

Research on the Enhancement Path of Brand Stickiness in the Short-Video Environment from the Perspective of Value Co-Creation: A Case Study of Labubu-Related KOC Content on Douyin

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of short-form video communication channels has resulted in a major medium for the brand communication in the modern days. Compared with the traditional media forms, the process of communication in a short-video environment is much more interactive, participatory, and socialized, which allows individuals to get involved in the process of developing and transmitting brand message. Among these actors, the key opinion consumer (KOC) role is particularly important in brand communication, as KOC communication is often perceived as authentic, expressed in relatable language, and shaped by peer influence. However, high exposure alone does not necessarily lead to strong relational bonds or sustainable brand stickiness. Therefore, this study examines this coexistence in Labubu-related KOC discussions on Douyin. Based on the extensive review of relevant literature and case study analysis, the main features of such phenomenon are outlined and presented in the form of five key dimensions: authenticity, emotionality, participatory co-creation, connectivity, and secondary diffusion. Using the identified dimensions as a basis, the study develops a five-dimensional framework along with corresponding strategic guidelines.

Keywords: value co-creation; brand stickiness; short-video platform; KOC; Douyin; Labubu

1. INTRODUCTION

Short video platforms have become an essential infrastructure for today's brand communication activities. It is not only about expanding the audience reach but also involves the reconstruction of branded content distribution with the help of algorithmic recommendation, participation in communication, and social diffusion of contents ^{[1][2][3]}. In such conditions, brands do not limit themselves to official communication but co-create their meanings through the interaction of platforms, audiences, and content producers.

In this new media environment, the role of key opinion consumer (KOC) content become critical. Contrasting to professionalized and commercialized KOL communication, KOC content often prioritize the presentation of personal experiences, peer communication style, and everyday context. Such aspects make KOC content more authentic, personal, and believable, as well as increase the credibility of contents in media environments that are overloaded with advertisements ^{[4][5][6][7]}. For a certain kind of brands such as Labubu that feature collectable nature, recognizability, emotional associations, and a possibility of display, KOC content become especially powerful. Through processes of unboxing, displaying, gifting, decorating the workplace, and sharing emotions, Labubu may become a part of users' daily routines.

Nevertheless, a large number of impressions does not guarantee stable brand stickiness, which becomes the main focus of this paper. While Labubu-related KOC content gain high popularity on Douyin in terms of views, likes, reposts, and emotional reactions, their success turns out to be rather temporary and fragmented. Users might like, share, and comment on these contents while failing to develop lasting emotional bond, stable communication practices, and brand loyalty.

Although previous studies have explored short video marketing, KOC communication, value co-creation, consumer participation, and brand loyalty, it still lacks detailed research of transforming transient visibility into sustainable brand stickiness in short video environment ^{[8][9][10][11]}. This aspect becomes particularly significant for Labubu type of brand that largely depends on users' contributions and symbolical participation. Thus, Labubu-related KOC content on Douyin are chosen to serve as the basis for revealing factors of instability in stickiness and developing further improvement strategy. The outline of the paper is as follows. Literature review will be presented in Chapter 2; the case analysis will be provided in Chapter 3; the five-dimensional framework for improvement will be articulated in Chapter 4.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

2.1 Short-video platforms and the transformation of brand communication

Studies on short video platforms confirm their role as a game-changer for digital communications. Instead of unilateral messaging, these systems are based on the principle of algorithmic recommendations, speed of distribution, and users' involvement ^[1]. In China, where the majority of people use the Internet via mobile devices, the importance of short videos as a channel for digital consumption and communication has been strengthened ^[2]. Reports from various industries also show the influence of short video environments on the way brands are communicated to consumers ^[3].

In this sense, short video platforms affect the process of branding from two main perspectives. First, they improve the efficiency of visibility; messages are quickly delivered to large audiences. Secondly, they increase user involvement as users do not only receive brand messages but also comment on, modify, and share them within social networks. As a result, the role of branding as a system of company-driven communication changes since its success now depends not on communication itself but on both the affordance of the medium and users' involvement. However, the same mechanism creates additional pressure for attention and makes successful communication easier but unstable.

2.2 KOC communication and peer influence

Literature on the topic of interest, namely KOC communication, reveals that authenticity, message value, and credibility are considered major factors that help build trust in branded content ^{[4][5]}. In China's social-commerce environment, the effectiveness of KOC communication largely derives from the alignment between KOC messages and everyday consumer experiences, rather than from professionally designed promotional narratives ^{[6][7]}.

In this regard, it is clear that messages from KOC can take up an important place on short-video platforms because users easily distinguish between authentic messages and sales pitches. Peer communication is expected to be more persuasive if a product possesses additional value aside from its monetary price, such as emotional or symbolic meaning. However, although trust, persuasion, and purchase intention in relation to KOC communication are discussed in detail in the extant literature, very little focus is made on the development of long-term relationships. In other words, KOC communication may generate consumer trust and purchase intentions without necessarily leading to brand loyalty.

2.3 Value Co-creation, Engagement, and Brand Stickiness

Value co-creation theory helps understand the underlying concept. The advocates of service-dominant logic argue that the creation of value does not occur only at companies; value appears as a result of interactions among different stakeholders, including consumers ^{[8][9]}. Moreover, in the realm of digital media, consumers become active as they engage in interpreting, sharing information, and transforming symbols ^{[10][11]}.

The topic of brand communities and engagement can shed more light on this process. According to previous findings, brand communities form due to the existence of shared symbols, interaction, and participation rituals ^[12]. In turn, the phenomenon of consumer engagement is defined in terms of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions as an essential aspect of the relationship between a consumer and a company ^{[13][14][15]}. In addition, social engagement should also be emphasized for the purpose of building brand loyalty. The importance of interactivity, trust, and communication between consumers should also be noted ^{[16][17][18][19]}. It has been shown in the Chinese market that value co-creation practices lead to the emergence of loyal communities ^[20].

Additionally, studies focusing on mobile short-form video shopping, live-streaming stickiness, brand-page stickiness, and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) in social media imply that sustainable stickiness relies on such factors as interactivity, empowerment, brand love, and engagement ^{[21][22][23][24]}. In addition, narrative processing and UGC-based engagement prove that stickiness occurs due to the fact that consumers are active participants and incorporate brands in their narratives ^{[25][26][27]}.

To summarize, brand stickiness can be viewed as the combination of the following aspects: attention, emotional connection, continuous engagement, community sustainability, and relevance. At the same time, the majority of previous studies tend to examine the components separately without considering their connections. In addition, there is a lack of scholarly literature that focuses on how these aspects interplay in a specific case of short-video platforms where a brand has become highly visible but failed to create sustainable loyalty. This issue will be addressed in the current study with reference to the case of Labubu.

3. LABUBU-RELATED KOC CONTENT ON DOUYIN: COMMUNICATION SUCCESS AND THE INSTABILITY OF BRAND STICKINESS

3.1 Labubu and its communication success on Douyin

Firstly, Labubu's short-video communication is highly effective because of its particular characteristics of being highly photogenic, tellable, and easy to integrate into ordinary life situations like decoration of the desk or bag, gifting, collection display, and interior designing. Hence, it can be considered that Labubu has several qualities that make it a suitable subject for being featured in Douyin as the platform operates with recommendation algorithms which favor content that is emotionally readable, visually obvious, and easily consumed ^{[1][3][21]}.

Secondly, another condition for the effectiveness of the Labubu short-video communication strategy is that it requires the intermediation of Key Opinion Consumer (KOC). Unlike regular advertising videos, those who promote Labubu through Douyin do so via storytelling about their first-hand experience with the product. Usually, Labubu is positioned as an integral part of users' everyday routine and emotional sphere as, for example, "desk companion," "healing object," gift, etc. Such communication style is characterized by reduced symbolic distance and increased brand warmth that comes from the participation of KOC consumer into everyday discourse of their followers ^{[4][5][6]}. It also allows the brand to actively take part in various forms of storytelling including, for instance, unboxing and blind-boxing reactions, showing off displays, and comparing series of products.

Thus, to sum up, we may state that Labubu's short-video communication cannot be regarded as ineffective because it successfully achieves its goals in terms of gaining visibility, engaging audience, and increasing brand warmth. Nevertheless, what it lacks is creating the relational bond between the audience and the brand.

3.2 Why visibility does not become stable stickiness

3.2.1 Authenticity is weakened by increasing commercialization

The first reason why KOC communication becomes less effective concerns the aspect of authenticity. Authenticity is considered a defining factor in ensuring the efficiency of KOC communication by emphasizing that the conveyed experience is authentic rather than calculated ^{[4][5]}. This advantage is obvious in Labubu's videos, where creators explain their purchasing process, emotional reaction, re-purchasing behavior, problems associated with the process of collecting products, or decision-making regarding displaying items and gifting.

Nonetheless, as the amount of Labubu related content increases, some of the videos tend to utilize a specific pattern of video creation, similar facial expressions, and general praise for the product. Once "authentic communication" becomes stereotypical and too standard, it becomes difficult to differentiate between genuine experiences and mimicry. According to research dedicated to social media interaction and KOC, credibility can be called a basis for efficient communication ^{[6][15]}. Once users perceive these stories as formulaic, the relational effectiveness of KOC communication begins to weaken.

3.2.2 Emotional resonance is weakened by shallow repetition

The second aspect refers to emotional resonance. The Labubu-related media often uses emotional markers such as "cute," "healing," "surprising," and "worth collecting." Such emotional elements help to immediately catch users' attention and increase the level of engagement on the platform. Nevertheless, when they are repeated without the development of new story elements, such repetition leads to emotional reactions on a relatively shallow level.

It is important in the context that Labubu represents both a functional item and an object associated with emotions, display, and symbolic self-presentation. Narrative-processing research shows that brand commitment emerges when branded items are associated not with temporary emotions but with self-relevant stories and memories ^[25]. In terms of the Labubu environment today, many videos generate emotional attraction but lack deeper emotional themes related to companionship in difficult working conditions, building friendship by giving gifts, creating memorable experiences, or expressing one's aesthetic taste. As the studies about brand commitment, brand love, and electronic word-of-mouth marketing (eWOM) reveal, stable relations are based on something other than simple likeability ^[24].

3.2.3 Deep participation and co-creation remain limited

The third problem is the depth of engagement. The interaction in relation to the Labubu brand through KOC channels lead to a large amount of liking, commenting, reposting, and general interaction. Even though all of these actions are positive, their predominant function lies in the level of shallow engagement. In terms of value co-creation theory, stronger brand

engagement takes place when users move beyond mere consumption or reaction to contribute something, interpret the message and create symbols collectively^{[8][10][11]}.

As far as Labubu, the level of deeper co-creation is relatively low. People react positively to Labubu-related material, but there are not too many ways to motivate people to contribute towards creating joint stories, repeating rituals and establishing a common symbolic system around the brand. As research shows, consumers' engagement with brands becomes stronger when users start participating in the process of meaning creation rather than reacting to the ready-made message^{[17][18]}. Thus, Labubu manages to activate reactions rather than engage in a joint creative process with its users.

3.2.4 Community ties are active but fragmented

Fourth, there is an issue related to community structure. Clearly, Labubu possesses the possibility of forming a community since the product is highly collectible, visually identifiable, and can be used for identification. The concept of brand community states that such goods have the potential of creating strong relational structures because of shared symbolism, rituals, and collective consciousness^[12]. In addition, further studies concerning virtual brand communities and consumer social media engagement point out that in order to build stable relationships, not only brand-consumer interaction is required, but also consumer-consumer interaction^{[13][16][20]}.

Nevertheless, on Douyin, Labubu interaction often focuses on specific videos, certain products releases, or temporary trends in using the product. Users create a public quickly and dissolve it just as quickly. They may share ideas about a hidden character, product release, and use methods. However, this does not result in developing a community of regular interaction. This can make the community look lively, but unstable at the same time. Since loyalty development is connected to trust, continuity, and social belonging^[19], fragmented interaction can generate traffic but fail to create brand loyalty.

3.2.5 Secondary diffusion lacks sustainability

The fifth problem concerns secondary diffusion. The contents of Labubu are easy to share thanks to their aesthetic appeal, emotional transparency, and suitability for personalization. However, successful secondary diffusion cannot be reduced to reposting alone; it also demands forms of organization that foster user involvement in persistent appropriation and remixing^{[26][27]}.

With regard to Labubu, secondary diffusion may occur as a result of elements such as novelty, scarcity, surprise responses, or algorithms. Although these techniques can indeed trigger a burst of interest, they do not necessarily guarantee the formation of an uninterrupted cycle of content dissemination. Studies of stickiness within live streaming and branded social media pages have shown that stickiness results from continuous experience, empowerment, and engagement rather than single-event engagement^{[22][23]}. In the context of Labubu, if its contents are too much about sudden bursts of hype, then visibility becomes recurrent, but not cumulative. Thus, what we see here is the main contradiction at play.

4. ENHANCEMENT PATH OF BRAND STICKINESS: A FIVE-DIMENSIONAL STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

4.1 Strengthening authenticity through everyday experience design

The first strategic path involves rethinking authenticity as a communicative practice instead of a value proposition. In terms of the Labubu case, this will require creating KOC content that showcases the integration of the product into daily practices: on office desks, in college dorms, during commuting, while packing bags for travel, or while gifting to others. This practice turns the product from an item being shown to one integrated into life and provides evidence of the creator's real involvement with the item.

This strategy is also supported by scientific evidence about message credibility and peer trust. The way to implement it would be to emphasize personal experiences, reasoning involved in decisions, and specific credible details about choosing a certain person, managing repeat purchase behavior, placing the product in the environment, or integrating it into daily practices. Such details create a stronger experience-based message. As a practical suggestion, brands should stop striving to standardize creators' messages and allow for unique stories based on real-life situations.

4.2 Enhancing emotional resonance through narrative specificity

The second approach involves the amplification of emotion through a shift from general emotional cues to more specific narrative elements. Instead of continually drawing on general terms like "cute" and "healing", Labubu messaging needs to

focus on more specific emotional narratives, such as the pleasure of owning an entire set, the feeling of having company when working at the desk due to stress, the sentimental value of a gift, a particular memory attached to a certain purchase occasion, or Labubu as a marker of personality and taste.

A body of literature has shown that consumers are more likely to develop relationships with a brand through the inclusion of the object of interest into a personally relevant narrative ^[25], which fits perfectly with other literature linking consumer engagement to brand love, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), and emotional extension ^[24]. Hence, for Labubu to become more emotionally relevant to its customers, it is necessary to adopt narrative framing mechanisms such as “Why did I buy this one?” “What does it mean?” and “Why is it still on my desk?” The key is not only to boost emotion but also to organize it into narrative form.

4.3 Building participatory co-creation mechanisms

An additional strategy involves setting up more organized ways for participation, thus allowing the users to move from being just consumers of brand meaning to producers of brand meaning. According to the literature, value co-creation and interactivity require participation that will facilitate creation, manipulation, and communication of meanings, rather than consumption of meanings only ^{[8][9][10][11][17][18]}.

Some possible strategies for implementation in Labubu can be related to thematically consistent ideas for narratives, diary of collection, challenge posts about the display, curating comparison posts by users, as well as recurrent ideas such as “my first Labubu,” “my desk mate,” or “the Labubu I would give my friend.” The key idea here is that the participation should be recurring, visible, and recognized. If users realize that they contribute to the brand dialogue, then they realize themselves as contributors to meaning-making, hence the relation intensity will grow. In other words, what Labubu needs is more than mere interactivity; Labubu needs meaningful interaction.

4.4 Building connections based on interests and stability

The fourth strategy focuses on increasing continuity between community members. As research shows, community relations are formed through frequent contact, sharing of common symbols, role definition, and feeling of unity ^{[12][13][20][27]}. Therefore, it should be obvious that in case with Labubu there is an urgent need in reorganizing the interactivity in terms of different interests groups within a community. There might be collectors, givers, display-oriented users, arrangers, and photographers among the followers of the brand. This division will lead to interaction becoming connection and eventually developing into a community.

At last, the quality of community relations also needs attention. Studies have shown that loyalty is developed not only because of interactivity but because of trust, commitment, and social interaction as well ^{[16][19]}. Thus, in addition to generating traffic and trends community relations should be oriented at promoting discussions on certain topics, providing opportunities for symbolic recognition, as well as regular interactive events so that users felt like a part of a particular community. Regular interaction happens when users see a community, rather than a valuable product in the brand.

4.5 Promoting sustainable secondary diffusion

The fifth approach to the issue of secondary diffusion implies treating diffusion as a constant communication process instead of a series of separate impulses. It is quite natural that any communication related to Labubu possesses the quality of highly visual and symbolic communicability, but this communicability should be structured within a stable structure. User-generated content (UGC) research demonstrates that relevance increases if users get the chance to interpret, personalize, and develop content ^{[26][27]}. Stickiness studies prove that prolonged relevance is achieved by means of providing users with continuous experience and expression opportunities ^{[22][23]}.

It means that a brand should offer its users a range of formats for continuous generation and communication: weekly updates of Labubu displays, creation of stories called “my first Labubu,” using gifting stories, collection statistics, and themed photos. Such formats make participation in Labubu easier and stimulate continuous content communication. Moreover, it helps to achieve not only increased viral diffusion potential but renewability. If Labubu content becomes more and more extendable and customizing, it is possible to shift the mode from sporadic hype communication to continuous relational communication. It is important that secondary diffusion serves both as an act of communication and as a means of stickiness formation.

5. CONCLUSION

In this paper, brand stickiness is analyzed through the lens of communication in the short video environment exemplified by the KOC-generated Labubu-related content on Douyin. The main argument put forward is that in the analyzed cases, brand communication is a co-construction effort involving both brands and consumers in collaboration with the platform mechanism, and even with a lot of visibility, long-term loyalty may fail to emerge. Following from that, a five-factor framework focusing on authenticity, emotional appeal, participation/co-creation, community connection, and secondary diffusion is offered for consideration. The strength of the model is seen in its ability to bridge communication performance with relational outcomes and to explain how high levels of brand visibility might co-exist with sticky brand communication.

A number of limitations should be highlighted, including reliance on one particular case, potential subjectivity of the findings due to the specifics of the brand's symbolic meaning, and interpretive rather than causally-oriented methodology, whereby only the factors contributing to stickiness have been revealed without any quantitative estimates being produced.

Possible avenues for future research include comparative studies involving other IPs or other social media platforms, combining interpretive approach with surveys/content analysis/platform data.

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