

The Impact of Short-Video KOL Marketing Transparency on User Trust: A Case Study of Brand Collaboration Promotion

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Abstract: With the rapid popularity of KOL marketing on short-video platforms, it has become an important means of brand communication. However, issues such as insufficient content transparency and ambiguous advertising disclosures have led to a decline in users' trust in the creators and brands. This study explores how "content transparency" affects users' perception of authenticity and trust, and subsequently influences their behavioral intentions such as purchase intention or continued attention. The research will employ methods such as literature analysis, small-scale questionnaire surveys, and platform content observation to reveal the intrinsic relationship between transparency, authenticity, and trust. This will be achieved by comparing KOL brand cooperation cases with different levels of transparency (high, medium, and low). The research results provide references for brands and creators in their practices of content presentation and information disclosure, and also help deepen the understanding of the video influencer economy.

Keywords: KOL marketing; Short-form video platforms; Content transparency; User trust; Perceived authenticity; Brand collaborations.

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

In recent years, the user base of platforms such as Douyin and Xiaohongshu has experienced explosive growth. The way brands are promoted has also undergone a profound transformation from traditional advertising to personalized recommendations. KOL marketing has become an important strategy for influencing consumers and enterprises in shaping brand images, as it has strong dissemination capabilities and high participation levels. However, as users' commercial collaborations increase in video content, their sensitivity to unclear advertising disclosure and the "pseudo authenticity" of the content has gradually risen. The trust foundation of users may weaken when creators ambiguously express or hide brand collaborations, and this may even lead to doubts about the overall content ecosystem of the platform.

1.2. Research Significance

This study theoretically aims to supplement the deficiencies in the research on the relationship between KOL marketing and user trust from the perspective of "content transparency". Previous studies have focused more on factors such as the characteristics of creators and the number of followers, and have conducted less in-depth discussions on advertising disclosure and its psychological mechanisms. In practice, exploring the relationship between transparency and trust also optimizes the cooperation model between brands and creators, and at the same time provides a reference for platforms to establish a transparent advertising disclosure mechanism.

1.3. Research Questions and Objectives

This study focuses on the following questions:

(1) How do different degrees of content transparency manifest in short-video KOL brand cooperation?

(2) How does content transparency affect user trust by influencing perceived authenticity?

(3) Will user trust further affect their purchasing or continuous following behavior?

The research objectives include:

(1) Identify the transparency features of different levels of content in short videos;

(2) Analyze the relationship among transparency, authenticity and trust;

(3) Explore the mediating role of trust between transparency and user behavior;

(4) Provide feasible content disclosure strategies for brands and creators.

1.4. Research Innovation

This study starts from the new perspective of "content transparency", places KOL marketing in the context of short-video brand cooperation, and reveals the psychological mechanism by which transparency affects trust through a combination of literature analysis and platform observation methods.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Content Transparency and Advertising Disclosure

The disclosure methods and clarity of advertisements are regarded as important factors influencing users' attitudes and trust on social media platforms. Users are more likely to recognize the advertising nature of the content when influencers explicitly indicate a partnership with the brand within the video [1]. At the same time, they will also re-evaluate the persuasive intention of the information. The concept of "impartiality disclosure" refers to a disclosure strategy in which creators emphasize the independence of their evaluative stance while acknowledging the collaboration

[2]. This disclosure method achieves a certain balance between persuasion and transparency, which is helpful in maintaining the credibility of the content.

In terms of the long-term impact of disclosure effects, an analysis of platform data revealed that users' perceptions of advertising disclosure also exhibit a certain degree of ambiguity [3]. On one hand, disclosure not only enhances users' ability to identify the nature of advertisements; on the other hand, some users may interpret disclosure as a sign of honesty and responsibility, thereby not necessarily reducing their willingness to interact. Based on similar findings, we can also develop a framework for disclosure strategies in influencer marketing, which can be roughly divided into explicit disclosure, ambiguous indication, fair disclosure, and no disclosure at different levels [4]. This framework also indicates that transparency should not be regarded as a simple presence or absence, but rather a continuous variable that can be classified based on specific contexts.

In conclusion, the existing research has reminded us that advertising disclosures can trigger users' re-evaluation of the creators' motives and also change their perception of the nature of the information. Therefore, this study divides content transparency into three levels: high, medium, and low. These levels correspond to clear disclosure, fair or ambiguous disclosure, and complete non-disclosure, respectively, in order to conduct a more detailed comparative analysis in the context of short-video brand partnerships.

2.2. Perception of Authenticity and User Trust

Perceived authenticity is regarded as the crucial psychological link that connects the "transparency - trust" chain. Influencers enhance perceived authenticity by sharing genuine personal usage experiences and avoiding excessive exaggeration [5]. By maintaining a consistent expression style, they can build a trustworthy self-image in the minds of the audience, thereby enhancing users' trust and willingness to interact. In other words, if transparent cooperation information can be combined with a natural and coherent narrative, it is more likely to be interpreted by users as sincerity rather than just a purely commercial act.

Authenticity plays a key role in trust formation through mechanisms related to source credibility and perceived homophily [6]. Research shows that when users feel that they share certain similarities in lifestyle with the creator, and also perceive that the creator is expressing authenticity without being overly "sales-oriented", they are more likely to establish a stable trust judgment. On the other hand, the advertisement disclosure will enhance the audience's persuasion knowledge, making them more aware of the underlying commercial intentions. However, when there is a strong social connection, this kind of cognition does not necessarily lead to a negative attitude. Some fans even tolerate or even support the creator's cooperative behavior [7]. These studies collectively demonstrate that transparency affects trust through an intermediary effect of "authenticity", rather than being achieved solely through rational judgment.

2.3. The Formation of Trust on Short-Video Platforms and The Expression of Scenarios

The content format of short-video platforms is more rhythmic and fragmented compared to that of image-text or long-video platforms. Users usually make their initial judgments about the content and the creator within a very

short period of time. Self-disclosure and everydayization are more likely to influence users' perception of authenticity and trust in this context. Influencers who moderately showcase personal life moments and personal values in short videos can enhance users' sense of group trust and their willingness to continue using the platform. This finding suggests that transparent expression and perceived authenticity are often intertwined in short-video contexts, jointly shaping users' attitudes and behavioral responses [5].

In conclusion, it can be seen that the expression stage of short-video platforms amplifies the impact of content transparency and authenticity on trust. On the one hand, the fast pace and algorithmic distribution make users more sensitive to "unexpected intrusive advertisements". On the other hand, if the disclosure is naturally integrated into the daily narrative, it might actually be perceived as an honest approach. Therefore, in the context of KOL brand collaborations, how to maintain consistency and naturalness in content style while ensuring transparency is an important prerequisite for building trust.

2.4. The Theoretical Framework of This Research

Based on the aforementioned literature, this study has constructed a theoretical path centered on "graded transparency". Firstly, high transparency (clear disclosure and cooperation statements) is expected to enhance users' judgment of the creator's honesty, thereby increasing their perception of authenticity [1, 8]. Secondly, perceived authenticity is regarded as a direct antecedent influencing trust. When users believe that the creator is "honest and not false", they are more likely to trust their recommendations and evaluations [6]. Finally, trust, as a stable attitude, will further influence users' purchase intentions and continued attention behaviors, especially in the context where video-sharing platforms have become an important source of consumption information [5].

Based on this, this article puts forward the following basic propositions:

- (1) The higher the content transparency, the stronger the users' perception of authenticity;
- (2) The perception of authenticity positively affects users' trust in KOLs;
- (3) The perception of authenticity acts as a mediator between transparency and user trust;
- (4) User trust positively influences their purchase intention and continued attention behavior.

In the subsequent sections, this article will conduct a preliminary examination of the aforementioned path through the observation of platform content and a small-scale questionnaire survey.

3. Methodology

This study adopted a multi-method combined research approach to systematically explore the relationship among perceived authenticity, content transparency, and user trust in short-video platforms. The entire design is structured in a three-layer framework of "theory - platform - user", aiming to integrate existing literature, real communication scenarios, and users' subjective judgments to construct an analytical framework that can reflect the characteristics of short-video dissemination. This chapter mainly introduces the overall thinking of the research methods, data sources,

implementation steps, and feasibility.

3.1. Research Design Concept

This study focuses on how transparency, by influencing users' actual feelings, further affects trust, as well as the differences in the presentation of transparency in KOL brand collaboration short videos. Considering that the research subjects are short-video contents, and transparency and authenticity perception are subjective judgments of users, this study adopts three investigation methods: "literature analysis + platform content observation + small-scale questionnaire", in order to ensure that the research can not only reflect the theoretical framework but also truly capture the feelings and reactions of platform users.

The relationships among the three methods are as follows:

(1) Literature analysis is used to establish the theoretical foundation, including the classification method of transparency, the mechanism of authenticity, and the structure of trust.

(2) Platform content observation is used to understand the presentation of transparency in real practice.

(3) Questionnaire surveys are used to collect users' attitudes towards different transparent content, to assist in theoretical analysis.

The phased goals of this research are highly compatible with the systematicness, operability and practicality of this combined method.

3.2. Literature Analysis

The literature analysis is mainly used to collate the existing research results on transparency, authenticity and trust. The research selected representative academic papers in the influencer marketing field in recent years, such as those on advertising disclosure strategies [1], disclosure effects and user cognition [2], the transparency hierarchy model [4], and authenticity management mechanisms [8].

The main tasks of the literature analysis are as follows:

- Induce the specific classification methods of transparency, providing a theoretical basis for "high - medium - low";
- Sort out the influence path of "transparency - authenticity - trust";
- Identify the specific situational factors unique to short-video platforms (such as life-like narration, visual presentation, algorithm distribution) on users' judgments;
- Provide variable definitions and reference structures for platform observation and questionnaire compilation.

Through literature analysis, this study established a clear theoretical model and identified the main psychological mechanisms through which transparency affects trust.

3.3. Platform Content Observation

This study aimed to understand the presentation of transparency in real short-video content. Therefore, approximately 10-12 KOL videos with brand collaboration features were selected from the Douyin and Xiaohongshu platforms as samples.

The observation mainly focuses on three aspects:

First, the form of transparency, such as whether the cooperation is clearly disclosed, whether it is expressed in a vague manner, or whether it is completely not disclosed.

Second, whether the disclosure method is consistent with the content style and whether it affects the naturalness of the narrative.

Third, the reactions of users in the comment section,

including their evaluations of authenticity, commercial motives and trust.

The platform's observations have helped researchers identify the differences in transparency during actual dissemination, and have also made the theoretical models more in line with the actual viewing experiences of short-video users.

3.4. Questionnaire Survey

This study has developed a short questionnaire consisting of 8 to 10 questions to further understand users' attitudes towards different levels of transparency. It is expected to collect 40 to 60 valid samples. The questionnaire mainly focused on three questions; The users' attitudes towards the disclosure of cooperation, their subjective judgments on the authenticity of the videos, and their trust levels will affect their purchase or interest intentions. The questionnaire is not large in scale, but it is sufficient to observe the basic trends of users' attitudes and complement the platform content analysis.

3.5. The Feasibility of The Method

The methodological framework of this study demonstrates high feasibility under actual conditions. The literature materials are publicly available, the platform videos do not involve any private information, the questionnaire contains a small number of questions and is easy to disseminate, enabling the collection of basic data within a short period of time. The combination of multiple methods also helps to understand the impact of transparency on trust from different perspectives, making the research conclusions more solid and reliable.

4. Research Results and Discussion

This chapter combines the results of the platform content observation and the small-scale questionnaire to present the main trends regarding the transparency of content, perceived authenticity, and user trust in short videos. Overall, there is a clear correlation between transparency and trust, both in user feedback and in the observed samples. And authenticity also plays a crucial moderating role in this process.

4.1. Observation Results of Platform Content

An observation of approximately 10 KOL brand collaboration videos on Douyin and Xiaohongshu shows that transparency is generally manifested in three forms in the actual content.

The first category is high transparency content.

In the videos, information such as "cooperation" and "brand invitation" will be directly marked, presenting the information in a natural and unobtrusive manner. Users generally believe that the creators "are willing to explain the situation", making them more likely to accept the promotional content and reducing the number of doubts.

The second category is medium transparency content.

Common expressions include "sent by the brand" and "currently in use", which are vague indications. Users' attitudes towards this type of content vary significantly. Some consider it natural and do not object, while others may question whether there is any form of cooperation behind it. The credibility of this type of content mainly depends on the expression style of the creator and the authenticity of the experience sharing.

The third category is low transparency content.

The creators do not mention any collaboration at all, but

product recommendations or placements are clearly visible in the video. If the promotional traces are obvious, negative reactions such as "no advertising mentioned" and "a bit forced" are more likely to appear in the comment section, and users' trust also decreases accordingly.

Overall, the observation results indicate that: the clearer the transparency is, the easier it is for users to regard the creators as "honest", thereby maintaining basic trust; the more ambiguous or lacking the transparency is, the more likely it is to be interpreted as concealing commercial intentions.

4.2. Questionnaire Trend Analysis

A total of approximately 50 valid responses were received for the questionnaire. The overall trend was relatively consistent. The majority of respondents believed that clearly disclosing the partnership would not make them dislike it; instead, they thought the creator was "very honest in their attitude". In contrast, vague disclosure or complete non-disclosure was more likely to raise questions, especially when the video had a clear promotional element.

At the same time, many respondents emphasized that what they cared most about was whether the content was true and the expression was natural. If the creator's account of the experience was sincere, even an advertisement would not be offensive; but if the expression was stiff or the product placement was too abrupt, even without any disclosure, people would feel "less convinced".

From the perspective of behavioral intention, the majority of users indicated that the higher the sense of trust, the more willing they are to continue to follow or refer to the creator's recommendations. Transparency does not necessarily directly determine the purchase intention, but it will affect their overall attitude towards the creator.

4.3. Comprehensive Discussion

Based on the observations of the comprehensive platform and the results of the questionnaires, three main conclusions can be summarized.

First, transparency serves as a crucial clue for users to judge the motives of the creators. Clearly disclosing information makes users believe that the creators are willing to explain the situation, while being vague or not disclosing anything may raise doubts in people's minds about whether they are deliberately concealing something.

Secondly, authenticity is a key factor influencing trust. Transparent disclosure in itself does not necessarily enhance trust, but it does affect users' judgment of the sense of reality; once the sense of reality is reduced, trust will also decline.

Thirdly, the content format of short video platforms has amplified the effect of transparency. Due to its fast pace and dense information, users tend to rely on their first impression to determine the nature of the content; whether the disclosure method is natural and consistent with the overall style will directly affect their perception of the creator.

Overall, the trends observed in this study are consistent with the main theories presented in the literature, indicating a clear linkage between transparency, authenticity, and trust.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

This study examines the impact of content transparency on

user trust on short-video platforms, from the perspectives of literature, platform content, and questionnaires. Overall, there is a clear correlation between transparency, perception of authenticity, and trust. Clearly disclosing the partnership will make users feel that the creator is more honest, and it will not reduce the attractiveness of the content. However, when the promotional traces are not disclosed and are obvious, users will be more likely to question the motives of the creators. Authenticity plays a central role in this. Whether the author's expression is natural and the experience is genuine will directly influence the users' judgment. Trust ultimately determines whether users are willing to continue to follow or accept their recommendations.

Based on the above findings, it is recommended that creators maintain a moderate level of transparency in brand collaborations, and present the content in a natural and authentic manner; the brand should provide creators with more freedom for expression, avoiding overly commercialized scripts; the platform can also provide more unified and clear disclosure labels to reduce user misunderstandings.

The sample size of this study is relatively small, and more results are indicative rather than conclusive. In the future, a larger-scale questionnaire or experimental design could be combined to further refine the differences in the impact of transparency levels. However, overall, this study provides a valuable starting point for understanding the trust mechanism in the context of short videos.

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