

Power and Influence of the Modern Internet Opinion Leader

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ABSTRACT

Power and Influence are particularly interesting research topics when examined in the growing technological web environment. User influence in social networks can help to explain the successful diffusion of innovative ideas and new products. These individuals can be referred to as “opinion leaders”, “web or online influencers”, or even “internet celebrities”. The objective of this paper is to examine how these individuals procure their influence, how they earned those roles, and how their influence over the average user is executed. The methodology is a comparative review of contemporary writings on modern online influence, compared that to more traditional scholarship regarding pop-culture influence maximization. This essay will identify criteria for an opinion leader, and what factors contribute to online influence by examining influencers through traditional academic concepts such as Influence Tactics, Influence Triggers, Power Bases, Motivational Sources and Zones of Resistance. The comparative findings show that despite the new technological medium, customary methods of power and influence remain largely effective.

Keywords: *Bases of Power, Zones of Resistance, Influence Tactics and Triggers, Motivation Sources, internet celebrity, online opinion leader, web influencer.*

INTRODUCTION

In the question of whether it is better to be feared or loved as a leader, Machiavelli advises fear (Machiavelli, 1992, p. 43). However, the modern phenomenon of web influencers relies solidly on an internet personality being “loved”. Online, public communication does not directly flow to the masses, but is interpreted firstly by opinion leaders [the “nobles”, as Machiavelli would say], and then reaches the common people (Zhang & Dong, 2008, p. 21). Web-based communities develop around shared interests and purposes, and the unprecedented power of web-influencers to participate in the media production and subsequent distribution process has prompted a new wave of interest in public research (Stansberry, 2015, p. 1).

User influence in social networks can help to explain the successful diffusion of innovative ideas and new products. Conventional Diffusion Theory states that a minority of people, called influencers, are generally considered to be the most critical factors at effecting information cascades (Zhang, Zhao, & Xu, 2016, p. 2). These individuals can be referred to as “opinion leaders”, “web or online influencers”, or even “internet celebrities”. In this essay, these terms will be used

interchangeably. The purpose of this paper is to examine how these individuals procure their influence, how they earned those roles, and how their influence over the average user is executed. This essay will try to identify the criteria for an opinion leader, and what factors contribute to online influence, by examining influencers through concepts such as Influence Tactics, Influence Triggers, Power Bases, Motivational Sources and Zones of Resistance.

DEFINITIONS OF A SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCER

There are many definitions of online influencers in existing literature, and these have some commonalities among them. Internet celebrities are people who have become famous by means of the Internet, and have the ability to influence others (Li, 2018, p. 533). Essentially, online communities, which consist of internet users who are highly engaged with a particular issue, exhibit characteristics of fan communities as evidenced by the development of shared values, language and culture (Jenkins, 2006). As many as 72% of online adults in the United States use social networking sites, and although Facebook is the most popular social networking platform, more than forty percent of U.S. Internet users regularly use multiple social networking sites

(Stansberry, 2015, p. 1). Online influencers are central to the information dissemination process in web-based, interest-centered communities. Social networks create a continuous flow of communication in which the information, reviews and recommendations on products and services can converge interactively and in a timely manner with consumers (Nunes, Ferreira, de Frietas, & Ramos, 2018, p. 68).

Viral marketing is a process of influence diffusion over social networks, wherein marketers identify individuals with high social networking potential, hoping that their friends will be influenced to purchase a product, then influence *their* friends, and so on (Wang & Street, 2018, p. 2). In social media marketing activities, internet celebrities can forward or directly post promoted information, provide recommendations, or give personal comments through their social media accounts to create a buzz and make an endorsement, which can shape their follower's interest (Li, 2018, p. 533). Influence Maximization (IM) attempts to build an influence-diffusion model that captures the detail in the diffusion process and the activation in word-of-mouth (WOM) marketing (Wang & Street, 2018, p. 3). WOM messages do not flow unidirectionally from seeded consumers [influencers] to others, but rather may be exchanged among any connected consumers in the network (Wang & Street, 2018, p. 3).

In general, opinion leaders are defined as such if they are engaged individuals who are viewed as honest and trustworthy by opinion followers with whom they frequently discuss issues (Turcotte, York, Irving, Scholl, & Pingree, 2015, p. 523). Studies focusing on how to target influentials in social networks investigate the dynamics of user influence in terms of retweets and mentions. They note that most opinion leaders can have a significant influence on a variety of topics, and that people with more connections might exert even greater influence on information dissemination (Zhang, Zhao, & Xu, 2016, p. 3).

Another definition says that the opinion leader refers to people who provide others with information or suggestions in the interpersonal communication network, and at the same time, they are the activists who can affect others (Zhang & Dong, 2008, p. 21). Three typical characteristics of opinion leaders, which dates back decades and may refer to both on and offline influence, are 1) high social participation (they can obtain information by more channels

and have rich life experiences), 2) high social status (they prefer to take part in formal or informal social activities), and 3) high social responsibility (they have far-reaching insight, innovative spirit, energetic thoughts and they like to accept new things) (Rogers, 1962). What makes opinion leaders different from common group members is that they are more directive, more innovative and more professional.

Recognized internet celebrities should have the following characteristics: a certain number of followers, a high level of activity on their profile and promising business value (Li, 2018, p. 539). Pioneering research takes the *symbolic* meaning of a person into consideration which means that social media users consider the image of internet celebrities as commodities. Individual online influence is relevant to the opinion leader's ability to provide values for the audience at content, technology, social, emotional and symbolic levels (Li, 2018, p. 539). Personal image is quite important to enhance online influence, because symbolic consumption becomes a considerable trend. Internet celebrities' unique images signify different meaning for their followers, which affects the construction of self-image of followers in return (Li, 2018, p. 540). At the heart of the web-influencer phenomena, are ordinary people being famous online to gain economic value.

One study proposes four types of individuals where web influencers are concerned: 1) opinion giver/seekers, 2) opinion givers, 3) opinion seekers and 4) non-discussants (Jung & Kim, 2016, p. 4439). One could consider oneself an opinion leader in one situation, while playing the role of a follower in another situation (Jung & Kim, 2016, p. 4440). This is one of the dynamics that makes influencers so successful: that they can be consumers themselves. The effect of mass media on individuals is buffered by opinion givers/seekers who follow mass media closely, either by personally trying products/services or comparing social media messages to their own value systems, and conveying these messages or endorsements to others in their community. Curating skills, or the ability to critically select important, useful and reliable information, and the ability to use interactive network channels to share information with others who would benefit from it, have become crucial for online opinion leaders (Jung & Kim, 2016, p. 4454).

In 1957, Elihu Katz's classic article on opinion leaders proposed three predictors of personal influence: 1) personal attributes (who one is), 2) competence (what one knows), and 3) social position (whom one knows) (Katz, 1957). Sociability is the primary factor related to leadership in online contexts. Individuals who engage in more communication activities can more easily obtain information and build relationships, thus having more potential to extend their reach and influence others (Shi & Salmon, 2018, p. 3).

The ultimate goal (what the influencer is trying to get the target to do), is for the targets to positively follow the endorsements of the influencers by trying products/services or by adopting information or messages (in the case of political issues, for example). Let us now examine, through the various academic constructs, how online web personalities influence followers/targets.

METHOD

If leadership is about relationships, power is the ability to influence others regardless of the medium. In organizations, even online communities, the dynamics of power and influence surround us. They play a role – often a fundamental role – in nearly the all aspects of life, from individual relationships, career advancement to broad organizational change. This literature review is designed to study the large body of theory and research regarding power, influence and political skills, with the applied context of online individual, community and organizational leadership. The historical versus modern opinion leader technique analysis critically researches information dissemination from a theoretical and empirical perspective. For the purposes of this article, “historical” refers to theories on power and influence from mid to late 20th century, or pre world wide web (versus “modern” which indicates applications after the invention of the internet).

The hypothesis suggested is this: though the medium or arena of power and influence has changed from pre to post internet, the traditional academic concepts of media influencers, now “social media” influencers, is largely the same from the twentieth to the twenty-first centuries. The research methodology summarized here applies traditional concepts to internet/online interactions (in contrast to real life experiences of influence), as well as develops strategies for leadership applications.

BASES OF POWER

Social power is defined as the resources one person has available so that he or she can influence another to do what that person would not have done otherwise (Rahim, 2009, p. 225). French and Raven list five types of social power 1) Coercive, 2) Reward, 3) Legitimate, 4) Expert and 5) Referent powers (French & Raven, 1959). Online influencers appear to operate primarily from the Expert and Referent power bases.

Expert power is based on the target's belief that the online influencer has adequate professional experience, training, special expertise and access to knowledge (Rahim, 2009, p. 226). Expert power requires two key things: 1) influencers and targets must have mutual goals, and 2) targets must trust influencers to act in the best interest of the collective (French & Raven, 1959). Web opinion leaders may exert significant influence on their targets because of specialized skills or title. This may be formal (e.g. doctors and lawyers), or informal (e.g. computer or pop-culture experts). For example, physicians may have opinions on drugs, procedures or health/wellness products. Celebrities may have opinions on film/television or perhaps beauty, glamour or fashion. Politicians may be particularly astute regarding public policy or the agenda of a particular political party. When a potential consumer accepts a message as a useful and reliable source of information, they are inclined to want to buy the product evaluated in the message (Nunes, Ferreira, de Frietas, & Ramos, 2018, p. 63). This, in turn, has the potential to make more targets desire and consider purchasing these same reviewed products or services.

Referent power is based on the desire of targets to identify and associate with the opinion leader (Rahim, 2009, p. 226). It is the ability to elicit in others, feelings of personal acceptance or approval (Barbuto, 2000, p. 380). This is particularly relevant when the influencer is a celebrity or politician. The identification is the feeling of oneness of the target to the celebrity. If targets emulate web celebrities or feel admiration toward them, it tends to resemble charismatic influences. Fame-seeking practitioners have to provide emotional value as the aggregated feeling of goodwill, to emphasize commonalities, and to create a sense of closeness and familiarity between themselves and their targets (Li, 2018, p. 539). Here, the control is dependent upon the influencer's

charm, charisma or personal magnetism to attract targets so that they will follow leadership in trying new services or products, adopt particular political ideologies, or participate in movements. When this base of power is operationalized, and it is evident that the target identifies with a social group or a desire to belong, this resembles social identity theory (Barbuto, 2000, p. 381). Internet celebrities with referent power are individuals whose followers look up to them, and then model their behavior using such celebrities as reference points (Shoham & Ruvio, 2008, p. 293). Variations of referent power are Persuasiveness (one's ability to reason effectively and use rational problem solving skills) and Prestige (associated with the status, esteem, or personal reputation of leaders in organizations) (Rahim, 2009, p. 228).

Trust is also associated with both of these power bases. Perceptions that the influencer is expert *and* honest may act as heuristic cues, telling the target whether content received from that source is useful and trustworthy (Turcotte et al, 2015, p. 525). Individuals may be more likely to perceive information as trustworthy if it is shared through a Facebook "friend". If the user considers the friend to be an expert and honest opinion leader, the user may then be more likely to judge the linked content of the post to be trustworthy.

INFLUENCE TACTICS

How people use these bases of power to influence their online colleagues or targets to satisfy organizational goals is accomplished by using influence tactics (Kipnis & Schmidt, 1980, p. 440). Yukl and Falbe presented a scale of eight influence tactics: Pressure, Upward Appeals, Exchange, Coalition, Ingratiation, Rational Persuasion, Inspirational Appeals and Coalition tactics (Yukl & Falbe, 1990, p. 133). Web influencers can use several of these tactics, alone, in succession or in combination. However, only one influence tactic, Rationality, had both substantial and significant positive relationships with the more positively viewed bases of power, Expert and Referent power, emphasizing its importance as a means of influence on target users (Hinkin & Schriesheim, 1990, p. 221). Exploring this relationship in social media communication could be a fascinating potential study.

The influence tactic of Rational Persuasion is characterized by the influencer explaining the reason behind a directive or recommendation. The opinion leader's use of rational

explanations to influence a target may lead to an increase in the target's perception of the leader's expertise and legitimacy (Hinkin & Schriesheim, 1990, p. 225). This use of rationality is positively associated with the attributes of Referent power, and the leader's perceived use of rationality as an influence tactic will have positive relationships with the attributions of Expert *and* Referent power. The current research seems to suggest that rationality should be emphasized by internet celebrities as a key influence tactic to both enhance personal power as well as to provide desired target outcomes. Using logical arguments and factual evidence to show a request is feasible and relevant for obtaining important task objectives [like targets accepting and trying products or ideas pitched by web opinion leaders], Rational Persuasion is the most effective "core tactic" for influencing target commitment (Yukl & Falbe, 1990, p. 213). Again, more research is needed to apply this phenomena to the online social media environment, but the relationship seems likely.

Once online enterprises identify opinion leaders, they can apply Rationality to influence these opinion leaders. Virtual communities are the uppermost spaces and channels for word-of-mouth (WOM) communication. Therefore, as enterprises are engaged in network WOM marketing activities, the vital step is to identify opinion leaders in virtual communities, and arm them with Rational Persuasion tactics (Zhang & Dong, 2008, p. 24)

INFLUENCE TRIGGERS

As a framework for understanding target compliance, we study influence triggers, which are understood as a target's reaction to an influence attempt (Barbuto, 2000, p. 367). Barbuto identifies ten triggers that are identified from recurring themes in literature, which fall into three categories 1) power-derived, 2) relations-derived, and 3) values-derived (Barbuto & Gifford, 2009, p. 265). Interestingly, there is one primary trigger from each of these three categories which most closely explains target compliance in terms of web-influence.

The strongest power-derived influence trigger is expertise. If targets are inclined to comply with an internet celebrity's endorsement because they believe that person has information, knowledge or unique expertise in the necessary area, *expertise triggers* are in effect (Barbuto, 2000, p. 369). While this relationship requires more research in the social media environment, it

seems a likely premise that targets comply with endorsements because they respect this unique knowledge and expertise, and trust the influencer to act in the collective interest [of the online community] (Barbuto & Gifford, 2009, p. 267). Trust is needed for expertise triggers to take effect, because without it, targets will question the agent's motives and limit compliance (the expertise triggers will have only a mild effect, making compliance unlikely). An example is when online influencers test new products, endorse them (or not), and then targets trust and rely upon the celebrities knowledge and are easily influenced by them.

Likewise, if studied in the web environment, there seems to be a strong possibility that if targets are inclined to comply with the opinion leader to derive social benefits or social rewards, then *social identification triggers* are in effect (Barbuto, 2000, p. 370). This could be the strongest relations-derived trigger for web influencers. Targets are motivated by socially desired outcomes, such as acceptance or admiration among peers, and increased social influence (Hinkin & Schriesheim, 1990). If targets place a high value on being part of a group and have a natural desire for acceptance, social identification triggers will lead to compliance (Barbuto & Gifford, 2009, p. 268). Peer pressure is a type of social identification trigger in practice. Targets may sense that others are behaving in certain ways or using certain products, and feel the need to go along with the crowd.

Finally, the strongest value-derived influence trigger is logically called *values-based*. If targets are inclined to follow online influencer's directives because they see links between goal attainment or task performance and their personal values, value-based triggers are in effect (Barbuto, 2000, p. 371). Targets believe the online influencer's goals (or the influencer's organizations' goals) are congruent with their value system, and that pursuing these goals (or trying endorsed products/services) will support target values (Barbuto & Gifford, 2009, p. 268). A good example of this is online marketing or campaigning in political races. Targets' personal values may become the driving forces that trigger compliance with the influencer's directives.

ZONES OF RESISTANCE

In online organization settings, the choice of influence tactic/trigger is associated not only

with what the influencer is trying to get the target person to accept, but also with the power of the target person and the amount of resistance shown (Kipnis & Schmidt, 1980, p. 443). A target's resistance can be understood as his/her degree of willingness to perform specific task directives or pursue communicated directions of online opinion leaders (Barbuto, 2000, p. 372). Of the five zones of resistance, behaviors that fall into the influence zone are those that may be considered the most by researchers studying online influence. In Barbuto's classic concentric model of Zones of Resistance, the *influence zone* is the second-to-largest circle, where resistance increases as behaviors or goals fall farther from the center (Barbuto, 2000, p. 373). Far less inducement is necessary in the inner three zones. However, for successful online influence, targets will require substantive inducements to perform such behaviors. This may be because of the sheer amount of data on social networking sites. Breaking through the "traffic" to capture target attention is difficult enough, much less gaining compliance. Thus, far greater inducements are required by online opinion leaders.

Of the influence triggers described in the previous section, value-based, expertise and social identification triggers are most effective when a target's resistance falls in the influence zone (Barbuto, 2000, p. 375). However, even in the presence of an influence attempt, behaviors in the influence zone may not occur. Opinion leaders will select their behavior based on characteristics of the tasks at hand, but a key behavioral determinant is the influence process is target's resistance to these tasks (Barbuto, 2000, p. 611). Targets will accept directives lying within their zone of indifference, and those in the influence zone are relatively indifferent to an online opinion leader's authority to make such requests. Because it may lead to inappropriate leadership styles and influence strategies, online opinion leaders may need to consider the importance of relating and examining the concepts of resistance and influence in these new high-tech contexts.

There are some characteristics that lead targets to consider a message as more persuasive and thus diminish their resistance: the quality of the message transmitted (the wealth of details, reliability, relevance, timeliness, comprehensibility) and aspects of the communicator/ influencer themselves (their competence and reliability, knowledge, previous experiences, pleasantness, empathy, and

similarity of tastes with the target) (Nunes, et al, 2018, p. 63). By understanding zones of resistance, the online opinion leaders can work their influence tactics/triggers to make them even more persuasive to the target.

MOTIVATIONAL SOURCES

Beyond the target's resistance, the relative success of an influence trigger depends, in part, on the target's source of motivation (Barbuto, 2000, p. 375). There are five sources of motivation (Barbuto Jr & Scholl, 1998), but one of these five seemingly most closely applies to online influence.

Self-concept external motivation tends to be externally based: targets attempt to meet the expectations of online influencers by behaving in ways that elicit social feedback consistent with their self-concept (Barbuto Jr & Scholl, 1998). Targets may believe their reputation or image will be enhanced if they comply. Online influencers who seek compliance from targets with self-concept external motivation, must attach external recognition of the target's traits, competencies and values to task completion or goal attainment (Barbuto, 2000, p. 378). Opinion leaders may want to remind their targets that their reputations will be enhanced by acquiescing. Because social identity is characteristic of this motivation source, it may also be useful for opinion leaders to stress that being part of an elite group will accompany compliance. Targets will then be more likely to behave in ways that satisfy referent group members, to first gain acceptance, and then status (Barbuto & Gifford, 2009, p. 273).

To tie some of this essay's concepts together, the effect of target motivation on the influence process will depend on whether the influence trigger has tapped into the target's source(s) of motivation (Barbuto & Gifford, 2009, p. 273). In the instances where the influencer taps into target's motives successfully, the likelihood of compliance may increase. Conversely, if influencers fail, likelihood of compliance may decrease.

RESULTS

The essence of leadership, even online leadership, is the ability to use the identified motivational patterns to influence others – in other words, to get people to voluntarily do things that they would not otherwise do (de Vries & Balazs, 2011, p. 385). Internet celebrities provide followers with unique content, visualized technology, and close social

relationships (Li, 2018, p. 540). The efforts of public relations practitioners looking to build mutually beneficial relationships with online, interest-based communities should focus on engaging with the relatively small number of online influencers who act as lynchpins for information flow within these communities (Stansberry, 2015, p. 16).

Existing past models of information flow had positioned mass media as the primary source of influence, and public relations practitioners had long focused their efforts on engaging with media sources. However, in the new world of viral-marketing, for highly engaged online communities that form around shared traits or interests, a relatively small number of influential members appears to be the primary source of message collection and distribution through social media. For more effective strategic communication activities related to online, interest-based communities, viral-marketers must reach out to, and engage, online influencers.

DISCUSSION

However, this strategy is not shared by all social media marketing experts. As mentioned earlier in this essay, according to traditional definition, an online opinion leader is one with a large number of followers, representing a higher level of influence on social media platforms. To identify opinion leaders, marketers must simply find people who are active and have lots of followers for a certain topic in a community forum (Zhang & Dong, 2008, p. 22). However, though the number of followers may indicate individual popularity, it is not necessarily related to influence. It is difficult to qualify the distinctive characteristics of individual online influence, as it is mainly a time and event-driven concept (Li, 2018, p. 533). As a number of hot topics and new influential users appear every day on the web, the influence of the social media user dynamically and quickly changes over time.

Viable online opinion leaders are also likely to be "effective followers", which indicates the ability to pay attention to other people's opinions and incorporate them into one's own decision making and opinion-formation processes (Jung & Kim, 2016, p. 4442). Several recent studies have argued that the role of opinion leaders is weakened in the current online media environment, because most people, including those who may have been classified as

targets, now have direct access to diverse information sources.

Another research argument is that the “crowd” also plays a decisive role in the early stages of trend creation, while the participation of opinion leaders as dominant early adopters only results in small-scale coverage (Zhang, et al, 2016, p.

CONCLUSION

It is impossible to ignore the current internet impact of influential Instagram bloggers, YouTube stars, would-be or unknown actors/actresses, experts in a specific field, politicians, fitness trainers, photographers, wealthy people who love to show off their luxuries, and so on. Internet celebrities all disclose their personal lives in an effort to influence a large number of followers on social media platforms. In fact, some web influencers use social media for perpetrating harmful objectives, and an interesting future study may be to understand how bases of power, zones of resistance, influence tactics and triggers and so on, can curtail social media influence in these situations.

The research methodology summarized here applies traditional concepts to internet/online interactions, proves the hypothesis, and develops strategies for leadership applications. There are many more Influence Tactics and Triggers, other Power Bases, and varied Motivational Sources and Zones of Resistance

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12). Contrary to the influentials hypothesis, opinion leaders can start diffusion locally, but only the participation of ordinary users can create broad coverage and form a trend. In examining the role of cultivating influentials in seeding the information diffusion process, some researchers think more attention should be paid to the role of the ordinary users.

not mentioned in this article, which may prove useful in offline arenas of information distribution. However, comparative findings of those academic methods that work best for online opinion leaders show that despite the new technological medium, customary scholastic approaches of power and influence remain largely effective. Though the medium or arena of power and influence has changed from pre to post internet, the traditional phenomenological concepts of media influencers, now “social media” influencers, is largely the same from the twentieth to the twenty-first centuries.

Internet celebrities, who have been deemed as trusted members of their online communities, have followers who rely on them for information, news and opinion. Some of the most successful internet celebrities even make a living as online influencers! With the continued growth of technology and the world wide web, this trend is likely to continue. Internet opinion leaders would be wise to study traditional models of power and influence in their endeavors.

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