



## THE EFFECT OF KEY OPINION LEADERS' CHARACTERISTICS ON PURCHASE INTENTION: A STUDY OF TIKTOK LIVE COMMERCE IN CHINA

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### Abstract

The purpose of this research is to explore whether key opinion leaders' characteristics affects consumers' purchase intention. In modern times, the existence and competitive advantage of businesses, particularly retailers, depend heavily on the social media presence of key opinion leaders and the promotion of their goods.

This research surveyed consumers on both sides of the strait, using China's Tiktok live commerce as an example. The data gathered from surveys was analyzed using SPSS 27 and AMOS 27, and the theoretical framework suggested in this research was confirmed. The findings demonstrate the verification of the five theoretical framework proposed hypotheses, all of which exhibit significant association. The aim of the research is to provide merchants a key social media marketing manual, offer recommendations on how to select key opinion leaders for social media platforms and consumers.

Keywords: Key Opinion Leaders' Characteristics, Purchase intention, Social media

Introduction

(Appel et al., 2020).

Modern online retailers rely heavily on social media platforms for their competitive edge and product promotion

Utilizing key opinion leaders has become a common practice in social media marketing (Nunes et al., 2018;

Akdevelioglu & Kara, 2020). While studies suggest that social media marketing can influence consumer purchase intentions, the specific strategies retailers employ regarding key opinion leaders' characteristics remain unclear. The aim of the research is to investigate, from a consumer psychology viewpoint, if the qualities of key opinion leaders affect customers' intention to make purchases in China's TikTok live commerce. A proposed conceptual framework in which Key Opinion Leaders' characteristics, brand image, brand attitude and consumer purchase intention, have path-dependent impacts on this connection will be investigated through empirical research.

The global pandemic has contributed to people's tendency to buy online (Tran et al., 2023) and habit of observing and evaluating products online (Martinez et al., 2019). Globally, there are 4.59 billion social media users (Sampige et al., 2024). Social media is used by Chinese firms as a marketing tool to develop international and domestic brands (Tang, 2023) and rises to the top (Bai & Yan, 2023). Individuals express their suggestions on products and brands on social media online (Wuisan & Handra, 2023), therefore, social media will influence the way consumers interact with brands and consumers' purchasing decisions (Khan & Sana, 2023).

Live commerce is a combination of e-commerce and live streaming (Zhu & Liu, 2023), it is a widely used social media marketing strategy and a popular business model in China (Feng, 2022).

Moreover, the entire industry chain of livestreaming business is mainly composed of brand owners, Internet celebrities and transport operators who use livestreaming to promote brands and products (Wong et al., 2023). "TikTok" is a "short video" platform (Kaye et al., 2021), it has positioned itself as a content platform, catering to the general population after first focusing on youth (Hu, 2020). This approach has resulted in widespread acceptance and the platform being the most popular social media in China (Chen, 2024). Additionally, TikTok drives traffic to brands (Oklander & Kudina, 2021). But, economic expansion and more options for leisure have also helped to explain the platform's broad user base, which includes users of all ages (Tang, 2023).

The following questions of the research include: the extent to which key opinion leaders' characteristics affects brand image, the extent to which brand image impacts brand attitude, and, the extent to which brand attitude influences purchase intention, with a focus on TikTok live commerce in China.

## Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

### *Key Opinion Leaders*

Opinion leaders are well-known social media use users' opinions and preferences (Scher & Schett, 2021). Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) are well-respected individuals with the power to change people's opinions, attitudes, and behaviors (Jin et al., 2023). They frequently have outstanding communica-

tion abilities. Besides, KOLs are used by companies as a distinctive marketing strategy since they may affect reputation and are viewed as informed experts in their industry (Charoennan & Huang, 2018). Also, they are particularly effective on social media. They improve customer engagement by sharing product expertise and responding to issues. This includes individuals with sizable followings on live streaming platforms (Liao et al., 2021).

#### *KOLs' Characteristics*

Internet influencers and KOLs use different approaches: influencers prioritize their professional knowledge, whereas KOLs communicate personal experiences (Xiong et al., 2021). When followers actively follow their advice, online influencer may become KOLs (Saito et al., 2015). Expertise, reliability, and attractiveness are three of the internet's three main characteristics (Gomes et al., 2022).

Celebrity spokespersons do not interact with consumers as closely as kols (Xiong et al., 2021), besides, celebrity spokespersons leverage their personal brands and assets to endorse products, transferring their image to the promoted goods through advertising (Kennedy et al., 2021), three characteristics of them are: credibility, attractiveness, and expertise.

Some studies stress "familiarity" as a crucial attribute of KOLs, as opposed to "attractiveness" (Xiong et al., 2021; He & Jin, 2022). The perceived "attractiveness" of endorsers might also be in-

fluenced by their "familiarity" (Afifah, 2022). Thus, trustworthiness, familiarity, and expertise are the three primary characteristics of KOLs. While trustworthiness is essential for retaining customers' trust and loyalty (Cho, 2010; Winter & Neubaum, 2016). Familiarity relates to consumers' understanding of KOLs (Thomas & Fowler, 2015). Knowledge and abilities about products that KOLs share with their audience, sometimes via live streaming, are considered expertise (He & Jin, 2022).

#### *Brand Image*

Brand image, firstly it is acknowledged as a crucial tool in an organization's toolbox that helps it to both maintain and strengthen its place in the market (Maymand & Razmi, 2017). Thus, employing brand image as an aspect can help improve a firm's image. Secondly, perceptions, attitudes, and knowledge about the firm are reflected in brand image (D'Souza et al., 2023). Thirdly, customers are more likely to create favorable and unique connections when they have strong feelings and emotions connected to the brand (Dew & Kwon, 2010)

#### *Effect of KOLs' Characteristics on Brand Image*

KOLs can enhance brand awareness. Moreover, the use of social media for marketing is conducive to improving brand awareness (Cheung et al., 2019), and studies have proved that brand awareness has a positive impact on the establishment of brand image (Sitorus et al., 2023). Due to the low threshold for

brands to enter the e-commerce live streaming platform (Chen, 2022) and the excessive release of product information (Lasser et al., 2022), consumers believe that it is unlikely to find high-quality products, and it is difficult to distinguish the function and quality of products (Den et al., 2006). As a result, consumers will make a purchase decision based on observing and following kols' introduction, usage and experience of the product (Liao et al., 2021). Given the above viewpoints, *the hypothesis is as follows:*

*Hypothesis 1a (H1a): Key opinion leaders' familiarity has a positive influence on brand image.*

*Hypothesis 1b (H1b): Key opinion leaders' trustworthiness has a positive influence on brand image.*

*Hypothesis 1c (H1c): Key opinion leaders' expertise has a positive influence on brand image.*

#### *Brand Attitude*

Brand attitude can be used to reflect consumers' tendency to consistently react positively or negatively to a particular brand (Jiang et al., 2024). Secondly, it is also a major source of brand equity. This is because individuals who have a favorable impression of a brand tend to pay more for it (Keller, 1993). If a brand is associated with excellent quality, customers will have a positive attitude towards it, and if it is associated with lower quality, customers will have a negative attitude (Oy et al., 2023).

#### *Effect of Brand Image on Brand Attitude*

Brand attitudes may be potentially driven by brand image (Haryanto et al., 2022). Consumers develop ideas about brands, which can develop into beliefs about product quality and directly affect their brand attitudes (Saydan & Dulek, 2019). Moreover, brand image plays an important role in shaping brand attitudes (Najafi & Alvandi, 2017). Given the above viewpoints, the hypothesis is as follows:

*Hypothesis 2 (H2): Brand image has a positive influence on brand attitude.*

#### *Purchase Intention*

Purchase intention refers to the desire or commitment to buy products or services in the future. It involves customers' selection process based on various factors, representing their implicit commitment to make a purchase later on (Phuong et al., 2020).

#### *Effect of Brand Attitude on Purchase Intention*

The research premise is that customers with a positive brand perception are more likely to increase their purchase intention (Sicilia et al., 2006). Favorable views and sentiments toward a brand create a conducive environment for considering its offerings and converting individuals into customers (Li & Peng, 2021). Given the above viewpoints, the hypothesis is as follows:

*Hypothesis 3 (H3): Brand Attitude has a positive influence on purchase intention.*

#### *Research Methodology*

The quantitative method was used in this research. Following the questionnaire's design, two versions—one in simplified Chinese and the other in traditional Chinese—were created for 248 respondents on both sides of the Taiwan Strait to complete. In all, 248 respondents participated in the research. The survey was conducted between March 4 and March 25. 12 customers from Taiwan and 15 from the Chinese mainland participated in the pilot study of this research and were asked to fill out questionnaires. The pilot study's conclusions indicated that the questionnaire's items were sufficient and comprehensible to confirm the survey's apparent validity as well as its overall completion time.

These items were measured using a seven-point Likert scale, the responses to these questions ranged from (1) strongly disagree to (7) strongly agree. The selection of 5 items for measuring familiarity from Xiong et al. (2021) and Amakyewaa et al. (2022), 3 items respectively for measuring trustworthiness and expertise from Xiong et al. (2021). 5 items from Cho (2011) and Samuels & Suki (2015) for measuring brand image. 5 items from Cambell (1995), Spears & Singh (2004), and Wang et al. (2019) for measuring brand attitude. The selection of 5 items from for measuring purchase intention from Agmeka et al. (2019) and Shafiq et al. (2011).

#### Data Analysis and Result

The analysis and survey findings of this research will be summarized. SPSS 27 and Amos 27 were utilized for statistical analysis to code the responses to the survey items out of a total of 248 respondents.

#### *Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA)*

The initial phase in the research to guarantee the hypothesis operates as intended is called exploratory factor analysis (Lorenzo & Ferrando, 2021). EFA is a method for determining a minimum quantity of requisite hypothetical factors that match a larger quantity of variables, and it is used to identify the basic factor structure (Ledesma & Valero, 2019). 23 items were significantly above the conservative 0.5 loading threshold were used to create a six-factor solution after 3 items that did not load beyond 0.5 (Hair Jr et al., 2019). As the sample size for the survey is 248 and the factor loadings ranged from 0.582 to 0.902.

#### *Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)*

For a set of variables, CFA can examine or confirm the fundamental structure (Pallant, 2007). According to Anderson and Gerbing (1988), CFA provides a more accurate and rigorous evaluation for latent constructs and their one-dimensionality. A six-factor solution loading 19 items that above the cautious cut-off level of 0.5 was generated after eliminating 4 items that did not load correctly on any factor or loaded excessively on several factors (Hair Jr. et al., 2019). Each variable only loads onto one factor, and the factor loadings ranged from 0.704 to 0.930, indicating strong convergent and discriminant validity.

#### *Reliability and Validity*

Cronbach's  $\alpha$ , the most widely used approach, was utilized to evaluate the

reliability of the obtained factors (Lin et al., 2001). The measures' convergent validity was investigated utilizing Composite Reliability (CR) and Average Variance Extraction (AVE) (Hair Jr. et al., 2016). The majority of the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  values were more than 0.7, indicating strong internal consistency. Despite the fact that one number was less than 0.7, the literature indicates that values above 0.60 are deemed appropriate (Pedroso et al., 2016). Hair Jr. et al. (2019) stated that all constructs need to have AVE values greater than 0.5, and, Fornell and Larcker (1981) stated that all CR (composite reliability) values need to be greater than 0.7. The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  values for each of the six factors in this research ranged from 0.649 to 0.857, AVE value and CR value ranged from 0.684 to 0.813 and 0.828 to 0.912, respectively.

### *Correlations*

After verifying construct validity, variables for supplemental statistical analysis are constructed by averaging items related to extracted elements.. The results indicate familiarity, trustworthiness, and expertise were significantly correlated with brand image ( $r = .248, p < 0.01$ ;  $r = .151, p < 0.01$ ;  $r = .519, p < 0.01$ , respectively). Also, brand image is significantly correlated with brand attitude ( $r = .172, p < 0.01$ ). Lastly, brand attitude also significantly correlated with purchase intention ( $r = .625, p < 0.01$ ).

### *Model Fit*

Lowry & Gaskin (2014) state that there is not a single statistical test of

significance for SEM fit indices, that is acknowledged as the only valid model as alternative models utilizing the sample data have produced findings identical to model fit. To compute model fit as measures of global fit, a variety of criteria can be combined (Hair et al. 1998). The structural equation modeling program AMOS version 27 was used to find and define the equations for the suggested structural model once the suitable measurement model had been created. Overall fit results ( $\chi^2/df = 1.573$ , GFI = 0.894, AGFI = 0.852, RMR = 0.035, CFI = 0.927, NFI = 0.813, IFI = 0.947, RMSEA = 0.038) showed that the model suited the data well. The results of this research validated all nine of the hypotheses that were put out, and all fit indices for the structural model in the survey reached the suggested threshold levels.

### *Conclusion*

This research significantly contributes to the understanding of causal linkages within theories, particularly in the dynamic landscape of social media platforms like TikTok Live Commerce. Firstly, it robustly confirms the well-established positive association between brand attitude and purchase intention, consolidating findings from numerous prior studies. Secondly, it intricately explores the intricate relationship between brand attitude and brand image, shedding light on how a favorable brand image can profoundly shape consumer attitudes and behaviors. Furthermore, the research meticulously investigates the impact of Key Opinion Leaders' characteristics on brand image, elucidating the

pivotal roles of attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise. These crucial traits, as highlighted by the research findings, have a detectable positive effect on brand image, giving useful information for marketers and practitioners navigating the world of influencer-driven marketing methods.

### *Theoretical Implications*

This research addresses three key shortcomings in previous studies. Firstly, it fills gaps in understanding consumers' purchase intention regarding key opinion leaders' characteristics. Secondly, it broadens the scope by examining how key opinion leaders influence various brands on TikTok live commerce, rather than focusing on a single brand. Thirdly, it explores new sales methods of key opinion leaders, incorporating discussions on branding and purchase intention.

Additionally, this research confirms previous conclusions about the strong correlation between branding and purchase intention. However, it uniquely focuses on how key opinion leaders' traits influence purchase intention through branding variables like brand image and attitude. By evaluating consumers' perceptions of key opinion leaders in terms of trustworthiness, expertise, and familiarity, the research highlights their impact on brand evaluation and purchase intention. This opens avenues for future research to explore additional mediating variables such as product dimensions or company attributes. Moreover, as the research focuses on consumers' purchase intention rather

than their purchase experience, future research could delve into repurchase intention among consumers.

### *Managerial Implication*

This research sheds light on effective strategies for online sales and live commerce, particularly in China's thriving market where live streaming of products is gaining momentum. It underscores the crucial role of selecting or nurturing key opinion leaders who possess high levels of trustworthiness, expertise, and familiarity. These influencers can significantly enhance product exposure and sales volume, thereby diversifying online sales methods, especially on social media platforms.

Besides, the study suggests that impactful key opinion leaders not only benefit online retailers but also amplify the appeal and engagement of social media platforms. Consumers are inclined to trust and follow platforms endorsed by familiar and reliable influencers, leading to increased platform downloads and views.

Also, consumers can leverage the three dimensions of key opinion leaders' characteristics—familiarity, trustworthiness, and expertise—to better evaluate and select suitable spokespeople for live commerce and other platforms. By considering factors such as exposure, cooperation history, and demonstrated expertise, consumers can make informed decisions about which influencers to trust and follow.

In addition, beyond live commerce,

key opinion leaders can play crucial roles in various marketing methods like advertising and word-of-mouth marketing. By integrating these influencers' three key characteristics, marketers can devise and execute efficient strategies to boost consumer engagement and drive sales effectively.

#### *Limitation and Direction for Future Studies*

The research included respondents from both sides of the strait to enhance reliability but acknowledged limitations due to regional differences. Future studies may broaden geographic representation. It focused solely on TikTok Live commerce, overlooking other platforms. While it examined consumer purchase intentions rather than experiences, it suggested potential expansion to new markets. Lastly, it acknowledged the broader role of key opinion leaders beyond live commerce, including product placement videos on platforms like TikTok.

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