

# Exploring KOL Influence on Content Production Models in Online Live Streaming from a Communication Studies Perspective: A TikTok Case Study Postprint

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## Abstract

The transformation of new communication modes, exemplified by online live streaming, has endowed KOLs (Key Opinion Leaders) with trending identities, rights to instant interaction, and commercial operational prerogatives in vertical domains such as e-commerce. At present, KOLs engage in autonomous content production within live streaming contexts, grounded in symbolic consumption and relational consumption, while capitalizing on the novel characteristics of new media—including interactivity, entertainment, and commercialization. From the perspective of communication studies and based on a case study analysis of Douyin, this paper investigates the emerging transformations in content production models for online live streaming and their future developmental trajectories.

## Full Text

### Preamble

#### Exploring KOL' s Influence on Content Production Models in Live Streaming from a Communication Perspective: A Case Study of Douyin

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**Abstract:** The evolution of new communication modes, exemplified by online live streaming, has endowed KOLs (Key Opinion Leaders) with influential identities, real-time interactive capabilities, and commercial operational rights in vertical domains such as e-commerce. Currently, KOLs engage in autonomous

content production during live broadcasts based on symbolic and relational consumption, leveraging the interactive, entertaining, and commercial characteristics of new media. From a communication studies perspective and through a case study of Douyin, this paper examines the emerging transformations in live streaming content production models and their future development trends.

**Keywords:** live streaming; online opinion leader; Douyin; production model; production form

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## 1. Literature Review

### 1.1 Domestic Research Status

#### 1.1.1 Live Streaming Content Production Models From UGC to PUGC Models

Duan Zhihui and Liu Yang (2021) argue from a network communication perspective that in the current mobile audio industry, two content production models—user-generated content (UGC) and professionally-generated content (PGC)—are converging toward a hybrid PUGC (Professional User Generated Content) model. This aggregation model emphasizes collaboration between streamers and platforms, involving pre-broadcast planning followed by autonomous content design during live sessions. It represents a novel production form that highlights both professional users and media platform participation. In this framework, KOLs leverage their perceived “ordinariness” and “professionalism” to satisfy audience expectations while exercising capabilities in live commerce and public opinion supervision.

#### Content Encoding in Body Performance

Zhang Ke (2020) observes from a media effects perspective that online live streaming uses the body as a visual symbol to construct a digital virtual field integrating information sharing, borderless interaction, immersive engagement, and cross-cultural communication. Streamers employ their bodies as production carriers, performing “content encoding” through embodied symbols that fulfill audience demands for situational and cultural experiences during information dissemination. Recent domestic scholarship on live streaming content production has primarily examined interaction rituals, social contexts, and explanatory effects, often focusing on superficial problems. This paper instead adopts a media psychology perspective to investigate how KOLs, as production

subjects within the PUGC aggregation model, influence the content production process itself.

### **1.1.2 KOL Guided Communication**

Han Zhen (2021) notes from a network communication perspective that individuals with significant influence and discursive power within a group constitute its KOLs. The emergence of a new two-step flow model—“self-media → community fans → general public” [3]—enables KOLs to leverage their “ordinariness” and “professionalism” to satisfy audiences while exercising capabilities in live commerce and public opinion supervision.

### **Labeled Persona Symbols**

Wang Xubiao (2021) argues from a media effects perspective that KOLs excel at constructing labeled persona symbols [4], generating topicality and broad attention within their vertical domains. Audience groups in these fields develop trust and admiration for their preferred KOLs, translating into consumer preference when both parties share a specific communication context—forming the foundation of live commerce. Recent domestic communication research on KOLs has concentrated on their characteristics, added value, and influence on fan communities, while comparatively neglecting their impact on content production models in text-image commerce and live streaming contexts.

## **1.2 Foreign Research Status**

### **1.2.1 Live Streaming Content Production Models Contextualized Display**

Zou Ji-Kai, Guo Han-Wen, and Liu Zi-Yang (2020) examine from a non-linear communication perspective that with the development of mobile terminals, internet, IoT, and streaming technologies, online and offline communication can achieve face-to-face interaction. Compared to traditional “text-based” communication, “online live broadcast” since 2018 has enabled detailed “contextualized” displays of values through unique functions such as three-dimensional product demonstration and real-time interaction.

### **Group Gathering in Virtual Contexts**

Xiao-Xue Tang and Young-Hwan Pan (2020) analyze from an interactive ritual chain perspective that users enter live streaming scenes across various vertical domains, engaging in community interaction led by streamers (Internet Celebrity IPs) based on shared group focus. Through participation in “program customization” and “co-production,” users achieve self-fulfillment, representing an interactive ritual based on mutual influence among components.

Synthesizing these perspectives, current foreign scholarship on live streaming content production models tends to shift from information-based linear transmission modes toward non-linear models, examining multi-dimensional and multi-layered aspects of new content production patterns in “media aggregator” platforms.

**1.2.2 KOL** As of this writing, keyword searches for “key opinion leader,” “opinion leader,” and “internet leader” on Google and CNKI reveal that various vertical domains in foreign new media platform live streaming are trending toward KOL-ization, yet no complete KOL-led content production model for live streaming has emerged. Consequently, foreign research on KOLs primarily focuses on their influence on audience psychology in internet fields, their role in guiding major topic public opinion, and existing gaps in opinion leadership. Research on KOL-led “live streaming +” content production models remains underdeveloped, lacking concrete analysis and systematic findings.

## 2. KOL Influence Mechanisms in Live Streaming

### 2.1 IP Effect

In various live streaming circles, KOLs not only participate in effective information communication and dissemination but also progressively engage in constructing content production models within these circles. The affordances of internet technology, based on streamers’ core influential positions within their circles, facilitate real-time interaction and feedback between streamers and users while simultaneously constructing a transmission chain of “streamer → circle users → outside users.” This presents a “point-to-point” circle communication pattern between communicators and audiences. Furthermore, according to Herbert Blumer’s symbolic interactionism, continuous meaning exchange between subjects and objects through “symbols” forms group-specific fixed patterns. The rich information dimensions and shared emotional identification led by top figures in live streaming vertical circles generate strong loyalty and willingness to follow among circle users.

### 2.2 Eyeball Effect

The “eyeball effect” refers to achieving sensational and eye-catching results through various methods and means. Live streaming represents the corresponding “attention economy.” As Herbert Simon (1971) noted, the real problem is not providing more information but allocating attention to received information. Since the live streaming boom began in 2016, broadcasts have increasingly incorporated dramatic and bizarre elements, designing content through contrast hype, celebrity combinations, and reverse publicity. This approach both captures traffic and attention resources while providing audiences with specific sensory experiences during information dissemination.

### 2.3 Live Streaming + E-commerce

Marshall McLuhan (1964) stated in *Understanding Media* that “the medium is the message,” with media constituting the fundamental driving force of social development. Currently, leading platforms like Douyin and Douyu are collaborating with various vertical industries through the “live streaming +” model, creating a diversified and differentially developed media environment. KOL

streamers employ personalized recommendations and strict quality control in the “people, goods, and place” framework to accurately deliver products to circle user groups while improving repurchase rates, forming a circular transaction 闭环 under the “live streaming + e-commerce” model.

National online retail sales in Q1 2021 reached 2.81 trillion yuan, representing a 29.9% year-on-year increase from Q1 2020 (see Figure 1). Since Q1 2020, the live commerce field has covered all industries. In China’s national poverty alleviation campaign, “industrial poverty alleviation” serves as a crucial strategy. Based on the established “live streaming +” model and 5G technology popularization, impoverished rural areas actively construct e-commerce industrial chains. Leveraging the all-time, all-region communication characteristics of live streaming, they guide public opinion in new media fields like Douyin and Douyu through positive energy stories, achieving positive guidance effects through the new communication form of “live streaming + poverty alleviation.”

[Figure 1: see original paper] National Online Retail Sales, 2018–2021 Q1 (Data from National Bureau of Statistics)

### 3. External Factors Driving Evolution: A PEST Analysis

The PEST model analyzes macro factors affecting industries across four dimensions: Political, Economic, Social, and Technological. This framework is applied to analyze how KOLs influence content production models in the Douyin live streaming industry [8].

#### 3.1 Political Factors: Strengthened Regulatory Oversight

At the national level, the *Administrative Measures for Online Live Marketing Marketing (Trial)* issued by seven departments including the National Internet Information Office took effect in 2021. The Measures require live marketing platforms to establish sound marketing behavior norms and improve content production quality. The Cyberspace Administration of China also launched a special campaign in 2021 to clean up the online environment for minors during summer vacation, preventing negative trends such as wealth flaunting, hedonism, and “aesthetic ugliness” from misguiding audiences. Consequently, platforms increasingly emphasize KOLs’ deep participation in constructing content quality and professionalism within live streaming production.

#### 3.2 Economic Factors: Positive Trends in Douyin E-commerce Live Streaming

In the post-pandemic era, national efforts to promote economic digitization have accelerated live commerce development. The Douyin Live Commerce Weekly Report for July 19–25, 2021, shows average daily sales reaching 1.45 billion yuan, with upward GMV trends and 1.09 million live sessions during the period. Top brands primarily rely on KOLs for product promotion. To maintain their com-

mercial value, KOLs orient their content production from self-marginalization toward product centralization, establishing “strong link, strong social” connections with users to enhance stickiness and ensure strong competitiveness in the live streaming field.

### **3.3 Social Factors: “Embodied Media” Effect**

Both communicators and audiences meet in cyberspace through digital bodies, increasing receivers’ cognitive understanding of senders and gradually transforming their information processing 思维方式. Coupled with the severe COVID-19 situation, the public’ s internet usage frequency increased significantly during home quarantine periods, raising both viewing and broadcasting frequencies. KOLs’ circle users on Douyin are equivalent to fans, making their content production increasingly unfold through bodily symbolization.

### **3.4 Technological Factors: Accelerated 5G Development**

From the 3G text-image era to the 4G video era and the current 5G ultra-high-speed era, technological innovation has lowered live streaming entry barriers. Functions such as beauty filters and virtual backgrounds have prompted KOLs who previously relied on external factors for attention to adjust their content production models.

## **4. Constructing the “KOL” Content Production Model**

### **4.1 Information Production Encoding**

In communication studies, communication subjects refer to information senders. As key opinion leaders in their fields, KOL streamers fulfill the function of circle information senders. In Douyin live streaming, top-tier KOLs differ from secondary or tertiary streamers who become mere mediums for merchant message transmission. The former’ s content production models demonstrate higher degrees of “precision” and “personification.” For example, Luo Yonghao, a KOL in Douyin’ s digital technology sector, leverages his extensive experience in the field to enhance audience acceptance and trust of his transmitted messages.

### **4.2 Information Communication Text**

Roland Barthes categorized texts into two types: readable texts and writable texts. The former represents a rigid, author-centered text, while the latter constitutes a textual feast maximizing reader participation. In the Douyin live streaming environment, text components include production subjects, arrangement and combination, selection, and context. The core factor determining textual meaning lies in platform audience decoding. Douyin’ s real-time communication function enables user participation in live content production: content and rhythm are influenced by bilateral interaction effects. KOL-led live content

production should therefore evolve toward a “sharing and interaction” model with equal status between communicators and audiences.

### 4.3 Information Transmission Regulation

Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding theory emphasizes that audiences’ knowledge structures, social positions, decoding contexts, and relationships with communicators lead to different decodings of content. In the Douyin live streaming field, information transmission gradually breaks through circles, circulating in liquid form across the entire field. Meanwhile, when audiences participate in communication practices within Douyin’s internet public sphere, value rationality often transcends instrumental rationality. Consequently, platforms should provide controllable pathways for KOL content authenticity, professionalism, and value significance during production, constructing a benign circular development model [9-10].

As media continues rapid evolution, live content production is updating from “centralization” to “decentralization.” After analyzing how KOL content production models face mass communication following circle-breaking, we must consider the extended value of content production for society, economy, and culture, constructing a forward-looking communication ecology for specialized production.

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*Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.*

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