

A Review of the Impact Effects of Key Opinion Leaders on Consumers' Purchase Behaviors

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ABSTRACT

With the rapid development of social media, the role of KOL (Key Opinion Leader) in brand marketing has become increasingly prominent, serving an important bridge connecting enterprises and consumers. This article adopts the literature review method to summarize research on the influence of KOL on consumers' purchasing behavior, both domestically and internationally. It focuses on analyzing influence mechanisms, action paths, and key variables. The study found that the professionalism, credibility, attractiveness, and homogeneity of KOL are the main factors influencing consumers' trust and purchase intention. Different types of KOL have differences in brand communication effects. Based on summarizing the shortcomings of existing research, this article proposes that future research can delve deeper into emerging popular methods. These include cross-cultural studies, algorithmic recommendation mechanisms, and virtual KOL idols. Such research can provide references for both brand marketing practice and academic research.

KEYWORDS

Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs); Consumer purchase behavior; Influencer marketing; Credibility; Attractiveness; Trust; Social media; Cross-cultural research

1 Introduction

In an era where the digital economy and social media have developed to a high degree, key opinion leaders (KOLs) have become an important bridge between brands and consumers. With the popularity of platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok, the way consumers obtain information has undergone a fundamental change. Unlike traditional television advertisements or print advertisements, the influence brought by KOLs is not merely about information dissemination, but also about the impact on consumption decisions based on trust, emotional connection, and social recognition. Both the academic community and the industry generally believe that KOLs have become one of the core forces in digital marketing ^[1-2].

In recent years, KOL marketing has become particularly popular in China. New e-commerce models such as "live streaming for product promotion" have changed the way consumers shop and the marketing strategies of enterprises. Chinese internet celebrities, such as Li Jiaqi and Weiyyi, leveraging their personal charm, professionalism, and frequent interactions, can generate sales of millions within a short period. This phenomenon not only attracts the attention of enterprises but has also become an important topic in academic research. For instance, some people pointed out that KOLs can stimulate the purchase intentions of the Z Generation more effectively than traditional advertisements in promoting green consumer products ^[3]; other people found that there is a significant positive correlation between the frequency of consumers' interactions in the live streaming room and the purchase conversion rate ^[4].

However, despite the significant influence of KOL in marketing and communication, there are still some deficiencies in academic research. Firstly, most studies focus on the fields of beauty, fashion, and fast-moving consumer goods, and there is a relative lack of exploration in industries such as education, healthcare, and finance. Secondly, cross-cultural research is limited, and there are significant differences in values, consumption psychology, and information acceptance methods between Western societies and Chinese consumers, but there are relatively few empirical studies in this regard. Finally, most studies are cross-sectional surveys and lack longitudinal data, making it difficult to reveal the long-term impact of KOL on consumers' consumption habits.

Based on the above background, this paper aims to systematically review the research results on KOL and consumer purchasing behavior both domestically and internationally. It will conduct a comprehensive overview from perspectives such as theoretical models, influencing mechanisms, empirical research methods, typical cases, and cross-cultural comparisons. At the same time, this paper will identify the research gaps and propose future agendas, with the intention of providing references for the academic community and offering insights for enterprises to formulate more scientific KOL marketing strategies.

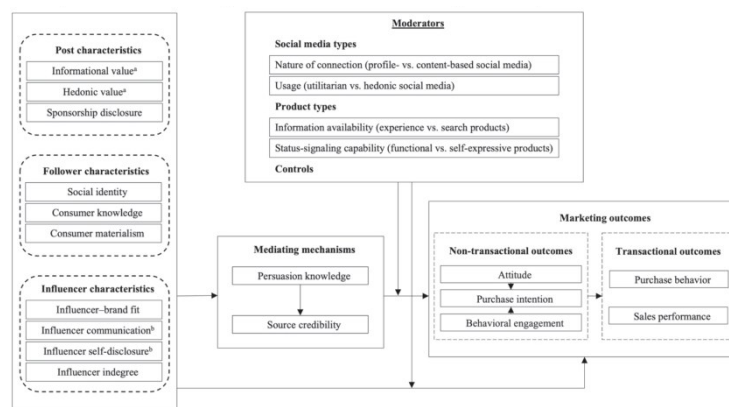
2 Research

2.1 Research on key opinion leaders

The academic research on KOL (Key Opinion Leader, Key Opinion Leader) can be traced back to around 2010. With the rise of social media platforms, researchers gradually noticed the special role of this group in consumer communication and brand marketing. The research by Freberg et al. was the first to clearly state that KOLs are not only disseminators of information but also constructors of opinions and guides of values in the social media environment ^[5].

Through their unique personalized expressions and strong interactivity, they can have a significant impact on fans' brand perception and attitudes. Subsequently, Boerman et al. further pointed out that compared to traditional advertising, KOLs can significantly enhance consumers' trust in the brand through real and personalized product recommendations, which has made KOLs gradually regarded as an important bridge connecting brands and consumers ^[6].

Entering the 2020s, the theoretical framework and research methods of KOL studies have gradually diversified. Lim et al. found through empirical analysis that the credibility and attractiveness of KOLs are the core variables influencing consumers' purchase intentions. Among them, credibility not only lies in the authenticity and reliability of the information, but also includes the alignment of KOLs with consumers at the value level ^[7]; while attractiveness is not limited to appearance and image, but also involves the influence of personality charm and lifestyle. Djafarova and Rushworth discovered through research on the Z generation that this group is more inclined to trust recommendations from "down-to-earth" online celebrities rather than traditional celebrity endorsements ^[8]. This finding indicates that generational differences are reshaping the influence mechanism of KOLs: younger generation consumers attach more importance to authenticity and resonance in information reception, rather than just the star effect.



a. We combine informational value and hedonic value as content value (Hughes et al. 2019) in SEM. b. We also combine influencer communication and influencer self-disclosure as interaction strategies (Aw et al. 2022) in the same analysis.

Figure 1

From: Influencer marketing effectiveness: A met a-analytic review

Furthermore, in recent years, the academic community has also gradually focused on the detailed research on different types of KOLs. For instance, Abidin proposed the concept of "micro-influencers", emphasizing that they have greater influence in specific fields because although their fan base is limited, their interaction rate and trust level are significantly higher than those of large-scale celebrity KOLs ^[9]. This "small but specialized" influence path showcases the new trend in KOL research in the social media era. Overall, KOL-related research has gradually formed a development pattern from "macro - micro", and "single - multiple", and the research focus has shifted from "existence of influence" to "mechanism of action".

2.2 Three major schools of research on consumer purchase behavior

In the study of consumer purchasing behavior, the academic community has gradually formed three major mainstream theoretical schools, which respectively reveal the internal mechanism by which KOLs influence consumers from different perspectives.

First, the influence model school.

This school emphasizes the mechanism by which the credibility, attractiveness and professionalism of KOLs play a role in consumer decision-making. Credibility is mainly reflected in the authenticity, authority and consistency of the information. For example, when KOLs maintain a transparent recommendation method for a long time, their statements are more likely to gain consumer trust. Attractiveness not only includes appearance and image, but also covers the consistency of values and the imitation of lifestyle. This trait can strengthen fans' psychological identification with KOLs ^[10-11]. Professionalism highlights the knowledge reserves and experience accumulation of KOLs in specific fields.

Professional recommendations often help consumers reduce information screening costs and thus improve purchase efficiency. These three factors jointly shape the authoritative image of KOLs, and thereby significantly enhance consumers' purchase intention.

Second, the fan identification sentiment school.

This school places greater emphasis on the role mechanisms at the emotional and social psychological levels. The studies by Jin et al. and Lou & Yuan indicate that fan identification sentiment is an important psychological driving force for purchase behavior. KOLs gradually establish trust relationships and emotional bonds with fans through continuous content output and long-term interaction (such as responding to comments, sharing daily life, and building communities)^[2,12]. In interaction behaviors such as likes, comments, and forwards, fans not only obtain immediate social satisfaction but also strengthen a sense of belonging and identification in the group atmosphere. When fans resonate with KOLs in terms of values, lifestyles, or consumption concepts, the imitation and following psychology will naturally transform into purchase motivation. This "emotional attachment - identity identification - consumption behavior" chain becomes an important theoretical model of this school.

Third, platform media influence genres.

This genre emphasizes that the communication effect of KOLs is not isolated but is closely related to the media attributes and technical mechanisms of the platform. The research by De Veirman et al. and Casaló et al. found that the algorithmic mechanisms and community atmospheres of different platforms have a significant moderating effect on the promotion effect of KOLs^[1,13]. For example, the personalized recommendation algorithms of Douyin and Xiaohongshu can precisely push content, significantly enhancing the exposure and dissemination efficiency of KOLs; while Instagram and YouTube rely more on community relationships and long-term subscription mechanisms, thereby forming different user stickiness and consumption paths. Thus, it can be seen that the platform is not only a channel for information but also an important mediating variable in shaping consumer behavior paths. The characteristics of different platforms determine the depth and breadth of the influence of KOLs to some extent, and also provide new analytical dimensions for researchers.

In conclusion, the three major schools not only reveal the mechanism by which KOLs influence consumers' purchasing behavior from three dimensions: information dissemination (influence model), psychological mechanism (fan identification), and technological environment (platform and media), but also form complementary relationships to varying degrees. This indicates that the path by which KOLs influence consumers is a dynamic process interwoven by multiple factors and multiple levels, and requires comprehensive consideration of various factors such as information characteristics, social psychology, and media environment.

3 Results

Through a systematic review of numerous empirical studies in both Chinese and English, as well as meta-analyses and industry reports, this study has summarized the following core results regarding the impact effect of KOLs on consumers' purchasing behavior:

3.1 Long-term influence and effect size (Effect Size)

A recent meta-analysis study titled "Influencer marketing effectiveness: A meta-analytic review" integrated 1,531 effect values from 251 articles to assess the effectiveness of influencer marketing in various marketing outcomes such as attitudes, engagement, purchase intention, and actual purchase behavior^[14]. The study found that in terms of purchase intention, the informational value and hedonic value of posts had higher effect values of 0.55 and 0.65 respectively. For actual purchase behavior, the effect value of informational value was approximately 0.36, while the impact of hedonic value on sales was very strong at 0.86.

Compared with the characteristics of the influencers (followers/influencers) and the characteristics of the fan base, the characteristics of the posts usually bring more direct and more effective enhancement of purchase intention.

These results indicate that "informational value" and "hedonic value" in KOL content are important variables driving purchase intention; the content itself has a stronger driving force for short-term purchase intention compared to the social identity or fan attributes of the KOL.

3.2 The role of moderating variables: involvement, brand consistency and perceived attitude

Another study, "The moderating effects of involvement on the relationships between key opinion leaders, customer's attitude and purchase intention", was conducted in Vietnam, with a sample size of 546 people. It examined the four perceived characteristics of KOLs (trustworthiness, attractiveness, expertise, brand consistency) and the relationship

between consumer attitudes and purchase intentions. The results are as follows ^[15]:

Consumer involvement positively moderates the relationship between KOL perceived characteristics and attitudes, as well as between attitudes and purchase intentions. That is, when consumers have high interest or engagement in the product/ category, the influence of KOL's attractiveness, trustworthiness, etc. on their attitudes and intentions is stronger.

Brand consistency (i.e., the alignment of the KOL's persona, style, and positioning with the brand/product itself) is crucial for the impact of KOL perception. The higher the brand consistency, the more the KOL is perceived as "fitting" the brand information, thereby enhancing trust and recognition, and subsequently increasing purchase intentions.

3.3 Detailed analysis of the trust dimension: ability trust, charisma trust vs. benevolence and honesty trust

In domestic Chinese literature, "Research on Consumer Trust in the Red Star Economy - Based on the Perspectives of KOL and KOC ^[16]" systematically constructed and verified a trust scale consisting of five dimensions: ability trust, benevolence trust, integrity trust, charisma trust, and institutional trust.

The study found that trust in KOLs is more dependent on ability trust and charisma trust. That is to say, fans tend to value KOLs' ability in professionalism and their personality charisma more; in contrast, trust in KOC (Key Opinion Consumers) - those creators with fewer fans, smaller influence but closer to consumers' daily lives - is more derived from trust dimensions related to morality or personality such as benevolence and honesty.

Furthermore, the relationship between this sense of trust and the driving force behind consumer behavior has been verified: there is a statistically significant correlation between the five dimensions of trust and the actual purchasing intentions/behaviors of the fans.

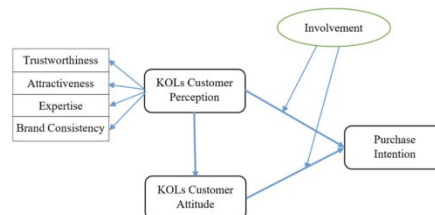


Figure 1. Proposed research model.

sub-dimensions of the source credibility (Ohanian, 1990) and one additional factor, brand consistency. This is illustrated in Figure 1.

3.4 Category and industry differences: beauty and fast-moving consumer goods vs. others

In multiple studies, the fields of skincare, fashion/clothing, and fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) have received the most intensive research attention:

"A Study on the Effectiveness of KOLs on the Brand Image of Skincare Products"^[17] examines the impact of KOLs on the brand image of skincare products and discovers that the professionalism and credibility of KOLs have a significant positive effect on enhancing the brand image.

In contrast, the research on snack foods ("A Study on the Impact of KOL Live Marketing on Consumers' Willingness to Purchase Casual Foods") found that in the live streaming environment, content perception, interaction perception, the personality of the KOL and the sense of authenticity have a significant influence on consumers' purchasing intentions.

Other industries such as education, finance, and healthcare have received less research. Currently, there is a lack of large-scale and sample-based empirical studies, which makes the influence mechanism and effectiveness boundary of KOLs in these industries still unclear.

4 Discussion

This study systematically analyzed the influence mechanism of Kols on consumers' purchasing behavior through the method of literature review. Research has found that the professionalism, credibility, appeal and homogeneity with fans of Kols are important factors influencing consumers' decisions. This is consistent with the relevant research results both domestically and internationally (Chu & Kim, 2011; Li Xiaohong, 2020).

Firstly, the professionalism and credibility of Kols can enhance consumers' trust in brand information, thereby increasing their purchase intention. For Generation Z, they tend to rely on social media to obtain information. Therefore, the authority of Kols directly affects their consumption decisions (Jin et al., 2019). Secondly, the appeal and personal charm of Kols can evoke emotional resonance and enhance consumers' emotional identification. This is particularly evident in live-streaming sales and short-video marketing (Wang Ting, 2021). Again, the homogeneity between Kols and

their fans (such as age, interests, values, etc.) helps to reduce psychological distance, making it easier for consumers to convert the recommendations of Kols into actual purchase behaviors (De Veirman et al., 2017).

However, the existing research also has certain limitations. On the one hand, most studies are based on questionnaires and lack longitudinal tracking of actual purchasing behavior; On the other hand, the long-term influence of Kols and the potential risks of negative events have not been fully explored. Therefore, future research should integrate big data analysis and experimental design to further verify the causal relationship between Kols influencing consumer purchasing behavior, and pay attention to the differentiated impacts of different types of Kols on different groups.

5 Conclusion

In conclusion, in the digital economy era, KOLs have become an important role in brand marketing. Their professionalism, credibility, attractiveness, and homogeneity are key factors influencing consumers' purchasing behavior. When enterprises formulate marketing strategies, they should fully utilize the influence of KOLs, select KOLs that are highly compatible with the target consumers, and pay attention to long-term brand image management and risk control. Future research can further expand the cross-cultural perspective to explore the effect differences of KOLs in different social and cultural backgrounds, and provide references for brand international marketing.

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