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KOL MARKETING STRATEGIES OF THAI BEAUTY BRANDS IN THE CHINESE MARKET: TAKING MISTINE AS AN EXAMPLE

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Abstract

This research explores the creative Key Opinion Leader marketing strategies employed by Thai beauty brands, with a specific focus on Mistine's successful penetration of the Chinese market. This study employed a mixed-methods approach combining a survey of 423 Chinese female consumers and content analysis of promotional materials from 2020 to 2024. Key findings reveal that trust in micro-influencers is the strongest predictor of brand awareness ($\beta = .824, p < .001$), while consumer engagement is the most direct driver of purchase intention ($\beta = .460, p < .001$). Economic factors, particularly targeting budget-conscious consumers, proved to be a key segmentation variable. All challenges and opportunities converged on the single core dimension of "Perceived Authenticity." The "Mistine Model" provides a replicable strategic framework for international beauty brands seeking to navigate China's complex digital ecosystem through authentic KOL collaborations. This study contributes to the understanding of innovation in digital marketing and cross-border entrepreneurship.

Keywords: KOL Marketing, Brand Awareness, Business Innovation

Introduction

The Chinese cosmetics market, valued at over 516.9 billion yuan in 2023, is one of the most competitive and digitally advanced in the world. Within this landscape, Thai beauty brand Mistine has achieved remarkable success, with sales exceeding 10 billion baht within a few years of its entry. A key driver of this success has been its innovative and creative application of Key Opinion Leader marketing. While KOL marketing is well-established, Mistine's strategic approach represents a significant innovation for Southeast Asian brands. This paper argues that Mistine's success stems from a creatively engineered and systematic KOL strategy, crystallized in this research as the "Mistine Model." This study aims to delineate this model and present its core findings to serve as a guide for entrepreneurial ventures in the digital age.

Research Significance and Objectives

While KOL marketing is well-studied in Western contexts, there is a notable gap in systematic research on how Southeast Asian brands, particularly from Thailand, adapt to



China's unique KOL ecosystem. Most existing studies focus on European, American, or East Asian brands, leaving the strategies of Thai beauty brands underexplored. This study addresses this gap by proposing the "Mistine Model," a phased KOL strategy framework that emphasizes authenticity and micro-influencer partnerships. The model not only explains Mistine's success but also offers a theoretically grounded and replicable approach for emerging market brands entering China.

The main objectives of this research are:

1. To examine the KOL marketing strategies used by Thai beauty brands, particularly Mistine, in the Chinese market.
2. To evaluate the effectiveness of these strategies in terms of brand awareness, consumer engagement, and sales performance.
3. To identify the challenges and opportunities associated with KOL marketing in the Chinese cosmetics industry.

Scope of the Research

1. Content Scope: Focus on KOL marketing strategies of Thai beauty brands in China, with Mistine as the primary case. Analysis covers promotional content from 2020–2024 on platforms including Weibo, Xiaohongshu, Douyin, and Taobao Live.
2. Demographic Scope: Chinese female consumers aged 18–50, who constitute the core user base of beauty products and are active on social media.
3. Variable Scope: Independent variables include KOL type (micro/macro), content strategy, and cultural relevance; dependent variables include brand awareness, consumer engagement, and purchase intention.
4. Time Scope: Data collected and analyzed from January 2020 to December 2024.

Literature Review

This study is grounded in several interconnected streams of literature concerning KOL marketing, consumer psychology, and cross-cultural adaptation in the digital age.

The foundation of KOL marketing lies in social influence theory and the two-step flow of communication model, which posit that messages from media are often filtered through influential opinion leaders before reaching a wider audience (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1957). In China's unique digital ecosystem, dominated by integrated social-commerce platforms like Douyin and Xiaohongshu, KOLs have evolved into powerful cultural brokers who interpret and translate brand messages for local consumers, making their role more critical than ever (Wang & Kim, 2023).

A key strategic distinction lies between micro-influencers (10,000-100,000 followers), valued for high engagement and perceived authenticity, and macro-influencers, who provide mass reach for brand launches (Cheng & Jiang, 2022). Mistine's success is linked to a layered strategy leveraging both.

The effectiveness of these influencers is measured through key marketing outcomes. Brand Awareness, defined as the ability of consumers to recognize or recall a brand, is a fundamental component of brand equity (Keller, 2020). Repeated exposure through trusted



KOLs enhances this recognition. Furthermore, Consumer Engagement—encompassing interactive behaviors such as liking, commenting, and sharing—is not a mere vanity metric. Theory suggests that these meaningful interactions foster emotional connections and are a precursor to long-term brand loyalty (Brodie et al., 2019; Pansari & Kumar, 2017). This engagement is theorized to directly influence Purchase Intention, which is the consumer's conscious plan to make a purchase, often shaped by attitudes and social proof provided by credible sources like KOLs (Ajzen, 1991).

For foreign brands, cultural adaptation is essential but insufficient if superficial. Drawing on Brand Authenticity theory (Morhart et al., 2015), we posit that cultural adaptation must contribute to the overarching construct of "Perceived Authenticity" to be effective. Cultural elements must be woven authentically into the KOL's narrative to be effective, rather than treated as a standalone variable. This research synthesizes these perspectives to investigate how KOL strategies, underpinned by authenticity, drive brand awareness, consumer engagement, and ultimately, purchase intention for Thai beauty brands in China.

Theoretical Framework and Conceptual Model:

This study integrates social influence theory, brand authenticity theory, and customer engagement theory to explain how KOL marketing influences Chinese consumers. As illustrated in the conceptual framework below, Perceived Authenticity serves as the central mediator between KOL trust and key outcomes such as brand awareness, engagement, and purchase intention.

Conceptual Framework Diagram

Independent Variables:

- KOL Type (Micro / Macro)
- Content Strategy (Livestream / Tutorials)
- Cultural Relevance

Mediating Variable:

- Perceived Authenticity

Dependent Variables:

- Brand Awareness
- Consumer Engagement
- Purchase Intention

Research Methodology

1. Research Design

This study employed a sequential mixed-methods design. Quantitative data from a consumer survey provided statistical insights into consumer perceptions and behaviors, while qualitative content analysis of KOL campaigns offered contextual depth and strategic understanding. This approach enabled triangulation of findings, enhancing the validity and



comprehensiveness of the results.

- **Sampling Technique:** A purposive sampling method was used to target Chinese female consumers aged 18–50 who have engaged with beauty KOLs or purchased Thai beauty products.

- **Ethical Considerations:** Participants provided informed consent at the beginning of the online survey. All data were anonymized and used solely for academic purposes.

- **Triangulation:** Quantitative survey results were cross-validated with qualitative content analysis of Mistine's KOL posts and livestreams. For example, high survey scores on micro-influencer trust aligned with observed high-engagement tutorial content on Xiaohongshu.

2. Research Steps and Data Collection

The research was conducted in four systematic phases: (1) problem identification and literature review; (2) instrument development and a pilot test ($n=30$), which confirmed high reliability (Cronbach's Alpha > 0.85); (3) data collection; and (4) data analysis.

The main survey was distributed online via platforms like Wenjuanxing and shared within beauty-focused communities on WeChat and Xiaohongshu. A screening question ensured respondents were female, aged 18-50, and engaged with beauty KOLs. A total of 423 valid responses were collected. Concurrently, qualitative data was collected by archiving and analyzing Mistine's KOL promotional content (including posts, videos, and livestreams) from 2020 to 2024 on Douyin, Xiaohongshu, Weibo, and Taobao Live.

3. Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS software. Statistical techniques included descriptive analysis, multiple regression, ANOVA, and exploratory factor analysis (EFA). Thematic analysis was applied to the qualitative data to identify recurring strategies and cultural nuances in Mistine's KOL collaborations.

Research Results

The analysis yielded several critical findings that form the foundation of the "Mistine Model."

- **The Primacy of Micro-Influencers:** Multiple regression analysis identified trust in micro-influencers as the single strongest and most significant predictor of brand awareness ($\beta = .824, p < .001$). The overall model was highly significant ($F(5, 417) = 132.60, p < .001, R^2 = .614$).

- **Engagement as the Conversion Engine:** Consumer engagement emerged as the strongest direct driver of purchase intention ($\beta = .460, p < .001$). This positions engagement not as a secondary metric but as a primary strategic objective for converting awareness into sales.

- **The Centrality of Perceived Authenticity:** Exploratory Factor Analysis revealed that all perceived challenges (e.g., over-commercialization) and opportunities (e.g., expert demonstrations) coalesced into a single, dominant factor explaining 69.64% of the variance—"Perceived Authenticity." This simplifies the strategic landscape, making authenticity the ultimate goal.

· Economic Segmentation Over Demographics: Analysis of Variance showed that income level was a primary differentiator. Consumers in the lowest income bracket ($\leq 5,000$ RMB) demonstrated significantly higher trust in KOLs and preference for livestreaming than higher-income groups, highlighting budget-conscious consumers as the most receptive audience.

Table 1: Results analysis of related variables mean and standard deviation

Related variables	n = 423		Interpretation
	\bar{x}	S.D.	
1. Trust in Micro-influencers	3.43	1.241	Agree
2. Trust in Macro-influencers	3.36	1.280	Agree
3. Appeal of Livestreaming	3.36	1.243	Agree
4. Appeal of Tutorials	3.34	1.272	Agree
5. Cultural Relevance	3.36	1.265	Agree
6. Brand Awareness	3.27	1.156	Neutral
7. Consumer Engagement	3.30	1.202	Neutral
8. Purchase Intention	3.28	1.114	Neutral
Total	3.34	1.22	Agree

Source: Developed from this research's survey data (n=423) Note: Interpretation based on the following scale: 1.00-1.80 = Strongly Disagree; 1.81-2.60 = Disagree; 2.61-3.40 = Neutral; 3.41-4.20 = Agree; 4.21-5.00 = Strongly Agree.

Regression analyses further confirmed the strength of micro-influencer trust as the primary predictor of brand awareness (Table4.6), and consumer engagement as the strongest predictor of purchase intention (Table4.7).

Table 2: Multiple Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Brand Awareness

Predictor Variable	B	SE	β	t	p
(constant)	0.805	0.114		7.059	<.001
Trust in Micro-KOLs	0.768	0.096	0.824	7.979	<.001
Trust in Macro-KOLs	0.012	0.058	0.013	0.204	.838
Appeal of Livestreaming	0.060	0.053	0.065	1.146	.253
Appeal of Tutorials	-0.103	0.050	-0.113	-2.068	.039
Cultural Relevance	-0.019	0.043	-0.021	-0.439	.661

Source: Developed from this research's survey data (n=423) Note: $R^2 = .614$, Adjusted $R^2 = .609$, $F(5, 417) = 132.60$, $p < .001$. Dependent Variable: Brand Awareness.

Interpretation: A one-point increase in trust toward micro-influencers is associated with a 0.824 standard deviation increase in brand awareness, underscoring their dominant role in brand recognition.

Table 3: Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Purchase Intention

Predictor Variable	B	SE	β	t	p
(constant)	0.535	0.110		4.856	<.001
Consumer Engagement	0.426	0.036	0.460	11.702	<.001
Trust in Micro-KOLs	0.312	0.092	0.348	7.979	.001
Trust in Macro-KOLs	0.062	0.052	0.072	0.204	.232
Appeal of Livestreaming	0.033	0.047	0.036	1.146	.492
Appeal of Tutorials	0.000	0.045	0.000	-2.068	.994
Cultural Relevance	-0.015	0.039	-0.017	-0.439	.698

Source: Developed from this research's survey data (n=423) Note: $R^2 = .666$, Adjusted $R^2 = .661$, $F(6, 416) = 137.995$, $p < .001$. Dependent Variable: Purchase Intention.

Interpretation: A one-point increase in consumer engagement leads to a 0.460 standard deviation increase in purchase intention, highlighting the critical role of active interaction in driving sales intent.

Conclusion and Discussion

This research concludes that Mistine's success in China is underpinned by a creative and highly effective KOL marketing strategy, which is formalized in this study as the "Mistine Model." This model is characterized by a phased approach: (1) Foundation Building using micro-influencers to establish authentic trust; (2) Amplification using macro-influencers and livestreaming for mass reach and conversion; and (3) Sustainance through community engagement and deep cultural fusion. The findings demonstrate that in the modern digital economy, creativity in marketing is not about the biggest budget but about the most authentic connection. The "Mistine Model" provides a replicable framework for other international brands, emphasizing that innovation lies in strategically leveraging niche influencers, designing for active participation, and embedding brand values within the cultural context to build unwavering consumer trust and drive sustainable growth.

The results highlight that economic segmentation is more decisive than demographics; lower-income consumers ($\leq 5,000$ RMB) showed significantly stronger trust in KOLs and a preference for livestreaming, suggesting affordability drives their responsiveness.

The "Mistine Model" offers a replicable framework for other emerging market beauty brands. While Mistine's "tropical efficacy" is unique to Thailand, the core strategic logic—



building trust via micro-influencers, deep cultural fusion, and targeting budget-conscious segments—is universally applicable. Brands from similar regions (e.g., Vietnam, Indonesia) can thus leverage their own unique origin stories through KOLs, rather than mimicking established K-beauty or J-beauty strategies.

· Contrast with Prior Studies: Unlike earlier research that emphasized macro-influencers for broad reach, this study shows that micro-influencers are more effective for building authentic brand awareness, especially for foreign brands.

· Managerial Guidelines:

- Phase 1: Build trust via micro-KOLs and KOCs on Xiaohongshu and Bilibili.
- Phase 2: Scale reach with macro-KOLs and livestreams on Douyin.
- Phase 3: Sustain community through UGC and cultural integration.

· Authenticity as a Core Metric: Brands should monitor “perceived authenticity” through sentiment analysis and engagement depth, not just views or likes.

However, challenges remain. Oversaturation of influencer promotions has led to consumer skepticism and “advertising fatigue.” Long-term partnerships, transparency, and authentic storytelling are key solutions. Importantly, both opportunities and challenges converge on one dimension—Perceived Authenticity. Authenticity functions as the ultimate strategic anchor for foreign brands seeking sustainable success in China.

Recommendations

1. Recommendations for the application of research results

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed for international beauty brands, marketing practitioners, and policymakers:

- Prioritize Authenticity Over Reach
- Leverage Economic Segmentation
- Integrate Cultural Elements Naturally
- Invest in Social Listening and Analytics

2. Recommendations for Future Research

Building upon the findings and limitations of this study, the following avenues are proposed for future scholarly inquiry:

Longitudinal and Cohort Studies: Track the long-term impact of the "Mistine Model" on brand loyalty, customer lifetime value, and brand equity. Future research could follow a cohort of consumers over 1-3 years to understand how their perceptions and purchasing behaviors evolve in response to sustained KOL strategies.

Cross-Cultural Comparative Analysis: Conduct a comparative study of KOL marketing strategies employed by beauty brands from different cultural backgrounds, such as Korean (K-Beauty), Japanese (J-Beauty), and Chinese (C-Beauty) brands. This would help isolate the unique effects of "Thai-ness" and "tropical efficacy" from other success factors.

Platform-Specific Algorithmic Strategies: As social media algorithms evolve rapidly, deep-dive studies are needed to understand how content strategies must be tailored for the specific algorithmic logics of Douyin (driven by short-term engagement) versus Xiaohongshu (driven by depth and authenticity) to maximize organic reach and impact.



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Exploring the Male Beauty Market: This study focused on female consumers. Future research should investigate the growing male beauty and skincare segment in China, exploring the types of KOLs, content formats, and messaging that most effectively engage male consumers.

Neuro-Marketing and Physiological Measures: Employ advanced research methods, such as eye-tracking to study visual attention in KOL videos or EEG to measure emotional engagement, to provide objective, physiological evidence for the mechanisms behind "perceived authenticity."

The Impact of Virtual Influencers (VIs): Explore the potential and limitations of using CGI-generated virtual influencers for cross-cultural beauty marketing, assessing their ability to build trust and drive purchase intention compared to human KOLs.

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