

# Analysis on the Role of Opinion Leaders Three Case Studies Based on Two-step Flow Communication Theory

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## ABSTRACT

Opinion leader is an important concept derived from the two-level communication theory, with special emphasis on the role and function of “middleman” in the process of mass communication. With the development of Internet technology and social media, traditional opinion leaders began to transform to new opinion leaders, and gradually played a more diversified role in the online world. This paper takes three cases as examples to analyse the role of opinion leaders. Specifically, the cases are the public opinion leaders on public emergency under the background of COVID-19, the promotion of knowledge bloggers to education, and the new opinion leaders in internet celebrity economy. According to the analysis, the effect of opinion leaders in modern society is very diverse and extensive. In detail, network opinion leaders are easier to be concerned and trusted by the public, which has a positive social impact while often possesses a negative impact for many reasons. This study will provide some case study basis for the research on the influence of opinion leaders in the new media era, and will be beneficial to further explore some problems such as the generation of the influence of opinion leaders in the future.

**Keywords:** *Opinion Leaders, two-step flow communication theory, social networks.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Internet makes the world closer, which makes it possible for human beings to communicate with each other without the restrictions of location. Information dissemination becomes much more convenient through large social network (e.g., Twitters and Microblogs). These large social network sites rely on brief, frequent updates to user profiles, lots of photos, and ever-growing lists of friends. People can post and receive updates via mobile phone, i.e., they can always be connected. On account of these merits, the social network sites become so popular in the world.

The definition of opinion leader is derived from the two-step flow communication theory proposed by communication scholars Paul Lazarsfeld and Elihu Katz in the 1940s. Lazarsfeld defined the person in interpersonal network who has an active influence on the transmission of information to others as “opinion leader” [1]. Additionally, he also defined the process where information is filtered by the mass media through

opinion leaders and then flows to individuals as the “two-step flow of communication” theory [1].

The role of new opinion leaders in communication belongs to interpersonal communication. The audience is easily affected by opinion leaders in public opinion [2]. The new opinion leaders have social identities to endorse their views. Besides, because of the informality of interpersonal communication, it is easier for the audience to have psychological identification with the opinion leaders and become followers of the opinion leaders. In the “post-truth era”, opinion leaders attract the audience owing to their subjective speeches. Moreover, they will also arouse the audience’s disgust because of their subjective speeches. When the views of opinion leaders are not accord with the objective facts, the audience is probably to have no confidence in opinion leaders [3].

This paper mainly analyses the role of opinion leaders in modern social life based on two-step flow of communication theory from three cases, including the public opinion leaders on public emergency, the

promotion of knowledge bloggers to education, and the new opinion leaders in consumption.

## **2. PUBLIC OPINION LEADERS ON PUBLIC EMERGENCY: TAKING COVID-19 AS THE BACKGROUND**

Since December 2019, COVID-19 has started to erupt worldwide. In February 11, 2020, WHO director general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus announced in Geneva, Switzerland, the name of New Coronavirus pneumonia was “COVID-19”. By 2021, more than 100 million people have been infected. The new covid-19 epidemic is the most serious social crisis at present. All mankind is concerned about the development of the epidemic. In order to prevent the further deterioration of the epidemic during this period, public opinion leaders from different countries have played a certain role. These public figures come from all walks of life, including movie stars, political leaders, doctors, and government staff. They play both positive and negative roles.

### ***2.1. The positive influence of public opinion leaders on public emergency***

#### ***2.1.1. Public opinion leaders from Broadcasting Industry***

During the epidemic period, many public figures in the media industry used some public platforms (e.g., microblog, instagram, Facebook), to encourage people to actively participate in the prevention and control of the epidemic, such as calling on people to go out and wear masks, keeping social distance, actively supporting the epidemic areas, and actively injecting vaccines. The most representative person was Han Hong from China. As a singer and actress, she actively devoted herself to charity. During the outbreak, she used microblog, a popular platform in China, to call on people to “offer assistance to Wuhan”, has been read 1.3 billion times, triggering 1.044 million discussions [4].

There were also some star artists who played the role of helping Wuhan and actively donate money. The most representative are Jay Chou and his wife, who donated up to 3 million yuan, which had played a good leading role for his fans, and fans had also joined the rescue team.

#### ***2.1.2. Public opinion leaders from government official accounts***

In addition to some stars in the mass media industry playing the role of opinion leaders, some official publishing websites jointly established with the government also played a positive role. Dr. Ding Xiangyuan is another medical blogger, which

cooperated with the Chinese government to spread information in time to guide the fight against the COVID-19 epidemic. When COVID-19 was first popular in 2020, people did not know what to do. There were many panic phenomena in the society. Dr. Ding Xiangyuan took the lead in running the real-time epidemic of New Coronavirus pneumonia, and continuously reported all kinds of epidemic related science knowledge, real-time information etc. In early March 2020, these articles were read more than 2.4 billion times. The knowledge can effectively alleviate the confusion and social pressure caused by the epidemic, stabilize the public mood, guide mankind to fight the epidemic reasonably and effectively, and make social behavior orderly.

#### ***2.1.3. Public figures played an active role in the vaccination of the COVID-19 vaccine***

Once the leadership or medical workers took the lead in injecting the vaccine, it would improve people’s trust in the vaccine. This was an example of what psychologists would call a “credibility-enhancing display” whereby CEOs and other corporate leaders would visibly “set the example” for their employees [5]. Engaging in a recommended behavior is far more effective in convincing others than simply recommending that behavior. Similarly, for the leaders of a country, taking the initiative to vaccinate openly can bring good positive operation to the people. Former US presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush and Barack Obama said in front of the camera that they planned to be vaccinated, which is a good example.

### ***2.2. The negative influence of public opinion leaders on public emergency***

#### ***2.2.1. The negative influence of public opinion leaders in the US***

Some public figures who lack public trust can not play the role of propaganda, but hinder the prevention and control of the epidemic, e.g., Donald Trump. A majority of Americans report that they are worried that political pressure could cause a vaccine to be approved before it is safe and effective and a majority of both Republicans and Democrats express concerns that approval of the vaccine will be based more on politics than science. in the 2020 Vice Presidential Debate, Senator Kamala Harris stated that she would not receive a vaccine if it was endorsed by President Trump [6].

Trump is the most notable public figure in the epidemic. He once expressed doubts about the seriousness of COVID-19. He has repeatedly advocated the unproven new crown treatment method, resulting in a serious decline in public trust. During this period, he emphasized the role of his government in the rapid

development of vaccines, greatly reducing the public's trust in vaccine safety. Decline in national vaccination coverage.

### *2.2.2. The negative influence of public opinion leaders in China*

The outbreak of COVID-19 has so far not been able to determine where it originated. As early as the end of January 2020, several virological studies have suggested bats as a probable origin for SARS-CoV-2, the causative agent of COVID-19 [7]. According to this study, it was found that a popular host named Wang Mengyun tried to eat bats in a tourism program, which aroused many people's dissatisfaction and anger. She apologized immediately after what happened and said that she was recording a travel program in Palau, did not know what a virus was, and knew nothing about bats as hosts. This incident shows that opinion leaders do not always have a positive impact on the public, and sometimes have a negative impact.

## **3. THE PROMOTION OF KNOWLEDGE BLOGGERS TO EDUCATION**

With the development of science and technology and the popularization of 4G technology, long-term video viewing has become possible. According to statistics, the scale of China's online education market and users are growing rapidly. In 2019, the scale of China's online education market will reach 404.1 billion yuan, and in 2020, the scale of China's online education market will reach 453.8 billion yuan. In terms of user growth, the number of online education users in China reached 261 million in 2019, and the occurrence of COVID-19 in 2020 has promoted the rapid development and application of online education. In the face of the epidemic, most schools in China have conducted online classes for nearly a year. Meanwhile, there are also online bloggers who have played the role of opinion leaders in the field of online education. They have brought new developments to online education.

According to the two-step flow theory, opinion leaders have the functions of processing and interpretation, diffusion and dissemination, domination and guidance, coordination and interference [8, 9]. Based on these functions of opinion leaders, we will summarize the role played by online bloggers as follows and try to show how online bloggers play the role of opinion leaders in the field of online education and analyze their impact.

### *3.1. Processing and interpreting information*

The primary role of Internet Bloggers is to process and interpret the large amount of information received in advance. One example is Luo Xiang, a Chinese

online blogger, who owns 15.26 million people on Bilibili, a popular social platform in China. Luo Xiang is a professor of criminal law at the University of political science and law in China. He is a humorous teacher who is good at dealing with young people. Starting from 2020, Luo Xiang began to release videos on Bilibili to discuss the hot legal topics in society to promote the popularization of law among young people. The topic of "Luo Xiang's theory of criminal law" is rich in content, including social hot issues. A large part of them are closely related to young people relevant. Sexual crimes and cyberspace crimes are "Luo Xiang's theory of criminal law". Among the 135 videos that have been published, the two are often discussed. The proportion is 20% and 15%, respectively [10]. One of the reasons why sexual crimes are often discussed in short videos is that sexual assault has been common in the media in recent years. Body is a social problem that people pay more attention to. Young people are eager to know Tao related conviction, sentencing and measures to strengthen self-protection. Luo is good at using analogies, who can explain complex legal phenomena with simple examples and straightforward words. Because his words are easy to understand, it is possible for ordinary people to understand complex legal issues.

### *3.2. Expanding and disseminating information*

When information is spread, it can't reach everyone immediately. Sometimes it can only be received by a certain number of people, who then spread the information to the ordinary people around them. Thus, Internet Bloggers play a role in expanding and disseminating information. One example is the "six-story building", a very famous blogger in China, which has changed people's ideas by expanding and dissemination of information. China is an oriental country with relatively traditional ideas. There is no sex education in primary and secondary schools in China. The lack of knowledge in this area provides opportunities for the spread of physiological diseases. With the development of the Internet, several bloggers specializing in popular science and medical knowledge have emerged in China. Six-story building is one of the most famous ones, with 2.44 million fans on Weibo. As a doctor of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Six-story building shares his experiences on Weibo through videos and articles, so as to popularize correct sex knowledge for everyone. As Chinese women pay more and more attention to these issues, the attitude of six-story building and other bloggers towards sex is not biased, exaggerated, which promotes the change of Chinese conservative social culture [11].

In the meantime, due to the understanding of gynecological tumors, Six-story building knew the role of HPV vaccine before it was launched. Therefore, in 2017, after the first batch of cervical cancer vaccines

were launched in China, Six-story building was the first blogger to introduce HPV vaccines in China. He constantly answered questions on Weibo, introduced cervical cancer and vaccine knowledge, let more people know about HPV vaccine, and promoted the gradual popularization of vaccine in China.

### **3.3. Guiding followers' behavior**

As a disseminator of information, Internet Bloggers also play a role in guiding followers' behavior. At the same time, the leading role of opinion leaders is related to prestige.

Bloggers can not only guide people to acquire new knowledge, but also work as a role model in behavior. Sometimes, people are willing to trust opinion leaders because they are often the embodiment of good values in the eyes of followers. This phenomenon can also be explained by Luo Xiang. Luo Xiang is loved and accepted by teenagers because of his humorous language style and pursuit of justice. Luo Xiang has a compassionate perspective and mind in the process of popularizing science and law. Through his own efforts, he wants to transcend the utilitarian level and convey more deep thinking of human nature to the society.

Meanwhile, teaching in fun is also a major feature of Luo Xiang. This may provide some enlightenment for online education. Luo Xiang is a good teacher and opinion leader since he has an attractive quality-humor. The seriousness of traditional law popularization is not welcome in online short videos, because boring legal knowledge will only keep users away. In "Luo Xiang said criminal law", Luo Xiang narrated the tortuous case by telling stories, mixing legal knowledge with entertainment. When giving examples, he often takes the virtual character "Zhang San" as an example, plus Luo Xiang's voice singing, or tactical voice changing, such as Francophone crosstalk, which makes users deepen their understanding of laws and regulations in laughter.

## **4. THE NEW OPINION LEADERS IN CONSUMPTION**

During the outbreak of the epidemic in China in 2020, in the FMCG category sales in the household consumer market, while the sales of FMCG food and snacks decreased, only the sales of packaged ice cream increased. There are more than 1410000 notes in the xiaohongshu of community consumption software in China. Ice cream brands such as Zhong Xue Gao and "Zhongjie 1946" have invited many Internet bloggers to promote their brand ice cream. Affected by opinion leaders, the number of people buying ice cream, especially high-priced ice cream, has increased, and high-priced ice cream has achieved great returns through packaging products and spending money on

product publicity. However, after the founder of the "Zhong Xue Gao" brand said "66 yuan, love or not" in an interview with the program, public opinion showed a one-sided critical attitude towards high-priced ice cream. Although this sentence was proved to have misinterpreted the original meaning, consumers lost their trust in the brand and high-priced ice cream after the founder's early marketing routine was discovered and spread by the media in the fermentation process of public opinion. As a guide to consumer consumption, online bloggers who play the role of opinion leaders have also been affected. Their audiences are suspicious of bloggers and no longer trust other products recommended by bloggers. Therefore, after the "love to buy or not to buy" incident broke out, even though the brand explained the founder's remarks to the public and condemned the media that spread the clip interview video. Nevertheless, the public's attitude towards high-priced ice cream has changed greatly, and the impression of public opinion has changed from penny for penny to false marketing.

### **4.1. Positive role of opinion leaders**

In the "post truth era", opinion leaders play an important role in public opinion. With the emergence of the Internet, communication has experienced a process from "decentralization" to "re centralization" [12], i.e., in the early stage of Internet communication, independent objects can express their views on the Internet platform, and individuals can spread to individuals with different social backgrounds. In this communication process, part of the published content attracts followers and has a fixed audience, He has become an opinion leader in the Internet age.

The impact of new opinion leaders on the audience is reflected in various fields. Take the consumption field as an example. In the consumption field, there are professional anchors selling discount goods jointly with the manufacturer. Besides, there are also bloggers who recommend items with the theme of sharing life, as well as commodity test bloggers.

The emergence of opinion leaders in product evaluation stems from the abundance of product types and quantities in the market on the one hand, and consumers' ignorance of products on the other hand. Consumer demand has spawned product evaluation bloggers. Early product testing bloggers made evaluation content based on their own experience, and the evaluation products of these bloggers were purchased at their own expense. When introducing products to the audience, evaluation bloggers recommend and describe the use of their products from the perspective of experimenters. Such an intuitive introduction answers the questions that the audience most wants to know, and shortens the distance between opinion leaders and the audience as well. Let the

audience produce opinion leaders is also the psychological identity of consumers, so as to reduce the psychological defence against opinion leaders, and then have a sense of trust in opinion leaders [13].

#### **4.2 Negative impact of opinion leaders**

The audience's trust in opinion leaders of social e-commerce platforms stems from the identity of opinion leaders as "ordinary consumers" or authorities in the field. The premise that the audience is influenced by these opinion leaders is that they think the content released by opinion leaders is relatively objective. When the audience believes that the content released by opinion leaders deviates from their expectations, the reputation of opinion leaders in the audience collapses, and then lose the fixed audience.

The anchor "Xinba" with goods was exposed that the anchor sold "bird's nest in sugar water" in the live broadcasting room. After it was exposed, the anchor and other anchors he trained, was suspected by most of their audiences, and the products previously sold were also suspected as fake by the audience. The speech about "I also bought fake goods in his live broadcasting room" was widely spread.

The reason why it is so easy to cause the reputation of relevant bloggers to collapse after the event of "love to buy high price ice cream" and damage the reputation of evaluation bloggers is that the audience feels that the evaluation content produced by evaluation bloggers after receiving the promotion of merchants does not meet the expectation of "real experience of consumers" in the audience's mind. They think that the evaluation after sponsorship is no longer the real feeling of bloggers.

In addition, the new shopping mode of "e-commerce +social" strengthens the social attributes of the shopping platform, i.e., users can make a voice for products. The audience can also ask the blogger about the issues they care about, and think of it as an interactive link, which shortens the distance between the audience and opinion leaders. Opinion leaders can improve the way of content production according to the audience's messages. At the same time, audiences can also communicate under the information released by bloggers to form a relatively fixed audience group and a "social circle". As opinion leaders, when conducting product evaluation, the evaluation of products itself has a certain subjectivity. For example, the use effect of skin care products, the taste of snacks, the preference of headphones, etc. Although the factory parameters of the product are consistent, the experience effect of the product varies from person to person. Consumers who like Sony earphones will not because of other earphones.

As the social platform of social e-commerce is an open model, message interaction under the content

released by opinion leaders will not limit the identity of users. Therefore, ordinary users can ask bloggers as opinion leaders about content issues, which can also give feedback on the use experience in the follow-up. This message feedback can bring attention and popularity to opinion leaders, and may also have a negative word-of-mouth impact on opinion leaders. The product effect feedback as a message is subjective. On the one hand, the message can only spread text information. On the other hand, the identity of ordinary users of the message does not need complete authentication, and the authenticity of the message feedback of some ordinary users is in doubt. In the theory of weak communication, when one party is in a weak position in public opinion, the audience will be more inclined to believe the message of the weak communicator. Among sellers and evaluation bloggers, consumers are more inclined to believe in evaluation bloggers, because evaluation bloggers are in a weak position in public opinion. Among opinion leaders and ordinary users, the audience is more inclined to believe in ordinary users, because ordinary users are vulnerable. Therefore, when a test blogger publishes a product test experience in the social e-commerce with a negative evaluation of the blogger in the message, it will weaken the audience's identity of the blogger, and then have an impact on the blogger's reputation.

To sum up, in the field of consumption, opinion leaders will be recognized by the audience because they are both consumers and their subjective remarks. Furthermore, they will also lose their reputation because they are considered to be non-objective.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

In summary, this paper analysed the role of opinion leaders through three different cases and believed that opinion leaders still exerted influence on the audience in modern public opinion, which is reflected in politics, learning, consumption and life. However, although opinion leaders can easily gain the trust of the audience, they will also easily lose their influence in the audience owing to the improper words and deeds. In addition, opinion leaders can not only play a positive role, but also cause negative effects (e.g., group polarization and information cocoons). This paper can provide some case basis for the research on the influence of opinion leaders in the new media era. Of course, the influence generation model of opinion leaders needs to be further studied in the future.

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