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EDITORIAL

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This Journal is the outcome of the contributions of insightful research-oriented papers/articles by various eminent academicians, and research scholars in a highly organized and lucid manner with a clear and detailed analysis related to the emerging areas in the fields of Social Sciences and Allied Areas.

The views expressed in the research-oriented papers/articles solely belong to the paper contributor(s). Neither the Publisher nor the Editor(s) in any way can be held responsible for any comments, views and opinions expressed by **paper contributors**. While editing, we put in a reasonable effort to ensure that no infringement of any intellectual property right is tolerated.

We also express our sincere thanks and gratitude to all the contributors to research papers/articles who have taken pain in preparing manuscripts, incorporating reviewer(s) valuable suggestions and cooperating with us in every possible way.

We also express our heartfelt gratitude to all the esteemed members of the Editorial Board, Esteemed Reviewer(s) who despite their busy schedules have given their valuable time, suggestions and comments to enrich the quality of the contributory research paper(s) in bringing to light this June issue.

Last, but not least, we revere the patronage and moral support extended by our parents and family members whose constant encouragement and cooperation made it possible for us to complete on time.

We would highly appreciate and look forward to your valuable suggestions, comments and feedback at editorbr2022@gmail.com

June, 2025
West Bengal, India

PEMA LAMA
Editor-in-Chief

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Understanding Key Opinion Leaders and Their Popularity in Indian Digital Advertisements

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ABSTRACT

Advertising in the digital age has witnessed a remarkable shift, which has reshaped the communication pattern of businesses with their prospective consumers. With the prevalence of social networking sites, digital advertising has seen tremendous growth. Development of Influencers and Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs), advertising has seen an emerging shift from one-way communication to interactive communication. Influencers are people with a large social media following who can influence the audience's opinion or behaviour. Meanwhile, a KOL is recognised as an expert in a particular field, who is willing to give information to others. The interactivity feature of social media makes businesses rely more on KOLs to get connected to their potential customers, especially in China, which is prevalent through various research articles and blogs. KOLs are the emerging figures which ushered unprecedented changes in advertising in digital platforms in China. India is also emerging with the flow where the Influencers and celebrities are the opinion leaders in the advertisements. In digital advertising, identifying and collaborating with KOLs is a pivotal strategy for businesses and brands. Partnering with KOLs in digital advertisement can leverage brand image, raise brand awareness, credibility and encourage consumers' purchase intention. Their emergence on social media platforms can boost their presence to a vast and global audience and significantly influence their followers' opinions.

This paper aims to highlight the characteristics of KOLs, their differences with Influencers and possible areas for research in India, which may be useful for both businesses and individual consumers. The role of KOLs in medical professionals is been a successful one in India. Due to the highest number of Millennials and Gen Z population, celebrities and Influencers are the face of every brand in India to target their potential audiences through digital advertisements. An Adequate number of studies can identify how various categories of businesses can involve KOLs in their advertising campaign through digital platforms in India to enhance their brand.

1 INTRODUCTION

Marketing a product or service in the 21st century to its targeted audience through customary advertising, such as public figures, celebrity endorsement, and specialist two-step flow advertisements, is a popular marketing strategy. The term "two-step flow" theory is a composition of two constituents: the first is the medium, and the second is the expert delivering the message or information (Khoury & Farah, 2019), which gave birth to the term opinion leaders. The term Opinion leader originated from research conducted by Paul Lazarsfeld,

a communication theorist on influence (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1964). A good example of two-step flow advertising would be an advertisement of toothpaste, where it endorses a dentist (professional expert/opinion leader) recommending the brand (Khoury and Farah, 2019).

The advent of the internet has revolutionised numerous aspects of human life, and one of the most important impacts has been witnessed in the field of advertising. The internet has emerged as a powerful promotional tool for businesses, offering unparalleled

reach, targeting capabilities & interactivity (Saxena, 2023). And the development of marketing techniques across time is enabling certain companies to connect with their ideal customers. Social media advertising has the potential to target a specific segment of the audience with precision. This ability has enabled businesses or advertisers to grab their potential consumers in an influential way. Social media has changed the scenario for both advertisers and consumers. It is making consumers dependent on it and access the latest information about different new behaviours or habits (Putri, 2019). Thus, social media advertisement makes the adjustment of those human habits, so that they can adapt them to fulfil it (Shiratina, Indica, Komoriyah and Hendriani, 2020). Organisations can choose any form of advertisement for their product or services, such as video, photos, text or sound in social media (Satria, Naldo and Ramdhani, 2023). The surge of social media advertising is giving rise to so-called 'virtual influencer' or 'influencer' or 'social media influencer'. Influencers in social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, etc. have shifted advertisers' way of advertising in a captivating way. The competitive B2C businesses pay significant attention to brand building (Xiong et. al., 2021), and the popularity of social media influencers has helped businesses in brand building quickly. But today's B2C market needs more comprehensive details of a brand to trust. For example, Maybelline's (a beauty brand) "two steps flow" advertising campaign reveals the rapid evolution of the opinion leaders' movement: professional from the field (opinion leader), a celebrity and at last a famous blogger (Khouri & Farah, 2019).

According to Turcotte et.al (2015) & Carpenter & Sherbino (2010), opinion leaders influence and share real experience on any product or service on their social media page. In China's 'double eleven' or 'Singles' Day' or '11-11' sales, KOL played a significant role in increasing sales of the products by giving authentic reviews based on their experience and expertise (He & Jin, 2022). Therefore, considering their influence on consumer purchase intention in China, selecting the right KOL to increase the purchase intention of a product or service is a practical need for businesses to sell their product or service and a new marketing strategy to explore in

India. Detecting the right opinion leader within the social networking sites raises an urgent area of research given their impact on shaping public opinion (Quelati et. al., 2023). Various studies on influencers have proved their ability, features, impact on brand awareness, and challenges in shaping consumers' views, but on the other hand, there are very few studies on key opinion leaders as a message source for brands in India. This study attempts to address the emerging trends of KOL in other countries and a prospective future in India. The objective of the study is twofold: Firstly, to conduct a descriptive review of the studies on KOL to bring out their characteristics. Secondly, to understand the Indian perspective on KOL, which will be relevant for both academicians and practitioners.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Considering the literature available, there are only a few studies on emerging Key Opinion Leaders. He & Jin (2022) reveal that KOLs' expertise and trustworthiness lead to higher purchase intention. Xiong et. al (2021) explore that KOLs' trustworthiness and familiarity affect their effectiveness in brand image building in skincare products. The knowledge from the study reshaped the management model of the enterprise Information system. Ng et. al. (2023) shed light on the importance of collaborating with KOLs in social media platforms to expand the food and beverage industry in Malaysia. A product or service promoted by a well-known KOL will greatly increase consumers' belief. Schwemmer and Ziewiecki (2018) in their study conducted a content analysis of YouTube channels, and the findings reveal that the use of opinion leaders, who are authentic and trustworthy, is increasing in promoting beauty & fashion products in Germany on YouTube. Bao and Chang (2016) reveal from their study the characteristics of opinion leaders as communicative, buzz-generating and trustworthy and use them to communicate product information via e-WOM. Sembel and Putri (2024) in their study, specifically done in Indonesia, found that a KOL, who is trustworthy in TikTok, influences the purchase intention of beauty products. Quelati et. al. (2023) in their paper establishes a hybrid model to effectively identify an opinion leader, which analyses the

interaction on posts, their content and comments. They also emphasise that an appropriate opinion leader can better evaluate the preferences and trends of the target consumers. Liu (2024) defines KOL as a person who is active in social media and has wide coverage on the internet, and reveals that the product involvement of a KOL and their professionalism influence consumer purchase intention. Xu et. al. (2020) in their article explain that a KOL's attractiveness, para-social relationships and information quality play an important role in shaping cognitive & emotional states of a viewer.

KOLs who are appropriate for a brand with interactive content enhance consumer trust and generate purchase intention (Tran & Uehara, 2023). Zhang et. al. (2023) in their conference paper identify the differences in the effect and mechanism of action in marketing between real and virtual KOLs, given two different product types: a) Search goods, consumers have a high level of consumer identification and purchase intention for virtual KOLs, and b) Experience goods, KOLs have a high level of consumer identification and purchase intention from traditional real KOLs. Amalia (2023) reveals that KOL has an effect on brand image and brand awareness, but indirectly affects brand awareness through brand image.

3 KEY CHARACTERISTICS

Katz (1957) opines that an opinion leader can be characterised by personal predispositions, domain-specific factors and social connection (Winter & Neubaum, 2016). From the above literature review, some key characteristics of key opinion leaders were identified and described as follows:

Trustworthiness

According to Ketchen et. al. (2008), a KOL who exhibits trustworthiness depicts the quality of personal integrity and sincerity (He & Jin, 2024). Trustworthy KOLs easily convince the followers about a product's value, and the product becomes worth buying (Xiong et al., 2021). And their trustworthiness determines consumers' favourable perception and recognition of the product (He & Jin, 2024). Therefore, trustworthiness is being reliable, credible and honest, which is one of

the important attributes of a KOL and studies by He & Jin (2022), Schwemmer & Ziewiecki (2018), Sembel & Putri (2024), Bao and Chang (2016), Xiong et. al. (2021), Xu et. al. (2020) was done to understand its linkage.

Attractiveness

The attractiveness of KOLs is another important factor influencing purchasing intention. It is partially related to aesthetics (Sundar et al., 2014); therefore, consumers are easily attracted to people / objects with aesthetically appealing features and appearance (Dongyan, 2022). Ohanian (1990) stated that attractiveness can be seen in the KOL's exquisite appearance, body and sweet voice. Therefore, KOLs who possess desirable appearances and descent lifestyles are more likely to influence consumers effectively. Research by Shan et. al. (2020) suggests that an attractive KOL creates a good brand image, which leads to higher purchase intentions (Ng et al., 2023). Xu et. al. (2020) studied KOLs' attractiveness in shaping cognitive & emotional states of a viewer. Therefore, attractiveness refers to KOLs physical appeal, charm and likability, which is one of the important features.

Expertise

Knowledge, experience, and skill in a particular domain that a KOL shares about a product refer to expertise. As they are believed to be experts, having an original idea, they tend to be followed by others (Ng et al., 2023). Referring to Biswas et. al. (2006), the expert endorsement is an unbiased judgement of a product quality delivered to consumers for their assessment (Xiong et al., 2021, p. 6). According to Schouten et al. (2020), expert knowledge not only shapes the level of credibility of a KOL but also shapes purchase intention (He & Jin, 2024) and influences KOLs' effectiveness (Xiong et al., 2021). KOLs' possession of specialised knowledge, skills and experience makes them more reliable for consumers.

Familiarity

The familiarity of the endorser has a positive effect on the effectiveness of an advertisement (Centeno & Wang, 2017 & Antil, 2012) and therefore, a familiar

KOL is more acceptable than the traditional endorsers. They could be an effective person for conveying messages to the desired consumers (Xiong et al., 2021). Referring to Maghfiroha (2021), KOLs who are more famous find more easier for them to win the trust of consumers (Lyu et al., 2024).

Authenticity

Authenticity refers to a genuine and sincere person in building trust and credibility. KOLs who are authentic are more influential in promoting beauty and fashion products (Schwemmer & Ziewiecki, 2018). KOLs, by their expertise and professionalism, are often perceived as authentic than the traditional endorsers, and this allows them to build a strong relationship with the consumer and influence them.

Communicative

Communicative refers to the skill to convey and interpret knowledge. According to the early studies by Lazarsfield, Berelson and Gaudet (1948), a KOL, who is communicative, tend to be more concerned and expressive about a product (Bao & Chang, 2016). Due to their expertise and experience, they are more communicative in sharing their opinion, which is also an important characteristic of a KOL.

Buzz-Generative

Buzz-generative individuals are those who create a high level of excitement and interest among the followers. Previous studies demonstrate opinion leaders as attention seekers and buzz-generating KOLs increase product/brand awareness, and this awareness is good for sales, whether it is bad or good (Berger, Sorensen & Rasmussen, 2010). Social media is one such platform to attract consumers for buzz-generating KOLs.

Active in social media

Social media is the most popular platform for consumers to seek information about new products or services, and KOLs' active presence in social media would help them to choose the best product (Liu, 2024) by examining their expertise and usage experience. KOLs' activeness would also help marketers to analyse to choose their content richness in social media.

Moreover, social media platforms enlarge KOLs' ability to increase their audience size depending on their trustworthiness, specialities (Ng et al., 2023), familiarity and attractiveness.

Therefore, KOLs' expertise, familiarity, attractiveness, trustworthiness, authenticity, communicative, buzz-generative and social media activeness are some of the characteristics that define their credibility to promote products or services adequately.

4 KEY OPINION LEADERS FROM INDIAN PERSPECTIVE

Apart from the big Indian brands and multinational brands, the growth of the direct-to-consumer brands (D2C), which target digitally first customers, is creating huge space for KOLs and Influencers. Earthfall, women Multi-vitamin 40 uses Suman Agarwal, Celebrity Nutritionist to promote it.; Food Scientist, Anveshan, Dr. Poonam Saraswat is seen promoting Anveshan coconut oil. These are a few examples, there are such more practices and is about to rise among other brands. So, it can be seen that the use of KOLs is rising in D2C brands in India. The finding of Setiawati et. al., 2020 reveals that the preparator of the entrepreneurs can themselves be a KOL in motivating consumers, for example, D2C Indian brands Founder & co-founder like KissanSay, A2 Bilona Ghee, Miduty, Two Brothers Organic Farms, Woolah, bagless tea, etc., are making themselves KOLs and promoting through information, factual and data-based advertising via social media reels. On the other hand, big brands using KOLs in advertisements can be seen, such as Chef Ranveer Brar showcasing his expertise and authenticity in promoting Everest Masala, Tata Sampan, and Master Chow foods brand in Television and Social media. Celebrity Hair Stylist Loic Champion is doing an advertisement for Tresemme hair serum along with Aashna Shroff, Beauty Influencer of India in Television and Social Media. A few brands are approaching Key Opinion Leaders apart from pharmaceutical brands, as they are the pioneers in using KOL for the dissemination of information. According to Forbes India (2022), for luxury product influencers.

The dominance of Celebrity endorsement is still prevalent in Indian advertising, along with Influencers.

According to Park (2006), celebrity in advertisements is an essential factor in deciding consumers' attitude formation and purchase intention (Singh & Banerjee, 2018). R. P., & Banerjee, N. (2018). So, it is a driving force of every brand in India, which is expensive and stylish. According to Influencity (n.d.), influencers have a wider span compared to the KOLs. But both influencers and KOLs can influence the opinion and behaviour of the audience. Interestingly, recognising an influencer requires the number of followers it has in social media or their popularity, but KOLs can be recognised for their expertise in a specific area (Tran & Uehara, 2023). According to IBEF (Indian Brand Equity Foundation) 2024, the influencer marketing industry in India is estimated to reach Rs. 3,375 crore by 2026, expanding at CAGR of 18 % over 2022-26, including Instagram and YouTube to be the most preferred platforms for promoting as per the reports of Ernest & Young (EY). The use of KOL in India is still way back as compared to the Chinese market.

5 KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

The present study sheds light on the few characteristics of KOL and will help academicians to do further research on its effectiveness, impact on brand awareness, loyalty and attitude formation. Moreover, a comparative study on Influencer marketing, celebrity endorsement and KOL will help marketers to properly use them. And also crucial for the management, mass communication and advertising professional to do some research on KOLs, their comparative analysis with influencers and celebrities to diversify their needs in various categories of brands.

From the managerial point of view, brands are recommended to actively collaborate with KOLs and explore new ways of promotion, instead of limiting themselves to old-school endorsements. Further, a brand should deepen its communication with KOLs and utilise their expertise to promote their product (Lu, 2023). According to Influencity (n.d.), a brand should assess some important things while engaging a KOL, such as the audience and goal of the brand, the expertise, influence, reach, authenticity and credibility of the KOL itself. Incorporating KOLs in advertisements may offer invaluable benefits to a brand, especially when aiming to create brand loyalty, sincerity and trust.

6 CONCLUSION

In recent years, the use of KOLs is becoming prominent, yet very few studies are dedicated to evaluating KOLs' contributions in building a brand (Xiong et al., 2021). The present study reveals some of the characteristics of KOLs as trustworthiness, attractiveness, expertise, familiarity, authenticity, Buzz-generator, communicative and active in Social media, as the criteria to select KOLs for promotion and the Indian scenario of KOLs as a message source. It is revealed that KOLs in the Chinese market are dominating in promotion and are a trusted source of information dissemination.

It is also revealed that India in some selected categories using KOLs for disseminating information via social media platforms, but not like China. The understanding of KOLs is becoming complicated due to the rise of influencers in India. The influencers are now regarded as the new celebrities for their huge availability in social media with huge followers. The D2C brand is opening the path for KOLs in India, which is a sign that consumers are shifting their trust towards authentic and expert information rather than the fancy jingles of advertisements.

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