



## OPINION LEADER THEORY IN THE CONTEXT OF INTERNET MARKETING

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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** The article deals with the two-step communication theory, which relies on the assumption of information being transmitted to the audience through intermediaries designated as opinion leaders. The study aims to determine the up-to-date characteristics of opinion leaders as social actors. **Methods:** An empirical study using the survey method is conducted on a sample of 400 students of universities in Kazan (Russia) aged 18 to 24. **Results:** The study provides insight into the classical theory through the prism of the modern realities of media content and the media environment, where opinion leaders are being replaced by Internet influencers. Based on empirical material, the paper outlines the main problems and limitations of the use of Influencers as a technology for the promotion of goods and services.

**Keywords:** Opinion leader; Advertising; Promotion; Influencer; Blogger.

## TEORIA DO LÍDER DE OPINIÃO NO CONTEXTO DO MARKETING NA INTERNET

### RESUMO

**Objetivo:** O artigo trata da teoria da comunicação em duas fases, que se baseia no pressuposto de que a informação é transmitida à audiência através de intermediários designados como líderes de opinião. O estudo visa determinar as características atualizadas dos líderes de opinião como actores sociais. **Métodos:** Um estudo empírico utilizando o método do inquérito é realizado numa amostra de 400 estudantes de universidades em Kazan (Rússia) com idades compreendidas entre os 18 e os 24 anos. **Resultados:** O estudo fornece uma visão da teoria clássica através do prisma das realidades modernas dos conteúdos mediáticos e do ambiente mediático, onde os líderes de opinião estão a ser substituídos por líderes de opinião que influenciam a Internet. Com base em material empírico, o artigo descreve os principais problemas e limitações da utilização de Influenciadores como tecnologia para a promoção de bens e serviços.

**Palavras-chave:** Formador de opinião; Publicidade; Promoção; Influenciador; Blogger.

### 1 INTRODUCTION

The Internet has connected many users into a single open communication network, creating an unlimited number of links, reducing the distance between network participants, and destroying spatial and temporal limitations. Every year, the amount of time spent in the Internet environment is growing. According to a 2022 study by We Are Social, Russians spend about 6 hours and 58 minutes on the Internet every day (We Are Social, 2022).

Thus, the social environment is progressively transforming from the real to the virtual. Interpersonal and mass communication, as part of the overall social reality, is also increasingly assuming the form of online communication. The familiar components of the social system that influence communication and are integral to it, such as opinion leaders, are also taking on a new form – the form of influencers (Bakanov et al., 2022). The characteristics of these new opinion leaders and how they relate to the classical interpretation of this phenomenon are the questions of the study, part of which is presented in this article.

### 2 METHODS

The methodological basis of the study consisted of monographic research and the results of a comparative analysis of youth content on the criteria of content, headings,

and forms of presentation in social networks. The basic methods of analysis were the general scientific methods of induction, deduction, and synthesis (Anderson & Hepburn, 2015).

A special research method was the survey method. The study used secondary data along with primary data from our own survey. The respondents were students of universities in Kazan (Russia) aged 18 to 24. The sample size was 400 people with the general population of 78,000 people. The survey was conducted between May and September 2022.

### 3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Back in 1937, the Rockefeller Foundation funded the creation of the Office of Radio Research, headed by P. Lazarsfeld, which was founded to study the impact of radio on radio listeners. Later on, in the 1940s-60s, research by Lazarsfeld and his colleagues at the Bureau of Applied Social Research into the influence of media on decisions in various aspects of social life (opinion formation, determining purchase items, decisions on how to spend the evening, etc.) served as a basis for a new middle-range theory (Merton, 2006) – the Limited Effects Theory. The foundation of this theory was a 1940 empirical study, the purpose of which was to determine the impact of mass media on public opinion during the US presidential election. The methodological basis for this study was the well-proven panel survey method. From May to November, researchers interviewed a sample of 600 families, with an average of five people each, in one Ohio community (Bryant & Thompson, 2004, p. 65). The result turned out to be unexpected in light of the silver bullet theory, which proclaimed the unlimited effect of media exposure. 53% of voters made their decision from the start and never changed it. The vote of 24% was predictable, and they remained true to it. 15% questioned their decision, shifting from one candidate to another, but eventually returned to their original choice. Only 8%, despite remaining loyal to their candidate throughout the entire campaign, ended up voting for someone else (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944). The research group later continued this line of research into the influence of the media on public opinion, which ultimately gave rise to a new theory of communication – the two-step communication flow theory (the two-step communication model). This approach distinguishes a new communication link – an opinion leader.

Subsequently, this phenomenon was comprehended separately and received its theoretical substantiation in a 1955 publication by E. Katz and P. Lazarsfeld (2004)

titled "Personal Influence". The authors concluded that opinion leaders, although present in all demographic and social groups, operate vertically rather than horizontally, exerting the greatest influence on people within their social circle.

This provision corresponds well with the Diffusion of Innovations theory conceptualized by E. Rogers (2010) in "Diffusion of Innovations". In this work, diffusion is understood as a process in which innovation, be it an idea, a product, or a candidate for an elected position, is transmitted over time through specific channels among members of social systems. In this book, Rogers (1983) introduces into communication the concept of homophily defined as "the degree to which pairs of individuals who interact are similar in certain attributes, such as beliefs, education, social status, and the like". Proponents of this approach emphasize that, given the possibility of choice, individuals tend to seek interaction with individuals who possess the same attributes as they do. Thus, homophilic individuals engage in more effective communication as similar attributes lead to greater information exchange. As a result, homophilic individuals tend to develop diffusion among themselves (McPherson et al., 2001).

Based on a comprehensive analysis, the authors outline the following characteristics of a typical opinion leader:

1. active life position;
2. extensive network of social contacts;
3. desire to search for new information;
4. desire to spread useful information;
5. confidence in shaping the trend
6. involvement in the process of problem-solving;
7. willingness to accept new social roles.

Several researchers later significantly expanded this list of characteristics (for example, "Identifying Opinion Leaders" by E. Noelle-Neumann (1985).

The theory has been subjected to numerous criticisms. In particular, it was noted that the model finds empirical support only in politics. Several researchers indicate that the political sphere is more prone to the presence of a vertically oriented hierarchy in the "opinion leader – social group" structure, where society tends to receive information from people with a higher social status. There are also some gaps with respect to Lazarsfeld's suggestion that opinion leaders receive information for dissemination from the media, while other sources, including other opinion leaders, are ignored. The two-step model of communication in principle does not adequately describe the learning process, since Lazarsfeld and his colleagues failed to identify a definitive flow of

influence. Subsequent empirical and behavioral studies have found that the initial information comes to the audience from the media and not from opinion leaders, who instead are the ones influencing the formation of attitudes toward this information, i.e., public opinion.

These findings led to the further development of the two-step flow theory. Now, the audience is not viewed as a single whole but is divided into different segments by a variety of characteristics – gender, age, social status, place of residence, etc. This development marked the beginning of audience segmentation in advertising and public relations.

In turn, other researchers have proposed modifications to the theory of two-step communication, adding other steps to it. Thus emerged the multi-stage communication model (Schramm, 2003, p. 7).

This idea was later confirmed in the works of various researchers. However, there have also been those who question both individual provisions and the theory as a whole.

In a long-term experiment, M. Schenk concluded that the intersection of mass and interpersonal communication channels occurs only at times of significant social phenomena that have real consequences or appear as such in the minds of society. Under normal circumstances, mass media have a direct influence on the audience. According to Schenck,

The selective processing of media content is even further ramified in interpersonal communication networks, which, on the one hand, facilitate the diffusion of ideas and information, but, on the other hand, as a result of their relationally low density, cannot offer a stable 'anchor' for individual attitudes and opinions, since under certain circumstances the impact of the media has to be reckoned with. (as cited in Shchepilova, 2013, p. 8).

The previously mentioned Diffusion of Innovations theory emphasizes that diffusion also requires heterophily for new ideas to be introduced. If the two individuals are identical, diffusion cannot occur, since there is no information to exchange. Therefore, the ideal scenario assumes the presence of potential adopters who are homophilic in every way except their knowledge about the innovation (Rogers, 1983, p. 19). However, it is also asserted that connections between heterophilic people are much weaker, as they are more difficult to create and maintain (Rogers & Bhowmik, 1970). Thus, it is the development of heterophilic connections between different social groups that can improve the efficiency of the diffusion of behavioral habits. When a previously homophilic individual accepts a behavior or innovation, other members of their group

are more likely to do the same (Centola, 2011).

Overall, to draw some conclusions from the theoretical section, we should highlight that the majority of current marketing studies rely on the two-step information flow theory. Especially emphasized is the role of opinion leaders in society, which allows working on the market more efficiently with less effort (Communication Theory, n.d.).

In today's world, in the sphere of the promotion of goods, services, and ideas in the context of our topic, a special place is held by influencer marketing. The latter represents a form of promotion on social media through influencers – users who have a large and mostly loyal audience and can exert some influence on it. Thus, there are some similarities to be found between influencers and opinion leaders. However, we must note that opinion leaders have a number of specific characteristics, their authority within their group is indisputable, and the audience perceives the information coming from them with a high degree of loyalty.

Western marketing distinguishes the following types of influencers (Kosaka, 2021):

- bloggers
- social media celebrities
- celebrities
- industry experts
- thought leaders
- customers
- non-competitive brands.

In Russian practice, the typology of influencers is much narrower: an influencer is a person, brand, or group of people who can influence some, usually a specific, audience. These categories are further wrapped up in a single concise term "blogger".

K. White (2019) classifies influencers by the following levels:

- Mega influencers (over a million subscribers) are used to increase brand awareness;
- Macro influencers (from 100 thousand to 1 million subscribers) are distinguished by high target coverage, high-quality content, and willingness to cooperate;
- Micro influencers (under 10 thousand subscribers) have a small, loyal audience, which can result in high trust and engagement; the prices of these influencers are significantly lower than those of mega and macro influencers.

- Nano influencers (under a thousand subscribers) are marked by high authority and trust in their group; these influencers have the least coverage but the highest level of audience engagement.

Importantly, representatives of the influencer industry rate the credibility of influencer promotion from social media users at 92% higher as compared to standard advertising (Weinswig, 2016).

However, despite the rapid growth of advertising and other means of promotion through bloggers, there are a number of problems that currently hold a high degree of urgency (Mirolubow, 2019).

1. The cost of ad placements by influencers is growing, while the effectiveness of such advertisements continues to decline.

2. Subscribers are fed up with direct advertisements that bloggers disguise as their native integrations. Subscribers themselves repeatedly find influencers abusing their influence and being too hungry for advertising budgets.

3. Along with subscribers, brands show increasingly less trust for influencers, while influencers themselves wish to work only with well-known brands.

4. The complex structure of modern social media does not provide the required KPIs and metrics, which leaves few guarantees for the success of campaigns. There are no methods for verifying data from influencers, including by themselves and even by social networks.

5. Social networks do not support the development of the influencer marketing format within their platforms.

6. The market at the level of macro and mega influencers is global due to their audience being unstructured, particularly in terms of geography. Localization at the municipal level is provided by micro and nano influencers.

A survey by the Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VTsIOM) and the "Platform" Social Design Center about Russians' attitudes toward bloggers (published September 24, 2020), the trust of Russian society in bloggers is somewhat exaggerated (VTsIOM, 2020).

Specifically, according to this study, most respondents understand bloggers as people running a blog, diary, or personal webpage (40% of respondents), yet there is also a growing share of those who understand bloggers as journalists working on the Internet.

Meanwhile, in absolute values, the majority of Internet users do not read or view blogs (54% of those not interested in blogs against 46% of those interested). However,

considering this issue from the point of respondent age groups, in the group of people aged 18 to 24, 63% of respondents are active blogger audience, in the group of people aged 25 to 44, this share is 50%, in the group of respondents aged 45 to 59 – 43%, and among people over 60 – only 30%. This finding can be attributed to the similarity of most parameters (interests, stylistics, linguistic forms, etc.) of bloggers and the young audience.

As for the efficiency of bloggers in advertising campaigns, 76% of the surveyed blog subscribers have never purchased a product or service on the advice of a blogger. Nevertheless, the share of those who follow the advice of a blogger on a specific producer when they initially intend to buy a certain product amounts to as much as 46% of blog subscribers.

It appears that these results primarily relate to the fact that the majority of respondents believe bloggers have no concern for their reputation (63%), artificially inflate their audience size (59%), and run blogs for the sake of personal income (64%) and drawing attention to themselves (40%).

Meanwhile, our own survey shows the following results. The largest share of respondents does read or view the pages of bloggers, whom they define as media personalities who regularly produce and post content on the Internet.

The vast majority of respondents (78%) follow bloggers' recommendations when making a purchase. Furthermore, more than 80% of those who listen to bloggers' recommendations also take their advice on the choice of a particular brand.

#### 4 CONCLUSION

Our survey was conducted in the age group of people aged 18 to 24. Although this sample does not reflect the opinion of the most solvent population group, it clearly outlines the general trend of the development of attitudes towards bloggers in Russia, since, in the future, this group will become the leader in shaping purchasing behavior.

Summarizing the study, we can conclude that today's influencers cannot be fully considered opinion leaders, and their use is complicated by many related factors that directly affect the effectiveness of this promotion method.

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