

Research on the Impact of Key Opinion Leaders KOLs Credibility on Consumer Decision-Making Paths in Social Media Marketing

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Abstract. Social media has developed rapidly, Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) have become important sources of information influencing consumer decision-making, but KOL credibility mechanisms across consumption stages remain poorly integrated. Therefore, this paper conducts a systematic literature review to investigate how KOL credibility is formed and how it affects consumer behavior during the pre-purchase stage. This paper provides a systematic analysis of the purchase and post-purchase stages within the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework, and accordingly synthesizes previous literature to identify the multidimensional antecedents of KOL credibility: personal traits and content characteristics. Most importantly, it concludes that KOL credibility serves as a salient external stimulus that affects consumers' cognitive evaluations and emotional reactions. The text explains how the approach increases purchase intention in the pre-purchase stage, reduces perceived risk so as to facilitate decision conversion during purchase, and builds trust, reinforces brand loyalty through expectation validation in the post-purchase stage. More importantly, it makes a point about the dynamic character of credibility, as it is constantly adjusted by consumer experiences. Hence, the paper extends the S-O-R model with a stage-based perspective and offers direct insights for KOL strategy and brand collaboration in digital marketing.

1 Introduction

Because social media platforms have become extremely popular and their user bases have been growing rapidly, social media marketing has naturally become a very important channel for corporate brand promotion and product sales. Hence platforms such as Xiaohongshu (specializing in authentic lifestyle sharing and building community trust), Douyin (with strong algorithmic recommendations and short video content), and Instagram (focusing on visual storytelling and global reach) are all noteworthy examples. Since the new media have changed the way users access information and have also altered the patterns of communication between brands and consumers, it is natural and logical to see Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) serving as important bridges connecting brands and consumers. By utilizing their expertise, authority, and loyal following in certain fields, KOLs now exert an ever-

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greater influence on consumer decision-making through content creation. KOLs create two distinct but complementary pathways through the transmission of information credibility and emotional appeal, therefore they are not only able to shape consumer perceptions and attitudes but can also directly influence purchasing behavior. For these reasons, studying the mechanisms of KOL influence and improving KOL credibility have become major topics of interest for both academic researchers and practitioners in the business world. The literature on the impact of KOLs on consumer behavior is already quite rich and well organized. From a theoretical standpoint, the Source Characteristics Theory, the Quasi-Social Relationship Theory, and the S-O-R Theory have been systematically and extensively used to explain the mechanisms of KOL influence. As for influencing factors, scholars have already examined various variables. The antecedents of KOL credibility have been systematically examined from two dimensions: personal traits (expertise, attractiveness, interactivity) and content traits (information quality, effectiveness, presentation platform). But it is also evident that the literature suffers from important fragmentation: first, there is no unified framework for defining and measuring KOL credibility, and second, consumer decision-making is a multi-stage process consisting of information search, purchase execution, and post-purchase evaluation, with KOLs having potentially different effects at different stages. Hence, existing research has not adequately integrated or compared these stage-specific influences. Since the paper is set against a certain theoretical background, it quite naturally and logically adopts the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) theory as its analytical framework, because the theory has three clear, well-defined components: external stimuli, internal psychological states, and behavioral responses, and thus can trace the entire path from information reception to decision-making behavior. More importantly, it integrates the multi-stage, multi-dimensional aspects of KOL credibility perfectly.

The paper provides a very clear, logically structured theoretical foundation for the systematic organization of relevant research: first it summarizes the antecedents of KOL credibility from the two dimensions of personal traits and content traits, and then it breaks down the consumer decision-making path into three distinct stages (pre-purchase, during purchase, post-purchase) to analyze the different mechanisms by which KOL credibility operates in each stage. The paper first reviews the relevant literature, then gives clear, well-argued recommendations and suggestions for future research, thereby naturally and logically leading to the construction of an integrated analytical framework for how KOL credibility affects the consumer decision-making path. As a result, it offers solid theoretical support for KOL marketing psychology and concrete guidance for improving KOL marketing strategies.

1.1 Key opinion leaders

The concept of "opinion leaders" has been thoroughly and systematically examined in communication studies over the past century, and Paul Lazarsfeld was the first to explicitly introduce the concept of "opinion leaders" in his 1944 book *The Choice of the People**, where he also formulated the famous "two-step flow theory", which argues that the fundamental mechanism of information dissemination is the transmission of messages through intermediaries who have some degree of influence. Therefore, the intermediaries in this theory are best understood as Key Opinion Leaders (KOL, i. e., Key Opinion Leader) is a term used to describe people in a given field or industry who exert substantial influence over others by virtue of their authority, expertise, experience, or persuasive power, and therefore guide or shape the opinions and behaviors of the public. KOLs are generally highly visible on social media, traditional media, or in industry circles, and their views, recommendations, and reviews have direct and significant impact on audience decisions, which is why they are of great value in brand marketing and consumer behavior analysis.

1.2 Consumer decision-making journey

The consumer decision-making journey can be clearly and logically defined as the process that begins with consumer awareness of a need and ends with the purchase decision and subsequent product experience, with many distinct stages and touchpoints along the way. Therefore, this paper divides the consumer decision-making journey into three well-defined stages: pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase, and systematically examines how decision-making factors and emotional states at each stage influence the final purchase behavior. More importantly, since KOLs are a key external source of information, the paper also discusses how they can exert different types of influence across all stages: pre-purchase information search, in-purchase option comparison, and post-purchase evaluation sharing.

1.3 The S-O-R theory

The S-O-R model is a well-known psychological theory introduced by Mehrabian and Russell in 1974 to account for the way individuals respond to stimuli, therefore it is natural and logical to define S (Stimulus) as external stimuli or environmental factors, i.e., the various external conditions affecting consumers, O (Organism) as the consumer's internal state, which encompasses the consumer's psychological reactions such as emotions, attitudes [1]. (S)cognition is the mental process triggered by external stimuli, and R (Response) denotes the consumer's final behavioral response, namely purchase decisions, brand selection, and consumer satisfaction, with each component being mutually connected and working together to determine consumer behavior. Therefore, the framework adopted in this study is quite natural and elegant: the credibility characteristics of KOLs are treated as the external stimulus (S), consumers' perceived trust and attitudinal changes toward them are considered the internal state of the organism (O), and purchase intention and decision-making behavior are identified as the final behavioral response (R). Thus, the three elements form the clear, logical theoretical foundation for analyzing the mechanism of KOL influence in this paper.

2 Analysis of antecedent factors affecting KOL credibility

2.1 KOL personal trait factors

From the standpoint of Hovland's source credibility model it is clear that the persuasiveness of information is fundamentally determined by the characteristics of the communicator, hence on social media KOLs are major information sources and their personal traits form the basis for consumers' trust judgments.

2.1.1 Professionalism

Professionalism is best understood as the combination of knowledge, skills, and experience that a KOL brings to his or her field, which is why audiences generally regard KOLs with professional backgrounds (doctors, professors, seasoned practitioners) or those who have spent a long time immersed in a particular area as more credible sources. Hence, when a KOL exhibits genuine professionalism, the audience is likely to develop "competence trust" in that person because the speaker or writer presents products they recommend or the views they express with the explicit or implicit assumption that the probability of their judgment being incorrect is very low, the audience is more likely to accept their influence and thus has a greater willingness to purchase. Wei Jiajie (2023) trenchantly and logically argues that KOLs

will only be admired and respected by their followers, earn their trust, and actually influence users' purchasing intentions if they have adequate professional knowledge [2].

2.1.2 Reputation

Reputation is simply the degree of public awareness and fame that a KOL enjoys, and therefore high reputation almost certainly means that the KOL has passed initial market validation. KOLs certified as "Brand Partners" must satisfy defined follower thresholds and content quality standards, which makes them far more trustworthy in the eyes of users, and as a result, they have genuine social influence and authority on social media platforms. Since the content and views of the KOL attract much attention from users, an increase in a KOL's visibility naturally increases public trust, thus making consumers more likely to choose and purchase the products the KOL recommends. More importantly, reputation can be neatly connected to the psychological concept of "social recognition": audiences generally see high-profile KOLs as more trustworthy and therefore regard their product recommendations as more credible. This psychological tendency can be very naturally and accurately described as an instance of the "social proof" mechanism, namely the tendency of individuals to use others' choices as a basis for judgment in uncertain situations. Bansal et al. (2000) have provided clear and compelling evidence that the reputation and word-of-mouth of key opinion leaders (KOLs) in an industry significantly affect the reputation and performance of products in that industry [2]. Yet it is also important to recognize that popularity has a dark side: extreme popularity often signals excessive commercialization, which can make audiences question the KOL's objectivity.

2.1.3 Attractiveness

Attractiveness can be neatly and logically defined as consisting of physical attractiveness, personal charm, and value congruence, and thus it is natural to expect that audiences are more likely to follow and trust KOLs whose aesthetic matches their own, whose personality is likable, or whose values align with their own. Moreover, existing research supports the idea that people tend to socialize with others who share common interests [3]. Therefore, attractiveness affects credibility emotionally. The concept of "transference" is neatly explained here through the lens of "similarity attraction": namely, many KOLs cultivate their image by means of persona development and content style design, and therefore many KOLs build clear, distinctive personal brands such as "working women," "travel bloggers," or "ingredient experts," which position them as the audience's ideal self or as someone like their friends and family, thus naturally lowering consumers' psychological defenses. Because such image-building efforts make users more likely to believe that the KOL's content is shared with good intentions rather than solely for commercial purposes, they therefore serve to clarify the KOL's positioning and also foster users' sense of identification with, and connection to, the KOL. In the context of social media marketing, quasi-social relationships can be neatly and accurately defined as the emotional bond that exists in a follower. The literature indicates that consumers view KOLs as friends or close companions, which is a crucial distinction from opinion leadership based on professional expertise, because quasi-social relationships are grounded in emotional attachment and therefore correspond to the emotional evaluation pathway that consumers take toward KOLs [4]. Prolonged exposure to a particular KOL leads audiences to develop a one-way emotional attachment similar to real-life interpersonal relationships, and such attachment naturally reinforces trust in and loyalty toward the KOL.

2.1.4 Interactivity

Interactivity can be clearly and systematically defined as the frequency and quality of interactions between KOLs and their followers, encompassing such behaviors as replying to comments, hosting Q&A sessions, interacting during live streams, and responding to fan suggestions. Therefore, high-intensity interaction dismantles the conventional barriers of one-way media communication, making KOLs feel truly "accessible." Yurika et al.(2022) have provided rigorous evidence on this point. KOLs can use interaction to build closer ties with their followers, making followers feel like actual members of the KOL's community, and hence form a special emotional bond [5]. Frequent interaction therefore enhances users' favorable impressions of the KOL, whereas thoughtful, constructive responses cultivate mutual trust. More importantly, audiences interpret such interactive behavior as a demonstration of respect and sincerity. Thus, the higher the interactivity, the more KOLs are perceived by their audiences as genuine interpersonal contacts rather than one-way commercial channels, which directly facilitates the formation of deeper relational trust. In short, interaction is fundamental to trust building between KOLs and their followers.

2.1.5 Credibility

Credibility is the perception of honesty, fairness, and integrity that a KOL has developed over time through past communications, and therefore is a direct reflection of the KOL's character as well as their ethical behavior in commercial dealings. Since credibility is the moral basis for trust, KOLs with higher credibility are more readily accepted by consumers, and the products they promote are more easily trusted by consumers. Sesar's research clearly and persuasively demonstrates that explicit communication of advertising disclosures enhances source credibility, namely that KOLs who openly tell consumers they are engaging in promotional activity are more easily accepted by consumers because such disclosure shows respect for consumers' right to know and their right to choose, thereby naturally reducing the audience's psychological discomfort [6]. The use of KOLs to promote products enhances their favorability and trustworthiness, especially when the KOL promotion involves cause-related marketing (CRM), where information integrity is even more crucial. Brønn&Vrioni (2001) provide a clear and elegant definition of CRM: it is a method by which companies communicate their social responsibility through marketing communications, but they also note that consumers tend to approach such activities with skepticism, worrying that companies may have hidden motives [7]. Therefore, the most effective approach for KOLs is to fully, transparently disclose specific details of cause-related marketing in their content, including donation percentages, partners, and actual beneficiary outcomes, which directly reduces consumer skepticism and bolsters perceptions of authenticity and trust toward both the KOL and the brand.

2.2 Factors related to KOL content characteristics

2.2.1 Information quality

Information quality can be clearly and systematically defined as the degree to which the content published by KOLs is accurate, complete, clear, and logically rigorous. Audiences who perceive the information provided by a KOL as accurate, comprehensive, and logically sound are more likely to form a positive judgment about the KOL's professional competence, hence assign a higher credibility rating. Moreover, when a KOL provides multi-dimensional details (usage scenarios, personal experiences, objective evaluations), consumers are much more likely to interpret the content as a genuine experience share rather than a commercial

promotion. This perception of authenticity is a fundamental prerequisite for trust formation. Therefore, information quality is not only an attribute of the content itself but also the bedrock upon which consumers' cognitive evaluations and trust judgments about KOLs are built.

2.2.2 Practicality

Relevance can naturally and logically be divided into two clear dimensions: first, timeliness, which refers to whether the content keeps up with industry trends and makes timely disclosures, and second, longevity, which refers to whether the content has enduring reference value and does not become obsolete too quickly. Therefore, a KOL who can swiftly get to the forefront of a trend and be the first to release pertinent content has true relevance. Product review videos or service analyses of new offerings are generally regarded by consumers as an "industry barometer," hence they are a natural and effective way to build a credible image in consumers' minds and also serve as indirect evidence of the KOL's expertise in the relevant field. More importantly, the longevity of content—that is, whether it retains its reference value after publication—determines whether a KOL's content can become a real long-term information resource for consumers, thus offering sustained decision-making support. Therefore, KOLs who can balance short-term trends with long-term value enjoy greater credibility with consumers.

2.2.3 Uniqueness

A KOL's uniqueness can be clearly and logically defined as the combination of differentiated viewpoints, original insights, and irreplaceable value expressed in their content. In today's media environment of information overload, where platforms are saturated with homogenized content, KOLs who offer unique perspectives and have distinct ways of presenting them therefore stand out more easily, and they also provide consumers with new, fresh angles that are hard to find elsewhere. Thus, publishing unique content allows KOLs to grab consumers' attention quickly while simultaneously making the content feel more authentic. Consumers are more likely to perceive it as a genuine expression rather than a commercial promotion, which in turn builds stronger trust between the consumer and the KOL.

2.2.4 Presentation platform

Since the platform is the channel through which KOLs publish their content, it is natural and important to note that different social media platforms have different user demographics and content orientations, hence the platform's own media image and perceived credibility can influence users' assessments of a KOL's credibility via the trust transfer mechanism. This point is elegantly addressed in the study by Shi&Chow (2015). Trust transfer occurs when users perceive similarities or a close relationship between two entities, hence users' trust in a platform naturally transfers to the KOLs operating on that platform [8]. More importantly, this transfer is facilitated when the KOL's content style is in very good harmony with the platform's tone, making users more likely to see a genuine connection. A clear example is a KOL who has earned authority by thoroughly engaging with the platform's community, because a member of a knowledge-sharing community naturally enjoys greater credibility when recommending paid knowledge products than a similar blogger who started on an entertainment-focused platform, the platform itself provides KOLs with an initial endorsement of trust, while the KOL's content performance directly reinforces or weakens the platform's overall reputation in the eyes of users. Thus, there is a clear, healthy symbiosis

of mutual dependence and two-way influence. Therefore, the assessment of a KOL 's credibility cannot be done in isolation from the platform context. Consequently, the degree of alignment between a KOL and the platform is itself a fundamental prerequisite for their credibility.

3 Mechanisms through which KOL credibility influences consumers

This chapter provides a very clear, systematic analysis of how KOL credibility affects consumer decision-making at different stages, framed appropriately within the S-O-R (Stimulus-Organism-Response) theoretical model proposed by Mehrabian and Russell (1974), which is already a well-established and frequently used framework in consumer behavior research. Specifically, the model explains that external stimuli (Stimulus) lead to changes in the individual's internal state (Organism). The text begins by explaining how stimuli drive behavioral responses (Response) and then goes on to discuss Jacob (2016)'s application of the S-O-R framework to social media contexts, namely that consumer behavior results from cognitive evaluations and emotional reactions to external stimuli. Therefore, Jacob's analysis naturally and elegantly justifies the inclusion of KOL credibility as a "stimulus" variable in the present study [9]. More specifically, in this study, KOL credibility is the central stimulus variable that affects consumers' cognitive evaluations and emotional states, which in turn shape their decision-making behavior at various stages of the purchasing process.

3.1 Pre-purchase stage: The mechanism of credibility's influence on purchase intention

Consumers in the pre-purchase stage search for product information and compare products by browsing social media, reading user reviews, and checking others' recommendations, hence KOLs are a major information source in this process and therefore have a substantial influence on consumer decision making. As such, purchase intention is a central and well-established variable in consumer behavior research. is generally defined as a consumer's subjective preference to purchase a specific product and has been thoroughly established as a reliable predictor of actual consumption behavior. Pen-Garcia provided a clear and neat definition of online purchase intention as the extent to which a consumer is willing to buy a product via an online store, while Mullet discussed consumers' attitudes toward a product or brand [10]. Because the effect of external factors on purchase intention can be systematically and clearly explained by the S-O-R model, it is reasonable to state that product recommendations by KOLs and their credibility constitute the external stimulus (Stimulus), which affects consumers' cognitive and emotional states (Organism) by increasing trust and product favorability, and therefore raises purchase intention (Response). Compared to ordinary information sources, highly credible KOLs are more likely to generate positive psychological responses in consumers, hence more effectively reinforcing their purchasing tendencies. Therefore, the process of using KOLs on social media to influence consumer behavior is well and systematically addressed in academic literature as "influencer marketing" (Zhang et al., 2024), which refers precisely to the way consumers form purchase intentions through sequential cognitive processing and emotional identification after exposure to KOL content. From an academic viewpoint, "influencing" is nothing other than the process by which consumers' purchase intentions are cumulatively accumulated and reinforced under the stimulation of KOLs.

3.2 At the time of purchase

Consumers have already formed some purchase intention at the purchase stage, but it is clear that whether they actually make a purchase depends on their evaluation of perceived risk, which is reduced by trust. Therefore, purchase intention does not automatically lead to purchase behavior, especially in situations of uncertainty, when consumers are likely to hesitate because of perceived risks. Since the trust mechanism based on the KOL's credibility plays a fundamental role in this process, it is natural and logical to turn to existing literature, which clearly shows that consumers still consider perceived risks at the critical moment of purchase decision-making even after purchase intention has been formed. Pan Yu et al. (2010) have convincingly demonstrated that trust increases consumers' risk propensity and thus facilitates purchase decisions [11]. (S) since information conveyed by highly credible KOLs is more readily accepted by consumers and therefore better at alleviating consumers' psychological concerns during the purchase process, it is much more likely to convert purchase intent into actual purchasing behavior. From the standpoint of the S-O-R model, the KOL's credibility and the content he or she presents (time-limited prompts, scenario-based demonstrations) can be logically regarded as the external stimulus (S). (O) the text leads quite naturally to the conclusion that exposure to certain stimuli causes consumers to develop a sense of trust, have reduced risk perception, and experience positive emotions such as a sense of urgency and anticipation (O), which in turn triggers immediate or impulsive purchasing behavior (R). Therefore, impulse buying can be accurately characterized as an immediate decision-making behavior driven by consumers' emotions, with emotions clearly playing a central role in the process [12]. In highly interactive settings such as live streaming, KOLs make very effective use of interactive behaviors: real-time product demonstrations, instant replies to chat questions, and sharing personal usage clips, thereby greatly enhancing information transparency and creating for consumers the perception of authenticity and immediacy, which in turn naturally strengthens consumer trust. Moreover, the sense of social presence generated by these activities is considerable. the live-streaming environment, and hence the degree to which individuals perceive the presence of others during interactions, increases consumers' emotional engagement and identification, which in turn facilitates the occurrence of purchasing behavior [13]. More importantly, the role of KOL credibility is not confined to high-presence scenarios: even in ordinary text-and-image or short-video recommendations, the trust established by KOLs reduces consumers' decision-making uncertainty, thus directly and effectively promoting purchasing behavior.

3.3 Post-purchase

In the post-purchase phase consumers use actual use and experience to re-evaluate the quality and value of a product or service and then adjust their later behavior accordingly, the role of KOL credibility naturally shifts from "influencing decision-making" in the early stage to "standing the test of reality," and is consequently reinforced or modified in response to consumer feedback. (S) from a holistic perspective it is logical and clear to treat the consumer's actual usage experience as an external stimulus (S), the emotional reactions and cognitive evaluations (satisfaction or dissatisfaction) during use as an internal psychological state (O), and the subsequent behavioral responses such as repurchase intent, brand loyalty, and word-of-mouth dissemination (R) as the observable outcome. Thus KOL credibility functions as a moderating variable. an "expectation verification" mechanism is described very clearly: when actual experiences conform to KOL recommendations, consumers experience reinforcement of trust, hence their sustained trust in both the KOL and the brand is increased. Rose has nicely shown that in online shopping situations, consumers' positive emotional states and satisfaction levels directly and powerfully enhance their perceived trust

[12]. A positive usage experience reinforces consumers' endorsement of the product and thus strengthens their base of trust in the KOL, leading to more frequent engagement with the KOL's content, higher adoption rates of subsequent recommendations, and even active secondary dissemination. But more importantly, the positive emotions generated from real experiences are the most fundamental driver of brand loyalty: brand loyalty. Loyalty is clearly a biased behavioral response, namely consumers' repeated purchase of a brand's products, and its fundamental cause is consumers' positive emotions toward the brand [14]. Therefore, when consumers' actual experiences match KOL recommendations, their positive emotions toward the brand are not only established but also reinforced, which in turn naturally leads to authentic brand loyalty. Since it is well established that the post-purchase phase is rarely entirely smooth, it is logical and important to recognize that when consumers encounter product quality problems, usage difficulties, or situations requiring returns/exchanges, the after-sales service context becomes a key moment for experience validation. Therefore, collaborative actions by KOLs and the brand, such as timely statements, are particularly valuable. Because offering compensation plans and communicating transparently can alleviate consumers' negative emotions and thus turn crises into opportunities to build trust, it follows logically that the post-purchase phase is a crucial moment for the dynamic adjustment of KOL credibility: consumers use actual post-purchase experiences to re-evaluate their previously formed trust judgments, which in turn influence their long-term consumption behavior and how they maintain the consumer-KOL relationship.

4 Discussion and recommendations

4.1 Theoretical implications

Since the present paper makes use of the S-O-R theoretical framework, it logically and systematically analyzes the influence mechanisms of KOL credibility at the three stages of consumer decision-making (pre-purchase, during purchase, and post-purchase), thus deriving clear theoretical insights. The present study makes a very clear, systematic integration of the multidimensional antecedent structure of KOL credibility, first delineating two dimensions: personal traits (expertise, fame, attractiveness, interactivity, and credibility) and content traits (information quality, effectiveness, uniqueness, and presentation platform), then using them to identify the major factors affecting KOL credibility and to reveal its multidimensional structure. Therefore, the study lays a solid operational foundation for future research and also gives direct, useful theoretical guidance for KOL capacity building. This paper provides a very clear, systematic refinement of the concept of the "organism (O)" in the S-O-R model, pointing out that traditional S-O-R research treats the "organism (O)" as a single psychological state, whereas the present study properly divides it into two distinct pathways: cognitive evaluation and emotional arousal, and then logically delineates their different functions at various stages of the purchasing process. In the pre-purchase stage, cognitive evaluation plays a particular role. The article presents a clear, logically structured argument: trust building and perceived risk reduction (along with emotional arousal, i.e., interest stimulation, emotional connection) jointly influence the formation of purchase intent, while emotional drivers such as impulse buying, when supported by trust, facilitate the conversion of intention into action during the purchase stage. Furthermore, cognitive accumulation (trust reinforcement) and emotional consolidation (brand loyalty) together determine the maintenance of long-term relationships in the post-purchase stage. Therefore, the findings offer a rich, well-integrated theoretical perspective on the psychological mechanisms underlying KOL marketing. The third part of the paper very clearly and systematically

presents the mechanism by which KOL credibility affects consumer decision-making, showing that the fundamental role of KOL credibility is to help consumers reduce perceived risk, thereby increasing their purchase willingness, and that this mechanism operates throughout the entire consumer decision-making process. Thus it naturally and powerfully supports Pan Yu et al. (2010) 's conclusion that " trust can help consumers overcome perceived risk in virtual environments," and reaffirms the importance of trust in e-commerce.

4.2 Practical recommendations

Since the development of multi-dimensional credibility should be approached in a synergistic way, it is natural and logical to consider that KOLs should improve their professional competence by taking part in industry training and obtaining professional certifications, engage in regular, sincere exchanges with followers via comments and Q&A, and transparently disclose partnerships. To build a solid reputation, KOLs should first consider recommended products, but more importantly, at the content level they ought to emphasize the accuracy of information, cite data sources appropriately, publish content in a timely fashion by keeping abreast of new product reviews and industry trends, and cultivate a distinct content style to avoid the pitfall of homogenized content. Hence, different types of KOLs should focus on different areas according to their positioning. Entertainment-oriented KOLs should stress appeal and interactivity, skill-based KOLs should highlight their expertise, and sales-oriented KOLs must build up their credibility and professionalism. Therefore, brands ought to pay close attention to the alignment between the KOL, the product, and the target audience. Consequently, when selecting KOLs for collaboration, brands should not rely solely on follower counts.

The text should first examine the congruence between the KOL's personal characteristics and the product's attributes, as well as the compatibility between the KOL's fan base and the target audience, then proceed logically to have brands provide clear product specifications and usage instructions, strictly comply with applicable regulations and platform policies, and properly label collaborative content with " collaboration " or " sponS-O-Red ", thus protecting KOL credibility and consumer rights while creating a genuinely transparent, trustworthy marketing environment.

5 Conclusion

The present study uses the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework to conduct a very clear, logical analysis of how Key Opinion Leader (KOL) credibility affects consumer decision-making, dividing the consumer decision process into three well-defined stages: pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase, and examining the antecedents of KOL credibility from both personal traits and content characteristics. The review clearly presents three major findings. The first is that KOL credibility is multidimensional, arising from the interaction of personal traits (such as expertise, interactivity, reputation) and content characteristics (such as information quality, timeliness, platform context). The second is that KOL credibility has distinct functions at different decision stages: in the pre-purchase stage, it increases purchase intention by affecting cognitive evaluation and emotional arousal. In the purchase stage, the process from intention to behavior is smoothly facilitated by emotional drive supported by trust, while in the post-purchase stage, brand loyalty is effectively reinforced by cognitive accumulation and emotional consolidation. More importantly, KOL credibility is itself dynamic, continually validated and adjusted according to consumers' actual experiences. Therefore, KOLs should build credibility from multiple dimensions, brands should match KOLs with their target audience appropriately, and platforms should enhance trust mechanisms with better certification practices and content moderation. This paper first

presents a theoretically sound extension of the S-O-R model by making clear distinctions between cognitive and emotional pathways at various decision stages, and then naturally derives an integrated framework for analyzing KOL credibility, which in turn yields practical advice for KOL strategy, brand collaboration, and platform trust building.

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