

# The Influence of Key Opinion Leaders' Attributes on Brand Attitude: The Mediating Roles of Homophily, Reverence and Parasocial Interaction in Vietnam's Beauty Industry

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**Abstract:** *The rise of social media has revolutionized marketing strategies, with Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) significantly shaping consumer behaviors, particularly in Vietnam's burgeoning self-care and beauty industry. This study investigates how KOL attributes (attractiveness and expertise), perceived homophily, reverence, and parasocial interaction (PSI) influence brand attitudes in this context. Using an online survey, data from 350 Vietnamese consumers aged 18 to 43 who follow KOLs for beauty-related advice were analyzed through PLS-SEM to test the proposed hypotheses. The findings reveal that attractiveness significantly enhances homophily, which mediates the relationship with PSI, while PSI strongly predicts positive brand attitudes. Conversely, expertise influences reverence but fails to directly affect PSI or mediate the relationship between expertise and PSI. These results emphasize the importance of emotional engagement in influencer marketing, highlighting PSI's central role in fostering consumer-brand connections. The study contributes to understanding how psychological interactions with KOLs drive brand preferences, offering valuable insights for marketers targeting Vietnam's beauty industry.*

**Keywords:** KOLs, parasocial interaction, homophily, reverence, self-care, beauty industry, Vietnam

## 1. Introduction

Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) have become central figures in digital marketing, reflecting global trends in influencer-driven strategies. As individuals who leverage their digital presence and relatable personas, KOLs foster credibility and influence among niche audiences through interactive content and engagement on social media platforms (Abidin, 2018). In Vietnam, this phenomenon has been amplified by rapid digital transformation, extensive internet penetration, and the rise of social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok. Vietnam's youthful demographic and increasing internet penetration make it a fertile ground for digital marketing strategies centered on KOLs. By early 2024, Vietnam boasted 78.44 million internet users, accounting for 79.1% of the population, a figure slightly lower than Indonesia's 80% (DataReportal, 2024; Antara News, 2024).

TikTok's short-form video format, emphasizing highly consumable and shareable content, has significantly enhanced KOL marketing by increasing their capacity to influence consumer behavior. Research indicates that content characteristics such as trust, expertise, and attractiveness in TikTok videos positively correlate with consumer purchasing behavior (Meng et al., 2024). Additionally, studies have found that KOLs on short video platforms like TikTok can effectively influence consumer purchase intentions through emotional responses and virtual interactions (Gong et al., 2022).

These findings underscore the pivotal role of TikTok's format in revolutionizing KOL marketing strategies. Moreover, the shift from traditional celebrity endorsements to authentic, interactive KOL engagements aligns with broader Southeast

Asian marketing trends. Vietnamese brands allocate 30–40% of their digital advertising budgets to influencer campaigns, reflecting a broader trend in Southeast Asia where similar practices are observed in Thailand and Indonesia (Statista, 2024; HelloPartner, 2023). Vietnam's engagement-focused strategies, such as TikTok's hashtag challenges and live-streaming sales, uniquely resonate with younger consumers, distinguishing it from neighboring markets (TikTok for Business, 2023). However, challenges such as the need for more measurable ROI and increasing competition among influencers persist, requiring innovative approaches to maintain effectiveness (Ken Research, 2023).

"The beauty and self-care industry in Vietnam has experienced remarkable growth, with the market projected to reach US\$2.40 billion in 2023 (Statista, 2023). This expansion has coincided with the increasing prominence of Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) on social media platforms, who play a pivotal role in shaping consumer attitudes and behaviors. Despite their undeniable influence, there is a lack of comprehensive research examining how specific attributes of KOLs affect consumer attitudes toward self-care and beauty brands within Vietnam's unique cultural and social media landscape.

The absence of such research has significant consequences for marketing strategies in the Vietnamese context. Without understanding how attributes like attractiveness and expertise interact with consumer perceptions of homophily (perceived similarity) and reverence (deep admiration), brands risk implementing ineffective campaigns that fail to resonate with local audiences. Vietnamese consumers value shared cultural identity and traditional beauty standards, which are often reflected in their engagement with KOLs (Tran & Uehara, 2023). Global beauty brands entering the Vietnamese market

frequently encounter challenges when localizing their messaging and influencer partnerships due to insufficient insights into the cultural factors that drive consumer trust and loyalty (Pham & Richards, 2015).

Existing research has primarily focused on the direct effects of influencer credibility on purchase intentions (Nguyen & Thanh, 2024), overlooking the mediating role of parasocial relationships—one-sided connections consumers form with influencers. This gap may lead to the misallocation of marketing resources and hinder the development of strong consumer-brand relationships. Furthermore, the collectivist orientation of Vietnamese culture emphasizes group harmony and social relationships, making perceived homophily a more critical driver of consumer engagement compared to individualistic societies (Pezzuti & Leonhardt, 2021).

Addressing this research gap is essential to optimize influencer marketing strategies in Vietnam's beauty and self-care sectors. Prior studies have demonstrated that parasocial relationships enhance consumer trust and loyalty (Xin Jean et al., 2017), but their role as mediators in the Vietnamese context remains underexplored. Additionally, reverence, a critical driver of emotional connections in personal care branding (Garg & Bakshi, 2024) has not been adequately examined in local research. By investigating the interplay between KOL attributes, homophily, reverence, and parasocial interactions, this research aims to fill a critical knowledge gap and support more effective consumer engagement strategies.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Key Theories

#### 2.1.1 Parasocial Interaction Theory

Parasocial Interaction (PSI) theory, introduced by Horton and Wohl (1956), describes the one-sided, illusionary relationships that media consumers develop with mediated personalities, such as celebrities or fictional characters. PSI arises when audiences perceive intimacy with these figures despite the lack of mutual interaction and has been widely applied to understanding media consumption, particularly in the digital age where social media heightens accessibility and relatability (Giles, 2002). Influencers on platforms like TikTok and Facebook foster parasocial relationships by sharing personal stories, engaging with followers, and providing exclusive content, thereby enhancing trust and boosting consumer engagement with promoted products (Durmaz et al., 2024).

Parasocial relationships involve one-sided interactions between audiences and media figures, where repeated exposure creates a sense of intimacy and interpersonal involvement despite the lack of reciprocal interaction (Möri & Fahr, 2023). These connections position influencers as role models whose opinions are sought as counselors. Parasocial relationships are seen as social rather than personal connections, shaped by proximity, similarity, and attraction (Wells & Aicher, 2013). Social media platforms amplify this dynamic by creating an illusion of immediacy and reciprocity, even though these interactions remain mediated (Balaban et al., 2022).

#### 2.2.2 Celebrity Endorsement Theory

Celebrity Endorsement theory provides a framework for understanding how endorsements by celebrities influence consumer attitudes and behaviors (Erdogan, 1999). The theory posits that the effectiveness of celebrity endorsements hinges on three attributes: credibility, attractiveness, and congruence between the celebrity and the endorsed product. In contemporary contexts, these attributes extend to influencers and micro-celebrities who dominate social media platforms. Studies reveal that relatability and authenticity often outweigh traditional markers of fame in determining endorsement effectiveness (Freberg et al., 2011). In Vietnam, local celebrities like Son Tùng M-TP enhance brand associations among younger audiences through their cultural resonance and relatability (Deliworld, 2023).

### 2.2 Definition of Key concepts

**Key Opinion Leaders, or KOLs**, are individuals who have established credibility and influence within a specific domain or industry, often through their expertise, social status, or media presence (De Veirman et al., 2017). The self-care and beauty industry encompasses products and services designed to enhance personal appearance, grooming, and overall well-being. This industry has seen significant growth in the digital era, especially through online platforms where influencers, particularly KOLs, play a critical role in shaping consumer preferences (Pina et al., 2019).

**Attractiveness**, both physical and social, refers to the endorser's ability to appeal visually and socially to the target audience (Erdogan, 1999). In industries like beauty, attractiveness is crucial for building trust and engagement with consumers (Freberg et al., 2011). Attractive KOLs can drive PSI by making consumers more emotionally invested in their recommendations (Ohanian, 1990).

**Expertise** is an attribute that enhances the credibility of KOLs in their respective fields. It refers to the knowledge and experience a KOL has in the area they endorse, which strengthens their influence over consumer decisions (Buhr et al., 1987). Expertise contributes to parasocial interactions by allowing consumers to view KOLs as both authoritative and relatable figures, thereby fostering a deeper emotional connection (Escalas & Bettman, 2017).

**Homophily** refers to the tendency of individuals to associate and bond with others who are like themselves in terms of characteristics, attitudes, or behaviors (McPherson et al., 2001). In the context of KOLs, homophily refers to the perceived similarity between KOLs and their followers, which increases the likelihood of trust and engagement.

**Reverence** in this context refers to the deep respect, admiration, or awe that consumers may feel towards a KOL (Horton & Richard, 1956). Reverence strengthens the bond between consumers and KOL, increasing the likelihood of PSI (Hoffner, 1996).

**Brand attitude** refers to consumers' overall evaluation of a brand, which includes their beliefs, feelings, and behavioral intentions towards the brand (Keller, 1993). A positive brand

attitude is often shaped by the influence of KOLs, especially when strong parasocial interactions are present.

### 2.3 Hypotheses development

Two critical attributes of KOLs—attractiveness and expertise—significantly affect consumer attitudes toward brands. However, the way in which these attributes influence brand perceptions remains complex, particularly in the context of parasocial interactions. According to Parasocial Interaction theory (PSI), consumers can form one-sided, emotionally charged relationships with media figures, such as KOLs, without direct personal interaction (Horton & Richard, 1956). KOL attractiveness often leads to increased emotional engagement with consumers, which enhances PSI, a construct that can foster positive attitudes towards the KOL's brand endorsements (Labrecque, 2014). KOLs' perceived expertise enhances their credibility, which is a key factor in building trust with the audience (Ohanian, 1990). Research has shown that expertise fosters admiration and respect, further amplifying PSI and leading to more favorable brand evaluations (Peter & Mettenheim, 2020).

***H1a: Consumers' perceived PSI with KOLs plays a mediation role in the relationship between KOLs' attractiveness and consumer's brand attitude.***

***H1b: Consumers' perceived PSI with KOLs plays a mediation role in the relationship between KOLs' expertise and consumer's brand attitude.***

The concept of homophily plays an important role in shaping the dynamics of parasocial relationships. Research by McPherson et al (2001) suggests that individuals are more likely to engage with others who share similar characteristics. In the context of KOL, consumers who perceive KOLs as attractive may be more likely to view them as similar to themselves, leading to stronger emotional connections.

***H2: The attractiveness of the KOLs enhances the consumer's perceived homophily with the celebrity.***

When consumers perceive KOLs as similar to themselves, they are more likely to develop a sense of closeness and emotional engagement, leading to stronger PSI. This is supported by Eyal & Rubin (2003), who found that perceived similarity between television characters and viewers positively influenced PSI.

***H3: Consumers' perceived homophily with KOLs enhances the consumer-KOLs PSI.***

The expertise of KOLs in the beauty and self-care domain enhances consumers' perceived reverence for these individuals. In the beauty industry, where specialized knowledge is highly valued, consumers are likely to hold

KOLs in high regard when they perceive them as experts (Ohanian, 1990).

***H4: The expertise of the KOLs enhances the consumer's perceived reverence for the KOLs.***

According to Horton and Wohl (1956), PSI refers to the one-sided emotional connection that consumers form with media personalities, and this connection can be deepened when consumers feel respect or admiration for the individual. Reverence, as a form of respect, can significantly enhance the PSI because it fosters stronger emotional engagement and trust (Lacap et al., 2024).

***H5: Consumers' perceived reverence for KOLs enhances consumer-KOL PSI.***

When a KOL is perceived as attractive, it may lead to stronger feelings of similarity, as attractive individuals are often seen as more relatable by certain consumer groups (Kaufman & Combs, 2016). When KOLs demonstrate expertise, consumers may also feel a connection based on shared values related to knowledge or proficiency, which can further enhance PSI (Ohanian, 1990). Reverence is defined as deep respect or admiration for a KOL, which may arise when consumers view them as possessing expertise or having an authoritative position in the beauty and self-care domain. Reverence influences how consumers emotionally engage with a KOL, as respect can elevate the emotional bond, deepening the parasocial connection (Eyal & Rubin, 2003).

***H6a: Consumers' perceived homophily with the KOLs separately play a mediation role in the relationship between attractiveness/expertise of KOL and consumer-KOL PSI.***

***H6b: Consumers' perceived reverence for the KOLs separately play a mediation role in the relationship between attractiveness/expertise of KOL and consumer-KOL PSI.***

PSI is central to understanding how consumers form attachments to media personalities, including KOLs, and how these attachments influence their behavior and perceptions of brands. Recent studies suggest that parasocial relationships can form among individuals who do not consider themselves fans (Su et al., 2021). This indicates that KOLs can still significantly impact consumers' brand attitudes through PSI. Hence, we proposed hypothesis 7:

***H7: The hypothesized path from KOL qualities (namely, attractiveness and expertise) to para-social interaction (PSI) and its drivers (specifically, homophily and reverence), and finally to brand attitude applies to both KOL fans and non-fans in the Vietnamese self-care and beauty sector.***

The conceptual framework and all hypotheses conduction are presented in **Figure 1:**

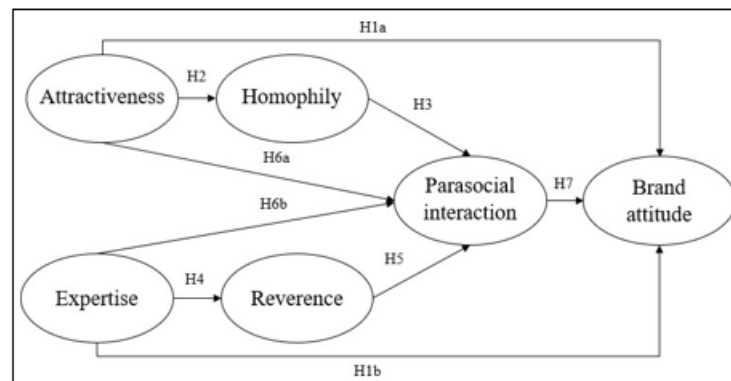


Figure 1: Research Model

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Measurement scale

The core section of the questionnaire encompassed measurement items derived from the study's theoretical framework. All measurement factors were assessed using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (extremely disagree) to 5 (extremely agree). In total, there were 35 observable variables corresponding to 35 statements, each variable being coded with a unique combination of two characters and one number to distinguish the six constructs. Before the questionnaire was distributed officially, there were 15 participants included in the pilot test survey. Since no major misinterpretations or difficulty in understanding were detected, correction and adjustment were not needed for the survey items.

#### 3.2 Sample and data collection

To ensure reliable results, the researcher aims to have at least 400 respondents from Vietnam based on our 35 measured variables. The target population consists of Vietnamese individuals born between 1981 and 2006, who are aware of KOLs in the beauty and self-care industry and follow them for product recommendations. Due to time and resource constraints, this research employed non-probability sampling methods, specifically convenience sampling and snowball sampling. The surveys for this study are distributed online through platforms such as Facebook, Zalo, and Gmail, which is a fast, convenient, and cost-effective approach.

### 4. Data Analysis and Results

The structural model in this research is complex, involving 81 indicators and 11 latent variables, which qualifies it as a large-scale model. According to (Chin, 2010) such complexity can pose challenges for CB-SEM due to its reliance on matrix inversion. However, PLS-SEM overcomes these limitations, making it the preferred choice for this study. Furthermore, PLS-SEM is recognized for its asymptotically correct results in large-scale applications, as noted Jöreskog & Wold (1982). Although some scholars have highlighted potential biases in PLS-SEM, these biases are not significant in this study due to the sufficient sample size and the adequate number of indicators for each latent variable.

In the process of conducting a reliability test using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, all Cronbach's alpha values are exceeding 0.7, which satisfies the threshold of above 0.7 proposed by [87]. These results demonstrate the reliability of the five selected constructs and the consistency of items included for each of them. Composite Reliability values above 0.7 confirm that the model is reliable for further analysis. The results for all items exceed the 0.7 threshold, confirming that the measurement scale meets the necessary validity criteria and is suitable for subsequent analysis.

According to (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) value must be equal to or greater than 0.5 for an item to be considered valid, and as all values exceed 0.5, this confirms the validity of the corresponding items and supports their inclusion in further analysis. The Fornell and Larcker table assesses discriminant validity by comparing the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) of each latent factor with the correlation coefficient between the factor and other factors in the model. According to this criterion, a factor is considered to achieve discriminant validity if its quadratic AVE is greater than the correlation coefficient between it and any other factor. For this study, all pairwise comparisons of all factors satisfy the conditions.

After completing the evaluation of the Measurement Model, this study will proceed with the assessment of the Structural Equation Model (SEM) and the validation of the proposed hypotheses. This phase includes several key analyses: (1) multicollinearity test, (2) the significance and relevance of the relationship, (3) evaluation of R<sup>2</sup> value, (4) f<sup>2</sup> effect size, (5) hypotheses testing result.

In this study, the inner VIF values for the six latent variables range from 1 to 2.554. Since all values are well below the threshold of 5, it can be concluded that multicollinearity is not a significant issue for the inner model. This confirms that the relationships between the latent variables are stable and reliable, supporting the validity of the structural model and this research will be continued to analyze following steps.

Table 1: Path Coefficients (Direct Effects)

	BA	KA	KE	PM	PR	PSI
BA						
KA	2.481			1.000		2.130
KE	2.380				1.000	2.182
PM						1.970
PR						2.143
PSI	2.554					



According to the bootstrapping results presented in Table 2, the path from PR to PSI yielded a p-value of 0.673, which exceeds the conventional threshold of 0.05 for statistical significance. Consequently, it can be concluded that there is no direct relationship between PR and PSI. This finding further reinforces the rejection of H5, indicating that Reverence does not significantly enhance Parasocial Interaction.

Almost path coefficients, except for path PR → PSI, have P-values below 0.05, signifying significant relationships between the corresponding constructs. To conclude, all hypotheses, except for H5, are well-supported with a 95% confidence interval. Considering the coefficient influence of the original sample value, all values in Table 2 show positive results. Therefore, it can be concluded that all relationships exhibit positive direct effects.

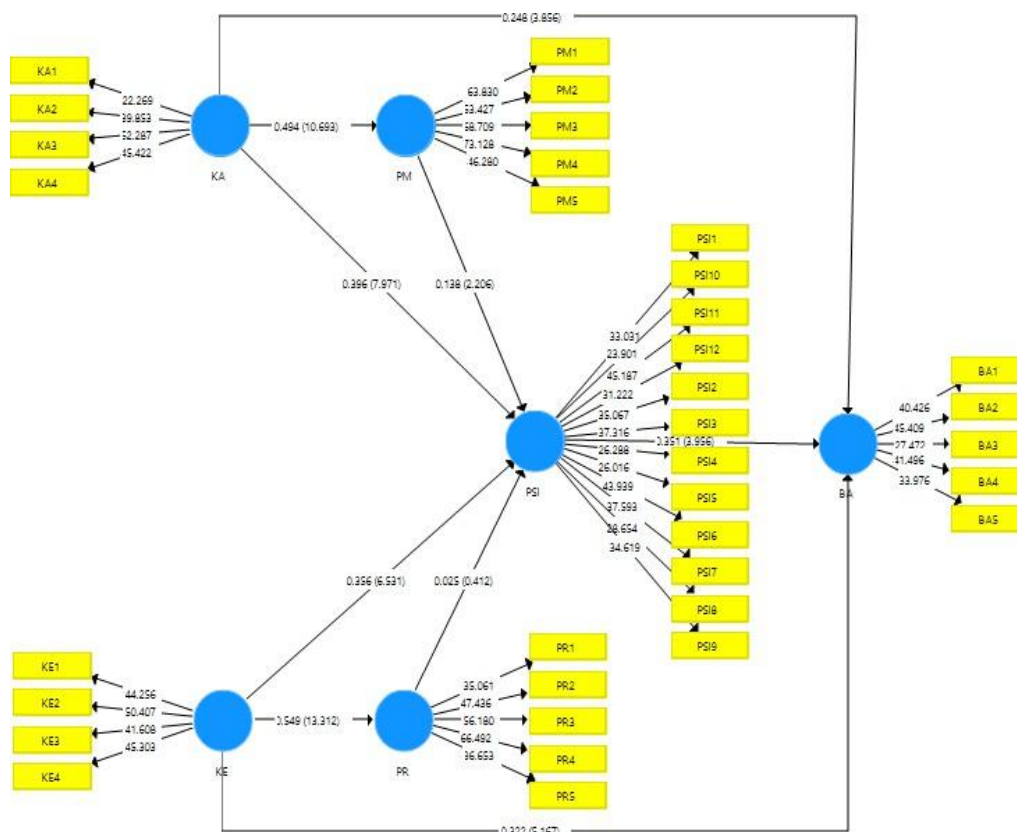


Figure 2: Structural Equation Model with Path Coefficients and T-Values

Table 2: Path Coefficients (Direct Effects)

	Original Sample (O)	T Statistics	P Values
KA → BA	0.248	3.856	0.000
KA → PM	0.494	10.693	0.000
KA → PSI	0.396	7.971	0.000
KE → BA	0.322	5.167	0.000
KE → PR	0.549	13.312	0.000

As per Table 3, the KE to PSI path ( $p = 0.681$ ) is statistically insignificant. Hence, it is concluded that the indirect relationship between Expertise and Parasocial Interactions have not existed or have little mutual effects. This finding reinforces the conclusion for H6b, indicating that Reverence does not significantly enhance the relationship between Expertise and Parasocial Interaction as a mediator. Almost path coefficients, except for H6b the relationship between Reverence and Brand Attitude, have P-values below 0.05, signifying significant relationships between the corresponding constructs. To conclude, all relationships and hypotheses, excluding H6b, are well-supported with a 95% confidence interval. Considering the coefficient influence of the original sample value, all values in Table 3 show positive results. Therefore, it can be concluded that all relationships exhibit positive indirect effects.

Table 3: Specific Indirect Effects

	Original Sample (O)	T Statistics	P Values
KA → PSI → BA	0.139	3.562	0.000
KE → PSI → BA	0.125	3.065	0.002
KA → PM → PSI	0.068	2.165	0.030
KE → PR → PSI	0.014	0.411	0.681
KA → PSI → BA	0.139	3.562	0.000
KE → PSI → BA	0.125	3.065	0.002

### Evaluation of Mediating Variables

To establish mediation, three conditions must be met following Baron & Kenny (1986): the indirect effect must be statistically significant (T-statistic > 1.96,  $p < 0.05$ , confidence interval excluding zero), the direct effect must change when the mediator is included, and the total effect must remain significant.

**KA → PSI → BA:** Analysis demonstrates that PSI partially mediates the relationship between KOL expertise and brand attitude. Table 4 shows the indirect effect is statistically significant, fulfilling the first mediation condition. The direct effect decreases from  $O = 0.248$  (without mediator) to  $O = 0.163$  (with mediator) while remaining significant, indicating partial mediation. The total effect remains substantial ( $O = 0.410$ ,  $T = 8.517$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ), supporting Hypothesis H1a.

**KE → PSI → BA:** PSI also partially mediates the relationship between KOL Expertise and Brand Attitude. The indirect effect through PSI is statistically significant (Table 4). The direct effect diminishes from  $O = 0.322$  to  $O = 0.130$  when PSI is included, while the total effect remains strong ( $O = 0.452$ ,  $T = 10.414$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ), supporting Hypothesis H1b.

**KA → PM → PSI:** PM partially mediates the relationship between KA and PSI. Table 4 confirms the indirect effect is statistically significant. The direct effect reduces from  $O = 0.396$  to  $O = 0.068$  with the mediator included, and the total effect remains significant ( $O = 0.464$ ,  $T = 8.087$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ), supporting Hypothesis H6a.

**KE → PR → PSI:** The analysis reveals that PR does not mediate the relationship between KE and PSI, as the indirect effect through PR is not statistically significant (Table 4), failing to meet the first mediation requirement.

**Table 4: Total Indirect Effects**

	Original Sample (O)	T Statistics	P Values
KA → BA	0.163	3.838	0.000
KA → PSI	0.068	2.165	0.030
KE → BA	0.130	2.654	0.008
KE → PSI	0.014	0.411	0.681
PM → BA	0.048	2.158	0.031
PR → BA	0.009	0.371	0.711

**Table 5: Total effect**

	Original Sample (O)	T Statistics	P Values
KA → BA	0.410	8.517	0.000
KA → PSI	0.464	0.463	0.057
KE → BA	0.452	10.414	0.000
KE → PSI	0.370	5.511	0.000

Five of seven hypotheses were supported. H1a and H1b confirmed PSI's mediating role between KOL attributes and brand attitudes. H2, H3, and H4 verified direct positive relationships between attractiveness-homophily, homophily-PSI, and expertise-reverence. H6a supported homophily's mediating role between attractiveness and PSI. However, H5 and H6b were rejected, indicating reverence does not significantly enhance PSI or mediate the expertise-PSI relationship. H7 was fully supported, validating the comprehensive model's robustness in explaining consumer attitudes in Vietnam's beauty sector.

**Table 6: Hypothesis Testing Results**

Hypothesis	Description	Result
H1a	Consumers' perceived PSI with KOLs plays a mediation role in the relationship between KOLs' attractiveness and consumer's brand attitude.	Supported
H1b	Consumers' perceived PSI with KOLs plays a mediation role in the relationship between KOLs' expertise and consumer's brand attitude	Supported
H2	The attractiveness of the KOLs enhances the consumer's perceived homophily with the celebrity.	Supported
H3	Consumer's perceived homophily with KOLs enhances the consumer-KOLs PSI.	Supported
H4	The expertise of the KOLs enhances the consumer's perceived reverence for the KOLs.	Supported
H5	Consumer's perceived reverence for KOLs enhances consumer-KOL PSI.	Not supported
H6a	Consumers perceived homophily with the KOLs separately play a mediation role in the relationship between attractiveness of KOL and consumer-KOL PSI.	Supported
H6b	Consumer's perceived reverence for the KOLs separately plays a mediation role in the relationship between expertise of KOL and consumer-KOL PSI.	Not Supported
H7	The hypothesized path from KOL qualities (namely, attractiveness and expertise) to para-social interaction (PSI) and its drivers (specifically, homophily and reverence), and finally to brand attitude applies to both KOL fans and non-fans in the Vietnamese self-care and beauty sector.	Supported

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendation

This research explored the influence of KOL attributes (attractiveness and expertise) and perceived homophily and reverence on consumer-KOL parasocial relationships and brand attitudes in Vietnam's self-care and beauty sector. The study aimed to investigate PSI's mediating role, examine relationships between KOL attributes and psychological constructs, and provide actionable recommendations for marketers. Data from 350 respondents was analyzed using SmartPLS 3.2.9, revealing that PSI significantly mediates relationships between KOL attributes and brand attitudes, attractiveness enhances perceived homophily, expertise fosters reverence, and homophily positively influences PSI. However, reverence showed no significant effect on PSI.

The findings demonstrate that KOL attributes significantly impact consumer perceptions through parasocial

interactions. Attractiveness enhances perceived homophily by making KOLs aspirational yet relatable, while expertise fosters reverence through perceived trustworthiness (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Ohanian, 1990). The mediating role of PSI underscores emotional engagement's importance in consumer behavior, particularly relevant in Vietnam's collectivist culture where interpersonal trust is paramount (Hofstede, 1980). Brands should partner with KOLs whose traits foster relevant emotional engagement and authenticity. Several limitations exist: reliance on self-reported data limits causal inference, lack of brand specification may have inflated PSI effects, the sample primarily consisted of young consumers limiting generalizability, and the small pretest sample affected representativeness. Future research should adopt experimental methodologies, incorporate specific brands with varying KOL congruence levels, explore demographic factors' roles, and investigate contextual factors

influencing reverence's impact on PSI in culturally unique markets like Vietnam.

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