

The Research on the Identity Construction and Influence of KOL in Cultural Community

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Abstract:

With the rise of Key Opinion Leader (KOL) in the digital era and the emergence of cultural communities, the importance of KOLs within these communities has been steadily increasing. This study examines the cultural construction and influence of KOLs in cultural communities. Employing literature analysis and case study methods, the study synthesizes existing scholarship to summarize characteristics of KOL identity and influence, and conducts an in-depth analysis of the representative KOL “Tao Heihei” to illustrate relevant phenomena. The findings show that KOL identity construction is a dynamic process evolving from “symbolic meaning generation” to “interactive negotiation” and finally “structural solidification,” embedded in social structures and capital logic. KOL influence depends on multiple factors: crisis management (e.g., Tao Heihei’s handling of the “Bingyu” incident), value expression aligned with community consensus (e.g., advocating gender equality), and accessible communication skills. The study fills gaps in marketing-focused KOL research and provides references for cultural community governance.

Keywords: KOL, digital communication, two-way interaction, competence, community trust

1. Introduction

Against the backdrop of rapidly developing digital media and social platforms, KOLs have become vital actors within cultural communities. They are not only intermediaries of information dissemination but also producers of cultural symbols and practitioners of discourse who contribute to shaping community identity. Research has indicated that KOLs construct

cultural meaning through symbolic narratives in digital communication, thereby consolidating their identities within communities [1]. However, such identities are not unilaterally constructed; they require continuous confirmation and reinforcement through audience-KOL interaction. Analyses of fan culture on live-streaming platforms reveal that fans’ emotional labor and co-creation practices not only sustain KOLs’ marketing activities but also implicitly

endow their identities with legitimacy, thereby stabilizing their cultural role within communities [2].

Thus, the identity construction of KOLs is a dynamic process, transitioning from symbolic meaning to interactive negotiation. For this identity to translate into community influence, trust must serve as a crucial intermediary. KOLs gain audience trust through professionalism and authenticity, which not only function as the glue that maintains community relationships but also as the foundation of their influence [3]. While existing research has explored KOLs from the perspectives of symbolic construction, community interaction, and trust mechanisms, most studies remain focused on marketing practices and lack a systematic examination of the pathways through which KOLs construct their identities and the factors constituting their influence in cultural communities.

Based on this, the present study proposes two research questions: How is the identity construction of KOLs in cultural communities formed? What factors determine their influence?

This study employs literature analysis and case study methods. By synthesizing existing scholarship, this study summarizes the characteristics of KOLs' identities and influence in cultural communities, while conducting an in-depth analysis of a representative case to concretely illustrate relevant phenomena. Theoretically, this study deepens the understanding of KOLs' roles in digital cultural communities and clarifies the logical relationship between identity construction and influence. Practically, it provides references for community governance and digital communication, expanding scholarly discussions beyond the scope of marketing research.

2. The Pathways of KOL Identity Construction in Cultural Communities

2.1 The Formation of Cultural Identity

At the initial stage within cultural communities, KOLs typically construct their identities through content production and symbolic expression. Distinctive narrative styles, visual symbols, and tag-based linguistic expressions allow them to establish a recognizable cultural positioning. Research suggests that KOLs are not merely intermediaries in digital communication but gradually build community identity by interpreting and reproducing symbolic meanings [1].

2.2 Two-Way Construction within Fan Culture

As community relationships deepen, the identity of KOLs gradually enters a phase of co-construction with fans.

Fans participate in KOL identity construction through commenting, sharing, supporting activities, and secondary creation, providing both emotional support and feedback for KOLs' identity adjustment. Studies have shown that emotional labor within fan culture not only reinforces the legitimacy of KOLs but also secures their positions within communities [2]. Additionally, research has highlighted that Generation Z users interact with KOLs in a two-way manner, making KOL personas and identities subject to continuous negotiation and reproduction [4]. During this stage, mechanisms of trust gradually take shape, stabilizing the KOL's image and amplifying their influence.

2.3 The Structural Solidification of Identity

In the final stage of identity construction, platform mechanisms and commercial logic provide KOLs with stronger structural support. Through platform recommendation algorithms, traffic allocation, and brand partnerships, KOL identity labels are amplified and solidified. Niche KOLs, for instance, have risen to prominence by "becoming media" through the combined influence of advertising and social platforms, thereby gaining structural empowerment beyond the individual level [5]. This indicates that KOL identity construction depends not only on individual and community interaction but is also deeply embedded in social structures and capital logic.

3. Factors Shaping KOL Influence in Cultural Communities: The Case of Tao Heihei

3.1 Case Background

"Tao Heihei" is known for his gameplay commentary and engagement with social issues. His series "Dormitory of Schemes" experienced a resurgence at the end of 2024: industry monitoring reported that a related video on Bilibili surpassed 5.18 million views, while his total fan base exceeded 5 million, with more than 500,000 new followers in a single month. The related topics and live-stream viewer counts also soared, creating a cross-platform diffusion effect [6]. At the same time, Bilibili pages recorded multiple gameplay videos with views ranging from one to several million, demonstrating sustained communicative power and community participation.

3.2 Crisis Management Awareness: Resolving Risks and Rebuilding Trust

In the highly exposed public sphere of social platforms, where every action and statement of KOLs is magnified under public scrutiny, KOLs inevitably encounter con-

troversty and crises—ranging from misunderstandings about their content to conflicts involving third parties, all of which can quickly erode the trust they have built with their communities if not handled properly. Tao Heihei, as a representative KOL in his cultural community, demonstrated strong public relations awareness and crisis response literacy by responding promptly to fan concerns (often within hours of a controversy arising), clarifying misunderstandings through detailed, transparent statements rather than vague evasions, and flexibly adjusting narrative strategies when necessary to align with community values. For example, during the “Bingyu” incident in 2025—a dispute triggered by alleged copyright issues between Tao Heihei’s team and an independent author—he did not adopt a defensive stance. Instead, he actively de-escalated tensions by first appeasing anxious fans through live-streamed explanations, then compensating the affected author out of his own funds to show sincerity, and finally publicly mediating between his team and the author to reach a mutually acceptable solution, sharing the mediation process with the community to ensure openness. This response not only addressed the immediate crisis but also exemplifies the dynamic three-stage model of trust evolution proposed by Luo Hanyang [7], which emphasizes “trust damage mitigation,” “active responsibility-taking,” and “trust reconstruction.” His proactive ability to manage crises and his consistent benevolent approach toward both fans and relevant stakeholders enabled him to stabilize community trust that might otherwise have fractured, and further strengthen the cohesion of his cultural community amid short-term turbulence, turning a potential trust crisis into an opportunity to reinforce his reliable image.

3.3 Equality Awareness: Value Orientation and Community Identity

The influence of KOLs depends not only on fan numbers but also on the authenticity and consistency of their value expression—superficial advocacy rarely fosters long-term audience identification. Tao Heihei consistently emphasized gender equality in his daily content (such as commenting on gender-related social topics) and respect for individuals (like defending marginalized voices in fan discussions), resonating strongly with his core fan base, most of whom are young people advocating for equity. This clear, unwavering value orientation not only reinforced his “progressive advocate” persona within frequent fan interactions but also expanded his identity label from a mere content creator to a community value spokesperson. Previous research has suggested that KOL cultural identities are constantly negotiated and reproduced in fan interac-

tions and value expressions [3, 4]. By closely binding his public practices to the moral consensus (e.g., fairness and inclusivity) widely recognized within the community, Tao Heihei not only enhanced the emotional cohesion among community members but also solidified the legitimacy of his influence, making his voice more persuasive in the community.

3.4 Communication Ability: Externalizing Influence into Persuasion

Communication and expression are vital channels for externalizing KOLs’ influence—only through effective delivery can their ideas, values, and perspectives truly reach audiences and drive resonance. Tao Heihei is particularly noted for his sharp, logical, and down-to-earth rhetorical style: he avoids obscure jargon, instead translating complex social or cultural issues into vivid, relatable narratives (such as drawing parallels to daily life scenarios) that are easily understood and proactively shared by fans. This outstanding communicative strength was particularly evident in the resurgence of his “Dormitory of Schemes” series: his concise, memorable “catchphrase-style” expressions not only sparked enthusiastic discussions among core fans but also inspired substantial secondary creations (including meme adaptations and short video parodies) and cross-platform dissemination across Weibo, Douyin, and Bilibili. As Li Li argues, authenticity and professionalism are central to KOLs generating audience trust [1], and refined communication ability is precisely a concrete reflection of professionalism in practice. Tao Heihei’s polished rhetorical skills not only significantly boosted the reach and impact of his content but also further consolidated his discursive power within the cultural community, making his viewpoints more likely to guide community discussions.

4. Conclusion

This study explored the identity construction pathways and influence-determining factors of KOLs in cultural communities via literature analysis and case studies. The findings are as follows: First, KOL identity construction is a dynamic process evolving from “symbolic meaning generation” to “interactive negotiation” and finally “structural solidification.” Initially, KOLs establish cultural positioning through differentiated content creation and symbolic expression. As community relationships deepen, fans participate in co-constructing KOL identities via commenting and secondary creation, with trust mechanisms forming simultaneously. Ultimately, structural forces like platform algorithms and commercial collaborations amplify and solidify KOL identity labels, which are deeply embed-

ded in social structures and capital logic. Second, KOLs' community influence is driven by multiple factors rather than fan count alone. The case of Tao Heihei shows that crisis management capabilities (e.g., taking responsibility in the "Bingyu" incident) stabilize trust; value expression aligned with community moral consensus (e.g., advocating gender equality) enhances influence legitimacy; and accessible communication skills (e.g., catchphrases in Dormitory of Schemes) turn influence into persuasive power. This study addresses the gap of existing marketing-focused KOL research, clarifies the logic between identity construction and influence, and provides references for cultural community governance and digital communication.

Nevertheless, limitations remain: the case selection is narrow and focused on a single KOL, and the methods are primarily qualitative, lacking large-scale quantitative support. Future studies may broaden samples across different fields and platforms and adopt empirical methods to more systematically reveal mechanisms of influence formation.

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