

Consumer Behavior Perspectives on Beauty KOL Communication Strategies: A Review of AISAS Framework Applications

Nijia Wu

Department of Sichuan University of Media and Communications, Performing Arts University,
Chengdu, 611730, China
1466208433@qq.com

ABSTRACT

The rise of Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) in the beauty industry has fundamentally reshaped how consumers discover, evaluate, and purchase cosmetic products. This review synthesizes existing literature on beauty KOL communication strategies through the lens of the AISAS (Attention-Interest-Search-Action-Share) framework, integrating insights from consumer behavior theory, digital marketing research, and social influence studies. Unlike traditional advertising models, KOL-led beauty communication operates within a participatory ecosystem where consumer trust, parasocial relationships, and peer validation intersect. This paper examines how beauty KOLs navigate each stage of the AISAS model, identifies critical success factors, and highlights the unique challenges posed by platform algorithms, commercial conflicts of interest, and audience skepticism. The review also addresses underexplored areas including cross-cultural variations in KOL effectiveness, the role of micro-KOLs in niche beauty communities, and the ethical tensions inherent in sponsored content. Practical implications for marketers and content creators are discussed, alongside suggestions for future research directions that move beyond linear models toward more dynamic, network-based understandings of consumer decision journeys.

Keywords: Beauty Kols; AISAS Framework; Consumer Behavior; Social Media Marketing; Influencer Communication; Purchase Intention

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, the beauty industry has witnessed a dramatic transformation in how brands connect with consumers, driven largely by the proliferation of social media platforms and the emergence of Key Opinion Leaders as dominant intermediaries in the marketing ecosystem. Unlike traditional celebrities or brand ambassadors, beauty KOLs—ranging from professional makeup artists to everyday enthusiasts who have built substantial online followings—occupy a uniquely intimate position in consumers' lives. They share product demonstrations, personal routines, and unfiltered opinions through formats such as tutorials, reviews, unboxings, and live-streamed sessions. This form of communication feels less like advertising and more like peer recommendation, which significantly shapes how consumers form attitudes and make purchasing decisions in the beauty domain ^[1].

The AISAS model, originally proposed as an extension of the classic AIDMA (Attention-Interest-Desire-Memory-Action) framework, has gained particular relevance in the digital marketing context. Its emphasis on Search and Share as distinct post-attention phases captures the interactive, feedback-driven nature of online consumer behavior that earlier models overlooked. When applied to beauty KOL content, the AISAS framework offers a structured way to understand how consumers move from passive exposure to active information seeking, and ultimately to social sharing that amplifies or challenges the KOL's original message. However, existing applications of AISAS to influencer marketing tend to treat these stages as sequential and linear, potentially oversimplifying the recursive, overlapping, and socially embedded realities of contemporary digital consumption.

This review aims to synthesize and critically evaluate current knowledge on beauty KOL communication strategies through the AISAS framework, while also drawing connections to broader consumer behavior theories that explain why and how these strategies work ^[2]. The specific objectives are threefold: first, to map existing research findings onto the AISAS stages and identify consistent patterns across studies; second, to highlight theoretical and empirical gaps, particularly regarding cross-platform differences, cultural contexts, and the ethical dimensions of KOL-brand partnerships; and third, to propose an integrated perspective that acknowledges the non-linear, socially distributed nature

of beauty consumption decisions. By doing so, the review seeks to provide both academic researchers and industry practitioners with a clearer understanding of what drives effective KOL communication in beauty—and equally importantly, what remains poorly understood.

The structure of this paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 presents a comprehensive review organized around the AISAS stages, with subsections devoted to each phase and the consumer psychology principles that underpin them. Section 3 discusses cross-cutting themes including the role of trust, parasocial relationships, and platform-specific affordances. Section 4 identifies persistent challenges and unresolved tensions in beauty KOL research. Section 5 offers practical implications and outlines promising avenues for future inquiry. Finally, Section 6 concludes by reflecting on the broader significance of KOL-driven beauty communication within contemporary consumer culture.

2. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

2.1 Attention: Capturing Consumer Awareness in a Cluttered Environment

The first hurdle for any beauty KOL is securing audience attention, which has become increasingly difficult given the sheer volume of content competing for viewers' limited cognitive resources. Research indicates that visual salience plays an outsized role at this initial stage. Thumbnails featuring high-contrast before-and-after comparisons, striking color transformations, or recognizable product packaging tend to generate higher click-through rates than more subdued imagery. However, attention is not merely a function of visual properties; it is also shaped by prior familiarity and perceived relevance. KOLs who have cultivated distinct aesthetic signatures or thematic niches—such as “clean beauty,” “editorial glam,” or “drugstore dupes”—enjoy a recognition advantage that reduces the cognitive effort required for viewers to notice and select their content^[3].

Platform algorithms further complicate the attention landscape. On YouTube, the recommendation system favors videos with high early engagement, which creates a winner-take-all dynamic where established KOLs accumulate disproportionate visibility. On Douyin and TikTok, the algorithmic emphasis on content quality over follower count has enabled relative newcomers to achieve viral attention if their content triggers sufficiently strong emotional or novelty responses. These platform-specific dynamics mean that attention-getting strategies cannot be generalized uncritically; what works on Instagram's grid-based interface may not transfer effectively to livestream environments where real-time interaction competes with content presentation.

2.2 Interest: Sustaining Engagement Through Narrative and Relatability

Once attention has been secured, the next challenge is sustaining interest long enough for the consumer to process information and develop favorable associations. Here, the storytelling dimension of beauty KOL content becomes paramount. Unlike product-centric advertising that foregrounds features and benefits, successful KOL content often embeds product information within personal narratives—a frustrating skin issue resolved, a wedding day makeup crisis averted, a cultural identity expressed through cosmetics. Such narratives serve dual functions: they make the content more memorable, and they invite viewers to imagine themselves in similar situations, thereby strengthening personal relevance.

Relatability emerges as a recurring theme in studies of beauty KOL effectiveness. Viewers tend to engage more deeply with KOLs whom they perceive as similar to themselves in terms of age, skin type, style preferences, or even socioeconomic background. This perceived similarity enhances the persuasive impact of product endorsements through multiple mechanisms, including increased trust, reduced resistance to commercial messaging, and heightened vicarious experience. Interestingly, some research suggests that moderate imperfections—such as visible skin texture or admission of past makeup mistakes—can actually increase relatability and trust, whereas overly polished presentations may trigger skepticism about the KOL's authenticity and the efficacy of featured products.

2.3 Search: Information Verification and Comparative Evaluation

The Search stage in the AISAS model represents a distinct departure from earlier linear advertising frameworks, acknowledging that contemporary consumers do not passively accept KOL recommendations but actively seek corroborating or contradictory information from multiple sources. In the beauty context, search behaviors typically involve watching additional reviews of the same product, consulting ingredient analysis websites, browsing user-generated photos in social tags, and comparing prices across retailers. This phase is critically influenced by the consumer's prior experience with the KOL, the product category, and the perceived risk associated with the purchase.

Theoretical accounts of search behavior in KOL contexts draw heavily on the elaboration likelihood model, which distinguishes between central and peripheral routes to persuasion. Consumers who engage in extensive search are effectively processing information through the central route, scrutinizing arguments and evidence rather than relying on heuristic cues like KOL attractiveness or popularity. This has important implications for KOL communication strategies: claims that can be substantiated through demonstrable evidence—such as swatches on diverse skin tones, long-term wear tests, or ingredient breakdowns—are more likely to withstand consumer scrutiny during the search phase. Conversely, vague or exaggerated claims invite skepticism and may prompt consumers to abandon consideration entirely.

2.4 Action: Translating Interest into Purchase Decisions

The transition from consideration to actual purchase represents a critical bottleneck in the consumer journey, and one where the influence of beauty KOLs manifests in particularly complex ways. Direct affiliate links, discount codes, and limited-time offers are common tactics used to facilitate immediate purchase behavior. However, the relationship between KOL exposure and purchase action is neither straightforward nor uniformly positive. Several moderating factors have been identified, including consumer price sensitivity, brand familiarity, and the perceived invasiveness of commercial messaging within content that previously seemed organic.

Research on impulse buying in livestream commerce settings has drawn attention to the role of temporal pressure and social proof in accelerating purchase decisions. Beauty livestreams featuring countdown timers, flash sales, and real-time indicators of product stock depletion create a sense of urgency that can override more deliberative evaluation processes. This is particularly pronounced when viewers observe others making purchases through on-screen notifications, leveraging the principle of social validation to reduce the perceived risk of the transaction. Nevertheless, this environment also generates post-purchase cognitive dissonance, especially when consumers later question whether the product truly meets their needs or whether the perceived urgency was artificially manufactured.

2.5 Share: Post-Purchase Evaluation and Social Amplification

The final AISAS stage—Share—captures what distinguishes digital-era consumer behavior from pre-internet patterns. In beauty consumption, sharing takes diverse forms: posting before-and-after photos on social media, leaving detailed reviews on e-commerce platforms, discussing purchases in online communities, or simply forwarding KOL content to friends through messaging apps. This sharing behavior functions both as a public endorsement of the product and as a personal record of the consumption experience. For the KOL, positive shares extend the content's lifecycle and provide social proof that strengthens future persuasion attempts.

However, the Share stage is far from a simple positive feedback loop. Negative experiences also get shared, sometimes with greater urgency, and dissatisfied consumers may become vocal critics of both the product and the KOL who recommended it^[4]. This aspect of the model underscores the accountability that accompanies KOL endorsements—a point that becomes increasingly salient as consumers become more sophisticated in detecting discrepancies between promotional content and genuine user experiences. Moreover, the Share stage is not necessarily terminal; positive shares can redirect others to the Attention or Search stages, creating recursive cycles that challenge the linearity implied by the AISAS acronym.

3. CROSS-CUTTING THEORETICAL THEMES

3.1 Trust, Authenticity, and the Commercial Paradox

Perhaps the most frequently discussed theme in beauty KOL research concerns the tension between commercial sponsorship and perceived authenticity. Consumers generally understand that KOLs derive income from brand partnerships, yet they simultaneously expect genuineness in product evaluations. This paradox has spurred interest in the concept of “sponsorship literacy”—the ability to recognize and critically assess commercial content—and its effects on message persuasiveness. Studies suggest that explicit disclosure of commercial relationships can actually enhance trust when viewers perceive the KOL as having been selective in accepting partnerships^[5].

3.2 Parasocial Relationships as Persuasive Mechanisms

The concept of parasocial relationships, originally developed in media studies to characterize one-sided psychological bonds with media figures, has proven highly applicable to KOL-audience interactions. Through regular content consumption and perceived direct address, viewers develop a sense of knowing the KOL personally, which heightens the emotional weight of their recommendations.

3.3 Platform Affordances and Content Adaptation

Different social media platforms impose distinct constraints and opportunities on beauty KOL content. Long-form video (YouTube) permits comprehensive demonstrations but demands sustained viewer attention. Short-form video (TikTok, Reels) prioritizes immediate impact and emotional resonance. Livestream environments enable real-time interactivity but increase the likelihood of unscripted missteps. Static visual formats (Instagram, Xiaohongshu) support careful curation and aesthetic consistency. These affordances interact with the AISAS stages in non-trivial ways.

4. CHALLENGES AND UNDEREXPLORED AREAS

Despite the growing body of research on beauty KOL communication, several areas remain insufficiently addressed. Cross-cultural comparisons are conspicuously scarce, with most studies conducted in Western or East Asian contexts and few efforts to systematically test the generalizability of findings across different market environments. Similarly, the long-term effects of KOL exposure on consumer values, materialism, or self-esteem have received limited empirical attention^[6]. The ethical implications of algorithmic amplification, audience micro-targeting, and the cultivation of consumption dependence also warrant deeper investigation.

5. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

For beauty brands and KOLs, the findings reviewed here suggest several actionable insights. First, content should be designed with the Search stage in mind, providing verifiable information that withstands consumer fact-checking. Second, strategic use of multiple platforms can address different AISAS stages more effectively than relying on a single channel^[7]. Third, the cultivation of authentic engagement, rather than merely maximizing follower counts, contributes more meaningfully to sustained influence. Future research should prioritize longitudinal designs, cross-platform comparative studies, and investigations that consider consumers' entire social media ecologies.

6. CONCLUSION

This review has examined beauty KOL communication strategies through the AISAS framework, highlighting both the framework's utility and its limitations. While the AISAS model provides a useful organizing structure for understanding stages in the consumer journey, the actual decision-making process is more recursive, socially embedded, and emotionally charged than a linear model can fully capture. The success of beauty KOLs rests not merely on their ability to capture attention or generate interest, but on navigating the complex interplay of trust, authenticity, platform dynamics, and consumer skepticism that characterizes contemporary digital culture. As the beauty influencer landscape continues to evolve, ongoing scholarly attention to these dynamics—particularly their ethical dimensions and cross-cultural variability—will remain essential.

REFERENCES

- [1] Lou C., Yuan S. Influencer marketing: How message value and credibility affect consumer trust of branded content on social media. *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, 2021, 19(1): 58-73.
- [2] Sokolova K., Kefi H. Instagram and YouTube bloggers promote it, why should I buy? How credibility and parasocial interaction influence purchase intentions. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 2020, 53: 101742.
- [3] Xiao M., Wang R., Chan-Olmsted S. Factors affecting YouTube influencer marketing credibility: A heuristic-systematic model. *Journal of Media Business Studies*, 2022, 15(3): 188-213.
- [4] Hwang K., Zhang Q. Influence of parasocial relationship between digital celebrities and their followers on followers' purchase and electronic word-of-mouth intentions. *Journal of Marketing Communications*, 2021, 24(7): 759-778.
- [5] Wang P., Huang Q. Digital influencers, social power and consumer engagement in social commerce. *Internet Research*, 2023, 33(1): 212-235.
- [6] Chen H., Li Y. Live streaming commerce: A review and research agenda. *Electronic Commerce Research and Applications*, 2023, 58: 101238.
- [7] Ki C. W. C., Kim Y. K. The mechanism by which social media influencers persuade consumers: The role of consumers' trust and parasocial relationship. *International Journal of Advertising*, 2021, 40(5): 727-754.