

A Study on the Influence of Social Media Key Opinion Leaders on the Decision-Making of Gen Z Female Consumers—Taking Beauty Products as an Example

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ABSTRACT

Taking beauty products as an example, this paper studies how beauty KOL affects their decision to buy things through the Fine Processing Possibility Model and in-depth chat with girls of generation Z. The study found that beauty KOL mainly affects us in two ways: one is called central pathway, which is to look at the product effect carefully and be afraid of buying the wrong one; The other is called peripheral pathway, which arouses our interest by making us feel sympathetic and KOL is real. We will switch between these two methods according to different products, and regard KOL as a useful tool, but we don't rely entirely on them. This study gives an idea for KOL marketing of beauty brands, and also makes people know more about how we buy things in the digital age.

Keywords: Beauty Products; KOL; Elaboration Likelihood Model.

1. RESEARCH BACKGROUND

With the deep integration of consumption upgrading and digital economy in China, the beauty industry has become an important pillar of “Yan value economy” and a key area of consumption structure transformation and upgrading. There is not an accurate and unified definition of “Yan value economy” in academic circles. We can understand its essence from two angles: broadly speaking, consumers' preference for high-value products and the resulting commercial value can be called value economy; In a narrow sense, consumption and related industries driven by personal value, such as cosmetics, medical beauty and fitness, constitute its core areas ^[1]. In 2024, the global beauty market reached \$586 billion, but the growth rate slowed down to 3.7%. As the second largest cosmetic consumer market in the world, the cosmetic market in China exceeded 516.7 billion yuan in 2024, up 6.4% year-on-year. In the global economic slowdown, the beauty market in China still shows amazing resilience and development potential. As the core driving force of “beauty Economy”, this industry not only maintains the leading scale in the world, but also becomes an important window to observe the emerging consumption trends and changes in women's consumption behavior in China under the impetus of digital transformation.

Nowadays, the economic value and social influence of the beauty industry are becoming more and more prominent. Consumers' behavior has changed from meeting basic functional needs to pursuing emotional value, personalized expression and social recognition. At the same time, under the digital wave, the beauty industry presents the characteristics of KOL “driving online consumption transformation, building social communication network and leading content value output”. Beauty KOL builds a social communication chain among “brands, KOL, users” by publishing evaluation, planting grass and other contents on the e-commerce social platform, and then directly converts traffic into consumption through live broadcast of goods and product link delivery. Beauty consumption has shifted from “product promotion” to “content attraction”, and the brand and KOL have cooperated to create exclusive IP, giving products emotional value and use value.

Social platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Douyin, Xiaohongshu and Bilibili have now become the main battlefields for beauty consumers to obtain information, discover products and interact with brands, while female consumers are still the core driving force. The penetration rate of female users in China has reached 84.3%, and it is still rising. The total annual consumption is as high as 10 trillion yuan, showing the huge consumption potential of the sinking market. Internet is increasingly becoming an important channel for women's consumption. Among them, consumers of Generation Z are gradually becoming the main force of this group. “Gen Z” refers to people born from 1995 to 2009. They were born in the digital information age and were deeply influenced by digital information technology, instant messaging equipment and smart phones. They are also called “digital natives” or “internet generation”. ^[2] In the field of beauty consumption, the characteristics of this group of people are particularly obvious: they are used to looking for makeup

inspiration, watching product evaluation and learning skin care knowledge through social platforms, and their dependence on online content far exceeds that of traditional offline channels. Gen Z female consumers often use shopping as a way to decompress and adjust their emotions, which makes their buying behavior more easily influenced by social media content and Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) recommendations. They are no longer satisfied with one-way brand advertising, but pursue high-quality content and unique personality. The fast pace of society, lack of time to shop, dependence on the internet, limited knowledge of products and other factors have made consumers rely more and more on KOLs. KOLs helps them to efficiently screen information, track the latest product trends, and effectively avoid inappropriate purchases, thus optimizing decision-making efficiency and improving shopping experience ^[3]. With the optimization algorithm of short video platform, the content distribution is more accurate, and the live delivery is more and more mature, the average interaction and conversion rate of each content of KOL will increase. This will promote their overall marketing revenue to grow steadily.

Generally speaking, the KOL beauty industry is shifting from the “expansion period” driven by traffic to the “maturity period” driven by value. The existing academic research mainly focuses on verifying the “effectiveness” and influence of KOL marketing, but it has not fully revealed its internal and situational mechanism, especially how it affects the cognition, emotional attitude and purchase intention of Z generation female consumers. Therefore, this study intends to use the Elaborate Processing Model (ELM) as a theoretical framework to deeply analyze how KOL, a beauty product, influences the decision-making mechanism and situational changes of female consumers of generation Z through the dual functions of central path and marginal path.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Under the dual background of social media technology iteration and digital transformation of beauty industry, KOLs has become the core bridge connecting brands and Z generation female consumers. They spread content through short video platforms, which deeply influenced consumers’ purchasing decision logic. This study will be divided into four parts: the communication characteristics and mechanism of short video platform; The theoretical significance and influencing factors of consumers’ purchase intention; The concept evolution and communication characteristics of KOLs; And the theoretical framework and application extension of ELM model. It will analyze the core findings and limitations of the existing research and provide theoretical reference for the follow-up research.

2.1 Communication Characteristics and Mechanisms of Short Video Platforms

The short video industry in China has entered an explosive growth stage since 2016. After policy-driven standardization, market stability, content ecological maturity and industrial diversification, it has now entered a stage of maturity and in-depth development. ^[4] Short video platforms are the main media for cosmetics KOL to carry out marketing activities, and their large-scale expansion provides basic conditions for consumer behavior. In terms of scale, by December 2024, the number of online video users in China will reach 1.07 billion, including 1.04 billion short video users, accounting for 93.8% of the total netizens. There are 1.101 billion social network users and 974 million online shopping users in China, accounting for 99.3% and 87.9% of the total netizens respectively. ^[5] For the platform, the competition has changed from grabbing users to grabbing users’ time and digging deep into video value. For brands and businesses, we must embrace the integration mode of “social short video+e-commerce” and deeply bury marketing in the content and social chain. For researchers, in this almost saturated and highly integrated market, studying how key factors such as KOLs affect consumers’ decision-making can lead to discoveries of great practical guiding value.

In this context, social e-commerce combines product recommendation with social sharing, and replaces “search shopping” with “spark shopping”, which has become a very important part of modern business model. Short-sighted band goods is a new marketing method in social e-commerce, which relies on the algorithm of the platform to push content. This allows users to be attracted quickly and click on the purchase link in the video to complete the transaction, which is also more suitable for our piecemeal consumption scenarios. ^[6] This reflects the change of consumer behavior from active search to passive stimulation. Spark-driven consumption, driven by algorithms and social relationships, has become a major trend in the digital economy, and KOLs plays an increasingly important role in stimulating consumers’ desire to buy.

2.2 Theoretical Implications and Influencing Factors of Consumer Purchase Intent

Different scholars in the world have different understandings of purchase intent. Ajzen and Fishbein (1975) believe that purchase intention represents consumers’ psychological thoughts and final purchase decisions during the purchase process, which is influenced by consumers’ views and other subjective factors. ^[7] Dodds (1985) and others believe that purchase

intention reflects the possibility of consumers obtaining a particular product or service, but it shows strong subjectivity due to the influence of consumers themselves and external interference.^[8] Zhu Xuefeng (2011) and others pointed out that the purchase intention constituted the psychological thought of consumers, and then contributed to the decision to buy the product.^[9] Therefore, we can draw the conclusion that consumer purchase intention represents the subjective tendency to buy a specific product or service and the possibility of behavior, and it is a bridge connecting consumers' psychological attitude and actual purchase behavior.

Consumers' willingness to buy is influenced by many factors. The first is the consumer's own psychological state. Selnes (1998) pointed out that consumers' willingness to act is influenced by both external environment and internal psychological activities.^[10] The key psychological characteristics include consumers' emotions, perceived value, perceived risk and trust.^[11] Yao Jing (2025) said that positive consumer sentiment is influenced by factors such as the live broadcast atmosphere, the emotional input of the anchor and the professional level.^[12] Specifically, the more positive the live broadcast atmosphere and the more professional the anchor, the stronger the positive emotion will promote the impulse purchase intention. Scholars such as Li Zongwei (2017) believe that consumers' perceived emotions include three dimensions: perceived product value, perceived service value and perceived social value. Zeithaml (1988) defined perceived value as consumers' comprehensive evaluation of product utility, and believed that its level had a significant impact on purchase intention.^[13] Gou Yanfeng (2025), according to the SOR model, found that people's perceived risk will actually affect the idea of buying things-the smaller the perceived risk, the stronger the idea of buying. KOL's personal characteristics, professional level and evaluation results will directly change the risks people feel in their hearts.^[14] Jia Qingdan (2025) and other scholars have proved that the trust consumers feel will positively and obviously affect their purchase intention after analyzing the sufficiency and necessity. Moreover, the community relationship established through social e-commerce is the basis for building a trust mechanism and enhancing trust.^[15] This shows that the psychological characteristics of consumers will be influenced by many factors, which will further affect whether they want to buy something. Therefore, in the live broadcast of e-commerce, effective management of consumers' psychological characteristics is a key method to enhance their purchase intention.

The second category is the product's own characteristics and others' comments on it, such as design, feel material, price, brand reputation and online comments. Li Jiansheng (2015) and other researchers examined the influence of price, packaging and word-of-mouth recommendation on the willingness to buy the store's own brand products, and they noticed that people felt that whether the risk was great or not and whether they trusted the product would affect the role of these factors.^[16] Research by Sun Xixiang and Chen Weijun (2014) shows that consumers need to know the characteristics, functions and values of a product before they can generate brand recognition and loyalty, which will then affect their buying behavior.^[17] Generally speaking, the internal and external clues of products will change consumers' purchase intentions and behaviors by affecting their feelings, trust, self-consistency and brand identity.

Finally, the background factors from the consumer environment are mainly influenced by external factors such as KOL. Hsu (2013) They have proved that opinion leaders are persuasive in spreading product information and can positively influence our purchase decision.^[18] Sokolova (2020) also pointed out from a psychological point of view that the sense of worship that celebrities make us feel will prompt us to listen to their recommendations, thus promoting the market development of products and brands.^[19] Ma Erwei et al. (2025) found in their research that the sense of humor, intimacy and nostalgic attraction of beauty anchors will positively affect our purchase intention, and the flow experience plays a part in mediating here.^[20] Wang Deyu (2023), when studying how KOL short videos and comments affect our willingness to buy things, emphasized that the participation of comments, the positive emotions of commentators, the identity of KOL and the credibility of comments will positively affect our willingness to buy things.^[21]

Simply put, purchase intent is an important bridge connecting consumers' psychology and actual behavior. It is influenced by many factors: consumer psychology (emotion, perceived value, perceived risk, trust levels, etc.), product-related factors (price, reputation, functionality, value, etc.) and consumer's situational context (external influence). In e-commerce livestreaming, if brands can effectively manage these factors, they can better enhance consumers' purchase intention.

2.3 Evolution of the KOL Concept and Its Communication Characteristics

The concept of "opinion leader" first appeared in Lazarsfeld's "The People's Choice". Later, related research gradually developed the concept of "Key Opinion Leader" (KOL). As early as 1960s, Rogers (1962) discovered from the perspective of innovation diffusion that key opinion leaders are usually respected people in social networks, who are open-minded and willing to share their views and play an important role in the promotion of new products.^[22] Stern (1988) and others further defined KOL from the perspective of consumers, saying that they are people with professional knowledge, experience and

influence in specific fields, and can actively promote others' purchase decisions or influence brand preferences.^[23] Domestic scholars, such as Guo Bo (2019), describe key opinion leaders as "active agents", that is, those who cannot only provide information to others but also have an impact in the communication between people and machines^[24]. KOLs are different from ordinary "opinion leaders". They are usually authoritative figures in a specific industry or field. When spreading information, they don't depend on how active an individual is, and they are easily recognized^[25]. Generally speaking, KOLs are people with professional knowledge and great influence in a specific field, circle or industry. They can influence the attitude of a large group of people or the decision to buy things.

In the era of social media, the role of KOLs cannot be underestimated. The brand can achieve great marketing effect by cooperating with KOLs. This study systematically summarizes the scholars' analysis of the characteristics of KOL.

2.3.1 Expertise

KOL's professionalism refers to their profound knowledge and experience, excellent content creation ability, and wide recognition from the audience and industry. Professionalism determines how influential KOL is. The more knowledgeable and familiar KOL is with products, the more professional they are, and consumers are more likely to look for them when searching for product information and evaluation.^[26]

2.3.2 Recognition

A KOL's recognition means how many people know them, recognize them, remember them, and how influential they are in the group of people or related fields they want to influence. Usually, a KOL's recognition depends on many aspects, such as how many fans they have on social media, how much fans love to interact with them, how influential they are, and whether their reputation in a particular field is good or not.^[27]

2.3.3 Interactivity

KOL's interactivity includes directly answering consumers' questions when selling goods live, and initiating discussions in non-sales scenarios to enhance participation. Therefore, interactivity measures the intensity of two-way information exchange.^[28]

2.3.4 Product Involvement

The fundamental definition of KOL product participation is to see if there is a relationship between each of our own characteristics, such as personal needs, goals and values, and how we understand or use this product. When we are particularly dependent on a product, our participation in it will become higher. Such consumers are willing to spend money on consumption and show more trust in the brands they have been using.^[29] These characteristics show that the influence of KOL in social media marketing is not determined by a single factor, but the result of multiple characteristics. When choosing KOL cooperation, brands must systematically evaluate their overall performance, instead of just focusing on such indicators as the number of fans.

This study mainly focuses on the influence of KOL on our purchase of beauty products. In the era of social media, the content forms of beauty KOL mainly include tutorials, unboxing reviews and live-streamed sales. Bai Jinting (2021) believes that beauty tutorial videos can make us relax in spare time and find self-affirmation in the content specially made for ordinary people to become beautiful.^[30] Zhang Yifan (2024) proved through research that usability cues in unpacking videos will trigger consumers' trust and flow experiences, thus affecting their purchase intention. The more practical the out-of-the-box video presentation is, the greater the potential audience's trust in the product, which will make them feel more involved and focused, thus increasing their desire to buy^[31]. Xu Jingyu (2023) and his colleagues found that beauty KOL not only improved their popularity on social media, but also helped the brand sell a lot of goods by showing and recommending various products and teaching professional makeup artist.^[32] These content forms do not exist alone, but cooperate with each other to form a particularly professional, scene-oriented and influential content matrix. This makes KOL's influence not only change everyone's attitude, but also deeply affect the purchase intention and behavior.

Generally speaking, the influence of KOL has changed from the authority of traditional social networks to a comprehensive authority in the social media era, based on trust, social interaction and content value. For the brand, the cooperation with KOL is not just a simple "media selection", but a deep cooperation centered on "creating value together".

2.4 Theoretical Framework and Applied Extensions of the ELM Model

Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) is a classic theory put forward by Petty and Cacioppo (1986) to explain the

mechanism of people's attitude change when they encounter persuasive information.^[33] This model divides the audience's path of processing information into two types: one is central route, which emphasizes the content of the information itself and the audience's in-depth thinking about the problem based on rational cognition; The other is the peripheral route, which emphasizes that the audience can easily make simple inferences and judgments based on various peripheral factors^[34]. In modern product marketing, Kols no longer rely solely on the rational argument of central route or the emotion of peripheral route, but generally adopt the strategy of "double-path collaboration" to attract consumers through compound persuasion.

For this study, on the core path, KOLs will provide core information through professional content such as component analysis and efficacy evaluation. Ledbetter (2018), after investigating the beauty community of YouTube, found that KOLs' beauty videos not only show makeup artist, but also use a set of professional words to build trust with the audience, so as to establish their image and have a good relationship with the audience^[35]. Liu Chenxi (2022) believes that beauty KOLs share skin care methods, product evaluation and love products through short videos. While seeking self-identity and value identity, the audience can also improve their fashion sensitivity and learn beauty knowledge, thus promoting their social development^[36]. On the marginal path, KOLs' personal charm, interactive mode and content form have become important clues. For example, once in a live broadcast of a brand, the anchor said inappropriate words, which aroused the anger of consumers and caused millions of fans to drop overnight. Many consumers swear that they will never buy anything from Li Jiaqi's live studio again, which indirectly affects the sales of the brand.^[37]

Generally speaking, the ELM model provides us with a core theoretical framework to analyze how cosmetic KOL convinces everyone. When selling things, beauty cosmetics KOL often uses the "dual route" method, that is, combining professional content with emotional tips: professional content can make us feel that they are knowledgeable and trustworthy, while emotional tips will make us want to buy things more, so that the two work together and the persuasion effect is stronger.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study mainly focuses on the influence of KOL communication on the purchase decision of Z generation female consumers. Based on the previous research, we put forward the following questions: RQ1: In what specific ways does cosmetics KOL affect the purchase decision of Z generation female consumers? RQ2: According to the ELM model, what are the differences in the mechanism and weight between the center path and the edge path when Z-generation female consumers receive KOL recommendations? RQ3: What are the differences in decision-making priorities of Z-generation female consumers with different ages, occupations or consumption frequency when facing KOL recommendation of beauty cosmetics?

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is based on the ELM model, mainly trying to find out how cosmetics KOL influence our decision to buy things in two different ways. Because cosmetic KOL affects everyone in a complicated way, and everyone's reaction may be different, researchers used semi-structured in-depth interviews to collect information. They coded the interview content to find out the path and aspects that affect us, so that they can build a theoretical explanation model in the ELM model to explain how beauty KOL affects our shopping decision.

5. SELECTION OF INTERVIEW SAMPLES

This study mainly focuses on the influence of KOL communication on the purchase decision of Z generation female consumers. In order to ensure the representativeness of the sample, the selected research object must meet the following conditions:

Participants must have at least half a year's experience in using social media and have a certain understanding of KOL recommendation for beauty.

Participants' purchase frequency of beauty products covers different levels to ensure that the samples are representative and diverse in beauty consumption behavior.

Participants have different educational backgrounds (majors), occupations and other personal circumstances, and at the same time have certain purchasing power.

Among the respondents, the proportion of students majoring in advertising is relatively high. This is mainly because they have stronger academic sensitivity and professional understanding of media communication, consumer behavior and marketing strategies. Advertising training makes them more accustomed to analyzing the communication mechanism and persuasion effect of various media contents (including KOL marketing), so they can provide more in-depth and organized feedback for research. Therefore, when selecting interviewees, advertising majors are given priority.

Through the above screening criteria, this study finally selected 12 respondents. Statistics are shown in table 1:

Table 1. Basic Information of Interview Participants.

No.	Age	Education (Major)	Frequency of Cosmetic Purchases	Occupation
1	20	Bachelor's (Advertising)	Once per quarter	Student
2	20	Bachelor's (Chinese Language and Literature)	Once per quarter	Student
3	20		2-3 times per week	Student
4	20	Bachelor's (Journalism)	1-2 times per month	Student
5	20	Bachelor's (Advertising)	Once per month	Student
6	20	Bachelor's (Data & Computer Applications)	Once per quarter	Student
7	30		1-2 times per year	Corporate Employee (Sales)
8	26	Bachelor's (Art Design)	1-2 times per month	Corporate Employee (Technical)
9	21	Associate Degree (Design Studies)	Once per quarter	Freelancer
10	21	Bachelor's (Advertising)	3-5 times per year	Student
11	20	Bachelor's (Advertising)	Once per quarter	Student
12	19	Bachelor's (Advertising)	Once per quarter	Student

6. RESEARCH PROCESS

This study used 1-to-1 in-depth interviews (including online and offline), and made a total of 12 interviews, each of which was about 40 minutes.

We designed a semi-structured interview outline around the themes of “platform usage habits, views and attitudes towards KOL, factors affecting purchase decision, and shopping experience”. You will also ask questions flexibly according to the respondents’ answers, such as “Are you more concerned about the product ingredients recommended by KOL or their personal experience?”, so that you can dig deeper information. We also asked participants to show their process of using social media (such as reading KOL posts in Little Red Book and interacting with content), which can make the data more realistic.

7. DATA PROCESSING

First of all, we sorted out the transcript of the recording, removed those repetitive, colloquial and useless contents, and corrected some unclear points, so that the text looked accurate and easy to read.

Next, we use the software NVivo, according to the core requirements of the ELM model, to mark 12 interview scripts. We initially found some important marker points and established a classification method of “major markers and minor markers”.

Finally, we correspond the sorted interview text with these marks, forming a relationship diagram of “original interview text-marks-categories”. This laid the foundation for us to analyze the data and research results later.

8. RESULTS ANALYSIS

8.1 Rational Defenders: How the Central Path Constructs the Decision-Making “Core Zone”

When girls of generation Z buy beauty products, they will take the initiative to carefully study all kinds of information and establish a risk prevention mechanism to find the most cost-effective and useful things, just like taking a “central road”.

This makes the central path a “safe bottom line” for them to make decisions.

8.1.1 Take the in-depth evaluation of “ingredients and efficacy” as the core decision-making basis

Our coding data shows that in the interview records, the term “composition and efficacy” appeared the most times (10 times), far exceeding other coding nodes. Followed by “cost performance and brand value evaluation” (7 times) and “quality evaluation” (2 times).



Figure 1. Coding Frequency of Central-Path Product Evaluation Factors in Gen Z Female Consumers' Beauty Purchase Decisions.

This shows that the consumer's decision mainly depends on the objective characteristics of the product, not entirely on personal preferences. As shown in Figure 1, the term "composition and efficacy" appears most frequently among central-path evaluation factors. Respondents generally said that they would pay attention to the key information provided by KOL, such as product analysis (“whether it contains ingredients that nourish the skin”), efficacy test (“concealer, makeup holding time, oil control effect”) and makeup effect (“natural makeup feeling, suitable skin type”), and also compare the prices of similar products. Respondent 1 said: “I will pay special attention to the efficacy and ingredients of product promotion before deciding to buy, and the price is secondary.” Respondent 7 added: “I pay more attention to the stability of brand reputation and product quality. KOL's measured data is more convincing than simple sales promotion. “The diversity and verifiable effect of products have become the key factors affecting consumers' purchase. Consumers will carefully evaluate whether the products meet their individual needs, such as brightening, moisturizing or anti-aging. High quality products can win the trust and praise of consumers, while poor quality products will be avoided. [38] Our generation Z has lived in the era of information explosion since childhood, so the ability to find and distinguish information is particularly strong. As we know more about beauty cosmetics, girls of Generation Z will take the initiative to study the ingredients in skin care products to see if they are suitable for their skin types and skin problems to be solved. This more detailed demand makes people pay more and more attention to the composition and actual effect, which has become a very rational basis for us to make decisions.

8.1.2 When looking for beauty information, everyone's behavior has gradually changed from “passive acceptance” to “active verification”

“Active search and verification”, “evaluating information credibility” and “judging potential risks” are typical information behaviors when people buy beauty products. This shows that the female consumers of Generation Z will not only passively accept what KOL said, but form an active information mode of “first doubt—then verify—finally confirm”. A typical decision-making process is like this: after seeing the contents of KOL, I became interested in a product → I took the initiative to search for information from various sources, such as the real evaluation of ordinary users and the evaluation on the professional beauty platform → I paid special attention to bad reviews to judge the possible risks → Finally, I made a final confirmation by personally going to the store to try it out or asking friends around me for recommendation.



Figure 2. Typical Decision Chain.

A typical decision-making process is illustrated in Figure 2. Many interviewees mentioned that they would deliberately distinguish between KOL's “advertising cooperation” and “sincere personal recommendation”, and they would be especially wary of those contents with obvious commercial labels. Respondent 8 said: “For the products recommended by

KOL, I always go to Xiaohongshu to look at the notes written by ordinary users-especially the bad reviews-to see if there are any allergic or ineffective problems.” Respondent 9 added: “I will go to the counter to test the color first to confirm the makeup effect and skin feeling, and then refer to the purchase channel recommended by KOL to avoid stepping on the pit.” In this process, KOL is no longer the “sole decision maker” in consumption choice. Their credibility will always be repeatedly checked and scored by consumers, and people will also check information from different places, which has become the key to making decisions. This shows that the logic of products recommended by beauty kols is changing. Simply saying “this product is good” is not enough to impress consumers. Only by establishing lasting trust through real experience and professional analysis can KOL people gain a firm foothold in the verification of consumers.

8.1.3 Risk avoidance is the core driver of the central path

The coded results for “risk assessment” and “current personal circumstances” reveal that the rational core of decision-making lies in avoiding multiple risks, a tendency further reinforced by past experiences of “falling into traps.” Consumers primarily avoid four types of risks: financial risks (e.g., “spending extra money on ineffective products”), efficacy risks (e.g., “product performance not matching claims”), physical risks (e.g., “allergies or skin irritation”), and social risks (e.g., “poor makeup results affecting social image”). Consumers primarily avoid four types of risks, as summarized in Figure 3.

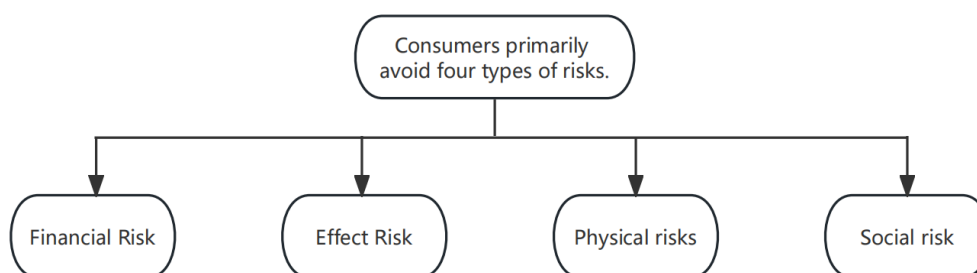


Figure 3. Consumers Primarily Avoid Four Types of Risks.

Respondent 4 mentioned: “I once bought a niche brand lipstick recommended by a KOL, but it dried out my lips and accentuated lip lines. Since then, I have paid special attention to the skin adaptability and bad reviews of the products.” At the same time, Respondent 2 said, “If I hoard a lot of cosmetics, I won’t be easily planted by KOL. I will think carefully about whether I really need it or not to avoid waste caused by impulsive consumption.” The interaction between personal consumption (such as “inventory status” and “actual demand”) and risk perception makes them more cautious when making decisions through the core path. Consumers’ increased vigilance against the risks of beauty products is actually the result of the combined effects of product characteristics, consumption scenarios and cognitive changes in social media ecology: beauty products directly affect the skin and face, and physical risks may bring irreversible harm-this is the core foundation of all risk concerns. At the same time, the effect and makeup feeling of beauty products vary from person to person, and it is difficult to predict the actual effect through standardized marketing, which further magnifies the uncertainty of performance risk. Although cosmetics are not a daily necessity, their prices range from cheap to expensive, which makes consumers pay special attention to the risk of “spending money on useless things”. If you add that you still have inventory at home, or the actual demand is not great, you don’t want to waste money. Besides, cosmetics can help us dress up better. If you buy the wrong cosmetics, it may affect your social image, so buying cosmetics is not only for your own use, but also related to how to show yourself in front of others. In addition, we can often see the experience of others spitting to buy cosmetics and stepping on thunder on social media now. Coupled with the psychological shadow of not being able to use it in the past, everyone is more and more afraid of taking risks, and they are especially careful when buying cosmetics. This mentality allows us to be rational when we see KOL’s recommendation. Let’s take a closer look at whether it is really reliable.

8.2 The Emotional Compass: How Peripheral Pathways Trigger Interest and Build Initial Trust

The peripheral path mainly depends on emotional clues that are not too brain-consuming. They are the “entrance” for consumers to get in touch with product information and generate interest. They lay a trust foundation for the in-depth thinking of the core path, and they can play a great role, and no one can replace them.

8.2.1 Emotional Connection and Self-Projection Spark Initial Interest

Many interviewees often mention “emotional drive” and “personality apparent preferences”. The personal charm of a KOL

and the emotional value conveyed through the content atmosphere are the key emotional clues. As shown in Figure 4, these factors are frequently mentioned by interviewees. We will be attracted by KOL's "visual appeal" (such as appearance and temperament), interactive style (such as humor and healing) and value expression-these personality characteristics will make us feel good about the products they recommend. At the same time, the "ideal scenarios" shown in the video (such as daily commuting makeup and dating makeup) will remind us of ourselves and stimulate our desire to realize our ideal self-image through these products.

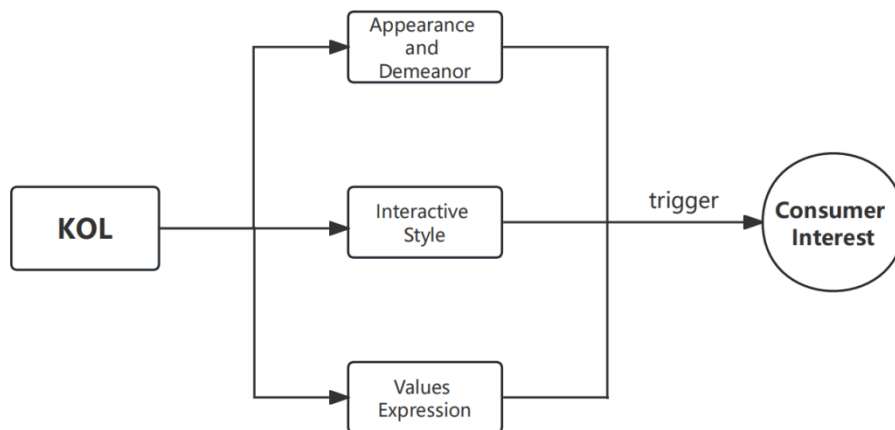


Figure 4. Regarding KOLs.

Respondent 3 mentioned: "The KOL I like, she has a real personality and won't sell things hard. Her daily makeup makes me feel, 'This is the makeup I want', so I will naturally buy products with her." Respondent 10 said: "Some videos made by KOL are very comfortable. Even if I don't need to buy cosmetics for the time being, I will read their contents. After a long time, I believe in their recommendation and will give priority to them when I need it." "This kind of emotional connection, which doesn't cost much brains, can well reduce our consumers' psychological preparedness and lay an emotional foundation for the subsequent purchase decision. This kind of self-projection triggered by KOL is actually to let consumers see their own shadow, their own needs and aesthetics in KOL and their content. Through emotional resonance and identity, the decision-making hesitation is solved psychologically, and at the same time, the purchase intention and trust are enhanced. As digital aborigines, female consumers of Generation Z rely on online platforms to build their self-identity. Their beautiful consumption has turned to status symbol consumption. At this time, KOL's style and recommendation have become their way of expressing themselves and finding a sense of belonging to the group. At the same time, Gen Z is in the critical stage of self-identity. KOL's real and resonant content can easily arouse emotional resonance and alleviate their anxiety about identity. Coupled with the external driving force of social evaluation in appearance economy, self-projection through beauty products has become an important way for them to explore their identity, express themselves and seek emotional closeness.

8.2.2 "Authenticity" serves as a key trust-inspiring cue in peripheral trust pathways

The coding results of "authenticity cues" and "source preference shifts" show that in the overwhelming commercial promotion, "authenticity" passed by KOL has become more important than professionalism or fame, and has become a more critical peripheral trust certificate. Consumers are increasingly favoring authentic content forms, such as amateur KOL sharing and daily vlog, which are embodied in the following aspects: unattractive display of skin texture, sharing of empty bottle products, real use scenarios, etc. KOL and "ordinary users" build a trust endorsement system through realism and affinity, which not only reduces the information collection cost of consumers, but also forms a "grass-roots endorsement" effect [39]. Respondent 6 said: "Compared with the exquisite evaluations of professional beauty bloggers, I believe in the 'Empty Bottles' sent by ordinary users-you can see that they have really been using this product, not just for advertising." Respondent 11 said: "If a KOL honestly admits the shortcomings of the product in the video, such as 'This can only last for 4 hours, and the oil skin needs makeup', I will feel that she is real and believe her recommendation more." Generation Z grew up in a social environment with a lot of information, so they are particularly sensitive to commercial advertisements and false propaganda. They instinctively don't like the modified KOL content like templates, and feel that the real KOL sharing is more cordial. This pursuit of realism also shows that people's trust style has changed, from

believing in “authority” to paying more attention to “truth” now.

8.2.3 Social Proof and Contextual Triggers Fuel Impulse Purchases

“herd mentality”, “scene stimulation” and “repeated seeing” are the main reasons that make people impulse to shop, among which “herd mentality” is mentioned the most. This shows that it is easy for people to buy things through social pressure and the stimulation of specific scenes. Respondent 12 said: “When double 11 watched the live broadcast, the anchor said that only a few dozen pieces of this eye shadow were left, and the comment area was full of ‘orders have been placed’, so I bought it.” Respondent 8 said: “Several KOLs I pay attention to have recommended a certain blush. After reading more, I feel it is a pity not to buy it, even though I don’t need it.” The widespread promotion of commodities and the favorable comments in the comment area have formed a strong “social identity”, which triggered people’s herd mentality-” Everyone is using it, and it can’t be wrong”. At the same time, the live broadcast platform magnifies our impulse shopping through limited-time discounts, money-saving recharge activities, anchor’s emotional appeals, and festivals like Double 11 or Valentine’s Day. This effect is especially obvious for those small things with low risk (such as lipstick and eyebrow pencils) or products with special emotional value (such as limited editions and joint venture funds). The combination of social proof and scene stimulation makes peripheral pathways the main driver of impulsive shopping.

8.3 “Relationship”: Dynamic Path Selection and Synergy Mechanisms

Generation Z female consumers will not only rely on the central path or the marginal path. On the contrary, they are flexible strategic information processors, and will dynamically switch between these two paths and use them cooperatively according to product characteristics, decision-making stages and personal cognition. Finally, a decision-making model combining rational verification with emotional drive was formed.

8.3.1 Path Differentiation by Product Category

In the process of programming, the situation of “CP/PP mixing” appeared seven times. Respondent 11 said: “I will pay more attention to the function of products that are directly used on my face, such as foundation, or skin care products and foundation makeup. But for those cosmetics that don’t touch the skin directly and have to be removed every day, the function is not so important.” Respondent 8 mentioned: “When buying foundation and skin care products, I am more rational than emotional. But with makeup like lipstick or mascara, I’m more likely to follow suit blindly. “This shows that the functional attributes and risk degree of different beauty products directly determine consumers’ information processing strategies and path selection preferences:

High-functional and high-risk categories (such as liquid foundation and functional skin care products): consumers’ decision-making strictly follows the central path. These products directly affect the skin health and effect, prompting consumers to actively check the ingredient list, compare performance data, refer to professional evaluation, and rationally evaluate the actual value.

High-experience and low-risk categories (such as lipstick and colored eyeshadow): Our decisions are more easily influenced by superficial and emotional things. These products have more emotional value and social attributes, so it is easy for consumers to place orders impulsively because of the fashion trend made by KOL, the good-looking appearance of the products, or because it is very fashionable.

This difference explains why the same consumer can stare at the “important ingredient” of the ingredients, and at the same time pay for the product’s face value or brand marketing. The core logic behind this is that we are actually balancing the risks and benefits of products.

8.3.2 Dynamic Synergy Across Decision Stages

When we buy things, our thoughts don’t go straight to the end. In fact, it is more like a process of cooperation: “first, I am attracted by some interesting little details → then I seriously think about whether it works or not → and finally I decide to buy it because I like its feeling or appearance.” This decision-making process follows a dynamic collaborative sequence, as illustrated in Figure 5.

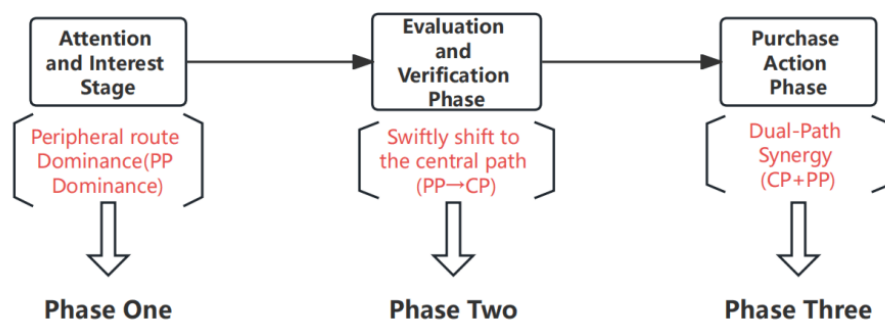


Figure 5. Decision-Making Dynamic Collaborative Sequence.

Attract attention stage: peripheral path dominates. At first, consumers will be attracted by KOL's appearance, video atmosphere or product packaging, and have initial interest. Just as several interviewees said- "I like KOL's true and unpretentious personality" or "I was moved by the healing atmosphere in the video"-this kind of emotional connection, which doesn't take much brains, has become their main entrance to understand product information.

Evaluation and verification stage: fast turning to central path leading. In order to reduce the risk of decision-making, consumers will take the initiative to check ingredients, watch product evaluation and compare prices-using rational information to verify whether the product is really suitable for them. Respondent 8 said, "I will read the user's notes on Xiaohongshu, especially the bad reviews", and "I will go to the counter to test the color and confirm the texture", which are typical examples of active verification under the central path.

Purchase action stage: two-way collaboration. The final purchase may be triggered by peripheral path factors such as live discount and limited time discount, but the premise of this behavior is that the core path verification has been completed. For example, Respondent 3 still confirms the efficacy of the product before placing an order after seeing social proofs and situational clues such as "limited inventory" and "explosion of the whole network" in the live broadcast.

This dynamic process shows the ability of Z generation female consumers to balance emotional attraction and rational judgment, and confirms the nonlinearity and flexibility of their decision-making process.

8.3.3 The "Instrumentalization" and "Limitations" of KOL Influence

Our analysis shows that they have a high "credibility assessment" (mentioned 9 times), but their "source dependence" is very low (mentioned only once). This shows that mature Z-generation female consumers no longer blindly "worship" KOL, but regard them as useful tools: first, as information filters, help them quickly understand new products and usage methods, and save themselves the trouble of finding information; Second, as a demonstration tool, we can intuitively see the beauty makeup effect and learning skills through KOL's real color test and face effect, and judge whether the product is suitable for us. Third, as a bridge of trust, recommending products with the help of KOL's real experience-such as their sincere actions of "sharing empty bottles" and "confessing shortcomings"-are all important signals for consumers to trust.

KOL can only trigger or assist decision-making, and the final decision is still in the hands of consumers. Consumers will form independent judgments through their own verification, rather than relying entirely on KOL's recommendation, which further proves that authenticity is the core pillar of KOL's influence. For example, Respondent 7 clearly said: "I will not pay for the brand premium" and "I will deliberately distinguish between advertising and real personal content". This rational defense mechanism limits the influence of KOL to the category of "tools" and cannot replace the final judgment of consumers.

9. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Based on the Elaborate Processing Model (ELM), we conducted in-depth interviews with 12 Z generation female consumers, and revealed the dual path mechanism and dynamic synergy characteristics of cosmetics KOL influencing their purchase decisions. It is found that the decision-making of beauty purchase of women in Generation Z is not dominated by a single path, but is the result of complementary synergy between the central path and the edge path: the central path follows the core logic of "maximizing the effect" and "avoiding risks". Consumers build a "safe zone" for decision-making by carefully evaluating objective information such as product composition, efficacy and cost performance. This forms an active information processing mode of "doubt-verification-confirmation", which effectively avoids four types of risks:

financial, effect, physical and social. The marginal path relies on “emotional resonance” and “true trust” as the key driving forces. KOL’s personal charm and content atmosphere trigger consumers’ self-projection, and their true expressions (such as empty bottle sharing and frank product shortcomings) become the core trust credentials. Social proof and scene trigger can easily make us impulse shopping. The process of making a decision is like this step by step: “First, I am attracted by something interesting (peripheral route)-then I really think that I should buy it (central route)-and the two ideas are added together to place an order.” When we buy things, we will choose the method according to the situation: things with important functions and a little expensive mainly rely on central route; And fun and cheap things are more likely to be influenced by good-looking designs or other people’s recommendation (peripheral route). Also, Kols are not just simple “message senders” now, they have become multifunctional helpers, helping us to find information, see physical displays and build trust. But they are only auxiliary. In the end, we have to make our own decisions and will not rely entirely on them. Different people make decisions in different ways: young people who often buy things are more likely to be influenced by feelings and friends; Older people who don’t buy often insist on rational comparison and follow the core way of central route.

The theoretical value of this study is that it uses the ELM model as a framework to find out how the two influence paths work and how they work together in the field of beauty. This solves the problem that the existing research can’t explain the internal logic of KOL’s influence well, and also makes clear the decision-making characteristics of “active verification” of Z generation female consumers, thus enriching our views on consumer behavior in the digital age. In practical application, the research results provide very specific guidance for KOL marketing of beauty brands: brands should formulate different communication strategies according to product types. For products with strong functions, we should focus on the content of the central path, such as highlighting KOL’s analysis of professional components and effect testing. For the category with high experience value, we should give full play to the personal charm of KOL and the expression of these “peripheral paths” created by scenes. At the same time, brands must attach importance to the core value of KOL’s “true” recommendation, encourage them to share their feelings sincerely, tell the shortcomings of the products honestly, and don’t engage in too much commercial packaging. Using a matrix composed of several kols can also achieve the effects of “repeated exposure” and “social identity”, so that the communication content of “central path” and “peripheral path” can be accurately matched at different decision-making stages.

In the future, more samples should be added and selected from Gen Z female consumers of different cities and different consumption levels, which will make the discovery more common. It is also necessary to use quantitative methods to verify the relative importance of the two paths and the influence of regulatory factors such as KOL type and platform characteristics through a large number of data, so as to establish a more accurate quantitative model. In addition, with the emergence of new forms of AI virtual KOL and metaverse marketing, future research should explore how the influence path of KOL will change under the new technology environment, and what new trends are there in the decision-making mechanism of female consumers in Gen Z. This can provide more forward-looking theoretical support and practical reference for brand marketing innovation and industry development.

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