

The Influence of Key Opinion Leaders on Social Media on Consumer Psychology and Behavior: A Case Study of Xiaomi Automobile

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Abstract. Against the backdrop of intensifying competition in the new energy vehicle market and the rise of cross-industry entrants, Xiaomi has entered the sector relying on its technological genes and the loyal "Mi Fan" ecosystem. Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) have become crucial factors affecting consumer psychology and behavior. Taking Xiaomi Auto as the research object, this study explores how KOLs shape consumer psychology, including perceived innovation, risk perception and brand trust, as well as consumer behavior such as purchase intention and word-of-mouth communication. Based on the source credibility model, social identity theory, parasocial interaction, the scarcity effect, and the authenticity effect, this paper summarizes the positive mechanisms of KOL marketing and its corresponding risks, and analyzes Xiaomi's coping strategies. It also proposes a sound risk governance system for enterprise KOL cooperation. The research provides theoretical support and practical implications for cross-border brands implementing influencer marketing.

Keywords: Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs), Consumer Behavior, Consumer Psychology, Xiaomi Automobile, Fan Economy

1. Introduction

Driven by China's Dual Carbon strategy and the wave of intelligent transformation, the new energy vehicle market has grown explosively. In this process, KOLs, with their professional expertise in niche fields and high fan stickiness, have become critical references for consumers seeking information and mitigating perceived decision-making risks. Therefore, this paper adopts the case study method to explore the psychological mechanism through which KOLs influence consumers' cognition, attitude and purchase behavior toward Xiaomi Automobile (Xiaomi Auto). It further identifies the risks in KOL marketing, their causes and Xiaomi's timely response strategies. The research offers suggestions for enterprises to build a risk governance mechanism for KOL marketing, providing strategic guidance and risk warnings for similar firms.

Against this background, Xiaomi Auto faces unique challenges and opportunities. On the one hand, as a new entrant in the automotive industry, consumers naturally question its technological

reliability and safety performance. On the other hand, Xiaomi enjoys remarkable advantages: first, its huge fan base, with over 500 million monthly active MIUI users worldwide, forming a solid user foundation; second, its first-mover advantage in KOL strategy, with its founder, Lei Jun, as a top-tier KOL who generates his own massive traffic. Before and after the SU7 launch, Xiaomi had cooperated with more than 500 niche internet celebrities by 2025, effectively reaching young consumers and demonstrating the growth potential of creator marketing in high-value consumption categories.

Therefore, this paper adopts the case study method to explore the psychological mechanism through which KOLs influence consumers' cognition, attitude and purchase behavior toward Xiaomi Auto. It further identifies the risks in KOL marketing, their causes, and Xiaomi's timely response strategies. The research offers suggestions for enterprises to build a risk governance mechanism for KOL marketing, providing strategic guidance and risk warnings for similar firms.

2. Literature review

2.1. Definition and theoretical evolution of KOLs

Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) are individuals who express views in specific fields and exert significant influence. Different from traditional opinion leaders, digital KOLs serve dual roles as content producers and commercial monetization vehicles.

With the rapid development of social media and social e-commerce, the connotation of KOLs has been continuously enriched. Fan & Zhang argued that KOLs play a central role in social e-commerce through the fan effect, expanding market reach and stimulating consumer participation via short videos and livestreams [1]. Their study found that KOLs with strong fan effects significantly improve manufacturers' pricing power and profit margins, thereby confirming KOLs' asset value from a commercial perspective.

Tran et al. systematically examined the impacts of five core characteristics of KOLs-specialty, connection, suitability, attractiveness and credibility, on consumer purchase intention [2]. They proposed that KOL effectiveness, as a second-order construct integrating the five traits, influences consumer decisions through both heuristic and systematic routes. Although suitability does not directly stimulate consumption, it indirectly increases purchase intention by enhancing perceived brand quality.

Subsequent research explored deeper mechanisms. Kong & Lou, based on self-congruity theory and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), showed that visual appeal and visual consistency strengthen consumer engagement with sponsored content through ideal self-congruity [3]. Social proof independently improves engagement through heuristic validation.

In addition, parasocial interaction, as a key mechanism of KOL influence, has gained renewed attention amid the rise of virtual influencers. Fu et al., using the uses and gratifications theory, found that consumers' social media browsing behaviors (hedonic and utilitarian) significantly affect their attitudes toward virtual influencers and parasocial relationships, further influencing purchase intention [4]. These studies expand the boundaries of traditional KOL research and provide new perspectives for understanding the emotional connections between KOLs and consumers.

2.2. Core theoretical mechanisms of KOL influence on consumers

To systematically explain the effectiveness of KOL marketing, existing research draws on multiple perspectives from social psychology and communication.

2.2.1. Source credibility

The influence of KOLs originates primarily from source credibility. Hovland et al. proposed the Source Credibility Model, which states that audience acceptance of information depends on the credibility of the source; higher credibility leads to stronger persuasion effects [5]. In the KOL context, when a KOL is regarded as an authority in a particular field, product endorsements trigger a trust transfer process: consumers shift their trust from the KOL to the brand or product, thereby reducing perceived risk.

2.2.2. Social identity and conformity psychology

KOLs maintain unique emotional connections with fans. The theory of parasocial interaction suggests that audiences form one-way intimacy and dependence toward media figures, similar to face-to-face relationships [6]. This is rooted in the concept of social proof, in which individuals rely on others' behavior to judge correctness in uncertain situations. Social identity theory and conformity behavior further explain group pressure. Asch confirmed through the famous line-judging experiment that individuals tend to abandon independent judgments under group pressure to gain acceptance or avoid isolation [7].

Research indicates that scarcity increases perceived value through psychological reactance [8]. Cialdini's scarcity theory argues that scarce products or opportunities enhance perceived value and desire. The fear of missing out (FOMO) theory posits that anxiety about missing valuable experiences drives irrational conformity [9].

3. Positive mechanisms of KOL marketing and Xiaomi's successful practices

3.1. KOL professionalism and trust transfer

Source credibility theory suggests consumers tend to trust professional KOL opinions [5]. Venciute and Kovaleva found that in KOL endorsements, credibility drives brand equity by strengthening parasocial relationships [10].

Xiaomi SU7's marketing validates this mechanism. Xiaomi invited technology KOLs such as Luo Yonghao and Wang Ziru for in-depth reviews. Their professional credibility laid the foundation for trust transfer. Comments such as cost-performance beyond Tesla and design comparable to Porsche gained wide exposure. The automotive influencer Houge Shuo Che gained over 20 million views on a single video, with frequent comments expressing understanding and plans for test drives.

3.2. Emotional connection: Parasocial interaction and community building

Parasocial relationships between KOLs and fans significantly drive behavior. During Xiaomi's pre-sale period, Lei Jun's personal account (43 million followers) hosted frequent Q&As and work-sharing livestreams, garnering hundreds of millions of views.

Social identity theory explains the diffusion of group behavior. When automotive influencers posted locked orders for the SU7, they provided a reference for group consensus, triggering fan imitation. This led to a wave of order-sharing among Mi Fans. Official data showed that orders exceeded 80,000 within 24 hours, and widespread conformity was observed on social media.

3.3. Scarcity and sense of urgency

The scarcity effect is a key psychological driver of immediate purchase [8]. You verified the interaction between scarcity and FOMO in influencer marketing [9].

After the launch of SU7, scalpers resold orders at premium prices on second-hand platforms, reflecting the scarcity constructed by KOLs. KOLs also implied limited-time pre-order availability to amplify supply shortages. Perceived scarcity increased product value and stimulated speculative behavior, while scalper premiums further intensified consumers' FOMO.

3.4. Moderate flaws and credibility balance

Contrary to traditional marketing, moderate disclosure of shortcomings can enhance credibility, explained by the authenticity effect. In an information-overloaded environment, consumers prefer sources that present a complete picture, including limitations.

KOLs reviewing the SU7 appropriately noted minor flaws, such as interior details, initial infotainment bugs, and delivery issues. Xiaomi responded positively without suppressing negative discussions, avoiding suspicion of excessive marketing. Imperial College Business School (2026) noted that in influencer marketing, consumers value an authentic human experience more than formal qualifications [11].

4. Double-edged sword effects of KOL marketing and Xiaomi's responses

KOL marketing brings significant commercial value but also multiple risks. Xiaomi Auto encountered three typical risks from 2025 to 2026, and its responses provide a valuable case for risk management.

4.1. Trust crisis caused by over-marketing

Excessive commercialization often triggers consumer distrust. According to the Persuasion Knowledge Model, consumers are highly sensitive to the boundary between sincere recommendation and commercial promotion; overly profit-driven KOL content induces skepticism and resistance [12].

Some KOLs exaggerated the SU7's range to 1,000 km, leading to strong dissatisfaction when real-world data showed a lower range. Consumer complaint videos on Douyin received millions of views. To address this, Lei Jun responded personally and released third-party test data, thereby restoring trust through transparent communication.

4.2. Amplification effect of negative information

KOLs can amplify negative information as powerfully as positive content. Media acts as a double-edged sword: negative reports exacerbate market uncertainty, while positive coverage alleviates mispricing [13].

In winter 2025, automotive media Dongchedi released a negative winter range test of the SU7, which was widely reposted by rival KOLs. Xiaomi's stock price dropped 4.5% in one trading day. Xiaomi responded by collaborating with authoritative third parties, such as CATARC, to issue standardized test reports, thereby leveraging institutional credibility to offset the influence of individual influencers.

4.3. Misselection of KOLs and loss of core users

KOL selection relates to brand identity and core user recognition. Cooperation with KOLs holding conflicting values may trigger identity betrayal and user churn.

In early January 2026, Xiaomi's cooperation with the controversial KOL Wanneng de Daxiong (Zong Ning), who had repeatedly criticized Xiaomi and its fans, triggered strong backlash. Negative sentiment reached 60.64% [9]. Core Mi Fans and pro-Xiaomi influencers protested publicly; some suspended cooperation with Xiaomi or even threatened to sell all their Xiaomi products.

Xiaomi responded quickly: its PR director issued a public apology, admitting to review negligence; terminated cooperation immediately; and its customer relationship management (CRM) team contacted core fans individually to repair relationships.

5. Discussion

5.1. Findings

KOLs influence consumer psychology and behavior through professionalism, emotional connection, and scarcity construction. Xiaomi, with its large fan base, top KOL founder Lei Jun, and content co-creation with technology influencers and users, effectively reached target consumers, thereby demonstrating the potential of creator marketing for high-value consumption. Meanwhile, the decentralized nature, high emotional involvement, and non-standardized characteristics of KOL marketing introduce significant operational risks.

5.2. Implications

Enterprises should use KOLs for precise market penetration, trust building, immersive experiences, and community building. To manage risks, firms should establish transparent communication channels, cooperate with authoritative third parties, and develop a multi-dimensional KOL screening system.

Under the B.U.I.L.D. governance principle, enterprises should move beyond simple price comparison to full-chain forensic auditing to ensure budget traceability [14]. First, conduct in-depth background and value alignment checks to ensure consistency between KOLs and the brand. Second, verify fan profiles and data authenticity to prevent fraud. Third, use stringent legal contracts that include moral clauses, allowing unilateral termination if the KOL damages the brand's reputation.

6. Conclusion

Taking Xiaomi Auto as a case, this study systematically explores how KOL marketing influences consumer cognition, attitude and behavior. Based on source credibility, social identity, parasocial interaction, the scarcity effect, and authenticity persuasion, this paper analyzes positive mechanisms, including trust transfer, emotional connection, scarcity construction, and moderate flaw disclosure. It also identifies risks such as trust crises from over-marketing, negative information amplification and core user loss due to inappropriate KOL selection. Corresponding governance strategies, including transparent communication, authoritative endorsement, and risk management systems, are proposed, thereby providing theoretical and practical guidance for cross-border enterprises.

This research has limitations. As a single case study, its generalizability requires further verification. It mainly relies on public data and second-hand materials, lacking first-hand empirical

tests to quantify effects. The rapidly evolving KOL environment may limit temporal and platform applicability. Future research may adopt multi-case comparisons or large-scale surveys to test cross-industry differences and to explore the long-term effects and dynamic evolution of brand-KOL relationships on brand equity.

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