

GETSOCIAL

KOLs & KOCs: THE NEW KEY TO INFLUENCER MARKETING

The essential guide to understanding KOL and KOC Marketing

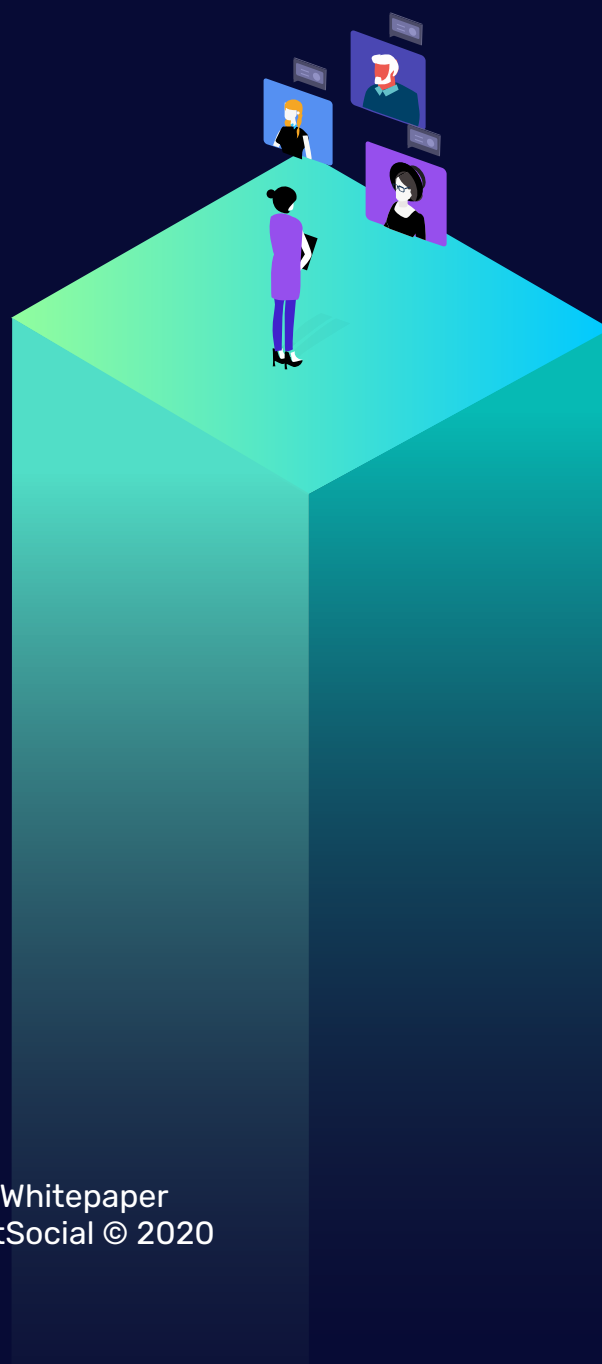


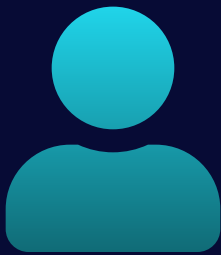
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What are KOLs?

A **KOL (Key Opinion Leader)** is considered to be an expert in a certain field, or at least experienced in forming and giving opinions on a specific topic. Their knowledge is respected by others in a community and their advice is trusted.

At first glance, it's easy to confuse this concept with the customary influencer that we so often hear about, but the two have a few differentiating characteristics.



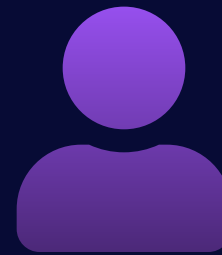
INFLUENCER

Strong social media presence and following

Relies on sponsorships for their income

Can reach different targets due to diverse following

Generally used for brand awareness



KEY OPINION LEADER

May not have a significant social media presence

Most likely doesn't rely on sponsorships for their income

Clear targeted and specific audience

Expected to generate sales for the brand

What are the differences between KOLs and influencers?

One key difference between an influencer and a KOL is that the latter doesn't necessarily work online.

While influencers are usually found on social media platforms (such as Instagram and YouTube) and rely heavily on the number of followers they have, **KOLs may not even have any social profiles.**

Influencers make a living out of partnerships with brands, which makes their presence on social media their full-time job. On the other hand, **KOLs are likely to not fully rely on social media for their income.**

For example, your doctor is certainly someone you turn to for advice when you're feeling under the weather. While you wouldn't normally consider them to be an influencer, they're a KOL because they have a massive influence on their patients' medical purchases.

This leads us to another characteristic that sets KOLs apart: **they have a clear targeted audience.**

A doctor's audience will have different needs but, ultimately, they're all looking for health-related recommendations.

Another interesting thing to note regarding KOLs is that **they're expected to generate sales for the brand.** While influencers are usually more used for brand awareness, KOLs have certain expectations to meet.

KOLs examples

Let's imagine you have a toothpaste to sell.

You may have the budget to catch Kylie Jenner's attention for a partnership, with all of her 150M followers on Instagram. **But would that be a good strategic choice?**

For one, it's not as if she's known for actively recommending toothpaste. And given how popular she is, it's safe to say that her followers' interests vary a lot. We can't say she has a clear targeted audience, solely based on her following and engagement.

This means that, should you have her promote your toothpaste, **a large portion of her followers likely wouldn't even care to look at your website or consider your brand.**

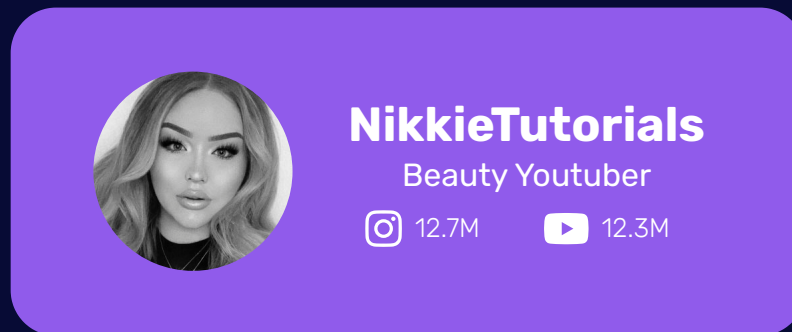
On the other hand, a safer (and cheaper) choice would be **dentists!**

Getting dentists who are quite influential in their field vouching for your toothpaste is a sure way to get a few new customers. That's because, generally speaking, if someone's looking for that sort of recommendation, they'd likely trust a KOL in dentistry without questioning their opinion.

Can KOLs be influencers and vice-versa?

Sure! Some KOLs may not fit the criteria of what we typically consider to be “influencers” (doctors, for example). But the two concepts can intersect.

One good example of this is Nikkie de Jager, more commonly known as **NikkieTutorials on YouTube**.



With an impressive 12.3M subscribers on her YouTube channel and 12.7M on Instagram, she’s earned the title of “influencer” in the cosmetics world.

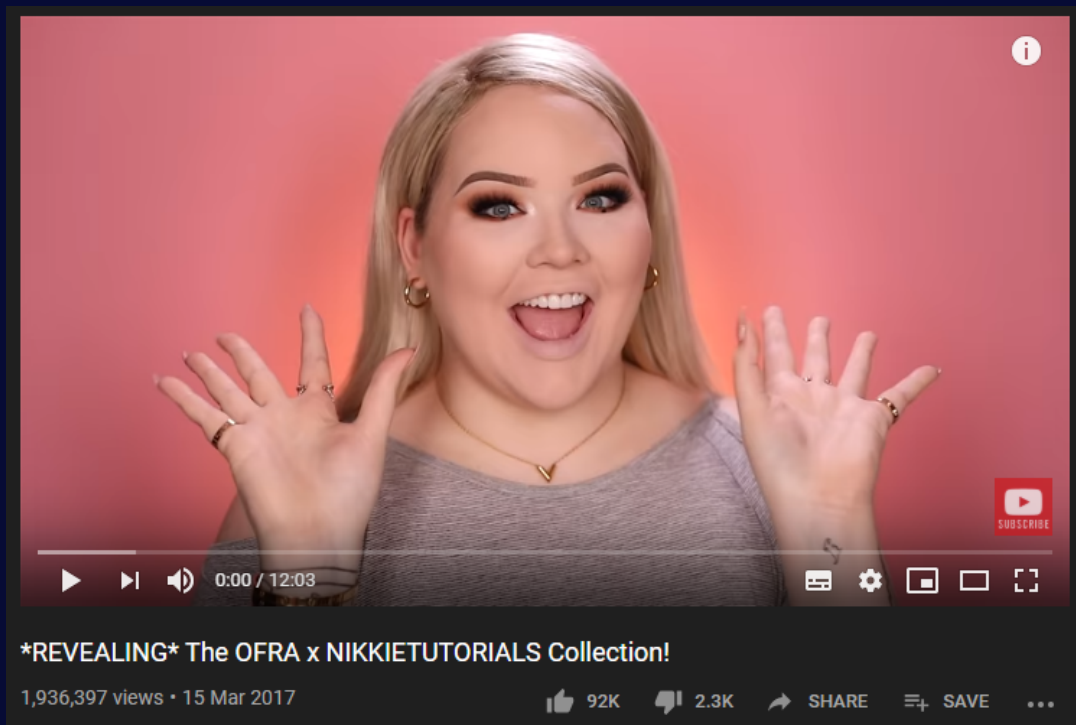
However, we can also consider her to be a beauty KOL, mainly for two reasons:

#1 - Given that every video she posts on YouTube involves makeup, you can be sure that most of her followers are interested in cosmetics and trust her recommendations. **Clear targeted audience? Check!**

#2 - While she does make a living out of social media, she doesn’t make videos with the intent of selling products per se. Instead, she “offers” her makeup tutorials. Her expertise in makeup is what keeps her followers interested, thus making her opinions respected.

As a cosmetics brand, you'd have a good chance of increasing your sales by collaborating with someone such as NikkieTutorials, as people trust her to know the best cosmetics products.

She's both a KOL and an influencer.



Example: In the past, she has collaborated with makeup brands such as Ofra to create exclusive products that were quick to sell out.

Furthermore, KOLs can even go one step beyond “influencers” and into “celebrity” status. To explore more of that, we need to look into how this works in China.

KOL marketing in China

China is clearly the leader in the online retail market, with a transaction value of around \$1.5 trillion¹. That's more than the next 10 largest markets combined, including the USA.



Source: McKinsey China Digital Consumer Trends in 2019

Still, even the biggest companies can't escape the challenges of the digital world and how it's constantly changing consumers' behaviors.

One of the biggest challenges brands have faced in the past year is the **effectiveness and ROI of KOLs, as well as the introduction of KOCs.**

These two concepts are widely known in China, more so than in any other country.

¹<https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/china/china-digital-consumer-trends-in-2019>

A study conducted by McKinsey on China's digital consumer trends for 2019¹ showed that professional knowledge is critical for consumers when buying:



Imported spirits (alcohol)



Mom/baby products



Consumer electronics



OTC pharmaceuticals and nutrition products



Home decoration items

According to McKinsey's research, **consumers are more likely to trust the help of employees at physical stores for these types of products**, than websites.

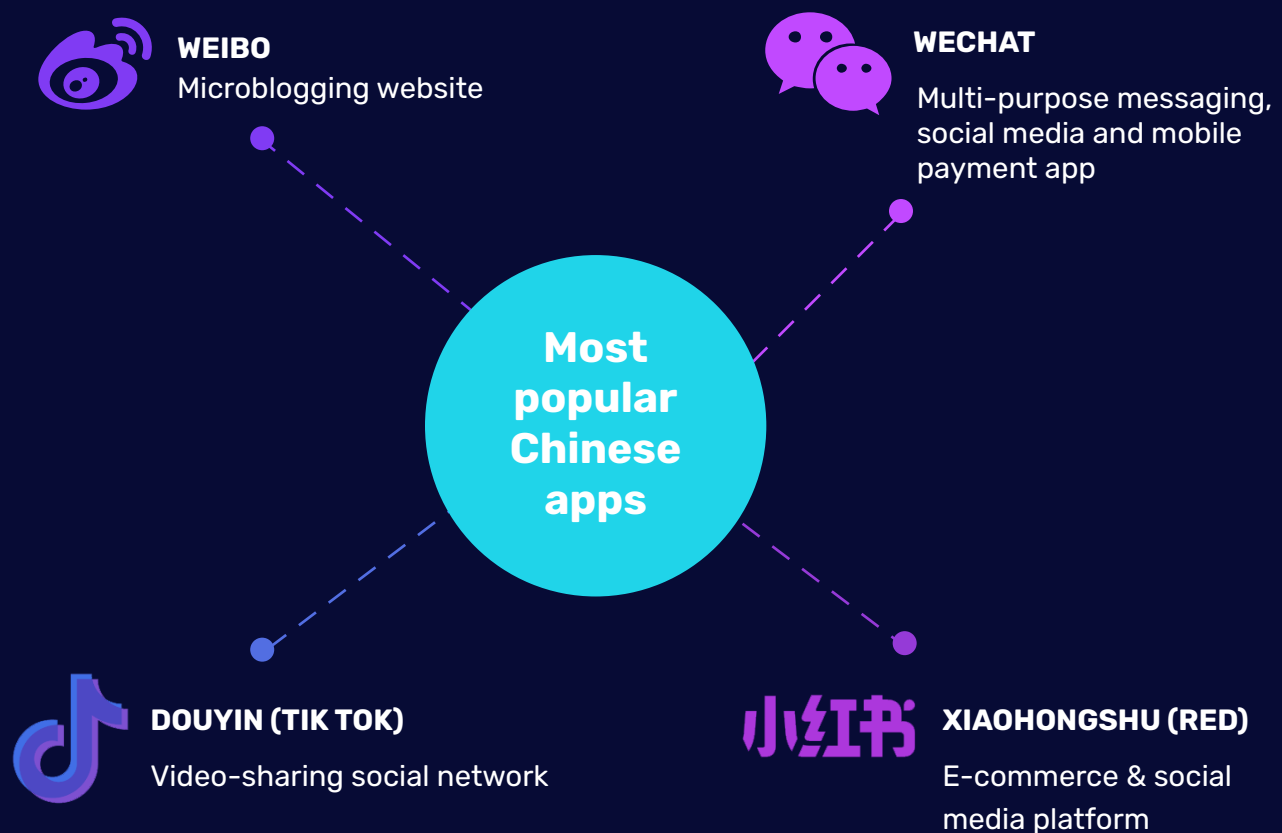
¹<https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/china/china-digital-consumer-trends-in-2019>

On the other hand, in categories such as beauty, packaged food, and apparel, celebrities have far more influence on purchasing decisions.

Because of this, **KOL marketing has become quite popular for the Chinese market**, especially for luxury brands.

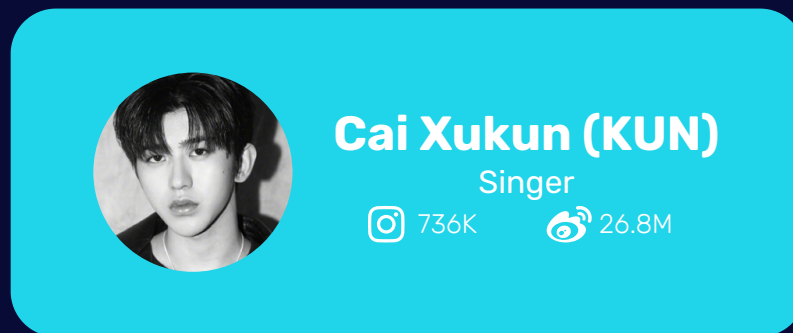
But the social media habits of Chinese consumers differ a lot from the rest of the world. When speaking of KOLs, you'll likely find them in apps such as WeChat, Weibo, Douyin (TikTok) and RED (Xiaohongshu), as opposed to Instagram or Twitter.

These social media platforms are the main sources of information for Chinese consumers, especially for the younger generations.



Examples of KOL marketing in China

Take the example of L'Oréal, who collaborated with Chinese popstar Cai Xukun (more commonly known as KUN) in 2018.



KUN is one of the most popular stars in almost every category on Weibo, an app similar to Twitter.

When he partnered with L'Oréal on the social platform for the brand's launch of a facial essence, **the brand sold 28.000 bottles in just 1 minute after its launch.**

It was completely sold out after 2 weeks and achieved a sales record of 25.8 million RMB (around \$3.75M USD).

Another successful collaboration on Weibo happened with Mr. Bags (包先生, real name Tao Liang). With well over 5 million followers, he earned his fanbase by commenting and recommending luxury handbags.

Givenchy, one of the most famous luxury brands in the world, took notice of this in 2017 and they partnered with him for Valentine's Day.

His promotion of the limited edition pink 'Mini Horizon' handbag helped the brand sell out in 12 minutes, amounting to 1.2 million RMB (around \$175.000 USD).



Tao Liang (Mr. Bags)

Fashion Blogger/Reviewer



Mr. Bags went on to break his record on WeChat, another popular Chinese app, where he collaborated with Tod's.

The brand sold **3.24 million RMB (around \$470.000 USD) worth of handbags in just 6 minutes.**

The other side of influencing: KOCs

Much like we often separate macro and micro-influencers, KOCs follow the same concept as KOLs, but on a much smaller scale.

KOC (Key Opinion Consumers) are everyday consumers, with enough following and credibility to influence their audience's purchasing decisions. Although they have a few more followers than considered "normal", it's still not enough to be considered an influencer. **Others consider them trustworthy mainly due to their relatability and honesty when reviewing products.**

They are essentially micro-influencers with a more targeted audience.

In China, **KOC marketing is growing in popularity**, mainly due to the growing reluctance from consumers to trust KOLs.

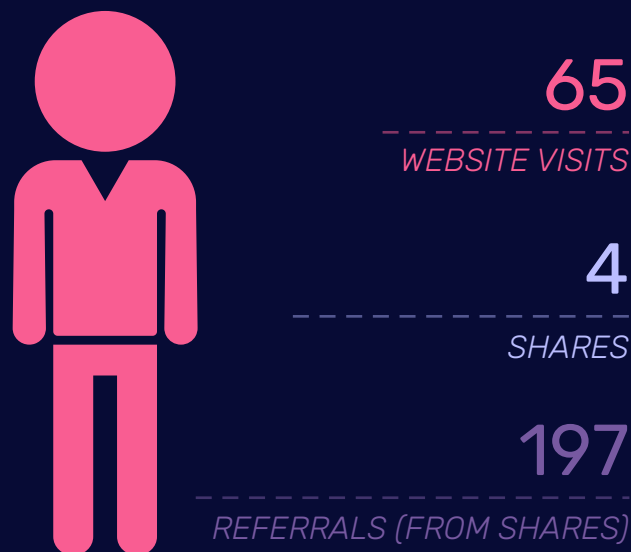
As more companies resort to influencer marketing to promote their products, consumers are becoming more aware of the high budgets involved in partnerships with KOLs and they're struggling to see value in recommendations from people who are clearly being paid for it.

More than ever, consumers worldwide are becoming less naive and paying more attention to the authenticity of a brand and the people they work with.

On the other hand, micro-influencers are capable of generating powerful results for brands who want to step away from the risks of campaigns with expensive macro-influencers.

A recent case study we did covers just how effective average consumers can be at sharing your content.

In just one week, one particular user was able to generate almost **200 referrals (traffic coming from shares)** from just 4 shares they did.



Source: GetSocial Influencer Marketing Case Study: How to Leverage Micro-Influencers

Granted, not all of your visitors are going to regularly check your website or share it as effectively. But even if it's happening with just one person, it's important to be aware of this untapped opportunity.

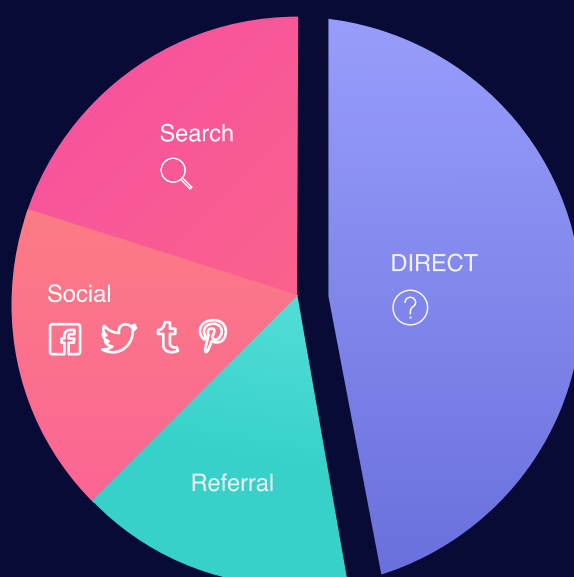
Collaborating with KOCs that have a significant following can be a great opportunity to increase influencer marketing ROI. Especially in Dark Social channels, as Adidas has proved with their Tango Squad

The role of Dark Social in influencer marketing

Dark Social traffic comes from social shares happening outside of what is usually measured by web analytics platforms. That includes social media channels such as WhatsApp, Slack, Email, etc.

The problem with Dark Social is that the referral traffic coming from these shares is commonly misattributed in analytics platforms.

For example, when someone shares a link in a WhatsApp conversation, the traffic that comes to the website is wrongly classified as Direct Traffic in Google Analytics. This implies that someone entered the website either through a bookmark or by typing the full URL on their browser. There's little you can do with this information, especially if it's wrong and the traffic is actually coming from WhatsApp.



Do you know where your direct traffic actually comes from?

Sharing in these private channels is becoming the new norm for consumers.

In 2019, around 77% of all shares were Dark Social shares.

With social networks such as Facebook becoming so popular and sometimes controversial, people now feel less comfortable sharing content so openly. Even Mark Zuckerberg has claimed that the future of social is private.

If consumers are shifting their way of consuming and sharing content, brands need to start adapting to this.

Although we tend to think of public social media profiles when we talk about influencer marketing, **Dark Social channels are an untapped opportunity for many brands.**

The digital world is rapidly changing how it views engagement metrics. In a reality where like counts are disappearing (see Instagram), companies need to pay attention to how and where their customers are sharing information that helps their purchasing decisions.

Moreover, with the growing distrust of the authenticity of paid influencers, consumers are now more than ever looking to their friends and family for organic recommendations.

Connecting with superfans through these dark social channels, where they're already spending most of their time, is the next step for influencer marketing.



Final thoughts

Are you ready to start looking for your KOLs/KOCs?

Keep in mind that, as it is with your regular influencer marketing campaign, you should always start by setting clear goals. Key opinion leaders and consumers can help your sales tremendously, but it all starts with determining and communicating the end objective.

To sum it up, here is a **KOL checklist**:

- They have a clear targeted niche audience
- They have extensive knowledge in a certain topic/field, which makes their opinion trusted by their peers and/or followers
- They don't necessarily rely on social media profiles and "influencing" as their main source of income
- They're more expected to generate sales instead of simply increasing brand awareness
- They can be KOLs and also fit the definition of influencer

On the other hand, if you're looking to avoid big budgets, **KOCs are proving to be a safer alternative**. Trust who's already your customer to know how to sell your product to others, whether it is just family and close friends, or their small but growing social following.

Keep an eye out for **opportunities to use dark social channels to strengthen your relationship with consumers** and build innovative campaigns based on private interactions.

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