norms and inspire participation. However, Eat Clean is sometimes misinterpreted as a rigid dietary regimen, whereas it should be understood as a flexible and balanced approach to healthy eating [11]. Extreme interpretations can lead to disordered eating behaviors, such as orthorexia nervosa [12]. Therefore, Eat Clean is best conceptualized as a sustainable lifestyle that supports long - term well - being while facilitating active interaction and content creation within digital environments.

2.1.2. *Stimulus - Organism - Response (SOR) model*

The Stimulus - Organism - Response (S - O - R) model, developed by Mehrabian and Russell in 1974, explains how external environmental stimuli influence individuals' internal psychological states, which, in turn, lead to behavioral responses [13]. Specifically, the model posits that human behavior is not simply a direct reaction to external factors but is mediated by internal cognitive and emotional processes. Within this framework, Stimulus (S) refers to environmental factors such as information, visual elements, or social interactions; Organism (O) represents internal states, including cognition, emotion, and engagement; and Response (R) denotes observable behaviors, such as approach, avoidance, or participation. The S - O - R model has been widely applied in consumer behavior and marketing research, particularly in retail and e-commerce contexts [14].

In digital and social media environments, the S - O - R framework is commonly employed to explain how online content characteristics and platform features influence users' psychological engagement and subsequent behaviors. Elements such as interactivity, visual appeal, inspiration, and social norms can act as stimuli (S), affecting users' internal engagement states (O), which, in turn, drive behavioral responses (R) such as interaction, sharing, and user-generated content [15]. This perspective underscores the applicability of the S - O - R model for examining user behavior in social media contexts, particularly in capturing the mediating role of psychological engagement in transforming external stimuli into behavioral outcomes.

2.1.3. Customer Engagement (CE)

Within the S - O - R framework, customer engagement (CE) is conceptualized as an intermediate psychological state (O), reflecting the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral investment of individuals in a brand or online community. CE is not merely characterized by repeated interactions; rather, it is a dynamic process through which customers form meaningful relationships with a brand based on their experiences and perceived value [16]. CE is expressed across three dimensions: cognitive, emotional, and behavioral, and is directly influenced by digital media stimuli [17]. High levels of CE foster behaviors that extend beyond transactions, such as sharing information, advocating for the brand, or generating content [18].

In social media contexts, CE functions as a mechanism that transforms personal experiences into social interactions, where consumers actively co - create value with the brand [15]. Thus, CE reflects not only information reception but also the depth of the connection between customers and the digital content ecosystem.

In the context of the Eat Clean lifestyle, CE emerges when users engage with aesthetically appealing, useful, and socially meaningful content on digital platforms. Such stimuli motivate users to shift from passive observation to active participation within the community [17]. Moreover, when content aligns with personal values and offers practical benefits, users are more likely to increase their interactions and maintain long - term relationships with the brand [19]. Therefore, in this study, CE is treated as a critical mediating mechanism linking digital communication strategies and social value stimuli to behavioral responses, such as user - generated content, particularly within health - oriented lifestyle communities.

2.2. Hypothesis development

2.2.1. Social media strategy

In the context of rapidly evolving digital media, social media platforms play a pivotal role in marketing and fostering relationships between businesses and customers. Through these platforms, companies not only communicate product or brand information but also create interactive environments that encourage users to exchange and share content. Social media strategy refers to the set of activities and methods employed to create, manage, and distribute content on online platforms to attract attention, stimulate engagement, and maintain long - term customer relationships [20]. Effective strategies empower consumers to actively engage in interactions, share content, and co - create brand - related material.

(1) Trendy Content (TREN) and Customer Engagement (CE)

In the realm of digital media, trendy content (TREN) functions as a key stimulus that revitalizes content value and sustains user connection by reinforcing perceptions of modernity, trust, and social relevance [21]. When content is perceived as trendy or trend - setting, it generates social pressure and a fear of missing out, which motivates users to actively engage and express their social identity [22]. This psychological dynamic directly drives interaction behaviors on digital platforms, thereby fostering user participation and making brands more relatable. Consequently, trendy content is expected to positively influence customer engagement.

H1: Trendy content (TREN) positively affects Customer Engagement (CE).

(2) Visual appeal (VISU) and Customer Engagement (CE)

Visual appeal (VISU) is a critical aesthetic stimulus that captures immediate attention and creates strong first impressions in social media environments. High - quality, visually appealing imagery enhances visual attraction, evokes emotional and sensory responses, and encourages user participation in online interactions [23]. Design characteristics, including color, layout, and visual harmony, influence brand perception and emotional responses while

serving as rapid cues that help users evaluate content credibility and quality [24]. Additionally, salient visual stimuli attract attention, extend viewing time, and enhance memory and information processing [25]. These cognitive and emotional responses effectively stimulate behavioral outcomes on social media platforms, encouraging users to increase interaction behaviors - such as liking, sharing, and contributing user-generated content (UGC) - thereby strengthening the relationship between customers and brands. Accordingly, visual appeal is expected to positively influence customer engagement (CE).

H2: Visual appeal (VISU) positively affects Customer Engagement (CE).

(3) Usefulness of information (USEF) and Customer Engagement (CE)

The usefulness of information (USEF) is a key extrinsic driver of user acceptance, originally defined as a core component of advertising value that reduces search costs and supports decision-making [26]. Building on this, within social media and electronic word-of-mouth settings, useful and credible content increases information adoption and encourages interactive behaviors such as sharing and commenting [27]. Empirical studies further confirm that useful information, attracts attention, and promotes engagement [28], thereby actively shaping user participation and interaction within digital platforms. Thus, the usefulness of information is expected to positively influence customer engagement (CE).

H3: Usefulness of Information (USEF) positively affects Customer Engagement (CE).

(4) KOL/KOC Endorsement (KOCL) and Customer Engagement (CE)

KOL/KOC endorsement is a powerful stimulus that reduces the trust gap between brands and consumers, as users perceive influencers as more authentic and relatable than traditional advertising, thereby fostering trust and emotional connection [29]. The credibility of influencers plays a critical role in driving user response, as consumers are more likely to engage with content they perceive as credible and trustworthy. Empirical studies confirm that attributes such as authenticity, relevance, information value, credibility, and attractiveness enhance parasocial relationships, brand perception, and behavioral intentions [30]. In social media contexts, influencer credibility further strengthens trust, perceived value, and long-term engagement [31], while increasing user interaction and participation with endorsed content [32]. Accordingly, KOL/KOC endorsement is expected to positively influence customer engagement (CE).

H4: KOL/KOC endorsement (KOLC) positively affects Customer Engagement (CE).

2.2.2. Social value

Social value refers to the relational benefits individuals derive from their interactions within online communities [33]. According to the uses and gratifications theory, users engage with media to satisfy various needs, including social interaction and self-expression, thus positioning social value as a significant driver of active participation [34]. Furthermore, Social identity theory posits that individuals define themselves through group membership. When users identify with the EatClean community, they are more likely to engage in order to maintain and express this identity [35]. Within the Stimulus - Organism - Response framework, social value serves as a stimulus, influenced by elements such as social support, social influence, social recognition, and social presence. These elements shape users' cognitive and emotional responses, ultimately fostering enhanced customer engagement [13].

(1) Social Support (SUPP) and Customer Engagement (CE)

Social support refers to the material and psychological resources individuals receive from their social networks, including emotional, informational, instrumental, and appraisal support. These forms of support foster a sense of being valued, cared for, and connected [36]. From a psychological perspective, social support functions as a buffering mechanism that reduces

stress and enhances well - being, particularly when aligned with individual needs [37]. In digital environments, online social support extends to social media interactions, where users exchange experiences, advice, and encouragement, thereby strengthening their sense of belonging and connection within communities [38]. Within the broader concept of social value, social exchange theory posits that individuals reciprocate relational benefits, such as support and recognition, through increased interaction. Grounded in this perspective and interpreted within S - O - R framework, social support serves as a key social stimulus that influences users' cognitive and emotional states, leading to stronger engagement. Empirical evidence further confirms that social support enhances trust, co - creation, participation, and customer engagement in online communities [33]. Thus, it is expected that social support will positively influence customer engagement (CE).

H5: Social Support (SUPP) positively affects Customer Engagement (CE).

(2) Social Influence (INFL) and Customer Engagement (CE)

Social influence refers to the process by which individuals adjust their thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors based on the presence or actions of others [39]. It operates through mechanisms such as compliance, identification, and internalization, reflecting various levels of influence adoption [40]. Social influence can be categorized into normative influence, driven by the desire for social acceptance, and informational influence, based on reliance on others as credible information sources [41]. In social media environments, social influence is amplified through visible interaction cues, such as likes, comments, and shares, which serve as social signals guiding user perceptions and behaviors [27]. These platforms facilitate the coexistence of normative and informational influences, where users conform to community norms while also relying on others' opinions to make decisions, thereby increasing interaction and participation [33]. Empirical studies further confirm that social influence plays a critical role in shaping user engagement and behavioral responses in online communities and eWOM contexts [42]. Accordingly, social influence is expected to positively influence customer engagement (CE).

H6: Social Influence (INFL) positively affects Customer Engagement (CE).

(3) Social recognition (REG) and Customer Engagement (CE)

Psychologically, the need for recognition is linked to self - esteem and social status, as outlined in Maslow's hierarchy of needs [43]. From a social exchange perspective, recognition acts as a symbolic reward that motivates continued participation and strengthens social ties [44]. Particularly in social media contexts, recognition is manifested through likes, comments, shares, or other feedback, which serve as social rewards that reinforce self - worth and encourage further interaction [45]. Furthermore, two - way interactions between users and brands further strengthen cognitive and emotional engagement in online brand communities [15, 17]. Thus, social recognition in the Eat Clean community is expected to positively influence customer engagement.

H7: Social Recognition (REG) positively affects Customer Engagement (CE).

(4) Social presence (PRES) and Customer Engagement (CE)

Social presence (PRES) refers to the extent to which individuals perceive others as real and present during mediated communication, conveying warmth, intimacy, and personal connection [46]. In online environments, social presence reflects users' subjective perception of interacting with real individuals, influenced not only by technology but also by communication style, interaction level, and participant characteristics [47]. High social presence in social media and e - commerce settings has been shown to enhance trust, engagement, and positive behavioral responses, such as purchase intention and active participation [48]. When brands enhance their online visibility and interactive depth, this

perceived presence effectively strengthens customer engagement and fosters long - term relational bonds. Accordingly, social presence in the Eat Clean community is expected to serve as a key stimulus that positively influences customer engagement.

H8: Social Presence (PRES) positively affects Customer Engagement (CE).

2.2.3. Content Contribution (CONT)

Content contribution behavior (CONT) refers to users' active creation and sharing of content on online platforms, positioning them as co - creators in the Web 2.0 ecosystem [49]. This behavior represents active participation, driven by social motivations, self - expression, and identity, and is influenced by cognitive, emotional, and social factors [50]. Expanding on these dynamics, within social media contexts, users' perceived value and desire for self - expression further shape their willingness to sustain content contribution and its continuity [51].

In this study, CONT is defined as the proactive sharing of brand - related user - generated content (UGC) by customers, representing a form of customer engagement that generates value beyond transactional exchanges [52]. Customer engagement (CE), conceptualized as a multidimensional psychological state [17], plays a crucial role in driving this behavior. Specifically, highly engaged customers are more inclined to contribute content and co - create value [53]. Consequently, it is hypothesized that customer engagement will positively influence content contribution behavior.

H9: Customer engagement (CE) positively affects content contribution behavior (CONT).

2.2.4. Brand Love (LOVE)

Brand love (LOVE) is defined as a deep and enduring emotional attachment to a brand, characterized by strong affection, passion, and a desire for long - term relationships [54]. It reflects intense positive emotions and emotional bonding that extend beyond cognitive evaluation, often resulting in discomfort when separation from the brand occurs [55]. Brand love is influenced by factors such as perceived quality, passion, and loyalty components intrinsically linked to brand equity and is further reinforced by positive emotional experiences and lovemarks that strengthen customer - brand relationships [10].

From a formation perspective, repeated positive interactions and brand experiences progressively reinforce emotional attachment over time [56]. According to Social Identity Theory, customers who actively engage with a brand tend to identify with it, enhancing their attachment and commitment to the brand [7]. Empirical studies confirm that active participation and engagement within brand communities foster emotional outcomes such as attachment and brand love, and that these emotional connections are closely linked to customer loyalty [15]. While brand love is commonly considered an outcome of engagement, this study conceptualizes it as a result of customer engagement, where increased interaction and emotional investment strengthen brand love.

H10: Customer engagement (CE) positively affects brand love (LOVE).

2.2.5. The mediating role of Customer Engagement (CE)

Customer engagement (CE) is conceptualized as a multidimensional psychological state that reflects customers' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral investment in a brand. It functions as a key mediating mechanism, linking marketing stimuli to customer responses [16, 17]. Prior studies indicate that digital environmental cues and marketing activities influence consumer behavior indirectly, primarily through internal states such as engagement [31].

Empirical evidence confirms that CE mediates the relationship between online community stimuli and outcomes such as loyalty and behavioral intentions [57]. Social and interactive factors further enhance engagement, leading to positive emotional outcomes such

as attachment and brand love [15]. This mediating role is also supported in Asian markets, where CE acts as a bridge between social media marketing activities and customer loyalty [58]. However, previous research has predominantly focused on isolated stimuli, with limited integration of multiple factors within a unified framework [17].

H11 - H14: Customer engagement (CE) mediates the relationships between social media stimuli, brand love, and contribution behavior.

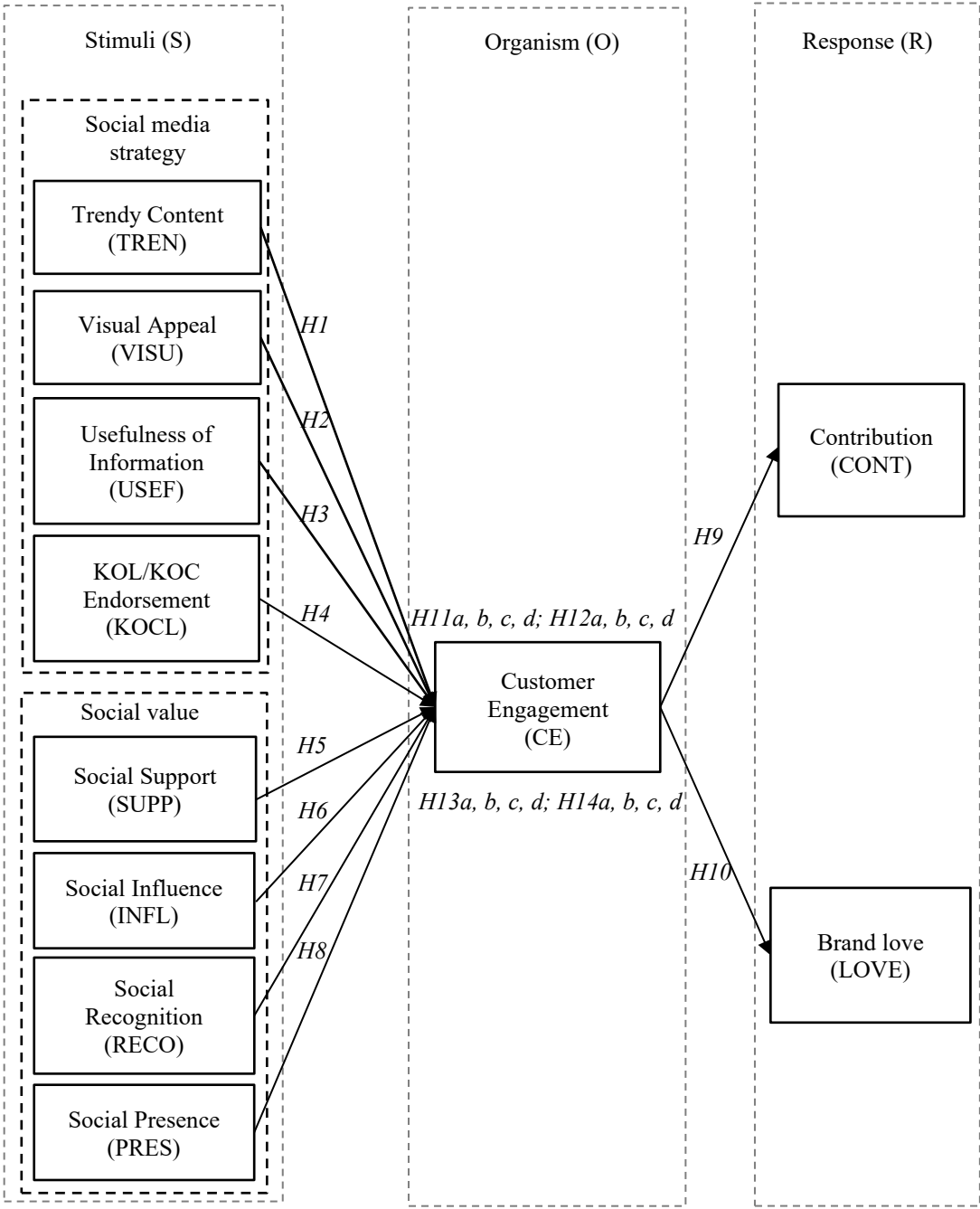


Figure 1. Research model (Source: own research)

3. METHODOLOGY

This study primarily adopts a quantitative research approach to test the proposed research model in the context of user behavior toward Eat Clean content on social media platforms. The research process was conducted in two stages: a preliminary pre - test (pilot study) to refine the measurement instrument, followed by a main quantitative study for model testing.

In the pre - test phase, expert consultations and small - group discussions were conducted to refine the conceptual framework and improve the clarity and relevance of measurement items. This step aimed to ensure content validity and contextual appropriateness of the questionnaire rather than to serve as a standalone qualitative research method. The expert panel included individuals with expertise in social media marketing and consumer behavior in health - related contexts.

In the main phase, data were collected through an online survey using a structured questionnaire. The target respondents were social media users aged 18 - 30 who had prior exposure to and interaction with Eat Clean content on platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram. Screening questions were employed to ensure sample relevance. A non - probability sampling method was used, incorporating both convenience sampling and snowball sampling techniques. After data cleaning, invalid responses and those failing the screening criteria were excluded, resulting in a final sample of 259 valid questionnaires for analysis.

The measurement scales were adapted from prior studies to ensure both contextual relevance and measurement reliability. Specifically, the components of social media strategy include trendy content [59], useful information [60], visual appeal [61], and KOL/KOC endorsement [62]. Social value factors include social support and social influence [105], while social recognition and social presence were derived from [63], [64], and [65], respectively. Additionally, brand love was adapted from [66], user - generated content behavior from [67], and customer engagement from [68].

Data analysis was conducted using SmartPLS with the PLS - SEM approach, which is suitable for models involving multiple latent constructs. The analysis procedure included the assessment of the measurement model and evaluation of the structural model using path coefficients (β), p - values, and bootstrapping techniques. Descriptive statistics of the sample were analyzed using SPSS software.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Sample description

The sample consists of 259 respondents. The majority of participants are female (61%), while male respondents account for 39%. Regarding age, the sample is predominantly concentrated in the 18 - 25 age group (93.8%), with a smaller proportion in the 26 - 30 age range (6.2%). This distribution suggests that the study primarily reflects the perspectives of younger users, particularly generation Z, who are highly active on social media platforms.

Table 1. Sample Characteristics

Item	Frequency (n=259)	Percent (%)
<i>Gender</i>		
Female	158	61,0
Male	101	39,0
<i>Age</i>		
18 - 25	243	93,8
26 - 30	16	6,2
<i>Monthly income</i>		
< 5 million VND	210	81,1
5 - 10 million VND	29	11,2
10 - 20 million VND	16	6,2
> 20 million VND	4	1,5
<i>Level of Exposure</i>		
Rarely	25	9,7
Regularly	165	63,7
Often	57	22,0
Very Often	12	4,6
<i>Platform Used</i>		
Facebook	185	71,4
TikTok	236	91,1
Instagram	120	46,3
Youtube	72	27,8
Thread	12	4,6

**Source(s): Author's own work*

Most respondents have a monthly income below 5 million VND, reflecting a sample dominated by students and early - career individuals. Participants generally report moderate to frequent exposure to Eat Clean content, indicating a relatively high level of familiarity. TikTok emerges as the most popular platform, followed by Facebook and Instagram, suggesting a strong preference for short - form and interactive content among young users.

The dominance of respondents aged 18 - 25 (93.8%) and those with monthly income below 5 million VND may limit the generalizability of the findings to older or higher-income groups. This skewed distribution can be attributed to the use of online surveys and snowball sampling, which tend to capture respondents within the researchers' social networks, primarily consisting of Gen Z users. Prior reports also indicate that individuals aged 18 - 24 exhibit the highest levels of social media usage and engagement, making them more likely to participate in online surveys and interact with digital content.

Importantly, while the Eat Clean lifestyle is often associated with higher costs, this study focuses on content engagement rather than actual consumption behavior. In the context of social media, Eat Clean is not necessarily limited to expensive consumption but also reflects a lifestyle orientation centered on healthy habits, information seeking, and content sharing. Therefore, younger users - despite having lower income - can still actively engage with, and contribute to, Eat Clean content. This demographic concentration implies that the findings mainly reflect the perceptions and behaviors of young, digitally active users. As such, caution

should be exercised when generalizing the results to broader populations, particularly older consumers or those with higher purchasing power. Future research is encouraged to employ more diverse sampling strategies to enhance external validity.

4.2. Measurement Model Assessment

The outer loadings were examined to assess indicator reliability. The results show that all loadings range from 0.705 to 0.826 (**Table 2**), exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70. This indicates that all indicators demonstrate satisfactory reliability and adequately represent their respective constructs. Therefore, all indicators were retained for further analysis.

Reliability and convergent validity were assessed using Cronbach's alpha, rho_A, Composite Reliability (CR), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE). As shown in **Table 2**, the results indicate that Cronbach's alpha values range from 0.655 to 0.764, exceeding the acceptable threshold of 0.60 for exploratory research contexts, particularly in studies involving complex consumer behavior and social - psychological phenomena. Composite Reliability values range from 0.813 to 0.849, and rho_A values from 0.656 to 0.767, indicating satisfactory internal consistency. In addition, AVE values range from 0.528 to 0.649, all above the recommended threshold of 0.50, confirming adequate convergent validity. Overall, the measurement model demonstrates acceptable reliability and convergent validity and is suitable for further structural model analysis.

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell - Larcker criterion. As shown in Table 2, the results show that the square roots of AVE exceed inter - construct correlations, satisfying the criterion and confirming that all constructs are empirically distinct. Therefore, discriminant validity is established, confirming the adequacy of the measurement model for subsequent structural analysis.

Table 2. Results of Reliability and Validity

Reliability and validity						
Variable	Item	Outer loadings	Cronbach's alpha	rho_a	CR/rho_c	AVE
Customer Engagement (CE)	CE1	0.770	0.740	0.741	0.837	0.562
	CE2	0.781				
	CE3	0.718				
	CE4	0.729				
Content Contribution (CONT)	CONT1	0.705	0.703	0.705	0.817	0.528
	CONT2	0.705				
	CONT3	0.733				
	CONT4	0.764				
Social Influence (INFL)	INFL1	0.742	0.674	0.674	0.822	0.606
	INFL2	0.804				
	INFL3	0.789				
KOL/KOC Endorsement (KOCL)	KOCL1	0.764	0.668	0.673	0.819	0.601
	KOCL2	0.751				
	KOCL3	0.810				
Brand love (LOVE)	LOVE1	0.787	0.764	0.767	0.849	0.585
	LOVE2	0.778				

		Reliability and validity				
	LOVE3	0.717				
	LOVE4	0.776				
Social Presence (PRES)	PRES1	0.826	0.730	0.736	0.847	0.649
	PRES2	0.767				
	PRES3	0.822				
Social Recognition (RECO)	RECO1	0.784	0.669	0.669	0.819	0.602
	RECO2	0.766				
	RECO3	0.777				
Social Support (SUPP)	SUPP1	0.810	0.703	0.705	0.835	0.627
	SUPP2	0.786				
	SUPP3	0.779				
Trendy Content (TREN)	TREN1	0.768	0.669	0.675	0.818	0.600
	TREN2	0.758				
	TREN3	0.797				
Usefulness of Information (USEF)	USEF1	0.750	0.655	0.656	0.813	0.592
	USEF2	0.806				
	USEF3	0.751				
Visual Appeal (VISU)	VISU1	0.808	0.661	0.667	0.815	0.595
	VISU2	0.731				
	VISU3	0.774				

*Source(s): Author's own work

4.3. Structure Model Assessment

Multicollinearity was assessed using the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF). The results show that VIF values range from 1.206 to 1.565, which are well below the recommended thresholds of 5 and the more conservative 3.3. This indicates that multicollinearity is not a concern in the model, as the indicators do not exhibit excessive correlations. Therefore, all indicators are retained for further analysis.

The structural model was evaluated using bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples. As shown in **Table 4**, the results indicate that 7 out of 10 proposed hypotheses are supported. Specifically, TREN ($\beta = 0.144$, $p < 0.05$), USEF ($\beta = 0.125$, $p < 0.05$), KOCL ($\beta = 0.144$, $p < 0.05$), RECO ($\beta = 0.116$, $p < 0.05$), and PRES ($\beta = 0.308$, $p < 0.001$) have significant positive effects on customer engagement (CE). In contrast, VISU, SUPP, and INFL show no significant effects ($p > 0.05$). Furthermore, CE has a strong positive impact on both content contribution (CONT) ($\beta = 0.708$, $p < 0.001$) and brand love (LOVE) ($\beta = 0.702$, $p < 0.001$). Overall, the findings confirm the key role of customer engagement as a central mediator in the model.

The mediating role of customer engagement (CE) was tested using the results in Table 5. Out of 16 proposed mediation hypotheses, 10 were supported, including H11a, H11c, H11d, H12a, H12c, H12d, H13c, H13d, H14c, and H14d, which represent the indirect effects of TREN, USEF, KOCL, RECO, and PRES on CONT and LOVE through CE. These supported hypotheses show positive path coefficients with statistical significance ($p < 0.05$). The remaining six hypotheses (H11b, H12b, H13a, H13b, H14a, and H14b) were not supported, as

the corresponding indirect effects were not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$). The detailed results of the mediation analysis are presented in *Table 5*.

Table 3. Fornell - Larcker Criterion

	CE	CONT	INFL	KOCL	LOVE	PRES	RECO	SUPP	TREN	USEF	VISU
CE	0.750										
CONT	0.708	0.727									
INFL	0.634	0.565	0.779								
KOCL	0.672	0.560	0.657	0.775							
LOVE	0.702	0.660	0.728	0.638	0.765						
PRES	0.733	0.660	0.617	0.680	0.630	0.806					
RECO	0.622	0.558	0.617	0.586	0.567	0.564	0.776				
SUPP	0.667	0.722	0.690	0.615	0.755	0.703	0.603	0.792			
TREN	0.640	0.677	0.557	0.577	0.632	0.622	0.584	0.718	0.775		
USEF	0.647	0.523	0.596	0.611	0.593	0.645	0.617	0.627	0.536	0.769	
VISU	0.623	0.544	0.615	0.671	0.555	0.650	0.607	0.614	0.576	0.643	0.771

**Note(s):* CE=Customer Engagement; CONT=Contribution; LOVE=Brand Love; INFL=Social Influence; KOCL=KOL/KOC Endorsement; PRES=Social Presence; RECO=Social Recognition; SUPP=Social Support; TREN=Trendy content; USEF= Usefulness of Information; VISU=Visual Appeal

**Source(s):* Author's own work

Table 4. Direct Effects and Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis		Original sample	Sample mean	(SD)	T - Value	p - value	Note
H1	TREN → CE	0.144	0.147	0.062	2.309	0.021	Supported
H2	VISU → CE	0.012	0.014	0.064	0.196	0.845	Unsupported
H3	USEF → CE	0.125	0.122	0.058	2.168	0.030	Supported
H4	KOCL → CE	0.144	0.145	0.063	2.273	0.023	Supported
H5	SUPP → CE	0.044	0.047	0.065	0.667	0.505	Unsupported
H6	INFL → CE	0.085	0.084	0.070	1.222	0.222	Unsupported
H7	RECO → CE	0.116	0.116	0.054	2.164	0.031	Supported
H8	PRES → CE	0.308	0.305	0.064	4.853	0.000	Supported
H9	CE → CONT	0.708	0.710	0.038	18.775	0.000	Supported
H10	CE → LOVE	0.702	0.704	0.033	21.455	0.000	Supported

**Source(s):* Author's own work

Table 5. Indirect Effects and Mediation Analysis

	Hypothesis	Original sample	Sample mean	(SD)	T - Value	p - value	Note
H11a	TREN → CE → CONT	0.102	0.105	0.046	2.212	0.027	Supported
H11b	VISU → CE → CONT	0.009	0.010	0.045	0.195	0.846	Unsupported
H11c	USEF → CE → CONT	0.089	0.086	0.041	2.179	0.029	Supported

H11d	KOCL → CE → CONT	0.102	0.102	0.044	2.298	0.022	Supported
H12a	TREN → CE → LOVE	0.101	0.104	0.045	2.270	0.023	Supported
H12b	VISU → CE → LOVE	0.009	0.010	0.045	0.195	0.845	Unsupported
H12c	USEF → CE → LOVE	0.088	0.086	0.040	2.172	0.030	Supported
H12d	KOCL → CE → LOVE	0.101	0.102	0.045	2.260	0.024	Supported
H13a	SUPP → CE → CONT	0.031	0.034	0.047	0.661	0.509	Unsupported
H13b	INFL → CE → CONT	0.060	0.060	0.050	1.216	0.224	Unsupported
H13c	RECO → CE → CONT	0.082	0.082	0.038	2.141	0.032	Supported
H13d	PRES → CE → CONT	0.218	0.217	0.047	4.601	0.000	Supported
H14a	SUPP → CE → LOVE	0.031	0.034	0.046	0.663	0.507	Unsupported
H14b	INFL → CE → LOVE	0.060	0.060	0.050	1.203	0.229	Unsupported
H14c	RECO → CE → LOVE	0.082	0.081	0.038	2.151	0.032	Supported
H14d	PRES → CE → LOVE	0.216	0.215	0.045	4.790	0.000	Supported

*Source(s): Author's own work

4.4. Research Findings

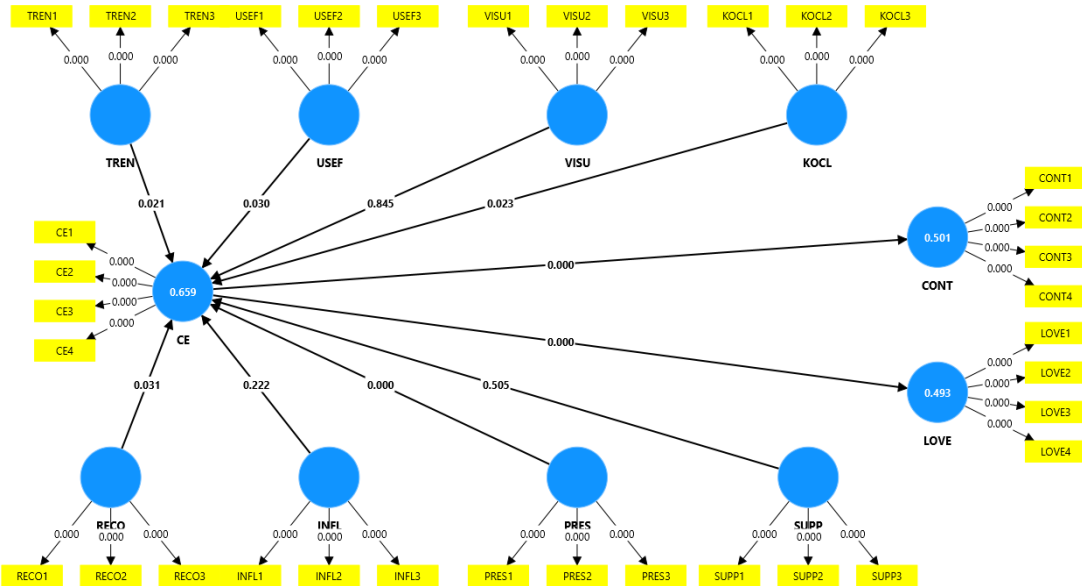


Figure 2. Bootstrapping Results for Hypothesis Testing (Source: Authors' own work)

The results support the S - O - R framework in explaining user behavior within the Eat Clean community, with customer engagement (CE) acting as a key mediator that significantly drives both brand love and user - generated content [56]. Regarding stimulus factors from social media strategies, trend content (TREN, H1: $\beta = 0.144$, $p = 0.021$), KOL/KOC endorsement (KOCL, H4: $\beta = 0.144$, $p = 0.023$), and useful information (USEF, H3: $\beta = 0.125$, $p = 0.030$) significantly enhance CE, whereas visual appeal (VISU, H2) has no significant effect ($p = 0.845$), suggesting that visuals alone are insufficient to drive deep engagement without informative or inspiring content. The social value factors, social presence (PRES, H8: $\beta = 0.308$, $p = 0.000$) and social recognition (RECO, H7: $\beta = 0.116$, $p = 0.031$) positively influence engagement, with social presence being the strongest driver. In contrast, social support (SUPP, H5) and social influence (INFL, H6) were not significant, indicating that users prioritize meaningful interactions and intrinsic value over external pressures or formal support.

The mediation analysis (H11 - H14) confirms that CE partially or fully mediates the effects of stimuli on behavioral outcomes, emphasizing that marketing activities are effective only when they successfully engage users. Overall, CE is a key mechanism transforming marketing stimuli into positive user responses, consistent with the S - O - R logic and prior research on online customer engagement [24].

5. CONCLUSION & IMPLICATION

The findings reinforce the S - O - R framework, highlighting customer engagement (CE) as a central mediating mechanism that significantly drives both brand love and user - generated content. Among social media strategy factors, trend content, KOL/KOC endorsement, and useful information positively influence engagement, confirming the importance of relevant and value - driven content. In contrast, visual appeal does not show a significant effect, suggesting that in the Eat Clean context, users prioritize informational and inspirational value over purely aesthetic elements, particularly among Gen Z who are increasingly content - critical.

Regarding social value, social presence and social recognition significantly enhance engagement, with social presence emerging as the strongest driver. This indicates that a sense of real interaction and acknowledgment within the community plays a crucial role in fostering user involvement. However, social support and social influence are not statistically significant. This can be explained by the nature of Eat Clean as a self - motivated, health - oriented lifestyle, where personal goals and intrinsic motivation outweigh external pressures or formal support. Additionally, in the Vietnamese context and among Gen Z users, engagement tends to be driven more by autonomy and self - expression rather than conformity to social norms. The mediation analysis confirms that CE serves as a key mechanism linking stimuli to behavioral outcomes, emphasizing that marketing efforts are effective only when they successfully foster user engagement.

5.1. Theoretical Implications

This study makes several significant theoretical contributions. It addresses the research gap concerning Eat Clean content from a marketing and social media perspective, particularly in the context of Vietnam, where research on user interaction and content creation within online healthy - lifestyle communities remains scarce. The study provides empirical evidence regarding the role of social value in fostering customer engagement (CE) by integrating multiple dimensions of social value - namely, social presence, social recognition, social support, and social influence - into a unified framework, thereby clarifying their distinct impacts on CE.

Additionally, the study contributes to the literature on social media communication strategies, emphasizing that trend - driven content, KOL/KOC endorsements, and useful information positively affect CE, while visual appeal alone is insufficient to generate strong engagement. This finding underscores the importance of meaningful content over superficial or purely aesthetic elements in driving user engagement. Moreover, the research extends the application of the Stimulus - Organism - Response (S - O - R) model to online healthy - lifestyle communities, demonstrating how social media stimuli and social value factors impact the organism (CE), which in turn influences user responses, including content creation (UGC) and brand love. This broadens the scope of the S - O - R model and its relevance to digital marketing in niche communities.

The study highlights social presence as a crucial psychological construct for engagement. It emphasizes that perceived interaction and connectivity within the community significantly encourage participation, underscoring the importance of fostering a sense of presence in digital platforms. The findings also offer insights into the psychological characteristics of Generation Z

users, who prioritize authenticity, recognition, and meaningful social interaction over passive social support or formalized content. This preference explains their inclination towards creating and sharing user - generated content within online Eat Clean communities. The study provides robust empirical evidence on how social and communication factors drive engagement and participation in online healthy - lifestyle communities. It also contributes to the expansion of both S - O - R theory and social media marketing research by offering new insights into how social media and social value impact user behavior in niche digital communities.

5.2. Managerial Implications

Social media engagement is a critical driver of user - generated content, which plays a key role in shaping brand perceptions. Food brands, particularly Eat Clean brands, should not view social media merely as a promotional tool; rather, it should be seen as a platform for fostering meaningful interactions with customers. By designing communication strategies that convert user engagement into positive brand attitudes and voluntary content sharing, businesses can build stronger customer loyalty. The focus should be on creating authentic, informative, and useful content - such as providing nutrition tips, meal planning advice, or sharing real - life experiences - rather than simply posting visually appealing images. This approach helps to build trust with consumers and establish long - term relationships. Additionally, brands can leverage interactive campaigns such as challenges, contests, and community - driven initiatives to encourage UGC and amplify content distribution naturally.

Endorsements from KOLs and KOCs are powerful tools for boosting user engagement, but relying solely on visuals is insufficient to maintain long - term interest. Influencers should combine attention - grabbing visuals with credible, informative, and genuine content, including personal stories and evidence - based explanations of the Eat Clean lifestyle. Engaging in two - way communication by responding to comments, encouraging audience participation, and nurturing dialogue and further strengthens social connections, builds trust, and fosters deeper community engagement.

Social presence emerges as the most influential factor in driving engagement within online communities. Community managers should focus on creating environments where users feel “present” and connected. This can be achieved through regular activities such as sharing personal stories, encouraging comments, facilitating group discussions, and organizing weekly challenges. Recognizing user contributions and fostering constructive, supportive interactions ensures long - term engagement. These efforts not only enhance user involvement but also provide brands with valuable insights that can guide marketing strategies and community-building efforts.

Finally, strengthening user engagement within Eat Clean communities not only drives content creation but also promotes responsible consumption and sustainable practices. Engaged users are more likely to adopt and share behaviors such as prioritizing local, seasonal foods, reducing food waste, and supporting eco - friendly packaging. As these behaviors gain momentum, they help establish new social norms around health and sustainability. This, in turn, generates authentic and influential content for brands, which can shape consumer perceptions and behaviors, contributing to both brand loyalty and broader societal goals.

5.3. Limitations and Future Research

Although this study has provided valuable insights, it has several limitations. The survey sample primarily focused on young individuals, particularly university students in Ho Chi Minh City, which may not fully reflect the behaviors and perceptions of other consumer groups. As such, the generalizability of the findings to broader populations, including older age groups or individuals from different regions, may be limited. Furthermore, consumer behavior may vary across different product categories, and this study did not account for the

potential differences in engagement and perceptions across various sectors. Future research could explore these variations by examining a wider range of industries.

Additionally, the role of technology in shaping consumer behavior is continually evolving. As new technologies emerge, the factors influencing user engagement and content creation may change as well. To capture these dynamics, future studies could investigate how technological advancements influence consumer behavior and engagement over time.

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