

Study on the Mitigation Mechanisms of Public Relations Strategies for Negative Brand Impact Following KOL Persona Collapse

Yuhan Duan

Affiliation: Ludong University 186 Hongqi Middle Road, Zhifu District Yantai, Shandong 264025, P. R. China

Email: duanyuhan_qy@163.com

Abstract

In the context of globalization and digital marketing, Key Opinion Leader (KOL) marketing has become a core approach to brand promotion. However, frequent occurrences of KOL persona collapse have significantly affected the brand image, consumer trust, and purchase decisions associated with the endorsed brands, presenting a new challenge for brand crisis management. This study aims to systematically investigate the mechanisms and effectiveness of various public relations strategies in mitigating the negative impact on brands caused by the collapse of KOL personas, developing a phased, scenario-based crisis public relations framework tailored to different user groups, and providing practical guidance for brands.

The research indicates that effective public relations strategies adhere to a phased logic of 'rapid response, emotional repair, and semiotic reconstruction.' Responsibility acknowledgment and swift dissociation strategies are particularly effective during the crisis outbreak phase; emotional resonance and empathetic communication are vital for trust restoration during the ongoing phase. Long-term reputation reconstruction relies on third-party endorsement and the semiotic reconstruction of the signifier-signified relationship of brand symbols. The study further proposes a 'user stratification adaptation model,' emphasizing that strategies should be differentiated based on the distinct psychological motivations of core fans, ordinary users, and resisters.

Keywords: KOL marketing; persona collapse; crisis public relations; brand repair; user stratification; semiotic reconstruction

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

We are currently in an era dominated by a social media-driven attention economy. Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs), leveraging their professional content, personal charisma, and extensive fan base, are successfully integrated into the brand marketing chain, serving as a vital bridge connecting brands and consumers. Their recommendations and endorsements exert a profound influence on consumer cognition, attitudes, and purchasing behavior. However, although KOL marketing is thriving, it also carries significant risks. The public image of KOLs—their 'persona'—is often a result of the collaboration among capital, media, and audiences, characterized by high constructiveness and instability. When incidents such as moral deviance, controversial statements, privacy breaches, or professional doubts—termed 'persona collapse'—occur, the ensuing public opinion tsunami not only erodes the KOL's own credibility but also, through the effects of 'emotional contagion' and 'shared responsibility,' severely damages the brands they endorse, resulting in a sharp decline in brand trust, consumer boycotts, and significant sales reductions. Therefore, systematically studying how effective public relations strategies can mitigate the negative impact on brands following KOL persona collapse has become an urgent and important issue in the fields of brand management and crisis communication. This study focuses on elucidating the impact mechanisms of KOL persona collapse on consumer trust and purchase decisions, mitigating the damage inflicted by persona collapse on brands, and constructing a phased, differentiated public relations strategy framework within the social media environment. Furthermore, it develops a phased, scenario-based crisis public relations strategy plan to provide enterprises with a comprehensive operational guide spanning from the 'crisis outbreak' to 'reputation restoration.'

1.2 Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is reflected in both theoretical and practical aspects. Theoretically, it expands the perspective of crisis management research from traditional corporate crises to KOL-related crises, introduces a semiotic approach to

analyze the mechanisms of brand trust destruction and reconstruction, and proposes a 'user stratification adaptation' model. This enhances the understanding of audience heterogeneity in crisis communication and facilitates the interdisciplinary integration of communication studies, marketing, and crisis management theories. Practically, the research findings can directly offer scientific decision-making support to brands, public relations practitioners, and KOLs themselves, enabling them to respond swiftly, accurately, and effectively during crises. This minimizes economic losses and damage to brand reputation, strengthens brand risk resistance and resilience, and thereby supports sustainable development within a complex media environment.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Domestic and International Related Research

In recent years, domestic scholars have examined the phenomenon of 'persona collapse,' primarily from the perspectives of communication studies, sociology, and psychology. The research mainly focuses on celebrities and internet influencers, employing case analysis and qualitative methods as the dominant approaches.

2.1.1 Domestic Research

Existing literature concentrates on the effectiveness of KOL marketing and case analyses of crisis public relations (Zhao Changrong, 2023), emphasizing the ethical deviations and cultural-industrial logic of persona collapse ^[1]. For example, Zhang Yue (2023) posits that the 'persona' is a product of the collusion among capital, media, and audience, with its collapse resulting from conflicts between labeled marketing and authentic personality ^[2]; Feng Yuting (2021) focuses on mid-tier livestream influencers on the Douyin platform, revealing through typical cases (such as 'He Jingjing' and 'Achun is a Quality Reviewer') two primary causes of persona collapse: the viral spread of negative incidents and malicious competition among peers ^[3], and notes that post-collapse data exhibit negative comment sentiment, decreased attention, and diminished commercial value; Zhang Yating (2019), based on Fiske's theory of popular culture, analyzed the active role of fans in the construction and collapse of celebrity personas ^[4], finding that fans engage in persona shaping through 'avoidant pleasure' and 'productive pleasure,' and after the collapse, shift toward 'resistant pleasure.' Gong Hongyun (2019), integrating Giddens' structuration theory of interaction ^[5], proposed socially ascribed factors of celebrity identity stigmatization (such as media, capital, and public opinion), and summarized three impression management pathways. In 'A Study on Social Bots' Public Opinion Intervention in Celebrity Persona Collapse,' Yang Kai conducted an in-depth analysis of the phenomenon of celebrity persona collapse ^[6], revealing that in multi-party power struggles, public opinion interventions occur, characterized primarily by labels serving as 'tools' in social bots' actions.

2.1.2 Foreign Research

Foreign related research primarily focuses on the identity construction and crisis management of social media celebrities, and investigates the role of public relations within blogs ^[7]. There is considerable application of cross-cultural communication theories (such as Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory) examining consumer responses to virtual influencers (in contrast to human influencers) as advertising endorsers ^[8]; however, empirical studies specifically addressing KOL persona collapse are limited and predominantly centered on Western markets, overlooking the Asian context. While there is increased attention to the application of cross-cultural communication theory in crisis management, empirical research specifically concerning KOL persona collapse remains scarce. Existing research largely approaches the issue from the perspectives of social media sentiment dissemination or the alienation of fan culture, lacking systematic comparisons of industry differences (such as beauty and cosmetics vs. fast-moving consumer goods) and cultural backgrounds (such as collectivism vs. individualism).

2.1.3 Literature Review

In summary, research on public relations strategies following KOL persona collapse primarily focuses on the ethical deviation and cultural-industrial logic associated with persona collapse, as well as the identity construction and crisis management of social media celebrities. However, there is currently insufficient industry-specific research; existing literature predominantly discusses the impact of persona collapse in a generalized manner, lacking targeted analysis of industries highly dependent on KOLs, such as beauty and cosmetics and fast-moving consumer goods. Furthermore, existing literature predominantly focuses on a single cultural context, with a scarcity of cross-cultural comparative research; Additionally, there is limited research integrating marketing opinion leaders with persona collapse, lacking thorough analysis of corresponding public relations management and insufficient practical recommendations for public relations

strategies; The mechanisms for long-term brand repair also merit comprehensive investigation. Current studies mainly concentrate on short-term public opinion mitigation, lacking systematic analysis of long-term reputation restoration.

2.2 Research Content

How to mitigate the negative impact on brands through public relations strategies following KOL persona collapse constitutes the core problem this study seeks to resolve. Rapidly match the optimal public relations strategy by integrating differences across various industries (such as beauty and cosmetics and fast-moving consumer goods). Compare the short-term and long-term effects of different public relations approaches (such as crisis statements, image reconstruction, and third-party endorsement) and propose optimization strategies. Examine how public relations strategies can mitigate the negative impact on brands (as symbolic representations) through symbolic repair.

3. Research Methods

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts multiple case study and qualitative analysis methods, selecting six typical cases of KOL persona collapse from both domestic and international contexts, covering industries such as beauty and cosmetics, fast-moving consumer goods, and maternal and infant sectors. Secondary data such as social media comments and brand statements were collected, and In-depth interviews were conducted with brand public relations managers and users of different types (core fans, general users, trolls) to obtain primary data. A total of 20 interviewees participated. This included 8 brand PR managers and 12 users. The selection criteria for PR managers required at least 3 years of experience in handling KOL-related crises. User participants were screened based on their active engagement with relevant KOLs or brands on social media platforms. All participants provided informed consent prior to the interviews. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured to protect their privacy and encourage candid responses. Data analysis was performed using three-stage coding (open, axial, and selective coding).

3.2 Research Methods

Multiple typical KOL collapse cases were selected through a case study approach to summarize the collapse triggers (moral deviance, misinformation, external attacks, etc.); Based on textual data including social media comments and media reports, public attribution patterns regarding KOL responsibility (e.g., internal versus external attribution) were extracted, leading to the establishment of a multidimensional classification framework for collapse events (trigger types, responsibility attribution, crisis severity). Through online data analysis, organize consumer groups (categorized into fans, general users, and trolls) to examine the acceptance of various strategies and associated moral controversies, thereby constructing an adaptive framework of 'strategy type–crisis scenario–user psychology.' Using the 'Huaxizi 79 Yuan Eyebrow Pencil Incident' as a representative case and integrating dissemination data from the Weibo platform, this study analyzes the crisis context, communication strategies, and the evolution trajectory of public opinion.

4. Research Process

4.1 Data Collection

Select multiple representative KOL collapse cases and, through text analysis and interviews, summarize the collapse triggers (such as moral deviance, information misinterpretation, external attacks) and crisis severity levels (high/medium/low). Identify key time points including crisis outbreak, public relations response, and public opinion attenuation. Compare changes in user sentiment polarity following different strategies (e.g., apology statements versus legal rights protection). Identify companies that have effectively mitigated the negative impact on their brands following KOL persona collapse and further analyze their public relations strategies.

Primary data is primarily used to deeply understand the rationale behind strategy formulation and users' psychological responses; this data mainly originates from online sources. On one hand, it involves the decision-making processes, strategic considerations, and effectiveness assessments of brand owners who have managed similar crises. On the other hand, it examines fans' behavior during crisis events, investigating their perceptions, attitudes, and behavioral intentions toward different public relations strategies; secondary data is primarily used to reconstruct the entire crisis event and the evolution of public sentiment. Specifically, this includes social media data (user comments, reposts, and likes under crisis-related topics collected from platforms such as Weibo, Douyin, and Bilibili, as well as public opinion shifts at key time points), media reports (coverage and commentary articles from mainstream news outlets and self-media regarding the

incident), and official brand materials (all publicly released statements, announcements, apology letters, legal documents, and other texts issued by the brand owner).

4.2 Data Analysis

All collected textual data (interview transcripts, social media comments, statement texts, etc.) were analyzed using the three-level coding method to inductively construct theory from the bottom up.

4.2.1 Open Coding

Data Decomposition: Conducting a sentence-by-sentence analysis of the original text (e.g., user comments like 'false advertising, trust collapse') to generate initial concepts (e.g., 'false advertising', 'trust loss').

Free Node Generation: Based on data tagging and avoiding predefined theories, forming nodes such as 'rapid disassociation' and 'emotional resonance repair'.

4.2.2 Axial Coding

Categorization: Merging similar nodes into higher-order categories (e.g., 'acknowledgment of responsibility strategies' and 'emotional repair strategies').

Logical Association: Establishing causal relationships (e.g., 'acknowledgment of responsibility → short-term public opinion mitigation' and 'technical comment control → user skepticism').

For example: A[False advertising] > B[Acknowledgment of responsibility strategy]

B > C[Decrease in negative volume]

C > D[Brand reputation restoration]

4.2.3 Selective Coding

Core category extraction: Identifying key concepts that permeate the entire context (e.g., 'User Stratification Adaptation Theory').

Theoretical integration: Developing a dynamic model (e.g., 'Strategy-User-Technology Ternary Interaction') to explain how strategies adapt to different user groups (core fans vs. general users) and the ethical boundaries of technological interventions.

5. Research Findings

5.1 Conclusion Analysis

This study provides an in-depth analysis of six typical cases spanning multiple industries, including beauty and cosmetics, fast-moving consumer goods, maternal and infant products, and digital technology. The types of KOLs involved include top-tier celebrity influencers, specialized vertical domain experts, and mid-tier live-commerce anchors. Collapse triggers are diverse and include false advertising, inappropriate remarks, personal moral controversies, and professional knowledge failures. All cases have incited large-scale social media public opinion crises, resulting in a significant short-term impact on brand reputation. Cross-case comparative analysis reveals that the effectiveness of public relations strategies is highly dependent on the attribution of responsibility for the crisis trigger. For incidents caused by the KOL's own faults (such as false advertising or moral deviance) where responsibility is clearly assigned, brand owners adopting a rapid disengagement strategy (such as immediately suspending cooperation and issuing stern statements to delineate boundaries) can most effectively curb the spread of negative public opinion toward the brand in the short term. Conversely, if the crisis originates from external misunderstandings or malicious attacks (such as distortion or rumors), brands adopting a defensive strategy (such as clarifying facts and legal rights protection) and responding jointly with the KOL are more likely to gain public support. Emotional repair is a core component in rebuilding trust. Research indicates that regardless of the initial strategy employed, empathetic communication containing clear acknowledgment of responsibility, sincere apologies, and specific remedial measures is essential to appease core fans and unsettled general users. Simple blame-shifting or issue avoidance only worsens the trust breakdown.

For the core fan group, most display high emotional investment and cognitive dissonance, strongly desiring to maintain the KOL and brand image; For the general user group, most remain rational observers, concentrating on factual accuracy

and brand stance, with trust shaken yet in a recoverable stage; For trolls and resistant groups maintaining critical attitudes and unwilling to change their stance, obvious inappropriate remarks can be managed through legal rights protection, limited responses, and technical controls.

5.2 Practical Implications

The research findings provide specific and feasible practical guidelines for brand management. Firstly, a KOL collaboration risk pre-assessment mechanism should be established, involving comprehensive background checks and content audits of KOLs prior to collaboration, in order to create risk assessment files; Secondly, this can assist in formulating phased crisis response plans by preemptively developing comprehensive procedures—including rapid dissociation, emotional repair, and symbol reconstruction—tailored to different types of KOL crises; Furthermore, it facilitates the implementation of precise communication strategies by abandoning a 'one-size-fits-all' approach and designing differentiated communication content and channels tailored to distinct user groups; finally, it guides investment in long-term brand image development. It is acknowledged that brand repair following a crisis is a prolonged process requiring sustained brand-building efforts to restore trust.

5.3 Research Limitations and Future Directions

This study presents certain limitations. First, the research methods primarily rely on qualitative analysis, which, although comprehensive, necessitates further validation of the findings' generalizability through subsequent large-sample quantitative studies. Second, the case selection primarily focused on events with high visibility and significant impact. This may introduce selection bias. Highly publicized cases often involve unique circumstances, extensive media coverage, and heightened public scrutiny. These factors may not represent all KOL persona collapse events, particularly smaller-scale or less publicized incidents. Consequently, the derived strategies might be more applicable to high-profile crises. Future research should include cases with varying levels of public visibility to enhance the findings' robustness.

Furthermore, although efforts were made to diversify the interviewees' geographical and industry backgrounds, the sample size remains limited. The sample's representativeness could be improved. For instance, the user groups interviewed might not fully capture the entire affected consumer spectrum's diversity. A larger and more demographically varied sample would strengthen the validity of the qualitative insights.

Based on the aforementioned limitations, future research could explore the following areas in greater depth. First, applying experimental methods to manipulate crisis types and public relations strategies, thereby more rigorously verifying the causal relationships between variables. Second, employing big data analysis techniques to conduct longitudinal tracking of more extensive social media data, quantitatively evaluating the long-term effectiveness of different strategies. Third, conduct cross-cultural comparative studies to thoroughly examine how cultural dimensions (such as individualism and collectivism) affect the public's response to KOL crises and public relations strategies. Fourth, investigate the ethical boundaries and future applications of artificial intelligence (such as social bots) in crisis information monitoring and public opinion management.

References

- [1] Zhao Changrong. (2023). Case Analysis and Strategic Reflections on Crisis Public Relations in KOL Marketing. *Contemporary Communication*, (4), 88-92.
- [2] Zhang Yue. (2023). On the Capital Logic, Media Presentation, and Ethical Dilemmas of 'Persona.' *International Journalism Review*, 45(3), 45-61.
- [3] Feng Yuting. (2021). A Study on Collapse Triggers and Reconstruction Strategies of Influencer Personas on the Douyin Platform. *Modern Communication*, 43(5), 112-117.
- [4] Zhang Yating. (2019). A Study on the Phenomenon of Celebrity 'Persona' from the Perspective of Fan Culture. *China Youth Research*, (11), 80-85.
- [5] Gong Hongyun. (2019). A Study on the Social Attribution and Impression Management of Celebrity Identity Stigmatization. *Journalism Circle*, (12), 56-63.
- [6] Yang Kai. (2024). A Study on Public Opinion Intervention by Social Bots in Celebrity Persona Collapse. *Journalism University*, (1), 78-91.
- [7] Jordi Xifra, Assumpció Huertas. Blogging PR: An exploratory analysis of public relations weblogs[J]. *Public Relations Review*, 2008, 34 (3).

- [8] Franke Claudia, Groeppel Klein Andrea, Müller Katrin. Consumers' Responses to Virtual Influencers as Advertising Endorsers: Novel and Effective or Uncanny and Deceiving?[J]. *Journal of Advertising*, 2023, 52 (4).