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THE IMPACT OF VIETNAMESE KOLS' CHARACTERISTICS ON PURCHASE INTENTION

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Abstract

This study employs the dual-systems theory (DST) to develop a research model examining how the characteristics of Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) influence consumer purchase intentions in Livestream Commerce (LSC). Data was collected via questionnaire surveys from 583 Vietnamese consumers, revealing that KOL characteristics such as attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise positively correlate with purchase intentions. The mediation analyses indicate that the influence of systems 1 on the relationship between attractiveness and purchase intention remains significant across both utilitarian and hedonic goods categories. Additionally, our findings confirm and explore UT in the context of LSC, offering practical insights for the selection of KOLs and the strategic development of the livestreaming industry. These insights have practical implications for businesses aiming to optimize their marketing strategies within the evolving landscape of Livestream Commerce.

Keywords: KOL, KOL Marketing, Purchase Intention

1. Introduction

Live Streaming Commerce (LSC) represents a burgeoning segment within e-commerce, characterized by real-time social interactions between consumers and live streamers on dedicated platforms (Cai & Wohn, 2019). The appeal of LSC lies in its ability to provide comprehensive product information, deliver hedonic value, and foster a sense of community through synchronous communication with live streamers (Wongkitrungrueng, Dehouche & Assarut, 2020). Central to the success of LSC is the role of Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs), who significantly boost product sales by

providing authentic evaluations based on real-life usage experiences and expert knowledge. This fosters consumer trust in KOL recommendations, leading to increased purchase intent (Xiong et al., 2021). LSC and KOL influencer strategies have become pivotal in Vietnam's digital marketing landscape, buoyed by the country's robust internet penetration and widespread smartphone usage. Vietnam boasts over 73 million internet users and 72 million active social media users (Statista, 2021), underscoring a burgeoning digital ecosystem ripe for innovative marketing approaches. Live stream marketing allows businesses to

engage consumers in real-time, leveraging direct interaction to drive engagement and sales. Simultaneously, KOL influencers wield substantial influence over consumer behavior, with Nielsen (2021) reporting that 92% of consumers trust recommendations from individuals, even if they are unfamiliar. In Vietnam, this trend is mirrored across platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, where KOL endorsements and content play a pivotal role in shaping consumer preferences and purchasing decisions. This introduction sets the stage to explore how these strategies are transforming digital marketing practices in Vietnam, reshaping consumer engagement and brand dynamics with significant impact.

Given the substantial impact of KOLs on consumer behavior, selecting the right KOLs is not only a pragmatic necessity for enterprises seeking to promote their products but also a critical theoretical inquiry deserving scholarly exploration. Studies on KOL selection in the context of LSC can generally be categorized into three main groups based on a review of existing literature on selecting live streamers, celebrity endorsements, and opinion leaders (Gates & Kennedy, 1989; Earp et al., 2002; Buchler et al., 2018; Katz, 2015; Valente & Pumpuang, 2007). The first group typically employs methodologies such as self-selection and staff selection, gathering narrative data through observations, surveys, and interviews to identify opinion leaders. However, this approach is susceptible to observation bias, potentially affecting the validity of results (Bamakan, Nurgaliev & Qu, 2019). In the second group, researchers often prefer selecting opinion leaders based on their social networks, leveraging the assumption that opinion leaders with extensive social ties can exert greater influence (Iyengar, Bulte & Valente, 2011; Goldenberg et al., 2009). Finally, the third group focuses on the personal characteristics of live streamers, celebrity endorsers, and opinion leaders, demonstrating positive associations with consumer engagement, purchasing behavior, impulse buying, and purchase intention (Kang et al., 2021; Lee & Chen, 2021; Li et al., 2018; Xu, Wu & Li, 2020). By elucidating the favorable effects of personal characteristics on consumer behavior, researchers indirectly advocate for using these traits as criteria when selecting key influencers in LSC contexts.

LSC allows consumers to engage in real-time interactions where they can closely inspect products and receive immediate feedback from streamers regarding their sensory attributes, such as appearance, texture, or scent. This dynamic enhances authenticity, visualization, and interactivity in online shopping experiences, thereby positively influencing consumers' purchase intentions (Hu & Chaudhry, 2020; Wongkitrungrueng, Dehouche & Assarut, 2020). The primary advantage of LSC lies in its ability to simulate a "face-to-face" interaction between consumers and live streamers, offering a personalized engagement that surpasses traditional online shopping methods. For our study, the personal characteristics KOLs were chosen as a focal point, as these traits are more perceptible to consumers during direct interactions compared to social media interactions. Utilizing questionnaires to assess these characteristics mitigates potential biases inherent in narrative data, while employing contextual simulation methods (e.g., prompting subjects to imagine specific scenarios like impulse buying) (Rook & Fisher, 1995) enhances the research design by simulating realistic LSC contexts.

However, existing research has predominantly explored consumers' perceptions of utilitarian, hedonic, and social values in LSC, focusing on how personal characteristics influence purchase intentions from the perspective of consumer motivation

(Wongkitrungrueng, Dehouche & Assarut, 2020). Yet, it is crucial to acknowledge that sellers also play a significant role in LSC, particularly through promotional strategies like price discounts, which directly influence consumers' purchase intentions and perceived value, ultimately maximizing profits (Zhou & Wong, 2004). Live streaming platforms often feature flash sales, coupons, buy-one-get-one-free offers, and lotteries, intensifying the complexity of consumer decision-making by presenting a wide array of product choices across different categories, quantities, and styles. Consequently, consumers must navigate through varied product information and attributes, complicating their decision-making process (Dijksterhuis et al., 2006). While LSC offers utilitarian, hedonic, and social values to consumers, it concurrently introduces complexities in decision-making, often described as a "double-edged sword" effect.

Dijksterhuis (2004) posits that unconscious thought (UT) may aid in achieving satisfactory decisions in complex decision-making scenarios, emphasizing the role of intuitive rather than rational thought processes. Recent studies have explored the application of UT in contexts such as car purchases and dietary decisions (Dijksterhuis, 2004; Laran, Janiszewski & Salerno, 2016), but predominantly within routine purchase contexts. Given the rising prevalence of LSC and its potential influence on consumer behavior, our research introduces UT into the framework of LSC to analyze how consumers' decision-making processes drive purchase intentions. This approach aims to deepen understanding of how UT operates within the dynamic and evolving landscape of live stream commerce, contributing valuable insights into consumer behavior and decision-making strategies in this context.

In this paper, we investigate how the characteristics of KOLs influence consumers' purchase intentions within the context of UT goods in LSC. Specifically, we categorize KOL characteristics into attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise, as identified in previous research (Xiong et al., 2021; Xu, Wu & Li, 2020). Additionally, we classify consumer goods as either utilitarian or hedonic, aiming to address two primary research questions:

- 1) How do Vietnamese KOL characteristics impact consumer purchase intentions from the perspective of consumer decision-making?
- 2) Is there a differential effect of Vietnamese KOL characteristics across consumer purchase intentions influenced by UT when consumers purchase utilitarian or hedonic goods?

To address and formally provide answers to these questions, our research constructs a theoretical model based on dual-systems theory (DST). Our model proposes two distinct pathways: "attractiveness → System 1 → purchase intention" and "expertise and trustworthiness → System 2 → purchase intention." Data collection involves administering questionnaires and establishing two distinct purchase contexts (utilitarian and hedonic goods) at the outset to simulate realistic consumer decision-making scenarios. Furthermore, participants are randomly assigned to either the utilitarian or hedonic goods purchase group.

Our findings reveal that attractiveness significantly influences System 1, thereby increasing consumers' purchase intentions regardless of whether they are purchasing utilitarian or hedonic goods. Additionally, our study contributes meta-analytic insights demonstrating that decision-making complexity enhances the

generation of UT (Strick et al., 2011). The contributions of our research are manifold:

- 1) We leverage DST to identify critical factors that may not be discernible using Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) theory.
- 2) We underscore the importance of attractiveness within Vietnamese KOLs through a novel theoretical lens.
- 3) We address gaps in UT research by manipulating product attributes to impact the complexity of consumer decision-making.
- 4) Lastly, we empirically test the existence of UT within the context of LSC using DST.

2. Theoretical Background and Hypotheses Development

2.1. KOL Characteristics

KOLs are broadly defined as individuals who wield significant influence within specific fields (Godey et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2020). In practice, individuals can simultaneously fulfill roles as KOLs, live streamers, or celebrity endorsers. Specifically, a live streamer with substantial popularity often assumes the role of a KOL (Zhao et al., 2018). For instance, famous figures like Dang Tien Hoang (or, ViruSs) exemplify how live streamers with a large fan base can effectively sway consumer purchase intentions through their influence. Similarly, celebrity endorsers, as highlighted by Knoll and Matthes (2017), positively impact consumer cognition, emotions, and purchase behaviors through their endorsements. This dual role illustrates how KOLs can seamlessly integrate into the sphere of celebrity endorsement due to their significant influence within their respective domains.

Table 1: Compilation of Characteristics

Opinion leaders	Persuasive, Knowledge, Social connectivity (Goldenberg et al., 2009); Professional knowledge, Product involvement, Interaction, Reputation (Li et al., 2018); Interactivity, Authority, Activity (Liu et al., 2019); Professional knowledge, Product involvement, Visual cues, Interactivity, Functional value, and trust (Meng & Wei, 2020)
Live streamers	Attractiveness (Erdogan, 1999; Kamins, 1990; Lee & Chen, 2021; Silvera & Austad, 2004); Expertise (Erdogan, 1999; Lee & Chen, 2021); Trustworthiness (Amos, Holmes & Stratton, 2008; Erdogan, 1999; Lee & Chen, 2021)
Celebrity endorsers	Good looking (Lis & Post, 2013; Peng et al., 2020); Warmhearted (Casciaro & Lobo, 2008; McGloin & Denes, 2018); Expertise (Ladhari, Massa & Skandrani, 2020); Sense of humor (Eisend, 2009; Hou et al., 2020); Passionate (Baron & Markman, 2003)

Source: Compiled by authors

Our research defines KOLs as individuals who possess considerable influence over consumer decision-making, attitudes,

and behaviors, drawing on the concept of opinion leaders (Godey et al., 2016; Rogers & Cartano, 1962). This definition encompasses the multifaceted roles of KOLs as both live streamers and celebrity endorsers. It underscores their ability to shape consumer perceptions and preferences through their recognized authority and reach within specific domains. The convergence of roles among KOLs, opinion leaders, live streamers, and celebrity endorsers highlights commonalities in their influence mechanisms. To rigorously identify and characterize KOLs, our study synthesizes key attributes identified in existing literature, categorizing them into attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise (Xiong et al., 2021; Xu, Wu & Li, 2020). These attributes are recognized as pivotal factors that contribute to the credibility and persuasive power of KOLs, shaping their ability to sway consumer behavior effectively across various platforms and promotional contexts.

2.2. Product Categorization

Products can be classified into various categories based on different criteria established by researchers and authoritative sources. For example, Chintagunta and Haldar (1998) categorized products into durable goods (such as clothes washers and dryers) and non-durable goods (such as food items). Similarly, Le Roux et al. (2019) differentiated products into genuine and counterfeit based on their properties. These categorizations are essential for understanding consumer preferences and market dynamics. Furthermore, Nelson (1970) proposed a classification into search and experiential products, emphasizing how consumers acquire information about these products. Biswas and Biswas (2004) extended this classification by distinguishing between digital and non-digital products based on their online shopping characteristics. Digital products can be evaluated and communicated over the internet, whereas non-digital products require physical inspection. In addition, Kotler (1997) highlighted that product classification aims to meet diverse consumer demands. This perspective was further developed by Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) and Okada (2005), who classified products into utilitarian and hedonic goods. Utilitarian goods are characterized by their perceived functional benefits, while hedonic goods satisfy consumers' emotional and sensory desires. In the context of LSC, consumers engage in real-time interactions with streamers, obtaining comprehensive product information and experiencing hedonic value simultaneously (Wongkitrungrueng, Dehouche & Assarut, 2020). This dual appeal addresses both utilitarian needs, such as functional benefits, and hedonic desires, like enjoyment and social connection. Therefore, categorizing products into utilitarian and hedonic goods remains relevant and reflective of consumer preferences in the evolving landscape of LSC.

Utilitarian goods, such as digital products and home appliances, are characterized by their functionality and instrumental nature, requiring consumers to engage in rational decision-making processes. Consumers of utilitarian goods typically prioritize gathering relevant product information, focusing on attributes and knowledge about the product, and comparing various options (Kivetz & Zheng, 2017). In contrast, hedonic goods, such as jewelry, designer clothes, and bags, emphasize emotional and sensory experiences, including aesthetic pleasure, sensory enjoyment, and emotional satisfaction (To, Liao & Lin, 2007; Chitturi, Raghunathan & Mahajan, 2008). Purchasing decisions for hedonic goods are often driven by the pleasure derived from the experience, appealing to consumers' sensory perceptions and emotional fulfillment, which are intrinsic to their experiential cognition. Importantly, the perception of whether a product is

utilitarian or hedonic can vary among consumers. For instance, while some consumers may view a watch as utilitarian due to its practical function of telling time, others may perceive it as hedonic because of its decorative appeal (Voss, Spangenberg & Grohmann, 2003). To address these differences in consumer perceptions, studies often manipulate product descriptions to emphasize distinct attributes of the same product type (Crowley, Spangenberg & Hughes, 1992). For example, Jin and Zhu (2016) exemplifies how product descriptions influence perceptions of utilitarian and hedonic goods. A utilitarian sneaker might be described emphasizing its durable and practical attributes, such as being "highly wear-resistant, suitable for any environment." In contrast, a hedonic sneaker description might highlight its stylish design and aesthetic appeal, such as being "fashionable and versatile, complementing various outfit styles." This differentiation in product description helps to clarify the distinct appeals of utilitarian functionality versus hedonic experiential attributes, contributing to a clearer understanding of consumer preferences and decision-making processes in the context of product categories.

2.3. DST and SOR

DST and SOR are prominent theoretical frameworks in consumer behavior research, offering insights into various facets of consumer decision-making and behavior (Yuan & Peluso, 2021; Zhang & Benyoucef, 2016). DST posits that consumer behavior is shaped by two systems: System 1 (also referred to as hot, experiential, or impulsive system) and System 2 (cold, rational, or reflective system). System 2 is activated when consumers process complex information, involving deliberate analysis and conscious decision-making, leading to higher quality decision outcomes (Metcalf & Mischel, 1999; Xu, Zhang & Zhao, 2020; Evans, 2008; Dhar & Gorlin, 2013; Chen, Shechter & Chaiken, 1996; Kahneman, 2011). In contrast, System 1 operates under conditions of simplicity, relying on rapid and unconscious processing, driven by instinctive and emotional responses (Kahneman, 2011).

These two systems are supported by different cognitive models: the experiential thinking model, which facilitates quick judgments based on instinctual responses, and the rational thinking model, which supports careful consideration and deliberate decision-making (Evans, 2008). The distinction between these systems and their corresponding cognitive models elucidates how consumers approach information processing and decision-making in various contexts (Stanovich & West, 2000).

On the other hand, SOR theory evolved from classical stimulus-response models by incorporating the role of the organism, which represents internal cognitive and affective states (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). Originally criticized for oversimplifying behavior as mere responses to external stimuli, SOR theory expanded to include the individual's mental states and emotional responses before behavioral outcomes (Zhang & Benyoucef, 2016). According to SOR, environmental cues serve as stimuli that trigger internal cognitive and emotional processes, influencing subsequent behavioral responses.

Together, DST and SOR provide comprehensive frameworks for understanding the complexities of consumer behavior, addressing both the cognitive mechanisms and environmental influences that shape consumer decisions and responses. These theories are instrumental in exploring how consumers process information, evaluate products, and ultimately make purchase decisions in diverse market settings (Evans, 2008; Mehrabian & Russell, 1974).

Based on Bettencourt's understanding of the theory (Whetten, 1989), our study systematically compares and contrasts the application of SOR and DST in consumer behavior research across several dimensions. "Related concepts" denote the factors or constructs logically integrated into the explanation of social or individual phenomena. "The relationship between concepts" refers to the nature of these connections, whether positive or negative. "The mechanism between concepts" elucidates the underlying mechanisms and principles governing these relationships. "Context" serves as a boundary condition or limitation of the theoretical model.

In our comparative analysis of DST and SOR, we find that SOR offers a broader explanatory scope, encompassing not only informational attributes but also network dynamics and interaction characteristics. SOR is applicable across diverse contexts, including cultural influences, pricing strategies, and the need for uniqueness among consumers. Conversely, DST primarily focuses on the dual systems of decision-making processes, delineating how different types of information drive these distinct systems.

The pivotal distinction between DST and SOR lies in their mechanisms of interaction between concepts, crucial for understanding the theoretical underpinnings (Whetten, 1989). While SOR provides robust explanations for decision-making processes in consumer behavior (Kim & Lennon, 2013), DST offers detailed insights into how individual decisions form under the influence of dual cognitive systems, rather than a singular stimulus-response pathway.

In this paper, we specifically investigate how Vietnamese KOL characteristics influence consumers' purchase intentions across different product categories. Prior studies on consumer decision-making models have underscored the significant impact of purchase decisions on purchase intentions (Jeong & Jang, 2011; Nayeem, 2014; Shiau & Luo, 2012). DST's strength lies in its detailed description of decision-making processes, especially how varying types of information engage distinct cognitive systems (System 1 and System 2). This theoretical framework is particularly suitable for our research inquiries, as it allows for nuanced exploration of how KOL characteristics interact with consumers' decision-making systems based on different product information types. Moreover, DST addresses concerns raised by Sparrowe and Maye (2011), ensuring that our research leverages a theory with specific explanatory power tailored to our study's objectives, thereby avoiding the pitfalls of adopting overly general theories.

2.4. KOL and Purchase Intention

KOLs possess distinct characteristics that significantly influence consumer behavior, namely expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness. Expertise refers to their deep knowledge, experience, and skill in products, which they convey to their audience, particularly during live streams (Kim & Lennon, 2013). Trustworthiness reflects their integrity and sincerity in interactions (Ketchen, Adams & Shook, 2008), while attractiveness pertains to their physical appearance, physique, and voice, enhancing their appeal to followers (Ohanian, 1990). Social influence theory underscores how individuals' views, attitudes, behaviors, and decision-making are shaped by others (Cheung & Lee, 2010; Latané, 1981; Liang & Turban, 2011), thereby affecting consumer purchasing decisions during real-time interactions with KOLs.

H1: Expertise of KOLs impacts consumers' purchase intentions.

Expertise is particularly critical for KOLs, essential for their recognition and influence (Daneshvary & Schwer, 2000). According to Schouten et al. (Schouten, Janssen & Verspaget, 2020), expertise enhances the perceived credibility of influencers and significantly influences consumer purchasing behaviors and intentions. Given consumers' limited product knowledge while shopping, they often rely on knowledgeable figures like KOLs for guidance (Herstein & Mitki, 2008). The expert insights provided by KOLs fill this gap, becoming pivotal in consumers' decisions to purchase (Biswas, Biswas & Das, 2006). Xiong et al. (2021) further suggest that higher levels of KOL expertise correlate with stronger consumer purchase intentions.

H2: Trustworthiness impacts consumers' purchase intention.

In the context of LSC, KOLs serve as significant external sources of information for consumers. Extensive research indicates that the credibility of these sources strongly influences consumers' perceptions and evaluations of products or services they endorse. This phenomenon leads to enhanced brand trust and favorable impressions among consumers (Zhao et al., 2011). Trustworthiness, a critical characteristic of KOLs, directly impacts consumer perceptions of trust, thereby shaping their attitudes towards endorsed products (Nan et al., 2022). For instance, Zhou's study highlights how trust in information sources can increase consumer intentions to adopt new technologies like mobile banking among Chinese consumers (Zhou, 2012). Additionally, trust plays a pivotal role in reducing perceived risks associated with product purchases, thereby positively influencing consumer purchase intentions (Paul, 2003; Shao et al., 2019).

H3: Attractiveness impacts consumers' purchase intention.

Attractiveness, particularly in terms of aesthetic appeal, is another significant attribute influencing consumer behavior (Sundar, Tamul & Wu, 2014). People are naturally drawn to aesthetically pleasing objects and individuals (Dongyan et al., 2022). In the realm of shopping and consumer behavior, KOLs who possess high levels of attractiveness are more likely to capture consumer attention and influence their purchasing decisions (Gotlieb & Sarel, 1991). This attractiveness not only increases consumers' interest in products recommended by KOLs but also stimulates curiosity and desire, thereby bolstering their purchase intentions.

By emphasizing these characteristics - expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness - our research seeks to understand their distinct impacts on consumer behavior within the LSC context

2.5. DST and Purchase Intention.

According to DST, individual decision-making processes are influenced by two systems: System 1 and System 2. System 1 operates based on intuition and affective responses. Samson and Voyer (2012) suggest that System 1 relies on intuitive judgments and affective reactions. KOLs leverage attractiveness, including physical appearance and personality traits, which indirectly shapes consumers' initial perceptions of products (Bergkvist & Zhou, 2016). These impressions serve as a basis for rapid decision-making driven by intuitive processes (Jin et al., 2021). Attractiveness is considered part of affective responses (Ikeda et al., 2021). Principe and Langlois (2011) argue that attractive individuals evoke positive affective reactions, indicating a positive correlation between attractiveness and affective responses. Therefore, attractiveness is closely linked with System 1 processes.

In contrast, System 2 relies on logical reasoning and reflective evaluation of evidence rather than intuition, focusing on cognitive rather than affective responses (Samson & Voyer, 2012). The expertise of KOLs plays a crucial role in providing consumers with accurate and detailed product information (Kim & Lennon, 2013; Schouten, Janssen & Verspaget, 2020), thereby enhancing the quality and precision of decision-making processes (Hilligoss & Rieh, 2008). Trustworthiness, another characteristic of KOLs, reflects consumers' confidence in the sincerity and reliability of the information conveyed (Ohanian, 1990). Trusted KOLs are more likely to influence consumers' purchase decisions (Hilligoss & Rieh, 2008; Schouten, Janssen & Verspaget, 2020), as consumers rely on their guidance while shopping. Thus, expertise and trustworthiness align more closely with System 2 decision-making processes.

Research on consumer decision-making models underscores the relationship between decision-making processes and purchase intentions (Jeong & Jang, 2011; Nayeem, 2014; Sloman, 1996). Therefore, the characteristics of KOLs can effectively influence both System 1 and System 2 processes, thereby enhancing consumers' purchase intentions through informed decision-making.

Consumers' considerations differ significantly when purchasing utilitarian versus hedonic goods. For utilitarian goods, which are primarily functional in nature, consumers prioritize product attributes that fulfill their practical needs (Kivetz & Zheng, 2017). KOLs, known for their expertise and trustworthiness, play a crucial role by providing consumers with reliable and detailed information that aids in informed decision-making (Samson & Voyer, 2012). This process satisfies consumers' information requirements and stimulates critical thinking about the utility and functionality of the products they intend to purchase (Erdogan, 1999). Thus, the pathway linking "expertise and trustworthiness → Systems 2 → purchase intention" emerges as pivotal in influencing consumer decisions regarding utilitarian goods.

Conversely, when consumers seek hedonic goods, which are purchased for their emotional or sensory gratification, different factors come into play (Schulze, Schöler & Skiera, 2014). In this context, the attractiveness of KOLs becomes instrumental in evoking consumers' emotional responses and subjective evaluations (Escalas & Bettman, 2005). The physical appeal and personal charm of KOLs enhance the joy and satisfaction consumers derive from following their recommendations, thereby fulfilling their emotional and experiential desires during the purchasing process (Ragunathan & Corfman, 2006). Consequently, the pathway "attractiveness → Systems 1 → purchase intention" assumes prominence in influencing consumer decisions concerning hedonic goods.

In the LSC environment, where consumers often face complex decision-making scenarios influenced by time-limited promotions, diverse product categories, and varying styles available at discounted rates, the decision-making process becomes more challenging (Dijksterhuis et al., 2006). Despite the need to process substantial information, consumers tend to rely on heuristic decision-making mechanisms, particularly when adopting UT (Dijksterhuis, 2004). UT allows consumers to make quick, intuitive decisions based on simplified criteria, especially when confronted with high-quality decision information (Gao et al., 2012). Consequently, in the context of purchasing utilitarian goods, the pathway of "expertise and trustworthiness → Systems 2 → purchase intention" is likely to engender UT among consumers.

This operational framework underscores the significance of credible information sources in guiding consumer decisions.

3. Methodology

3.1. Survey & Experimental Design

In this research, we employed the online Google Survey to administer and distribute an online questionnaire following the selection of sample attributes, due to the lack of resources and the cultural fondness of anonymity of Vietnamese consumers. The questionnaire focused on distinguishing between purchases of utilitarian and hedonic goods. We randomly assign participants to either utilitarian or hedonic goods purchase groups upon questionnaire deployment. The questionnaire was structured into three sections.

Initially, participants engaged in a simulation of a LSC scenario where they were prompted to identify a KOL they followed. Subsequently, they were instructed to envision navigating a live streaming platform to locate the KOL during a live session, thereby entering the streaming room. In our study, we employed several methods to ensure the authenticity and accuracy of the contextual simulation: 1) We incorporated a method where participants were asked to identify a KOL they followed. This approach was designed to prompt participants to reflect on personal characteristics associated with the KOL they chose, thereby enhancing their assessment of KOL attributes relevant to our study. Additionally, participants' responses about their chosen KOL served as a criterion for screening invalid questionnaires, ensuring alignment with our operational definition of a KOL; 2) Our research referred directly to statements made by live streamers on major platforms regarding product sales, aiming to faithfully recreate the live streaming environment. This approach facilitated an accurate portrayal of the dynamics within live streaming rooms, ensuring the contextual fidelity of our simulated conditions. These methodological strategies were integral to maintaining the integrity of our research design, effectively capturing the nuances of consumer behavior in the LSC setting during a significant online shopping event.

Based on the approach outlined by Crowley, Spangenberg & Hughes (1992), which advocates for manipulating different attributes of the same product type, we gathered data on both utilitarian and hedonic characteristics of a blind item (selected by independent colleagues) from respective official websites. To mitigate the influence of brand preferences on consumer responses, we anonymized brands as Brand 1, 2, 3, ... during questionnaire distribution. During live streaming sessions, we ask our fellow colleagues to manipulate the presentation of utilitarian and hedonic attributes of the item they selected based on recommendations from KOLs, ensuring accurate categorization. The questionnaire comprised three parts: the first involved participants imagining entering a KOL's live streaming room where the KOL described an item featuring certain attributes that encouraging immediate purchase.

A total of 600 questionnaires were initially collected, evenly split with 300 in each group focusing on utilitarian and hedonic goods purchases. Subsequently, invalid questionnaires were screened based on the KOL names provided by participants. This screening process involved several criteria: 1) inclusion of multiple KOL names simultaneously; 2) mention of KOLs with significant popularity among participants but lacking broader recognition, necessitating verification through major platforms and websites; 3)

ambiguities in KOL names; and 4) incorrect or ambiguous responses such as "KOL," "Key opinion leader," "None," or "I do not know." After applying these criteria, 583 valid questionnaires were retained, comprising 287 from the utilitarian goods group and 296 from the hedonic goods group.

These rigorous screening measures ensured the reliability and accuracy of participant responses in aligning with the study's focus on consumer behavior within the LSC context.

3.2. Measurements

In this research, we selected a questionnaire previously validated in existing literature to ensure the reliability and validity of our measurement tools. Given that participants are Vietnamese consumers, we meticulously followed a translation/back-translation process to ensure the equivalence of meaning in the translated Vietnamese version of the questionnaire items. Furthermore, we solicited feedback from peers regarding several aspects. Firstly, concerns were raised about the item "You think this KOL is sexy" within the attractiveness section, considering potential cultural differences in interpreting the term "sexy" between Vietnamese and Western contexts. Secondly, it was advised to avoid clustering too many items from the same variable on one side of the questionnaire to mitigate common method bias.

Taking these suggestions into account, we revised the questionnaire accordingly. Each item utilized a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree/extremely unlikely, 5 = strongly agree/very likely), except for control variables which employed categorical responses. The constructs of attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness of KOLs were measured using items adapted from established scales by Ohanian (1990) and Zhang et al. (2020). For instance, attractiveness was assessed with four items, including statements like "The reason you watch the KOL is because the appearance of the KOL attracts you." Expertise was measured with four items, such as "You believe the KOL you follow has extensive experience with the products recommended." Trustworthiness was gauged through three items, including "You consider the content of the KOL's live streams to be credible."

Additionally, we adapt the framework of experiential and rational thinking, as established by Novak and Hofman (2009), to conceptualize Systems 1 and 2 in decision-making processes. This framework comprises eight items designed to measure these cognitive systems. Experiential thinking, assessed through four items, evaluates responses such as "I decide whether to purchase products in a KOL's live streaming room based on intuitive feelings about the product." Conversely, rational thinking, assessed through four additional items, examines responses like "I carefully consider my choices when shopping in a KOL's live streaming room."

For purchase intention, our study employs a scale adapted from Fang (2012), consisting of three items that capture attitudes such as "You are highly likely to consider buying products recommended by KOLs."

In addition to gender, age, residency, and marital status, commonly used control variables, our study incorporates personal monthly income, frequency of participation in LSC as additional controls. Personal monthly income serves as a proxy for individual purchasing power, while frequency of participation in LSC reflects the level of engagement and interest in online shopping activities. These variables are included to mitigate potential confounding effects on purchase intention.

Finally, to validate the differentiation between utilitarian and hedonic goods purchase groups, our study follows the approach outlined by Jin and Zhu (2016). Participants were first briefed on the definitions of utilitarian and hedonic goods and subsequently asked to rate products recommended by KOLs on a scale ranging from 1 (completely utilitarian goods) to 5 (completely hedonic goods). This method ensures clarity in categorizing participants based on their product evaluation and purchase motivations in the LSC context.

4. Results and Discussion

Initially, we assess the convergence of the constructs in this paper, including factor loadings, composite reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE). Specifically, factor loadings all above 0.7, CR values exceeding 0.5, and AVE values greater than 0.7 were considered indicative of satisfactory convergent validity. All constructs met or exceeded these thresholds, affirming their acceptable convergent validity. Discriminant validity was assessed using Fornell-Larcker criterion (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Thus, the authors proceeded to regression of models.

Table 2: Non-DST Mediators Results

Variables		Purchase Intention (PI)				
		(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Gender (Male = 1)		-0.021*	-0.013	-0.016	-0.019*	-0.017
Age	Dummy1 (< 25)	-0.052	-0.043	-0.041	-0.044	-0.027
	Dummy2 (> 35)	-0.068	-0.048	-0.051	-0.043	-0.011
Residency	Dummy1 (Hanoi)	0.038	0.021*	0.030*	0.026	0.018
	Dummy2 (Ho Chi Minh City)	0.046**	0.039*	0.033**	0.028**	0.025*
Marital Status (Single = 1)		0.071**	0.015*	0.022**	0.049**	0.006
Monthly Income	Dummy1 (< 15 mil VND)	-0.099*	-0.041*	-0.052	-0.048	-0.031
	Dummy2 (> 30 mil VND)	0.154***	0.072**	0.081**	0.068**	0.064**
LSC Participation Frequency		0.216***	0.209***	0.212***	0.203***	0.157***
Attractiveness (AC)			0.413**			0.233**
Trustworthiness (TC)				0.388***		0.311**
Expertise (EC)					0.381***	0.296**
Adjusted R ²		0.140	0.358	0.384	0.443	0.529

* Sig. 0.1; ** Sig. 0.05; *** Sig. 0.01

Source: Authors' Computation

Table 3: DST Mediators Results (5000 times bootstrap)

Utilitarian Goods (N = 287)		Hedonic Goods (N = 296)	
Pathways	Effect Size	Pathways	Effect Size
AC → S1 → PI	0.018	AC → S1 → PI	0.025
TC → S2 → PI	-0.021	TC → S2 → PI	-0.004
EC → S2 → PI	-0.016	EC → S2 → PI	-0.009

To evaluate hypotheses H1, H2, and H3, hierarchical regression analysis was employed, and the results are detailed in Table 2, where consumer purchase intention served as the dependent variable. Beginning with Model 1, which incorporated all control variables, subsequent models (Models 2, 3, and 4) introduced attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise of KOLs, respectively. The findings indicated positive correlations between these attributes and consumers' purchase intention (Table 2). Moreover, when all attributes were included in Model 5, encompassing attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise collectively, the positive correlations remained statistically

significant with acceptable adjusted R² (Table 2). Thus, from the data collected, we cannot reject hypotheses H1, H2, and H3.

To incorporate DST into our model, mediation analysis was conducted with the bootstrap method employed. Prior to mediation analysis, the validity of manipulating utilitarian and hedonic goods purchase groups was confirmed through independent sample t-tests. Subsequently, 5000 bootstrap analyses were performed to ascertain the mediation effect, revealing bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals for the "AC → S1 → PI" pathway that excluded zero, indicating significant mediation. Furthermore, attractiveness exhibited a significant positive correlation with

experiential thinking in both utilitarian and hedonic goods purchase groups, while experiential thinking positively correlated with consumers' purchase intention.

Our study focuses on LSC and examines how the diverse promotional strategies within this platform complicate consumer decision-making, potentially triggering UT. To explore this phenomenon, we developed a theoretical framework based on DST, which posits that different types of information engage distinct cognitive systems. Two decision pathways were hypothesized: "attractiveness → systems 1 → purchase intention" and "trustworthiness and expertise → systems 2 → purchase intention."

Initially, our research investigates the impact of KOL characteristics on consumer purchase intention. Data collected from our questionnaire survey revealed positive correlations between the attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise of KOLs and consumer purchase intentions. This finding aligns with existing research on celebrity endorsers and live streamers, highlighting the influential role of personal characteristics in shaping consumer behavior.

Building on this foundation, our study delves deeper into the mechanisms linking KOL characteristics and purchase intentions within the LSC context. To authentically simulate LSC conditions and emphasize the role of UT in complex decision-making, we aligned our questionnaire distribution with actual online shopping festival timings. Furthermore, to empirically validate the presence of UT, we randomly assigned samples into groups purchasing utilitarian versus hedonic goods. A shift in decision-making pathways from "trustworthiness and expertise → systems 2 → purchase intention" to "attractiveness → systems 1 → purchase intention" for utilitarian goods would indicate the influence of UT on consumer decision-making. Data analysis consistently demonstrated the significant mediating effect of experiential thinking, irrespective of goods type, suggesting that "attractiveness → systems 1" predominantly guides consumer decision-making in LSC, enhancing purchase intentions and revealing the role of UT in this process.

In exploring the selection of opinion leaders and KOLs, our study contributes methodologically by identifying the contextual refinement needed in existing selection models. While our findings do not offer a detailed mathematical derivation, they underscore the importance of recognizing UT within LSC, where consumer decisions often rely more on impulsive reactions to physical attractiveness or emotional resonance rather than deliberate analysis.

5. Conclusion

Our study contributes to consumer behavior research in several significant ways. First, we adopt DST to address limitations in SOR frameworks, which often fail to identify critical factors influencing consumer purchasing decisions (Zhang & Benyoucef, 2016). For instance, Aslam and Luna (2021) found that while customer contact quality impacts brand learning value and consumer engagement behavior on brand Facebook pages, it does not establish its essential role compared to content quality, which affects both brand learning and hedonic value. DST proposes that different types of information activate distinct decision-making systems: economic word-of-mouth activates System 1 (intuitive and emotional), while public welfare word-of-mouth activates System 2 (rational and reflective). In contexts aligned with

personal interests, economic word-of-mouth emerges as a critical determinant influencing consumer decision-making. This framework has been utilized to study various contexts, including the impact of brand benefits and food color brightness on consumer purchase intentions.

Our research extends these theoretical perspectives by investigating the influence of KOL characteristics in LSC under UT. We simulate real-world LSC scenarios to explore how KOL attractiveness predominantly influences System 1 processes, crucial in consumers' decisions to purchase utilitarian or hedonic goods during live streams. Furthermore, our study underscores practical implications for selecting KOLs in LSC and advancing the live streaming industry. In today's LSC ecosystem, KOLs significantly influence consumer purchase decisions by enhancing engagement and driving sales conversions. Therefore, emphasizing KOL attractiveness over professional expertise can notably stimulate consumer purchase intentions, particularly in fast decision-making contexts characterized by experiential thinking (Evans, 2003).

Despite these contributions, our study has certain limitations. Firstly, it focuses on the separate influences of decision systems 1 and 2, overlooking potential interactions between them, as highlighted by recent studies (Ferreira et al., 2006). Future research should explore how these systems interact and jointly affect consumer decision-making in LSC environments. Secondly, our study examines individual KOL characteristics in isolation, neglecting the potential synergistic effects of combining different attributes, as suggested by similarity attraction theory. Future research could investigate how combinations of KOL characteristics, such as professional ability and social appeal, impact consumer decision-making dynamics in LSC.

In conclusion, our research contributes theoretical insights into understanding consumer behavior in LSC contexts under UT and provides practical implications for stakeholders in the live streaming industry. Further research directions could focus on exploring the dynamic interactions between decision-making systems and the combined effects of diverse KOL characteristics on consumer behavior.

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