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From Visible Halos to Invisible Influence: A Mixed-Methods Analysis of KOC Strategies and Evolutionary Trajectories in Social Commerce

Kai Lin Hsu * and Wei-Hsi Hung

Department of Management Information Systems, National Chengchi University, Taipei 116026, Taiwan;
fhung@nccu.edu.tw

* Correspondence: 106356503@nccu.edu.tw

Abstract

This study examines how key opinion consumers (KOCs) influence consumer behavior in social commerce, particularly under growing distrust toward traditional key opinion leaders (KOLs) and the resulting limitations in their influence. While prior research has primarily focused on trust-building, this study investigates how KOCs create perceived value through a distinct influence mechanism that distinguishes between the roles of trust and distrust. Using an explanatory sequential mixed-methods approach, this research integrates results from a quantitative study with findings from a qualitative study to arrive at robust meta-inferences. Following the PLS-SEM analysis ($N = 582$), qualitative interviews were conducted to corroborate these inferences and provide complementary insights into the psychological mechanisms underlying trust and distrust, identifying boundary conditions—such as the ineffectiveness of physical attractiveness—that redefine influence models in social commerce. The results indicate that a KOC's expertise and recommendation cues significantly enhance perceived value, which serves as a key mediator influencing purchase behavior. This study conceptualizes the “invisible influence” effect as a distinct persuasion mechanism. KOCs construct utilitarian value through authentic, experience-based sharing. By identifying the mediating role of perceived value and mapping the evolutionary trajectories of influencer roles, this research extends social commerce strategy.

Keywords: social commerce; key opinion consumers (KOCs); purchase behavior; source credibility; invisible influence

1. Introduction

The development of social commerce has fundamentally changed how consumers seek product information and how such information shapes their purchase behavior [1,2]. In recent years, brands have relied heavily on key opinion leaders (KOLs) for marketing and endorsement [3,4]. KOLs typically produce professional content and maintain formal relationships with brands, focusing on broad visibility and commercial reach [5]. However, as consumers are increasingly exposed to sponsored content, they have begun to seek information from sources they perceive as more relatable [6,7]. This shift has drawn attention to the emerging role of key opinion consumers (KOCs).

Unlike KOLs, KOCs are typically everyday consumers who share their personal experiences and opinions about products. Their influence stems largely from voluntary sharing rather than formal commercial agreements, positioning them as a distinct, peer-driven source of information in the social commerce environment [8,9].



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Recent literature on influencer effectiveness has predominantly emphasized highly visible characteristics, such as physical attractiveness, interaction style, and expertise [10–12]. For instance, Jiang et al. (2026) [10] demonstrate how specific configurations of beauty streamer characteristics activate consumers' emotional responses while reducing cognitive control, thereby driving impulse buying. However, this body of research largely focuses on highly visible, performance-driven KOLs [13], leaving a critical research gap in understanding KOCs [14]. As consumer skepticism toward traditional KOLs continues to grow [15], KOCs appear to operate through a fundamentally different psychological mechanism.

Existing studies often treat trust-building as equivalent to reducing perceived risk [16,17]. This study instead distinguishes explicitly between trust and distrust as separate mechanisms [18]. It argues that KOC influence depends less on the recommender's physical appearance or emotional stimulation and more on the informational value of the content, particularly the depth of personal experience and perceived authenticity. In this sense, KOCs function as informative peers rather than traditional influencers. Rather than merely reducing perceived purchase risk through practical product evaluations [19], they contribute to the construction of utilitarian value.

Despite the growing practical relevance of KOCs, academic research on this group remains limited [20,21]. This study investigates how key KOC characteristics, including trustworthiness, expertise, and physical attractiveness, together with specific recommendation cues (e.g., two-sided messages), influence consumer purchase behavior. It further examines perceived value as the central mediating mechanism in this process. To account for individual differences that are often underexplored in influencer research, the Big Five personality traits are included as control variables [22]. By mapping how these variables interact through perceived value to influence actual purchase behavior, this study conceptualizes the "invisible influence" effect as a distinct persuasion mechanism in which KOCs construct utilitarian value through authentic, experience-based sharing.

To address this research gap, this study uses a sequential mixed-methods research approach by integrating results from quantitative and qualitative studies to arrive at rich and robust inferences and meta-inferences [23–26]. Partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) is combined with qualitative thematic interviews to provide a comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms through which KOCs exert this form of influence.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Re-Evaluating Source Credibility

The effectiveness of influencers and peer endorsers is traditionally examined through the source credibility model [27]. This foundational framework posits that the persuasiveness of a communicator is determined by three core dimensions: expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness [11,28]. Together, these characteristics shape consumers' evaluations of both the source and the validity of the message in promotional contexts.

Within this framework, physical attractiveness has consistently been identified as a significant determinant of consumer attitudes. Classical persuasion theory suggests that communicators with high physical appeal are more likely to be perceived as credible due to the "halo effect", a cognitive bias in which physical attractiveness serves as a heuristic for overarching competence and positive traits [29,30]. However, a different dynamic may emerge in the context of key opinion consumers (KOCs). Because high levels of physical attractiveness and polished presentation are often associated with the professionalized and commercialized image of key opinion leaders (KOLs), overly curated aesthetics displayed by peer-level sources may be perceived as inauthentic [31]. As a

result, while attractiveness is traditionally viewed as a positive heuristic cue, it may elicit skepticism in the KOC context.

Consequently, consumers evaluating KOCs may adopt a more utilitarian rather than hedonic approach [32]. In contrast to aspiration-driven consumption associated with KOL endorsements, peer-based influence relies more heavily on functional evaluation [33]. Consumers are likely to prioritize the informational diagnosticity of content, such as detailed usage scenarios, transparent product limitations, and balanced reviews, to reduce perceived purchase risk [34,35]. This suggests a theoretical shift in social commerce: the perceived value generated by KOCs may depend more on the utility of information than on visual appeal.

2.2. KOC Characteristics: Attractiveness, Trustworthiness, and Expertise

2.2.1. KOC Attractiveness (H1)

Although some studies suggest that high physical attractiveness may reduce perceived relatability among peers, the source credibility model remains a dominant framework in influencer research. Prior literature generally indicates that visually appealing sources generate more favorable consumer attitudes [11,30,36]. Based on this perspective, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: *KOC attractiveness positively influences consumers' perceived value.*

2.2.2. KOC Trustworthiness and Expertise (H2 & H3)

In the context of KOCs, trustworthiness refers to the perceived honesty and objectivity of the source [11,37]. Because KOCs are typically viewed as independent peers rather than formal brand representatives, their recommendations are more likely to be perceived as credible. Similarly, KOC expertise is often expressed through experiential knowledge, that is, practical understanding derived from direct product use [38]. Consumers rely on these source-related attributes to evaluate product quality and reduce uncertainty. Accordingly, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H2: *KOC trustworthiness positively influences consumers' perceived value.*

H3: *KOC expertise positively influences consumers' perceived value.*

2.3. Recommendation Strategies, Perceived Value, and Purchase Behavior

Recommendation cues are important determinants of consumer attitudes toward products. According to emotional contagion theory [39], individuals exposed to others' enthusiasm tend to develop similar emotional responses [40]. In social commerce contexts, when KOCs share product experiences with genuine enthusiasm, consumers may experience corresponding positive emotions. This emotional alignment can enhance product evaluation and increase perceived value [41,42]. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4: *KOC recommendation cues positively influence consumers' perceived value.*

In addition to affective cues, KOCs often employ specific content strategies such as balanced reviews. Balanced reviews, which present both strengths and limitations of a product, can enhance perceived objectivity and reduce concerns about persuasive bias [43–45]. This transparency strengthens message credibility and increases perceived authenticity [46,47]. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H5: *Balanced reviews in KOC recommendations positively influence consumers' perceived value.*

Perceived Value and Purchase Behavior (H6)

Perceived value is widely recognized as a key determinant of purchase behavior, encompassing cognitive processes such as information search, evaluation of alternatives, and decision-making [48,49]. In social commerce settings, KOC recommendations can support these processes by reducing perceived risk and increasing decision confidence [16]. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H6: *Consumers' perceived value positively influences their purchase behavior.*

2.4. Consumer Personality Traits

Consumer personality traits represent intrinsic psychological factors that influence how individuals interpret and respond to social recommendations. Drawing on the Big Five framework, prior research suggests that personality differences affect information processing and decision-making [50]. Extraverted and agreeable individuals tend to be more receptive to peer-generated content due to their social orientation [51,52], whereas conscientious and emotionally stable individuals prefer rational, information-oriented messages and engage in more deliberate evaluations [52,53]. In contrast, individuals with neuroticism are more sensitive to risk and may respond more strongly to uncertainty [54,55].

To account for these individual differences, this study incorporates the Big Five personality traits as control variables in the analysis of purchase behavior [56]. This approach enables a more accurate estimation of the effects of KOC-related variables.

2.5. Research Gap and Proposed Framework

Despite extensive research on the influence of KOLs, limited attention has been given to how KOCs shape consumer perceptions in technology-mediated environments [21]. In particular, the mechanisms underlying their “invisible influence” remain underexplored [57]. This study addresses this gap by developing a framework that examines how KOC characteristics (attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise) and recommendation content (recommendation cues and balanced reviews) jointly influence consumer decision-making through the mediating role of perceived value.

Importantly, the concept of “invisible influence” extends beyond traditional electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). While eWOM typically encompasses aggregated opinions from anonymous users [58], a KOC's invisible influence is grounded in perceived homophily and semi-authentic social ties [59]. This mechanism challenges traditional source credibility theory [11], which often emphasizes overt “visible halos” (such as immense popularity or physical attractiveness). In contrast, invisible influence operates precisely through the absence of these halos; by presenting themselves as peer consumers rather than professional endorsers, KOCs bypass consumers' defensive persuasion mechanisms [60], thereby constructing a more robust sense of utilitarian value.

Building on the preceding hypotheses, this study proposes a conceptual model to explain the influence mechanisms of KOCs. As illustrated in Figure 1, the model included two groups of independent variables: KOC characteristics (attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise) and recommendation content (recommendation cues and balanced reviews). Perceived value is positioned as the central mediating variable linking these antecedents to purchase behavior (H1–H6). In addition, the model incorporates consumer personality traits (Big Five dimensions) as control variables to account for individual differences. This framework provides a structured basis for examining peer-driven influence in social commerce [61].

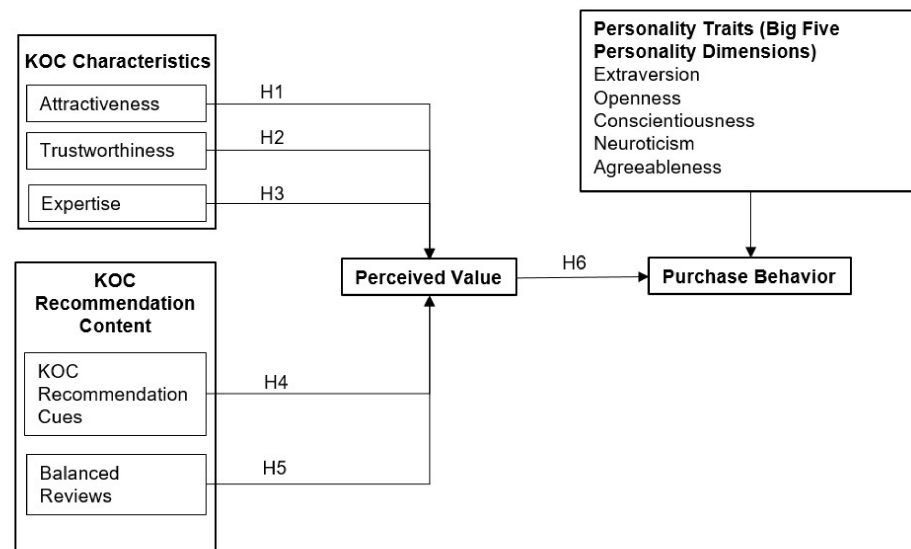


Figure 1. Conceptual framework illustrating the relationships among KOC characteristics, recommendation content, perceived value, and purchase behavior.

3. Research Methodology

This study adopts a sequential mixed-methods approach to examine how KOC characteristics, recommendation strategies, and perceived value jointly influence consumer purchase behavior [26]. Specifically, the research design integrates a quantitative survey with qualitative expert interviews. This approach is intended to provide a comprehensive understanding of KOC persuasion mechanisms in social commerce, with qualitative insights used to explain and contextualize the quantitative findings.

However, for a robust understanding of the underlying persuasion mechanisms, which are relatively unexplored in social commerce, it is crucial to corroborate and confirm the inferences from the quantitative study with another qualitative study [25,26]. To summarize, the two primary purposes of the mixed methods research methodology used in this study are the corroboration/confirmation and complementarity of the findings, and an explanatory sequential mixed methods approach is suitable for these purposes [25,26]. We use triangulation to corroborate and confirm the findings and use integration throughout the data collection and analysis to identify potential boundary conditions that may limit traditional influence models [25,26] (see Figure 2).

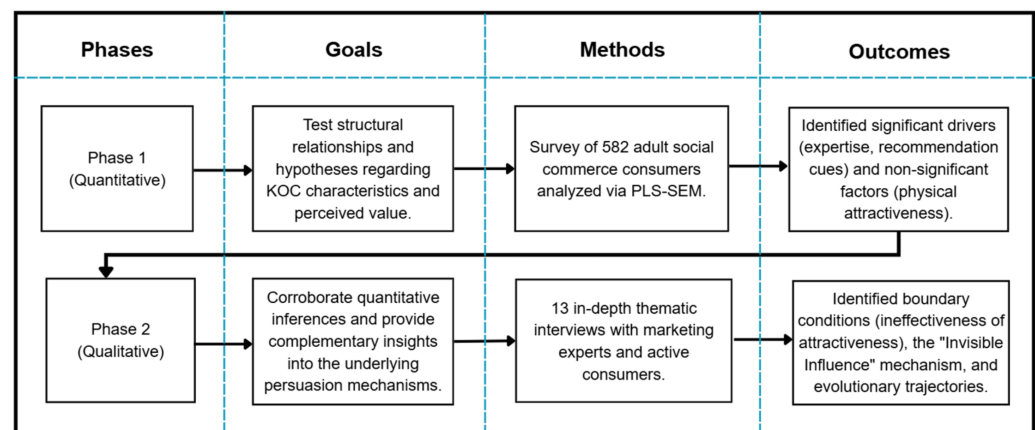


Figure 2. The Explanatory Sequential Mixed-Methods Research Design.

3.1. Quantitative Data Collection and Analysis

3.1.1. Measurement Development

All measurement items were adapted from validated scales in prior research to ensure reliability and validity. In line with existing literature, KOC attractiveness is defined in terms of visual appeal and personal presentation [29]. Trustworthiness refers to the perceived honesty and transparency of the KOC [62], while expertise reflects the KOC's product knowledge and ability to provide experience-based insights.

Recommendation strategies, including recommendation cues and balanced reviews, are measured using items that capture the informational richness, clarity, and objectivity of the KOC's message.

Perceived value is conceptualized as consumers' overall assessment of the utility, relevance, and credibility derived from KOC content. Purchase behavior is measured as the self-reported likelihood of acting on a KOC's recommendation, consistent with prior social commerce research. Finally, the Big Five personality traits are measured and included as control variables.

3.1.2. Data Collection and Analytical Procedure

Quantitative data were collected through an online survey distributed across major social media platforms. The reliability of the measurement model was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, while construct validity was evaluated through composite reliability (CR), average variance extracted (AVE), and established discriminant validity criteria [63,64].

To test the proposed hypotheses, partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) was employed. This variance-based technique is appropriate for estimating complex relationships among latent constructs and for handling multivariable frameworks [65].

3.2. Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis

To supplement and contextualize the quantitative findings, the second phase of the study employed a qualitative approach within a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design [23]. A semi-structured interview guide, developed in alignment with the research hypotheses (H1–H6), was used to ensure consistency while allowing for the exploration of context-specific insights.

To mitigate potential confirmation bias inherent in explanatory designs [23], the semi-structured interviews incorporated open-ended, non-leading prompts (e.g., asking participants to freely describe failed persuasion attempts). This approach allowed for the discovery of emergent themes that were not strictly confined by the quantitative results, such as the unexpected finding that physical attractiveness serves as an ineffective cue in KOC contexts.

To facilitate data triangulation, the qualitative sample comprised two groups of informants. The first group included three senior marketing professionals (P1–P3), each with more than five years of experience in KOC strategy implementation. The second group consisted of ten active consumers (C1–C10) who frequently use mainstream social media platforms, such as Instagram, Facebook, and Threads. Each interview lasted between 40 and 60 min. All sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for subsequent thematic analysis. Detailed profiles of the 13 informants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Profiles of qualitative interview informants ($N = 13$).

Code	Professional Background/User Experience Profile	Mode	Duration
P1	Marketing Director with over 10 years of experience in e-commerce, specializing in KOC strategy execution and brand positioning.	Online (Video)	55 min

Table 1. *Cont.*

Code	Professional Background/User Experience Profile	Mode	Duration
P2	Creative Lead with over 7 years of experience. Social media agency specialist focusing on Instagram content marketing and traffic conversion.	Online (Video)	45 min
P3	Brand Consultant with over 9 years of experience, specializing in cross-platform influence analysis and optimization of the consumer purchase journey.	Online (Audio)	60 min
C1	Female, 24, professional. Active Instagram and Facebook user, spending over 2 h daily on KOC-related content discovery. Exhibits high purchase intent and frequent conversions driven by social media influence.	In-person (Audio)	45 min
C2	Male, 28, manager. High-value technology consumer. Uses YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook to evaluate KOLs through KOC-related content. Purchasing decisions are influenced by perceived authenticity, social proof, and brand loyalty.	In-person (Audio)	40 min
C3	Female, 19, student. Digital native with strong interest in beauty and fashion content. Relies on community feedback and KOC content for frequent, online purchases.	Online (Audio)	50 min
C4	Male, 27, professional. Uses social media as an information source for product evaluation. Applies cross-platform validation and KOC discussions before making purchasing decisions.	Online (Audio)	45 min
C5	Male, 21, student. Interested in automotive and gaming products. Prioritizes user-generated reviews and KOC content to reduce perceived purchase risk.	In-person (Audio)	45 min
C6	Male, 22, professional. Digital-oriented consumer influenced by fandom culture. Engages with K-pop and gaming-related content and exhibits habitual online purchasing behavior.	In-person (Audio)	50 min
C7	Male, 27, professional. Interested in food and anime content. Relies on niche KOC reviews for research-driven and consistent purchasing behavior.	In-person (Audio)	40 min
C8	Female, 45, professional. Focuses on personal development and lifelong learning. Frequently engages in online shopping influenced by KOC content related to self-improvement and well-being.	Online (Audio)	55 min
C9	Female, 60, professional. Lifestyle-oriented consumer. Influenced by KOC content related to travel and family life in making frequent online purchasing decisions.	Online (Audio)	40 min
C10	Male, 45, professional. Technology-oriented consumer. Uses Facebook groups and Threads to gather information and relies on peer evaluations and long-form content from trusted influencers when making purchasing decisions.	Online (Audio)	45 min

Note: P = Professional/Expert; C = Consumer.

The qualitative phase was designed to address three main objectives:

1. To explain the quantitative findings, particularly the non-significant effect of physical attractiveness in peer-based contexts.

2. To identifying contextual factors, including platform-specific dynamics that influence KOC effectiveness across different social media environments.
3. To triangulating findings in order to enhance ecological validity and provide industry-relevant perspectives.

Key discussion topics included participants' interpretations of the quantitative results, the mechanisms underlying both significant and non-significant effects, platform-specific dynamics (e.g., visually driven versus information-driven environments), and the managerial implications of KOC characteristics.

4. Phase 1: Quantitative Analysis and Results

4.1. Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

A total of 582 valid responses were collected through an online questionnaire targeting social commerce consumers in Taiwan. The gender distribution was relatively balanced, with approximately 55% of respondents identifying as female and 45% as male.

In terms of educational background, the majority of respondents had attained higher education qualifications: 67% held a bachelor's degree, and 24% held a master's degree or higher. The remaining participants had an associate degree or a high school education. Overall, the sample reflects a highly educated population, which is generally consistent with the profile of active users in technology-mediated social commerce environments.

The mean scores of the research variables ranged from 2.86 to 4.99. Among the measured constructs, agreeableness exhibited the highest mean score, while purchase behavior had the lowest. A detailed summary of the descriptive statistics for each construct is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of research variables.

Variable	N	Mean	SD
Attractiveness	582	4.32	0.91
Trustworthiness	582	4.72	0.97
Expertise	582	4.64	1.00
Recommendation cues	582	4.70	0.95
Balanced reviews	582	4.70	1.02
Perceived value	582	4.70	0.99
Purchase behavior	582	2.86	1.28
Extraversion	582	4.34	1.11
Openness	582	4.78	0.88
Neuroticism	582	4.17	1.03
Conscientiousness	582	4.76	0.97
Agreeableness	582	4.99	0.96

Note: N = 582; SD = standard deviation.

4.2. Analytical Approach and Measurement Model Assessment

This study employs partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) to evaluate both the measurement and structural models. PLS-SEM was selected over covariance-based SEM (CB-SEM, e.g., AMOS or LISREL) for several methodological reasons.

First, a Kolmogorov–Smirnov (K-S) test indicated that the data significantly deviated from multivariate normality. As a variance-based approach, PLS-SEM does not require strict distributional assumptions and is robust when handling non-normally distributed data [66,67]. Although asymptotically distribution-free (ADF) estimation in CB-SEM can address non-normality, it typically requires substantially larger sample sizes to produce stable estimates. Therefore, PLS-SEM is more appropriate for the present study, given the sample size ($N = 582$).

Second, PLS-SEM is well suited for complex structural models and is designed to maximize the explained variance of endogenous constructs. Through component-based estimation and flexible factor loadings, it effectively captures the structure of multi-item constructs without relying heavily on global model fit indices, which may misrepresent causal validity in complex models [66,68].

To evaluate the measurement model, internal consistency reliability and construct validity were assessed. Specifically, the analysis examined indicator factor loadings, composite reliability (CR), Cronbach's alpha (α), and average variance extracted (AVE). The results are presented in the following section.

4.3. Reliability and Convergent Validity Analysis

The measurement model was evaluated in terms of internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity using PLS-SEM.

Internal consistency reliability was established, as both Cronbach's alpha (α) and composite reliability (CR) values for all constructs exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70 [69]. Cronbach's alpha values ranged from 0.887 to 0.956, while CR values ranged from 0.852 to 0.938.

Convergent validity was assessed through indicator loadings and average variance extracted (AVE). All indicator loadings exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, and AVE values ranged from 0.614 to 0.906, surpassing the minimum threshold of 0.50 [69].

Discriminant validity was evaluated using multiple criteria. The Fornell–Larcker criterion and cross-loading analysis indicated that each construct shared more variance with its own indicators than with other constructs. In addition, following Henseler et al. [70], the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations was assessed. All HTMT values were below the recommended threshold, confirming discriminant validity.

Collinearity diagnostics were also examined to assess model robustness and potential common method bias (CMB). Variance inflation factor (VIF) values remained within acceptable ranges, with most values below 3.3. According to Kock [71], full collinearity VIF values below 3.3 indicate that the model is unlikely to be affected by substantial common method bias. Overall, the measurement model demonstrates adequate reliability and validity, supporting its use in subsequent structural model analysis. Detailed results are reported in Tables 3 and 4, and the full list of measurement items is provided in Appendix A.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of personality traits.

Trait	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Extraversion	582	4.34	1.11
Openness	582	4.78	0.88
Neuroticism	582	4.17	1.03
Conscientiousness	582	4.76	0.97
Agreeableness	582	4.99	0.96

Note: $N = 582$ for all variables.

Table 4. Measurement model results.

Construct	Factor Loadings (λ)	Error Variance (θ)	AVE	CR	Cronbach's Alpha
Attractiveness	0.837, 0.864, 0.764, 0.742, 0.697	0.299, 0.254, 0.416, 0.449, 0.514	0.614	0.852	0.887
Trustworthiness	0.909, 0.922, 0.927, 0.915	0.174, 0.150, 0.141, 0.163	0.843	0.938	0.956
Expertise	0.899, 0.913, 0.921, 0.872	0.192, 0.166, 0.152, 0.240	0.813	0.923	0.945
Recommendation cues	0.854, 0.905, 0.896, 0.901, 0.889	0.271, 0.181, 0.197, 0.188, 0.210	0.791	0.934	0.950

Table 4. *Cont.*

Construct	Factor Loadings (λ)	Error Variance (θ)	AVE	CR	Cronbach's Alpha
Balanced reviews	0.954, 0.950	0.090, 0.099	0.906	0.896	0.951
Perceived value	0.918, 0.912, 0.912	0.157, 0.168, 0.168	0.829	0.897	0.936
Purchase behavior	0.844, 0.920, 0.851	0.288, 0.154, 0.276	0.761	0.857	0.905

Note: Reported values include factor loadings (λ), error variances (θ), average variance extracted (AVE), composite reliability (CR), and Cronbach's alpha for each construct.

Discriminant Validity Assessment

Discriminant validity was assessed to verify that each construct in the model is empirically distinct from the others. This assessment was conducted using the Fornell–Larcker criterion and the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio.

According to the Fornell–Larcker criterion, the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct should exceed its correlations with all other constructs. As shown in Table 5, this condition is satisfied. The diagonal values, representing the square roots of the AVEs (ranging from 0.784 to 0.952), are greater than the corresponding off-diagonal correlation coefficients. This indicates that each latent construct shares more variance with its indicators than with other constructs in the model.

Table 5. Discriminant validity assessment (Fornell–Larcker criterion).

Construct	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	$\sqrt{\text{AVE}}$	CR	α
(1) Attractiveness	0.784							0.784	0.852	0.887
(2) Trustworthiness	0.645 **	0.918						0.918	0.938	0.956
(3) Expertise	0.653 **	0.831 **	0.902					0.902	0.923	0.945
(4) Recommendation cues	0.620 **	0.824 **	0.829 **	0.889				0.889	0.934	0.950
(5) Balanced reviews	0.550 **	0.686 **	0.676 **	0.720 **	0.952			0.952	0.896	0.951
(6) Perceived value	0.607 **	0.809 **	0.850 **	0.882 **	0.707 **	0.911		0.911	0.897	0.936
(7) Purchase behavior	0.180 **	0.252 **	0.242 **	0.275 **	0.194 **	0.266 *	0.872	0.872	0.857	0.905

Note: Bold values on the diagonal represent the square roots of the AVE. Off-diagonal values represent Pearson correlation coefficients. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

In addition, the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations was assessed as a complementary measure of discriminant validity [70]. As shown in Table 6, most HTMT values fall below the conservative threshold of 0.85. However, the HTMT values for perceived value with expertise (0.934) and with recommendation cues (0.963) exceed the 0.90 threshold.

Table 6. HTMT results for discriminant validity.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
(1) Attractiveness							
(2) Trustworthiness	0.742						
(3) Expertise	0.803	0.898					
(4) Recommendation cues	0.850	0.841	0.873				
(5) Balanced reviews	0.817	0.812	0.841	0.887			
(6) Perceived value	0.835	0.847	0.934	0.887	0.963		
(7) Purchase behavior	0.843	0.776	0.849	0.882	0.844	0.890	

Note: Values in bold indicate HTMT ratios above the 0.90 threshold [70].

Despite these elevated values, the corresponding constructs are treated as conceptually distinct in the existing literature [72]. Moreover, all other construct pairs fall within acceptable HTMT ranges, and the Fornell–Larcker criterion is fully satisfied. Taken together,

these results indicate that the measurement model demonstrates adequate discriminant validity and is suitable for subsequent structural analysis.

4.4. Structural Model Assessment and Predictive Power

To examine the hypothesized relationships in the conceptual framework, the structural model was estimated using Smart PLS (version 4.1.1.2). A bootstrapping procedure with 5000 subsamples was applied to obtain standard errors and assess the statistical significance of the path coefficients [66].

The predictive power of the model was evaluated using the coefficient of determination (R^2). The R^2 value for perceived value is 0.828, indicating that KOC characteristics and recommendation content jointly explain a substantial portion of its variance. In contrast, the R^2 value for purchase behavior is 0.092, indicating a relatively limited level of explained variance for the final outcome variable. Taken together, these findings suggest that structural model demonstrates strong explanatory capability, while its explanatory power for purchase behavior is limited.

The complete structural model and path results are depicted in Figure 3.

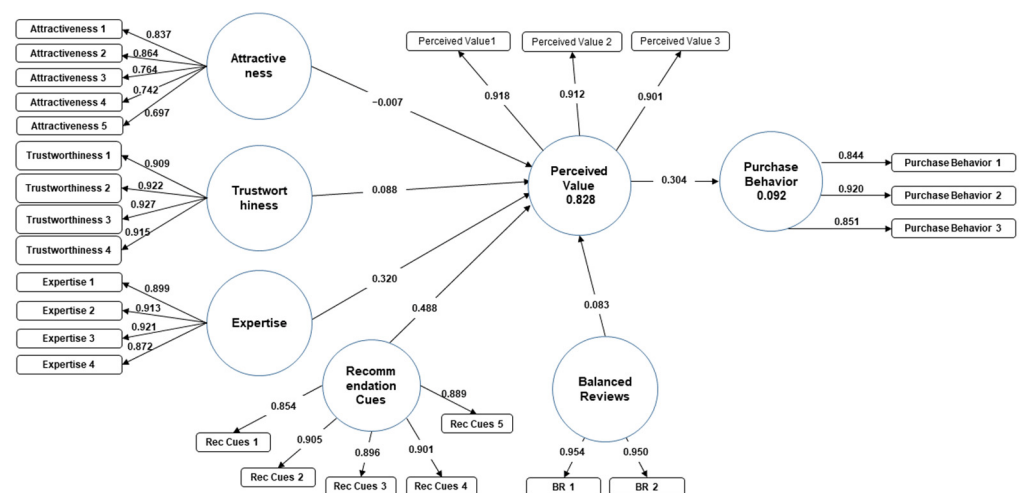


Figure 3. Structural model with path coefficients and R^2 values. Note. $N = 582$. All reported coefficients are standardized path coefficients (β).

4.5. Hypothesis Testing Results

Following the evaluation of the structural model, the hypothesized relationships (H1–H6) were tested. Standardized path coefficients (β), t -values, and p -values were obtained from the bootstrapping procedure to assess statistical significance.

For KOC characteristics, trustworthiness ($\beta = 0.088$, $p < 0.05$) and expertise ($\beta = 0.320$, $p < 0.05$) have significant positive effects on perceived value, supporting H2 and H3. In contrast, attractiveness does not have a significant effect on perceived value ($\beta = -0.007$, $p > 0.05$), and thus H1 is not supported.

For recommendation content, both recommendation cues ($\beta = 0.488$, $p < 0.05$) and balanced reviews ($\beta = 0.083$, $p < 0.05$) have significant positive effects on perceived value, supporting H4 and H5.

Finally, perceived value has a significant positive effect on purchase behavior ($\beta = 0.304$, $p < 0.05$), supporting H6.

A summary of the hypothesis testing results is presented in Table 7.

Table 7. Results of hypothesis testing.

Hypothesized Relationship	Path Coeff. (β)	t-Value	p-Value	Decision
H1: Attractiveness $\rightarrow$ Perceived value	−0.007	0.239	0.811	Not supported
H2: Trustworthiness $\rightarrow$ Perceived value	0.088	2.149	0.032	Supported
H3: Expertise $\rightarrow$ Perceived value	0.320	6.816	<0.001	Supported
H4: Recommendation cues $\rightarrow$ Perceived value	0.488	11.285	<0.001	Supported
H5: Balanced reviews $\rightarrow$ Perceived value	0.083	3.127	0.002	Supported
H6: Perceived value $\rightarrow$ Purchase behavior	0.304	9.352	<0.001	Supported

4.6. Robustness Check: The Control Effect of Personality Traits

To assess the robustness of the findings, a hierarchical linear regression analysis was conducted to control for the potential confounding effects of consumer personality traits.

In Model 1, the five personality traits (extraversion, openness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and agreeableness) were entered as control variables predicting purchase behavior. The model is statistically significant ($F = 4.873$, $p < 0.05$) and explains 4.1% of the variance in purchase behavior (adjusted $R^2 = 0.041$). Among the control variables, only extraversion has a significant positive effect ($\beta = 0.141$, $p < 0.05$), whereas the remaining traits are not statistically significant.

In Model 2, perceived value was added to the analysis. This addition increases the explanatory power ($F = 9.480$, $p < 0.05$; adjusted $R^2 = 0.090$). Perceived value has a significant positive effect on purchase behavior ($\beta = 0.240$, $p < 0.05$). After its inclusion, the previously significant effect of extraversion is no longer significant, and none of the personality traits remained significant predictors.

Taken together, these results indicate that effect of perceived value on purchase behavior remains robust after controlling for personality traits.

A summary of the hierarchical regression results is presented in Table 8.

Table 8. Linear regression analysis of the effect of perceived value on purchase behavior.

Model Dependent Variable	Model 1 Purchase Behavior		Model 2 Purchase Behavior	
F-value	4.873		9.480	
p-value	<0.001		<0.001	
R²	0.041		0.090	
Control Variables	Beta	p-value	Beta	p-value
Extraversion	0.141	0.002 **	0.079	0.086
Openness	0.046	0.379	0.002	0.975
Neuroticism	−0.057	0.195	−0.044	0.303
Conscientiousness	−0.025	0.669	−0.015	0.796
Agreeableness	0.059	0.255	0.092	0.069
Independent Variable	Beta	p-value	Beta	p-value
Perceived value	—	—	0.240	0.000 ***

Note: ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

5. Phase 2: Qualitative Analysis and Findings

5.1. Corroborating the Quantitative Inferences: The Boundary Condition of Attractiveness

To deeply integrate the mixed-methods results, the qualitative phase was explicitly structured to corroborate, complement, and challenge the quantitative findings. Rather than merely restating the statistical results, the qualitative themes corroborate the structural model by illustrating how consumers actively search for expertise and balanced reviews. Furthermore, they complement the quantitative data by revealing the underlying psychological transition from hedonic appreciation to utilitarian evaluation. Most importantly, the

qualitative insights challenge traditional KOL paradigms by explaining exactly why the hypothesized effect of physical attractiveness (H1) failed, identifying a critical boundary condition in peer-based social commerce.

The quantitative findings from Phase 1 indicate a deviation from the conventional expectations of influencer marketing. As shown in Table 7, the relationship between KOC attractiveness and perceived value is not statistically significant ($\beta = -0.007, p = 0.811$). This result suggests that, in the context of key opinion consumers (KOCs), physical appearance does not play a meaningful role in shaping perceived value.

Rather than contradicting the source credibility model, this finding points to boundary conditions in technology-mediated social commerce environments. Specifically, it suggests that the role of attractiveness may differ between professional influencers and peer-level actors. To further examine the mechanisms underlying this pattern, a qualitative analysis was conducted.

5.2. Thematic Findings and Complementary Insights

5.2.1. The Primacy of Authenticity over Appearance

The qualitative findings provide contextual support for the non-significant effect of attractiveness. Across interviews, informants consistently emphasize that in the KOC context, perceived authenticity outweighs physical appearance. KOCs are described as establishing trust through relatable, experience-based sharing, rather than through curated visual presentation.

This pattern helps explain why the “halo effect” associated with physical attractiveness is less influential in this setting. Instead, participants emphasize the importance of what may be described as experiential realism, that is, the perceived alignment between the recommender’s experience and the consumer’s own expectations. Several expert informants also note that adopting highly polished or celebrity-like presentation styles can reduce perceived authenticity and weaken peer-based influence [31].

5.2.2. Content Strategies as Mechanisms of Trust

The qualitative analysis further clarifies how specific content strategies contribute to perceived value. Informants describe recommendation cues, such as contextual storytelling and detailed product demonstrations, as key mechanisms that enhance informational clarity and reduce perceived risk.

In addition, balanced reviews emerge as a central theme. Content that acknowledges both the strengths and limitations of a product is consistently perceived as more credible and informative [45]. This form of presentation reinforces the perception of the KOC as an independent evaluator rather than a commercial promoter, thereby strengthening perceived value.

5.2.3. The Role of Personality Traits and Managerial Implications

The qualitative findings also provide insight into the role of personality traits. While the quantitative analysis indicates that perceived value drives purchase behavior irrespective of personality traits, interview data suggest that certain traits, particularly, extraversion, may influence initial engagement. For example, more extroverted individuals are described as being more responsive to dynamic and socially oriented content.

However, across both expert and consumer interviews, content quality and perceived authenticity remain the dominant factors shaping evaluation and decision-making. Personality traits appear to influence how consumers engage with content, but not the underlying mechanism through which perceived value affects purchase behavior.

From a managerial perspective, interviewees emphasize the importance of allowing KOCs a degree of creative autonomy. Rather than imposing highly structured promotional scripts, brands are advised to support more flexible and experience-driven content creation. This approach helps preserve authenticity and supports the development of longer-term consumer trust.

The resulting conceptualization of KOCs are illustrated in Figure 4.

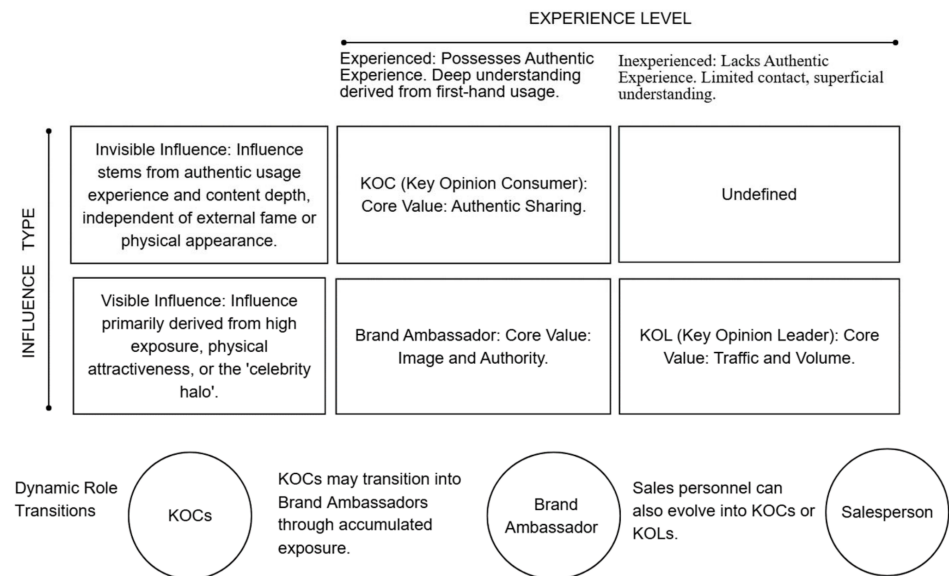


Figure 4. Deconstructing opinion leaders: a revised definition and role segmentation of KOCs.

5.3. Complementary Paradigm Shift: From Hedonic Appreciation to Utilitarian Evaluation

The non-significant effect of physical attractiveness, together with the strong influence of recommendation cues, suggests a shift in how consumers evaluate influence in social commerce contexts. Based on these findings, this study proposes a conceptual transition from a KOL-driven, hedonic orientation to a KOC-driven, more utilitarian mode of evaluation.

In traditional influencer marketing, persuasion is often associated with affective mechanisms, including the visual appeal and aspirational value. These elements align with hedonic motivations, where consumers derive value from admiration and emotional engagement with highly visible influencers. However, as social commerce environments become more information-dense, consumers increasingly face information overload and decision fatigue. In this context, the focus of engagement appears to shift toward more functional considerations, particularly those related uncertainty reduction [73,74].

This shift helps explain why KOCs can exert influence despite limited emphasis on visual presentation. The findings suggest that consumers engage with KOCs using a more problem-oriented evaluative approach, placing greater weight on the informational and experiential content of recommendations. Rather than prioritizing aesthetic appeal, consumers appear to rely on the diagnostic value of content, including firsthand experience and transparent product evaluation [75].

From this perspective, the influence of KOCs can be understood as emerging from their ability to support decision-making under conditions of uncertainty. Their role is less associated with generating affective appeal and more with facilitating evaluation through credible, experience-based information. In this sense, the “invisible influence” of KOCs reflects a shift toward utilitarian evaluation, where perceived value is grounded in informational usefulness and trust-related judgments [57].

6. Discussion

6.1. General Discussion: The Paradox of Attractiveness

The source credibility model has traditionally identified physical attractiveness as a key dimension of influence, alongside expertise and trustworthiness [11,12]. Prior research, particularly in the context of celebrity endorsements and key opinion leaders (KOLs), has emphasized the role of the “halo effect,” where visually appealing sources generate more favorable attitudes and higher perceived value among consumers. Within this perspective, visual aesthetics function as a heuristic cue for credibility and persuasive effectiveness.

The findings of this study do not support this expectation in the KOC context. Specifically, physical attractiveness does not have a statistically significant effect on perceived value (H1 not supported, $p > 0.05$). This result contrasts with the “what is beautiful is good” heuristic commonly reported in prior literature.

Rather than rejecting the source credibility model, this pattern suggests that the role of physical attractiveness is highly context-dependent within social commerce. In particular, its influence appears to be attenuated in peer-based technology-mediated social commerce environments. This indicates the presence of boundary conditions that differentiate the mechanisms of influence between professionalized KOLs and KOCs [57].

While these findings provide significant insights into the mechanism of KOC influence, they should be interpreted within the specific social commerce environment of Taiwan. Future research is encouraged to investigate how distinct cultural dimensions—such as varying levels of collectivism or peer trust—may act as moderators, as the effectiveness of the “invisible influence” effect might fluctuate across different social and cultural landscapes.

To interpret this pattern, the study introduces an evolutionary framework of influence, as illustrated in Figure 5, which conceptualizes how the relative importance of attractiveness shifts across different forms of mediated persuasion.

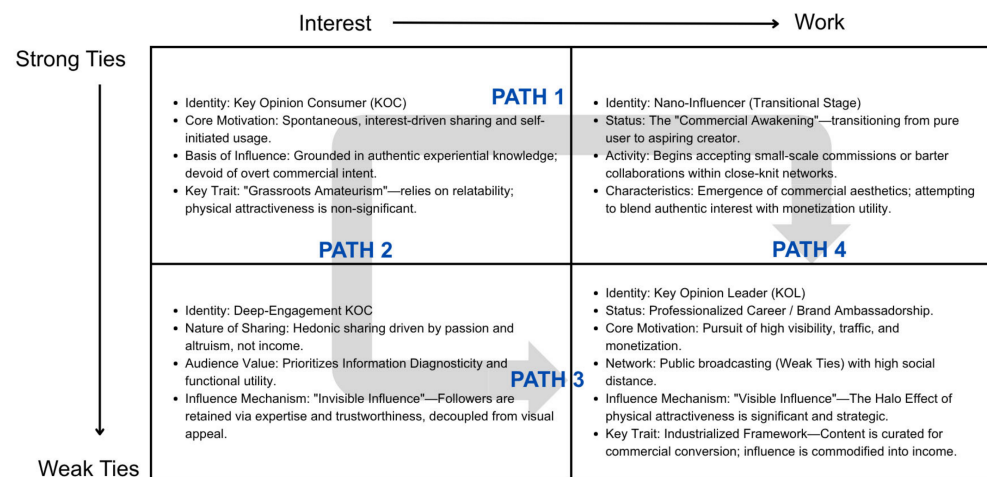


Figure 5. Evolutionary trajectory of influence from key opinion consumers (KOCs) to key opinion leaders (KOLs).

6.2. The Proposed “Invisible Influence” Effect

Although physical attractiveness does not have a significant effect, the empirical results identify recommendation cues as the strongest predictor of perceived value ($\beta = 0.488$, $p < 0.001$). This contrast points to a shift in the mechanisms of social persuasion in KOC-led contexts. Rather than relying on visual appeal, consumers appear to prioritize diagnostic information, including usage scenarios, detailed comparisons, and actionable recommendations.

This pattern supports the proposed “invisible influence” effect. In this context, influence is less associated with the visible persona of the recommender and more with the informational content of the message. The KOC is positioned less as an aspirational figure and more as a source of evaluative input that supports decision-making. Influence, therefore, is shaped by the clarity and usefulness of recommendation content, particularly its ability to reduce uncertainty [61].

Figure 5 synthesizes these relationships within the structural model. The non-significant effect of attractiveness indicates that KOC influence does not depend on attention-driven visual characteristics. Instead, perceived value is primarily shaped by trustworthiness, expertise, recommendation cues, and balanced reviews. These elements operate through content and experience rather than presentation, forming a basis of what is described here as the invisible influence effect.

6.3. Evolutionary Paths: Dynamics of Role Transition

As illustrated in Figure 6, the proposed framework outlines four evolutionary trajectories through which influencers transition across two dimensions: motivation (from interest-driven to work-oriented) and network structure (from strong ties to weak ties).

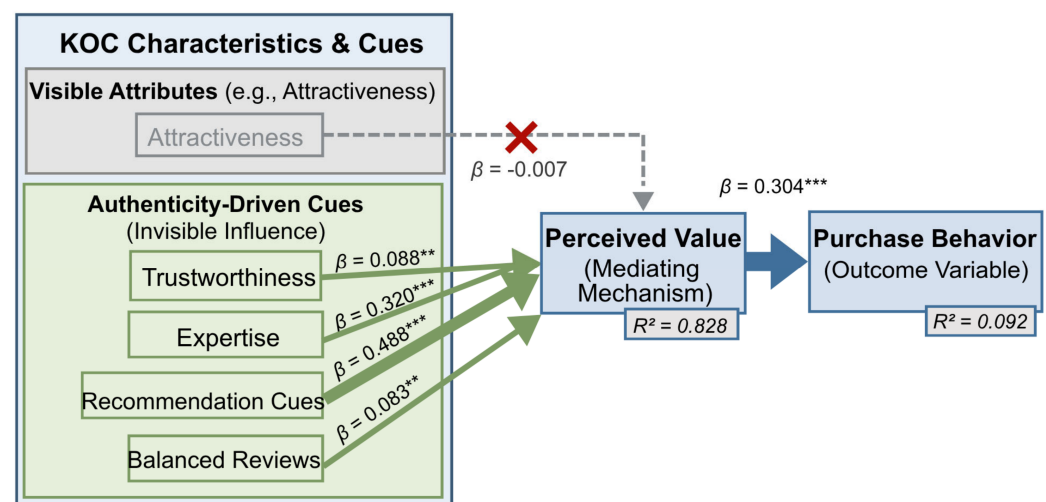


Figure 6. The invisible influence effect: redefined path analysis. Note: The cross mark (×) indicates a non-significant path; ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

- Path 1: Commercial awakening (direct monetization). With initial follower growth, the KOC begins to shift from non-commercial participation toward early-stage monetization. This transition typically occurs within close-knit networks, where small-scale commissions or collaborations are introduced. At this stage, the individual may be characterized as a transitional nano-influencer while still maintaining strong social ties.
- Path 2: Deepening of influence (content accumulation). Rather than pursuing immediate monetization, the KOC focuses on developing expertise and expanding audience reach. This involves a gradual shift toward weaker ties and broader exposure. Influence is built through consistent, experience-based content that emphasizes informational value and diagnostic clarity, while remaining primarily interest-driven.
- Path 3: Strategic professionalization (from expert to KOL). As credibility and audience trust accumulate, the KOC may transition into formal collaborations and endorsements. This stage involves the adoption of more structured content practices and platform strategies. Visual presentation and visibility become more prominent, complementing the previously established content-based influence.

- Path 4: Scaling up (expansion of reach). In this trajectory, early monetization is followed by a deliberate expansion of audience reach. The individual transitions from network-based influence to broader public visibility, often accompanied by increased professionalization of content production and branding practices. This pathway leads toward the characteristics associated with KOLs [21].

6.4. Synthesis of the Evolutionary Framework

The left quadrant of the framework represents KOCs operating within an interest-driven domain, where influence is grounded in spontaneous, experience-based sharing rather than formal commercial intent. The empirical findings support this characterization, indicating that consumers place greater emphasis on recommendation cues ($\beta = 0.488$) and trustworthiness than on visual aesthetics.

The non-significant effect of attractiveness (H1) further suggests a boundary condition specific to peer-based influence. In the KOC context, highly polished visual presentation may be interpreted as a signal of commercialization, potentially weakening perceived authenticity [75]. As a result, attempts to replicate KOL-style aesthetics may conflict with expectation of relatability and reduce the effectiveness of peer influence.

Taken together, these findings suggest that KOCs and KOLs differ not only in scale but also in the underlying mechanisms of persuasion. In particular, they operate through distinct relationships between visual presentation, perceived authenticity, and commercial intent [76,77].

6.5. Synthesis of Theoretical Innovations

The non-significant effect of physical attractiveness highlights a key distinction between KOL- and KOC-based influence. While prior research has emphasized admiration-driven mechanisms associated with highly visible influencers, the present findings suggest that KOCs operate through a more information-oriented mode of influence [78].

Specifically, consumers appear to prioritize recommendation cues ($\beta = 0.488, p < 0.001$) and expertise ($\beta = 0.320, p < 0.001$) over visual appeal when evaluating KOCs. This pattern indicates that persuasive effectiveness in this context is more closely linked to informational value than to aesthetic presentation.

This shift is captured in the concept of the “invisible influence” effect, where the persuasive role of the communicator is less dependent on visible attributes and more dependent on the content of the message. Credibility is constructed through perceived authenticity, experiential relevance, and informational clarity rather than through curated visual aesthetics [19].

An additional theoretical insight emerges from the inclusion of consumer personality traits as control variables. While prior research frequently positions traits such as extraversion as strong intrinsic drivers of social commerce engagement, our hierarchical regression reveals a compelling full-mediation effect. Specifically, once the KOC-driven “perceived value” is introduced into the structural model, the initial predictive power of innate personality traits becomes non-significant. This finding is theoretically significant: it suggests that the “invisible influence” effect operates as a universal persuasion mechanism. The utilitarian and diagnostic value generated by authentic KOC recommendations is sufficiently robust to override inherent psychological differences among consumers, thereby standardizing the path to purchase behavior regardless of individual personality profiles.

A summary of how these findings align with and diverge from prior research is presented in Table 9.

Table 9. Summary of research alignment and divergence from prior studies.

Research Dimension	Alignment with Prior Studies	Sources	Divergence from Prior Studies	Sources
Effect of KOC Traits on Perceived Value	KOC traits, including attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise, positively influence consumers' perceived value.	[11,62]	Trustworthiness and expertise are more influential than physical attractiveness in shaping perceived value.	This study extending [11,29]
Effect of KOC Recommendation Content	Enthusiastic tone and balanced (positive and negative) reviews enhance perceived value.	[19,43]	Overly enthusiastic tones may reduce trust, and excessive positivity may diminish perceived authenticity and value.	This study extending [62]
Perceived Value and Purchase Behavior	Higher perceived value enhances purchase behavior and customer loyalty.	[5,78]	The effect of perceived value on purchase behavior is moderated by product involvement and consumer personality traits.	This study extending [49]
Moderating Role of Personality Traits	Extraverted consumers are more susceptible to KOC influence, whereas conscientious consumers tend to be more skeptical.	[22,51]	Even conscientious consumers may report higher perceived value when KOCs demonstrate strong expertise.	This study extending [29]
KOC-Consumer Value Congruence	Consumers who align with KOC values are more likely to exhibit brand loyalty and engagement.	[78]	Value misalignment may trigger negative reactions, particularly among consumers who prioritize authenticity and transparency.	This study extending [62]

7. Conclusions

This study employs a mixed-methods approach to examine how key opinion consumers (KOCs) influence consumer purchase behavior in social commerce. The empirical findings indicate that expertise and recommendation cues are the primary drivers of perceived value. The qualitative analysis supports these results by showing that authentic, experience-based feedback and demonstrated knowledge help reduce perceived risk and guide purchase decisions. In particular, recommendation cues highlight the importance of informational depth and diagnosticity, while expertise positions KOCs as knowledgeable peers rather than commercial promoters.

These findings extend existing social commerce research, which has largely emphasized the affective mechanisms associated with traditional influencers. For instance, prior studies show that highly visible KOLs and live streamers often stimulate impulse buying by increasing emotional arousal and reducing cognitive control [10]. In contrast, the present study identifies a different mechanism in the KOC context. Through the concept of “invisible influence” effect, this research shows that perceived value is generated primarily through authenticity and informational utility rather than through visual appeal or sensory stimulation. The integration of qualitative insights further strengthens this contribution by providing a more comprehensive account of how this mechanism operates in practice [79].

The non-significant effect of physical attractiveness provides additional support for this shift. In contrast to the “what is beautiful is good” heuristic commonly observed in KOL contexts, attractiveness does not significantly influence perceived value in the KOC setting. Instead, consumers appear to rely more heavily on informational content and recommendation quality when evaluating influence. This suggests a more cognitively

oriented process, in which functional utility and informational relevance outweigh aesthetic considerations.

Overall, these findings confirm that perceived value serves as a central mechanism linking KOC characteristics to purchase behavior. The results highlight the increasing importance of utilitarian value, informational credibility, and peer-based trust in contemporary social commerce environments [80]. A comprehensive summary of the key findings, theoretical innovations, and managerial implications is provided in Table 10.

Table 10. Summary of Key Findings, Theoretical Innovations, and Managerial Implications.

Research Dimension	Core Focus/ Mechanism	Empirical Evidence and Strategic Insights
Research Scope and Methodology	Investigating KOCs' distinct influence mechanisms	Focuses on how key opinion consumers (KOCs) influence consumers' perceived value and purchase behavior in social commerce. Conceptualizes the "invisible influence" effect, proposing that KOC persuasion stems from authentic, experience-based sharing rather than physical appearance. Adopts a sequential mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative PLS-SEM analysis ($N = 582$) and qualitative thematic interviews (13 experts and consumers).
Hypothesis Testing (Structural Model)	Re-evaluating the Source Credibility Model	Attractiveness (H1): Shows no significant effect ($\beta = -0.007$), indicating the "halo effect" is attenuated in KOC contexts. Trustworthiness (H2) and Expertise (H3): Both demonstrate significant positive effects on perceived value. Recommendation Cues (H4) and Balanced Reviews (H5): Both significantly enhance perceived value, with recommendation cues being the primary driver ($\beta = 0.488$). Purchase Behavior (H6): Perceived value serves as a central mediating mechanism driving purchase behavior, remaining robust after controlling for the Big Five personality traits.
Qualitative Insights	Paradigm Shift and Dynamic Role Transitions	From Hedonic to Utilitarian Evaluation: Consumers shift from affective, hedonic appreciation of KOLs to an information-oriented, utilitarian evaluation of KOCs.
Theoretical Innovations		Primacy of Authenticity: Highly polished or celebrity-like presentation styles can reduce perceived authenticity; consumers rely more on the informational diagnosticity of content. Evolutionary Framework: Introduces four evolutionary trajectories detailing how influencers transition based on motivation (interest-driven to work-oriented) and network structure (strong to weak ties).
Managerial Implications	Strategic Guidelines for Social Commerce	For Niche and High-Involvement Brands: Rather than investing heavily in high-visibility KOLs, allocate marketing resources toward KOCs who possess deep domain expertise. Focus on product seeding that allows KOCs enough time to generate authentic, detailed, and balanced reviews (highlighting both pros and cons) to reduce consumer perceived risk. For Visually Driven Platforms (e.g., Instagram/TikTok): Avoid enforcing highly curated, celebrity-like aesthetic guidelines on KOCs. Brands should explicitly instruct KOCs to maintain their "grassroots amateurism" visual style, as overly polished content on these platforms triggers persuasion knowledge and reduces peer trust. For Text/Discussion-Heavy Platforms (e.g., Facebook Groups/Threads): Encourage KOCs to prioritize informational diagnosticity. Brands should provide KOCs with in-depth technical specifications and encourage them to share detailed usage scenarios and contextual storytelling, which serves as the primary driver of perceived value in these environments. Long-term Influencer Portfolio: Diversify the influencer portfolio by tracking the evolutionary trajectories of KOCs (as modeled in Figure 5). Maintain sustained collaborations with early-stage KOCs to preserve authenticity, while strategically transitioning them into brand ambassadors only when broad reach is required.

7.1. Theoretical Contributions

This study makes several theoretical contributions to the literature on social commerce and influencer marketing. First, it extends source credibility theory [78] to context of key opinion consumers (KOCs) by examining how credibility operates in peer-based

influence settings. The findings provide empirical evidence that expertise and recommendation cues as the foundational antecedents of perceived value in this context. By identifying these factors as the strongest predictors in the structural model, the study clarifies that KOC influence is grounded in perceived competence and the diagnostic quality of experiential content.

Second, the study differentiates KOCs from key opinion leaders (KOLs) by identifying distinct mechanisms of persuasion. While prior research on KOLs often emphasizes affective evaluation and parasocial attraction [81], the present findings indicate that KOC influence is driven more by informational credibility and expertise. This distinction is further captured in the concept of the “invisible influence” effect, which describes how influence is derived from content-based cues rather than from visible attributes of the source.

Third, the findings refine the role of physical attractiveness within the source credibility framework. The non-significant effect of attractiveness suggests that its influence is context-dependent and may be limited in peer-based, utilitarian-oriented environments. Instead, authenticity-related cues, including sincerity and balance reviews, play a more central role in shaping perceived value. This provides empirical support for a shift in evaluation criteria from aesthetic appeal to information utility in KOC-driven contexts.

Finally, through the careful application of a sequential mixed-methods research framework [25,26], this study demonstrates how integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches yields rich and robust meta-inferences. While the quantitative PLS-SEM analysis established the structural relationships of KOC influence, the subsequent qualitative study not only corroborated these empirical inferences but also provided crucial complementary insights. Specifically, by uncovering the boundary condition regarding the ineffectiveness of physical attractiveness, the qualitative findings explained the underlying psychological mechanisms that the quantitative data alone could not reveal. This integrated approach enables the construction of a more holistic and substantive theory of the “invisible influence” effect, offering a valuable methodological template for future research examining complex, emerging phenomena in social commerce.

7.2. Managerial Implications

The findings of this study suggest several implications for marketing practice in social commerce contexts.

First, brands may need to reassess how marketing resources are allocated between KOLs and KOCs. While KOLs remain effective for generating visibility and brand awareness, the results indicate that KOCs play a distinct role in shaping consumer trust and purchase decisions through content-based influence [76]. Accordingly, brands may benefit from increasing their engagement with KOCs who demonstrate strong expertise and credible user experience, rather than relying predominantly on high-visibility endorsements.

Second, the focus of content development may need to shift from visual presentation to informational utility. Given that physical attractiveness does not significantly influence perceived value in the KOC context, brands should encourage the production of balanced, experience-based, and detailed product evaluations. Providing KOCs with sufficient product access, time for use, and relevant technical information may support the creation of content that reduces perceived risk and enhances consumer confidence.

Finally, influencer management strategies may benefit from a longer-term perspective. Rather than relying on short-term promotional campaigns, brands can consider developing sustained collaborations with KOCs. Supporting their growth over time may help maintain authenticity and strengthen the consistency of brand communication [82], particularly as some KOCs transition into more formalized influencer roles.

7.3. Limitations and Future Research Directions

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that suggest directions for future research.

First, the structural model focuses primarily on source characteristics and recommendation content. Future studies could incorporate additional relational and behavioral variables, such as interaction frequency and community engagement, to further examine how influence operates in social commerce environments. In addition, the cross-sectional design captures relationships at a single point in time. Given the proposed evolutionary framework, longitudinal research would be valuable for examining how KOC influence develops and changes as individuals move toward more professionalized roles.

Second, the empirical data are drawn from a single market context (Taiwan), which may limit the generalizability of the findings to different cultural environments. In particular, cultural factors such as the prevalence of collectivist values versus individualistic orientations may moderate the impact of KOCs' "invisible influence." As social commerce practices and consumer trust structures vary globally, these findings may not fully capture the influence dynamics in cultural contexts where peer-based trust is less central. Future research could conduct cross-cultural comparisons to explore how perceptions of authenticity, trust, and influence vary across different social and cultural environments.

Third, this study encountered discriminant validity challenges, as the HTMT ratios between perceived value and two of its antecedents—expertise (0.934) and balanced reviews (0.963)—exceeded the conservative threshold of 0.90. While the existing literature treats these constructs as conceptually distinct, these high values suggest a strong cognitive alignment in the social commerce context; consumers appear to immediately translate a KOC's authentic expertise and objective balanced reviews into direct utilitarian perceived value, rendering these constructs highly interrelated in practice. Although this integration is theoretically interesting, it poses a challenge to discriminant validity. Future researchers should interpret the structural paths with caution and are encouraged to prioritize experimental designs specifically aimed at isolating the independent cognitive mechanisms of value perception from source characteristics, thereby addressing the discriminant validity challenges identified in this study.

Fourth, the R-squared value for the ultimate dependent variable, purchase behavior, was relatively low at 0.092, indicating that the model accounts for only 9.2% of the variance in actual consumer purchasing decisions. This statistical outcome underscores that while KOC attributes are critical in cultivating strong consumer perceived value, actual conversions on social commerce platforms remain highly complex and are predominantly driven by unmeasured external catalysts, such as algorithmic product recommendations, immediate promotional pricing, and platform transaction friction. Consequently, the practical significance of our model should be interpreted as explaining the psychological mechanism of value cultivation rather than direct transaction prediction. Future studies should integrate these external commercial factors to improve behavioral explanatory power.

Fifth, a notable measurement limitation exists in our operationalization of purchase behavior (Appendix A). Items PB1, PB2, and PB3 captured participants' general online shopping frequency and financial expenditure over the past year, rather than quantifying specific purchasing choices directly stimulated by a KOC's recommendation. While general shopping propensity reflects a baseline readiness to engage in social commerce, it fails to capture direct transactional conversion rates driven by KOC text or video cues. Accordingly, we have softened our conclusions regarding the model's direct predictive validity for KOC conversions. Future empirical research should employ more precise click-through tracking data or scenario-based experimental designs to isolate and capture immediate consumer purchasing responses triggered exclusively by KOC recommendations.

Additionally, regarding the conceptual distinction between trust and distrust, our quantitative structural model primarily operationalized and tested “trustworthiness” as a unidimensional construct. The complex psychological mechanisms of active “distrust”—particularly the growing skepticism toward highly commercialized KOLs—were primarily explored through our subsequent qualitative interviews rather than quantified in the survey. Future quantitative studies should develop and validate distinct measurement scales that capture both trust and distrust simultaneously to further rigorously test these dual mechanisms.

Sixth, this study captures influencer dynamics at a specific point in time, yet the social commerce ecosystem is rapidly evolving. The observed trend of “increasingly distrusting” traditional, highly commercialized KOLs is a dynamic phenomenon that may vary across contexts and platforms. As KOC platforms and monetization practices continue to mature, the very nature of “authenticity” may shift. We acknowledge that the effectiveness of the “invisible influence” mechanism may face new challenges as KOCs transition toward more professionalized roles. Future longitudinal research is essential for examining how these influence dynamics evolve as consumers adapt to the changing commercialization strategies within social commerce.

Finally, regarding the qualitative phase, the sample size of 13 informants is relatively small and primarily served a targeted explanatory function—specifically, to triangulate and investigate the underlying reasons for the non-significant effect of physical attractiveness. While sufficient for addressing this specific empirical anomaly, the generalizability of these qualitative insights remains limited. Future qualitative studies are encouraged to employ larger sample sizes and incorporate standardized product stimuli (e.g., using a fixed KOC endorsement post for a specific product during interviews) to control for product-related variance and more robustly explore the ineffectiveness of physical attractiveness in KOC contexts.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: According to the national guidelines set forth by the Ministry of Health and Welfare in Taiwan (specifically, the “Regulations on Human Trials” and the exemption criteria for non-biomedical, non-interventional research), ethical review is waived for research that meets the following conditions: 1. The study relies solely on anonymous surveys and interviews. 2. The research does not collect sensitive personal data (e.g., medical records, financial status, or criminal history). 3. The participants are not part of a vulnerable population, and the study poses minimal to no physiological or psychological risk to the subjects. We confirm that this study fully complies with these national exemption criteria. All participants were provided with informed consent before participation, detailing the academic purpose of the study and ensuring that their participation was completely voluntary and anonymous.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Appendix A. Survey Constructs and Measurement Items

This appendix presents the measurement constructs, corresponding items, and their psychometric properties, including factor loadings, error variances, average variance extracted (AVE), composite reliability (CR), and Cronbach's Alpha. All items were measured using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), unless otherwise indicated.

Table A1. Constructs, items, and reliability statistics.

Construct	Item No.	Measurement Item	Factor Loading (λ)	Error Variance (δ)
Attractiveness (AVE = 0.614, CR = 0.852, α = 0.887)	A1	This KOC is attractive.	0.837	0.299
	A2	This KOC is outstanding.	0.864	0.254
	A3	This KOC is physically attractive.	0.764	0.416
	A4	This KOC is elegant.	0.742	0.449
	A5	This KOC is sexy.	0.697	0.514
Trustworthiness (AVE = 0.843, CR = 0.938, α = 0.956)	T1	This KOC appears to be reliable.	0.909	0.174
	T2	This KOC is honest.	0.922	0.150
	T3	This KOC appears to be trustworthy.	0.927	0.141
	T4	This KOC seems sincere.	0.915	0.163
Expertise (AVE = 0.813, CR = 0.923, α = 0.945)	E1	This KOC is an expert in the products or services they recommend.	0.899	0.192
	E2	This KOC is experienced with the products or services they recommend.	0.913	0.166
	E3	This KOC possesses relevant knowledge about the products or services they recommend.	0.921	0.152
	E4	This KOC often provides additional usage tips for the products or services they recommend.	0.872	0.240
Recommendation cues (AVE = 0.791, CR = 0.934, α = 0.950)	RC1	The visual elements (e.g., product comparison charts, recommendation scores) in this KOC's video content increase my purchase intention.	0.854	0.271
	RC2	The suggestions provided in this KOC's video content are helpful in finding the best product or service for me.	0.905	0.181
	RC3	The advice in this KOC's video content helps me choose the product or service I want to buy.	0.896	0.197
	RC4	I trust the advice provided in this KOC's video content.	0.901	0.188
	RC5	Before making a purchase, I rely on the product or service recommendations in this KOC's video content.	0.889	0.210

Table A1. Cont.

Construct	Item No.	Measurement Item	Factor Loading (λ)	Error Variance (δ)
Balanced reviews (AVE = 0.906, CR = 0.896, α = 0.951)	BR1	This KOC's video content discusses both the strengths and weaknesses of the recommended product or service.	0.954	0.090
	BR2	This KOC provides both positive and negative evaluations of the product or service in the video content.	0.950	0.098
Perceived value (AVE = 0.829, CR = 0.897, α = 0.936)	PV1	Compared to other sources, the information provided by this KOC contains richer product-related content.	0.918	0.157
	PV2	Compared to other sources, the information provided by this KOC makes it easier to find the product information I need.	0.912	0.168
	PV3	Compared to other sources, I am more likely to like the information provided by this KOC.	0.901	0.188
Purchase behavior (AVE = 0.761, CR = 0.857, α = 0.905)	PB1	In the past year, how many times have you purchased products online?	0.844	0.288
	PB2	In the past year, approximately how much money have you spent on online shopping?	0.920	0.154
	PB3	In the past year, how many different types of products have you purchased online?	0.851	0.276

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