The Mechanism of Emotional Marketing in Live-Streaming E-commerce: An Empirical Analysis Based on Streamer Intimacy and Consumer Purchase Intention

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Abstract: With the rapid expansion of live-streaming e-commerce, the emotional connection between streamers and consumers has emerged as a critical determinant of purchasing decisions. Drawing on the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) framework, this study develops a theoretical model in which streamer intimacy (stimulus) serves as the antecedent, consumers' psychological perceptions (organism) function as the mediating variables, and purchase intention (response) represents the outcome. Based on survey data collected from users of the Kuaishou platform and employing structural equation modeling (SEM) for empirical analysis, the findings indicate that streamer intimacy can be decomposed into three dimensions: affective, cognitive, and social. These dimensions indirectly and positively influence consumers' purchase intention by eliciting emotional resonance, fostering trust, and enhancing immersion, respectively. Notably, the mediating effect of consumers' psychological perceptions is statistically significant. This study elucidates the multi-path mechanisms through which emotional marketing operates in live-streaming e-commerce, providing both theoretical insights and practical implications for platform ecosystem optimization, streamer engagement strategies, and brand marketing decision-making.

Keywords: Emotional Marketing; Live-Streaming E-Commerce; Streamer Intimacy; Psychological Perception; Purchase Intention; S–O–R Model

1. Introduction

In recent years, live-streaming e-commerce, driven by short-video platforms, has risen rapidly and reshaped the landscape of online retail. Within this model, streamers are no longer mere one-way transmitters of product information; instead, they establish a new form of relationship that integrates both social and commercial attributes through frequent, real-time interactions with users. The sense of "intimacy" cultivated in such relationships has gradually surpassed traditional product displays and emerged as a pivotal factor influencing user trust and purchase decisions [1]. As a leading short-video live-streaming platform in China, Kuaishou exemplifies this dynamic through its distinctive "laotie economy," which emphasizes high levels of interaction and strong community belonging. This ecosystem provides fertile ground for streamers to construct quasi-kinship interaction scenarios and offers a valuable empirical context for examining the mechanisms of emotional marketing.

Although existing studies have acknowledged the role of emotional factors in live-streaming contexts—such as streamers' emotional expressions [2] and social presence [3]—several limitations remain. First, the core construct of "streamer intimacy" lacks a unified conceptualization, and its multidimensional structure and measurement require more systematic empirical validation. Second, prior research has largely focused on single emotional pathways or the direct effects of streamer characteristics, with insufficient attention to the full causal chain through which streamer intimacy influences users' internal psychological states and, ultimately, their purchasing behavior. Third, for platforms like Kuaishou—characterized by strong relational ties and a focus on lower-tier markets—the uniqueness and effectiveness of emotional marketing strategies call for further context-specific empirical investigation.

Against this backdrop, the present study focuses on the Kuaishou platform to address the

following questions: How should streamer intimacy be conceptualized and measured? Through what mechanisms does it influence users' psychological perceptions and, in turn, their purchase intention? Grounded in the S–O–R framework, this study decomposes streamer intimacy into three dimensions—affective, cognitive, and social—and operationalizes users' psychological perceptions as emotional resonance, trust, and immersion. A comprehensive mediation model is then constructed and empirically tested.

Theoretically, this research extends the application of the S–O–R model within the context of live-streaming e-commerce and enriches the literature on emotional marketing and consumer behavior. Practically, it provides evidence-based insights for streamers to optimize interaction strategies, for platforms to design effective incentive mechanisms, and for brands to make informed decisions when selecting collaborative streamers.

2. Theoretical Foundations and Research Hypotheses

2.1 Conceptual Definitions and Theoretical Underpinnings

2.1.1 Application of the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) model

The Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) model, originally proposed by Mehrabian and Russell, is a well-established framework in environmental psychology for explaining how external environmental stimuli influence individuals' internal states and subsequently trigger specific behavioral responses [4]. The model conceptualizes behavior as a three-stage process: stimulus refers to external environmental inputs, organism denotes individuals' internal psychological and physiological states, and response represents observable behavioral outcomes. In marketing research, the S–O–R model has been widely applied to examine how various stimuli—such as retail atmospherics, website design, and advertising content—shape consumers' cognition and emotions, ultimately driving purchase decisions.

Within the highly interactive and emotionally rich context of live-streaming e-commerce, the S–O–R model demonstrates strong explanatory power. The live-streaming room constitutes a unique virtual consumption environment in which the streamer serves as the most salient and dynamic environmental element. The streamer's verbal and nonverbal behaviors, interaction styles, personal attributes, and the community atmosphere cultivate collectively form a complex set of stimuli (S) for viewers. As the organism (O), users process these stimuli and experience immediate emotional fluctuations, cognitive evaluations, and varying degrees of psychological immersion. These internal state changes ultimately lead to responses (R), such as purchase intention, actual purchasing behavior, and word-of-mouth recommendations. Accordingly, applying the S–O–R framework enables a systematic examination of the logical chain linking the "person" (streamer), the "mind" (user psychology), and the "action" (purchase behavior), thereby providing a robust theoretical foundation for this study.

2.1.2 A multidimensional conceptualization of streamer intimacy

The notion of intimacy traditionally describes closeness, trust, and mutual understanding in interpersonal relationships. From the perspective of para-social interaction, users can develop one-sided yet socially meaningful emotional bonds with media figures, such as streamers [5]. In this study, streamer intimacy is defined as users' subjective perception of closeness with the streamer—encompassing emotional, cognitive, and social dimensions—formed through interaction during live-stream viewing. It is conceptualized as a multidimensional construct, integrating insights from interpersonal relationship theory and the specific characteristics of live-streaming contexts:

Affective intimacy refers to the emotional closeness, liking, and resonance elicited by the streamer through sincere self-disclosure, expressive communication, empathetic responses, and affective interaction with users. It emphasizes affective bonding and serves as the foundation for emotional attachment [6].

Cognitive intimacy denotes users' rational evaluation of the streamer's competence, credibility, and reliability, established through professional expertise, clear and accurate product information, logically structured explanations, and substantive cognitive interaction. It is grounded in trust transfer theory, whereby users' trust in the platform or recognition of the streamer's expertise extends to their product recommendations [7].

Social intimacy captures users' sense of group

membership, belonging, and perceived social support fostered by the streamer through community-building practices—such as creating fan groups, using inclusive forms of address (e.g., "family"), organizing exclusive activities, and facilitating audience interaction. Rooted in the sense of community theory, it highlights the behavioral implications of shared identity [8].

These three dimensions are complementary and collectively reflect the streamer's capacity to construct a personalized, humanized persona and cultivate deep relational ties with users in live-streaming environments.

2.1.3 Key mediating variables: users' psychological perceptions

Within the S–O–R framework, the organism represents the critical mechanism through which stimuli are translated into behavioral responses. This study focuses on three representative psychological perception states in live-streaming e-commerce as mediating variables:

Emotional resonance, grounded in para-social interaction and emotional contagion theories, refers to the psychological experience whereby users' emotional states align with those expressed by the streamer, resulting in feelings of understanding, identification, and affective synchronization. When users empathize with the streamer's expressions of joy, frustration, or values, emotional resonance is established [9].

Trust is a central determinant in online transactions characterized by information asymmetry. In the context of live-streaming e-commerce, trust reflects users' confidence in the streamer's product recommendations and promises, based on an integrated assessment of the streamer's integrity, expertise, and past reliability. It serves as a cognitive safeguard in decision-making [7].

Immersion, derived from flow theory, refers to a state of deep engagement in which individuals are fully absorbed in an activity, exhibiting intense concentration and diminished awareness of time and self [10]. In live-streaming settings, streamers can induce immersion through fast-paced content, engaging narratives, real-time interaction, and dynamic scenario design, thereby creating a highly absorbing user experience.

2.2 Hypothesis Development and Model Construction

Building on the above theoretical foundations, this study proposes a chain mediation model to examine how the three dimensions of streamer intimacy influence purchase intention through corresponding psychological perceptions.

H1: Affective intimacy has a significant positive effect on emotional resonance.

The streamer's affective expression is a direct channel for conveying emotional value and establishing emotional connections. When streamers display sincerity, enthusiasm, and empathy, they are more likely to overcome the psychological distance imposed by the screen, thereby eliciting users' emotional responses and identification, which fosters emotional resonance [6].

H2: Cognitive intimacy has a significant positive effect on trust.

In purchase decision-making, expertise serves as a key signal of credibility. By delivering clear, accurate, and in-depth product information, streamers demonstrate professionalism and responsibility, fulfilling users' need for reliable information and reducing perceived risk, thereby effectively building rational trust [7].

H3: Social intimacy has a significant positive effect on immersion.

A strong sense of community enhances users' motivation to participate and their identification with the group. When users perceive themselves as members of a shared "circle" or "family," their level of engagement and psychological involvement in the live-stream increases significantly. The community atmosphere and collective activities fostered by the streamer create an immersive environment characterized by shared goals and social rewards [8].

H4: Emotional resonance has a significant positive effect on purchase intention.

Emotional resonance aligns users affectively with the streamer and the promoted products. This emotional identification and preference can directly translate into favorable attitudes and supportive intentions toward the product, shortening the psychological distance between "interest" and "desire to own" [2].

H5: Trust has a significant positive effect on purchase intention.

Trust constitutes the foundation of transactions. When users trust the streamer, concerns regarding product quality and after-sales service are substantially reduced, lowering the psychological threshold for decision-making and enhancing purchase intention [7].

H6: Immersion has a significant positive effect on purchase intention.

Under immersive conditions, users' attention is highly concentrated on the live-stream content, and their cognitive resources are guided by the streamer, making them more receptive to information and suggestions. Moreover, the pleasure and excitement associated with immersive experiences may stimulate impulsive purchase intentions [10].

Based on these hypotheses, the theoretical model proposed in this study (see Figure 1) delineates the complete mechanism of "streamer intimacy (S) → users' psychological perceptions (O) → purchase intention (R)."

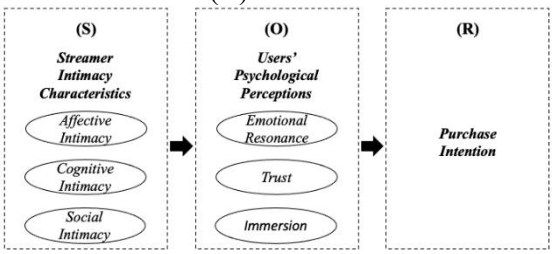

Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Emotional Marketing Effects in Live-Streaming E-Commerce Contexts

3. Research Design

3.1 Measurement Scales and Questionnaire Design

This study employs a survey-based approach for data collection. All measurement scales were adapted from well-established instruments in prior research, with appropriate modifications to fit the specific context of Kuaishou live-streaming. All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale.

Streamer Intimacy: This construct comprises three dimensions—affective intimacy, cognitive intimacy, and social intimacy—measured by a total of nine items. The scale was primarily adapted from the work of Wei et al. [11] and Wang et al. [2]. A sample item for affective intimacy is: "The streamer appears sincere and approachable during the live broadcast."

Users' Psychological Perceptions: This construct includes three dimensions—emotional resonance, trust, and immersion—also measured by nine items in total. The scale draws mainly on Wang et al. [2] and Guan [7]. A representative item for immersion is: "When watching the live stream, I often lose track of time."

Purchase Intention: This variable is measured using three items adapted from Wei et al. [11], such as: "When watching live streams, I am willing to purchase products recommended by the streamer."

In addition, the questionnaire includes demographic and control variables, such as gender, age, income, viewing frequency, and consumption amount.

3.2 Data Collection and Sample Description

The target population of this study consists of Kuaishou live-streaming users. Data were collected through online channels, including fan groups within live-streaming rooms and social media communities. A total of 309 valid responses were obtained, yielding an effective response rate of 94.2%.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Survey Sample

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	157	50.8%
	Female	152	49.2%
Age	Under 18	13	4.2%
	18–24	84	27.2%
	25–30	91	29.5%
	31–40	73	23.6%
	41 and above	48	15.5%
Monthly Income	≤ RMB 2,000	12	3.9%
	RMB 2,001–5,000	49	15.9%
	RMB 5,001–8,000	145	46.9%
	≥ RMB 8,000	103	33.3%
Viewing Frequency	Daily	29	9.4%
	Several times per week	183	59.2%
	Occasionally (a few times per month)	85	27.5%
	Rarely (a few times per year or less)	12	3.9%
Monthly Spending (Past 3 Months)	RMB 0–500	165	53.4%
	RMB 500–1,000	96	31.1%
	RMB 1,000–1,500	39	12.6%
	Above RMB 1,500	9	2.9%

Descriptive statistical analysis indicates that the sample is well-balanced and representative. Specifically, the gender distribution is relatively even (50.8% male, 49.2% female). In terms of age, young users aged 18–30 constitute the majority (56.7%), which aligns with the core user demographics of the Kuaishou platform. Regarding income, 80.2% of respondents report a monthly income above RMB 5,001, indicating a certain level of purchasing power. Viewing frequency is predominantly "several times per week" (59.2%), suggesting that most respondents are active users. In terms of consumption behavior, the average monthly spending on Kuaishou live-streaming over the past three months is concentrated in the RMB 0–500 range (53.4%). Overall, the sample structure is reasonable and demonstrates good representativeness (see Table1).

4. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) Analysis

4.1 Descriptive Statistical Analysis

As shown in Table 2, the descriptive statistics and reliability analysis for all constructs indicate satisfactory measurement quality. Cronbach's α coefficients for all latent variables range from 0.836 to 0.935, demonstrating strong internal consistency. The mean values of the constructs range from 3.37 to 3.67, while standard deviations fall between 0.92 and 1.12, suggesting a relatively concentrated data distribution. Among the variables, purchase intention exhibits the lowest mean (M = 3.374) and the highest standard deviation (SD = 1.124), indicating comparatively greater variability.

Table 2. Means and Standard Deviations of Constructs

Construct	Cronbach's α	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Affective Intimacy	0.896	3.544	0.955
Cognitive Intimacy	0.893	3.634	0.962
Social Intimacy	0.935	3.533	1.077
Emotional Resonance	0.899	3.671	1.002
Trust	0.836	3.519	0.988
Immersion	0.836	3.654	0.920
Purchase Intention	0.916	3.374	1.124

4.2 Reliability and Validity Assessment

To ensure the robustness of the measurement model, both reliability and validity were rigorously assessed.

First, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) indicates a good overall model fit (CFI=0.982, TLI=0.978, RMSEA=0.040, SRMR=0.032), as shown in Table 3. The standardized factor loadings of all measurement items range from 0.72 to 0.93 ($p<0.001$), suggesting strong construct validity (Table 4). In terms of reliability, composite reliability (CR) values range from 0.836 to 0.936, Cronbach's α coefficients range from 0.836 to 0.935, and average variance extracted (AVE) values fall between 0.630 and 0.829. All indicators meet the recommended thresholds for reliability and convergent validity (Table 5).

Table 3. CFA Model Fit Indices

Index	χ^2	df	p-value	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR
Value	251.2179	168	3.34e-05	0.9824	0.9780	0.0400	0.0316

Table 4. Standardized Factor Loadings

Construct	Item	Std. Est.	p-value
Affective Intimacy	QGQM1	0.864	< .001
	QGQM2	0.821	< .001
	QGQM3	0.902	< .001
Cognitive Intimacy	RZQM1	0.896	< .001
	RZQM2	0.762	< .001
	RZQM3	0.921	< .001
Social Intimacy	SHQM1	0.899	< .001
	SHQM2	0.904	< .001
	SHQM3	0.928	< .001
Emotional Resonance	QGGM1	0.914	< .001
	QGGM2	0.864	< .001
	QGGM3	0.821	< .001
Trust	XRG1	0.773	< .001
	XRG2	0.785	< .001
	XRG3	0.823	< .001
Immersion	CJG1	0.826	< .001
	CJG2	0.813	< .001
	CJG3	0.739	< .001
Purchase Intention	GMYY1	0.921	< .001
	GMYY2	0.854	< .001
	GMYY3	0.882	< .001

Table 5. Reliability and Convergent Validity Indicators

Construct	CR	AVE	Alpha
Affective Intimacy	0.897	0.745	0.896
Cognitive Intimacy	0.896	0.744	0.893
Social Intimacy	0.936	0.829	0.935
Emotional Resonance	0.901	0.752	0.899
Trust	0.836	0.630	0.836
Immersion	0.836	0.630	0.836
Purchase Intention	0.916	0.785	0.916

Second, discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell–Larcker criterion. As presented in Table 6, the square roots of AVE values (diagonal elements) for all constructs are greater than their correlations with other constructs, indicating satisfactory discriminant validity. For instance, the square root of AVE for social intimacy is 0.910, which exceeds its highest correlation with other variables (0.584), confirming good construct distinctiveness.

4.3 Structural Equation Modeling Analysis

The SEM results indicate a good model fit ($\chi^2/df=1.77$, CFI=0.972, TLI=0.966, RMSEA=0.050, SRMR=0.051), as shown in Table 7.

The path analysis results support all proposed hypotheses (see Table 8). The findings can be interpreted along three key pathways:

Table 6. Discriminant Validity (Fornell–Larcker Matrix)

Construct	Aff. Intimacy	Cog. Intimacy	Soc. Intimacy	Emot. Resonance	Trust	Immersion	Purchase Intention
Affective Intimacy	0.863						
Cognitive Intimacy	0.393	0.863					
Social Intimacy	0.455	0.404	0.910				
Emotional Resonance	0.499	0.493	0.559	0.867			
Trust	0.473	0.515	0.639	0.678	0.794		
Immersion	0.501	0.439	0.584	0.622	0.595	0.794	
Purchase Intention	0.448	0.418	0.445	0.559	0.541	0.530	0.886

Table 7. SEM Model Fit Indices

Index	χ^2	df	p-value	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR
Value	308.5759	174	< .001	0.9715	0.9657	0.0500	0.0510

Table 8. SEM Path Analysis and Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Path	Unstandardized Estimate	Standardized Coefficient (β)	p-value	Supported
H1	Affective Intimacy → Emotional Resonance	0.340	0.248	< .001	Yes
H2	Cognitive Intimacy → Trust	0.399	0.272	< .001	Yes
H3	Social Intimacy → Immersion	0.551	0.404	< .001	Yes
H4	Emotional Resonance → Purchase Intention	0.265	0.285	< .001	Yes
H5	Trust → Purchase Intention	0.204	0.234	< .001	Yes
H6	Immersion → Purchase Intention	0.229	0.245	< .001	Yes

1) Affective path (H1, H4):

Affective intimacy significantly and positively influences emotional resonance (β=0.248), while emotional resonance exerts the strongest effect on purchase intention among all psychological pathways (β=0.285). This suggests that sincere and emotionally engaging interactions by streamers effectively evoke users' empathy, and such emotional alignment serves as a powerful driver of purchasing decisions.

2) Cognitive path (H2, H5):

Cognitive intimacy significantly enhances trust (β=0.272), which in turn positively affects purchase intention (β=0.234). This indicates that the streamer's professional competence forms the foundation of rational trust, which is essential for reducing transaction uncertainty and facilitating purchase decisions.

3) Social path (H3, H6):

Social intimacy has the strongest impact on immersion (β=0.404), underscoring the critical role of community belonging in fostering deep engagement. Immersion further translates into increased purchase intention (β=0.245). This finding validates the effectiveness of the "laotie economy" on Kuaishou, where cultivating a "family-like" atmosphere and community interaction significantly enhances user involvement and stimulates consumption impulses.

In addition, the direct effect of streamer intimacy on purchase intention was tested, yielding a significant but relatively weaker coefficient (β=0.158, p< 0.01) compared to the indirect effects mediated by psychological perceptions. This further highlights the central mediating role of users' psychological states in the stimulus–response process.

To assess common method bias, Harman's single-factor test was conducted. The first unrotated factor accounts for 41.26% of the variance, which is below the 50% threshold, indicating that common method bias is not a serious concern in this study (Table 9).

Table 9. Common Method Bias Test

Indicator	Value	Conclusion
Variance Explained by First Factor	41.26%	Acceptable; no serious bias

5. Conclusions and Implications

5.1 Research Conclusions

Grounded in the S–O–R framework and based on empirical data from the Kuaishou platform,

this study systematically examines the complex mechanisms through which streamer intimacy influences users' purchase intention. The key findings are as follows:

First, streamer intimacy is conceptualized as a multidimensional higher-order construct comprising affective, cognitive, and social dimensions. These dimensions correspond to three distinct relational strategies: emotional bonding, rational trust-building, and community belonging. Among them, social intimacy exerts the strongest effect on users' sense of immersion. This finding highlights the strategic importance of community-oriented and relationship-driven operations in live-streaming e-commerce, particularly on platforms like Kuaishou. Such mechanisms not only enhance user stickiness but also serve as critical catalysts for creating immersive consumption scenarios and stimulating immediate purchase behavior.

Second, users' internal psychological perceptions—namely emotional resonance, trust, and immersion—fully mediate the relationship between streamer intimacy and purchase intention. This suggests that the influence of streamer–user relationships on sales outcomes is not direct or mechanical, but rather operates through a subtle psychological transformation process. Specifically, streamers engage users emotionally (via emotional resonance), persuade them cognitively (via trust), and attract them experientially (via immersion). These three pathways function in parallel and synergistically, jointly facilitating the transition from relationship formation to consumption persuasion.

Third, this study confirms the strong explanatory power of the S–O–R model in the context of live-streaming e-commerce. Beyond validating the applicability of the "stimulus–organism–response" logic in digital interactive environments, this research refines the model by operationalizing stimulus as multidimensional intimacy and organism as three specific psychological states. In doing so, it deepens the analytical granularity of the model and provides a more nuanced theoretical lens for understanding emotional marketing in live-streaming contexts.

5.2 Managerial Implications

The above findings offer clear and actionable insights for key stakeholders in the live-streaming e-commerce ecosystem:

First, streamers should cultivate multidimensional intimacy to enhance user engagement. Streamers should move beyond transactional selling scripts by increasing emotional engagement through frequent interaction and authentic expression. At the same time, they should strengthen cognitive intimacy through scenario-based demonstrations and logical product explanations, while actively fostering social intimacy by organizing fan appreciation events, private-domain promotions, and interactive community activities to reinforce users' sense of belonging.

Second, platforms should upgrade interaction design and empowerment systems. Platform operators should introduce innovative tools—such as emotion recognition and intelligent real-time comment (bullet screen) systems—to enhance interaction efficiency and immersive experiences. In addition, platforms should establish comprehensive training and tiered recommendation systems for streamers, incorporating competencies such as emotional engagement and community management, in order to cultivate a more human-centered and engaging content ecosystem.

Third, brands should leverage intimacy-driven relationships for brand value internalization. Brands should move beyond purely traffic-based criteria when selecting streamers and place greater emphasis on their emotional expressiveness and the level of trust they command among followers. By co-creating immersive narratives and emotionally engaging scripts with streamers, brands can seamlessly embed product information into community interactions, thereby achieving more effective trust transfer and improved sales performance.

5.3 Limitations and Future Research Directions

Despite its contributions, this study is subject to several limitations. First, the sample is predominantly composed of users aged 18–30, which may limit the generalizability of the findings across broader demographic groups. Second, the use of cross-sectional survey data constrains the ability to capture the dynamic and evolving nature of users' emotional states in live-streaming environments.

Future research could address these limitations by integrating behavioral data from platforms (e.g., clickstream data, viewing duration) with advanced analytical techniques such as natural

language processing (e.g., real-time comment sentiment analysis) to construct a more comprehensive and dynamic evaluation framework that combines subjective and objective measures. Additionally, further studies may explore the boundary conditions of emotional marketing mechanisms by examining factors such as product categories, users' risk preferences, and platform algorithmic interventions, thereby deepening our understanding of consumer behavior in live-streaming e-commerce.

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