

Explaining Heterogeneous Effects of KOL–KOC Combinations: A Persuasion-Knowledge Framework for Multi-Source Influencer Marketing

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Abstract

Both key opinion leaders (KOLs) and key opinion consumers (KOCs) are frequently deployed by brands in short-video social commerce. In the existing studies on the effects of such multi-influencer combinations, there are various results ranging from synergy to no significant effect, and even negative consequences. This review synthesizes research on influencer marketing, multi-source information integration, and the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM) and develops a framework centered on consumers' interpretation processes to explain this heterogeneity. We hold the opinion that the combination of KOL and KOC is not inherently complementary. Its effectiveness depends on how consumers perceive the relationship between them. When the level of persuasion knowledge or skepticism is low, consumers are more likely to interpret multiple cues as independent confirmations, thereby enhancing the diagnosticity of perceived information and promoting purchase. When the level of persuasion knowledge is high, the same configuration is more likely to be interpreted as a coordinated persuasive behavior, thereby stimulating consumers' inference of the manipulative intention and psychological resistance, weakening or even reversing the persuasive effect. Integrating prior empirical and review evidence, we propose a dual-pathway, multi-source persuasion framework that explains when KOL–KOC combinations function as complements versus substitutes. By unifying diagnosticity-based information processing with reactance-based resistance mechanisms, this review clarifies the theoretical origins of heterogeneous influencer-mix effects and provides guidance for future research design and influencer portfolio strategies in short-video commerce.

Keywords

key opinion leaders (KOLs), key opinion consumers (KOCs), persuasion knowledge(PK), perceived diagnosticity, psychological reactance

1. Introduction

Short-video social commerce has transformed consumer decision-making from a linear “exposure–purchase” sequence into a multi-touch process that requires integrating information across sources. For instance, in a single decision-making process, consumers are often exposed to two distinct types of influencer cues: key opinion leaders (KOLs) (who convey professionalism and authority), and key opinion consumers (KOCs) (who emphasize peer similarity and real experiences). Therefore, the determinants of purchasing

decisions are shifting from the sole effect of a single source to how consumers integrate and interpret the information from multiple sources of influencers.

Although previous studies have shown that influencer marketing is generally effective on average, meta-analyses and review studies have also documented significant heterogeneity in effects across different contexts, types of influencers, and execution characteristics. This phenomenon is particularly evident in multi-influencer scenarios. The same KOL + KOC combination sometimes enhances perceived diagnosticity of information through cross-source verification, thereby generating a complementary effect; however, when consumers interpret this combination as redundant or strategically coordinated persuasion, it does not bring additional benefits and may even cause backlash. These results indicate that the KOL-KOC combination does not inherently have a synergistic effect; its impact depends on how consumers interpret the relationships between different sources.

This paper adopts the persuasion knowledge model (PKM) as the unified theoretical perspective and integrates relevant studies on KOL, KOC, and multi-source persuasion in short-video social e-commerce to explain the above inconsistencies. We propose that consumers' persuasion knowledge and their level of skepticism determine whether the combined KOL-KOC exposure is interpreted as independent confirmation - thereby enhancing perceived diagnosticity and promoting purchase - or as coordinated persuasion, thereby activating manipulation intention inference and psychological resistance, weakening or reversing the persuasive effect. By reviewing and integrating existing research, this paper (1) explains the sources of heterogeneity in the effect of KOL-KOC combinations, (2) proposes a multi-source influencer persuasion framework centered on the consumer interpretation process, and (3) provides theoretical guidance for future research on how to design experiments and how brands can combine influencer combinations.

2. Method: Literature Search and Selection Procedure

This study adopts a semi-systematic literature review approach, focusing on influencer marketing effectiveness, persuasion knowledge, and multi-source endorsement mechanisms. We conducted structured searches in Web of Science, Scopus, EBSCO Business Source Complete, and Google Scholar. The review covers relevant studies published between 1994 (the year the Persuasion Knowledge Model was introduced) and 2025.

To ensure comprehensive coverage, backward and forward citation tracking was conducted for foundational and high-impact studies.

The inclusion criteria were peer-reviewed journal articles published in English that examined influencer effectiveness or endorsement mechanisms and involved identifiable psychological processes (e.g., diagnosticity, persuasion knowledge activation, authenticity, disclosure effects, or psychological reactance). Industry reports, conference abstracts, and purely descriptive analyses lacking theoretical grounding were excluded.

The initial search yielded 386 records. After removing duplicates, 301 unique articles remained. Title and abstract screening reduced the sample to 124 studies addressing influencer heterogeneity, persuasion knowledge, or multi-source persuasion. Following full-text evaluation, 68 articles met the inclusion criteria. Among these, 20 core studies were identified as foundational for theoretical integration.

The retained studies were coded along five dimensions: (1) influencer type, (2) focal mechanism, (3) mediating variables, (4) moderating conditions, and (5) outcome variables. Through comparison and analysis, two primary explanatory pathways were identified, which form the organizing structure of the subsequent theoretical framework. The first is a positive mechanism, whereby perceived source independence enhances information diagnosticity and strengthens persuasive outcomes. The second is a negative mechanism, whereby perceived coordination triggers manipulative intent attribution and psychological reactance, thereby reducing persuasive effectiveness.

3. Literature Review and Conceptual Development

3.1 Influencer Types as Distinct Source Signals in Short-Video Commerce

In short-video social commerce, consumers use creator attributes (such as follower count, verification badges, profile labels, and stylistic presentation) as cues to make initial judgments about credibility. Research consistently distinguishes between more professionalized, large-scale influencers and smaller, peer-like creators, and shows systematic differences between these two groups in engagement patterns and conversion outcomes [1, 2]. Key opinion leaders (KOLs) are typically associated with expertise, authority, and professional credibility. Empirical evidence indicates that when credibility cues are salient, top-tier/macro influencers tend to generate greater exposure and translate their strategic positioning into performance outcomes [3]. Key opinion consumers (KOCs), by contrast, are more akin to peer-based electronic word-of-mouth, emphasizing lived experience and perceived authenticity [4]. Meta-analytic research finds that influencer marketing effectiveness varies with source characteristics, indicating that source type fundamentally shapes the persuasion process rather than merely expanding exposure reach [1]. Therefore, distinguishing between KOLs and KOCs reflects differences in the dominant inference mechanisms consumers rely on: competence-based trust versus identification-based trust.

Table 1: Conceptual Differences Between KOL and KOC Source Cues

Dimension	KOL	KOC
Core Signal	Expertise / Authority	Similarity / Authenticity
Platform Indicators	Verification badge, high follower count	Ordinary profile, lifestyle framing
Primary Trust Mechanism	Competence-based trust	Identification-based trust
Potential Risk	Perceived commercialization	Limited technical credibility

3.2 Multi-Source Influence: Complementarity Versus Redundancy

When consumers are exposed to information from multiple sources, persuasive effects are not necessarily additive. Research on informational diagnosticity suggests that when convergent evaluations come from sources that are independent of one another, they increase perceived reliability and improve consumer decision-making under uncertainty [5]. Moreover, multi-endorser research indicates that when different endorsers provide complementary signals, the effect is more pronounced than in single-source designs [6].

However, multi-source exposure can also backfire. Evidence from seeded word-of-mouth campaigns shows that coordinated promotional efforts may generate nonlinear spillover effects and even produce counterproductive outcomes [7]. In other words, when multiple persuasive cues are interpreted by consumers as “strategic coordination” rather than “mutual independence,” adding additional sources does not increase value and may instead have the opposite effect.

Therefore, in influencer marketing contexts, joint KOL–KOC exposure may operate in two ways: it can serve as cross-source corroboration that strengthens informational diagnosticity, or it can be perceived as redundancy or strategic persuasion that attenuates impact. Even though meta-analytic research documents substantial heterogeneity in influencer marketing effectiveness [1], it still cannot fully explain why these opposing outcomes occur. This suggests that the key to understanding whether multi-influencer combinations are complementary or offsetting lies in how consumers interpret them.

3.3 Persuasion Knowledge and Skepticism as Boundary Conditions

The Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM) proposes that consumers draw on their knowledge of persuasive intent and tactics to interpret influence attempts [8]. When persuasion knowledge is activated, individuals are more likely to attribute commercial motives and discount message claims. In influencer contexts, sponsorship disclosures and commercialization cues significantly shape audience responses [9]. The salience of advertising elements further determines whether persuasion knowledge activation attenuates message effectiveness [10]. In addition, advertising skepticism represents a chronic tendency to doubt promotional claims, reinforcing discounting processes [11].

Thus, the same KOL–KOC combination may be interpreted differently depending on consumers’ level of persuasion knowledge. When persuasion knowledge is low, multiple influencer cues are more likely to be construed as independent confirmation; when persuasion knowledge is high, the same combination is more likely to be interpreted as “coordinated persuasion.” This boundary-condition logic explains the contradictory findings in prior influencer research.

3.4 Manipulative Intent and Psychological Reactance

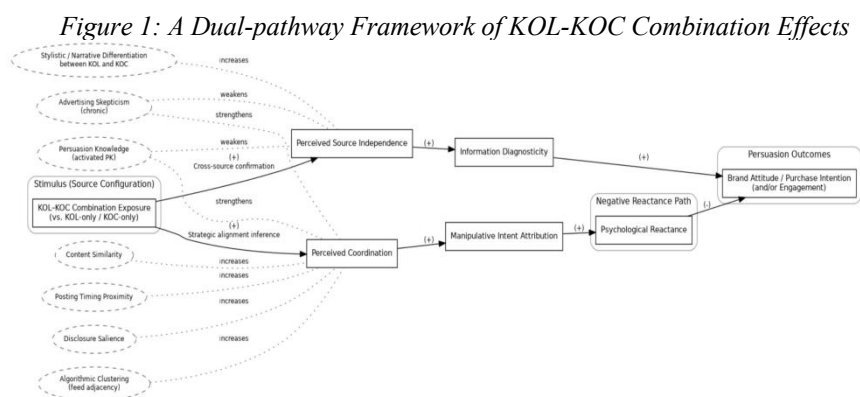
When persuasive attempts are perceived as strategically manipulative, resistance processes may emerge. Reactance theory posits that perceived threats to autonomy trigger motivational states aimed at restoring freedom [12]. Empirical evidence shows that inferences of manipulative intent increase psychological reactance and reduce persuasion effectiveness [13]. In influencer marketing, overt commercial coordination or excessive brand control can strengthen such resistance responses. Research further indicates that some consumer segments, particularly younger audiences, actively avoid influencers and endorsed brands when persuasion attempts appear overly commercialized [14]. Thus, multi-influencer exposure may not only increase informational input but also amplify perceptions of orchestration, activating reactance mechanisms that suppress persuasion.

3.5 Conceptual Integration: A Dual-Pathway Account of KOL–KOC Combinations

Synthesizing the preceding literature, KOL–KOC combinations may either enhance informational diagnosticity and promote purchase intentions when they are perceived as “independent” [5], or weaken persuasion when they are perceived as “strategically coordinated,” thereby eliciting attributions of manipulative intent and psychological reactance [12]. Accordingly, persuasion knowledge determines which interpretation consumers are more likely to adopt, helping explain heterogeneity in outcomes [1, 8].

3.6 Theoretical Structure of the Dual-Pathway Model

Building on the above, we formally conceptualize KOL–KOC combinations as a stimulus configuration that influences persuasion outcomes through two sequential mediation chains. In the positive pathway, KOL–KOC combinations enhance perceptions of source independence, increase perceived informational diagnosticity, and further strengthen brand attitudes and purchase intentions [5]. In the negative pathway, KOL–KOC combinations increase perceived “coordination,” reinforce attributions of “manipulative intent,” trigger psychological reactance, and ultimately weaken persuasion outcomes [12]. Because these two pathways are competing yet may co-occur, the overall persuasive outcome depends on the relative strength of “diagnosticity enhancement” versus “reactance activation.” Persuasion knowledge and advertising skepticism moderate the inference stage, shaping whether consumers construe multi-source exposure as independent confirmation or coordinated persuasion [8].



4. Propositions

P1 (Diagnostic Path)

When consumers perceive KOL and KOC as independent sources, the combination enhances perceived information diagnosticity, which increases purchase intention.

P2 (Reactance Path)

When consumers infer coordination between KOL and KOC, the combination increases perceived manipulative intent, which triggers psychological reactance and reduces purchase intention.

P3 (PK Moderation – Positive Path)

The positive diagnostic pathway is stronger among consumers with low activated persuasion knowledge.

P4 (PK Moderation – Negative Path)

The negative reactance pathway is stronger among consumers with high persuasion knowledge.

P5 (Contextual Moderation – Coordination)

Greater disclosure salience, higher content similarity, and shorter posting intervals increase perceived coordination, thereby strengthening the negative pathway.

P6 (Differentiation Moderation)

Greater stylistic and narrative differentiation between KOL and KOC increases perceived independence and strengthens the positive pathway.

5. Research Implications and Future Directions

5.1 From Influencer Types to Multi-Source Interpretation

Most influencer research compares source types or disclosure formats as isolated variables [1, 2], thereby implicitly treating multi-influencer exposure as an “additive” effect. This review proposes a shift in research focus from “which influencer is more effective” to “how consumers interpret the relationships among multiple sources.”

Future research should conceptualize influencer combinations as cue configurations rather than as cumulative exposure counts. In particular, perceived source independence—central to informational diagnosticity [5]—should be measured directly rather than assumed. Integrating persuasion knowledge theory [8] into multi-source contexts enables scholars to model persuasion as an interpretation-driven process rather than an outcome driven solely by source characteristics.

5.2 Testing Competing Mechanisms

The dual-pathway framework identifies two mechanisms: enhanced informational diagnosticity [5] and psychological reactance triggered by perceived manipulation [12, 13]. Prior influencer research has rarely examined these two processes simultaneously. To determine when complementarity and backlash may co-exist, future research should measure diagnosticity, manipulative intent, and reactance within the same research design. In addition, insights from spillover research suggest that coordination cues may produce nonlinear effects, linking micro-level resistance processes with macro-level campaign diffusion dynamics [7].

5.3 Improving Multi-Source Research Design

Methodologically, multi-influencer research must address recurring confounds. First, exposure duration should be held constant to isolate source effects, because execution characteristics of short-form video can directly influence purchase behavior [15]. Second, differences in production quality across influencer types should be controlled to avoid conflating “professionalism” with “persuasive strength” [3]. Third, combining experiments with platform behavioral data can enhance external validity and help explain the heterogeneity documented in meta-analyses [1, 2].

5.4 Extending the Context: Algorithms and Audience Heterogeneity

Short-video persuasion unfolds within algorithmically curated environments. Recommendation systems shape the order and clustering of exposure, which may influence perceptions of “coordination” and subsequent interpretation. Future research should test how sequencing and presentation structure moderate multi-source persuasion effects. In addition, generational and individual differences also matter. Evidence suggests that younger consumers may be more sensitive to commercial cues and avoidance tendencies [14]. Future research should examine how consumers’ interpretive tendencies dynamically evolve with repeated exposure to influencer ecosystems. To guide future inquiries, we propose a structured research agenda with specific research questions, designs, and expected contributions, as summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Future Research Agenda and Recommended Designs

Research Question	Core Constructs	Suggested Design	Recommended Context	Expected Contribution
When do KOL–KOC combinations increase perceived source independence versus coordination?	IV: KOL–KOC exposure; Mediator: independence/coordination; DV: attitude/purchase	2×2 experiment manipulating “relationship cues” (independent vs coordinated)	Short-video commerce (TikTok/Douyin)	Directly validates the inference stage in Figure 1
Does disclosure salience shift consumers from diagnosticity to reactance?	Moderator: disclosure salience; Mediators: PK, coordination; DV: purchase/engagement	Experiment: disclosure prominence × KOL–KOC exposure	Sponsored short videos	Links disclosure literature to dual-pathway mechanism
How does content similarity (script, visuals, claims) shape coordination inference?	Moderator: content similarity; Mediator: coordination; DV: persuasion	Stimulus-based experiment with controlled similarity levels	Brand campaigns with multiple creators	Operationalizes “coordination cues” more precisely
Does posting timing proximity (same day vs spaced) intensify perceived orchestration?	Moderator: timing proximity; Mediator: coordination; DV: reactance	Field experiment / quasi-experiment using campaign schedules	Short-video campaigns	Connects campaign planning to consumer inference
Do platform recommender systems amplify coordination perceptions via feed adjacency?	Moderator: algorithmic clustering; Mediator: coordination; DV: reactance/avoidance	Platform simulation / A/B test: feed adjacency vs dispersed exposure	TikTok/Douyin feed	Extends PKM into algorithmic context
How do KOC vs micro-influencer boundaries affect the independence pathway?	Source type operationalization; Mediator: independence; DV: diagnosticity	Multi-cell experiment varying follower counts + “consumer identity” cues	Social commerce	Clarifies conceptual boundary and improves external validity
Which consumer traits make the negative pathway dominant even without clear coordination cues?	Moderator: skepticism/trait reactance; Mediators: manipulative intent/reactance	Survey + experiment (measured traits × manipulated cues)	Gen Z vs older cohorts	Individual-difference boundary conditions
Can narrative differentiation (different evidence types, story style) rescue KOL–KOC synergy under high PK?	Moderator: differentiation; Mediators: independence/coordination; DV: purchase	Experiment: differentiation high/low × PK activation	Sponsored video pairs	Practical design lever to reduce backlash

6. Managerial Implications

The findings synthesized in this review suggest that multi-influencer strategies should be managed as interpretive configurations rather than as simple exposure multipliers. How audiences interpret the relationship between sources determines whether KOL–KOC combinations are effective.

6.1 Designing Influencer Portfolios Strategically

Managers should treat KOLs and KOCs as distinct signaling assets rather than interchangeable promotional tools. For audiences with lower persuasion knowledge or skepticism, combining KOL authority with KOC-style experiential validation can increase informational diagnosticity, reduce decision uncertainty, and improve conversion outcomes. In contrast, for audiences with higher persuasion knowledge, the same mix may be perceived as orchestrated; coordinated posting, highly similar scripts, or uniform disclosure formats can heighten manipulative-intent perceptions. Managers should therefore reduce visible coordination and increase differentiation across influencer voices to preserve perceived source independence.

6.2 Managing Commercial Salience and Platform Execution

In many markets, advertising/sponsorship disclosure is legally required [9], but how it is presented shapes audience interpretation. Compared with highly attention-grabbing cues that emphasize commercial intent, clearer and less “sensational” disclosure formats are more likely to reduce reactance; meanwhile, excessive brand control over content can also heighten perceived “coordination.” Because short-video platforms are algorithmically curated, managers should also coordinate exposure sequencing and presentation structure: dense deployment of multiple influencers within a short period may increase perceived coordination, whereas spacing exposures out and differentiating them across time, content, and context can better preserve perceptions of “independence.”

Accordingly, managers should strike a balance between transparent compliance and creative autonomy, and—considering platform-driven presentation patterns and potential spillover effects [7]—avoid amplifying the salience of persuasive intent; evidence likewise suggests that excessive commercialization increases resistance, especially among younger audiences [14].

6.3 Audience Segmentation and Long-Term Strategy

Finally, influencer-mix effectiveness is contingent on audience heterogeneity. Generational cohorts and digitally sophisticated consumers may be more sensitive to persuasion tactics [14]. Rather than assuming uniform responses, managers should segment audiences based on skepticism levels, platform familiarity, and prior exposure to influencer marketing. Over time, repeated exposure to influencer ecosystems may increase persuasion knowledge. Sustainable strategy thus requires adaptive portfolio management rather than static multi-influencer deployment.

7. Conclusion

This review addresses a central question in influencer marketing: why do KOL–KOC combinations sometimes create synergy and at other times generate backlash? Rather than treating multi-influencer strategies as inherently additive, we propose an interpretation-centered framework that explains heterogeneous outcomes through competing psychological pathways.

We conceptualize joint KOL–KOC exposure as a multi-source cue configuration whose effectiveness depends on how consumers construe relationships between sources. When perceived as independent confirmation, combined exposure enhances informational diagnosticity and strengthens purchase judgments. When perceived as coordinated persuasion, the same configuration increases manipulative intent attributions and psychological reactance, thereby attenuating or even reversing persuasive effects. Persuasion knowledge and skepticism determine which pathway prevails.

By shifting attention from source-type comparisons to consumer interpretation processes, this review offers a theoretically integrated account of multi-source influencer persuasion. Complementarity versus redundancy is not an inherent property of influencer combinations, but a consequence of audience inference. This

perspective helps reconcile conflicting findings in prior research and underscores the importance of examining perceived source relationships rather than exposure counts.

More broadly, in digitally mediated commerce environments, persuasion effectiveness depends increasingly on how audiences interpret networks of influence rather than isolated endorsements. As influencer ecosystems evolve within algorithmically curated platforms, understanding these interpretive dynamics becomes essential for both theory and strategic practice.

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