

The Influence of Social Media Influencers' Authenticity and Expertise on Consumer Purchase Intention, Brand Loyalty, and Brand Trust

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Abstract. This paper reviews existing research on how key opinion leaders' (KOLs) authenticity and expertise influence consumer purchase intention, brand trust, and brand loyalty in the context of social media. As digital platforms become oversaturated, consumer decision-making increasingly relies on influencer communication rather than traditional advertising. Using a literature-review methodology, this study synthesizes theoretical models and empirical findings related to credibility, trust formation, parasocial interaction, and persuasive communication. The review indicates that authenticity reduces perceived persuasion intent, strengthens emotional bonds, and enhances long-term loyalty, especially in lifestyle and low-risk product categories. Expertise provides informational clarity, reduces perceived risk, and increases cognitive trust, which is particularly important for high-involvement or technical products. The findings highlight that authenticity and expertise operate through different trust mechanisms but jointly shape consumer evaluation and brand perception. The paper concludes that effective influencer strategies require aligning KOL attributes with product types, communication goals, and audience needs, and suggests future research using cross-cultural and longitudinal designs to examine long-term trust formation.

Keywords: Key Opinion Leaders, Authenticity, Expertise, Brand Trust, Purchase Intention

1. Introduction

With the rapid development of social network and social media, customers are transforming rapidly on their perceptions of products and brands, purchase patterns and the underlying motivations driving these behaviors.

Be Brand communication has become less effective due to the oversaturation of social media content, driven by the rapid expansion of mobile platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Xiaohong Shu, and YouTube [1,2]. The reliance by consumers of Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) and social media influencers for information about products, lifestyle and emotional relevance has seen dramatic change. This indicates that trust, persuasion, and brand meaning can now be formed through interactions and peer-like communication mechanisms rather than traditional advertising [3]. KOLs not only impact whether or not data users choose to engage with certain content, their satisfaction with brands, and purchase intention, but also trust in brands and products. Personal

credibility and authority are already recognized as a determinant of confidence, especially when consumers face an overload of information and aggressive commercial competition. Over a decade now, brands across sectors – beauty, fashion, tech, health and sustainability have turned to influencers to develop the brand persona and build lasting loyalty to their business.

The current paper attempts, with literature review method, to examine the effects of KOL's authenticity and expertise on consumer's purchase intention and brand trust and organize existed theories and empirical evidence, contrast each other of different research designs and summarize the influential paths among the major effects. The goal of the present review is (1) to provide a systematic analytic framework that helps us to understand the importance of KOLs and how the attributes of KOLs affect consumers' purchase choices, (2) provide managers with actionable insights for future influencer marketing strategies, and (3) identify the research paths.

2. Key concepts

2.1 Definition and key features of KOLs

Many scholars define KOLs as content creators who demonstrate professional ability, personal charisma, and consistent influence on their audiences [1].

However, the influence of a KOL is not generated solely through visual communication skills. Chen et al.'s study notes that this influence also emerges from consistent posting, stable communication patterns, and continuous interaction with followers, through which creators build shared values and establish long-term emotional relationships [2]. With the passage of time, the followers begin to perceive them as experience resourceful and benevolently guiding advisers in consumption decisions [2]. We name it credibility capital composed of expertise, perceived authority, word-of-mouth reputation, and a consistent set of personal values. Ong et al. find that KOLs with strong reputation, high credibility, and transparent communication significantly increase consumer acceptance, purchase intention, and recommendation behaviors [4].

Lin et al. propose a persuasion model that evaluates authenticity, expertise, credibility, and interactivity as key KOL features [5].

Authenticity represents the creator's consistence between their personality/behavior to the audience, while expertise refers to the creator's knowledge and the quality of the content, he /she provides. Besides, Wang and Chan-Olmsted also propose that the KOL's influence is not conditioned by just one aspect. Emotional trust, moral principles, and behavioral norms jointly create a multilayered influence pathway that strengthens persuasion [6]. In addition, Xue further extends existing KOL trust frameworks by integrating professionalism, authenticity, and interactivity into a multi-dimensional trust model, emphasizing the dynamic and affective nature of trust formation in digital environments [7]. This provides a more comprehensive foundation for understanding how multiple KOL attributes jointly shape followers' trust. Furthermore, Cheng demonstrates that these trust pathways directly translate into consumer behavioral responses, showing that KOLs with higher perceived credibility and authenticity significantly enhance brand loyalty [8]. This reinforces the idea that trust-based persuasion is a central mechanism through which KOLs influence consumers.

2.2 Consumer purchase intention and brand loyalty

Consumer purchase intention is defined as consumers' purchase willingness based on their perceived value, risk, information credibility and emotional experience of a product [9].

In the circumstances of social media, consumer purchase intention is affected by multiple factors, including parasocial relationships, immersion content, matching values and trust mechanisms [4]. Empirical studies prove that real materials can mitigate customers' perceived risk, increasing purchase motivation. Brand loyalty can be described as a long-term psychological commitment to the brand that is manifested through repeat purchase, word of mouth, and brand switching and brand loyalty has the feature of a lasting tendency towards the brand [10].

The second possible causal mechanisms of influence of KOLs on consumer behavior is via the brand trust. As followers trust the KOL, their positive evaluations are transferred to endorsed brands through the mechanism of trust-based associative learning. In this sense the brand recognition increases, and this can lead to the brand loyalty [6]. Accordingly, a conceptual path that establishes "KOL characteristics → trust mechanism → consumer outcomes" is the conceptual framework of the work derived by the research proposition."

3. The influence of authenticity on consumer purchase intention and brand loyalty

The authenticity of KOLs in social media communication has been evaluated according to their credibility and persuasive power, which includes the accuracy and transparency of information as well as the communication of values, personality presentation, lifestyle demonstration, and emotional exchange with followers.

Findings show that consumers are more likely to rely on KOLs who appear trustworthy, authentic and sincere. Such KOLs display this type of authenticity, consumers become less skeptical because authenticity reduces perceived persuasion intent and enhances message transparency and more interested in participating in the material or thinking of the advertised products. Ong et al. utilized 423 valid survey responses and conducted variance and regression analyses to examine authenticity effects [4]. The outcomes indicate that authentic content is perceived as being fairer and convincing than traditional ads. We interpret the presence of authenticity as heightening sensitivity to the potential that brands have powerful, persuasive intentions; so, people are more responsive to the KOL's suggestion. Additionally, the study demonstrates that authenticity supports continued engagement, reflected in commenting, sharing, and voluntary word-of-mouth behaviors. Communication types like comments, sharing and creating positive word of mouth can contribute to an increase in social recognition feelings for a brand.

The significant positive correlation between authenticity and customer engagement reported by Zahran and Aljuhmani's study on sustainable fashion Instagram users reports a significant positive correlation between authenticity and customer engagement [10]. Value-driven areas, like sustainability, health and environmental protection, create a strong emotional connection with their followers, where many of them don't perceive their purchasing decision as the product itself, instead of a declaration of identity or convictions. This suggests that authenticity functions as a long-term trust signal that communicates stability and value congruence, building higher brand value and lasting relationships.

Chen et al. propose a trust model showing that authenticity is closely linked to perceived risk [3]. They suggest that authenticity particularly lowers perceived risk for high-involvement products that require expert advice, which in turn enhances consumers' perceived reliability of the brand and strengthens purchase intention. The specific categories, when its nature is high involvement, costliness or technical features, e.g., skincare, beauty, health products, education services or tech devices, the risk-reducing effect, in particular, is important.

From the dimension of parasocial relationship, they argue that individuals begin to treat this KOL as a "known" or "trusted" person when establishing a long-term emotional connection with a KOL

[5]. In this case, authenticity is not only a signifier of information trustworthiness but also emotional closeness. Consequently, customers express a higher level of propensity to accept recommendations as well as a sense of brand identification.

Multiple studies reveal differing effect sizes depending on product involvement levels and media platforms. Several works use surveys and regression, but the environments in which they operate are not similar. Ong et al. observe general consumers, whereas Zahran and Aljuhmani focus solely on sustainable fashion consumers who presumably have a more expressive value system. There is also a difference in their methods. Zahran and Aljuhmani used regression techniques opposite to the pure regression based on structural equation modelling, where more detailed explanations about the relationships between variables are provided [10]. Although they both show that authenticity is a strong positive influence on consumer psychology, they consider different approaches for it. Nevertheless, the sway extent might differ depending on which consumer category and what media environment.

The general significance of authenticity has already been suggested by other researchers, as Lou observes that followers establish parasocial relationships with the KOL and attribute their own feelings to the KOL [2]; Castro et al. note that authenticity is an essential characteristic to create lasting influence [1]. This kind of cultivates brand loyalty, building consumer brand trust, and enhancing brand purchase intent.

Credibility operates through reduced perceived threat, enhanced relational bonding, and reinforced brand attachment. This applies, second, to authenticity, lowering threat perception to the extent that it increases content credibility.

Parasocial involvement and similarity provide legitimacy, which in turn leads to a sentimental connection [2]. Originality enhances the emotional attachment toward a long-term brand, hence strengthening the brand loyalty.

Though the consensus about the effects of authenticity is positive, there are also limitations. Most of the works focus primarily on young people, based on single media forms or use subjective evaluations of authenticity. Therefore, future research should include cross-cultural experiments and longitudinal tracking to clarify long-term authenticity effects.

4. Impact of brand trust and consumer behavior on KOL's knowledge

Authenticity, or knowledge rather than expertise - highlights emotion connection and personal revelation – is the foundation that KOLs can achieve an authoritative, credible, and persuasive effect on the consumers to make purchasing decisions based on their experiences and capacity to provide reliable and useful information. Consumers prefer to trust to Knowledge Leader (KOLs) with verifiable knowledge, analytical skills, and longterm experience when they evaluate the info, not the one who mainly publishes lifestyle content and emotional stories, because the quality of content and expertise are mostly considered at the evaluation stage. From a brand perspective, the influence of KOLs in the information space is driven by expertise and the ability to also condition how consumers understand the information presented and, by doing so, enhance brand value.

Based on their dataset of YouTube social commerce user (411 valid cases), Chen et al. conducted their model test using the structural equation modelling and found that expertise exerts a strong positive impact on purchase intent [3]. For the most part, audiences prefer Knowledge Leaders to provide professional elaboration (for complex information) and professional explanations (for technically challenging products) over entertainment or lifestyle influencers. Such skills include comparative analysis, evidence interpretation, and the ability to explain product functions clearly, which increases consumers' sense of safety. In terms of risk categories like Beauty, Health Care,

Education Service, Mother and Baby Products, Skincare, Technology Device, Financial Investment, etc, the effect becomes more obvious. This research further proposes a trust mechanism that consumer treats professional KOLs as a decision-making substitute, which finally leads to dependence and long-term loyalty to the source of information.

Lin, Niu, and Wang compared celebrity KOLs and professional KOLs to disentangle the difference in the role [5]. They re-designed their survey for the exposure via media, the intimacy in interaction, and the appeal of contents. Their result suggests that the more rational, evidence-based, and understandable information is offered by the professionals. This study showed that informational recommendation, but not emotional suggestion, is more appropriate for guiding the consumer's new-product experience as well as long-term investment decision. In particular, the influence is stronger in medical treatment and function beauty cases, where users prefer such a recommendation. This study also revealed that expertise involves less material content. These include the framing of information, the scientific data usage, the risk explanation, and the limitation in the understanding about their own knowledge are all determined. It has been clearly obvious that the professional KOL are not the people who have more knowledge but help consumers make wiser decisions.

Chan-Olmsted and Wang explored the trust relationship between expertise and brand communication using national survey data and a multi-dimensional trust model, which proved if KOLs' trust is provided, brand trust can be elevated by the rational expert judgment [6]. The credibility, expertise, and past accomplishments of the KOL reinforce this transfer. Studies additionally mention that cognitive trust is mainly influenced by expertise, whereas emotional trust is primarily governed by authenticity. This discrimination can suggest that the expertise factor is motivated by facts and knowledge, where authenticity is motivated by relations and emotional bond. Both types of trust interact but convince customers via different channels. Yuan and Lou contend that expertise is one of the strongest predictors of perceived content credibility and that when information comes from an expert and includes evidence and is structured coherently, customers show higher levels of trust and more willingness to comment and share [8]. Logical consistency is achieved when KOLs provide well-structured explanations supported by clear evidence, enabling consumers to process information more coherently and evaluate product claims with greater confidence. It is also argued that "experts plus explanation ability" is more powerful than content that contains multiple technical terms. It is the KOL's ability to express complex knowledge in a clear, hands-on way that makes expertise potent.

Zahran and Aljuhmani found, from a brand perspective, that combining expertise and values congruence generates higher brand loyalty [10]. In green markets, social responsibility, or ethical consumption, expertise not only enhances the perception of trustworthiness but also turns KOLs into messengers of values. Now, brand loyalty has been based not on feelings but on value consent, with emotional aspects on the rational status of identity. Hence, expertise can be both marketing's source of information and the value language of the ethical marketplace.

Even with the high impact that proficiency has on research, however, there are certain limitations.

Firstly, expertise is often measured through subjective perception. The results of multiple studies depend on followers' emotional judgments of a KOL's competence when objective information such as credentials, training, or professional background is absent, which makes these findings unreliable. Secondly, most existing research focuses on beauty or social commerce platforms. Studies centered on products like makeup, skincare, and online shopping may not be fully generalizable to other areas, such as finance and education, which may follow different patterns. Thirdly, in fields such as medicine, law, and finance, certified credentials are required. This limits the influence of general

lifestyle KOLs and highlights the importance of formally trained experts. In many medical, technological, and legal contexts, certified knowledge is mandatory, and KOLs cannot be recognized as experts simply based on perception, which further restricts the generalizability of these findings. Finally, perceptions of expertise vary depending on the type of content, platform, and audience involved. Moreover, platform algorithms shape perceived expertise by selectively amplifying certain types of content, which may cause audiences to overestimate or underestimate a KOL's actual professional competence. We would suggest that these limits act as prerequisites for future work in developing more unbiased mechanisms of determining expertise, comparing results between differing platforms and cultures, and keeping aware of the risk of false or malicious authority.

5. Discussion and suggestions

The review concludes that authenticity as well as expertise influence consumers' and brands' reactions but are affected differently by different factors and in different contexts. Authenticity builds emotional trust via affective bond, self-expression, and value alignment, while expertise creates cognitive trust via informational quality, trustworthiness of knowledge, and sense of lowered risk. The KOL's influence cannot be assessed by a single factor, but should depend on the communication objective and the audience target. That is supported by the different influences across product type, consumer attribute, perceived risk, intimacy degree, and country culture.

From a decision-making perspective, authenticity tends to exert stronger influence on low-risk, lifestyle-oriented products, but its persuasive power becomes weaker in high-stake financial or medical decisions where consumers rely more heavily on verified expertise. Thus, it is preferred to use in less risky products, high emotion engaging items, and lifestyle-based content (for example, sharing beauty and daily style, videos about lifestyle and fashion, emotions of other users, or videos). The force of an influencer is more crucial if the customer relies a lot on data or faces a higher financial or personal risk. This is the case in industries as finance, technology, healthcare, education, and professional dermatology. Thus, an influencer's impact shouldn't be measured by simply following count or popularity funniness. Assessment should take the audience's needs and content category into account.

When applied from the point of view of brand strategy, authenticity makes sense mostly in building a reliable image and, emotionally, an emotional engagement, especially in the case of sustainable values, social interest programs, independent brands, or cultural or story-oriented products. A professional knowledge officer, together with a domain expert, can jointly enhance consumer trust by offering both practical insights and technical accuracy throughout product testing, launch evaluations, and evidence-based reviews. When expert knowledge can be used to make a decision and lessen the risks of buying. While a technology product sounds too technical when only explained by a technical expert, when a lifestyle KOL shares experiential narratives, it is more balanced and compelling to people.

Relying on the research that has been surveyed, a few practical proposals can be forwarded.

Firstly, brands should select KOLs according to their communication objectives.

A well-expert KOL should be chosen if maximizing understanding or minimizing risk is the objective, while a well-authentic KOL should be chosen if maximizing affection or longevity in participation is the objective.

Secondly, KOLs should increase transparency and provide supporting evidence.

Even for KOLs who are very well informed, such statements need to cite sources, provide figures, explain, and provide warnings for risks in order to establish credibility in avoiding issues for perceived overstatements.

Thirdly, Platforms and brands should develop more complete influencer evaluation systems.

Today's systems are too fixated on traffic and engagement, but they must account for the professional background, level of depth, impartiality, and reluctance to fall victim to the commercial incentives of a KOL.

Finally, Cross-cultural studies are essential because trust formation and authenticity perception vary significantly between collectivist and individualist societies. Cross-country samples are able to form wider applicable findings, because the trust construction and value preferences differ from one culture to another. Authenticity and expertise, two key factors of KOL's influence, are in no way incompatible but work synergistically to build customer trust and establish lasting brand value. The main hurdle of influencer marketing going forward will thus be how to find the right balance between the two and pair them with a given audience and communication goal.

6. Conclusion

This paper reviewed previous literature on the influence of KOL authenticity, expertise, and buyer intention, brand trust, and brand loyalty. Our finding is that KOL influence relies on neither one of them, but it comes into reality via affective trust and cognitive trust. Verifiability promotes affection trust because the customers experience verifiability through their genuine experiences of life, individual thoughts, and an innate way of self-disclosure. This can make customers feel a sense of companionship and understanding, thereby bringing stable preference and loyalty. Credibility promotes cognitive trust by providing well-structured reasoning, clear evidence, and reliable informational quality. Together, all these elements increase the validity of the information, giving the consumer a feeling of safety in decision-making, especially in situations of higher risk or complex evaluation.

The literature implies that a brand experience, lifestyle, or values focus is better for authenticity. Brand expertise does better for knowledge-based or high-risk situations where the consumer requires accurate guidance, but both these qualities need not be antithetical for a full-fledged communication mix to be made. Trust is the emotional bedrock to which truth can be anchored, whereas expertise is the armature on which decisions can be made. The combination of both serves a highly effective trust chain that helps brands generate value with their customers, for the long term.

In the future, marketers and brands, rather than relying on the popularity of KOLs for selection, should make KOL selection decisions considering content characteristics and audience needs. Future studies could employ longitudinal or experimental research designs to capture the dynamic processes through which authenticity and expertise shape trust over time. Recognizing these differences can help improve the scientific foundation and validity of influencer advertising, thus allowing for more accurate and effective marketing practices.

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