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The Effect of Key Opinion Leader Type on Purchase Intention: Considering the Moderating Effect of Product Type

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the age of self-media, when consumers choose to make purchases online, they are faced with the dilemma of not being able to observe and touch the actual product, so they tend to actively search for and obtain information about the product and use it as a basis for their purchase. At this time, KOLs (Key Opinion Leaders) can play a central role in the group to guide and influence others. They can use their expertise to actively participate in discussions in online communities, for example, by sharing real experiences and feelings, announcing product information, driving community members to participate in discussions and interactions, arousing cognitive and emotional resonance among followers [1][2].

At the same time, as digital connectivity continues to improve and VR technology is constantly being updated, compared to traditional virtual spokespersons, virtual KOLs are more anthropo-morphic in terms of appearance, and their appearance, body shape, and clothing are more realistic in terms of setting and are no longer limited to virtual worlds such as anime, film and television, or simple advertising design. Through daily operations, the avatars are brought into the real world, participating in current social events, and grasping trends, expressing opinions and attitudes, giving them personality and emotional expression, and creating a three-dimensional and rich character image. This study considers that consumers' ability to obtain information for different types of products is different; for example, products can be classified as experience goods and search goods according to whether consumers can obtain information about product quality before purchase [4].

Therefore, this study will provide a more in-depth analysis of the relationship between KOLs and purchase intentions. Our research questions are as follows. (1) How do virtual and real KOLs influence consumer purchase intentions? (2) Do KOLs need to be matched to product types (experience and search goods)? (3) What are the differences in the mechanisms of action of different KOLs?

2. THEORY AND RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

Based on SOR theory, consumer identity and perceived trust theory, this paper presents the hypothesis and theoretical model (Figure 1).

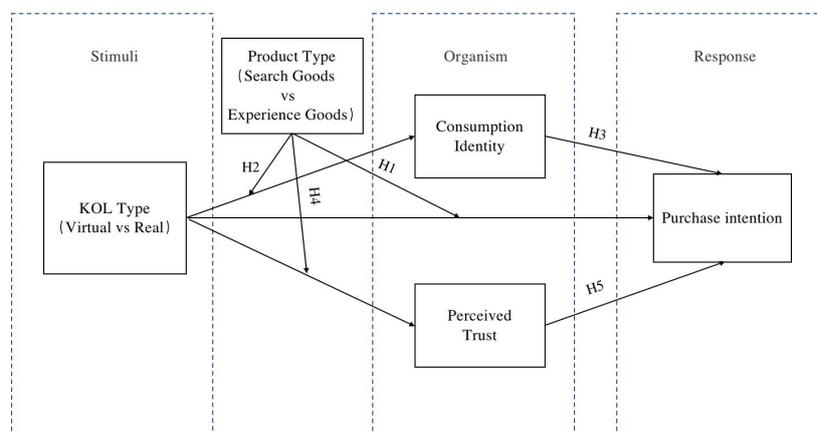


Figure 1. Theoretical model.

This study used a situational simulation experiment with a 2(KOL type: real vs. virtual) × 2 (product type: search goods vs. experience goods) between-group factorial experimental design. The data required for the study was collected through an online survey agency (www.wjx.cn) A total of 248 valid questionnaires were collected.

3. RESULTS AND MAJOR FINDINGS

This study observed some valuable and interesting findings: (1) There are significant differences between the two different KOLs on consumer identification and purchase intention in different product type contexts. For search goods, the recommendations of virtual KOLs generate higher levels of consumer identification and purchase intentions than those of traditional real-life KOLs; for experience goods, consumers have higher levels of consumer identification and purchase intentions for the recommendations of real-life KOLs with greater empathy and authenticity than those of emerging virtual KOLs. (2) The study also verified the mediating mechanism of consumer identification in the influence of KOLs on consumer purchase behavior. Perceived trust is only significantly mediated in the generation of purchase intentions for experience goods but not for search products. This is due to the difference in product nature, as the selection of experience goods requires subjective experience, and therefore the perceived trust in the empathy and authenticity of the KOLs who recommend the products significantly affects purchase intentions; whereas search goods are a category of goods with distinct objective parameters, and purchase intentions are based more on the attributes of the products themselves, without concern for the emotional resonance and feelings of the KOLs.

4. CONTRIBUTIONS

The theoretical contribution of this study is to identify for the first time the emerging marketing method of virtual KOLs and to investigate the differences in the marketing effects and mechanisms of action between real and virtual KOLs. It also proposes a theoretical model of the influence of consumers' purchase intentions in different product types (search goods and experience goods), deepens the understanding of consumers' motivation in different product types, explains the mediating function of perceived trust and consumer identification in the mechanism of action of KOLs, and provides a useful addition to the existing theoretical research system in this field.

When marketing, companies should use different KOLs to recommend their own products and should distinguish whether their products are search goods or experience goods and adopt different marketing strategies. Companies should avoid blindly following the trend and analyze their products rationally. If they are search goods, they should actively try virtual KOLs to help reduce marketing costs and increase online consumers' willingness to buy. When designing the appearance of virtual KOLs, designers or companies should match their intended persona. This will enable consumers to empathize and gain a higher level of perceived trust and consumer identification, leading to better marketing results.

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