

# Impacts of Key Opinion Consumers on Customer Purchase Intention: A Study of Social Commerce Platforms in China

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## Abstract

This study explores the pivotal role of Key Opinion Consumers (KOC) in influencing purchase intention among social commerce customers in China, with a focus on Xiaohongshu users in Shanghai. A survey of 599 Shanghai residents revealed key findings: Firstly, KOCs directly enhance purchase intention. They serve as influential figures whose endorsements positively impact consumer decisions to make purchases on social commerce platforms. Secondly, perceived risk negatively affects both purchase intention and customer trust. Consumers' concerns about risks associated with social commerce transactions can deter their willingness to purchase and erode their trust in the platform. Thirdly, customer trust plays a crucial role in bolstering purchase intention. When consumers trust KOCs and the platforms they endorse, they are more inclined to purchase despite perceived risks. Additionally, the study reveals that KOCs indirectly influence purchase intention through their effects on perceived risk and customer trust. This indirect influence underscores the complex pathways through which KOCs shape consumer behavior in social commerce settings. Moreover, customer trust is a moderator, mitigating the negative impact of perceived risk on purchase intention. Higher levels of trust can alleviate consumer apprehensions, thereby fostering a more favorable environment for purchasing. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how KOCs promote purchase intention in social commerce contexts, highlighting the importance of managing perceived risks and fostering customer trust. The insights from this research offer valuable guidance for developing effective marketing strategies tailored to enhance consumer engagement and drive sales in social commerce platforms, particularly within the dynamic market landscape of China.

**Keywords:** Key Opinion Consumers, Purchase Intention, Perceived Risk, Customer Trust, Social Commerce

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## **Introduction**

E-commerce has significantly altered people's lives, and online shopping has emerged as one of the most important avenues for modern netizens to purchase (Rigdon, 2023). As of June 2023, China had 1.079 billion Internet users, with 884 million engaging in online commerce, an increase of 38.8 million since December 2022, according to the 52nd Statistical Report on China's Internet Development produced by CNNIC (2023). The volume of e-commerce transactions in China has also risen (Fan, 2021). With fierce competition, e-commerce businesses need innovations to attract new customers constantly.

Social commerce has recently emerged as an innovative product of social media and e-commerce (Abdelsalam et al., 2020; Meilatinova, 2021). It refers to the use of social media by suppliers and consumers during e-commerce (Jami Pour et al., 2022; Jiang et al., 2021). Social commerce offers a richer social, collaborative, and interactive online shopping experience than traditional e-commerce (Duan et al., 2019; Jamil et al., 2022). Xiaohongshu is currently one of China's most popular social commerce platforms, with over 300 million registered users (Qin et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2023). It has a sizable user base and substantial purchasing power, allowing it to influence consumers' decisions (Brizzo, 2024). Even though it faces substantial competition from other social media and e-commerce platforms in China, including WeChat, TikTok, and Taobao, Xiaohongshu has gained popularity for its user-generated content model, fostering trust among users seeking authentic recommendations (Chinafy, 2023; Liu, 2023).

Social commerce platforms require innovative marketing strategies; key opinion leaders, or KOLs, are among the most widely used e-commerce marketing strategies. Celebrities, well-known athletes, and supermodels were examples of KOLs-trusted, well-respected people with real experience and competence in a particular sector who had the power to influence others' beliefs and behaviors (Nguyen et al., 2023; Ratasuk, 2019; Wang et al., 2020). However, many customers are skeptical about KOLs' authenticity and that their reviews may have been manipulated and paid for (SEO, 2020). As a result, a new marketing strategy called Key Opinion Consumer (KOC) has emerged and become increasingly popular (GMAdmin, 2022). Key opinion consumers (KOCs), in contrast to Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) who are often esteemed experts or celebrities, are everyday individuals who wield considerable influence over others' purchasing decisions by authentically sharing opinions and recommendations on online platforms. KOCs prioritize personal experiences with products and services, highlighting real-life usage scenarios and genuine emotional responses, which effectively cultivates trust among their audience and aids in making well-informed purchasing decisions (Lim, 2022; Wei et al., 2024). Thus, online marketplaces and enterprises need to be aware of and comprehend Key Opinion Consumers' (KOCs) effects on purchase intention in social commerce.

This study aims to forecast the impact of Key Opinion Consumers (KOCs) on enhancing the buying inclination of Xiaohongshu consumers in Shanghai, China. It also examines the intermediary functions of perceived risk and customer trust according to social capital theory. Even though the literature on KOC already exists in Chinese literature, it is very limited in English literature and requires further investigation (Le, 2022; Nunes et al., 2018). This research model that KOC is mainly investigated as a direct predictor of purchase intention and indirectly through perceived risk and customer trust, which has not been done.

This study is expected to provide new significant insights into the online marketing literature, with particular emphasis on the role of KOC, which is very limited, in cultivating

customer trust, promoting purchase intention, and reducing perceived risk. At the same time, the research results will also provide suggestions for business practices of social commerce and Internet companies.

## **Research Objectives**

1. To examine the influence of KOC on customers' purchase intentions in social commerce.
2. Investigate how KOC enhances customers' inclination to buy in social commerce by considering the mediating effects of perceived risk and customer trust, using the social capital theory as a basis.
3. To establish effective strategies for enhancing client buy intent in e-commerce enterprises, specifically in social commerce within China.

## **Literature Review**

### **Social Capital Theory**

The degree of trust and reciprocity between communities or individuals can be used to gauge the applicability of this theory, which is based on social exchange theory (Putnam, 2000). According to Häuberer (2011), social capital was seen as amassing resources from various personal relationships. It was defined as the links and networks between people who lived or worked together in a particular society. Social capital theory has explained numerous events in various academic fields, including sociology, political science, education, and management (Dubos, 2017; Ratasuk, 2023b). Social media platforms have the most potential as research platforms. One common issue in this kind of research was whether using social media influences people's perceptions of self-social capital and their social support networks (Domahidi, 2018). For example, according to research by Kasim et al. (2022), utilizing social media at work can predict social capital, which includes network connections, shared vision, and trust. Social capital affects job engagement and the relationship between innovative work performance. Warren et al. (2015) examined social capital's structural, relational, and cognitive aspects. Their findings indicated that it had a favorable effect on online citizens' conduct in Facebook's public virtual community.

### **Purchase Intention**

Purchase intention was the premeditated actions of a buyer willing to buy a thing (Belch & Belch, 2009). It refers to a person's intention to perform a purchase behavior or the motivation to purchase (Gelbrich et al., 2023). Consumers would assess the entire product or service during the online shopping process to generate positive or negative feedback, and consumer feedback would affect all examples of online transactions (Chen et al., 2022). Numerous authors have shown how customer views affect consumers' purchase intentions (Ohk & Kim, 2018; Tien et al., 2019; Yusuf & Busalim, 2018). For example, TikTok user-generated content influenced skincare brands' purchasing intentions (Halim & Candraningrum, 2021). Intentions were essential because they significantly predicted actual action (Balau, 2018). Therefore, their research was essential to any online retailer's success.

### **Key Opinion Consumer**

Key Opinion Consumers (KOCs) are customers who influence their friends, followers, and readers to make similar purchasing decisions based on their opinions and feelings about

brand item (Zhou, 2023). KOC has emerged due to businesses' desire to leverage familiarity economies and viral marketing to quickly promote products, encouraging consumers' purchases on social media and generating revenue for businesses (He et al., 2019). KOC had the ability to transform public domain traffic into private domain traffic, leading to increased consumer purchases (Shen & Wang, 2019). This is because Customers' prominent opinions can shift (Özbölük & Akdoğan, 2022). For example, Park et al. (2021) believed that consumers associated more with key opinion consumers because they were likable and generally seen as truthful. Customers often perceive reviews and other subjective information as more reliable and trustworthy than traditional sources, significantly influencing their purchase decisions (Macheka et al., 2023).

Key opinion customers have the following characteristics: expertise, trustworthiness, homogeneity, and tie strength.

### **Expertise**

McCracken (1989) defined expertise as “the perceived capability of the source to offer valid statements”. In the current era of the information explosion, consumers frequently have high expectations for online reviews, especially from reliable sources, which could lead them to believe that their information is accurate (Fileri et al., 2018; Wiedmann & Von Mettenheim, 2020). Additionally, people were more likely to agree with evaluation experts' opinions than non-experts' (Bannor & Aryee, 2022). Therefore, customers prefer reviews from KOCs with evident expertise. For example, Wang and Scheinbaum (2018) showed how an endorser is an ability that directly determines the degree of belief in convincing shoppers' talent influences how much of a belief consumers have in persuading them to buy any product they promote. Expertise is defined in various ways; it is context-specific and pertains to knowledge and experience in a particular field (Döringer, 2021).

### **Trustworthiness**

Verma and Dewani (2021) state that trustworthiness is confidence in information's objectivity, honesty, and validity. Majeed (2021) argued that trustworthiness measured how much the audience believed the speaker's claims to be true. For example, customers were overwhelmed by the volume of product information and options they found while doing product searches, and customer engagement required trustworthiness (Santini et al., 2020). KOC would increase customer trust, give customers more reasons to make decisions and enhance decision-making by offering reliable extra information, evaluations, and tailored guidance (Tian & Li, 2022). Trustworthiness increases customer purchase intentions and positively influences endorsed reliability (Martiningsih & Setyawan, 2022).

### **Homogeneity**

Homogeneity mainly refers to the proximity between consumers and key opinion consumers regarding personal style, product interest, consumption values, and concepts (Chen, 2022). When two homogeneous parties shared product information more frequently, people perceived the other party's interests and pastimes as similar. There were fewer obstacles to communication, and it was more comfortable and more accessible (Xu & Wang, 2018). For example, Hoang et al. (2023) discovered that similarity influences whether a person seeking information accepts the assertions, judgments, and evaluations made by the source as applicable to their circumstances. Customers considered if the KOC would utilize the product as intended (O'Reilly et al., 2016). In conclusion, the resemblance between KOC and customer usage will impact customers' views and assessments.

**Tie Strength**

The strength of a tie is influenced by the duration of time spent, emotional depth, level of closeness, and the exchange of services that characterize the relationship (Granovetter, 1973). Liu (2020) pointed out a strong relationship between key opinion consumers and consumers, manifested in intensive interaction and emotional resonance, significantly impacting purchase decisions. Strong relationships may be shown in the fact that similar to genuine relationships, the more frequently people in a community communicate with one another, the deeper their affection is for one another. Conversely, it is referred to as a weak relationship (Yuan & Lou, 2020). For example, social interaction is a viewer's actions exposed to TikTok content, including advertisements. Regardless of location or time, it enabled successful communication while watching (Chittawarakun & Phimcharoen, 2022).

**The Difference between KOC and KOL**

Opinion leader marketing was a tactic that leveraged the sway of influential people to affect consumers' perceptions of a brand and their buying decisions (Suratepin & Funk, 2022). They were typically regarded as authoritative experts in each sector, with their professional expertise and sizable fan following (He & Jin, 2022). Using Kols' extensive reach to boost sales and raise brand awareness was a common strategy used by successful brands (Acikgoz & Burnaz, 2021). Interest transactions between merchants and KOLs were an inevitable part of KOL marketing, and they could compromise the impartiality and objectivity of KOL marketing materials (Zhang, 2023). The content released by KOC is often based on life and personal experience, which is more engaging. KOL attracts public domain traffic, while KOC captures private domain traffic (Gu, 2019). The relationship between merchants and consumers will continue to be customer-oriented, and the concept of being consumer-oriented will become increasingly popular (Tao et al., 2022).

**Perceived Risk**

Customer-perceived risk is the anticipation of potential losses and negative consequences associated with buying a product or service (Ariffin et al., 2018). Users consider perceived risk while accepting online reviews on social media. Consumers' actions and choices are influenced by their opinions about the worth of products and services (Chen et al., 2022). It represented uncertainty about the future, directly affecting consumers' purchase intention (Wei et al., 2018). For example, Casidy and Wymer (2016) discovered that consumers perceived high-risk scenarios when confronted with unfavorable or unstable circumstances. Consumer attitudes and behaviors were significantly influenced by perceived risk in online reviews (Yadav et al., 2023).

**Customer Trust**

Trust refers to a person's optimistic outlook on life or belief that others will carry out their responsibilities (Ratasuk & Charoensukmongkol, 2019). Trust has also been applied in business contexts, particularly the trust of customers in businesses, particularly for online actions that require trust (Davis et al., 2021; Ratasuk & Gajesanand, 2023). For example, Hu and Zhu (2022) discovered that users' intentions to shop online can be influenced by their confidence level in electronic media. One major challenge facing e-commerce in emerging economies is the low level of consumer trust in websites caused by information asymmetry (Mainardes et al., 2019). Therefore, trust was more crucial since it aided customers in overcoming their sense of danger (Sharma et al., 2017). Ratasuk and Gajesanand (2022) added customer trust as a mechanism



allowing food safety to promote customer repurchase intentions in Bangkok food delivery during COVID-19. Ratasuk (2023a) also examined the role of consumer trust in linking food hygiene to customer purchase intentions among Bangkok Street food customers.

### **Hypothesis Development**

Based on social capital theory, which posits that relationships and exchanges within social networks foster trust that can create business values (Fussell et al., 2006; Kim et al., 2020), the positive perceptions and attitudes consumers hold toward Key Opinion Consumers (KOCs) are expected to enhance confidence and trust in products and services, ensuring they meet expectations for quality and satisfaction (Phan & Nguyen, 2024). For instance, Zhou (2023) emphasizes that a defining characteristic of effective KOCs is their ability to cultivate customer trust, particularly within the social commerce sector, aligning with Hoang et al. (2023), who asserts that consumer perceptions of KOCs significantly influence trust and thereby enhance customer engagement in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Moreover, KOC recommendations are known to mitigate perceived risks associated with purchasing decisions (Ilhamalimy & Ali, 2021; Xie et al., 2017). Conversely, negative perceptions of KOCs can heighten perceived risks among online shoppers, as Zhou (2023) and Wydymus (2023) revealed. When products and services endorsed by KOCs are perceived as low risk, consumer trust is bolstered, stimulating purchasing intentions (GMAAdmin, 2022; Lim, 2022; Zhao et al., 2019). Further research by Ratasuk (2023a) underscores that perceived risk and customer trust serve as critical mechanisms influencing the purchase intentions of street food in Bangkok, with lower perceived risks regarding food safety contributing to increased trust and repurchase intentions as found by Ratasuk and Gajesanand (2022). Therefore, KOCs act as opinion leaders who wield significant social influence and disseminate information across their networks, reducing perceived risks and enhancing confidence in recommended products, ultimately stimulating purchase intentions (Bhandari & Rodgers, 2018; Farivar et al., 2017). Notably, Hoang et al. (2023) highlight that compared to Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs), KOCs are particularly effective in promoting consumer purchase intentions by fostering customer trust. Thus, social capital theory elucidates how KOCs influence purchase intentions by elucidating the interplay of perceived risk and customer trust within social networks (Park et al., 2019; Silva et al., 2019). This theoretical framework underpins the development of nine hypotheses, as outlined in Table 1.

**Table 1** Summary of Hypothesis

<b>Hypothesis</b>	
H1	KOC has a positive impact on purchase intention.
H2	KOC has a negative influence on perceived risk.
H3	KOC has a positive impact on customer trust.
H4	Perceived risk negatively affects purchase intention.
H5	Perceived risk negatively influences customer trust.
H6	Customer trust positively impacts purchase intention.
H7	Perceived risk positively mediates the positive relationship between KOC and purchase intention.
H8	Customer trust positively mediates the positive relationship between KOC and purchase intention.
H9	Customer trust negatively mediates the negative relationship between perceived risk and purchase intention.

## **Methodology**

This study investigates the effects of KOCs on customer purchase intention and the mechanism between them via perceived risk and customer trust in the Chinese social commerce setting. The following are the details of how the study will proceed.

### **Sample and Data Collection Procedure**

Shanghai was chosen for its large and diverse population, economic significance, technological adoption, and cultural diversity, making it an ideal location to study consumer behavior related to platforms like Xiaohongshu (Lian et al., 2021; Sun & Ly, 2023). Shanghai is divided into three main parts, with 24.87 million people. Even though 16.62 million individuals in Shanghai were between the ages of 15 and 59, there was no proof that everyone who lived there was a customer of Xiaohongshu (Statistics, 2021). Therefore, stratified random sampling was used to ensure that the sample represents the entire city rather than being biased toward certain areas (Iliyasu & Etikan, 2021). A sample of 200 customers of Xiaohongshu who are 18 years old and older from each part of the city. With all three parts, a total of 600 respondents were initially approached to guarantee the sufficiency of the final data, which was considered adequate at a 95% confidence interval (Serdar et al., 2021). The sample size in this study was adequate to account for unforeseen circumstances (Ahmad & Halim, 2017). Quantitative research was conducted using self-administered questionnaires. Before distributing the questionnaires, the respondents were informed about their anonymity and rights to leave the study anytime.

### **Measurements**

All question sets assessing latent variables were derived from prior research. They have been demonstrated to be valid and dependable. A five-point Likert scale was used to assess each question item, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

KOC is measured from the perspective of the four characteristics of Expertise, Trustworthiness, Homogeneity, and Tie Strength using scales adapted from Nguyen et al. (2023), Xu & Wang (2018), and Xiao et al. (2018). Each characteristic consists of 5 items measuring consumers' awareness of KOC.

Perceived risk was measured using the scale adapted from Tseng and Wang (2016) and Zhang and Yu (2020). This scale consists of five items measuring consumers' purchase risk assessment through KOC.

Customer trust was measured using the scale adapted from Sun et al. (2022) and Lou and Yuan (2019). Question items included five, which were used to measure consumers' trust in products or brands through KOC.

Purchase Intention was assessed using the scale adapted from Chen (2022) and Zhao et al. (2020). Question items included five, measuring consumers' purchase intention after being influenced by KOC.

### **Data Analysis Method**

The study employed structural analysis by partial least squares structural equation modeling to assess the measurement and structural models. PLS-SEM combines principal component analysis, path analysis, and regression sets to determine standardized regression coefficients for model paths and factor loadings of measurement items (Chin & Newsted, 1999). PLS-SEM is preferred over covariance-based SEM due to its ability to work with smaller sample numbers and be more effective in circumstances of anomalous data distribution (Hair et al., 2021;

Ratasuk, 2022). Warp PLS 8.0 was selected because it is the latest version. However, the gathered survey data must first be examined for an appropriate degree of multicollinearity, common method bias, or CMB, as well as convergent and discriminant validity and reliability before PLS-SEM analysis can begin.

The data collection methods and self-administered questionnaire have been examined and complied with all Research Ethics Committee (REC) standards, obtaining reference number PIM-REC 010/2567.

## **Research Results**

Six hundred and seventy-eight Xiaohongshu consumers were initially approached, and 599 of them, 88.35 %, responded to the survey. The results revealed that most respondents were female (532), accounting for 88.81% of the respondents, and the rest were 67 males, representing 11.19%. Most respondents (386) were between 18 and 25 years old, representing 64.44% of the sample, followed by 113 respondents between 26 and 30 years old, accounting for 18.86%. Four hundred thirty-two respondents have a bachelor's degree, or 72.12%, followed by those with a master's degree (129 people), representing 21.54% of the total sample. Two hundred and three respondents have disposable income between 2000 and below 2000 RMB per month, representing 33.89%, and 153 respondents have disposable income between 2001 and 4000 RMB per month, accounting for 25.54.

Prerequisites need to be met before performing PLS-SEM analysis. Convergent and discriminant validity, reliability, and model fit indices were evaluated. Ratasuk (2022) evaluated convergent validity by an analysis of factor loadings, Composite Reliability (CR), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE). All factor loadings of all constructs ranged from 0.511 to 0.867. This conforms to Cheung and Wang (2017) and Cheung et al. (2023), who recommended that all factor loadings should be no lower than 0.5. Table 2 shows that the lowest CR value is 0.772. At the same time, the CR of all constructs is recommended to be higher than 0.7 to be recognized as satisfactory, while the AVE values range from 0.605 to 0.735, recommended that the AVE of all constructs significantly greater than 0.5, indicating less error remains (Hair et al., 2020). Therefore, the convergent validity of the data is satisfactory.

Discriminant validity was established by comparing the square root of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for each variable with its respective correlations. Table 2 results indicated that all variables' square root of AVE values were higher than all relevant correlations, confirming satisfactory discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). As illustrated in Table 2, composite reliability and Cronbach's alpha for all variables ranged from 0.730 to 0.906, higher than 0.7 total. Complete collinearity tests were performed to test multicollinearity among the variables and standard method bias (CMB). Kock (2015) recommended that the full VIF be lower than 3.3. Table 5 shows that the highest VIF was 2.876, lower than 3.3. Therefore, the model has no serious multicollinearity issue and is free from CMB.



**Table 2** Correlations, Composite Reliability (CR), Cronbach's Alpha, and Full Collin. VIF

List	Purchase	Trust	Risk	KOC
Purchase	(0.736)			
Trust	0.646**	(0.814)		
Risk	-0.403**	-0.439**	(0.797)	
KOC	0.646**	0.781**	-0.445**	(0.798)
Composite Reliability (CR)	0.772	0.838	0.897	0.919
Cronbach's Alpha	0.730	0.759	0.855	0.906
Full Collin. VIF	1.921	2.865	2.865	2.876

Source: \*\*p-value $\leq$ 0.01, Purchase=Purchase Intention, Trust=Customer Trust, Risk=Perceived Risk, KOC=Key Opinion Consumer

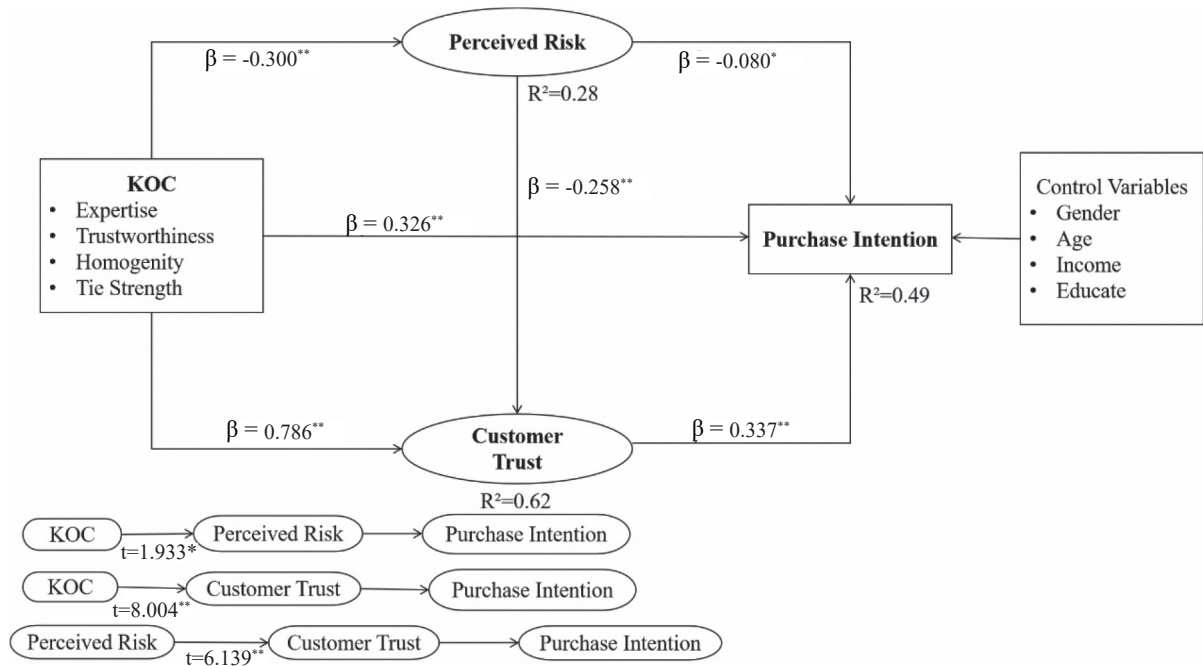
Lastly, ten measurement criteria in model fit indices in Table 3 presented the total quality of this research model as satisfactory.

**Table 3** Model Fit and Quality Indices

Model Fit Indices	Coefficient	Result
Average Path Coefficient (APC)	0.220**	Significant
Average R-Squared (ARS)	0.462**	Significant
Average Adjusted R-Squared (AARS)	0.459**	Significant
Average Block VIF (AVIF)	2.096	Ideally
Average Full Collinearity VIF (AFVIF)	1.834	Ideally
Tenenhaus GoF (GoF)	0.587	Large
Simpson's Paradox Ratio (SPR)	1.000	Ideally
R-Squared Contribution Ratio (RSCR)	1.000	Ideally
Statistical Suppression Ratio (SSR)	1.000	Acceptable
Nonlinear Bivariate Causality Direction Ratio (NLBCDR)	0.900	Acceptable

Source: \*\*p-value $\leq$ 0.01

Moreover, the normality results showed that none of the variables were normally distributed, confirming that PLS-SEM suits this study (Ratasuk & Charoensukmongkol, 2020). Consequently, the overall quality of this research model was considered satisfactory, and all proposed hypotheses were ready to be tested. Figure 1 presents the results from PLS-SEM analysis.



**Figure 1** The PLS-SEM Results

Source: \*p-value≤0.05, \*\*p-value≤0.01

Figure 1 presents the results of PLS-SEM, showing the relationships among all the factors, which are as follows.

Hypothesis 1 suggested that KOC positively impacts purchase intention ( $\beta = 0.326$ ;  $p < .01$ ). The results indicated that KOC positively impacts purchase intention; thus, hypothesis 1 is supported.

Hypothesis 2 suggested that KOC negatively influences perceived risk ( $\beta = -0.300$ ;  $p < .01$ ). The results indicated that KOC positively influences perceived risk; thus, hypothesis 2 is supported.

Hypothesis 3 suggested that KOC positively impacts customer trust ( $\beta = 0.786$ ;  $p < .01$ ). The results indicated a positive impact of KOC on customer trust; thus, hypothesis 3 is supported.

Hypothesis 4 suggested that perceived risk has a negative effect on purchase intention ( $\beta = -0.080$ ;  $p = .025$ ). The results showed a negative effect of perceived risk on purchase intention; thus, hypothesis 4 is supported.

Hypothesis 5 suggested that perceived risk negatively influences customer trust ( $\beta = -0.258$ ;  $p < .01$ ). The results showed that perceived risk is negatively associated with customer trust; thus, hypothesis 5 is supported.

Hypothesis 6 suggested that customer trust positively impacts purchase intention ( $\beta = 0.337$ ;  $p < .01$ ). The results indicated a positive impact of customer trust on purchase intention; thus, hypothesis 6 is supported.

Hypothesis 7 suggests that perceived risk positively mediates the positive relationship between KOC and purchase intention. The Sobel test results indicated a significant positive and partial mediation of perceived risk between KOC and purchase intention ( $t = 1.933$ ,  $p = .048$ ). Therefore, hypothesis 7 is supported.

Hypothesis 8 suggests that customer trust positively mediates the positive relationship between KOC and purchase intention. The Sobel test results indicated a significant positive and partial mediation of customer trust between KOC and purchase intention ( $t = 8.004$ ,  $p = .000$ ). Therefore, hypothesis 8 is supported.

Hypothesis 9 suggests that customer trust negatively mediates the negative relationship between perceived risk and purchase intention. The Sobel test results indicated a significant positive and partial mediation of customer trust between perceived risk and purchase intention ( $t = 6.139$ ,  $p = .000$ ). Therefore, hypothesis 9 is supported.

According to the PLS analysis, the association influences of the four control variables, including gender, age, income, and education, on purchase intention were also tested. The analysis showed no significant impacts of gender, age, income, and education on purchase intention.

## **Discussion**

This research explores the influence of KOC on customers' buy intentions in social commerce and how KOC enhances customers' purchase intentions by mediating perceived risk and customer trust. The study found that these findings are consistent with previous research that KOC positively and significantly impacts user purchase intention and customer trust while reducing perceived risk (Chen et al., 2022; Nguyen et al., 2023; Phan & Nguyen, 2024). For example, Xu and Wang (2018) study found that expert recommenders possess extensive product knowledge or experience. Consumers can leverage their expertise to mitigate the risk of unfamiliarity with the product, enhance trust, and boost their desire to purchase. Consumers will only be willing to buy when they have sufficient trust. Meanwhile, the research findings showed that perceived risk harms purchase intention and customer trust, aligning with previous studies (Ariffin et al., 2018; Ilhamalimy & Ali, 2021). For example, the findings of the research of Farivar et al. (2017) revealed that the sense of danger had a strong negative effect on trust. When consumers have faith in a product, it decreases the perceived risk. For social commerce, the perceived low risk when conducting transactions can increase consumer trust and interest in purchasing online. Moreover, the study demonstrated a strong and meaningful correlation between consumer trust and purchase intention, aligning with other research findings (Firmansyah & Ali, 2019; Gibreel et al., 2018; Zhao et al., 2019). For example, the study of Firmansyah and Ali (2019) found that consumer trust creates reasonable confidence in the seller and will increase the tendency of consumers to repurchase. Lastly, the study revealed that perceived risk and customer trust mediate between KOC and purchase intention, aligning with prior studies (Bhandari & Rodgers, 2018; Farivar et al., 2017). For example, Ilhamalimy and Ali (2021) discovered that consumer trust in the Shopee App facilitates access to information from diverse and dependable sources and recommendations from other consumers, hence boosting consumer interest in online buying on Shopee. The results also indicate a negative correlation between customer trust, perceived risk, and purchase intention. Silva et al. (2019) found that increased perceived risk reduces trust in the online environment, leading to a decline in purchase intention and activity.

## Conclusion

In this context, online consumers who positively perceive KOCs as valuing their expertise, trustworthiness, homogeneity, and tie strength tend to have higher intentions to purchase products and services reviewed by the KOCs since they tend to perceive a lower level of risk from purchasing. As a result, they tend to feel more confident and trust the products and brands, which eventually drives their intentions to purchase. This may be because of the nature of online purchasing that consumers limitedly experience products and services before deciding to purchase; therefore, making online consumers perceive lower risk while promoting their trust in products and services that they can only experience through multimedia is crucial in promoting their purchase intentions and can be done by KOCs.

## Recommendations

### Academic Contributions

This study explores the impact mechanism of KOC on purchase intention in social commerce, paying particular attention to the mediating role of perceived risk and customer trust framed by social capital theory. This study fills the research gap on the role of KOC, provides new models and directions for future research, and has positive academic significance for promoting the development of the social commerce field.

### Practical Contributions

To effectively enhance customer purchase intentions, businesses and marketers should:

- 1) Identify and cooperate with KOCs whose values and audiences align closely with their products to maximize impact on visibility and purchase intentions. For example, partnering up with micro-influencers on platforms like Xiaohongshu can drive significant sales due to authentic recommendations.
- 2) Develop interactive campaigns encouraging KOCs to engage directly with consumers, such as hosting live-stream shopping events featuring KOCs who engage with viewers through real-time demonstrations and Q&A sessions. This direct interaction boosts consumer confidence and trust and encourages immediate purchases.
- 3) Integrate user reviews and KOC video testimonials showcasing product usage to help alleviate consumer concerns and reduce perceived purchase risks. For example, a KOC might demonstrate a fashion item in various scenarios, addressing potential customer doubts about fit and style.
- 4) Allow KOCs to share genuine experiences with products, which can help build authenticity and credibility, enhancing consumer trust.
- 5) Promote user-generated content featuring KOC endorsements and honest customer feedback to create a community feel and reduce perceived risks.
- 6) Implement training programs for KOCs to ensure they communicate brand values and product features effectively, thus enhancing their influence on purchase intention. For example, a cosmetic brand has trained KOCs to discuss body positivity while promoting their products, ensuring consistent messaging that resonates with consumers.
- 7) Establish loyalty programs that reward KOCs and customers for engagement and purchases, reinforcing trust and encouraging repeat transactions.
- 8) Tailor marketing strategies to resonate with the cultural nuances of the Chinese market, ensuring KOCs reflect local consumer sentiments and preferences. For instance, during the Lunar New Year, a global sneaker brand collaborates with KOCs to promote limited-edition products that celebrate traditional themes, making them more appealing to consumers.
- 9) Create mechanisms to gather and analyze feedback on KOC performance and consumer sentiments,

allowing brands to quickly adapt strategies to market changes. For example, if a KOC highlights a specific issue with a product, brands can quickly adjust their messaging or product offerings in response to consumer concerns.

### **Limitations**

The limitations of this research also need to be recognized. 1) The results are based on data collected from Xiaohongshu social commerce platform customers in Shanghai City, China; therefore, the findings may not apply to other social commerce platforms or in different contexts. 2) All variables' measurements were subjective evaluations, which may cause subject bias. 3) Other influential variables not included in this study, such as perceived credibility, perceived value, and brand awareness, may provide interesting results in future studies if included. 4) Since the data were collected using a cross-sectional method, the results may not represent causal relations but only correlations among the variables.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Recommendations for future research are: 1) Regarding the role of KOC in promoting purchase intention, this study can also consider the differences in the influence of different cultural backgrounds and different social platforms on KOC, conduct cross-cultural and cross-platform comparative studies, and explore the characteristics and rules of KOCs' impact on purchase intention in different environments. 2) Examine other factors that can affect purchase intention as mediating variables between KOC and purchase intention, such as perceived credibility, perceived value, and others. 3) Explore the effect of KOC on other desirable factors, such as brand awareness and brand loyalty.

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