

KEY OPINION LEADER REALITY: THE KEY TO SUCCESSFUL B2B DIGITAL MARKETING?

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Abstract. KOLs are increasingly using social media to implement digital marketing strategies. This research was conducted in the social context of business-to-business (B2B) sector companies in Indonesia. The study focused on the massive digital marketing activities independently carried out by employees as internal parties of the company, on their personal marketing content on LinkedIn. Consequently, employees are regarded as KOL marketing actors who can cultivate aspects of trust and expertise. This, in turn, affects the credibility of the employees themselves as well as the credibility of the company in the eyes of customers. The results of this study will serve as a practical guide for B2B company leaders. It will help them evaluate key opinion leader strategies through marketing content presented by employees. This will maximize credibility and the success of digital marketing. It will align with the changing market and increasingly dynamic customer needs. The findings of this study, as well as the ensuing discussions, have provided a comprehensive understanding of the challenges associated with leveraging employees as KOLs in marketing endeavors. These challenges manifest in the context of content activities on the LinkedIn platform and pertain to integrity, relevance, accessibility, and market response. The challenge of integrity is related to the consistency of digital presence, time management, honesty in conveying information and data in every piece of content, and transparency in explaining interests in becoming a KOL while being an employee and the face of the company. The challenge of relevance lies in meeting the needs and interests of a professional audience, obtaining company data, and synchronizing marketing trends and case studies with content creation techniques. The challenge of accessibility stems from the company's inadequate support and conflicts of interest, leading to actions without formal direction.

Keywords: digital marketing strategies, social media, Key Opinion Leader

I. INTRODUCTION

Marketing activities continue to change over time due to uncertain economic conditions. Starting from traditional or conventional methods with their limitations in terms of location and time, they have shifted to marketing methods using information and communication technology, accompanied by increasing internet usage. According to survey data from the Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association (APJII) in 2022-2023, internet users in Indonesia reached 215.63 million. The rapid penetration of information and communication technology (ICT) has increased internet usage, according to Kasali (2019). (Mahyuni & Rinaldi, 2022: 238) has shown an important role in changing and supporting the development of current digital business activities.

The development of the internet and digital technology will drive the economy of a country, including Indonesia, towards a digital economy, which will have major implications for overall economic growth in various sectors along with changes in technology, consumer behavior, and market trends. (Aulia & Aslami, 2023: 65). Citing information from kominfo.go.id, in 2024, the digital economy will impact market access, driving innovation, quality, and efficiency in business operations. The development of the digital economy

has also transformed the way companies interact with markets, customers, and employees, addressing challenges and increasing productivity in digital businesses by adopting digital marketing.

Digital marketing Currently, digital marketing has become a massive marketing activity implemented by companies to expand market reach, create more interactive and effective product or service marketing with the help of the internet and digital media (Gita Sagita, 2022: 26). Digital marketing has various strategies that can be implemented, one of which is content marketing on social media in the form of infographics (images and text) and videos. A Demand Metric study stated that the use of digital marketing in the form of marketing content on social media has resulted in 82% of consumers having a positive perception or impression of a brand. The rapidly evolving business environment has encouraged marketers to introduce their businesses through social media to increase their competitive advantage.

According to Hanna, Rohm, and Crittenden (2011) in (Intan NN & Nugrahani, 2021: 4150), the unique aspects of social media have transformed digital marketing and promotion practices, enabling them to quickly capture the attention of target audiences by generating new habits and trends. Social media helps companies communicate and

interact directly with customers, quickly strengthening their brand presence in the market, influencing consumer attitudes, and increasing sales. (Dwivedi et al., 2021: 2) This statement aligns with research (Zeffanya., 2022: 25), which found that 69% of consumers use the internet and social media to obtain information about companies and the products they need. This certainly presents an opportunity for companies to market their products extensively on social media according to the desires and needs of target audiences with diverse preferences and characteristics.

The implementation of digital marketing strategies through social media is increasingly widespread, with the help of KOLs, or Key Opinion Leaders. The presence of KOL marketing strategies in the uncertain digital economy era will help win business attention, build trust, and create awareness and a positive brand image to reach a larger audience and potentially become new prospects. (Lailiyah & Istiqomah, 2023: 1056). In general, KOL is a collaborative marketing activity between a brand or business and external individuals as early-stage messengers who have significant influence due to professional specialization in a particular industry or field. Specialization is considered to demonstrate capability and openness based on the knowledge and experience of a KOL on a particular topic to provide recommendations for a product or service relevant to their opinions packaged in the form of informative content on social media. The target audience will be emotionally bound to have trust that the product or service has been tested by experts. In addition to the emotional side, the KOL marketing strategy also refers to connectivity as a fundamental trend in current marketing that allows consumers to connect and recommend each other.

The use of KOL marketing is not a new thing like in the B2C or business-to-consumer sector, but it has become the latest marketing trend in the B2B or business-to-business sector to build and manage networks with stakeholders in the future through internal company parties. (Cartwright et al., 2022: 339). The role of opinion leaders is crucial in B2B business processes to generate long-term positive relationships with audiences or business partners, so KOLs must have the competencies. (Mero et al., 2023, p. 86) Competence in the B2B sector is closely related to building credibility and trust, which often requires more competent and significant resources and industry experience. Moreover, people tend to seek the opinions of others with more competence before making purchasing decisions. According to data from the 2022 CMO Survey, 87% of B2B customers prefer credible content sourced from trusted key opinion leaders in their industry. This data further demonstrates the opportunities for B2B marketers, as reported by Forbes.com in 2023, where 94% of marketers believe KOL marketing can be the best B2B business strategy.

The huge potential of KOL marketing in the B2B sector also provides the advantage of reaching the target consumer base, strengthening brand recognition, and having a positive effect on sales profits. (Agustian et al., 2023: 75). These data have shown that purchasing decisions in the B2B sector are determined by trust in the credibility of sources that can create good relationships between B2B companies in overcoming

the gap between theory and practice as a step towards efficiency and mutual benefit. The complex, personalized, and limited marketing approach in the B2B sector has made digital marketing methods develop by involving organic company employees as KOL marketing who create a variety of useful content. Referring to employees as trusted sources of information who share company activities, product or service knowledge, as well as information about experiences related to their expertise and professional careers on personal social media pages.

This is a transformative way to connect with potential customers and be recognized as credible advocates in the industry. Employees, as thought leaders in the company, apply their professional insights and experience to content on a variety of engaging topics within their respective areas of expertise. Audiences tend to value and relate to content that enhances their professional knowledge or skills on a human level, rather than content that focuses on hard selling. (Ar Rahmah, 2023: 48) When B2B company employees actively share content on social media, the credibility they convey implicitly represents the reputation and values of the company they work for, even if unintentionally, by being associated with its experts. Employees can also maximize the visibility of B2B company products and services to build and manage networks with future stakeholders. (Cartwright et al., 2022: 339). Building long-term, positive business relationships with B2B customers requires KOLs to demonstrate expertise and authenticity in their content. This is because the marketing activities of successful opinion leaders are based on authenticity. (Cartwright et al., 2022: 346).

KOL marketing activities by Employees, as a valuable company resource, are increasingly being managed independently, especially in the B2B sector, as a platform to market and demonstrate professional capabilities that influence audiences. Furthermore, changing marketing needs, which emphasize the personal and emotional aspects of audiences, create the potential for KOL marketing to expand networks, prospects, and add value. Internal B2B companies acting as thought leaders currently tend to utilize LinkedIn.

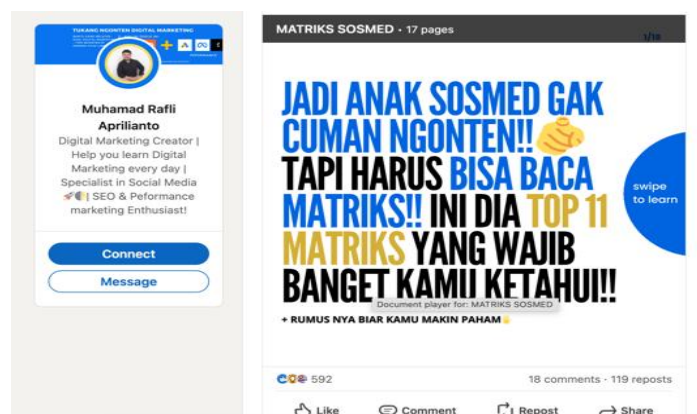


Figure 1. KOL Marketing on LinkedIn

Developing a KOL marketing strategy through LinkedIn social media content can be key for B2B marketers in increasing visibility and meeting customer needs (Balaji et al.,

2023: 247). LinkedIn has various advantages that have transformed the way B2B companies interact by connecting professional individuals in an industry with potential audiences as customers. An employee's LinkedIn profile can serve as an advocacy channel that builds audience trust in the relevance of the experience, opinions, and depth of knowledge as an internal KOL or thought leader. While various social media platforms can be used in B2B companies, LinkedIn has a trusted global reach and the potential to generate business collaboration contacts that benefit the company and the employees themselves. Clearly, the advantages of the LinkedIn platform are starting to be utilized by professionals from B2B companies in Indonesia, such as digital marketing agencies and edutech.

Armed with professional knowledge and experience in utilizing digital platforms and technologies, internal B2B companies such as digital marketing agencies and edutech companies are better able to provide in-depth perspectives on the effectiveness of products or services, phenomena, and specific issues relevant to their expertise, potentially guiding audiences to develop further steps towards business decision-making. B2B companies such as digital marketing agencies and edutech companies have a distinct advantage because their employees are equipped with specialized expertise in mastering the planning and implementation of digital marketing strategies and understanding digital content optimization on the LinkedIn platform. This established expertise will easily build trust as KOLs in maintaining long-term relationships with potential audiences while increasing company profits. The growing number of B2B companies in Indonesia is expected to become a solution and a platform for transformation in optimizing digital marketing so that they can address various marketing challenges and reach potential target audiences.

However, there are inconsistencies that actually indicate the opposite situation, namely that B2B influencer marketing is considered difficult as a strategy capable of determining sales success because B2B marketing targets are usually a specific group of people who are more specific and cannot be easily reached by focusing only on B2B followers (Mero et al., 2023: 89). Based on data from Forbes.com in 2023, in reality, only around 24% of B2B businesses have included KOL marketing in their overall marketing plan. This data is also in line with Hubspot survey data in "The Ultimate List of Marketing Statistics for 2024" that 61% of CMOs or Chief Marketing Officers of B2Bs have difficulty reaching clients until the final stage or closing. Another fact states that 60% of B2B companies report not having the skills or knowledge related to marketing with KOL (Mero et al., 2023: 79). In fact, based on research data from CELIOS or the Center of Economic and Law Studies on celios.co.id, the B2B business segment states that the value of global B2B transactions is projected to continue to grow from 903.50 billion USD in 2021 to 1618.15 billion USD in 2028.

Pertumbuhan Nilai Transaksi B2B Secara Global

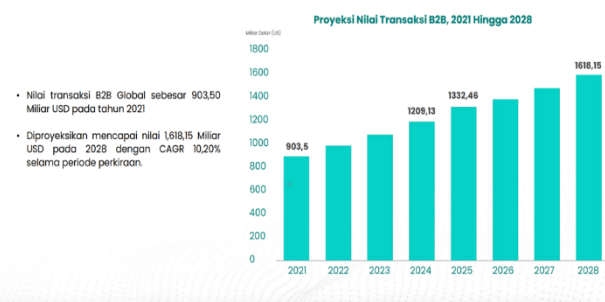


Figure. 2. Global B2B Transaction Growth Value Data

The growth of the B2B segment in the coming years could serve as a benchmark for maximizing KOL marketing activities in various sectors. Previous research has demonstrated the development of influencer marketing as a management practice in the digital economy era of the B2B sector. This includes focusing on strategic approaches to influencer marketing in the B2B market (Mero et al., 2023), consumer influence (Tran & Uehara, 2023), and the impact of these factors on company success (Thelen & Men, 2023). To the researcher's knowledge, research related to the reality of KOL marketing conducted independently by employees of B2B companies, analyzing the dimensions of challenges and supporting factors, has not been well and in-depth. This creates an opportunity and need for further research on this phenomenon from an employee perspective.

Based on the empirical gaps presented, which are inconsistent with the results of previous research and the actual data on the ground, this issue raises an anomaly. Researchers aim to address this gap by further analyzing the challenges and supporting factors of employees as KOLs in the dynamics of establishing credibility, in order to identify the key to successful digital marketing in the B2B sector. This study also aims to provide a comprehensive overview of how trust and expertise can be effectively optimized internally by B2B companies through organic activity on the LinkedIn platform, while contributing directly and indirectly to the development of digital marketing for the B2B companies studied in this study. By identifying this phenomenon, employees and companies will be able to develop key points of contact with potential customers, leading to faster and more professional purchasing decisions.

Referring to Source Credibility Theory can be a research gap that has never been used in previous studies by using the Trustworthiness and Expertise approach, will increase customer awareness, understanding, and retention of B2B companies. Source Credibility Theory states that positive trust and expertise from influencers can have an impact in influencing audience opinion and acceptance that can increase interest in business decisions. This research is expected to provide a new breakthrough to form new guidelines that help assess the reality of KOL credibility to build the key to B2B digital marketing success in terms of engagement, consistency, relevance, accessibility, and strategic response of the audience. This research also has implications in providing

insights and recommendations for leaders and internal parties of B2B companies regarding digital marketing strategies that need to be evaluated and developed to be more authentic and support and build employee initiatives as KOLs on LinkedIn.

The purpose of this study is to explore in depth the challenges and supporting factors of key opinion leaders in building the key to success in digital marketing in the B2B sector and to analyze the dynamics of key opinion leaders in realizing credibility as the key to success in digital marketing in the B2B sector.

This theoretical basis describes the theory regarding the concept of kol (key opinion leader) marketing, the B2B (business-to-business) industry, and the concept of source credibility theory.

A. The Concept of KOL (Key Opinion Leader) Marketing

Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) often serve as role models and benchmarks for consumer behavior and decisions, directly empowering their audience to participate in all marketing activities, including purchases. KOLs tend to develop social media content that illustrates their area of specialization or profession by presenting opinions on controversial case studies, hoping to provide value to their audience. It could be argued that all thought leadership is content, but not all content is thought leadership. Thought leadership content encompasses the sharing of knowledge and experience, demonstrating expertise in building trust, thus indirectly supporting businesses and brands.

Everyone has experience, but not everyone can translate that experience into competent and useful thought leadership. KOLs provide fresh insights into market trends, challenges, and opportunities that can facilitate the advancement of thinking and understanding among audiences and industries. Digital marketers choose to leverage the expertise of KOL marketing to credibly convey product or service marketing messages through expert recommendations and endorsements of specific products or services. This can influence the opinions and attitudes of target markets, thereby optimizing and growing company sales.(Gunardi, 2024: 981–983).

KOL marketing involves the marketing activities of an internal or external individual with great authority or influence and is at the forefront based on competence, knowledge, and experience related to certain industry issues so that every opinion directed from a KOL will be considered valid to build and maintain a long-term relationship of trust with customers.(Baharsyam & Wahyuti, 2022: 245)The involvement of Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) in digital marketing strategies significantly influences potential customers to take business action, namely purchasing decisions.

KOL marketing strategies can increase brand visibility on social media or other online platforms, making it easier for customers to find them and having a large follower engagement base, thus strengthening brand awareness until customer trust is perceived as an authority source that influences purchasing decisions. The effectiveness of KOLs has consolidated over time, contributing to changes in the purchasing decision-making process as well as business

partnerships that share information about brands and products, such as insocial media(Sari & Basit, 2020: 35).Building consumer trust in a brand or product is an important element in KOL marketing because according to Xiong (2021) in(Cantika & Kurnia, 2023: 215)The more the audience places trust in KOL, the more the effectiveness and success of the marketing strategy will increase.

B. Marketing, B2B Industry (business-to-business)

B2B companies' target groups are business stakeholders who tend to be more specific and focus on specific needs, compared to B2C target groups such as customers, employees, intermediaries, and competitors. B2B relationships are built on trust and commitment that enable the parties to co-create value, resulting in more active business partner engagement.(Cartwright et al., 2022: 339).

Organizations operating in the B2B segment need to develop trusted relationships with customer organizations so that B2B marketing can focus on networking and interactions between organizations.(Mikalef et al., 2023: 2). B2B marketing also focuses on ongoing relationships with potential customers, referring to a marketing process that takes into account the long-term value of a company's products or services and makes it easier for B2B marketers to understand the specific needs of customers and provide appropriate solutions. Business to Business is an association or organization that produces a product or service intended for organizations and/or corporate customers. B2B opens the door to trade by using networks between business organizations, not to end consumers like the B2C sector or single transactions.(Indah Wahyu Putri & Suriyanto, 2022: 46).

C. Source Credibility Theory concept

TheorySource credibility states that key opinion leaders (KOL) or often referred to as influencers, are believed by the public to be experts in a particular professional field who are trusted because they have in-depth and specific expertise or knowledge and will be more effective in conveying marketing messages.

Hovland, Janis, & Kelley (1953) in(Zakaria et al., 2020: 3129–3130)argues that the primary factor in determining credibility is trust in a credible and reliable source. People or recipients will be more easily persuaded when the source displays their credibility. The credibility of a message source is based on the recipient's trust in the sender. Source credibility theory has the basic assumption that the audience will feel reassured when the source possesses knowledge that is perceived as reliable. The higher the expertise or competence of the source, the higher the recipient's trust in the material conveyed by a credible source compared to that conveyed by a non-credible source.(Hovland & Weiss, 1951: 649–650). Expertise is related to the realm of competence, while trust touches on a person's intentions so it can be concluded that both are able to influence potential attraction.(Crisafulli et al., 2022: 386).

II. RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research design. The researchers conducted qualitative analysis to interpret and contextualize the meaning of the data obtained in depth regarding the independent activities of internal marketing KOLs in formulating the reality of successful B2B digital marketing strategies.

This research uses a case study method because it allows researchers to collect as much data as possible, then analyze and clearly understand the reality of a phenomenon. Thus, case study research can help researchers understand how the realities and challenges of KOL marketing interrelate to optimize the credibility of company employees as implementers and contributors to the company's future B2B marketing strategy.

A. Research Setting

The physical setting of this research utilized the Zoom Meeting platform as an inclusive interaction space with research informants, who were employees from various companies across Indonesia. The researchers sought to understand the differences in perception based on the informants' background knowledge and experience, allowing for calm and constructive interviews, optimizing the depth of information obtained and remaining an integral part of the research setting.

This research was conducted on the social context of B2B companies in Indonesia, focusing on the massive, independent digital marketing activities carried out by internal employees, specifically through marketing content on their personal LinkedIn social media platforms. Based on this, employees are considered KOL marketing actors capable of developing trust and expertise, thus impacting both their own credibility and the company's credibility in the minds of customers.

B. Data Collection and Analysis Techniques

The type of data required by researchers in this study is qualitative data with a case study approach. The data obtained in this study comes from primary data. The primary data in this study consists of data from interviews with employees of B2B companies as informants who are opinion leaders or KOL marketing. The primary data was obtained by referring to interview guidelines that have been designed and submitted to informants to meet the research objectives. In addition to primary data, this study will collect secondary data to complement the research data, namely documentation studies in the form of observations of images and publications of reports and LinkedIn social media content. Researchers will gain a clearer, more complete, and in-depth understanding of the reality of the challenges and supporting factors of employees as organic or internal KOLs in supporting the success of digital marketing in the B2B sector. Data collection uses observation, interviews, and document studies. Data analysis in qualitative research is carried out from the initial discovery of data in the field by researchers, then the data goes through the stages of condensation or reduction of inappropriate data, data presentation, data interpretation and drawing conclusions in the form of a series of sentences. Next,

the validity of the analysis results is verified using a source triangulation model.

This study employed source triangulation by conducting data testing through in-depth interviews with nine informants, employees of B2B companies implementing KOL marketing. This allowed the researchers to obtain in-depth data sources to answer the research questions. These data sources must first be validated to ensure more accurate and credible research results. The data obtained was then supported and compared with previously obtained documentation. Then the research data analysis used NVivo 14 software

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Researchers utilized NVivo's word frequency query feature to create codes and themes by analyzing the most frequently occurring words in the interview data. Below, the researchers present the results of the word frequency query in word cloud format:



Figure. 3 Word Objects in Interview Results (Word Cloud)

The word cloud results show a collection of words such as "trust," "engagement," "credibility," "success," and "professional" which tend to be mentioned most among other words in the research data on the reality of KOL in the success of B2B digital marketing. The word "trust" which has the largest dimension becomes an issue in the inconsistency of previous research that there is no trust in influencer marketing or KOL marketing because it is considered difficult to be a determining strategy for sales success in the B2B sector. As a result, the reality of key opinion leaders is questioned regarding the level of audience trust in KOL as a source of professional information that prioritizes honesty and credibility in the implementation of KOL marketing which in this study was conducted by internal or organic parties of B2B sector companies on LinkedIn. These five large-dimensional words illustrate the core of source credibility theory and indicators of the implementation of key successful KOL marketing in the B2B sector.

The following words, namely "experience," "development," "improve," "consistency," "knowledge," "useful," and "portfolio" show that the reality of KOL marketing as the key to the success of B2B digital marketing is also based on the experience, knowledge, and portfolio of employees as KOLs on LinkedIn who are consistent and relevant in expressing opinions on current industry issues so that they can be useful

for the audience and are able to increase the success of B2B digital marketing despite the challenges and doubts that arise.

Additional themes that complement and expand the reach of the reality of challenges and supporting factors of KOL marketing are visible in the word cloud, namely "specialization," "quality," "impression," "marketing," and "profit." These themes illustrate that KOL marketing is carried out organically with openness and specialization in quality content that makes it easier to reach the target audience, thus optimizing marketing and profits in the B2B sector.

A. Challenges and Supporting Factors for Key Opinion Leaders in Building Successful Digital Marketing in the B2B Sector

Based on interviews with informants, researchers found that KOLs do face challenges and supporting factors that play a crucial role in achieving digital marketing success in the B2B sector. The various deep-rooted dimensions that constitute challenges that must be overcome and can be addressed as supporting factors for B2B company employees in fulfilling their key opinion leader roles have been visualized in a mind map using the NVivo application as follows.

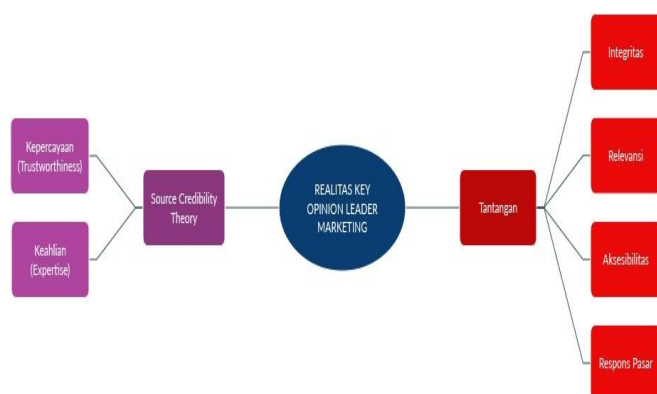


Figure. 4. Mind Map Visualization

The in-depth focus of the research mind map presented in Figure 2 is the reality of key opinion leader marketing (KOL) marketing, which is connected to source credibility theory as a theoretical foundation and guide for interpreting research findings. It is accompanied by an explanation of four dimensions of challenges and supporting factors. Two aspects of source credibility theory are trustworthiness and expertise. Before discussing the reality of employee trust and expertise as KOLs in being the key to successful B2B digital marketing, the researcher attempted to analyze the dual contribution of these four dimensions, which have the potential to become challenges when certain obstacles occur or become supporting factors or drivers of success for KOL marketing on LinkedIn. Existing challenges not only can hinder KOL marketing from achieving digital marketing success but can also reduce the effectiveness of their content, which will impact credibility as an expert. However, if the existing challenge dimensions are implemented and overcome

properly, they can support the realization of the desired B2B digital marketing success.

Referring to the results of informant interviews, managing integrity amidst demands for consistency, authenticity, honesty, and transparency; creating relevance according to audience and industry needs in growing business relationships and prospects; the level of accessibility of reach and audience involvement in finding and understanding marketing content; and responding to market responses related to impressions, engagement, achievement, positive feedback and reflection of negative responses are dimensions of challenges for B2B company employees when creating KOL marketing content on LinkedIn that can be overcome as supporting factors for the success of B2B digital marketing if maintained and managed properly.

The demand to uphold integrity as a thought leader presented a challenge to informants in identifying the role of a marketing KOL, which they perform independently without formal direction from the company. Several informants specifically mentioned limited time management skills when juggling their primary job at the company with their role as a marketing KOL on LinkedIn. Furthermore, the demand to demonstrate expertise first to gain the audience's trust as an expert in their field is not accompanied by rewards or incentives, as it is purely a personal initiative to share professional knowledge and experience. This is feared to impact how KOLs maintain the values of authenticity, honesty, and transparency, to maintain audience trust while maintaining personal branding that aligns with their professional values. The next integrity analysis of the informants stated that they initially had no specific motivation to be a marketing KOL, but over time they realized their presence could open up discussion spaces and provide useful insights for the audience, thus the informants were considered credible as thought leaders. The informants then felt confident and active with KOL marketing content on LinkedIn with profiles of the informants' expertise and experience and also included their company names. All informants also always mentioned that they were employees of B2B companies when mentoring in online classes, speaking at seminars, and networking with many relations. Showing transparency of these affiliate relationships, even though they are independent marketing KOLs, can still increase trust in the minds of the audience that the informants uphold professionalism as marketing KOLs and employees of B2B companies. Examining that several informants actually proved that integrity is a strength and supporting factor because the informants successfully illustrated consistency between personal values and the reflection of the company's internal image. At the same time, they also succeeded in ethically delivering marketing content without exaggeration or hard selling.

Likewise, the relevance dimension is a supporting factor for KOL marketing. Employees as KOL marketing upload content that consistently receives high engagement, thus adding value to B2B audiences, namely case study content relevant to current topics in their respective industries or fields of expertise. This is especially true if the chosen content

topic is at an easy level with a clear hook, keywords, and bridging so that it is easily understood by the B2B audience. KOLs also always include insights into practical solutions for audiences to apply to business development and expertise that demonstrates KOL marketing's expertise in meeting the needs of B2B audiences. For example, one informant from Antlia Creative Agency in content on his LinkedIn account advised the audience to 'copythink' before doing copywriting to maximize and appropriately serve as a digital marketing strategy that is able to attract interest and is relevant to the audience so that they are willing to take action or business decisions. The informant also uploads evergreen content that greatly supports increased engagement and credibility because it is very useful and long-term. This proves that KOLs cannot only focus on developing trends to be considered up-to-date, but must be able to understand the audience who needs problem solving to build long-term relationships between KOLs and their audience. KOLs can also increase engagement and conversions through content A/B testing, identifying what content is effective, relevant, and long-term with B2B target audiences, and measuring specific metrics based on data acquisition to make more informed decisions for digital marketing success. Informants also stated that they studied audience behavior, which is more interested in discussing digital marketing strategies from well-known brands or companies and trusts KOL content with a narrow scope. Although relevance is a supporting factor for the sustainability of KOL marketing content, there are several things that make the relevance aspect a challenge.

The relevance challenge experienced by informants to date is the dilemma of maintaining data ethics and privacy for KOL marketing content needs. KOL marketing requires valid data to be trusted as expert opinion leaders in their fields and optimally create content relevant to audience needs. All informants specifically mentioned that the data needed to improve the quality of KOL marketing content is difficult to access because it is confidential, specific, and some data is not updated, both from their companies and well-known companies in Indonesia. This difficulty in accessing it presents a challenge for KOLs in managing content material to remain relevant and trustworthy, even though they do not fully utilize valid data related to social media algorithms, website traffic, or the latest monthly and annual reports from official sources.

As internal company personnel, informants face a dilemma when utilizing company data. They must adhere to ethical policies regarding obtaining private and non-public data without the data owner's permission. They must also maintain content relevance with the latest data. Regulatory limitations will increasingly diminish content quality, as every KOL's opinion must be based on data to be more credible. Without this, audiences will perceive informants as merely good talkers without the necessary skills, knowledge, and experience to be a marketing KOL.

Relevant content was also considered a challenge by informants due to the demands of being experts in their fields, who must be able to address the needs and preferences of a dynamic and unpredictable audience. Informants' statements

regarding relevance have demonstrated that KOL marketing activities not only demonstrate a supporting factor for B2B digital marketing success, but also present challenges that can impact confidence in KOL marketing expertise.

Informants explained that accessibility is both a challenging dimension and a supporting factor for independent KOL marketing activities in the B2B sector. Busy working as employees in B2B companies and being independent KOL marketing on LinkedIn means that informants actually have limited time to consistently upload content regularly because the process of designing content from the beginning of finding content ideas to packaging it into visual content is very time-consuming. Some informants felt limited time to engage in active discussions with the audience in the comments section or direct messages personally. This time challenge is an implication of KOL marketing activities carried out independently without formal direction or company support. However, other informants stated that accessibility makes it easier to interact with the audience, thus creating an advantage in driving positive exposure.

Overall, informants stated that their companies support opinion leadership because it positively impacts employee skill development, experience, and personal branding. Employees are given the freedom and constructive feedback to become credible marketing KOLs, as long as they can remain focused on their internal responsibilities and maintain the privacy of company data.

However, few of the companies interviewed provide adequate technical support, such as device facilities, tool subscriptions, training access, and access to company industry data. If employees could receive full company support, it would be a supporting factor as KOL marketing, strengthening their legitimacy as company representatives and better managing ethical dilemmas about data privacy. According to informants, companies' positions have not yet optimized the accessibility of KOL marketing content and mitigated the conflict of interest between KOLs' responsibilities as employees and opinion leaders, even though they are operating without formal direction from B2B companies.

The accessibility dimension for KOL marketing can also be a supporting factor, with various features and systems in LinkedIn support. One informant mentioned that the account feature as an individual or as a content creator allows KOL marketing content to achieve high reach because it is easier to spread widely to the target audience. LinkedIn's algorithm system supports this by recommending KOL marketing content based on intensity and trend relevance, as well as high levels of likes and comments. Positive responses or reception from the audience, such as lively comments columns with discussions and requests for KOLs to discuss a topic in subsequent content, as well as intense questions related to LinkedIn content, are also supporting factors for KOL marketing.

Market response is the final dimension that illustrates the challenges and serves as a supporting factor in establishing the credibility of KOL marketing, helping to identify the key

to success in digital marketing in the B2B sector. In-depth identification of the high and low responses of professional audiences, as decision-makers in the B2B industry, presents challenges such as controlling engagement and feedback on KOL marketing content. In reality, engagement does not present a challenge, as informants' KOL marketing content receives high engagement. Most informants create case study content linking to well-known brands or companies such as Apple and Netflix, which have generated hundreds to thousands of likes, comments, and reposts. This response actually serves as a supporting factor for KOLs to continue engaging audiences by presenting content that can satisfy the curiosity and needs of B2B audiences. Vendors who approach, send direct messages, and request connections to KOL marketing or to companies via LinkedIn are positive feedback that further supports KOL marketing activities as a key to success in digital marketing in the B2B sector. Audience responses come not only from individuals but also from large companies that can become potential customers or business clients. One informant engages in KOL marketing activities with content that frequently discusses IKEA's digital marketing strategy. The impact is that KOLs receive connection benefits from IKEA, as do B2B companies where KOLs work, which receive leads in the form of cooperation contracts because their internal companies indirectly promote and strengthen IKEA's branding in a wider audience. Based on this analysis, it has shown how market response can be the key to successful digital marketing in the B2B sector, although it cannot be denied that there will be challenges that must be watched out for and can be managed well so as not to hinder KOL marketing activities in the long term.

Various dimensions that emerge as challenges and supporting factors for B2B company employees as KOL marketing on LinkedIn as previously explained, have reflected the characteristics of opinion leaders, namely having popularity and influence, creating engagement and connections, presenting authenticity, to the development based on measuring results. KOL marketing activities carried out by B2B company employees as informants have demonstrated their popularity and influence with their ability to share knowledge and experience in their respective fields through content on LinkedIn. In this study, informants have included valid and up-to-date data about digital marketing in each of their opinions. Informants inform marketing trends, case studies from well-known companies or brands, to raise problems that are often hot topics among digital marketing professionals to be adapted as business solutions for the audience and long-term business development. The company's popularity also increases with the intensity of mentions in content that makes it more known to the audience and can also be trusted by its credibility such as the credibility of KOLs in content on LinkedIn independently. It can be concluded that KOL marketing demonstrates expertise to be trusted by the audience and is popular and has influence as an expert in its field.

The expertise of a KOL marketer was then questioned regarding how to build engagement and connections with the audience. When actively posting content on LinkedIn,

outreach via DM increases to potential leads. Furthermore, the informant also actively engages with the audience who responds to KOL marketing content through the comments section, expressing praise, gratitude, and asking questions related to the content, topics, or new case studies. This engagement significantly supports the LinkedIn algorithm, which elevates content to the top due to high engagement in terms of likes and comments. As a result, the informant feels the opportunity to build reputation and connections is created, one of which is by being directly involved in receiving all feedback, thus becoming increasingly recognized and trusted as a speaker, mentor, and even as a business collaborator, both personally and with companies.

Engagement and connections are crucial for the sustainability of KOL marketing activities, allowing informants to follow each other's professional KOL LinkedIn accounts and provide constructive feedback. The breadth of connections or relationships a KOL builds with experts reflects the KOL's shared credibility, potentially opening up business collaboration opportunities. Another characteristic that reflects an opinion leader, key to successful B2B digital marketing is authenticity in KOL marketing content, which fosters two-way interactions, including likes, shares, and comments, which organically increase engagement rates because the content is perceived as valuable and relevant to the audience. Authenticity is demonstrated by avoiding the need to follow trends, especially those that are not aligned with our branding. Dare to be different by developing original content based on the KOL's experience and knowledge, then adapting it to the audience's values and needs, as well as current marketing trends. Authenticity also encompasses honesty and the avoidance of plagiarism, prioritizing the originality of facts, data, and expert opinions. KOLs with popularity and influence that generate engagement and connections in fostering authenticity as experts must measure the results of KOL marketing activities, such as content on LinkedIn.

Informants continuously monitor the development of likes, viewers, and comments on each piece of content on LinkedIn because it demonstrates trust in KOL marketing. Despite this statement, informants, as KOLs or experts, place a strong emphasis on building connections and relationships, and the most important thing is that their opinions are accepted and approved by the audience. Companies in the B2B sector handle longer sales cycles, focusing on building relationships and providing solutions tailored to the needs of specific clients or customers. Therefore, B2B companies invest in managing leads with content marketing, personalized communications, and demonstrating performance results to potential clients or customers. Informants stated that influencer marketing is measured by the number of new connections and engagement levels such as likes, comments, and shares, while also increasing audience awareness of the B2B companies where KOLs work.

Sales generated were not explicitly or clearly stated because all informants considered it not the primary focus of B2B marketing but rather the ultimate goal of all efforts to build connections and relationships through KOL marketing

on LinkedIn. The research results can be summarized that the four dimensions are contextual, referring to the company's experience, knowledge, and support during their independent role as a B2B KOL.

Understanding the 4 dimensions that are challenges and supporting factors for KOL marketing can be further elaborated with the following frameworks such as reach, relevance, and resonance, which are crucial to implement to achieve credibility and success in B2B digital marketing. The reach of informants as B2B KOLs is not a challenge because of the ease with which their KOL marketing content can be found, accepted, and implemented by the audience through LinkedIn support in the "account as an individual" or "as a content creator" feature, which creates a higher reach than using the "account as an individual" feature.

B. Key Opinion Leader Process Builds Reality of Trust and Expertise in Realizing B2B Sector Digital Marketing Success

Based on the results of interviews with informants, the process of achieving successful digital marketing in the B2B sector focuses not only on content creation and reaching audiences, but also on credibility as opinion leaders. This credibility is based on two aspects of source credibility theory, namely trust and expertise. In this study, we will optimize research understanding by explaining source credibility theory that accommodates the dimensions of integrity, relevance, accessibility, and market response to present a new framework. This framework is integrated with four derivative dimensions as an integral part that is able to map the reality of trust and expertise of KOL marketing in shaping audience perceptions. Therefore, the researcher presents a concept map to clarify the reality of trust and expertise of KOL marketing in the following framework:

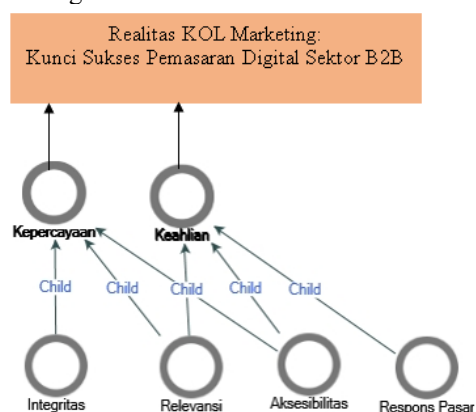


Figure 5. Research Concept Map

Based on Figure 3, it can be understood that the dimensions of integrity, relevance, accessibility, and market response are integrated with the two aspects of source credibility theory. This means that each dimension is a constituent factor of trust and expertise as the credibility of KOL marketing that has been well managed. At the same time, the four dimensions that are challenges and supporting factors for employees as KOLs have direct implications for realizing the key to success in digital marketing in the B2B sector. The

trust aspect leads to the aspects of integrity, relevance, and accessibility. The expertise aspect to relevance, accessibility, and market response. A deeper and more detailed understanding of each dimension and aspect is discussed below:

1. Trust

The first aspect of source credibility theory is trust in KOL marketing, whom B2B audiences rely on as experts or breakthrough creators in a field, based on their knowledge and experience. Trust emerges as a crucial determinant of consumer engagement and purchasing decisions, in addition to the opportunity for KOLs to objectively convey products and receive subjective feedback.(Chen et al., 2024: 3371).

In this study, the trust aspect refers to the integrity of employees as B2B marketing KOLs, who consistently develop personal branding, maintain consistent content messages with honesty based on their knowledge and experience, and prioritize originality, thereby enabling audiences to trust them and become B2B customers or partners. This enables KOLs and companies to develop digital marketing strategies to generate new leads or prospects. This aligns with the perspective of(Kusuma & Nugroho, 2021: 33)Trustworthiness is related to honesty, integrity, sincerity, and trustworthiness as a spokesperson. Therefore, employees, as independent marketing KOLs, can be relied upon to lead audience opinion in their respective fields.

All informants experienced personal growth because the content they actively created and uploaded to their personal LinkedIn accounts made them known as the face of their company, as external B2B audiences contacted them to establish business partnerships and become new prospects for their company. This aligns with the primary goal of a B2B thought leadership strategy: cultivating long-term relationships of trust with customers.

Indirectly, the company's reputation increases and becomes more widely known to the audience because it has employees or trusted internal parties as opinion leaders with the ability to meet the needs of B2B audiences for knowledge and credible information related to the company's products or services. Opinion leaders who promote products or services through soft selling by providing the latest knowledge, new insights, and insightful ideas to the audience and are considered as trustworthy experts.(Neuhaus et al., 2022: 99).

The content designed by KOL marketing must not only be relevant to marketing trends but also accurate and reliable to meet the needs of the audience, thus increasing the perception of trust in the KOL. Furthermore, accurate facts and data in every recommendation from KOL marketing are obtained from official sources, both the KOL company itself and well-known companies discussed in the KOL case study content, making them trustworthy. This also illustrates that in addition to focusing on personal branding, KOLs are also truly sincere in playing the role of opinion leaders or experts in their fields by paying close attention to the topics and materials for their evergreen content on LinkedIn. Trust between various parties is not only built by the relevance and depth of content knowledge but also by the visibility of a

thought leader demonstrated through their LinkedIn profile.(Neuhaus et al., 2022).

Employees as marketing KOLs have been able to boost visibility by displaying their company name, portfolio, and content that is useful and needed by B2B audiences on their personal LinkedIn profiles. The clarity between the informant's identity as a KOL expert in their field and institutional credibility shows that their professional credibility is very strong and focused as a form of implementing a trust-building strategy. Prioritizing rationality, accuracy, and authenticity of information sources is a common characteristic of B2B audiences because 94% of buyers conduct online research regarding a company and its products or services before making a business decision.(Dwivedi et al., 2021: 10).

KOLs with a strong reputation in their field and from reputable companies can easily gain trust due to their trust in them as fellow "humans" and the credibility of their companies. This aspect of audience trust can be seen in the personal LinkedIn profiles of marketing KOLs who have achieved high profile impressions. Typically, KOLs list their expertise in a particular field, their company name, and their findings, as well as their statements.(Benedict, 2022: 85)that customers trust information shared by company employees three times more than that shared by the CEO. The popularity and trust that KOLs have today can influence purchase intentions that involve emotions and virtual interactions by optimizing engagement, demonstrating loyalty, and creating relationships with audiences as ongoing customers.(Balaji et al., 2023: 254).

Following up on the relationship between the three dimensions with source credibility theory directly shows the reality of B2B company employees forming trust and strengthening credibility as professional KOL marketing representatives in the marketing sphere. It can be seen from the approach that employees have taken in practicing the integrity of personal branding and company branding values with honesty, transparency, and originality; the relevance of personalized content makes the audience feel heard and their needs understood; and the accessibility of KOL openness in reaching the audience, that the credibility of the informant as KOL shows how much trust the recipient of the message has built in the sender. Therefore, being able to modify challenges becomes a key supporter of the success of digital marketing in the B2B sector.

2. Skill

The second aspect of source credibility theory is expertise, referring to the knowledge and experience of marketing KOLs, namely employees of B2B companies, to optimize the products or services being marketed. Thought leaders who conduct marketing activities in the B2B market have valuable competencies for their audiences to become potential customers. This study shows that B2B marketing KOLs create content based on personal professional experiences that are utilized to build meaningful engagement with stakeholders. Consistent content is crucial in strengthening brand identity so that it is easily recognized by the audience. However, content quality is a key factor in a

successful B2B digital marketing KOL strategy. The expertise of marketing KOLs, who in this study are employees of B2B companies, is highly valued in being able to drive engagement for stronger relationships with B2B audiences.

Involving the audience as a stakeholder will make it easier for employees and companies in the B2B sector to understand the dynamic needs and preferences of customers so they can get results according to business targets.(Balaji et al., 2023: 245). Professional expertise is essential for KOLs to go beyond simply building audience engagement by liking, commenting, and sharing content; they must also be able to organically expand the reach of marketing messages.(Yudhyani, 2024: 1563). It is also undeniable that B2B marketing emphasizes opinion leaders who have the highest credibility according to the perception of the audience or customers.

The informants in this study, as KOLs, possess extensive knowledge and over five years of experience in their respective fields, demonstrated through their content, which includes up-to-date and accurate data to maintain quality. These digital marketing activities align with the expertise requirements, requiring KOLs to possess professional competence and mastery of their fields, capable of supporting the development of both their personal branding and B2B company brands. People or recipients tend to be more easily convinced when their source presents themselves as credible.(Agitashera et al., 2020: 231).

The professional competence of informants as credible KOLs in digital marketing is demonstrated by their understanding and mastery of technical terms such as hooks, copywriting, SEO, and even data and metrics that are not readily available to the general public. This significantly satisfies the marketing knowledge needs and curiosity of audiences, especially beginners, in the digital marketing field. The quality and competence of KOLs are closely related to the originality of the content they create, including non-generic ideas, insights, or opinions, or new perspectives, as KOLs serve as role models in their field. In B2B, KOLs' expertise will be valued as experts provided they are able to share original content.

Before reaching professional competence and being considered an expert, KOLs go through a rollercoaster of development, building their content mastery skills. Business opportunities arise when they become KOLs without expert motivation and simply want to share insights into the realities of their field. Therefore, they continually apply their knowledge and experience throughout their careers to informative LinkedIn content to reach their audience's needs.

KOLs need to strive to deliver content that not only demonstrates expertise but also provides credible, valuable, and trust-based recommendations with their audiences. To achieve this, KOLs leverage LinkedIn's features to transform regular accounts into creator-specific accounts to expand their content reach and reach greater audiences. However, KOLs must also navigate the challenges of aligning their expertise with audience needs and LinkedIn's dynamically changing algorithms to optimize B2B audience accessibility.

The informant's expertise as a marketing KOL can also be demonstrated by how they design specific strategies to increase engagement, impressions and reach, as well as direct feedback from B2B audiences.



Figure 6. KOL Marketing Content on LinkedIn

Figure 4 demonstrates the informant's expertise in developing topics, analyzing data, and tailoring their content to their audience's needs, resulting in exposure on LinkedIn, with thousands of reactions and reposts. In the B2B sector, high engagement levels in terms of views, likes, and comments, coupled with open professional discussions, reflect perceptions of expertise, credibility, or the value of the content.

Opportunities to become expert speakers, speak with renowned brands, receive requests for more detailed information with product or service demos, and even connect with potential business clients are all tangible validations of the market's perception of KOL marketing's competence and positioning as experts in their fields. KOLs who are enthusiastic about marketing content in their areas of expertise are more likely to be perceived as authentic experts because it reflects their passion. Employee engagement plays a crucial role in B2B KOL marketing because providing

employees with opportunities to showcase their expertise helps maximize reach to potential business partners, as a single transaction is far more valuable in B2B than in B2C. (Cartwright et al., 2022: 339).

Overall, expertise is an absolute element to demonstrate the reality of KOL credibility that trust grows from knowledge, experience, and technical ability to create relevant content, organic accessibility to the audience, and building market response or audience engagement with various adaptive strategies to suit audience needs and platform algorithms. In essence, the reality of B2B KOL Marketing lies in trust and expertise that must be a unified handle to optimize integrity, understand relevance, realize accessibility, and open or accept market response as the key to successful digital marketing in the B2B sector.

V. CONCLUSION

Based on the research and discussion, the reality of employees as marketing KOLs can be understood from the challenges that arise in content activities through the LinkedIn platform, namely integrity, relevance, accessibility, and market response. Integrity challenges arise related to consistent management of digital presence time, honesty in conveying information and data in each content, and transparently explaining the importance of being a KOL by being an employee and the face of the company. Relevance challenges in responding to the needs and interests of professional audiences, limitations in obtaining company data, synchronization between adaptation of marketing trends and case studies with technical content creation, and conflicts of interest. Accessibility challenges lie in the suboptimal support from the company and the existence of conflicts of interest so that it is increasingly carried out without formal direction from B2B companies. Challenges in market response arise in controlling engagement and feedback on KOL marketing content that is carried out independently by B2B company employees. B2B company employees have strived to overcome these challenges, and while challenging to manage, the results have been instrumental in KOL marketing establishing credibility as experts in the digital marketing field. These four dimensions are key factors in building trust and expertise in KOL marketing, helping them reach potential audiences and optimize the success of business decisions in the B2B sector. Trust management is reflected in the evolving values of authenticity, honesty, and transparency among KOLs, leading to their growing recognition and strategic role in B2B digital marketing.

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