

Opinion Leadership and Its Influence on Consumer Decision-Making in the Digital Age

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the influence of opinion leadership on consumer decision-making in the digital age, with a focus on Instagram influencers in the food and fitness sectors. Opinion leaders, through their perceived authenticity and relatability, significantly shape consumer behavioral intentions by fostering trust and providing personalized recommendations. Using a descriptive research design and purposive sampling of 345 respondents from Mumbai, the study assesses how influencer credibility and alignment with followers impact purchasing behavior. Data was collected through a structured questionnaire to evaluate consumer perceptions. The findings underscore the growing importance of opinion leadership in shaping digital consumer engagement.

Keywords: Opinion Leadership, Consumer Behavior, Instagram Influencers

INTRODUCTION

Influencers and opinion leaders play a significant role in shaping consumer behavior through their ability to create engaging, trustworthy, and personalized content. Unlike traditional celebrities, these individuals often appear more accessible and relatable, which enhances their persuasive power. Opinion leaders, in particular, influence both attitudes and behavioral intentions by recommending products based on personal use and expertise. This influence is especially pronounced when there is a perceived similarity between the influencer and the follower, which strengthens the impact on purchase decisions; De Veirman et al. (2017). Given their growing role in the digital marketplace, influencers and opinion leaders are now considered key drivers of consumer engagement and purchasing behavior.

Opinion leaders serve as key advisors for other consumers. Within the food and fitness sector, Instagram is currently the most widely used platform by these leaders, a trend likely to persist. Moreover, opinion leadership shapes consumer behavioral intentions not only toward the influencer such as engaging with their content and recommending their account but also toward the broader food and fitness industry. Additionally, when consumers feel a strong personal connection or alignment with an influencer's account, it enhances the likelihood that they will follow the advice shared.

In today's digital landscape, influencers play a similar role by translating brand messages into personalized and relatable content for their audiences. Their perceived expertise, authenticity, and accessibility position them as trusted voices in specific niches whether fashion, fitness, food, or lifestyle allowing them to impact buying decisions more effectively than traditional advertisements.

Opinion leaders can play a transformative role during organizational change due to their strong influence within informal networks across the organization. These individuals possess the capacity to shape the perceptions and actions of their peers, making them critical partners in facilitating change efforts; Lam & Schaubroeck, (2000). By harnessing their influence, organizations can generate greater support and accelerate the acceptance of new policies, practices, or behaviors. Moreover, opinion leaders can offer motivation and reassurance to employees who are reluctant or uncertain about the change, thus helping to minimize resistance and enhance the overall effectiveness of the transformation process.

The influence of opinion leaders within organizations is rooted in their ability to effectively communicate and persuade others. They exert their influence through various informal and formal communication channels. In marketing, brands increasingly collaborate with these influencers to promote products and services in ways that feel organic rather than scripted. As opinion leaders, influencers shape trends, introduce new ideas, and provide reviews that their followers often view as credible and informed. Their influence is further amplified by their direct interactions with followers via comments, live sessions, and personalized messages, fostering a sense of community and trust. The perceived credibility and expertise of influencers significantly contribute to the persuasive power of their endorsements, making them powerful allies in shaping consumer preferences and enhancing brand engagement.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Chevalier and Mayzlin (2006) explain that opinion leaders mainly influence others via social media platforms, online forums, and blogs. Through these digital channels, they effectively shape consumer choices and spread their views using word-of-mouth communication, amplifying brand messages and significantly impacting purchasing behavior across wide audiences.

According to Mowen (2007), an opinion leader's perceived credibility and trustworthiness are strongly influenced by their expertise and reputation. Effective communication and charismatic presence further strengthen their ability to connect with and persuade their audience, thereby deepening trust. Additionally, their innovativeness allows them to share current and valuable information, which consumers appreciate and rely on, further reinforcing trust. Park (2013) found that self-identified opinion leaders, especially on Twitter, are highly motivated by social observation and actively share content with enthusiasm. The more individuals publicly express their opinions on the platform, the greater the likelihood that they will be seen as opinion leaders by others.

Haron (2016) emphasizes that opinion leaders act as key advisors, strongly shaping consumer behavior and influencing purchasing decisions. As social networks continue to expand, these individuals become even more vital in promoting product awareness and acceptance, playing a central role in encouraging the adoption of new and innovative products.

In their empirical research, Park and Kaye (2017) found that Twitter opinion leaders tend to share original content more frequently, and this originality is a key factor in how their opinion leadership is perceived. Consequently, when it comes to cosmetic-related posts, the uniqueness and creativity of the content may play a decisive role in whether the individual is identified as an influencer.

Rebelo (2017) aimed to investigate how Instagram users, acting as consumers, perceive the influencers they follow on the platform. The study specifically focused on how the perceived credibility of these influencers influences consumers' purchasing intentions. It also sought to determine which aspects of credibility play the most significant role in shaping consumers' intent to buy.

According to Mangold and Bachl (2018), online opinion leaders especially those with high status tend to present themselves through high-quality content such as images, videos, written posts, and logos. This strategic use of polished and professional content helps them effectively stand out from the crowd and reinforce their unique identity.

Casaló et al. (2020) suggest that when influencers are acknowledged as opinion leaders within their social circles, their persuasive power significantly increases. This recognition enhances their credibility and amplifies the trust their followers place in their recommendations, making their impact on consumer attitudes and purchasing decisions even more substantial and far-reaching.

Guptaa (2021) aimed to explore the rapid rise of influencer marketing on social media during the pandemic and its effects on both businesses and consumer buying behavior. The study gathered data through a small-scale survey involving 50 participants, focusing on how influencer marketing influenced their purchase decisions and overall consumer behavior.

Zeeni et al. (2024) conducted a study highlighting a link between frequent exposure to food-related content on Instagram and a rise in unhealthy eating habits among young adults. The research suggests that visually appealing posts of high-calorie or indulgent foods can influence dietary choices, often leading to increased consumption of such items.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

- To examine various ways in which opinion leadership influences consumer behavioural intentions.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a descriptive research design to evaluate the impact of Instagram influencers on branding. A purposive sampling technique was used to select 345 respondents from the Mumbai region, chosen based on relevant user characteristics aligned with the study's objective. Primary data was collected through a well-structured questionnaire designed to gather insights into consumer perceptions and influencer impact. The methodology aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how Instagram influencers contribute to brand trust and recognition among targeted users.

ANALYSIS

Table 1: Response to the question “In what ways do you believe opinion leaders influence your purchasing decisions?”

Components	Response (In numbers)	Response (In %)
Product recommendations	105	30.44
Lifestyle endorsements	85	24.64
Reviews	155	44.92
Total	345	100

Analysis: The data reveals that Reviews are the most influential form of opinion leadership in shaping purchasing decisions, cited by 44.92% of respondents. This highlights the trust placed in detailed, experience-based evaluations when making buying choices. Product recommendations also play a significant role, influencing 30.44% of respondents, suggesting that followers value direct suggestions from trusted figures. Additionally, Lifestyle endorsements impact 24.64% of respondents, indicating that many consumers are inspired by the broader lifestyle choices and behaviors of opinion leaders, beyond just product-specific content.

Table 2: Response to the question “Do you feel that opinion leaders impact your views on brands or products in a positive or negative way?”

Components	Response (In numbers)	Response (In %)
Positively	307	88.96
Negatively	38	11.04
Total	345	100

Analysis: The data shows that a vast majority of respondents, 88.96%, feel that opinion leaders impact their views on brands or products in a positive way. It shows opinion leaders are largely perceived as credible and influential sources that enhance brand perception and consumer confidence. In contrast, only 11.04% of respondents reported a negative impact, indicating that while a small portion may view opinion leaders with concern.

Table 3: Response to the question “How do you feel about the role of opinion leaders in shaping consumer behavior on social media?”

Components	Response (In numbers)	Response (In %)
Very Positive	46	13.33
Somewhat Positive	135	39.13
Neutral	150	43.48
Somewhat Negative	11	3.19
Very Negative	3	.87
Total	345	100

Analysis: The responses indicate a generally favorable perception of the role of opinion leaders in shaping consumer behavior on social media. 39.13% of respondents view their influence as somewhat positive, while 13.33% have a very positive perception, reflecting recognition of their beneficial impact in guiding purchasing decisions and trends. A significant portion, 43.48%, expressed a neutral stance, suggesting that while they acknowledge the presence of opinion leaders, they may not see their influence as strongly impactful. Whereas, 3.19% reported a somewhat negative view and 0.87% viewed the role of opinion leaders as very negative.

Table 4: Response to the question “The recommendations of opinion leaders significantly impact your buying decisions?”

Components	Response (In numbers)	Response (In %)
Strongly Agree	54	15.65
Agree	72	20.87
Neutral	94	27.25
Disagree	81	23.48
Strongly Disagree	44	12.75
Total	345	100

Analysis: A combined 36.52% of respondents agree (20.87%) or strongly agree (15.65%) that opinion leaders significantly influence their purchases, indicating that over one-third acknowledge their persuasive power. However, 27.25% chose a neutral stance and 23.48% disagree, 12.75% strongly disagree, totaling 36.23% who do not feel significantly influenced by opinion leaders.

Table 5: Response to the question “Do you trust the opinions of opinion leaders more than advertisements from brands?”

Components	Response (In numbers)	Response (In %)
Strongly Agree	50	14.50
Agree	85	24.64

Neutral	97	28.12
Disagree	72	20.87
Strongly Disagree	41	11.87
Total	345	100

Analysis: The responses indicate a moderate level of trust in opinion leaders over traditional brand advertisements. A combined 39.14% of respondents agree (24.64%) or strongly agree (14.50%) that they trust the opinions of opinion leaders more than brand advertisements, reflecting a growing reliance on peer-like endorsements rather than direct promotional messages. 28.12% maintain a neutral position, whereas, 20.87% disagree and 11.87% strongly disagree, totaling 32.74% who place more trust in brand advertisements or remain skeptical of influencer authenticity.

Table 6: Response to the question “Do you often share your own opinions on products based on what you learn from opinion leaders?”

Components	Response (In numbers)	Response (In %)
Strongly Agree	49	14.20
Agree	88	25.51
Neutral	84	24.35
Disagree	81	23.48
Strongly Disagree	43	12.46
Total	345	100

Analysis: The responses suggest a varied pattern of behavior regarding the sharing of personal opinions influenced by opinion leaders. A combined 39.71% of respondents agree (25.51%) or strongly agree (14.20%) that they often share their own views on products based on insights gained from opinion leaders, indicating a notable level of engagement and influence. 24.35% chose a neutral stance, possibly reflecting occasional sharing or uncertainty about the extent of influence. On the contrary, 23.48% disagree and 12.46% strongly disagree, totaling 35.94% who do not actively share product opinions influenced by opinion leaders.

CONCLUSION

The reviews emerge as the most impactful form of opinion leadership in shaping purchasing decisions, followed by direct product recommendations and lifestyle endorsements, highlighting the multifaceted ways opinion leaders affect consumer behavior. Opinion leaders are generally viewed as having a positive impact on brand and product perception, enhancing consumer confidence and acting as credible sources of information. The respondents express an overall favorable view of opinion leaders’ roles on social media, though a substantial portion maintains a neutral stance, suggesting a balanced perception with some room for skepticism. While a notable segment of consumers acknowledges being influenced by opinion leaders in their

purchasing decisions, another significant group remains unaffected, reflecting diverse consumer responses to influencer content. There is moderate trust placed in opinion leaders over traditional brand advertisements, indicating a shift in consumer trust toward peer-like voices over corporate messaging. A considerable number of consumers tend to share their own views and experiences based on what they learn from opinion leaders, demonstrating an active engagement that reinforces the cycle of influence.

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