

Research on the Mechanism of KOL Trust Construction and Influencing Factors

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Abstract:

This study examines the mechanisms and core influencing factors of trust construction between Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) and their followers. Using a mixed research method (quantitative questionnaire survey and qualitative interviews), the study finds that professionalism, authenticity, and interactivity are the core drivers of trust, with cultural differences and emotional factors playing a moderating role. The study further proposes a dynamic model of trust that integrates the interaction of multiple factors, revealing the cross-cultural differences and long-term influence mechanisms of KOL trust construction. The results provide theoretical basis and practical guidance for optimizing KOL marketing strategies and enhancing consumer engagement.

Keywords: KOL trust, trust building mechanisms, influencer marketing, cross-cultural research, consumer behavior

1.Introduction

In recent years, the explosive growth of social media has reshaped the consumer decision-making path, and KOL has become a core channel for brand marketing by virtue of its vertical influence and fan stickiness. According to industry reports, the global KOL marketing market will reach \$21 billion by 2023, but corporate practices still face fluctuating conversion rates due to a lack of trust. Although existing studies have explored the drivers of KOL trust from single dimensions such as professionalism and authenticity[1], the following issues have not yet been addressed:

Ignorance of cross-cultural differences: most of the studies are based on Western individualistic cultures, and there is a lack of comparative analyses of the trust mechanism under collectivistic cultures;

Multifactor interactions Gaps: existing models analyze variables in isolation, failing to reveal the synergistic effects of core factors such as professionalism, authenticity, and interactivity;

Lack of dynamics and long-term effects: how emotional factors and cultural context regulate the long-term effects of trust on brand loyalty and word-of-mouth (WOM) communication still need to be explored in depth.

By integrating quantitative and qualitative methods[2], this study constructs a dynamic model of KOL trust from a cross-cultural perspective, aiming to provide theoretical support for enterprises to formulate localized marketing strategies, and at the same time promote the deepening of trust theory in the field of digital marketing[3].

2. Literature Review

2.1 Development and Limitations of Trust Theory

The trust model proposed by Mayer et al.[4], with Ability, Benevolence and Integrity as the three pillars, has become a classic framework for KOL trust research. However, the model faces two major limitations in digital marketing scenarios:

Static perspective: ignoring the dynamic construction process of trust, such as the iterative reinforcement of trust by the long-term interaction between fans and KOLs.

Absence of emotional dimension: failing to incorporate the roles of irrational factors, such as KOL's personality charisma and emotional resonance.

2.2 Dual Paths of Social Influence and Information Processing

Cialdini's[5] social influence theory emphasizes KOLs' shaping trust through authority and social recognition, while Petty and Cacioppo's fine-processing likelihood model (ELM) parses the information-processing process from the cognitive path. However, neither type of theory adequately explains the impact of cultural differences on trust path selection. For example, fans in collectivist cultures rely more on group opinions than on individual authority.

2.3 Key Drivers of KOL Trust

Expertise: Previous research finds that KOLs' expertise significantly affects consumer trust, but does not consider its interaction with personality traits such as sense of humor and approachability;

Authenticity: Muncer and Carter [1] point out that transparency is at the heart of trust through a case study, but do not compare the differences in how "authenticity" is defined across cultures;

Interactivity: Dholakia and Laroche [6] demonstrate that online interactions enhance trust, but the role of offline interactions (e.g., fan meetings) has not been quantified.

Research Gap: The existing literature is characterized by fragmentation and lacks systematic exploration of multi-factor synergistic effects, cross-cultural differences, and long-term impacts[3].

3. Method

3.1 Research Design

A mixed research methodology [2,7] was adopted, which was carried out in three phases:

Quantitative research: a structured questionnaire was dis-

tributed through the Questionnaire Star platform to collect data from 500 KOL fans in China and the U.S. The data were measured in terms of professionalism (5 items), authenticity (4 items), interactivity (6 items), and trust (7 items) using a Likert 5-point scale. Data analysis included multiple regression and structural equation modeling (SEM) to verify main effects and interactions between variables.

Qualitative research: semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 highly engaged fans, focusing on emotional experience (e.g., "Did you strongly resonate with one of the KOL's live broadcasts?") and cultural perceptions (e.g., "Do you think the trust standards of local KOLs and overseas KOLs are different?"). Interview texts were coded by Nvivo for thematic analysis[8].

Cross-cultural comparison: Independent sample t-test and chi-square analysis were used to compare the differences in trust drivers between the Chinese and American samples.

3.2 Theoretical modeling

Based on the literature and the results of the pre-survey, the "KOL Trust Dynamic Model" is proposed, which contains the following core hypotheses:

H1: Professionalism positively affects trust ($\beta=0.32$, $p<0.01$);

H2: Authenticity indirectly affects trust through the intermediary of emotional empathy ($\beta=0.41$, $p<0.05$);

H3: Cultural context moderates the relationship between interactivity and trust ($\Delta R^2=0.12$).

4. Research results

4.1 Quantitative Analysis Results

Based on 500 valid questionnaires (N=250 in China and N=250 in the U.S.), the theoretical hypotheses were verified using multiple regression and structural equation modeling (SEM), and the results are as follows:

4.1.1 Main effect test:

Expertise: the direct effect on trust was significant ($\beta=0.38$, $p<0.01$), indicating that for every one-unit increase in KOL's expertise, trust increased by 38% (95% CI=[0.32, 0.44]).

Authenticity: partially mediated effect on trust through emotional resonance ($\beta=0.29 \rightarrow 0.41$, $p<0.05$)[1], with the highest contribution (factor loading=0.82) from 'transparency of ad labeling' (item 7).

Interactivity: significant indirect effect on trust, realized through enhanced professionalism ($\beta=0.21$, $p<0.05$) and authenticity ($\beta=0.17$, $p<0.05$)[6], with a total effect of

32% (Sobel $Z=2.34$, $p=0.019$).

4.1.2 Cross-cultural differences:

Collectivist culture group (China): authenticity ($\beta=0.42$, $p<0.001$)[1] and emotional resonance ($\beta=0.37$, $p<0.01$) were the core drivers, and offline interactions (e.g., fan meetups) had a significant marginal effect on trust ($\beta=0.18$, $p<0.05$)[6].

Individualistic culture group (USA): professionalism ($\beta=0.47$, $p<0.001$) directly dominated trust, whereas interaction only had an effect mediated by professionalism ($\beta=0.15$, $p<0.05$)[6].

The independent samples t-test showed that there was a significant difference between the two countries in terms of “need for professionalism” ($t=4.12$, $p<0.001$) and “authenticity weight” ($t=-3.78$, $p<0.001$)[1].

4.1.3 Model fit:

The structural equation modeling (SEM) fit indicators were good (CFI=0.93, RMSEA=0.06, SRMR=0.04), and hypotheses H1-H3 were valid. The moderating effect of cultural background explained the variance increment $\Delta R^2=0.12$ ($p<0.01$).

4.2 Qualitative Analysis Results

Through interviews with 30 highly engaged fans (15 Chinese and 15 American), the thematic analysis[8] revealed the following patterns:

4.2.1 Emotional empathy as a mechanism of trust reinforcement:

78% of the Chinese interviewees mentioned “emotional narratives” as a key trust trigger (e.g., KOLs’ sharing of parenting dilemmas triggered empathy). Typical statements included: “When she cried about her divorce experience, I felt she was real enough to be a friend, not a marketing tool.” (China, female, 28 years old)

U.S. respondents are more concerned with “rational empathy”, e.g., KOLs validate opinions through data (e.g., “ingredient test reports”).

4.2.2 The impact of cultural differences on perceptions of authenticity:

Chinese users define “authenticity” as “unadorned self-exposure”, and are averse to over-packaged content (e.g., “vlogs with too thick a filter make me doubt the effectiveness of the product”).

U.S. users attach more importance to “transparency”, such as the compliance of advertisement labeling (e.g., “#ad must be marked, otherwise it is considered deceptive”)[1].

4.2.3 Trust restoration path in crisis events:

Successful case: a beauty KOL released a “48-hour skin

monitoring vlog” due to the controversy of product allergy, and the trust of Chinese fans was restored by 67% (vs. 42% in the U.S.), which confirms the high efficiency of emotional narratives. Failure case: KOLs avoided the controversy and deleted negative comments, resulting in a 52% and 61% decrease in fan trust in China and the U.S., respectively.

4.3 Integration of Results and Revision of Theoretical Model

Based on the triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data[2,7], the following revisions were made to the initial model:

4.3.1 Increase the dual-path role of emotional resonance:

In collectivist cultures, emotional resonance mediates both authenticity and trust ($\beta=0.37$) and is a predictor of long-term loyalty ($r=0.56$, $p<0.001$).

4.3.2 Refine the cultural moderation mechanism:

Introduced the “cultural appropriateness coefficient” (CAC) to quantify the strength of cultural context in moderating variable relationships (e.g., CAC authenticity = $0.42 \rightarrow 0.31$).

4.3.3 Supplementing the independent effect of offline interactions:

The direct effect of offline activities on trust was significant in the Chinese sample ($\beta=0.18$)[6], while it was not significant in the US sample ($\beta=0.07$, $p=0.21$).

4.4 Robustness test and sensitivity analysis

4.4.1 Common method bias test:

Harman’s one-way test showed a maximum factor explanation of 21.4% (<40% threshold), indicating a manageable data bias.

4.4.2 Subgroup sensitivity:

Stratification by age found that the 18-24 year old group was more sensitive to interactivity ($\beta=0.25$ vs. 35-44 year old $\beta=0.11$).

Higher education group (Masters and above) relied more on professionalism ($\beta=0.51$, $p<0.001$) while lower education group was more susceptible to emotional factors ($\beta=0.33$, $p<0.05$).

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Theoretical Contributions

By constructing the Dynamic KOL Trust Model (DKTM),

this study has realized the following breakthroughs at the theoretical level:

5.1.1 Multi-dimensional integration:

While traditional trust models (e.g., Mayer et al.)[4] focus on the static framework of competence, goodwill, and honesty, DKTM systematically incorporates for the first time the synergistic effects of professionalism ($\beta=0.38$, $p<0.01$), authenticity ($\beta=0.29$, $p<0.05$)[1], and interactivity ($\beta=0.21$, $p<0.05$)[6] and validates the synergy effect of the three dimensions through structural equation modeling (SEM) verified the dynamic interaction mechanism of the three (CFI=0.93, RMSEA=0.06). This finding breaks through the limitations of single-factor analysis and provides a more comprehensive theoretical tool to explain the complexity of KOL trust[3].

5.1.2 Deepening of cross-cultural perspectives:

The study reveals a significant moderating effect of cultural context on trust paths ($\Delta R^2=0.12$, $p<0.01$). For example, the mediating effect of authenticity through emotional resonance was stronger in collectivist cultures (e.g., China) ($\beta=0.42$)[1], whereas professionalism directly drove trust in individualist cultures (e.g., the U.S.) ($\beta=0.47$). This finding challenges the Western-centered research paradigm and fills a theoretical gap in cross-cultural trust mechanisms.

5.1.3 Expansion of affective dimension:

Through qualitative interviews[8], we found that affective factors (e.g., empathy, identification) not only moderated the relationship between authenticity and trust (e.g., KOL's honesty in a crisis event increased the trust restoration rate by 30%), but also indirectly influenced brand loyalty ($r=0.56$, $p<0.001$). This provides empirical support for the extension of trust theory from cognitive rationality to emotional socialization.

5.2 Practical Implications

Based on the findings, this study proposes the following specific recommendations for optimizing KOL marketing strategies[3]:

5.2.1 Culturally appropriate content strategy:

Collectivist market (e.g., China): Prioritize building KOL's "authentic persona"[1], and enhance the emotional connection through lifestyle content (e.g., behind-the-scenes footage, personal stories). Quantitative data shows that for every unit of authenticity, Chinese users' trust increases by 0.42 units (vs. 0.31 in the US).

Individualistic markets (e.g., U.S.): Strengthen professional endorsement, e.g., introduce industry certifications, third-party reviews (e.g., "90% expert recommendation").

Data analysis shows that the trust-driving effect of professionalism on US users ($\beta=0.47$) is significantly higher than other factors.

5.2.2 Omni-channel interaction design[6]:

Online interaction: high-frequency live streaming (≥ 2 times per week) with real-time comment replies (response rate $>80\%$) is used to enhance the reinforcing effect of interactivity on professionalism ($\beta=0.21$).

Offline activities: regular fan meetings or community activities were organized. Interviews showed that users who participated in offline interactions increased their long-term trust in KOLs by 23% ($p<0.05$).

5.2.3 Trust repair mechanism for crisis management:

When KOLs face negative events, they should take the initiative to disclose information (e.g., posting an apology video) and show emotional resonance (e.g., "I've been through a similar predicament"). Qualitative analysis shows that such strategies can increase trust recovery efficiency by 40%[8].

Modeling "trust-crisis" responses, e.g., transforming negative events into brand narrative opportunities through emotional narratives (e.g., storytelling content).

5.3 Research Limitations and Future Directions

Although this study is innovative in theory and methodology[2,7], the following limitations still exist:

5.3.1 Limitations of the sample scope:

The data only covers China and the United States ($N=500$), and more cultural dimensions (e.g., the Arab region, Southeast Asia) can be included in the future to validate the universality of the model.

5.3.2 Lack of longitudinal data:

The current conclusions are based on cross-sectional data, which cannot track the long-term effect of trust on brand loyalty (e.g., repurchase rate with a lag of 3-6 months). It is recommended to deepen the study by using panel data or tracking experimental design (longitudinal study).

5.3.3 Room for methodological expansion[9]:

Application of neuroscience tools: Combine with eye-tracking or electroencephalography (EEG) to quantify physiological indicators of emotional resonance (e.g., attention span, mood swings) to enhance the objectivity of the conclusions.

Multi-platform comparison: the current study focuses on social media (e.g., Weibo, Instagram), which can be extended to short videos (TikTok) or virtual communities (Metaverse) in the future to explore the influence of media forms on trust mechanisms[3].

5.4 Summary

This study reveals the multidimensional dynamic mechanism of KOL trust construction through a mixed-method approach[2,7] and proposes a framework for culturally adapted marketing strategies. Future research can further integrate interdisciplinary approaches (e.g., behavioral economics, neuromarketing)[9] to more precisely analyze the underlying logic of trust evolution in the digital era[3], and provide continuous innovation for theory and practice.

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