Study on the Influence of KOL on Consumer Purchasing Decisions based on the Perspective of Brand Symbolization

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Abstract: **This study explores how key opinion KOLs influence consumer purchase decisions as brand symbols. Traditional AISAS and other models focus on exposure and conversion, ignoring the symbolic meaning of communication content. Drawing on brand semiotics, this paper constructs a "KOL-brand-consumer" triadic interaction model, emphasizing how KOLs symbolically connect brand value through personal image and content style, triggering consumer identity and emotional transfer. The study adopts purposive sampling, interviews 15-20 consumers, and participatory observation of 3-5 top KOL live broadcasts. Based on the open, main axis and selective coding of grounded theory, three types of nonlinear decision-making driving mechanisms are identified: professionalism, emotional resonance and scene immersion. The results show that the match between KOLs and brands at the symbolic level significantly enhances consumer trust and willingness to buy, and emotional narrative is better than information transmission in stimulating participation. This study proposes a symbolic KOL selection and content optimization framework and designs quantifiable indicators such as symbol consistency and emotional projection to evaluate its marketing effectiveness. This enriches the theoretical perspective of KOL marketing and provides feasible guidance for brands and platforms.**

Keywords: KOL Marketing; Brand Semiotics; Consumer Identity; Emotional Resonance; Symbol Consistency

1. Introduction

In the era of digital communication, key opinion KOLs have become a core force influencing consumer behavior and brand perception. With the widespread use of social media platforms, brands increasingly rely on KOLs to build trust, convey value, and establish emotional connections with audiences. However, in reality, many KOL marketing activities face problems of low engagement and conversion rates, which often stems from the lack of symbolic associations between KOLs, brands, and consumer self-concepts. This highlights the need for a deeper understanding of the symbolic dimension in the KOL influence mechanism. Existing research focuses on aspects such as credibility, attractiveness, and parasocial interaction, and pays less attention to the semiotic mechanism in brand communication. KOLs are only regarded as information transmitters, ignoring the construction of brand meaning and the process of emotional internalization. This makes it difficult to explain why some collaborations trigger strong resonance while others have mediocre effects. To fill this theoretical gap, this paper introduces the "symbolic interaction model", which integrates brand semiotics and consumer identity theory to explore how symbolic consistency between brands, KOLs, and audiences stimulates emotional attachment and drives purchasing behavior. This study aims to: First, construct the model to reveal the meaning of the co-construction process among the three. Second, it empirically verifies the impact of symbolic fit on trust and purchase intention. Third, it provides practical suggestions for brands to select KOLs and design resonant content and promotes the development of digital marketing theory and practice.

2. Literature Review

2.1 KOL Classification and Attributes

Currently, the academic community and the industry generally divide KOLs into three categories: professional, entertainment, and lifestyle. Professional KOLs mainly establish authority through their own knowledge background or professional identity, such as medical beauty bloggers, financial experts, etc. This is suitable for the dissemination of

categories that require rational persuasion. Entertainment KOLs rely on personal charm and entertainment content to attract traffic, such as jokes, imitations, and plots. These are common on short video platforms and are suitable for the promotion of fast-moving consumer goods or products with low cognitive thresholds (Luo et al., 2025). Lifestyle KOLs focus on "daily sharing" as the main content and build emotional connections with fans by showing their personal lifestyles, such as "grass-planting" bloggers in the fields of beauty, home, and food.

2.2 Brand Semiotics Theory

Brand Semiotics believes that a brand is not a single functional symbol, but a symbol system that contains cultural meaning and social value. Arvidsson (2008) pointed out that the social function of a brand is increasingly transcending physical attributes and becoming a tool for the construction of individual identity. When consumers consume brands, they are also participating in the cultural interpretation of brands. Schroeder (2006) further proposed the concept of "brand visual culture", emphasizing that the brand's images, colors, characters, etc. in advertising and communication construct a perceptible cultural atmosphere. Consumers gain identity and cultural recognition by identifying and accepting these "visual narratives".

From this perspective, KOL is not only a brand communication channel, but also a symbolic intermediary. Its own aesthetic style, language system and lifestyle become the carrier of brand meaning. For example, if a blogger who emphasizes an environmentally friendly lifestyle endorses a green consumer brand, its effectiveness comes not only from its fan base, but also from the consistency between the KOL's personal image and brand value.

2.3 Consumer Purchasing Behavior Model

The consumer purchase behavior model provides a basic path for understanding the marketing effect of KOL. Among them, the AISAS model is a representative model in the field of digital marketing. This model emphasizes the behavioral logic of consumers in the context of social media. First, they pay attention to (A) a certain content, arouse interest (I), then actively search (S), take purchase behavior (A), and finally spontaneously share (S) to achieve secondary dissemination of information (Xue et al., 2021).

Many current studies use the AISAS model to analyze the effect of KOL marketing. This especially emphasizes the importance of interest stimulation and conversion promotion. For example, on the TikTok platform, the purchase interest in the first two stages is stimulated through the design of content scripts and voice styles. This will guide actions through limited-time discounts and live broadcasts (Bray, 2024). However, the model also has obvious limitations. First, it assumes that consumer behavior is a rational and traceable linear path, while ignoring the irrational mechanisms such as emotional identification, aesthetic pleasure, and even cultural identification that consumers have when facing KOL content. Second, the model fails to explain "why consumers think that a certain KOL's recommendation is more trustworthy." The "symbolic meaning identification" implied behind this is not taken into consideration.

3. Research Methods

3.1 Data Collection

This study will collect three main data sources, aiming to obtain real and complex details about the KOL-brand-consumer interaction process from multiple perspectives.

(1) Semi-structured in-depth interviews

This study intends to interview 15-20 social media users of different genders, ages, education levels, and urban backgrounds, with priority given to consumers who frequently watch live broadcasts, follow KOLs to promote products, or have experience in "planting grass" or "pulling grass".

Consumers aged between 18 and 35 who frequently watch live broadcasts and follow KOLs to recommend products. Inclusion criteria also require participants to purchase 1-3 KOL-recommended products per month in the past three months. Participants with high familiarity or emotional investment in specific KOLs will be given priority.

In addition, the number of fans of the KOLs selected for observation ranges from 100,000 to 1 million, covering areas such as beauty, parenting, and lifestyle. This ensures a balance between professional influence and relevance and covers a range of symbolic content strategies. Interview questions will focus on the interviewee's perception of KOL content, understanding of brand symbols, emotional

resonance mechanism, and judgment of "credibility" and "fitness". Semi-structured interviews are conducive to exploring the individualized and in-depth experiences and opinions of the interviewees while ensuring the unity of the core issues (Osborne & Grant-Smith, 2021).

The interview process will be recorded and transcribed, and the anonymity of the interviewees will be protected after obtaining informed consent. Each interview is expected to last 30-45 minutes, and the location will be selected online Zoom or offline public space to ensure a comfortable environment and freedom of expression.

(2) Participant observation

To further understand how KOLs construct brand symbolic meanings in their daily content, this study will select 3-5 representative KOLs for a one-month participatory tracking observation. Preliminary candidates include Li Jiaqi (representative of beauty products), Wei Ya (all categories), and emerging lifestyle bloggers (such as Zhong Xiaotang, Kelly, etc.) to cover different KOL types and platform distribution.

The observation content includes but is not limited to the visual symbols, language style, brand implantation methods, interactive strategies, fan comments, forwarding and co-creation of KOL videos. The researcher will act as a "bystander-analyst" to record their content style and explicit and implicit strategies in brand communication, and collect text, screenshots and video clips.

(3) Archival data analysis

In addition to the original interview and observation data, the study will also include media reports, brand cooperation announcements, user comments and secondary communication content as archival data to establish a multi-level corpus. This method helps to sort out the image construction of KOLs in popular discourse and supplement the social evaluation and brand framework that may be omitted in the interviewees' expressions.

3.2 Data Analysis Methods

This study will use grounded theory for qualitative analysis. Grounded theory is a classic path for gradually constructing theories by summarizing empirical data. It is particularly suitable for exploratory research and the revelation of empirical complexity (Makri & Neely, 2021). Specifically, the following

three-stage coding process will be followed:

(1) Open coding

The researcher will analyze the transcribed text line by line, mark key concepts, behavioral patterns and emotional expressions, and classify them into preliminary categories. For example, the interviewee's comments such as "Li Jiaqi is very real" and "He knows us very well when selecting products" can be classified into the two initial categories of trustworthiness and value identification.

(2) Axial coding

Based on the initial categories, identify the logical relationship between them, and construct a causal chain and interaction mechanism. For example, "KOL aesthetic style-consumer emotional resonance-brand association enhancement" can constitute a preliminary communication mechanism path.

(3) Selective coding

Based on the continuous comparison and review of data, the key interaction patterns and cultural meaning construction methods in the "brand-KOL-consumer" ternary structure are abstracted, and finally a theoretical model is formed.

To improve the systematic ness and accuracy of the analysis, the study will use qualitative analysis software such as NVivo to assist in coding and classification, thereby improving data management efficiency. It also enables comparison and visual cross-analysis of multiple materials.

3.3 Research Reliability and Validity Control

This study will improve the reliability and validity of data and analysis results through the following strategies:

(1) Member checking

Feedback the preliminary analysis results to some respondents to listen to their approval of the researcher's understanding or supplementary opinions to verify whether the research conclusions are consistent with their real perceptions.

(2) Expert consultation

Invite 2-3 scholars in the fields of brand communication, sociology or media research to review the research design and analysis logic to ensure the theoretical adaptability and academic rationality of the research framework.

(3) Triangulation

Through the mutual verification mechanism of three types of data sources, namely interviews,

observations and archives, ensure the robustness of the research findings and avoid the bias caused by a single data source (Das et al., 2018).

4.Results and Discussion

4.1 Model Construction: KOL–Brand–Consumer Symbolic Interaction Model

Based on the induction of brand semiotics theory and in-depth analysis of consumer interview data, this study constructed the KOL–Brand–Consumer Symbolic Interaction Model. This model focuses on symbolic resonance in the process of brand communication and emphasizes the intermediary role played by KOLs in the construction of brand meaning. The model identifies three core mechanisms, namely professional symbolic communication, emotional resonance construction, and scene substitution simulation. These three mechanisms work together to facilitate consumers to form a deep connection with the brand at the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral levels.

First, the professional symbolic mechanism refers to KOLs enhancing the credibility and professionalism of the brand through professional terms, real evaluations, and explanations of product processes and ingredients (Wen et al., 2025). This type of symbolic expression helps consumers reduce information asymmetry and perceived risk, thereby identifying KOLs as "expert spokespersons".

Second, the emotional resonance mechanism is mainly achieved through narrative expression (Giorgi, 2017). KOLs tell about emotional experiences, life scenarios or dilemma solutions related to products in their content, making brands no longer just functional, but part of the expression of life meaning and identity. This mechanism stimulates consumers' emotional projection and self-substitution and improves brand stickiness.

Third, the scenario substitution mechanism reproduces the product usage scenario through visual and life-like video content, allowing consumers to pre-experience the product value. For example, KOLs show the use of products in home, travel or work scenarios through Vlog, live broadcast, etc., helping consumers psychologically establish a connection between the brand and their own lives, thereby

accelerating purchase decisions.

These three mechanisms do not exist in isolation but reinforce each other. Professional expression enhances the credibility of emotional content, and real emotions provide a contextual basis for scenario substitution, ultimately achieving a chain transformation of "meaning-trust-behavior".

4.2 Interview and Case Analysis Insights

In the interview, many consumers mentioned the professionalism and trust brought by Li Jiaqi's live broadcast. A 28-year-old woman said: "He really understands the product, talks about ingredients and skin quality, and also says that it is not suitable for oily skin. It feels like he is recommending it from our perspective." This sense of trust does not come from simple information transmission, but from the symbolic identification system built by Li Jiaqi through professional rhetoric, real experience and content style.

Li Jiaqi's iconic language expression, rhythm control and emotional appeal, such as "OMG sisters buy it!", etc., go beyond sales behavior and form a symbolic professional shopping guide personality. Through coherent product comparisons, on-site trials, limited-time discounts and other strategies, he creates a situation of "being understood and guided", so that consumers and brands can establish a trust connection based on professionalism and emotion.

In contrast, although the mid-level lifestyle KOLs represented by "Xiao Tian Yuki" are visually attractive, their content is mostly reprinted from brand press releases, lacking in-depth analysis and real experience. The interviewee said, "Her style is beautiful, but it seems like she is reading lines and lacks resonance." This type of content is difficult to build a symbolic link between KOLs and brands, and consumers have low recognition and willingness to buy.

The above comparison reveals the key variable of "symbol matching". The reason why high-quality KOLs can effectively convey brand value is that their content style, professional ability and personal image can highly match the core value of the brand, forming a reliable symbolic meaning, thereby stimulating identification, trust and purchasing behavior. KOLs that lack this matching are visually attractive, but it is difficult to carry the brand's

emotional transmission and identity recognition functions.

4.3 Theoretical Dialogue and Supplement

Compared with the traditional AISAS model that emphasizes the linear advancement of consumer paths, the symbolic interaction model proposed in this study is more nonlinear and cyclical. When consumers are strongly touched at a certain symbolic level (such as emotional resonance), they often skip the information search step and go directly to purchase, or reversely strengthen brand identification after acting, forming a "cyclical re-cognition". The symbolic mechanism is not an appendage of the stage, but a core force acting on each node of the path.

In addition, this paper further found that the symbolic interaction mechanism is different in cultural contexts. In the Chinese market, emotional and family-oriented KOL content is more likely to resonate. This is related to the characteristics of "relationship-oriented" and "emotional expression restraint but emphasis on depth" in Eastern culture. For example, when comparing two maternal and child KOLs from China and South Korea, it was found that Chinese KOLs established empathy more through detailed descriptions of "motherhood", while Korean KOLs focused more on the display of product functions and children's experience. This shows that the construction of emotional symbols needs to be embedded in a specific cultural context, otherwise it is easy to fail to communicate "the information is right, but the emotion is wrong".

4.4 Practical Suggestions

Based on the above model and empirical insights, this paper proposes the following suggestions to guide the brand's symbolic strategy in KOL screening, content planning and effect evaluation.

(1) Establish a symbol matching screening mechanism

Brands should combine their core symbolic meanings such as technology, nature, intimacy, authority, etc. to screen KOLs that have shown a high degree of symbolic fit in past content. For example, a brand that focuses on minimalist design and environmental protection concepts should give priority to KOLs with simple style and a lifestyle that emphasizes less is more, rather than experts known for gorgeous shapes

and luxurious backgrounds.

(2) Design a symbolic scenario content framework

It is recommended that the brand content team and KOL jointly design scenario content templates, such as real-life daily use, problem-solving sharing, emotional companionship stories, etc. Through the structural content framework, the consistency of content and symbol recognizability are enhanced, and the efficiency of user memory and resonance is improved.

(3) Develop a two-dimensional evaluation model of symbol consistency-emotional projection

Traditional ROI data is not enough to measure the symbol effect. This study proposes to establish a content evaluation model from two dimensions. First, symbolic consistency can be evaluated through content analysis scores (0-10 points) based on the degree of fit between KOL content and brand core values. For example, evaluators can evaluate whether the KOL's language, tone, and scene reflect brand identity characteristics, such as professional, environmentally friendly, or young.

Second, emotional projection can be measured by counting the frequency of resonance-related keywords in user comments, such as I feel the same way, she said what I think, or this is exactly my situation. This approach helps quantify the extent to which audiences emotionally internalize KOL information. The combination of these two dimensions can provide a more reliable predictor of conversion potential.

5. Conclusion

Based on the "KOL-brand-consumer" symbolic interaction model, this study explores how KOLs influence consumer brand cognition and purchase decisions through three mechanisms: professional expression, emotional resonance, and scene reproduction. First, KOLs establish a credible image and enhance brand authority through professional terminology and knowledge output. Second, by sharing real emotions and personal experiences, resonance is aroused, allowing the brand to carry emotional identification. Secondly, the life-like scene display visualizes the product functions, enhances the sense of substitution and purchase intention. These three mechanisms work together to build a symbolic closed loop from meaning identification to behavior

transformation, making up for the traditional AISAS model's neglect of cultural symbols and irrational motivations.

Although this study has theoretical contributions, it also has limitations. Limited by qualitative methods and sample size. This limits the generalizability of the symbolic interaction model. Future research could use larger scale surveys or experiments to test the effectiveness of the model in different consumer groups and product categories. The applicability of the research conclusions between categories and platforms is limited. In addition, the proposed symbolic mechanism lacks quantitative verification, and in the future, it can be empirically expanded through questionnaires, experiments or structural equation models. At the same time, the social media environment is constantly evolving, and current findings may be limited by specific technologies and cultural contexts, making it difficult to reveal long-term evolutionary trends.

Based on the above shortcomings, subsequent research can be deepened from four aspects: First, large-scale quantitative tests are conducted based on this model. Second, cross-cultural comparisons are carried out to explore the similarities and differences of symbolic mechanisms in different contexts. Third, longitudinal research is used to track the changing trajectory of KOL symbolic influence. Fourth, combined with platform mechanisms, the symbolic co-construction path between platform-KOL-users is analyzed to provide more forward-looking theoretical support for digital marketing practice.

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