

The Mechanism of KOL on Brand Loyalty: A Study of the Mediating Effect of Perceived Trust and Perceived Value

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ABSTRACT

Based on the SOR theory, this study constructs an integrated framework of "KOL characteristics-perceived trust and perceived value-brand loyalty", aiming to analyze how KOL influences consumers' brand loyalty through the dual mediation mechanism. A questionnaire survey was conducted among 304 consumers who had purchased products on the recommendation of KOLs, and structural equation modeling was used for empirical analysis. The results show that perceived trust plays an important mediating role between KOL and brand loyalty. At the same time, KOL can also positively enhance consumers' perceived value, which in turn affects consumers' brand loyalty.

KEYWORDS

Kol; Brand Loyalty; Perceived Trust; Perceived Value; SOR Theory

1 Introduction

With the rapid growth of the digital economy, Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) have emerged as pivotal players in brand marketing strategies. Leveraging their domain-specific expertise and authoritative influence, KOLs significantly shape consumers' purchasing behaviors, which in turn fosters long-term brand loyalty among target audiences. Contemporary marketing strategies increasingly prioritize KOLs as pivotal instruments for brand enhancement, particularly within digital domains such as livestream commerce and social media campaigns. By leveraging attributes like public prominence, domain expertise, and dynamic audience engagement, KOLs demonstrate a capacity to cultivate consumer recognition and credibility at scale (Chen, 2023). Although the influence of KOLs on consumer behavior has received widespread attention, research on how KOLs influence brand loyalty through perceived trust and perceived value remains to be carried out in depth. This study employs a dual mediation framework to empirically investigate how KOLs influence brand loyalty via perceived trust and perceived value. The findings aim to furnish actionable insights for optimizing enterprise-level KOL collaboration strategies.

2 Literature Review

KOLs sustain consumer engagement by delivering differentiated value through diverse social media content, thereby establishing relational trust. Such trust-based interactions stimulate repeat purchasing patterns, positioning KOLs as critical intermediaries in fortifying brand-consumer loyalty dynamics. Scholarly investigations have increasingly focused on delineating how KOL attributes shape purchase intentions, with empirical emphasis on the dual mediating pathways of trust and value perceptions. Based on the SOR theory, Chen (2023) constructed a model to take the five aspects of KOL's popularity, professionalism, and interactivity as trait variables, and explored how they affect consumers' purchase intention through perceived trust. Huang (2022) on the other hand, pointed out that among the types of KOLs such as bandwagon anchors, consumers' perceived value and trust have a significant mediating effect on purchase intention. From the perspective of social capital, Zhang (2024) empirical study shows that KOL effectively promotes consumers' sustained purchase behavior by enhancing perceived trust and perceived value. While another part of the research focuses more on the role of brand trust and perceived value in KOL marketing strategy to strengthen consumer brand trust. Harsono et al. (2018) found that brand trust and perceived value played a crucial mediating role in the process of brand image influencing purchase intention through the analysis of different product categories, which was especially obvious in local brands. Li and Lee (2024) argued that brand image and the influence of KOL anchors play a key role in enhancing perceived value and perceived quality, which can increase consumer trust and satisfaction, and thus enhance consumer brand loyalty. Most of the current studies have designed scales based on traits such as KOL's professional characteristics, interactivity and popularity, and in empirical studies, scholars have used a variety of methods to measure consumers' brand loyalty and its dimensions (Chen, 2023). Prior research has extensively investigated the role of Key Opinion Leader characteristics in shaping consumer purchase intentions and elucidated the underlying mechanisms. These studies have collectively determined that KOL traits are a pivotal precursor influencing consumer purchase decisions and, subsequently, brand loyalty. Within this context, perceived trust and value have emerged as central

mediating factors that facilitate the translation of consumer purchase intentions into brand-specific purchasing behaviors.

However, research on KOLs in brand loyalty is still in its infancy. Most studies have focused on short-term purchase intention, while long-term loyalty has not been consistently tracked; the mediating pathways between perceived trust and perceived value have not yet been systematically integrated, and how to influence brand loyalty through these two mediating mechanisms remains an issue that requires in-depth research. Consequently, drawing on the SOR model, this study constructs an integrated framework linking "KOL traits," "perceived trust and perceived value," and "brand loyalty." Through empirical investigation, the study examines the mediating roles of perceived trust and perceived value, as well as elucidates the specific pathways and impacts through which KOLs shape brand loyalty.

3 The theoretical basis and research hypothesis

3.1 SOR theory

The SOR theory, commonly represented as "Stimulus - Organism - Response," is a well-established framework for explaining behavior in psychology. In recent years, it has seen extensive application in consumer behavior research (Belk, 1975). External stimuli act on the psychological level of consumers to produce changes in their mental states in terms of emotions, cognition and attitudes, which in turn have an impact on the final behavioral response of consumers. Within the context of online shopping, consumers' cognitive evaluations are activated, with perceived trust and risk emerging as pivotal response mechanisms. In addition, these two cognitive responses largely determine consumers' purchase intention (Chang & Chen, 2008). In the realm of brand promotion, the attributes of Key Opinion Leaders function as external stimuli that significantly influence consumer behavior. KOLs convey information regarding their endorsed brands and products through various means, such as live-streaming product demonstrations, sharing usage experiences, and offering expert advice. This information dissemination serves as an external stimulus, which can enhance consumers' perceived trust and cognitive assessments, thereby consistently driving their intent to purchase the brand. Consequently, the SOR theory is well-suited to examining the mechanisms through which KOLs shape consumer brand loyalty.

3.2 Model construction

Grounded in the SOR theory, this investigation develops a theoretical framework elucidating how KOL traits impact consumer brand loyalty. By referring to related studies, KOL traits are categorized into professionalism, interactivity, popularity, recommended consistency, recommended usefulness (Chen, 2023). KOL characteristics can prompt consumers to develop trust and perceived value toward the brand, thereby sustaining their purchase intentions and subsequently shaping their brand loyalty. The proposed model is depicted in Figure 1.

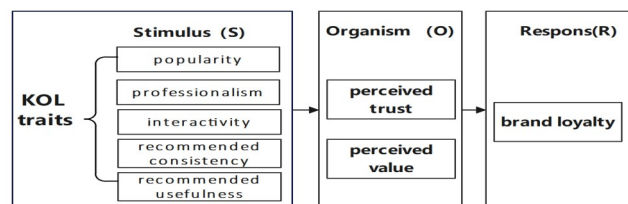


Fig. 1 Research model of KOL influence on consumer brand loyalty influence

3.3 KOL influence on consumer brand loyalty

KOL utilizes its unique attributes to establish an emotional bond with consumers, which in turn has an impact on consumer loyalty to its brand. KOL expertise, KOL has an in-depth understanding of the product's knowledge and the ability to disseminate it, which significantly strengthens the consumer's continued attention to the brand by enhancing their sense of trust (Lin, 2021). KOL has the ability to increase consumer loyalty by perceiving its functional value (Liu et al., 2021). In terms of KOL awareness, high-profile KOLs help to strengthen the image of their brands due to their influence in society and extensive public exposure. IWOM, as a new form of media, provides consumers with more choice avenues and opportunities. The public exposure of opinion leaders has a positive impact on consumers' trust in the content they recommend (Bansal & Voyer, 2000). In terms of KOL interactivity, KOLs reduce the risk of consumers making decisions by communicating and emotionally connecting with them in real time, while their interactivity drives repeat purchase behavior by enhancing perceived usefulness (Zuo, 2021). Regarding the consistency of KOL recommendations, it is primarily reflected in the strong alignment between the KOL's brand image and the market positioning of the endorsed products. Celebrity-product congruence significantly enhances advertising reliability and consumer preferences (Wang & Ma, 2004). Consistency helps to reduce cognitive conflicts and thus increases brand loyalty (Ling, 2008). Regarding the

usefulness of KOL recommendations, the useful insights offered by KOLs facilitate more informed consumer decision-making. The objectivity and granularity of the recommended content bolster consumers' assessment of the brand's value. (Yang, 2021). In summary, the study advances the following hypotheses:

- H1a: KOL's popularity positively affects consumer brand loyalty.
- H1b: KOL's professionalism positively affects consumer brand loyalty.
- H1c: KOL's interactivity positively influences consumer brand loyalty.
- H1d: KOL's recommendation consistency positively influences consumer brand loyalty.
- H1e: KOL's recommendation usefulness positively affects consumer brand loyalty.

3.4 The mediating role of perceived trust

Perceived trust is the psychological identification that consumers hold with KOLs' recommendation motives and brand reliability (Wei et al., 2022). KOLs utilize their traits to portray an image of trustworthiness, which reduces consumers' perception of risk and further strengthens brand loyalty. This study explores the ways in which KOLs influence perceived trust in terms of five dimensions of their traits: the expertise possessed by KOLs helps to reduce information asymmetry, thereby increasing consumer trust in brand quality; KOLs provide in-depth analyses of product ingredients and technology, which greatly enhances consumer trust (Lin, 2021); high-frequency interactions establish, through emotional connections, a "proposed acquaintance relationship", while close interaction increases the stickiness of trust by reducing the psychological distance (Wang & Li, 2007); through the mechanism of social identity, the public exposure of opinion leaders helps to strengthen consumer trust (Bansal & Voyer, 2000); when the image of a KOL fits with the brand's tone, consumers have a higher degree of trust in the authenticity of the content it recommends higher trust, and consistency helps to reduce cognitive conflicts, thus increasing trust (Wang & Ma, 2004). In terms of KOL recommendation usefulness, the practical information conveyed by KOLs helps to build functional trust by solving consumers' pain points, and the objective recommendation content provided by KOLs significantly reduces decision-making risk (Yang, 2021). In summary, KOLs enhance consumers' perceived value through a variety of attributes that are key drivers of brand loyalty. Therefore, the following hypothesis is formulated:

- H2a: Perceived trust mediates the relationship between KOL popularity and brand loyalty.
- H2b: Perceived trust mediates the relationship between KOL professionalism and brand loyalty.
- H2c: Perceived trust mediates the relationship between KOL interactivity and brand loyalty.
- H2d: Perceived trust mediates the relationship between KOL recommendation consistency and brand loyalty.
- H2e: Perceived trust mediates the relationship between KOL recommendation usefulness and brand loyalty.

3.5 The mediating role of perceived value

Perceived value reflects a consumer's comprehensive evaluation of the practical, emotional, and social benefits derived from a brand's product. (Zeithaml, 1988). KOLs communicate high-value information through their traits, which optimizes the consumer's decision-making experience and further promotes brand loyalty behaviors. The verticality of a KOL's content can significantly increase the perceived value of the consumer, which can significantly increase brand stickiness (Zhou & Huang, 2023). From the dimension of KOL's characteristics: KOL's professional interpretation helps consumers identify product differentiation advantages and enhances the perception of functional value, while its professionalism strengthens consumers' rational reliance on the brand by reducing the cost of cognition (Liu et al., 2021); real-time social interaction enhances the social value by increasing the sense of belonging to the community, while the pop-up interaction of live streaming and personalized Q&A services significantly enhance the The pop-up interaction of live broadcasting and personalized Q&A services significantly enhance consumers' sense of participation (Zuo, 2021); high-exposure KOLs utilize the "quality benchmark" effect to enhance their social value, and the recommendation of the head KOLs can increase the social value of their products.

Highly visible KOLs use the "quality benchmarking" effect to enhance their social value, and the recommended brands of head KOLs are often regarded as status symbols (Han, 2020); consumers tend to resonate more strongly with the emotional value projected by KOLs when it aligns with the brand's tone (Ling, 2008); KOL utility information increases the value of utility by reducing the cost of decision-making, and the usefulness of KOL-recommended information drives brand loyalty by optimizing the efficiency of consumer choices (Kim & Lennon, 2008). In summary, KOL traits effectively weaken consumers' psychological defense mechanism through the value transfer path, and then form a continuous brand dependence relationship. Based on the preceding analysis, the following hypotheses are formulated:

- H3a: Perceived value serves as a mediator between KOL popularity and brand loyalty.
- H3b: Perceived value serves as a mediator between KOL professionalism and brand loyalty.
- H3c: Perceived value serves as a mediator between KOL interactivity and brand loyalty.
- H3d: Perceived value serves as a mediator between KOL recommendation consistency and brand loyalty.

H3e: Perceived value serves as a mediator between KOL recommendation usefulness and brand loyalty.

4 Research Design

This study focuses on consumers who have purchased branded products following KOL recommendations. Data collection was conducted through online questionnaires distributed via the Questionnaire Star platform. A total of 335 questionnaires were initially collected. After excluding invalid responses—defined as those completed in under one minute or with over 90% repetitive selections—we obtained 304 valid questionnaires, resulting in an effective response rate of 90.74%. The study utilized a five-point Likert scale (ranging from 1=“strongly disagree” to 5=“strongly agree”) as the measurement tool. All scales were contextualized and adapted with reference to mature scales. Among the survey respondents, 64.06% was female, while 35.94% were male. In terms of educational background, undergraduate and postgraduate education accounted for 68.75% of the total; the age distribution was mainly between 18 and 45 years old, and the proportion reached 91.78%; the amount of data was relatively sufficient, and the sample was highly representative, which made it suitable for the subsequent analysis. After the questionnaire was recovered, it was imported into SPSS and AMOS software to analyze the data, and the specific contents of the questions are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Question item content of the scale

Variable	subject	Encodings
KOL traits(S)	popularity	I think KOLs have more influence and appeal. POP1
		I think KOLs have a certain social prestige. POP2
		I think opinion leader KOLs are more active in social media or forums. POP3
	professionalism	The KOL has enough experience to judge the recommended brands. PRO1
		The KOL has done its own research before recommending the recommended brands. PRO2
		This KOL's introduction gave me a fuller understanding of the recommended brands. PRO3
	interactivity	This KOL is always patient and positive in answering queries posed by his fans. INT1
		This KOL interacts very well with his fans. INT2
		When introducing recommended brands, KOLs show a passion for their fans. INT3
	recommended consistency	High brand recognition for items recommended by this KOL. RC1
		The KOL can recommend the brand grade of the product based on a certain status. RC2
		The KOL reflects the image of the user of the recommended brand of goods. RC3
	recommended usefulness	KOL recommendations give me a quick overview of the brand's merchandise. RP1
		KOL recommendation can make me remember the brand of the item. RP2
inner state (O)	perceived trust	I find it useful when KOLs recommend certain brands. RP3
		I think the brand recommended by the KOL meets my consumer needs. PT1
		I think the KOL is trustworthy. PT2
		I think the KOL has a good reputation. PT3
	perceived value	I think the brand information provided by the KOL is in line with reality. PT4
		I think the brand recommended by the KOL is high quality. PV1
		I think the brand recommended by the KOL is good value for money. PV2
		I think the brand recommended by the KOL meets my consumer needs. PV3
		I think the brand recommended by this KOL meets my expectations. PV4
		I find the brand recommended by the KOL attractive. BL1
response of the organism (R)	brand loyalty	I am willing to buy the brand recommended by this KOL for a long time. BL2
		I would recommend this KOL recommended brand to my friends and relatives. BL3
		I think the KOL can influence whether or not I can continue to buy a branded item. BL4

5 Empirical analysis

5.1 Reliability and validity test

The study employed SPSS to conduct the scale data analysis, with the results of reliability and validity assessments presented in Table 2. The Cronbach's α values for KOL traits (popularity, professionalism, interactivity, recommendation consistency, and recommendation usefulness), perceived trust, perceived value, and brand loyalty all exceeded 0.8. Additionally, the composite reliability (CR) was above 0.8, indicating satisfactory reliability of the scales used. The factor loadings for each measurement item were above 0.7, and the average variance extracted (AVE) was above 0.55. The discriminant validity test results are shown in Table 3. The square root of the AVE was significantly higher than the inter-construct correlation coefficients, confirming both convergent and discriminant validity of the scales used in the study.

Table 2 Reliability and Validity Analysis

Variable	Encodings	Factor loading	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE
popularity	POP1	0.826	0.875	0.877	0.704
	POP2	0.917			
	POP3	0.767			
professionalism	PRO1	0.792	0.828	0.831	0.623
	PRO2	0.843			
	PRO3	0.728			
interactivity	INT1	0.763	0.849	0.855	0.664
	INT2	0.821			
	INT3	0.857			
recommended consistency	RC1	0.85	0.888	0.889	0.727
	RC2	0.872			
	RC3	0.836			
recommended usefulness	RP1	0.875	0.872	0.870	0.696
	RP2	0.825			
	RP3	0.802			
perceived trust	PT1	0.844	0.899	0.900	0.691
	PT2	0.82			
	PT3	0.834			
perceived value	PT4	0.828	0.899	0.899	0.691
	PV1	0.838			
	PV2	0.8			
brand loyalty	PV3	0.823	0.886	0.909	0.713
	PV4	0.853			
	BL1	0.828			
	BL2	0.838			
	BL3	0.835			
	BL4	0.898			

Table 3 Distinct validity test

	brand loyalty	perceived value	perceived trust	recommended usefulness	recommended consistency	interactivity	professionalism	popularity
brand loyalty	0.844							
perceived value	0.704	0.831						
perceived trust	0.69	0.571	0.831					
recommended usefulness	0.61	0.529	0.51	0.834				
recommended consistency	0.626	0.532	0.54	0.491	0.853			
interactivity	0.66	0.63	0.593	0.533	0.496	0.815		
professionalism	0.669	0.623	0.549	0.563	0.562	0.544	0.789	
popularity	0.638	0.572	0.61	0.511	0.519	0.547	0.538	0.839

5.2 The main effect test of KOL on consumer brand loyalty

The main effect was tested by Bootstrap method in AMOS software, and the path analysis is shown in Table 4. KOL's qualities can enhance consumers' sense of trust, as well as enable them to recognize the value of the brand in a more rational way and establish a deep emotional connection and value recognition, thus increasing consumers' continued attention to the brand and their willingness to repeat their choices. KOL's attributes can enhance consumers' trust in them, and can also make consumers more rationally recognize the value of the brand to build deep emotional connection and value recognition, thus increasing consumers' continued attention to the brand and their willingness to repeat the choice. Regarding popularity, the path coefficient was found to be 0.123 ($p < 0.05$). For professionalism, it reached 0.159 ($p < 0.001$). Interactivity exhibited a path coefficient of 0.128 ($p < 0.05$), while recommendation consistency showed a coefficient of 0.129 ($p < 0.001$). Additionally, recommendation usefulness had a path coefficient of 0.138 ($p < 0.05$). These results further validate the hypotheses (H1a, H1b, H1c, H1d, and H1e), confirming that KOL traits significantly enhance consumer brand loyalty across the specified dimensions.

Table 4 Path coefficient test for main effects

hypotheses	trails	Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P value	conclude
H1a	popularity→brand loyalty	0.123	0.046	2.652	0.008	Valid
H1b	professionalism→brand loyalty	0.159	0.048	3.304	***	Valid
H1c	interactivity→brand loyalty	0.128	0.043	3.000	0.003	Valid
H1d	recommended consistency→brand loyalty	0.129	0.037	3.502	***	Valid
H1e	recommended usefulness→brand loyalty	0.138	0.044	3.125	0.002	Valid

5.3 Examining the Mediating Effects of Perceived Trust and Perceived Value

The mediating influence of perceived trust and perceived value was evaluated using structural equation modeling, with the results detailed in Table 5. KOL characteristics can engage consumer interest and foster trust, thereby enhancing perceived trust and subsequently reinforcing brand loyalty. Across the five dimensions examined, including popularity, professionalism, interactivity, recommendation consistency, and recommendation usefulness, KOL traits were found to bolster brand loyalty by strengthening consumer trust. The corresponding hypotheses (H2a, H2b, H2c, H2d, H2e) were confirmed. Furthermore, KOL traits can deepen consumers' understanding of brand features, thereby stimulating their perception of brand value and enhancing brand loyalty. The mediating effects across these dimensions indicate that KOL traits, including popularity, professionalism, interactivity, recommendation consistency, and recommendation usefulness, can elevate perceived value, which in turn further increases brand loyalty. These findings support the validity of hypotheses (H3a, H3b, H3c, H3d, H3e).

Table 5 Path coefficient test of mediating effect

hypotheses	trails	Impact coefficient	95% confidence interval		P value	conclude
			Lower	Upper		
H2a	popularity→perceived trust→brand loyalty	0.060	0.022	0.123	0.002	Valid
H2b	professionalism→perceived trust→brand loyalty	0.042	0.015	0.097	0.001	Valid
H2c	interactivity→perceived trust→brand loyalty	0.030	0.005	0.074	0.016	Valid
H2d	recommended consistency→perceived trust→brand loyalty	0.054	0.016	0.119	0.001	Valid
H2e	recommended usefulness→perceived trust→brand loyalty	0.046	0.014	0.095	0.002	Valid
H3a	popularity→perceived value→brand loyalty	0.054	0.022	0.111	0.001	Valid
H3b	professionalism→perceived value→brand loyalty	0.031	0.007	0.077	0.003	Valid
H3c	interactivity→perceived value→brand loyalty	0.025	0.005	0.066	0.008	Valid
H3d	recommended consistency→perceived value→brand loyalty	0.024	0.001	0.068	0.036	Valid
H3e	recommended usefulness→perceived value→brand loyalty	0.025	0.004	0.070	0.019	Valid

6 Conclusion and Implications

Based on the SOR theory, this study examines the influence mechanism of KOL traits on brand loyalty through empirical research. The findings indicate that KOL traits, including professionalism, interactivity, popularity, recommendation consistency, and recommendation usefulness, exert significant positive impacts on brand loyalty.

Perceived trust and perceived value emerge as critical mediators between KOL traits and brand loyalty. Perceived trust primarily drives brand loyalty by capturing consumer attention and fostering trust, whereas perceived value enhances brand loyalty by deepening consumer understanding of the brand's functionality and utility. Moreover, different KOL traits influence perceived trust and perceived value through distinct pathways. Recommendation consistency has a more pronounced effect on perceived trust, while popularity and professionalism have a more significant impact on perceived value. Based on these insights, the following managerial recommendations are proposed: first, when selecting KOLs for cooperation, enterprises should focus on those KOLs with strong professional ability, frequent interaction and high visibility, while not neglecting the consistency and usefulness of KOLs' recommended content. By improving the comprehensive quality of KOL, its credibility and sense of value in the minds of consumers will be enhanced. Secondly, brand loyalty is a dynamic process of change, enterprises need to continuously track the effect of KOL marketing activities according to market changes and consumer demand, timely adjustment of KOL selection, and marketing strategy. Thirdly, companies should leverage KOLs to disseminate high-value information, thereby augmenting consumers' understanding of the brand's functional and emotional benefits.

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