Proceedings of ICLLCD 2026 Symposium: Intelligent Media for Cultural Bridge: Forum on Global-Local Communication
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.BJ34736

When Are Ordinary Users More Persuasive than KOLs? The Roles of Perceived Similarity

Ziwen Niu

Northeast Normal University, Changchun, China
941616069@qq.com

Abstract. In social media marketing, recommendations from key opinion leaders (KOLs) are often assumed to be more persuasive than those from ordinary users. The current research examines whether this assumption always holds. Across two experiments, the current research shows that ordinary users can be more persuasive because they are perceived as more similar to consumers, which further enhances purchase intention. However, this persuasive advantage depends on consumers' relationship with the KOL. In this case, ordinary users are perceived as more similar and therefore more trustworthy. In contrast, when consumers have a strong relationship with the KOL, the advantage of ordinary users is reversed, and KOL recommendations become more effective. These findings extend previous literature on persuasion and influencer marketing, while also provide actionable insights firms on how to choose the appropriate type of recommender in social media marketing.

Keywords: Key Opinion Leader (KOL), Ordinary Users, Influencer Marketing, Perceived Similarity, Persuasion

1. Introduction

Social media has become an important channel for consumers to learn about products. Before making purchase decisions, consumers often read posts, watch short videos, and check comments or reviews from different users. On social media platforms, product recommendations usually come from two sources: key opinion leaders (KOLs) or ordinary users.

Previous research suggests that KOLs can influence consumers because they are knowledgeable and socially influential [1-4]. Their recommendations may be persuasive when consumers need professional suggestions. Ordinary users can also be persuasive. Compared with KOLs, ordinary users are less likely to be seen as commercial figures. Thus, their recommendations may appear more authentic and trustworthy [5, 6].

Given this background, little research has compared the relative effectiveness of recommendations from KOLs and ordinary users. The current research aims to answer this question. Across two behavioral experiments, we show that consumers are more likely to perceive ordinary users (vs. KOLs) as similar to themselves, and thus find the recommendation more relatable and trustworthy [5, 7], which leads to stronger persuasiveness. However, when consumers have a strong relationship with the KOL, the persuasive advantage of ordinary users (vs. KOLs) reverses.

© 2026 The Authors. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.BJ34736

This research not only extend previous literature on social media marketing and persuasion, but also provide important implications for managers.

2. Hypothesis development

2.1. KOLs vs. ordinary users

In social media platforms, consumers can receive product recommendations either from KOLs or ordinary users. KOLs mainly attract attention through their higher visibility and professional images [1, 8], while ordinary users usually persuade other consumers by sharing their own personal consumption experiences [9-12]. Previous research suggests that ordinary users (vs. KOLs) may seem less commercial and closer to everyday consumers. Therefore, their recommendations can appear more sincere, relatable, and trustworthy [5, 6].

To sum, KOLs mainly rely on expertise and social influence, while ordinary users rely more on authenticity and relatability.

2.2. Source credibility theory

Source credibility theory suggests that consumers not only evaluate a message by its content, but also on the source of it [13, 14]. Source credibility is evaluated along three dimensions: expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness [15, 16]. Expertise means whether the source is knowledgeable and competent; trustworthiness means whether the source is honest and sincere; and attractiveness means the general appeal of the source [15, 16].

KOLs and ordinary users may persuade others through different dimensions of credibility. KOLs can be linked to expertise because they usually provide professional content [17-19]; whereas ordinary users may gain credibility through trustworthiness as they often share personal consumption experiences [2, 16].

2.3. Perceived similarity and persuasion

This research suggests that ordinary users will be more persuasive than unfamiliar KOL. This effect can be explained by perceived similarity, which means that consumers feel a person shares similar preferences or consumption experiences with them [20-23].

Compared with KOLs, ordinary users often share products based on daily consumption experiences, which makes their recommendations more relatable [5, 6] and increases social connection and perceived similarity [24]. When consumers perceive a recommender as similar to themselves, they may believe that the recommender has a similar consumer position, which increases trust [7, 21, 25].

By contrast, when consumers are not familiar with a KOL, they may view the KOL more as a commercial figure [26, 27]. This may make the recommendation feel less relatable and weaken perceived similarity. Therefore, ordinary users may be more persuasive than unfamiliar KOLs because they appear more similar and trustworthy. Thus, we hypothesize:

H1: Compared with KOLs, consumers are more likely to be persuaded by ordinary users.

H2: The persuasive advantage of ordinary users over KOLs is mediated by greater perceived similarity.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.BJ34736

2.4. The moderating role of the KOL-consumer relationship

In social media contexts, consumers may not always see KOLs as distant or unfamiliar. Some consumers like the same KOL for a long time. This process makes consumers feel that they have an emotional connection with the KOL [28-30], which further affects how consumers respond to KOL recommendations.

When consumers feel distant from a KOL, ordinary users may seem more relatable and trustworthy. However, when consumers already know and like the KOL, they may no longer view the KOL only as a commercial source. Instead, the KOL may become a familiar and personally relevant people. Thus, KOLs may benefit from both expertise and similarity, making their recommendations more credible to consumers [31, 32]. Accordingly, we hypothesize:

H3: The persuasive advantage of ordinary users (vs. KOLs) is moderated by the KOL-consumer relationship.

3. Study 1: Main effect and mediation test

3.1. Participants, design, and procedure

One hundred and fifty participants (Mage = 30.79 years, SD = 8.96) were recruited from Credamo to participate in a single-factor (recommender type: KOL vs. ordinary user) between-subjects experiment. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions and view a simulated Xiaohongshu post recommending a hydrating facial mask. In the KOL condition, the post was attributed to a beauty blogger with more than 2.5 million followers. In the ordinary user condition, the same post was attributed to a Xiaohongshu user with 77 followers. The recommendation content, including product features and usage experience, was held constant across the two conditions. After reading the post, participants completed measures of purchase intention and perceived similarity, and finally reported demographic information.

3.2. Measures

Purchase Intention. By adapting the scale from previous research [33], this construct was measured using a 4-item, 7-point Likert scale (e.g., "I am willing to buy the product recommended by this user," "The user's recommendation has enhanced my purchase intention for the product"; 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree; $\alpha = .94$).

Perceived Similarity. Following prior literature [34], 5 items were used to assess participants' perceived similarity with the recommender (e.g., "I think the user has similar hobbies to me," "Overall, I think the user is very similar to me"; 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree; $\alpha = .91$).

Manipulation Check. To verify the effectiveness of the recommender type manipulation, a single item was used to assess participants' perceived follower count of the recommender ("How would you describe the person who posted this content?"; 1 = ordinary consumer, 7 = professional influencer).

Demographic Information. Participants reported their gender and age.

3.3. Results

Manipulation check. A one-way ANOVA showed that the manipulation of recommender type was effective. Participants in the KOL condition perceived the recommender as having a significantly

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.BJ34736

higher follower count (M = 6.03, SD = 0.90) than those in the ordinary user condition (M = 2.28, SD = 1.30; F (1,148) = 420.97, p < .001).

Purchase Intention: As expected, recommender type significantly influenced purchase intention (F(1, 148) = 4.80, p = .030). Participants who viewed the recommendation from the ordinary user showed higher purchase intention (M = 5.45, SD = 1.00) than those who viewed the KOL's post (M = 5.03, SD = 1.34), thus supporting Hypothesis 1.

Mediation Analysis. Recommender type also had a significant effect on perceived similarity (F(1, 148) = 9.21, p = .003). Participants in the ordinary user condition reported significantly higher perceived similarity (M = 5.15, SD = 1.07) than those in the KOL condition (M = 4.58, SD = 1.24).

To test the mediating role of perceived similarity, we conducted a bootstrap mediation analysis using PROCESS Model 4 with 5,000 bootstrap samples [35]. Recommender type was the independent variable (0 = KOL, 1 = ordinary user), perceived similarity served as the mediator, and purchase intention serves as the dependent variable. The results revealed a significant indirect effect through perceived similarity (Effect = 0.48, 95% CI = [0.16, 0.83]), thus supporting H2.

3.4. Discussion

Study 1 provides an initial test of the proposed effect. The results show that participants reported higher purchase intention after viewing a recommendation from an ordinary user than after viewing the same recommendation from a KOL. In addition, this effect is mediated by perceived similarity: ordinary users were perceived as more similar to participants, which further increased purchase intention. Study 2 further explores whether the observed persuasive advantage of ordinary users is impacted by the KOL-consumer relationship.

4. Study 2: The moderating role of the KOL-consumer relationship

4.1. Participants, design, and procedure

Two hundred and forty participants recruited from Credamo took part in the study (M_{age} = 29.42, SD = 7.85). They were randomly assigned to one of two conditions in a single-factor between-subjects design: KOL versus ordinary user.

The focal product was thick-cut toast, a low-involvement experiential product. After reading the informed consent form, participants viewed a simulated Xiaohongshu product recommendation post. The post described the product's features and usage experience and included the same images and hashtags across conditions. Only the recommender identity varied. In the ordinary-user condition, the post was attributed to a non-professional Xiaohongshu user with 77 followers. In the KOL condition, the same post was attributed to Dong Yuhui, a well-known knowledge-based KOL with 572,000 followers in the real world. After viewing the post, participants completed the purchase intention measure and manipulation check. Then, we measured the relationship strengthen between the KOL and participants. Finally, participants reported demographic information.

4.2. Measures

Purchase Intention. Purchase intention was measured using a 3-item, 7-point scale adapted from previous research [33] (e.g., "I have a strong intention to buy this toast after reading this recommendation"; "I will add this toast to my recent breakfast list"; 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree; α = .89).

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.BJ34736

KOL-Consumer Relationship Strength. Relationship strength was measured using a 7-item composite scale capturing two dimensions: parasocial interaction [29] (4 items; e.g., "Dong Yuhui feels like an old friend to me") and emotional connection [36] (3 items; e.g., "Dong Yuhui's values resonate strongly with me"; 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). The averaged score served as the index of relationship strength, showing excellent reliability ($\alpha = .92$).

Manipulation Check. To verify the effectiveness of the recommender manipulation, participants responded to a manipulation-check item: "How would you describe the person who posted this content?" (1 = ordinary consumer, 7 = professional influencer).

Demographic Information. Participants reported their gender and age.

4.3. Results

Manipulation Check. A one-way ANOVA confirmed that the manipulation was successful. Participants in the KOL condition rated the recommender as significantly more professional ($M = 6.12$, $SD = 0.78$) than those in the ordinary user condition ($M = 2.05$, $SD = 0.92$; $F(1, 238) = 124.67$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta = 0.59$).

Interaction Effects. To test the moderating role of KOL-Consumer relationship strength, we conducted a moderation analysis using PROCESS Model 1 [36]. Recommendation source (0 = ordinary user, 1 = KOL) served as the independent variable, purchase intention as the dependent variable, and KOL-consumer relationship strength as the moderator.

The results revealed a significant main effect of recommendation source ($b = -1.20$, $SE = 0.58$, $t = -2.06$, $p = .041$), indicating that, on average, ordinary users generated higher purchase intention than KOLs. There was also a significant positive effect of relationship strength ($b = 0.37$, $SE = 0.08$, $t = 4.54$, $p < .001$). More importantly, the interaction between recommendation source and relationship strength was significant ($b = 0.33$, $SE = 0.12$, $t = 2.83$, $p = .005$). A Johnson-Neyman analysis further showed that when relationship strength was low (≤ 4.52), there was no significant difference between KOL and ordinary user recommendations. However, when the KOL-consumer relationship is relatively strong (> 4.52; 69.5% of the sample), KOL (vs. ordinary user) recommendations generated significantly higher purchase intention, thus supporting H3.

4.4. Discussion

Study 2 further examined the boundary condition of the effect found in Study 1. The results suggest that the influence of recommender type depends on how close consumers feel to the KOL. When the KOL-consumer relationship is strong, the KOL (vs. ordinary user) recommendation produced higher purchase intention. However, when the relationship between KOL and consumer is weak, the two recommender types did not differ significantly. Together, the findings highlight the importance of choosing the most appropriate recommenders based on consumer segments and product category.

5. General discussion

5.1. Theoretical contributions

This research compares KOLs and ordinary users in the same recommendation context. Although previous studies have discussed both types of recommenders, they often examine them separately [2, 5-8]. By comparing the two sources in the same setting, this research provides a clearer understanding of when each type of recommender may be more persuasive.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.BJ34736

Second, this research shows that perceived similarity and the KOL-consumer relationship are important for understanding social media persuasion. The findings suggest that ordinary users may be more persuasive because consumers see them as more similar to themselves [20, 21]. However, when consumers feel close to a KOL, the KOL's recommendation may become more effective. This suggests that KOL influence may also come from familiarity and emotional connection, not only from popularity or professional image [28, 29, 37].

5.2. Managerial implications

The findings provide practical suggestions for brands. When choosing a recommender, brands need to consider who their target consumers are. If consumers are not familiar with a KOL, ordinary-user recommendations may be more effective. However, if consumers already know or like a KOL, cooperation with that KOL may work better. Therefore, in brand or product promotion, businesses should consider both the recommender type and the audience's relationship with the KOL.

5.3. Limitations

This main limitation of the current research lies in the stimulus design. Specifically, Study 2 used a real and well-known KOL Dong Yuhui. Although this improves realism, participants with a weak reported relationship with the KOL may still have been familiar with him or viewed him as credible. Future studies could compare well-known KOLs, micro-influencers, and unfamiliar KOLs to better understand how familiarity and relationship strength jointly shape persuasion [38].

References

[1] De Veirman, M., Cauberghe, V., & Hudders, L. (2017). Marketing through Instagram influencers: The impact of number of followers and product divergence on brand attitude. International Journal of Advertising, 36(5), 798–828. https: //doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2017.1348035

[2] Lou, C., & Yuan, S. (2019). Influencer marketing: How message value and credibility affect consumer trust of branded content on social media. Journal of Interactive Advertising, 19(1), 58–73. https: //doi.org/10.1080/15252019.2018.1533501

[3] Katz, E. (1957). The two-step flow of communication: An up-to-date report on an hypothesis. Public Opinion Quarterly, 21(1), 61–78. https: //doi.org/10.1086/266687

[4] Katz, E., & Lazarsfeld, P. F. (1955). Personal influence: The part played by people in the flow of mass communications. Free Press. https: //doi.org/10.4324/9781315126234

[5] Cheung, C. M. K., & Thadani, D. R. (2012). The impact of electronic word-of-mouth communication: A literature analysis and integrative model. Decision Support Systems, 54(1), 461–470. https: //doi.org/10.1016/j.dss.2012.06.008

[6] Djafarova, E., & Rushworth, C. (2017). Exploring the credibility of online celebrities' Instagram profiles in influencing the purchase decisions of young female users. Computers in Human Behavior, 68, 1–7. https: //doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.11.009

[7] Gefen, D. (2000). E-commerce: The role of familiarity and trust. MIS Quarterly, 24(4), 725–737.https: //doi.org/10.1016/S0305-0483(00)00021-9

[8] Belanche, D., Casaló, L. V., Flavián, M., & Ibáñez-Sánchez, S. (2021). Understanding influencer marketing: The role of congruence between influencers, products and consumers. Journal of Business Research, 132, 186–195. https: //doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2021.03.067

[9] Hennig-Thurau, T., Gwinner, K. P., Walsh, G., & Gremler, D. D. (2004). Electronic word-of-mouth via consumer-opinion platforms: What motivates consumers to articulate themselves on the Internet? Journal of Interactive Marketing, 18(1), 38–52. https: //doi.org/10.1002/dir.10073

[10] OECD. (2007). Participative web: User-created content. OECD Publishing.

[11] Kaplan, A. M., & Haenlein, M. (2010). Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of social media. Business Horizons, 53(1), 59–68. https: //doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2009.09.003

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.BJ34736

[12] Brown, J. J., & Reingen, P. H. (1987). Social ties and word-of-mouth referral behavior. Journal of Consumer Research, 14(3), 350–362.https: //doi.org/10.1086/209118
[13] Hovland, C. I., & Weiss, W. (1951). The influence of source credibility on communication effectiveness. Public Opinion Quarterly, 15(4), 635–650. https: //doi.org/10.1086/266350
[14] Hovland, C. I., Janis, I. L., & Kelley, H. H. (1953). Communication and persuasion: Psychological studies of opinion change. Yale University Press. https: //doi.org/10.1037/11235-000
[15] Ohanian, R. (1990). Construction and validation of a scale to measure celebrity endorsers' perceived expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness. Journal of Advertising, 19(3), 39–52. https: //doi.org/10.1080/00913367.1990.10673191
[16] Pornpitakpan, C. (2004). The persuasiveness of source credibility: A critical review of five decades' evidence. Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 34(2), 243–281. https: //doi.org/10.1111/j.1559-1816.2004.tb02547.x
[17] Petty, R. E., & Cacioppo, J. T. (1986). Communication and persuasion: Central and peripheral routes to attitude change. Springer.
[18] He, W., & Jin, C. (2024). A study on the influence of the characteristics of key opinion leaders on consumers' purchase intention in live streaming commerce: Based on dual-systems theory. Electronic Commerce Research, 24(2), 1235–1265. https: //doi.org/10.1007/s10660-022-09651-8
[19] Chen, Y., Qin, Z., Yan, Y., et al. (2024). The power of influencers: How does influencer marketing shape consumers' purchase intentions? Sustainability, 16(13), 5471. https: //doi.org/10.3390/su16135471
[20] Byrne, D. (1971). The attraction paradigm. Academic Press.
[21] Baek, E. C., & Falk, E. B. (2018). Persuasion and influence: What makes a successful persuader? Current Opinion in Psychology, 24, 53–57. https: //doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2018.05.004
[22] Nelson, P. (1970). Information and consumer behavior. Journal of Political Economy, 78(2), 311–329. https: //doi.org/10.1086/259630
[23] Montoya, R. M., Horton, R. S., & Kirchner, J. (2008). Is actual similarity necessary for attraction? A meta-analysis of actual and perceived similarity. Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 25(6), 889–922. https: //doi.org/10.1177/0265407508096700
[24] Mudambi, S. M., & Schuff, D. (2010). What makes a helpful online review? A study of customer reviews on Amazon.com. MIS Quarterly, 34(1), 185–200. https: //doi.org/10.2307/20721420
[25] Choi, J., Lee, H. J., & Kim, H. W. (2017). Examining the effects of personalized app recommender systems on purchase intention: A self and social-interaction perspective. Journal of Electronic Commerce Research, 18(1).
[26] Audrezet, A., de Kerviler, G., & Moulard, J. G. (2020). Authenticity under threat: When social media influencers need to go beyond self-presentation. Journal of Business Research, 117, 557–569. https: //doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2018.03.026
[27] Trope, Y., & Liberman, N. (2010). Construal-level theory of psychological distance. Psychological Review, 117(2), 440–463. https: //doi.org/10.1037/a0018963
[28] Horton, D., & Wohl, R. R. (1956). Mass communication and para-social interaction: Observations on intimacy at a distance. Psychiatry, 19(3), 215–229. https: //doi.org/10.1080/00332747.1956.11023049
[29] Rubin, A. M., Perse, E. M., & Powell, R. A. (1985). Loneliness, parasocial interaction, and local television news viewing. Human Communication Research, 12(2), 155–180. https: //doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2958.1985.tb00071.x
[30] Sokolova, K., & Kefi, H. (2020). Instagram and YouTube bloggers promote it, why should I buy? How credibility and parasocial interaction influence purchase intentions. Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services, 53, 101742. https: //doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2019.01.011
[31] Granovetter, M. S. (1973). The strength of weak ties. American Journal of Sociology, 78(6), 1360–1380. https: //doi.org/10.1086/225469
[32] Chu, S.-C., & Kim, Y. (2011). Determinants of consumer engagement in electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) in social networking sites. International Journal of Advertising, 30(1), 47–75. https: //doi.org/10.2501/IJA-30-1-047-075
[33] Dodds, W. B., Monroe, K. B., & Grewal, D. (1991). Effects of price, brand, and store information on buyers' product evaluations. Journal of Marketing Research, 28(3), 307–319. https: //doi.org/10.1177/002224379102800305
[34] McCroskey, J. C., Richmond, V. P., & Daly, J. A. (1975). The development of a measure of perceived homophily in interpersonal communication. Human Communication Research, 1(4), 323-332. https: //doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2958.1975.tb00281.x
[35] Hayes, A. F. (2013). Introduction to mediation, moderation, and conditional process analysis: A regression-based approach. Guilford Press.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.BJ34736

[36] Dwyer, F. R., Schurr, P. H., & Oh, S. (1987). Developing buyer-seller relationships. Journal of Marketing, 51(2), 11–27.https: //doi.org/10.1177/002224298705100202
[37] Ki, C.-W. (Chloe), & Kim, Y.-K. (2019). The mechanism by which social media influencers persuade consumers: The role of consumers' desire to mimic. Psychology & Marketing, 36(10), 905–922. https: //doi.org/10.1002/mar.21244
[38] Freberg, K., Graham, K., McGaughey, K., & Freberg, L. A. (2011). Who are the social media influencers? A study of public perceptions of personality. Public Relations Review, 37(1), 90–92. https: //doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2010.11.001