Chapter 8

Opinion Leaders Go Online: An Empirical Study on Interpersonal Influence on Purchase Intentions in E-Retailing.

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ABSTRACT

“Social influence” in innovative e-retailing environments increasingly seems to have an important impact on online buying behavior. This chapter addresses this issue, focusing on the role of online opinion leaders. The opinion leadership construct has been associated with innovative behavior as well as with the early adoption of electronic shopping technologies. Despite these assumptions, little is known about online opinion leaders and their characteristics in e-retailing environments. The aim of the chapter is twofold: to identify the main features of opinion leaders in digital contexts and, by means of an exploratory empirical study, to analyse whether they have an impact on the purchase decisions of high involvement products, by explaining from where opinion leaders derive their skills.

INTRODUCTION

The advances of the Internet toward a “social web” configuration are beginning to have a major impact on the dynamics of purchase decisions in digital environments. Social media technologies provide a high number of platforms, such as blogs, forums, social network sites, and reputation systems where consumers can interact with each other through the dissemination of opinions regarding companies/brands and their products (Bodendorf & Kaiser, 2009; Kang & Johnson, 2013; Shi & Wojnicki, 2014).

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This is a growing area of importance particularly for e-retailing, as “social influence” seems to have a major impact on online buying behavior within Web 2.0. This chapter addresses this issue, focusing on the role of online opinion leaders.

Opinion leaders are generally considered as being crucial figures in studies on interpersonal communication, as they exert personal influence on their own informal community, above all in the domain in which their peers consider them to be experts (Katz, 1957; Childers, 1986; Flynn, Goldsmith & Eastman, 1996). The opinion leadership construct has been associated with innovative behavior (Rogers, 1983; Venkatraman, 1989; Goldsmith & Hofacker, 1991; Eastlick, 1993) as well as with the early adoption of electronic shopping technologies (O’Cass & Fenech, 2003).

Despite these assumptions, little is known about online opinion leaders and their characteristics in the e-retailing environment. The aim of the chapter is thus twofold: to identify the main features of opinion leaders and to study their current role in the online environment, analyzing whether they have an impact on the decisions of other consumers to purchase high involvement products.

The remainder of the chapter is organized as follows. We begin by describing the conceptual foundations of the main constructs considered here, namely opinion leadership and market mavenship. We then discuss the role of opinion leaders in digital contexts and define objectives of the chapter. The chapter next focuses on an empirical research study on the impact of different sources of information on the purchasing behavior of a smartphone in a simulated online setting. Several differences were found between the buying intentions of different types of consumers (opinion leaders, non-leaders, etc.). Finally the implications, research challenges and concluding remarks are presented in the last two sections.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

The literature on opinion leadership is vast and crosses the borders of many disciplines in the social sciences. The origins of this concept can be traced back to the “two-step flow communication theory” of Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) and the subsequent multi-step theories (e.g., Robinson, 1976; Windahl, Signitzer & Olson, 1992) that conceptualized opinion leaders as the brokers of information stemming from the mass media and as the filter of this same information to their own network of relations.

The first contributions to the debate on opinion leadership came from sociology, in which interpersonal communication became an autonomous field of study, as distinct from mass communication. In the 1940s the appreciation of interpersonal relations was one of the decisive elements in facilitating the transition from the paradigm of the “powerful mass media” (e.g., the magic bullet theory) to “limited effect” models (McQuail, 1985), such as the above-mentioned “two-step flow of communication” (see Figure 1). It was found, for example, that both the choices of voters in reference to politicians as well as those of consumers in relation to products depended more on interpersonal communication with members of their social network rather than on direct exposure to mass media (Lazarsfeld, Berelson & Gaudet, 1948; Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955).

Primary groups (family, friends, colleagues, etc.) in which interactions are long lasting, informal and based on face-to-face relationships, constitute the networks of communication in which people are deeply involved. In these groups, people tend to change their minds collectively rather than individually, and to refer to the most influential members of their communities, which embody the “typical” group
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