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# Key Opinion Consumers (KOCs) and Consumer Behavior on Xiaohongshu: An Empirical Study via the Authenticity - Interactivity-Professionalism (AIP) Framework

**Zhenwei Yan[1,2], Asad Ur Rehman[1,*]**

[1]Graduate School of Management, Postgraduate Centre, Management & Science University,40100, Selangor, Malaysia
[2]School of Logistics and e-Business, Henan University of Animal Husbandry and Economy, 450000, Zhengzhou, China
**Author to whom correspondence should be addressed.*

**Abstract:** ***This study investigates the influence of Key Opinion Consumers (KOCs) on consumer behavior within Xiaohongshu, a leading social commerce platform in China, by proposing an integrated Authenticity-Interactivity-Professionalism (AIP) framework. Drawing on the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) and Social Identity Theory, the framework aims to unpack how KOCs shape consumer trust and purchase intention through three core dimensions. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining quantitative analysis of 500 user surveys, qualitative coding of 100 high-engagement KOC posts, and in-depth interviews with 20 KOCs across beauty, parenting, and travel niches. Results indicate that authenticity ($\beta$=0.47, $p<0.001$) and interactivity ($\beta$=0.34, $p<0.01$) are significant antecedents of consumer trust, while professionalism ($\beta$=0.41, $p<0.001$) directly drives purchase intention. Notably, KOCs' unfiltered content and real-time interactions outperform traditional Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) in triggering impulse purchases, as raw authenticity mitigates skepticism and live engagement enhances immediacy. This study contributes to user-generated content (UGC) marketing theory by validating the AIP framework and offers actionable insights for brands and platforms to leverage KOCs' grassroots influence.***

**Keywords:** Key Opinion Consumer (KOC); Social Commerce; Consumer Trust; User-Generated Content (UGC); Xiaohongshu; AIP Framework.

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## 1. Introduction

The rise of decentralized social commerce has redefined consumer decision-making, shifting power from brands to user-generated content (UGC). Within this ecosystem, Key Opinion Consumers (KOCs)—ordinary users with 1,000 to 100,000 followers who share authentic product experiences—have emerged as critical intermediaries, distinct from both nano-influencers (<1,000 followers) and high-profile Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs). Unlike KOLs, who often rely on polished, commercially driven content, KOCs derive influence from grassroots credibility, making them effective in driving measurable conversions (Jin & Ryu, 2020).

Xiaohongshu, a prominent social commerce platform in China with 200 million monthly active users (QuestMobile, 2023), exemplifies this trend. On the platform, KOC-generated content achieves 1.8 times higher engagement rates than KOL content, with a 34% conversion rate in high-impact categories like beauty and parenting. Despite their growing significance, academic research has predominantly focused on KOLs, leaving a gap in understanding KOCs' unique behavioral mechanisms—particularly how their authenticity, interactivity, and professionalism collectively shape consumer trust and purchase decisions.

This study addresses three critical gaps: (1) theoretical underrepresentation of KOCs' authenticity-driven trust compared to KOLs' commercial authority; (2) limited empirical validation of KOCs' multidimensional influence (e.g., how interactivity and professionalism interact to drive behavior); (3) lack of actionable frameworks for platforms and brands to optimize KOC ecosystems. By proposing the AIP framework, this study aims to clarify KOCs' role as pivotal agents in social commerce and provide a roadmap for leveraging grassroots influence in an era of declining trust in traditional advertising.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM)

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) distinguishes between two routes of persuasive communication: the central route (high cognitive effort, based on argument quality) and the peripheral route (low cognitive effort, based on heuristic cues like emotional appeal or source relatability). KOCs predominantly operate through the peripheral route, leveraging authentic storytelling and relatable experiences to trigger emotional resonance. For example, a beauty KOC sharing unfiltered photos of a skincare product—including imperfections like acne or redness—fosters empathy by aligning with followers' real-life experiences, bypassing the need for technical specifications (Wongkitrungrueng & Assarut, 2020).

Xiaohongshu's visual-centric design amplifies this effect: short videos and photo diaries emphasizing lifestyle aesthetics (rather than product specs) align with low-involvement purchase contexts (e.g., daily essentials), where emotional connection outweighs factual scrutiny (Smith et al., 2021). Notably, KOCs redefine professionalism within this framework: instead of rigid expertise, they present niche knowledge in accessible formats (e.g., explaining sunscreen efficacy through a personal beach vacation anecdote), bridging peripheral emotional cues with moderate central route processing.

### 2.2 Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) posits that individuals derive self-concept from group memberships and strive to maintain positive in-group distinctiveness. KOCs act as prototypical in-group members, their consumption behaviors signaling shared values that followers adopt to reinforce group identity. Unlike KOLs, who often represent aspirational out-groups (e.g., celebrities), KOCs embody the "average consumer," fostering kinship. For instance, a college student KOC reviewing budget-friendly skincare resonates with peers facing similar financial constraints, creating a micro-community bound by economic identity (Algesheimer et al., 2005).

On Xiaohongshu, this dynamic is particularly pronounced in niche categories: KOCs curate subcultural aesthetics (e.g., Hanfu, vintage thrifting), and followers adopt these styles to signal group belonging. A 2022 survey found 68% of users purchased KOC-endorsed products to "feel part of a community" (iResearch, 2022), while KOC critiques of brands (e.g., ethical issues in fast fashion) can trigger collective boycotts, reflecting identity-driven avoidance of out-group stigma.

### 2.3 Synthesis of Theories

Xiaohongshu's UGC-centric algorithm democratizes content visibility, enabling KOCs to thrive without institutional backing (iResearch, 2023). Its user base—68% female, aged 18–35—prioritizes peer reviews over branded ads, a tendency amplified by China's collectivist culture, where "guanxi" (relational interdependence) and "renqing" (reciprocal obligation) prioritize interpersonal trust over institutional authority (Hwang, 1987). KOCs, as "virtual peers," embody these norms through unfiltered sharing, fostering trust via mutual vulnerability.

Together, ELM and Social Identity Theory provide a dual lens: ELM explains how KOCs persuade through emotional heuristics, while Social Identity Theory clarifies why consumers internalize these cues to reinforce group belonging. This synergy is intensified by Xiaohongshu's algorithmic personalization, which amplifies in-group echo chambers, strengthening both peripheral processing and identity-driven mimicry.

## 3. Hypotheses and Model Development

### 3.1 The AIP Framework

Building on social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) and parasocial interaction theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956), we propose the AIP framework, which identifies three core dimensions of KOC influence:

- **Authenticity:** Defined as content transparency and relatability, including unedited visuals (e.g., unretouched before-and-after photos) and balanced reviews (framing both pros and cons). Authenticity reduces perceived risk by aligning with consumer skepticism toward idealized advertising (Smith et al., 2020).

- **Interactivity:** Encompasses real-time engagement (e.g., live Q&A, polls) and personalized responses, fostering parasocial relationships where followers perceive KOCs as approachable peers. Bidirectional communication strengthens emotional bonds and loyalty (Li & Wang, 2022).

- **Professionalism:** Refers to domain-specific expertise, such as scientific ingredient analysis (beauty), safety tips (parenting), or cost-saving itineraries (travel). Professionalism reduces information asymmetry, facilitating informed decisions (Smith et al., 2021).

### 3.2 Hypothesis Development

From the AIP framework, we derive the following hypotheses:

- **H1a:** Visual authenticity (e.g., unedited visuals) positively affects consumer trust by mitigating skepticism toward idealized portrayals.

- **H1b:** Balanced reviews (highlighting pros and cons) enhance consumer trust through perceived objectivity, as overly positive content may trigger suspicion (Xie et al., 2023).

- **H2a:** Comment responsiveness strengthens consumer trust by signaling attentiveness and fostering reciprocity (Blau, 1964).

- **H2b:** Live-stream engagement amplifies consumer trust through real-time interaction, which humanizes KOCs and validates product claims (Wongkitrungrueng & Assarut, 2020).

- **H3a:** Expertise depth (e.g., scientific explanations) indirectly drives purchase intention through consumer trust.

- **H3b:** Cross-scenario applicability (e.g., demonstrating product use in diverse contexts) enhances purchase intention by strengthening consumer trust.

### 3.3 Theoretical Framework

As illustrated in Figure 1, the AIP model positions authenticity and interactivity as antecedents of consumer trust, which mediates their impact on purchase intention. Professionalism directly influences purchase intention by fulfilling utilitarian needs. This framework integrates emotional (trust) and cognitive (utility) pathways, offering a holistic view of KOC effectiveness.

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1 Data Collection

#### Surveys

A structured questionnaire was administered to 500 active Xiaohongshu users who had interacted with KOC content (liked, commented, shared, or purchased) in the prior three months. Recruitment via in-app notifications ensured relevance, and screening questions verified engagement frequency. The sample was stratified to reflect Xiaohongshu's demographics: 70% female, 30% male; 60% aged 18–25, 40% 26–35; 50% daily users, 30% weekly, 20% occasional.

The 35-item questionnaire used 7-point Likert scales (1= "Strongly Disagree" to 7= "Strongly Agree") to measure AIP constructs (e.g., "This KOC shows real product effects" for authenticity). Reverse-coded items (e.g., "This

KOC's content feels overly promotional") minimized response bias. A pilot test with 50 users confirmed reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha > 0.85$ for all constructs).

**Content Analysis**

A purposive sample of 100 high-engagement KOC posts (January–December 2022) was selected from beauty (40%), parenting (30%), and travel (30%) categories. "High engagement" was defined as likes/views >5%, ≥50 comments, and ≥20 shares (industry benchmarks for Xiaohongshu).

Two NVivo 12-trained coders analyzed posts using a predefined codebook: authenticity (unedited visuals, flaw disclosure), interactivity (comment response rate, polls), and professionalism (technical depth, cross-scenario examples). Inter-coder reliability (Cohen's $\kappa=0.82$) exceeded the 0.75 threshold (McHugh, 2012).

**Interviews**

Semi-structured interviews with 20 KOCs (10,000–100,000 followers) explored content strategies. Participants represented beauty (8), parenting (6), and travel (6) niches, with interviews lasting 45–60 minutes. Key questions included: "How do you balance authenticity and aesthetics?" and "What strategies maintain follower engagement?" Transcripts were analyzed via thematic coding in MAXQDA.

### 4.2 Analytical Approach

- **Structural Equation Modeling (SEM):** AMOS 28.0 tested the AIP model via a two-step process: confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to validate measures (convergent validity: AVE >0.50; discriminant validity: $\sqrt{AVE}$ > inter-construct correlations [Fornell & Larcker, 1981]), followed by structural model testing with path coefficients ($\beta$) and p-values. Model fit was evaluated using $\chi^2/df < 3$, CFI/TLI >0.90, RMSEA <0.08, and SRMR <0.06 (Hu & Bentler, 1999).

- **Mediator Analysis:** 5,000 bootstrap samples assessed trust's mediating role in authenticity/interactivity-purchase intention relationships.

- **Text Mining:** Python's NLTK library analyzed post sentiment (VADER lexicon), themes (LDA), and keywords (TF-IDF) to complement quantitative findings.

## 5. Results

### 5.1 Descriptive Statistics

62% of survey respondents reported purchasing products influenced by KOCs, with the highest conversion rate in beauty (45%). Effective KOC posts emphasized authenticity (78% used unfiltered visuals) and educational value (65% included tutorials), consistent with trust-driven consumption trends (Li & Wang, 2022). Posts featuring real-time testing or unedited before-and-after comparisons achieved 2.3× higher engagement than polished promotional content.

### 5.2 Reliability and Validity

The measurement model demonstrated robust psychometric properties (Table 1). Cronbach's $\alpha$ for authenticity (0.89) and interactivity (0.87) exceeded the 0.70 threshold (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Composite Reliability (CR=0.91 for authenticity, 0.88 for interactivity) and AVE (0.72 and 0.68) confirmed convergent validity (Hair et al., 2019). The Fornell-Larcker criterion supported discriminant validity ($\sqrt{AVE}$ > cross-construct correlations).

**Table 1:** Reliability and Validity Metrics

| Construct | Cronbach's α | CR | AVE | Mean (SD) | 95% CI |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Authenticity | 0.89 | 0.91 | 0.72 | 5.32 (0.78) | [5.20, 5.44] |
| Interactivity | 0.87 | 0.88 | 0.68 | 4.95 (0.82) | [4.82, 5.08] |

### 5.3 Hypothesis Testing

SEM results showed excellent model fit ($\chi^2/df=2.35$, CFI=0.95, RMSEA=0.06). Key findings (Table 2) include:

- **H1a supported:** Authenticity strongly predicted trust ($\beta=0.47$, $p<0.001$), aligning with social exchange theory (transparent content fosters perceived sincerity).
- **H2b supported:** Interactivity significantly predicted trust ($\beta=0.34$, $p=0.002$), driven by real-time engagement (e.g., live Q&A) enhancing perceived expertise.
- **H3a supported:** Professionalism directly predicted purchase intention ($\beta=0.41$, $p=0.001$), particularly in high-involvement categories (e.g., skincare ingredient analysis reducing risk).

**Table 2:** SEM Path Coefficients (N=500)

| Hypothesis | Path | β | p-value | 95% CI | Supported |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| H1a | Authenticity→Trust | 0.47 | <0.001 | [0.41, 0.53] | Yes |
| H2b | Interactivity→Trust | 0.34 | 0.002 | [0.27, 0.41] | Yes |
| H3a | Professionalism→PI | 0.41 | 0.001 | [0.35, 0.47] | Yes |

### 5.4 Qualitative Insights

Thematic analysis of interviews and content revealed:

- **KOC Strategies:** 80% prioritized authenticity over aesthetics. A beauty KOC noted, "Posting my acne journey increased trust more than any sponsored tutorial," while a travel KOC emphasized, "Followers want flaws—like a rainy day at a 'perfect' destination."
- **User Perception:** 72% of respondents viewed KOCs as "friends, not salespeople." One user explained, "I trust them because they're relatable—they've actually struggled with the product, like me," reflecting parasocial bonds (Horton & Wohl, 1956).

## 6. Discussion

### 6.1 Key Findings

- **Authenticity as Trust Catalyst:** Unfiltered content outperformed polished ads, reinforcing vulnerability as a digital trust-building tool (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). Balanced reviews (e.g., "This serum works but dries my skin") reduced skepticism, while unedited visuals fostered "realness" perceptions.
- **Interactivity Dynamics:** Live engagement (vs. delayed comments) drove trust via immediacy—real-time Q&A created urgency, while delayed replies felt less reciprocal (Blau, 1964). This highlights the importance of timeliness in parasocial relationship-building.
- **Cultural Nuances:** In China's collectivist context, KOCs leveraging group identity (e.g., "Join our skincare community") achieved 1.8× higher conversions than individual-focused appeals, aligning with "guanxi" norms (Hwang, 1987).

### 6.2 Theoretical Implications

The AIP framework advances social commerce literature by integrating ELM and Social Identity Theory, explaining 68% of purchase intention variance—an improvement over KOL-centric models (Kim & Kim, 2020). It clarifies that KOCs operate through dual pathways: peripheral cues (emotional storytelling) for low-involvement purchases and moderate central cues (accessible expertise) for high-involvement categories. The "authenticity paradox"—imperfect content enhancing trust—challenges KOL norms of curated perfection, aligning with "flawed authenticity" research (Escalas & Bettman, 2017).

### 6.3 Practical Recommendations

- **Brands:** Partner with micro-KOCs (1K–10K followers) for 23% higher ROI in beauty/parenting (iResearch, 2023). Prioritize those with >80% comment-response rates and 3:1 pros:cons review ratios to balance authenticity and utility.

- **Platforms:** Implement "Authenticity Verified" badges using algorithms to score unfiltered content frequency and user trust metrics, countering stealth marketing while boosting discoverability.

- **Policy:** Mandate real-time sponsorship disclosures (e.g., live-stream pop-ups), as 62% of users cannot distinguish paid/organic content, enhancing transparency.

### 6.4 Limitations and Future Research

- The female-skewed sample (70%) limits generalizability to male-dominated niches (e.g., tech), where professionalism may outweigh authenticity.

- Focus on Xiaohongshu restricts cross-platform applicability (e.g., TikTok's entertainment focus may prioritize interactivity over authenticity [Koay et al., 2022]).

- Longitudinal studies are needed to assess KOCs' long-term impact on brand loyalty.

## 7. Conclusion

This study validates the AIP framework as a tool to explain KOC influence on Xiaohongshu, highlighting authenticity and interactivity as trust drivers, and professionalism as a direct purchase trigger. By integrating ELM and Social Identity Theory, it clarifies how KOCs bridge emotional and cognitive pathways, offering a blueprint for brands and platforms to harness grassroots influence in skeptical digital markets. As social commerce evolves, prioritizing KOCs' unique strengths—authenticity, real-time engagement, and accessible expertise—will be critical for building sustainable consumer trust.

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