

# Opinion Leadership and Its Role in Buyer Decision Making

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## Abstract:

This research tends to explore the concept of opinion leadership, explaining their characteristics and identifying the influencing strategies triggered by opinion leaders. This is a desk research and research type utilized is qualitative research, which is completely based on secondary resources as (articles and websites). Extensive literature review has been done in order to fully explain the construct of opinion leadership. Much literature can be found identifying opinion leaders, in contrast to the impact opinion leaders have on buyer decision making. Future research suggests a construct to be made where the relationship between purchase and influencers are empirically tested.

**Keywords:** Opinion leader, Opinion leadership, decision making, buyer purchase decision

**Paper type:** Research Paper

## Introduction

Rogers, (1962), suggests opinion leadership to be viewed as a continuous variable even though it is disproportionately concentrated in a few individuals for a given topic area. Although this position has been well established, most of the research on opinion leadership has used the dichotomy of leaders and non-leaders because the operational measures of opinion leadership precluded its treatment as a continuous variable (Charles, K. 1970). Prior literature has widely researched on interpersonal communication and its influence across various disciplines. A concern for the impact of informal or word-of-mouth communication has emerged as a strong interest area within the domain of consumer behavior research (Schiffman, L., & Gaccione, V. 1974). Much literature support is present in the identification of opinion leader in different situations. Research is needed to identify the ways in which opinion leaders form the opinion of different non-leaders.

### Opinion leaders

Opinion leaders have been defined in many ways Cosmas, C., & Sheth, J. (1980) defines them as "someone whose opinions are highly respected and utilized by the respondents to help in making decision across a variety of situations such as what types of clothes to wear, where to have major household items repaired, how to discipline children,

and for whom to vote in political elections. This person can be someone with whom the respondents have personal contacts (a friend, priest, member of social group, relative, or someone in public life whose advice is derived from his/her public statements)". Burt, R. (1999) states that opinion leaders are more precisely opinion brokers who carry information across the social boundaries between groups. They are not people at the top of things so much as people at the edge of things, not leaders within groups so much as brokers between groups. Corey, L. (1971) defines the term opinion leaders as "trusted and informed people who exist in virtually all primary groups." And further elaborates that they are "models" of opinion, they can be major influencers on marketing effort through word-of-mouth communication to circles of relatives, friends, and acquaintances. Glock and Nicosia point out that opinion leaders "act not only as channels of information but also as a source of social pressure toward a particular choice, and of social support to reinforce that choice once it has been made." On another level, Berelson and Steiner describe opinion leaders as "those trusted and informed people who exist in virtually all primary groups, who are the 'models' for opinion within their group, who listen and read in the media, and who then pass on information and influence to their circle of relatives, friends and acquaintances." Katz and Lazarsfeld, (1955) proposed opinion leaders to act as mediators between mass media and mass audience.

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### Purpose of the research

Lack of a single paper explaining the complete construct of opinion leader, explaining their characteristics and identifying the influencing strategies triggered by opinion leaders, poses a need for a comprehensive paper to be written.

### Structure of the research

The article is structured in a way to provide comprehensive insights about the concept of opinion leaders, their importance, past studies, proceeding with discussion, conclusion and finally concluding the article with limitation and suggesting future research areas.

### Word of mouth evidence from literature

Marketers have long recognized interpersonal communication as an important medium for idea exchange in contemporary American society. Butler, R (1923) in one of the early marketing texts discussed the importance of word-of-mouth communication in securing product acceptance among consumers. In the 1930's, "professional rumor mongers" reportedly organized word-of-mouth campaigns to promote clients' products or criticize competitors' brands (Jacobson, D 1948). Katz and Lazarsfeld, (1965), in the classic Decatur study, found interpersonal communication to be involved more frequently and to have greater impact than any of the mass media in brand switching for small food products, soaps, cleansers and household goods. Whyte, W (1954), in his study of air-conditioner ownership in Philadelphia row houses, noted that although white-collar neighborhoods were homogeneous in terms of age and socio-economic status, ownership of air conditioners was clustered within neighborhoods, rather than distributed throughout the blocks. Whyte interpreted the clusters of ownership as evidence of a "powerful communication network."

Fisk, G (1959), found "family, friends and neighbors" to be the most important sources of information about new food products for household meal planners. King, C (1963), noted personal influence to be an important variable in adoption of new fashions. Nicosia, F (1964) documented the importance of personal influence in auto insurance purchasing. Feldman, S (1966) found that new residents in a community relied primarily upon friends, neighbors and co-workers in selecting physicians. Cox, D (1963) pointed out that interpersonal communication is an important complement to the mass media in reaching consumers. Cunningham, S (1964) related perceived risk and interpersonal communication. More recently, Myers, J (1966) documented the importance of interpersonal communication in disseminating information about new products.

### Types of opinion leaders

Probing into the literature Cosmas, S. (1980) categorizes prior opinion leadership research to fall into three distinct categories

1. Involves whether opinion leadership is specific to a product, idea, or issue, or if it is generalized across products, ideas or issues (Katz, E. 1957)
2. Involves the issue of whether opinion leaders are different from followers (Rogers, E. et al., 1971)
3. Involves the issue of how opinion leaders are utilized in the flow of communication among people (Katz, 1955)

### Characteristics of opinion leaders

Following attributes of opinion leaders are shown as:

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| 1. Enjoys life  | 13. Has all around knowledge  |
| 2. Has common sense   | 14. Evaluates you fairly  |
| 3. Utilizes you to test his or her ideas                      | 15. Is available when you need him or her   |
| 4. Motivates you to follow his or her advice                  | 16. Looks like you  |
| 5. Does not care what social group you associate with         | 17. Expresses empathy towards others; identifies with them                        |
| 6. Belongs to the same social group as you do                 | 18. Is wealthy  |
| 7. Can easily evaluate you for what you are                   | 19. Is mature   |
| 8. Has high degree of professionalism                         | 20. Makes you follow rules; enforces norms on you                                 |
| 9. Has strong opinions on many things                         | 21. Quite experienced about life  |
| 10. Is not modest   | 22. Likes to give advice so others will do those things he or she is afraid to do |
| 11. Is down to earth, practical or pragmatic, not pretentious | 23. Not afraid to give an opinion   |
| 12. Gets jealous of other opinion leaders                     | 24. Does not stand out in a crowd   |

### Stephen C. Cosmas and Jagdish N. Sheth, 1980

Cosmas, S. (1980) has merged all the attributes into seven broad categories Practical, Authoritarian, General Expert, Accessible, Peer Expert, Self-Centered and opinionated.

Opinion leaders differ for different attributes, but they have in common their channeling of the impersonal content of mass communications into the personal stream of the influence (Berelson, B., & Steiner, G. 1964). Study conducted by Corey, L. (1971) suggest following attributes to be related to opinion leaders

1. They are more involved in activities related to their topic
  2. They are more informed about new developments in their topic
  3. They read more in the media related to their topic
- Corey, L. (1971) also suggests that, to one extent or another, consumer opinion leaders will be found in all demographic groups.

### Diffusion Theory an approach used in opinion leadership research

Diffusion research goes one step further than two-step flow theory.

Diffusion is the "process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over a period of time among the members of a social system".

An innovation is "an idea, practice, or object that is perceived to be new by an individual or other unit of adoption". "Communication is a process in which participants create and share information with one another to reach a mutual understanding" (Rogers, 1995).

S-shaped diffusion curve because "most innovations have an S-shaped rate of adoption" (Rogers, 1995).

*"Diffusion research centers on the conditions which increase or decrease the likelihood that a new idea, product, or practice will be adopted by members of a given culture. Diffusion of innovation theory predicts that media as well as interpersonal contacts provide information and influence opinion and judgment".*

Studying how innovation occurs, E.M. Rogers (1995) argued that it consists of four stages:

1. Invention
2. Diffusion (or communication) through the social system
3. Time
4. Consequences

The information flows through networks. The nature of networks and the roles opinion leaders play in them determine the likelihood that the innovation will be adopted. Innovation diffusion research has attempted to explain the variables that influence how and why users adopt a new information medium, such as the Internet.

Opinion leaders exert influence on audience behavior via their personal contact, but additional intermediaries called change agents and gatekeepers are also included in the process of diffusion. Five adopter categories are:

- (1) Innovators very, little innovators adopt the innovation in the beginning (2,5%)
- (2) Early adopters, early adopters making up for 13,5% a short time later
- (3) Early majority, the early majority 34%
- (4) Late majority, the late majority 34%
- (5) Laggards, laggards make up for 16%

These categories follow a standard deviation-curve.

Some of the methods are network analysis, surveys, field experiments and ECCO analysis. ECCO, Episodic Communication Channels in Organization, analysis is a form of a data collection log-sheet. This method is specially designed to analyze and map communication networks and measure rates of flow, distortion of messages, and redundancy. The ECCO is used to monitor the progress of a specific piece of information through the organization.

Diffusion research has focused on five elements:

- (1) The characteristics of an innovation which may influence its adoption
- (2) The decision-making process that occurs when individuals consider adopting a new idea, product or practice
- (3) The characteristics of individuals that make them likely to adopt an innovation
- (4) The consequences for individuals and society of adopting an innovation
- (5) Communication channels used in the adoption process.

### Approaches used to identify Opinion leadership Research

Jacoby, J. (1974) investigates three basic techniques used to measure opinion leadership

1. Self-designating
2. Sociometric
3. Key Informant

**Self-designating or Self-Report approach** asks the individual to indicate how much an opinion leader he perceives himself to be.

Example of such questions can be taken from study conducted by Corey, L. 1971; 1969

1. Individuals who claim that associates come to them for advice and information about specific consumer topics (i.e., "opinion leaders").
2. Individuals who claim that they go to associates for such advice and information (i.e., "non-leaders").

Another study conducted by Corey, L. (1969) study of automobile opinion leadership used the following question: When it comes to knowing about automobiles, which one of the following statements comes closest to describing you:

- 1) Friends and relatives usually come to me for advice and information;
- 2) I usually go to friends or relatives for advice and information?

The same basic question was used in his 1964 study by the author of opinion leaders on food preparation topics:

- Would you say other people seem to come to you for ideas about you seem to go recipes and food, or that to other people for these ideas?

In the above three studies if the respondent claims associates or friends to come to him/her than shall be classified as opinion leader otherwise as a non-leader. However study conducted by Tittle & hill, (1967) indicated that error introduced as a result of the self-reporting technique is minor.

**Sociometric approach**, is used when all members of a given group are asked to identify those group members considered most influential with respect to the object or idea under consideration. However, the size of a typical consumer survey makes the sociogram impractical for opinion leadership in most market studies.

**Key informant approach** involves first identifying limited number of peoples assumed to be knowledgeable regarding the patterns of influence within a group, and then asking them to identify the influential's in that group.

Application of the key informant and sociometric techniques is meaningless if all group members do not know, or know of, one another. Consequently, relatively cohesive groups had to be utilized.

Cosmas, S. (1980) argues that All three areas observation or questioning limit the scaling of opinion leadership to a dyadic with respect to a specific issue, product, or idea. It seems that the identification of opinion leaders may be unnecessarily constrained in terms of research investigation, particularly in cross-cultural research.

Campbell and fiske suggests multimethod-multitrait approach to be used in order to develop construct validity (convergent as well as discriminant validity) of the measures.

Katz and Lazarsfeld, (1955) provide percentage-based evidence indicating a high degree of agreement between self-designating and sociometric approaches. Rogers and Catarno, (1962) cite data from an unpublished doctoral dissertation in which all three methods of measuring opinion leadership were applied to 28 dairy farmers. "Self-designating opinion leadership scores were correlated .300 with the number of sociometric choices, and .640 with composite opinion leadership rating by four key informants. The number of sociometric choices was correlated .876 with the composite key informant's ratings." However, while these data provide an indication of convergent validity, they provide no indication of discriminant validity, and it is the latter which is essential for establishing construct validity. This shows that there is convergent validity in the three approaches (Self-designating, Sociometric, Key Informant) taken to measure opinion leadership.

### **Behavior of opinion leaders across cultures**

Cosmas, S. (1980) concludes that people within and across cultures do use some basic dimensions to evaluate their opinion leaders. And among these dimensions, different cultures apply different degrees of importance. Whether other dimensions are used, or more are used, are subjects for further research. It appears that the more similar cultures are the more similar are the dimensions used to evaluate opinion leaders. These findings suggests that similar geographic boundaries, may have different sort of opinion leaders. Only same cultural values predict same type of opinion leaders. Similarly this study suggests that geographical boundaries are not always the best criterion for studying cultures, or for choosing markets (Triandis, H. 1972).

### **Opinion leader as a source of segmentation**

Mancuso, (1969) proposed building panels of opinion leaders among consumers on the basis of predetermined personal characteristics related to social status.

Corey, L. (1971) reports opinion leaders to be distinguished on the basis higher incomes and occupational levels. He further recommends that the characteristics which do appear to reflect their higher incomes distinguish them unique involvement with market topics. Compared to non-leaders in a particular topic, leaders read more media about related consumer issues; they are more knowledgeable about related new product developments; they participate more often in related consumer activities; and they derive greater satisfaction from those activities. Considering the personal influence attributed to opinion leaders, they emerge possibly one of the most important segments that can be isolated among consumers.

### **Opinion leadership role in buying behavior**

#### **New product development**

An important area for marketers is "new product development" as a case history; introductory campaign for a motor speedway in Los Angeles included a coupon with which to buy tickets for its opening event. As advance sales came in, records were kept of the first 50 purchasers, or "early adopters." These people were telephone with a subsequently interviewed by questionnaire that included a self-report measure of automotive opinion leadership. The finding was that 60% of the "early adopters" were automotive opinion leaders, compared to 17% found in the general Los Angeles population from previous study. As, supported by diffusion research. Confirming that the vast majority of "early adopters" tend to be opinion leaders, but also provides clear indication for future advertisers.

#### **Channel of information**

Opinion leader's act as "channels of information" between mass media and mass audiences (Glock, C. et al., 1963). In other words, opinion leaders legitimize the contents of a mass communication when and if they "pass it on to their circle of relatives, friends, and acquaintances (Berelson, B., & Steiner, G. 1964)." Since advertising is a form of mass communication, the dissemination of its content may also depend upon the mediation of opinion leaders. The direction and intensity of their response to a commercial, for example, may have a direct influence on its effectiveness in a total audience.

#### **Attitude Research**

Research is frequently conducted to determine consumer attitudes toward a product category, brand, or company. However, the attitudes which opinion leaders "pass on" to their circles of influence are rarely identified. The identification of opinion leaders might provide an indication of such attitudes among opinion leaders, particularly as compared to their rank-and-file associates.

### Influence strategies in buying centers

Six prominent influence strategies as suggested by Venkatesh, R et al., (1995) Threats, promises, recommendations, requests, legalistic pleas, and information exchange.

Research on power, the ability of people, or sources, to influence other people, or targets, is rooted in the bases of power classification proposed by French and Raven (1959). More recent work argues for a distinction between the mere possession of power (the primary focus of previous research) and the actual use of power to influence targets (e.g., Frazier and Summers 1984; Gaski 1984). Frazier and Summers (1984) delineate six different influence strategies-requests, information exchange, recommendations, promises, threats, and legalistic pleas-that a source can use to influence a target, and they make a strong case for studying these strategies. They suggest that these six influence strategies differ in two respects: (1) those that are coercive versus those that are noncoercive and (2) those that alter versus those that do not alter a target's perceptions. Frazier and Summers (1984, pp. 45-47) define the six influence strategies as follows: (1) Requests: "The source merely informs the target of the action(s) it would like the target to take without mentioning or directly implying any specific consequences of the target's subsequent compliance or noncompliance;" (2) Information exchange: The source uses "discussions on general business issues" without suggesting "specific target action;" (3) Recommendations: The source suggests that following a specific course of action is likely to be beneficial; (4) Promises: "The source pledges to provide the target with a specific reward contingent on the target's compliance with the source's stated desires;" (5) Threats: "The source communicates to the target that it will apply negative sanctions should the target fail to perform the desired action;" and (6) Legalistic pleas: The source cites a legalistic, contractual, or informal agreement "that either requires or suggests that the target perform a certain action."

### Research Method Used

Our research will include a combination of methods. Desk research will be used as methodology to more carefully define key concepts and ideas in related to opinion leadership. This is the type of research in which information is gathered through published resources.

The essentials of good desk research involve:

- Having a clear idea of what to look for and where to look for
- Monitoring the quality of the source material
- Making sure that the right information is gathered

Traditionally gathering of information about prospective customers, competitors and stakeholders in markets has been a time consuming process by using desk research. It used to be carried out on an on-going basis because of the

slow deliverance of paper-based material. But now with the Internet, gigantic oceans of information have opened up electronically which have made desk research a useful and practical tool for research, particularly in dynamic circumstances where data gets outdated very quickly.

We will conduct qualitative research by collecting secondary data that would include.

- Scholarly research articles
- Case studies
- Newspaper articles
- Information accessed through the Internet
- Any other reliable available sources of information that are documented
- Web site

### Reasons of Selecting This Method

We have used desk research because online desk research has helped us in systematic identification, collection, analysis and documentation of data for achieving our objectives of the research. It has helped us in collecting required market information along with statistics in a cost efficient and time effective manner. We have conducted a qualitative research because it has provided an excellent opportunity to study the available materials of the recent or more isolated past to gain knowledge for both methodological and theoretical issues. We have tried to ensure good documentation during the secondary analysis of qualitative data to make our research process systematic and meaningful.

Employing the qualitative method has allowed us:

- Collect the secondary data in an elastic, non-structured way that allowed materialization of information and interpretations of importance of quality in automobile sector;
- Obtain a more sensible and hands-on feel of importance of quality that cannot be experienced in the mathematical data and statistical analysis used in quantitative research.

### Ethical Issues

We are going to collect data from secondary sources, where data is mostly accessible with the consent of the concerned party, so there will be no ethical issues involved in our research. Moreover we will ensure that we do not access confidential information of any company under study.

### Data Collection

We have gathered secondary data from the net and other reliable sources as websites, free available data on the Internet, some renowned newspapers and magazines, and literature. We have ensured that the sources of data and the collected material were reliable and related to our topic of research.

## Discussion and Analysis

The main purpose of this research was to qualitatively investigate and elaborate the concept of opinion leadership and explain the influence they play on buyer decision making. Literature review suggests that prior research has focused more on explaining the construct of opinion leaders in lights of self-reported surveys rather than other measures as diffusion theory, two-way communication theory, sociometric and key informant approach. Marketers for centuries have been focusing on different strategies to capture new customers and retain the old ones. But less attention has been made in identifying the biggest medium as supported by literature to capture new and retain old customers, word-of-mouth communication. E.g., google, the multi-billion company on the web has used only one strategy and that was word-of-mouth. The advertising expenditure of "google" is far less than its competitors "MSN" and "YAHOO", while the market share is considerably much.

The definition of opinion leader is widely accepted to be one who is highly respected and whose opinion is utilized by the respondents to help in making decision across a variety of situations. The construct of opinion leaders, vary across types of products. At one instant they can be a friend and on another they can be a relative. Prior research shows that the most prominent form of opinion leader are family, friends and neighbors. It is also evident that opinion leaders are specific to a product, idea or issue this versatility makes study of opinion leaders more important and more difficult. Some common traits as predicted in opinion leaders have also been identified as Practical, Authoritarian, General Expert, Accessible, Peer Expert, Self-Centered and opinionated. Some researchers refer to opinion leaders as more involved, more informed and read more media related to their topics. So, opinion leaders are the ones who actively participate in different activities. There are three approaches to identifying opinion leaders (Self-designating, Sociometric and Key Informant) where self-designating approach is proposed to have the greatest validity and acceptability in literature. It is also suggested that among cultures opinion leaders are same compared to geographical locations. Some sources of segmentation are also suggested as according to income and occupation. Consent on the behavior of opinion leaders during the launch of new products is widely present. They are treated to be as a good source of information, acting as mediators between advertisers and the audience.

Influence strategies as discussed in this article contribute significantly towards making a decision choice for buyers. Non-coercive strategies (i.e., information exchange and requests) and recommendations (a soft coercive strategy) are the most frequently used strategies, whereas threats and promises (high on instrumentality) are used the least. The characteristics of the influencers are more significant

compared to characteristics of target people. Among all the influence strategies recommendations strategy as mentioned in literature is found to be more effective than other influence strategies. This may be because recommendation strategy is a task oriented rather than influential strategy. It is worth noting for marketers that influencers must be the major market rather than the target itself.

As the data collected was qualitative and does not involve any questionnaire or surveys we have analyzed the data theoretically and have explained the research topic on the basis of certain approaches used to develop construct of opinion leadership. The approach that we have used is to take the ingredients mentioned in the research purpose one-by-one and analyze it according to on the basis of past research. Different practices for identifying and measuring opinion leadership are compared with each other and recommendations are made accordingly.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Extensive literature can be found in other fields related to marketing but research related to opinion leadership is a bit victim of stalemate from the last decade. It has been found evident that much work is still to be done on the concept of opinion leadership, more specifically on how leaders behavior influence purchase intention. As literature suggests recommendation strategies by opinion leaders to have the greatest impact on targets, marketers are recommended to direct their marketing efforts towards identifying opinion leaders who provide recommendation to non-leaders. Opinion leaders can be a new form of target market for marketers who can work as multiplier for the firm. Research on opinion leadership can be used in opening new avenues not only for the scholars but also for the marketers. Many areas in this regard can be fruitful as identifying new segments or new strategies.

## Limitations of the Study

As, the data being collected is secondary in nature following limitations are present

### Outdated data

There are thousands of links retrieved from the search of any data through a search engine. These include valid results which are vital for the research but also include some data that is outdated. The reason being that fast pace of change, in technology and within the industry makes data outdated in a short period of time. The data collected through secondary research can help but may not provide the current situation and updates.

### Limited Useful Data

It takes a lot of time to search required data on the internet because it is very difficult to filter out desired details from the irrelevant data. The reasons of limited availability of useful data include the reluctance of publishers to give all the details freely, so availability of data is usually restricted and incomplete. In most cases one source is not enough to

gather all the required data so careful search and identification is mandatory. In case of any missing data it has to be replaced with related or similar data very carefully from other reliable sources.

#### Future Research

- Empirical study explaining the impact of opinion leadership on purchase intention
- A meta analysis is required to explain the past research on opinion leadership and find out the point of commonalities
- Research analyzing the behavior opinion leaders predict at the launch of new product vs existing product purchase

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