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Exploring the Transformation of Opinion Leaders from a Traditional to a Digital Mindset

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ABSTRACT

The advancements in the field of communication concurrently transpire throughout the evolution of the Internet and its accompanying tools. A free communication opportunity over the internet platform has resulted in the involvement of a sizable people mass in this digital environment. Individuals also pose variations in communication styles since Web 2.0 technology promotes interpersonal connection and communication. Such variations have resulted in modification and deformation in the Two-Stage Flow Theory, which is among the traditional communication models. According to the conventional definition, opinion leaders have the force to potentially influence society with their respective approaches and responses to various events and cases. They have revived alongside the changing media contexts. The transition in these platforms proceeds beyond the change in technology since they facilitate a significant portion of social change. Nowadays, opinion leaders appeal to eventuate social change since they have the potential to convey to a sizable mass of internet users. The vast majority of internet users are influenced by the attitudes and accessions of new opinion leaders while making decisions on their social life, political issues, products, and personal investments. On the one hand, people, groups, companies, and political structures that are aware of the indulgent aspects of the opinion leaders try to persuade them; on the other hand, these entities seek to generate their opinion leaders and forge a follower mass for them. The purpose of the study was to assess the concept of an opinion leader introduced by the Two-Stage Flow Theory and the new context in which it has emerged in light of the elaboration of modern communication technology. The study findings revealed that the Internet and its accompanying tools differed the recent opinion leaders from traditional ones; however, the most critical pillar of this differentiation was digital domains where opinion leaders appeal to large masses composed of different layers.

Introduction

Technology has evolved in a way that positively benefits humans throughout human history. The advancing technology deeply affects societies and daily human life. Communication technologies are the most significant area where such effects have materialized. While the communication environments among society members have changed, the content in these environments has begun to diverge concurrently with the options the environment has created. The primary source of this divergence in human life is the Internet platform. The social media platforms available nowadays are the most crucial agencies used in communication.

The escalation in the number of social media sites and a sheer number of users involved in these platforms have switched from face-to-face communication to virtual communication. With the spread of social networking applications, opinion-sharing websites, blogs, and microblogs, people are now able to effectively and freely express their occasions, opinions, and feelings about a particular product, service, policy, or even economic issues through interacting with others (Bamakan et al., 2019, p. 201).

Alteration in all communication environments has contemporarily modified the notion of opinion leader, which has previously emerged with traditional mass media. Traditional opinion leaders disseminate information by self-filtering, reshaping, and adding their perspectives while sharing it with others within the framework of the Two-Stage Flow Theory in the context of media impact theories. This revised and delivered knowledge leads the groups and people to construct an opinion and attitude affected by the opinion leader on a specific issue. Such an interaction method eventuates in the alteration in individuals' perceptions and attitudes and inevitably reflects in their decision-making process.

Nowadays, the classical and traditional notion of opinion leader (mentioned above) has moved into digital contexts and has had the opportunity to influence larger audiences. Opinion leaders who share their views and thoughts with others through contemporary social networking sites go by many names, including phenomenon, influencer, digital leader, and entrepreneur. They differ from the conventional opinion leader in the communication channels and the tools they employ. Concepts such as wisdom, experience, and maturity that prevail in traditional opinion leaders are absent in modern digital opinion leaders. While traditional opinion leaders often assess political information from a societal perspective, contemporary opinion leaders emphasize commercial goods like fashion and entertainment. Unlike the conventional ones, new opinion leaders have the potential to significantly manipulate sizable masses by making more superficial and casual assessments of political matters. Therefore, this concept appears before people in social life as a hollow, albeit more effective, concept compared to the past.

Two-Stage Flow Theory and Opinion Leaders

When individuals originally began to speculate about the effects of the mass media, they displayed two divergent tendencies. Some social scientists opined that the mass media would merely reproduce the educated popular opinion that characterized the 'town meeting.' This prospect implied that citizens once again had equal access to an almost first-hand description of it. However, some scientists have noticed something quite the opposite, defining the mass media as agents of evil striving to obliterate democratic society (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1964). Therefore, there were two distinct groups in the history of communication theories; those who

regarded the media as a tool directly affecting individuals and those who considered it a tool indirectly affecting individuals. Lazarsfeld et al. (1960), defending the opinion of the second group, asserted that it was not the mass media but the opinion leaders strongly impacting individuals in society. Lazarsfeld et al. (1960) concluded that notions such as culture and belief systems had an effect on individuals. The concept of opinion leadership and the two-stage flow theory were proposed during this timeframe as referring to the 'finite effects' period (Güz & Gazali, 2019, p. 82; Mora, 2008, p. 7; Yaylagül, 2006, p. 49).

The hypothesis that 'thoughts constantly flow from radio and printed publications to opinion leaders and from them to less engaged community segments' has been tested in numerous successive studies. Each study endeavored to deliver a unique answer to the problem of how to consider interpersonal relationships in conventional survey design; as a result, the original hypothesis was largely validated (Katz, 1957, p. 62).

The fundamental argument of Katz and Lazarsfeld (1964) resided in what they refer to as a 'two-stage flow of communication,' which asserts that media content does not directly impact public opinion. Instead, the exertion or mediation of the influence takes place inside interpersonal networks and the personal webs in which people are embedded. A crucial function in this process hinges upon those referred to as 'opinion leaders'; in other words, individuals who make statements that guide others about current affairs and everyday life (Hepp, 2018, p. 293; Peltekoğlu & Tozlu, 2018, p. 223).

The Two-Stage Flow Theory reveals that information dissemination occurs in two different stages. First, opinion leaders must be willing to accept the information, and second, they should convey their remarks or views to others (Wang et al., 2020, p. 6).

A study of the 1940 Presidential Elections proved that the opinion leaders disseminating information from the media to society were more influential on individuals' voting behavior during the elections. Opinion leaders, according to Lazarsfeld et al. (1960), were politically vigilant individuals. During the election campaign, opinion leaders were more intensively engaged in reading, listening, and discussing political matters than other community members throughout the election campaign (Lazarsfeld et al., 1960, p. 51). By focusing on some particular aspects, the study on the 1940 election analyzed why personal influence was more persuasive in changing individuals' opinions than the mass media and consequently concluded that it was usually aimlessness, flexibility, and reliability. Additionally, this study revealed that the number of opinion leaders did not confine to the upper layers of society; instead, they were almost evenly present across all socioeconomic classes and strata (Lazarsfeld et al., 1960, p. 51). This finding led to subsequent efforts to scrutinize to which extent this is true in areas other than election campaigns and specify what aspects distinguish opinion leaders from their followers (Katz, 1957, p. 68).

Robinson (1976, pp. 308-309) listed the characteristics of the Two-Stage Flow Theory as follows:

- The media's information dissemination to the opinion leader constitutes knowledge, not influence.
- When the mass media disseminates information that opinion leaders ought to hear, it initially strives to convince them when messages contradict broadly accepted norms.
- The Two-Stage Flow Theory barely considers whether the person being less attentive to the media is sensorial to the information and influence of the mass media. According

to the theory, the lesser the personal affinities with opinion leaders, the lesser the mass media influence

- The reinterpretation of the Two-Stage Flow Theory asserts that this is an effort of influence rather than a knowledge transfer. However, the 'sharing opinion' concept among opinion leaders does not specify whether knowledge or influence is the dominating exchange or shared item.
- The less careful situations are more frequent for both sides. There is no materialized influence and information exchange here; only the less active and more active become significant in this setting.

The following are the rudimentary presumptions of the Two-Stage Flow Theory, according to McQuail and Windahl (1997):

- Individuals are not socially solitary entities; conversely, they are members of social groupings interacting with others.
- There are no instant and direct reactions and responses to the mass media messages; contrarily, these posts are shared through social relations, eventuating the desired influence through these clerics.
- There are two responsive processes, one of them is reception and attention, and the other is accepting or rejecting the influence or information dissemination initiative.
- Individuals are unequal in the face of mass media campaigns; however, they maintain diverse functions in the communication process, and they potentially distinguish as those who actively acquire and share thoughts from the mass media and those who primarily rely on other personal relationships for guidance.
- It is achievable to define whether opinion leaders take on a more functional role based on their intensive involvement in mass communication, higher levels of socialization, awareness of their ability to influence others, and roles as sources and guides; as a result, these aspects distinguish them from others.

The theory, which presumes that individuals acquire information from interpersonal relations as much as mass media, describes the process of conveying messages from the source to the recipient through mass media and interpersonal channels. Its primary distinction from other theories originates from its dependence on opinion leaders' support while carrying out information gathering, processing, and dissemination tasks (Windahl et al., 2006, p. 51).

It is well-established that not everyone in a society has an equal impact on others. Opinion leaders with more social experience and higher social stances seem more compelling to induce others to revise their perspectives towards news or innovation. Undoubtedly, opinion leaders retain a higher potential to access mass media and are more efficacious than others in conveying positive or adverse information (Wang et al., 2020, p. 6). There are always some individuals who stand out for their level of organization and activity in every social group. They are more sensitive to the needs of society than others and are more inclined to express themselves on critical issues. It is relatively easy to encounter these individuals and thus examines how they vary from the bulk of their groupings (Lazarsfeld et al., 1955, p. 238). Society assigns such individuals the position of opinion leader. While it is challenging to define an opinion leader, the typical reference is that they differ from others due to their social standings or status or because they were more engaged with the issue at hand. They potentially follow the mass media

more closely and intentionally than non-leaders since they pose more sophisticated belief systems (Robinson, 1976, p. 307).

One of the critical roles of opinion leaders is to adjudicate between the mass media and other individuals in their groups. According to conventional insight, individuals supposedly acquired information directly from newspapers, radio, and other media platforms; however, findings refuted this claim. Most people acquired their mass knowledge and opinions through direct interactions with opinion leaders in their groupings. Opinion leaders expose themselves to mass media relatively more than others (Lazarsfeld et al., 1955, p. 238). Another significant opinion leader's role is to pose a tendency to use their predetermined views frequently to reinforce what they have to share rather than merely convey them (Laughey, 2007, p. 25). In the web of interpersonal ties, opinion leaders have also another critical function. They have more power over people than the mainstream (official) media. Surprisingly, opinion leaders successfully convey messages even to the less active media-using-segment of society (Lazarsfeld et al., 1960, p. 151).

It is not like the concept of opinion leadership emerged by chance or as a brand-new term. Numerous studies focusing on "power," "impact," and "leadership" demonstrated that every community comprises remarkable men and women individuals who set the fashion and others emulate. Studies, however, indicated that this well-known idea has evolved. Unlike classical leadership theories, opinion leadership processes communication horizontally and vertically, from top to bottom. Additionally, opinion leaders exist in every aspect of life (Lazarsfeld et al., 1955, p. 238).

Social media outlets such as Facebook, Twitter, and hundreds of blog sites have recently offered new ways for users to share information on online social networks. The escalating influence of social media delivers a fresh perspective and yields a substantive amount of data to analyze the role of opinion leaders. Such broad data availability (Walter & Hanke, 2020, p. 587) eventuate in assessing opinions, sentiments, and relationships increasingly manageable within groups (Güz & Gazali, 2019, p. 80; Kwak et al., 2010, p. 600; Wang et al., 2020, p. 7; Demir & Baloğlu, 2019). Influential opinion leaders on social media include significant politicians, well-known researchers, journalists, bloggers, and other individuals engaged across multiple social media platforms. The information dissemination in social media displays clustering patterns for various reasons, such as mutual interests. Clusters deliver stable features and establish a clear global view of interactions as individuals often strive for their interests (Wang et al., 2020, p. 8).

The evolution of opinion leaders has progressed in the following order; no opinion leader, a single opinion leader, and multi-opinion leaders. The concept of multi-opinion leaders corresponds to the notion of having opinion leaders merely confronted in the digital age in which we live. The stage of multi-opinion leaders achieved its zenith and gave rise to a new media paradigm with the widespread use of social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube. At this stage, it was merely enough for the opinion leader to be an explicit internet user with a substantial number of followers, not necessarily a media professional or an authority in the field (Garcia et al., 2020, p. 277; Khoury & Farah, 2018, pp. 452-454). In addition to the above-mentioned social networks, blogs offer more additional opportunities, especially for digital opinion leaders. Since such tools pose simple, accessible, and free natures, users efficiently communicate with others on social networks. Blogs,

however, offer separate channels for digital opinion leaders –a tiny albeit an active portion of society– to share ideas and solicit a response from members of their social networks (Kavanaugh et al., 2006, p. 79).

Digital Opinion Leaders

The introduction of unconventional mass communication techniques escalated the communication flow and extended the linkage between the message and the message recipient. Experts capitalized on the Two-Stage Flow and initiated using it in advertising and strategic promotional campaigns in the first decade of the 21st century via making businesses, public figures, and celebrities market a product or service used to appeal to various segments of the target audience through typical advertising and public relations procedures (Khoury & Farah, 2018, p. 451). Nevertheless, experiential marketing has recently proven to be more successful than traditional advertising, and this is a strategy precisely what direct marketing ensures (Anil, 2020, p. 64). Opinion leaders (influencers) appear to be intermediaries who acquire information from the media or marketers and then disseminate it to other individuals or consumers (Segev et al., 2012, p. 6). At this point, brands favor allying with some powerful entities to deliver their message to a larger audience. The contemporary digital opinion leaders are the actors functioning as the brand's spokesperson, employing communication tools to convey the message and frequently with a higher impact than some advertising campaigns (Costa & Alturas, 2018, p. 1).

Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) recognized the criticalness of opinion leaders in disseminating news from media and public sources (Bergström & Belfrage, 2018, p. 584) with the Two-Stage Flow Theory. Discovering that interpersonal communication had more potential to influence society than media content, this concept was highly compatible with network technology and social media networks built on individuals conveying various kinds of information. Consequently, interpersonal communication concepts and perceived opinion leadership gained even more meaning as social media dominated information-seeking uses (Garcia et al., 2020, p. 277; Turcotte et al., 2015, p. 523). In the new media environments, Peltekoğlu and Tozlu (2018, p. 288) defined opinion leadership as people who are influential in the decision-making process of other people while advertising products, services, and technologies within their relationships and networks, whereas Güz and Gazali (2019, p. 85) emphasized that opinion leaders are not only scholarly about a subject but also lean on the quality of the social surroundings they are involved. Therefore, it is safe to argue that opinion leaders are also individuals who are capable of accessing multi-sourced information based on their current stance in the social setting.

Rather than excluding individuals from models and theories in this inquiry of knowledge, there shall be a particular consideration for opinion leaders and their followers necessary for the flow of communication in today's most innovative and increasingly crucial media platform (Karlsen, 2013, p. 304). Although the Two-Stage Flow Theory is about to lose its significance, it has begun rising again with web technology.

Depending on the advancements in modern technology, extending in communication technologies, ease of storing, processing, and transmitting information and data, digitalization that facilitates the dissemination of information and data, and the widespread adoption of internet technology have all had a significant impact on the way of searching and receiving information (Ayhan & Şeker, 2021, p. 120).

According to Bennett and Manheim (2006, p. 213), who first propounded the Two-Stage Flow Theory, the potential for traditional opinion leaders to "lead" has substantially diminished due to alteration and transformation in communication technologies and fundamental shifts in the relations between individuals and society. Although several scientists criticized this theory since it resided on an insufficient and misunderstood comprehension of power and authority, others defended the view that it manifested itself in communication environments. They also emphasized that opinion leadership is only in question occasionally for particular times and matters (Özçetin, 2019, p. 112); as a result, the Two-Stage Flow Theory has transformed the traditional concept of opinion leader and created a new notion.

While recent studies on opinion leadership have revealed additional findings (Güz & Yegen, 2019, 142), scientists focused on addressing the questions regarding how information flows and how opinion leaders arise from this information flow with an empirical-based study formulated by the Two-Stage Flow Theory (Watts & Dodds, 2007, p. 443). Additionally, the research sought answers to questions such as 'Does the information flow in online public forums follow the two-stage communication model?', 'If yes, what are the characteristics of opinion leaders in such forums?', 'Are they content creators, influential people, or both?' While Ulutaş (2016, p. 24) questioned whether the new communicative networks should serve as a new iteration of opinion leaders to address all these questions (Choi, 2015, p. 698), he also emphasized that social media offers a unique opportunity. Yet, according to Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955), opinion leaders develop from information exchange during typical and daily interpersonal relationships. Indeed, a daily, personal relationship-based information flow exists in social media.

The flow of communication among individuals depends on information transfer interpersonally. Opinion leaders, therefore, are equally critical of the flow of communication on social networking sites, as highlighted in the original conceptualization of Lazarsfeld et al. (1955) as nodes connecting mass media and interpersonal networks. Opinion leaders are now assessed digitally and ingrained as nodes in the social structure that defines society (Karlsen, 2013, pp. 302-303). Jain and Katarya (2019, p. 1) asserted that social networks display a crucial role in sharing information and introducing new products to individuals. People can share their views on specific topics, news, products, works, and trends anywhere, anytime, and on any occasion, instantly receiving feedback from others. In this sense, opinion leaders on these networks are critical personalities having the power to alter and transform the opinions of others with their knowledge and competencies.

Since opinion leaders construct meaningful content for social media, and concurrently, social media is an essential platform for opinion leaders, the evolution of opinion leaders eventuates in parallel with the advancement of the Internet (Khoury & Farah, 2018, p. 454). Hence, new mass media have developed in terms of content (Güz & Gazali, 2019, p. 86) along with communication technology during the initial studies focusing on opinion leadership notion and the subsequently conducted studies in the following period. The role of unification, an essential aspect of the opinion leader, is inherent in the interaction and connectivity that defines the nature of social media (Garcia et al., 2020, p. 279). The channels that the opinion leader dominates have changed due to the shifting tool in the notion of the new opinion leadership. For instance, influential opinion leaders have left their active positions in radio shows, editorials, and television debate programs and moved to the Internet. The new and vocal

opinion leaders, who are growing, expanding, and forging their authority in the social media mass media every day, benefit from such new mass media. They use their current power considerably more efficiently and permanently, way beyond face-to-face communication. As a result, the opinion leader-dominant channels have been altered by the advancement of technology, leading to opinion leaders shifting from their current positions in radio programs, columns, and television discussion programs to the internet. New and influential opinion leaders, who rise, extend and consolidate their authority in social media with each passing day, benefit from these new mass media (Keleş, 2012) and resume the flow of information with the environment they simulate through these instruments. Opinion leaders maintain their endurance in social media in health, marketing, fashion, politics, science, and media settings and connection with modern communication technology.

Information flow is becoming an increasingly prominent component of social media platforms. Social media users potentially receive news by either subscribing to a news organization or following virtual friends online who create posts with linked news content. These attempts are a unique feature of news presentation on social media, as both professional journalists and fellows discuss the essence and relevance of news content to construct new digital opinion leader-follower dynamics as yet unexplored in communication and psychology (Turcotte et al., 2015, p. 524). The concept of internet behavior, as studied these dynamics for a while, states that most users are less engaged online, and a small user minority is accountable for the contribution of behavior to society in general (Weeks et al., 2017, p. 4). This minority includes the modern-day digital opinion leaders.

Opinion leaders have always impacted the decision-making process of consumers. Digital leaders also denoted as influencers, critical persons, impactors, opinion leaders, and online leaders, represent a remarkably authentic group of people who publicize their attitudes, opinions, and observations through social media in the modern age with the development of digital technologies and social networks (Duman, 2018, p. 108; Güz & Gazali, 2019: 84; Karsak & Sancar, 2017, p. 318; Zak & Hasprova, 2020, p. 1). Social networks have developed to be massive information portals thanks to the rapid evolution of web technology, and text-based content on social platforms has influenced the views of the user and society. For instance, Twitter and microblogs are easy and fast social platforms that users can easily access. Users potentially share everything happening around them on these platforms with their companions and other followers. In this context, this field contains millions of pieces of text information every day. This information bulk is followed and processed by society and used in developing their opinions (Li et al., 2019, pp. 61-62). In addition to the distinctive features of the medium, factors such as the characteristics and motivations of the users, their proximity to the events geographically, and the appeal of the topics all play a role in the significance and influence of bloggers and Twitter users in the process of gaining attention (Segev et al., 2012, p. 3; Xu et al., 2010, p. 1278; Yegen, et al., 2022). Nowadays, where social media networks have become an integral part of daily life, the agenda is determined through these networks. Unlike conventional mass media, opinion leaders pose great significance in online networks where the individual stands out (Demir & Ayhan, 2020, p. 1).

It is undeniable that mass media, especially social media, influences personal opinions. These settings, which have the potential to become a critical determinant in everyday social interactions, frequently become a central issue in social relations (Ulutaş, 2016, p. 24). Direct

marketing, which arose with digitalization and social media, is the practice of directing individuals with mass followers in social media applications toward a particular brand or product. The referrer might be a celebrity, blogger or YouTuber, journalist, or specialist (Garcia et al., 2020, p. 289) or in the category of fashion and gaming (Bankova & Stancheva, 2021, p. 17) depending on the interests of society. People fail to trust a social media algorithm, whereas they tend to trust opinion leaders promoted by these algorithms (Dubois et al., 2020, p. 11). The follower in this setting is a genuine opinion leader beyond being an authority. The essential aspect is that such individuals are adept at high persuasion (Anil, 2020, pp. 61-62). While the persuasiveness of a message is evaluated subjectively by the recipients of the message through dimensions such as the quality of the argument, the reliability of the source and the attractiveness of the message (Nunes et al., 2018, p. 66; Peltekoğlu & Tozlu, 2018, 289), the prestige of influencers who share their own experiences may gain more respect and credibility at this rate (Karsak & Sancar, 2017, p. 319). In this context, it is more effective to convey messages to the target audience through the mass media using well-known, dependable, and popular entities with entertainment content; it is more likely that the target audience will well receive the message communicated and decode it conveniently (Bayındır, 2017, p. 601).

In the context of social media networks, the notion of incidental news consumption clarifies how users undergo them without any original and particular engagement. Firstly, since some of the web options may haphazardly lead individuals to encounter content they are not actively seeking, there are restrictions on the Internet's purpose as an informative tool; secondly, these restrictions limit the transformation over time as a function of technological innovations and their adoption; and finally, they restrict changes in digital media and social goals (Valeriani & Vaccari, 2016, p. 1863).

Owing to the invented new media tools and social networks, users potentially expose to filtered information, selective homogeneous content delivered to them, and substantive contents relying on the political heterogeneity of social media and user networks (Güz & Gazali, 2019, p. 86). Social networking sites are becoming immensely popular where individuals experience messages. The social media stream consists of a mix of private and public posts, intertwining with messages, news, and all other activities. What individuals are exposed to in this stream relatively depends on the conduct of other networkers (Bergström & Belfrage, 2018, p. 583). The views of digital opinion leaders about products and services are more prevalent on social media platforms that are widely utilized (Nunes et al., 2018, p. 59). Individuals cannot detach themselves from their atmosphere, which is teeming with people, opinion leaders, and influencers who frame their thoughts and opinions, especially in the century in which we live (Khoury & Farah, 2018, p. 452).

Social media platforms not only have the capacity to unite disparate segments, but they also deliver a forum for groups where diverse ideas freely voice their opinions. Despite the diverse mentality of thought, there can certainly be a user account suitable for that idea. Hence, it serves individuals to get organized effortlessly, and those with specialized knowledge may come to the forefront to facilitate as opinion leaders in these networks. There are structural differences between opinion leadership in traditional media and social media opinion leadership (Tam, 2020, p. 78). Yet, conventional and digital opinion leaders differ in content, meaning, and substance, albeit they pose some commonalities.

In the conventional sense, opinion leaders serving an essential function in the construction and control of society strive to maintain social opinions under control and discipline (Karataş, 2019, p. 256) by reproducing the ideology of political power and using them in their discourses in their new communication settings within the practices of daily life.

Social media networks such as Facebook and Twitter have become considerably simple and inexpensive in terms of accessibility. The Internet has ceased being an extravagance, has evolved into a new form of self-expression demanded by everyone nowadays, and widened their awareness and status. In this sense, the traditional definitions of opinion leaders in the media –such as those emphasizing wisdom, social superiority, education, knowledge, and experience– do not apply to opinion leaders in today's social media. These new leaders take on the role of opinion leaders in communities where some members have similar social structures, are equally knowledgeable, or have a high level of education, and share the same beliefs and viewpoints; however, congregating under the leadership and thus share a social structure (Keleş, 2012). One of the advantages of social media for digital opinion leaders is that they potentially influence online and reach wider audiences as new stakeholders in online communities. While social media influences millions of online users, traditional media maintains its message-spreading function in public relations, although social media affects millions of online users. These individuals, who comprise online communities, actually speak for millions of individuals whose relationships and online chats are impacted (Karsak & Sancar, 2017, p. 318). As a result, even while social media platforms and the digital world offer a unique setting for opinion leaders, the unique perspectives conveyed by the concept indicate that the Two-Stage Flow Theory moves it in different directions. Innovation of new technologies in the field and new communication prospects introduced new theoretical and conceptual vistas for opinion leaders. The relationship between trust and the shift in social structures triggered by social media, notably in the media, has created a transformation in the phenomenon of opinion leaders and given rise to the emergence of new and parallel opinion leaders (Ayhan & Şeker, 2021, p. 125).

Some Studies on Digital Opinion Leaders

In their study, Nunes et al. (2018) stated that social media was the typical source of persuasive messages shared by digital opinion leaders. The study investigated how consumers were affected by their purchase intentions. The study findings revealed that such 'persuasive messages' shared by digital opinion leaders might alter followers' perspectives and lead them to purchase the evaluated products by persuading them to accept the provided information.

Turcotte et al. (2015), in their study assessed the impact of the news shared by opinion leaders on social media. The study outcomes confirmed that individuals gain trust in particular media organizations through the persuasion of opinion leaders, and subsequently, they can use these organizations directly and even take on the role of opinion leaders.

Bergström and Belfrage (2018) posed questions to individuals to assess the roles that others play in exposing people to news through social networks. As a result, most surveyed interviewees responded that they perceived certain people as opinion leaders in digital settings. These opinion leaders in the digital domain are extraordinarily engaged with social media and post updates frequently.

In a study, Hermida et al. (2012) analyzed the impact of social media platforms on news consumption based on an online survey of 1600 Canadian participants. They further

emphasized that news organizations were utilizing social media, considering Facebook and Twitter-like services as indispensable opportunities to market and distribute their product content. The study also discovered that social networks became a critical news source for Canadians as two-fifths of social network users receive their news from the individuals they follow on platforms like Facebook and one-fifth from news organizations and individual journalists. As a result, individualized news feeds for individuals, or messages from opinion leaders, are expanded by networked media technology.

Yet, digital opinion leaders have been involved and voiced in all areas of daily life. Flicker (2012) focused on how physicians participate as opinion leaders in digital environments and what potential roles they might play in initiatives to increase public awareness of certain diseases. The study also provided evidence that some digital opinion leaders have been successfully selected and trained by pharmaceutical companies. Therefore, companies identified some physicians who are unpopular or unaccepted widely since they expressed positive thoughts on a particular drug, and their promotion as opinion leaders disrupted the consensus process recognizing the detrimental role of that drug.

In their study, Zak and Hasprova (2020) scrutinized the influence of digital opinion leaders on consumers in the modern-day digital age via employing a survey technique on participants. The participant replies revealed that purchasing habits and the potential influence of digital opinion leaders on consumer behavior in social networks received the most attention. The study data also verified the value of social networks in digital marketing. The study findings further proved that communication effectiveness in social networks highly relies on many factors, one of which is digital opinion leadership. Identifying the target audience is also one of the most critical factors in choosing the right digital opinion leader.

Conclusion

Based on media influence studies, the matrix of the opinion leader concept is to verify the Two-Stage Flow Theory. These two stages indicate the process of news and information exchange based on trust among those in the first group who are trustworthy and have good ties to the mass media but are poorly connected to it and those in the second group who are well-connected to it and have a high socioeconomic status and a high level of education. In the past, access to mass media was not as manageable and accessible as it is today; hence, the opinion leaders dominating the mass media and disseminating messages they received from other sources would share their views by relying on the trust they gained in the society. Consequently, the community would abide by this information since the person conveying that message was reliable and would develop their opinions and behaviors by residing it. Nowadays, however, technological advancements made it much more viable to access mass media than when compared to the past.

The advancements in communication technology resulted in the notion of an opinion leader, which initially gained visibility with traditional mass media studies, evolving into a digital influencer. Contemporary individuals regarded as opinion leaders naturally persist in influencing the views and opinions of people through social media since they are both users and influencers. It is necessary to emphasize that the term 'opinion leader' is not used in the traditional meaning here. In a digital setting, opinion leaders adored and respected by a community might not be more knowledgeable, experienced, or educated than the followers they influence. These recently emerged opinion leaders, whose sentiments are appreciated and

frequently followed, especially by young users, are not required to have formal education. In this sense, it is safe to argue that the opinion leader's role, once considered a societal responsibility, stands now focused on the person's financial and psychological conditions rather than social responsibility.

Although the term 'concept' as meaning is still habituated as it used to be, entities and communities digitally influenced by opinion leaders have transformed. The environment influenced and the messages shared have also changed, and they currently seem artificial. Indeed, while those valued and esteemed individuals by society undertake this task, anyone with high social media ratings and a personable appearance potentially takes on the role of opinion leadership. Such a fact indicates the lack of security around information sought to be transferred and shared in digital domains.

Opinion leaders' migration to digital settings and becoming visible occasionally by anonymous identities obstruct our cognition of what purpose they are acting the way they are. In conclusion, it is crucial to approach those entities having a voice and influencing others in digital settings with greater vigilance to apprehend their unclear objectives.

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