

The Emergence of E-Opinion Leadership on Social Networks: An Unupdated Literature Review

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Abstract

The emergence of social networks was followed by the emergence of new sources of influence that are e-opinion leaders. Academic literature has focused on the concept's antecedents, its method of identification, and its role. This article presents the evolution of the concept from the offline context to the online context as well as the main works that studied its conceptualization and its identification. The divergence of the results leaves the managers perplexed and some theoretical questions always open.

Keywords: *Opinion leadership; influence; characteristics; social networks; identification method.*

1. Introduction

Opinion leadership appeared in the field of political science with [1], who were studying then, the influence of the social circle on the voting decisions during the presidential elections in the United States. In 1955, the concept was integrated into the interpersonal influence [2] demonstrating its role of mediator of advertising messages between the media and the target (Two-step flow model). And it was in the 1970s that the concept was integrated into consumer behavior researches [3].

Between the 1980s and the late 1990s, researches on this concept were becoming increasingly rare. It was only in the 2000s and with the emergence of the Internet that managers rediscovered the concept. Whatsapp and Facebook are considered as the most frequently used social platforms in the world according to GlobalWebIndex. According to GWI 52% of Facebook users connect to this platform more than once a day, followed by 34% on Youtube and 31% on Instagram. Conscious of the importance of mastering these new tools and their direct impact on their business, managers use marketing strategies based on social networks (Viral Marketing Strategy). However, to ensure the effectiveness of these strategies, it is necessary to rely on the right people who contribute to their success or failure and who have a certain social power: the opinion leader.

Through our literature review, we found that academic research on offline opinion leadership is abundant. Many have tried to define their individual characteristics, to determine an identification method or to understand their motivation. The theoretical framework of the concept shows that its conceptual components are questioned, that there is currently no general consensus and theoretical questions remain open to research (Universality of the concept, identification method, etc. ...). As for academic works that have studied online opinion leadership, most have relied on the traditional definitions of the opinion leader to define an e-opinion leader [4] or have used the traditional opinion leadership scales on online platforms [5].

Some studies [6] considered this approach as limited, and proposed a new scale for the concept. To our knowledge, the latest study [7] that focused on the conceptualization and measurement of e-opinion leadership on social networks, was based on only two aspects of opinion leadership which are the creation of content valued by network members and the construction of social capital. The social network studied was twitter and the study focused on a single category of product "video games". The results of the study show that there would be other antecedents of e-opinion leadership other than content creation and social capital.

2. Litterature Review

Our readings of existing academic research on opinion leadership show that there are uncertainties and points of agreement regarding the concept of opinion leaders. An agreement on consequences of opinion leadership behavior (its capacity to influence and its tendency to exchange information and to be solicited by its entourage). The uncertainties generated several researches works in three different lines of research:

- The first one concerns the different methods of identifying an opinion leader. [8]
- The second one is interested in the characteristics of the opinion leader. [9]
- And the third one focuses on its role.

2.1 Conceptual Framework

2.1.1 Traditional opinion leader

The analysis of the opinion leader's approaches, whether in offline or online context, shows that they define the status of opinion leader by its consequences. Indeed, three different approaches exist in the literature [10]

- The first one define the opinion leader by its capacity to influence [11]; [12].
- The second one defines it by its capacity to exchange information (the solicitations and frequent discussions of the leader with his entourage) ([3], [4])
- The last one considers the two previous dimensions together [8].

2.1.2 Emergence of the e-opinion leader concept

With the emergence of the Internet in the early 2000s, managers and academics got more interested in the functioning to argue. Polite, courteous and very committed to the community. ". Although particular characteristics are common between the two concepts such as: expertise, social characteristics, some are specific to the e-opinion leader which are the attachment to the community and the editorial skills.

Another study [37] determine the most appropriate method of identifying e-opinion leaders. This study shows that the most relevant scale compared to traditional ones is the scale of [6]. Although it has the to be improved as it is not adapted to all social networks since it was created on the basis of netnographic studies on forums (social networks and virtual communities are two objects of measurement with different technical and formal characteristics) . Some dimensions can not be transposed into social networks such as community attachment and relational behavior. The study that tries to answer this question [7]generates new dimensions of e-leadership of opinion namely: the creation of valued contents and the social capital (the will to be followed and listened to by a maximum of contacts). Considering influence as the dependent variable, the two antecedents of opinion leadership generated are the attractive profile and expertise. Social capital and the creation of valued content explain only 47% of the variance of e-opinion leadership, which leads us to conclude that other characteristics exist. The research was limited on the social network Twitter, it would be relevant to look at other social networks including Facebook.

Among the most recent works, a study [38] that focuses on the personality of opinion leaders on social networks and specifically in the travel industry. The author is particularly interested in the impact of, openness, exhibitionism, relational competence and flow experience as characteristics of the opinion leader.

2.2 Identification methods

There are several measures of the traditional opinion leader. The main methods of identification have advantages but also some limits:

Table1: Advantages and limitations of identification methods

Method	Advantages	Inconvenient
Observation: Ethnography / Netnography.	It is direct, reliable especially when it comes to studies involving small groups. (class, village ...). [39]	It is criticized for the long observation time that it requires .
Key informants Method	It is more interesting for studies that focus on ostentatious consumer products with an imitation phenomenon. And provides qualitative information in verbal and non-verbal data [40]	The limit of this method is the distinction to be made between opinion leaders and key informants [41]. Exploitation time can be too long, and the subjectivity due to the intervention of a third party can be source of bias. [40]
Sociometric method	Objectivity because the leaders selected are those who are designated by the greatest number of people. It is also effective to the social context that works with referents. [40].	Assume that the consumer is aware of the people who influence him daily in all areas which seems far from obvious. (The existence of memory availability bias). Cannot be applied on a large population and requires a lot of time.
Self-designation method	In marketing, methods of self-designation of opinion leaders are favored for reasons of efficiency (speed and ease of operation), including in online environments [5], This method is also preferred for quantitative approaches and for marketing work that focuses on consumerism.	Internal factors such as self-esteem or self-confidence can alter self-perceived influence, both in terms of overvaluation and undervaluation. Problem of the dependence on the measurement scale: the scales of opinion leadership are numerous and especially, marked by disagreements on the essences of the concept.

3. Conclusion

The literature review highlights two lines of research:

- The characteristics of the e-opinion leader: a study that focuses on the profile of the e-opinion leader and particularly on social networks remains interesting. It would also be relevant to decide on the universality of the concept, in other words, is there a typical profile of the opinion leader regardless of the product category?
- The appropriate measure for the identification of these Internet users.

These questions, stimulated by the differences in the results and the methods used, also encourage us to try to understand how these individuals influence on the web and to measure the effectiveness of a strategy based on these individuals, especially since companies invest more and more in these strategie

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