

The Impact of Opinion Leader Types in Virtual Communities on Consumer Behavior

Yi Dai

*School of Economics and Management, Shanghai Institute of Technology, Shanghai, China
daiy2335429@gmail.com*

Abstract. Nowadays, with the development of the Internet economy, virtual communities have become important spaces for consumers to obtain information, communicating with others and making purchase decisions. Key opinion leaders (KOLs), as central actors in these communities, influence consumers not only through direct recommendations but also by shaping the community atmosphere. This study uses thematic synthesis and content analysis to review literature on virtual communities, KOL types, community atmosphere and consumer purchase intention. Based on the different roles of KOLs, this study divides them into three types: cognitive-expert, emotional-resonance and structural-hub KOLs. Cognitive-expert KOLs provide professional information and help form a supportive atmosphere. Emotional-resonance KOLs build emotional connections and strengthen members' sense of belonging. Structural-hub KOLs connect different groups and promote an open community environment. These findings indicate that community atmospheres affect perceived value, trust, emotional identification and purchase intention of consumer. Therefore, the influence of KOLs in virtual communities follows both a direct path and an indirect path through community atmosphere. This study develops a framework of KOL typology, community atmosphere, consumer behavior and suggests that brands should select KOLs according to marketing objectives while platform managers should maintain community trust and prevent excessive commercialization during their daily operations.

Keywords: Virtual communities, key opinion leaders, community atmosphere, consumer behavior, purchase intention

1. Introduction

1.1. The definition of virtual community

The concept of community was first developed by Ferdinand Tönnies, who described a traditional community as a physical space in which members share common values and maintain emotional ties. With the growth of online interaction, virtual communities have emerged as informal social groups formed through the internet. Among numerous literature studies, Han Xiaoyun et al. [1] find that members having regular interaction based on the same target, interests and need is the main feature of virtual communication. In addition, Lyu Pan et al. [2] consider that virtual community is the group that people communicate through computer networks, share knowledge and information

with each other. Meanwhile, empirical research by Ridings and Gefen [3] identified information exchange and the pursuit of emotional value as two core driving factors. Therefore, current virtual community not merely serves the basic function of information exchange, but additionally perform consumer's emotion and social interaction needs.

1.2. Definition of virtual community key opinion leader

Before defining virtual community key opinion leader, it is necessary to clarify the meaning of community opinion leader. The concept of the community opinion leader can be traced back to 1948 in the Two-Step Flow of Communication theory proposed by Paul Lazarsfeld et al., defined as individuals who influence others' attitudes. In the current era of thriving Internet and virtual communities, virtual key opinion leaders affect others' attitudes through information quality and their existing social status [4]. Cheng argues that KOLs deeply affect community members' information reception and consumption decision-making abilities by building trust relationships and creating a social atmosphere. Furthermore, most KOLs in virtual communities possess solid professional capabilities to support their reputations, granting them a strong ability to build trust endorsements within the community [5]. For specific performance, In e-commerce livestreaming field, KOL usually plays a crucial persuasive role in consumers' purchasing decisions by virtue of their professional product knowledge, high-frequency interactivity and huge social influence [6].

1.3. Classification of virtual community key opinion leader

In existing literature on opinion leader typologies, Valente and Pumpuang [7] summarized 10 methods for recognizing opinion leaders, which include the celebrity method, self-designation, expert nomination and sociometric techniques, among others. Rehman et al. [8] divided key users in online discussion networks into five roles: Conversation Starter, Influencer, Active Engager and Network Builder; the influencer corresponds to the opinion leader in public perception. Zhao Duannan et al. [9] further noted that, in some public events involving complex social controversies, .opinion leaders' positive messaging does not necessarily boost ordinary netizens' positive sentiment, indicating that the influence of opinion leaders on groups is limited.

Based on above research, examining the relationship between virtual community atmosphere and consumer behavior, the author divided virtual community key opinion leader into three mold : cognitive-expert type, emotional-resonance type and structural-hub type. In virtual community, cognitive-expert KOL serve the function of professional knowledge export, who offers supporting atmosphere in community by providing high professionalism, highly reliable product information and objective assessment. The emotional-resonance KOL assume the function of emotional support in virtual community. Fans of this type usually follow them originated by affective identification and spiritual resonance, thus emotional-resonance type KOL perform community happiness and sense of belonging. Unlike the first two type, structural-hub KOL respond for break social circle estrangement, shaping community opening structure and atmosphere, which take the position of structure hole in community. The subsequent analysis of how KOL affect virtual atmosphere and consumer behavior differently in this paper will be grounded in this typology.

1.4. Research method

This research introduces the cognitive-expert, emotional-resonance and structural-hub types of KOLs by using thematic synthesis and content analysis. By inductively analyzing, interpreting

systematically reviewing the core literature on virtual communities, KOL definitions, KOL classifications and community influence mechanisms, this research systematically sorts out the role models of KOLs in community atmosphere the role models of KOL in community atmosphere and consumer behavior by combining Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) theoretical model proposed in existing studies.

2. The influence of virtual community key opinion leader on consumer psychology

2.1. The influence of key opinion leader on virtual community

Virtual community atmosphere is a form of emotional aggregation that deeply affects the attitudes and collective behavioral cognition of community members when they participate in community activities. Current academic research on community climate mainly focus on existing online brand communities, which has been divided into three perspective: supporting atmosphere, controlling atmosphere and creative atmosphere. Supporting atmosphere present as mutual assistance and care in members, while controlling atmosphere involve into community operator standardizing and controlling malicious information in communities. Creative atmosphere means the community constant innovation, bring out introduction of new activities and features. In virtual community, as the core hub, the behave method of key opinion leader straightly influenced and fostered the social atmosphere.

In social network aspect, Zou Lin [10] noted the underlying impact of community atmosphere from KOL: key opinion consumer in virtual community play the role of bridging in social network construct hole, who takes on the function of information hub through different internet consumer. Also, the key opinion consumer (KOC) can be seen as the extended character of KOL in normal consumer. By using weak ties like daily recommending content, evaluation and interaction, KOLs build a new type of trust network, meanwhile, this information spreading type leaded by KOL break through the limitation of strong ties and increasing the information spreading efficiency in community. KOLs perform the function of building an open, inclusive and high-trust interaction pattern among groups, which lays the foundation for the community's distinctive atmosphere.

Existing research concluded the create of community atmosphere made by KOL into supporting atmosphere, controlling atmosphere and creative atmosphere. In supporting atmosphere, through high frequency of positive emotion stimulate and community support, KOL set up empathy and mutual assistance keynote in community, which improved emotion belonging and the sense of social identity effectively [11]. In controlling atmosphere aspect, the specific discourse systems and recommendation norms (such as authentic evaluation standards and elimination of false advertising) through communication built by KOL, invisibly establishes behavioral boundaries and maintains its specific atmosphere for the community [12], In evoking creative atmosphere, through creating new trend and carrying out innovative topic planning, KOL keep promoting community liveness.

Over all, in the structure of social network, KOL leading the formation and evaluation of virtual community atmosphere from emotion, standard and innovation, which also lay the foundation of the discussion of how community atmosphere further affected to consumer psychology.

2.2. The impact of virtual community atmosphere on consumers

Based on existing literature, the author notes that research on virtual brand communities in academia mainly focuses on consumer-related areas. Jiang Shu and Li Rongjie [13] observe that 72.7% of academic research concentrate on consumer area, central theme include user engagement, brand

loyalty and community identity. In addition, in recent five years, researches still focus on this direction. This research tendency indicate that discussing how community environment transferred to specific consuming behavior gradually becomes to a core proposition in virtual community research.

As a significant branch of virtual communities, online brand communities typically reflect the influence of a unified virtual community atmosphere on consumers. In the empirical research based on the SOR theoretical framework [14], external stimuli is defined as a supportive, controlling and innovative atmosphere in the online brand community. Moreover, the organism state will change when community members are situated in an interactive, well-managed and innovative community environment. This study found that all three atmospheric elements can significantly enhance consumers' perceived value. They enable consumers to not only obtain functional perceptions (such as useful product information) in the community, but also experience emotional and social perceptions (such as pleasure, trust and psychological identification). This perceived value ultimately prompts consumers to have a strong response, that is to generate a significant purchase intention. The statistics of this study also shows that perceived value plays a partial mediating role between community atmosphere and consumers' purchase intentions.

Furthermore, the consumption conversion generated by a positive community atmosphere has social attributes in social networks. Zou Lin [10] further point out in the research: In a warm community atmosphere, weak ties among members are more likely to build trust, which means that the emotional connection between users and KOLs will translate into recognition of the recommended products. Therefore, KOCs who located in structural holes can leverage their information acquisition advantages in social networks by incorporating the trust and value in the community atmosphere into potential consumption decisions. Overall, the model of a virtual community's atmosphere can be summed up as follows: based on social network relationships, this mode directly triggers the buying behavior of consumers by stimulating their perceived value. After they making a purchase, their voluntary sharing and word-of-mouth will help feeding back into the community atmosphere, which creates a positive cycle in virtual community.

Overall, the internal psychological states of consumer influenced by virtual community atmosphere through specific social environments, which drives consumers to take actual actions. At the same time, through voluntary sharing behaviors, virtual communities reinforce their impact on consumers' psychology.

2.3. The psychological impact of KOL on consumers

In virtual communities, the influence of KOLs on consumers lies in the aspects of superficial information acquisition as well as consumers' cognitive, emotional and psychological motivation levels. Existing empirical studies of the SOR theory [14] suggest that KOL and the community atmosphere they create act as external stimuli in consumer decision-making. These two factors drive consumers to engage in purchasing behavior jointly and directly alter their internal psychological states.

From the perspective of cognitive psychology, KOLs break down consumers' information barriers by producing high-quality recommendation content. Cheng Yuxuan [12] indicates that KOL can accurately project the specific needs of consumers during the cognitive and interest stages through scenario-based evaluations and recommendations, triggering consumers' curiosity and desire to explore brands or products. At the same time, Zou Lin [10] argues KOL as primary disseminators who also use weak ties to connect different groups and occupy structural hole positions within social networks. The utilization of weak ties broadens the information horizons of consumers, which easily

fosters new forms of trust across groups and lowers their original psychological defenses. In this way, KOLs positively influencing decision-making and emotions of consumer.

In terms of emotions and feelings, the personalized traits of KOLs can significantly stimulate emotional resonance among consumers in virtual communities. Through continuous content output and interaction with fans, KOLs activate and satisfy consumers' specific emotional needs. The customer-fit theory written by Han Xiaoyun et al. [11] proposed that the emotional sense of belonging is the essence of deep alignment between customers and brand communities. Another study written by the same researchers further indicated that KOLs can effectively activate social identity among community members. This article points out that customer-to-customer identification and customer-to-community identification are key to stimulating customers' fit attitudes, KOLs serve as an important link in maintaining this identification relationship, which established a unique atmosphere of community emotional resonance and reciprocal sharing. Similarly, in the process of continuously following KOLs, fans develop a deeper sense of self-satisfaction and spiritual pleasure. This positive psychological feedback directly enhances consumers' psychological identification [10]. The study by Zhao Ran and Tian Xueying [14] provides empirical evidence for this mechanism. In their measurement of consumer perceived value, they proposed that a community atmosphere favorably cultivated by KOLs can make consumers feel joy and gain a strong sense of community belonging and identification. This combination sense of pleasure, trust and identification collectively constitutes the dominant emotions of consumers within the community.

Based on the content discussed in this chapter, the impact of KOLs on consumers' psychology and emotions can be summarized as the following cycle: KOLs produce content, creating a specific emotional and social atmosphere, which triggers consumers' emotional resonance, trust and sense of belonging, thus promoting consumers' purchase intentions. This cycle of KOL-driven emotional arousal carries the responsibility of converting commercial value within virtual communities.

3. The impact of KOLs in virtual communities on consumer behavior

3.1. The influence of KOLs on consumer behavior

Despite KOLs being an emerging role in the internet marketing ecosystem, research about their impact on consumer behavior in different contexts is still lacking. This section will analyze and discuss the existing literature from three aspects. In the context of live streaming, Li Xiaoru [6] argues that KOLs with significant characteristics such as professionalism, interactivity and social influence, affecting consumers' purchasing decisions profoundly through three directions: trust building and transmission, product demonstration and recommendation, interactive experience and emotional resonance. Especially in the highly interactive environment of live streaming, the real-time two-way interaction between KOLs and consumers is more immediate and immersive compared to the weak-tie interactions in general communities. This not only enhances consumers' sense of immersion and belonging, but also effectively stimulates their emotional needs, which furtherly transforming emotional resonance into purchase intention.

In the field of social media, the study by Lu Xiyan and Yu Pengliang [4] pointed out that in terms of information quality, update frequency, distribution platforms, the information quality and update frequency of self-media KOLs can significantly reduce consumers' perceived risk. Regarding social evaluation, the social reputation and public image of self-media KOLs can also negatively impact perceived risk. This means that in the domain of self-media, KOLs can not only persuade consumers by providing high-quality arguments, but also further simplify consumer decision-making through their own social image, with the degree of consumer demand playing a significant moderating role.

At the same time, Xu Bingxin [5] pointed out that the attractiveness and compatibility of vloggers on Bilibili are key factors influencing user word-of-mouth communication and product purchase intention, among which the compatibility between UP owners and users has an especially significant impact on the perceived quality of information. When content creators (UP hosts) share similar values, aesthetics, or lifestyles with consumers, consumers' perceived quality of the review information is greatly enhanced further promoting their purchasing behavior. In Bilibili marketing, KOLs therefore influence purchase intention through professional information, emotional interaction and a close match with their audience.

Overall, previous studies show that KOLs can increase purchase intention through trust, information quality and personal characteristics. However, they often treat KOLs as separate sources of information and examine their direct persuasive effects on consumers. Less attention has been given to the position of KOLs within the social networks of particular virtual communities. As the preceding discussion indicates, their influence also depends on interaction norms, shared emotional belonging and recognition among community members. Therefore, the relationship between individual KOL characteristics and the collective features of virtual communities remains insufficiently examined.

3.2. The impact of virtual communities on consumer purchase intention

Lyu Pan et al. [2] found that in social sharing, the content aspects (informational and interactive nature of text; authenticity and fun of videos), the subject aspect (role of KOL) and the technical features (personalized recommendations by the platform) act as external stimuli that boost consumers' perceived value and trust, which in turn positively influence their purchase intentions. Through these researches, the path coefficient for KOLs is the highest, indicating that among the various factors in virtual community sharing, KOLs remain the primary drivers of perceived value. This study also demonstrates that virtual communities can effectively stimulate consumer purchasing behavior by enhancing their sense of trust and value.

Han Xiaoyun et al. [1] confirmed that customer-perceived usefulness, customer-community identification and customer-customer identification satisfy consumers' major psychological needs in three aspects: autonomy, competence and relatedness, thereby promoting the formation of customer engagement. Customer engagement influences engagement behavior and ultimately triggers purchasing behavior directly. This indicates that in order for virtual communities to convert customers into deeply engaged customers, they must genuinely meet members' psychological needs for belonging and identification to ultimately achieve the transformation from 'non-transactional behaviors' (such as sharing and discussing) to 'transactional behaviors' (purchasing). Therefore, the community atmosphere is precisely the critical soil driving this transformation.

In summary, virtual communities significantly influence purchase intentions of consumers through the combined effects of multiple mechanisms, including community atmosphere, KOL interaction and member identification. This process gradually drives consumers from mere participation to deep alignment by stimulating their emotional needs and fulfilling their need for group identification, ultimately leading to purchase behavior. Therefore, it is evident that the synergy between KOLs and the community atmosphere is the core mechanism through virtual communities drive consumer purchases.

3.3. The impact of virtual community KOL on consumer purchase intention

Previous sections discussed how KOLs reach consumers and influence their purchase intentions through direct and indirect pathways. This section will in conjunction with the KOL typologies proposed earlier and further explore the dual influence mechanism.

Based on the three KOL typologies mentioned earlier—cognitive-expert, emotional-resonance and structural-hub—considering the positioning of KOLs in virtual communities different KOL create specific atmospheres within these communities. Cognitive-expert KOLs, through their expertise, product reviews, experience-based answers, establish themselves as reliable sources of information in the community. By consistently providing information and responding to questions, they help foster a supportive environment and reduce consumers' perceived risks [4]. Emotional-resonance KOL focus on emotional connection and shared values, using life sharing, experience storytelling, attitude expression to build an emotionally engaging atmosphere, allowing consumers to feel emotional attachment, identity recognition and enjoyment, which further boosts their willingness to purchase related products or brands [5]. Structural-hub KOL mainly serve as network bridges in virtual communities, connecting different interest circles. By promoting cross-circle discussions, spreading information and encouraging user interaction, they indirectly create an open and expansive community atmosphere [8].

Similarly, in virtual communities influenced by KOLs, the specific atmosphere generated directly affects consumers' psychological states and purchase intentions. Under the influence of external atmosphere, the empirical study of the SOR model by Zhao Ran and Tian Xueying [14] demonstrates that supportive, controlling and innovative atmospheres within a community can directly trigger consumers' psychological identification and generate perceived value. Research based on self-determination theory by Han Xiaoyun et al. [1] also confirms that when the community atmosphere meets members' needs for relationships and sense of belonging, customer alignment is transformed into purchase behavior. In other words, a favorable community atmosphere acts as a direct emotional catalyst, making it easier for consumers, under the influence of strong community trust and emotional attachment, to form purchase intentions and convert these into purchasing behavior.

Therefore, the influence of KOL in virtual communities on consumers' purchase intentions is based on KOL indirect shaping of the community atmosphere, as well as the community atmosphere's direct driving effect on consumers. In the commercial ecosystem of virtual communities, KOL not only directly stimulate consumers' purchase intentions but also indirectly prompt consumers to form purchase intentions by creating a unique atmosphere within the virtual community. Thus, the influence mechanism of KOL in virtual communities ultimately forms a closed loop of effects: 'individual KOL influences community atmosphere—community atmosphere evokes group psychological identification—group psychology drives individual purchasing behavior.'

4. Discussion and suggestion

Based on the preceding analysis of the multiple roles KOLs play in virtual communities regarding consumers and in conjunction with a review of relevant literature, it is concluded that in virtual communities, KOL not only perform functions of information dissemination, product recommendation and opinion guidance, but also deeply participate in the construction of community atmosphere. They indirectly influence consumer behavior by shaping the community atmosphere. In virtual communities, KOLs build supportive, emotional and creative atmospheres by providing

professional support, establishing emotional connections and bridging communication. Furthermore, in specific community atmospheres, as external stimuli, which directly awaken perceived value and community trust of consumer and guiding purchase intentions. Therefore, in today's virtual community ecosystem, consumer behavior is largely influenced by the combined effects of KOL influence and community atmosphere.

Based on the conclusions above, this paper puts forward three recommendations for regarding the marketing behaviors of KOL in virtual communities:

First, brands should develop differentiated marketing strategies based on KOL types. If the brand needs to convey professional information, it should prioritize selecting cognitively professional KOL and leverage their expertise to reduce consumers' perceived risk [4]; if the brand needs to convey lifestyle attitudes and social values, it should collaborate with emotionally resonant KOL, who, due to their high alignment with fans in values and lifestyle, can evoke emotional resonance within the community and further promote consumer behavior [5].

Second, platform operators should exercise careful governance over the atmosphere of virtual communities, focusing on aspects such as content authenticity, frequency of commercial promotions, quality of user interactions and maintenance of community trust. The commercialization of virtual communities is built upon a healthy community environment. Therefore, the absence of a controlled atmosphere can lead to excessive marketing and false promotions by KOL, which provokes consumer resentment. Existing studies indicate that in complex network public opinion that positive statements from KOL have not effectively reversed the emotions of ordinary netizens [9]. Therefore, platform operations must establish strict community review mechanisms, rather than relying solely on the self-purification mechanisms of virtual communities. Also they should encourage deep interaction between KOL and users to foster a healthy, supportive environment.

Third, community managers should make effective use of KOLs' weak ties and structural-hole advantages. They should recognize the structural-hub role of KOLs when working with them, encouraging followers to share and discuss content across different groups. This can turn weak ties into emotional connections and increase the commercial value of the community as a whole.

This study still has certain limitations. The primary limitation is that it is mainly based on existing literature for theoretical derivation, which has not yet fully examined the long-term dynamic evolution process between KOL influence, community atmosphere and consumer purchase intention. Secondly, this study primarily focuses on textual content, insufficient exploration of the cumulative impact of KOL on consumer psychology in highly interactive contexts such as short videos and live streaming. Finally, the current research mainly focuses on positive impacts, while the potentially destructive aspects of KOLs on communities remain to be further investigated.

5. Conclusion

This study reviewed and integrated existing literature regarding the influence of opinion leaders (KOLs) in virtual communities on consumer purchase intentions, which drives the following core conclusions: In virtual communities, KOL indirectly shape the supportive, emotional and innovative atmosphere of the community through their expertise, emotional resonance, structural hub characteristics. Specific community atmospheres, external stimuli, directly trigger consumers' perceived value, community trust and emotional identification, ultimately guiding purchase intentions. Based on the distinct mechanisms through which KOLs influence consumers, this paper categorizes them into three main types: cognitive-expert, emotional-resonance and structural-hub. Different types of KOL exhibit significant differences in their focus and pathways of influence on the community atmosphere.

Based on the above conclusions, this paper argues that: in practical business scenarios, brands should adopt differentiated collaborations according to the characteristic types of different KOL when launching marketing campaigns, in order to precisely align with brand objectives. Also, platform managers of virtual communities must attach great importance to maintaining the community's trust ecosystem, fostering a healthy interaction atmosphere, preventing consumer emotional backlash caused by excessive commercialization.

The theoretical significance of this study lies in moving beyond the analytical perspective, which regards KOLs merely as single information transmission nodes, constructing instead an analytical framework of 'KOL Typology—Community Atmosphere—Consumer Behavior.' This provides a new theoretical reference for the social-psychological mechanisms understanding through which opinion leaders in virtual communities influence consumers' purchase intentions. Also, this framework also offers a theoretical reference for subsequent researchers to explore the dynamic evolution of opinion leaders' influence in social media environments.

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