

Online Opinion Leaders in the Health Promotion Digital Era

JOYCE CHEAH LYNN-SZE
AZLINA KAMARUDDIN
Universiti Utara Malaysia

ABSTRACT

Health opinion leaders have widely embraced social media for health promotion and public health communication which can make a strong influence on the public decision making. However, despite the growing relevance of public health threats such as infectious diseases, pandemic influenza and natural disasters, research has paid little attention to the qualities of opinion leaders. Moreover, there is limited evidence that public health organisations use social media appropriately to engage in meaningful conversations with audiences. Thus, the aims of the study are to describe principles of communication practised by online opinion leaders to promote health issues, to discuss the strategies of social media used, to explain the opinion leaders' influence attributes in health decision making and finally to develop a model of online opinion leader in the contemporary health promotion era. Content analysis was conducted on Facebook postings of five selected health opinion leaders. In addition, semi-structured interviews with 10 followers were conducted. The findings of the study revealed that there are three principles of communication practised by online opinion leaders, which are language, interaction and themes. There are three strategies opinion leaders use to influence the public: social connectivity, social support and social consultation. Furthermore, there are five opinion leaders' attributes that influence the public's decision making, namely personality, authenticity, trust/credibility, professional knowledge and social position. The model would be beneficial in educating and guiding the current public health opinion leaders in order to establish health and social well-being.

Keywords: *Online opinion leader, online health communication, public health, two-step flow theory, decision making.*

INTRODUCTION

Social media is a form of information technology used by leaders to communicate their vision and purposes. The development of internet technology has spawned a large number of opinion leaders throughout the world. Opinion leaders are individuals who influence the opinions, attitudes, beliefs, motivations, and behaviours of others (Luqiu, Schmierbach & Ng, 2019).

Two-Step Flow theory discusses how opinion leaders influence society through interpersonal communication, which is no longer suitable in our present environment (Mohamad, Ahmad, Mohamed Salleh & Wan Sulaiman, 2017). This is largely because the content of the mass media is now available directly to the society, so opinion leaders may not be able to fully control the public opinion. In addition, the flow of communication between the mass media and the public has begun to change and there are new ways of considering the dissemination of information (Mohamad et al., 2017). The new way of communication flow better explains communication processes in today's media landscape; it also recognises audiences as active users of the media.

In the 21st century, individual health decisions are no longer based entirely on doctor's advice, but are often convinced by individuals or organisations that are considered trustworthy and reliable (Dubois, Minaeian, Labelle & Beaudry, 2020). Opinion leaders play a role in reducing health problems and are capable of influencing health attitudes and behaviours. In addition, the increasing patterns of online health information-seeking behaviours and the demand for the availability of validated health information require effective strategies to share health information and increase public participation on social media.

In Malaysia, opinion leaders began using online platforms to voice their views, particularly in the late 1990s (Majali, Alsoud, Omar & Alhassan, 2021). Social media enabled opinion leaders to communicate more quickly and the public to talk openly about health issues. This can be seen in various health-related areas, where social media becomes a platform for discussion and information exchange. It also allowed for the discussion of sensitive and taboo health issues on a broader platform. For this reason, the idea of creating a healthy society in Malaysia, by utilising social media, is pivotal.

This study revisited the concept of opinion leaders and followers within the context of today's social and media environments based on Two-Step Flow theory. The opinion leader is a concept that derives from the traditional media (Savolainen, 2021). However, many researchers remain unsure whether the concept of opinion leader can be applied in the new media environment (Mohamad et al., 2017; Savolainen, 2021). Social networking sites such as Facebook offer new ways to share news that allow users to be opinion leaders, encourage discussion and potentially increase their participation in news events. Facebook is an interesting social media platform to explore about opinion leaders because "shares" and "likes" show in real-time and can be used to measure the climate of opinion at that particular time (Patten, Balls-Berry, Cohen, Brockman, Valdez, West, Cha, Zavala & Eder, 2021; Rashid, Mohamad & Mohd Haris, 2021). Considering these, it is appropriate that this study reexamine the traditional way to define opinion leaders and revisit the theory of Two-Step Flow in health communication. Thus, the main aim of this study is to develop a model of online health opinion leaders which include the principles of communication practised by online opinion leaders, the strategies used and opinion leaders' attributes in influencing decision making among the public.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Media Opinion Leaders

In online society, people no longer get information directly from conventional media, but via opinion leaders. They are more likely to rely on the information from familiar and trusted individuals (Jenkins, Ilicic, Barklamb & McCaffrey, 2020). At this stage, research on the identification of online opinion leaders has focused on analysing the characteristics, such as persuasion, dialogue patterns (Lee & Theokary, 2021) and the motivation of opinion leaders to share content online (Dubois et al., 2020; Jenkins et al., 2020).

The characteristics of opinion leaders set them apart from other members in their community and facilitate their ability to help them fulfill their role (Feng, Chen & Kong, 2020). Opinion leadership includes the leader's values, characteristics, skills, expertise and social position (Hefler, Kerrigan, Henryks, Freeman & Thomas, 2019). Social networks are essential to determine how ideas are disseminated and how new practices are adopted. Successful opinion leaders depend on those they know, who knows them and the extent to which they are accessible (Hefler et al., 2019).

Previous research has demonstrated that sharing information on Facebook has some positive effects on the public. These effects are strengthened when the content is shared publicly on the “wall” and when the audience asks questions to its network after sharing the content (Savolainen, 2021). As such, the social mechanisms of the Facebook page seem to encourage the involvement and influence of the information. While research has shown that the credibility of the information improves when people with matching values share content on social media, Facebook provides a unique area to explore news credibility and opinion leadership given that Facebook is less homogenous than other social networking sites (Patten et al., 2021; Parsons, 2013). Hence, one way that the users can judge Facebook messages with related news content is by assessing the sender of the message.

Scholars have showed how a variety of communication factors such as language, style, interaction and quality affect receiver perceptions (Lee & Theokary, 2021). Knowledge of the content was also identified as one of the most important factors influencing decision making when evaluating a message (Feng, Chen & Kong, 2020). Research on persuasive messages has revealed that knowledge makes it easier for receivers to critically assess messages (Feng, Chen & Kong, 2020). When the receivers are well informed, their capacity and motivation is greater, which reinforces their intention to follow and be influenced.

Online Health Promotion

Over the past few years, online health information has become one of the most important sources of information for individuals looking for health information (Zhu, Guan & Donovan, 2020). With the growing availability of online medical information sources, as well as the desire to take on greater health responsibility and control costs, more and more people are going online to access health related information. Health information that is sought includes guidance and information about conditions, symptoms, and treatment options. The benefits of using health information online include savings, privacy protection, lack of embarrassment, effective retrieval of information and the ability to adapt information to meet each individual’s needs (Majali, Alsoud, Omar & Alhassan, 2021; Kostygina, Tran, Binns, Szczypka, Emery, Vallone & Hair, 2020). Thus, online health information research has the potential to improve healthcare outcomes by reducing the health care disparity and encouraging patients’ engagement with doctors.

The Internet has profoundly changed the way most people find and share health and medical information. Online health information search has become increasingly popular, with 77.2 percent seeking health information online (MCMC, 2018). Health-related information most frequently requested by users were ‘symptoms and illnesses’ (91.4%), followed by ‘health care advice’ (89.8%) and ‘method of treatment’ (83.5%). More than half of them were looking for ‘drug/medication information’ (73.7%) and ‘places to be treated’. Even for severe health problems such as cancer, people are more likely to go to the Internet first to get health information despite having greater confidence in their doctor as a source of information. There are many reasons for the development of the Internet as a source of health information, including the availability and increased anonymity it provides to people with sensitive health care needs and the ability to connect with other individuals with similar health conditions.

Despite the rapid and widespread adoption of Facebook among Internet users, little is known about the broader representation of health issues on Facebook. The current literature has focused primarily on a small number of particular health problems that have

adopted one of the following two approaches, either an analysis of the content of the messages, or a more detailed analysis of the primary objective of the groups, the number of members and the content of the messages.

Two-step Flow Theory and Opinion Leadership

Opinion leaders are defined as experts in their fields who are able to elicit feedback, spark conversations in the community or shape how other members of a group discuss a topic (Savolainen, 2021). In other words, opinion leaders are individuals who are active and trusted by the community and as a result, they can affect public decision making. Regarding their characteristics, opinion leaders tend to be skilled in being able to use new high technology products, are large media consumers and are socially active (Zhang & Ma, 2021).

More recently, research on opinion leaders has shifted from personal networks to social networks by focusing on the level of social integration of opinion leaders or by the number of social connections (Mohamad et al., 2017). This change is mainly due to communication research which contributed to a whole new dimension of Two-Step Flow Theory. The communication perspective determines who speaks to whom within a community (Savolainen, 2021). The approach allows researchers to determine who is the most central in the network and therefore the most influential. Social media sites have played a critical role in the success of information delivery, have changed the way people interact, and have created platforms for online opinion leaders (Savolainen, 2021).

The concepts of Two-step Flow Theory and opinion leadership was introduced in Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1955) research on the media effects of political campaigns in the mass media. As Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) explained, two-step flow is the process by which political ideas deliver from radio and print to the opinion leaders and from them to the less active parts of the population. This revealed that people are more influenced by interpersonal communication than the content of the media since the public is less attentive to information. Given that social uses of sites such as Facebook for information-seeking purposes, interpersonal communication and perceived opinion leadership can help "opinion followers" make sense and assess the content of information exchanged through social media (Savolainen, 2021). In the two-step flow model, opinion followers are in the final stage of information flow, where mass media messages are shifting from media institutions to opinion followers through opinion leaders.

As the two-step flow research has evolved, the conceptualisation and operationalisation of the "opinion leader" has been refined. Public health opinion leaders use social media to gain support and implement community-based health programs. Opinion leaders certainly play a prominent role in society and are likely to grow as health promotion programs become more community-based (Hefler, Kerrigan, Henryks, Freeman & Thomas, 2019). They have several roles and responsibilities in implementing successful community health promotion efforts (Hefler et al., 2019). The status, leadership, and social position of opinion leaders allow them to influence followers, which is a key component to connecting a community and achieving better group performance (Lin, Huang, Zhang & Chen, 2018).

Drawing on previous research, this study defines online opinion leaders as people who create, receive, and disseminate information online through network connections and serve as information bridges and active participants. Online opinion leaders have significantly higher levels of network connectivity and influence the development of shared attitudes and cognitions between members of online communities compared with non-leaders. Indeed, researchers found that online communities tend to have greater success when an online

opinion leader is present in centralised networks, setting agendas, moderating interactions, and maintaining the group on track with their objectives (Hefler et al., 2019). Additionally, through the use of personal computers and mobile devices, online opinion leaders are better equipped to provide advice by providing information and opinions more effectively (Rashid, Mohamad & Mohd Haris, 2021). It makes sense to assume that online opinion leaders would be a significant factor in the dissemination of messages and that they may well serve as “role model” when communicating with others (Yousuf, Corbin, Sweep, Hofstra, Scherder, van Gorp, Zwetsloot, Zhao, van Rossum, Jiang, Lindemans, Narula & Hofstra, 2019). However, there is a limited understanding of the role of online opinion leaders in the health promotion network in Malaysia.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative study approach. There are two methods involved in this study. First, content analysis is to describe the principles of communication of the opinion leaders in social media. The semi-structured interview method is to discuss the strategies used on social media by opinion leaders in influencing the public with regards to health related issues and to explain the influence attributes of online opinion leaders in health decision making among the public.

Content Analysis

The team carried out a preliminary review of the use of social media by a few medical practitioners involved in health promotion. A list of five famous local opinion leaders was compiled from a variety of lists of health practitioners. Researchers content analysed Facebook usage among five active opinion leaders engaged in health promotion. The five opinion leaders had an average of 2000 followers. A total of 94 posts were generated over the 30-day period, with an average of one post per day.

To identify the opinion leaders on health issues, the selection criteria are pre-determined by the researcher before to the selection process and listed as below:

- i. The opinion leader is an active social media user. (Facebook)
- ii. The opinion leader has an active voice within his/her community and has people reply to his/her postings on social media sites.
- iii. Has a high credibility on health issues, depending on several categories: illnesses/health issues, lifestyle, exercise, nutrition and sports.
- iv. Has a strong personal background (education, career, etc.)

This research is focused on Facebook “Pages” of health opinion leaders. Data collection was conducted for each opinion leader in the month of June 2020 and assessed the 30 days of activity leading up to the start of data collection. Researchers examined every post on the Facebook wall, text and videos and the information presented as a whole.

In this study, the unit of the study represents each post generated by each opinion leader. A Facebook “post” is defined as an update of the channel with one of the following Facebook features to share content, this includes status updates, discussions, and videos. Items that the opinion leaders shared by other Facebook users were not included.

Facebook was chosen on the basis that it has the greatest number of members and is easy to access (Haigh & Brubaker, 2012). Opinion leaders represent the following health categories: Obstetrics and gynecology, wellness, orthopaedic and health and nutrition. On Facebook, users are able to express their views by simply clicking on a button labelled “Like”. This is often used as a way to measure the popularity of a particular posting on a page. Each “like” depicts a Facebook user who has clicked on a Like button on Facebook directly or in other online media.

The focus of this study was on user-generated videos and text data. There are two main types of user-generated text data created by users on Facebook, which are posts and comments. A post is written by a Facebook user, and then appears in the timeline of another Facebook user. A status update is a common type of post in the Facebook environment, which will show in a user’s Facebook friends newsfeed (Haigh & Brubaker, 2012). A newsfeed is a list of updates from a user’s Facebook friends which is intended to provide the user with a quick update about what their Facebook friends did on Facebook. While a comment is either a reply to a Facebook post or an answer to another comment itself. Both types of user-generated text on Facebook can be combined with images and videos.

Semi-Structured Interview

Next, this study uses semi-structured interviews to discuss the strategies used by opinion leaders on social media in influencing the public and to explain the online opinion leaders’ influence attributes in health decision making among the public. This study conducted interviews with 10 followers of online health opinion leaders, consisting of five males and five females, aged between 32 to 43 years old. Referring to many researchers, qualitative studies usually require small samples due to the intensive nature of these studies (Creswell & Hirose, 2019). The interviews were conducted between October 2020 to January 2021 in personal meetings. Due to COVID-19 pandemic, some participants had to be interviewed via online Cisco Webex or Zoom.

In order to identify the followers, a category was created for each follower from comments and likes, posted on the Facebook page. This was used to identify and determine which followers were highly-active, moderately-active, and non-active. Due to the varying levels of activity on the page, this research adapted the Viswanath, Mislove, Cha and Gummadi (2009) approach of splitting them into three categories. Some users are more active than others so the category was identified based on the amount of interaction on the Facebook wall. During the analysis of the point of view of the followers about the relationship with opinion leaders, the follower type can be subdivided into three categories. The first type is the follower who is highly-active and continues to comment and “follow” or “like”. The second type is the moderately-active follower who lacks interaction with the opinion leader, not really commenting, but still follows them. Finally, the third type is non-active; the followers are silent readers, they do not comment or like, but just follow the opinion leader.

Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for further analysis. NVivo12 software was utilized to conduct thematic analysis on the interviews. The outcome of the analysis was the input for developing the opinion leader model in the new communication environment.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Principles of Communication

According to the informants, opinion leadership is the extent to which an expert is able to influence the attitudes or behaviours of other people in a desired manner. When opinion leadership was transplanted to cyberspace, it refers to “online opinion leader”.

Based on the content analysis, there are three main themes on opinion leaders’ principles of communication that are practised by health opinion leaders, which are language, interaction and themes. A detailed description of each theme and its related sub-themes are presented in the next sub-topics.

a. Language

Research has shown that specific language choices of a message may enhance social influence. Language has long been acknowledged as a key foundation of the leadership process (Lee & Theokary, 2021). Thus, findings revealed that the five opinion leaders focus on message clarity, uncomplicated message and informal language on their Facebook postings.

Lee and Theokary (2021) noted that the language used by the opinion leaders will influence what the receiver notices, learns, remembers, and eventually the types of judgements and decisions they make. Since the message receiver processes the message content, positive and negative framing may be more influential because it captures the attention and becomes more prominent to the receiver. The positive impact in the messages strengthens the sense of community and encourages ongoing participation, while the negative impact can lead to feedback through hostile and offensive interactions.

Besides, when considering the Internet, information needs to be understood and simple. If the opinion leaders do not satisfy the followers’ information needs, the follower will turn to other sources of information to satisfy those needs. The explanations must be clearly pointed because if the receiver understood the message, they will be more inclined to respond or otherwise engage with the postings.

Another way of interpreting the results is for leaders to use an informal tone to engage in a new way, which attracts readers and viewers in. Lee and Theokary (2021) suggested that leadership is about telling fascinating stories that appeal to people. If the majority of messages in a group seem inconsistent or even disorganised, it seems likely that a reader could concentrate on messages that show reflection and clarity.

Thus, the results suggest that online leaders that are more confident and certain in their online communication and powerful language appear to be an effective persuasive tool that leaders use when trying to make a point across or debate an issue.

b. Interaction

Facebook offers opinion leaders several options to communicate with their followers. Two interaction behaviours are identified on Facebook, which are engagement and interactive features. These behaviours are of interest because they represent the type of interactions between opinion leaders and followers that are in Facebook pages.

Facebook also provides followers the chance to speak to these opinion leaders and the ability for the opinion leaders to communicate and reply to their followers.

The health influencer shares with us first hand experiences of health issues that can benefit us. This allows us to connect to the topic or issues in a new and innovative way. From the placement of the photos, to the caption, and even to the context of the scene in which everything is carried out in a special manner to maximize the interaction. (Informant 5)

Through interactive video content, opinion leaders bring positive insights into health information, health products and give advice on health. This study defines interactivity as the opinion leaders who work with the viewer to seek input.

Throughout all the videos, the opinion leader takes the time to ask her followers their opinions about what she is sharing and also tells the viewers to apply her experiences to their everyday lives. (Informant 8)

Similar to the comments of Informant 8, Informant 2 also commented that social media enables a conversation between opinion leaders and followers to build relationships and trust. For instance, one of the opinion leaders invites her followers to interact with her through the comments section. This interactivity causes followers to comment, asking advice from the leader. Conversations about such issues are an important element of the strategy.

c. Themes

Social media can be personalised and adapted to different audiences' needs and preferences. Yousuf et al. (2019) found that focusing on issues or problems that the audience prefer are effective in encouraging interaction with followers.

Studies looking at the content of posts found various themes or topics of health promotion on Facebook. The findings found that wall posts and discussion topics were characterised by the exchange of information about health problems and awareness purposes, followed by posts related to maternal and child health and also nutrition.

Health problem and awareness is the most famous topic, indicating that Facebook opinion leaders can potentially influence the public agenda. Almost half of the posts of the five health opinion leaders included medicine, mental health, cancer, obesity and other health-related information.

The findings also found that women's health, for example obstetrics and gynaecology are also the most prevalent topics discussed. The topics discussed included pregnancy, childbirth and the health of the female reproductive system. Health opinion leaders on Facebook have a clear emphasis on female followers and topics that interest women.

Based on the findings, messages containing diet information are more likely to lead to behavioural change. Another half of the posts of top health opinion leaders include nutrition related information, which will empower the audience in adopting recommended behaviours or taking healthy food. The findings suggest that messages containing food information are more likely to be liked.

The Strategies of Social Media Used in Influencing The Public

The second aim of this study is to discuss the strategies of social media used by the opinion leaders in influencing the public. Interview findings found that most followers followed and accessed the page because they need social connectivity, social support and social consultation.

a. Social Connectivity

Opinion leaders still use social connectivity in groups to share information and establish relationships (Yousuf et al., 2019). The reason is they believed that getting involved in a more communication activity increases the potential for influence and extends to more followers (Kostygina et al., 2020). This study showed that informants perceive leaders according to the level of communication and follow them accordingly. Most of the informants said that communication activity creates online social structures that facilitate information sharing, influence social behaviours and even attract new followers.

At first, I felt curious about some health problems that I faced, but eventually, I started to learn by listening and reading posts/comments from these opinion leaders. Many of us can connect very well and there would always be some significant few who would argue and disagree. Having FB followers asking questions and reacting to the post, I have learned new things and added knowledge to something that I dare not ask. (Informant 1)

According to Lia and Ding (2012), social connectivity is one of the communication strategies. All five opinion leaders are good at connectivity, not only because they assume the role of shaping the opinions of followers about health issues and medical information, but they also encouraged them to share their opinions with other followers as well. Given that social connectivity is a credible and reliable source, followers may be more likely to listen to them as they interact with them.

b. Social Support

Another advantage of using social media for health communication, as identified by most of the informants, is their ability to obtain social support from a broad network of friends and of course, opinion leaders. This study found that 60% of the informants were getting social support from the opinion leaders.

What I would say is that it's really interesting that both leaders and followers are able to provide and get on Facebook. In other words, opinion leaders do not simply post messages, but they also spend time responding to others. (Informant 8).

Thus, social support is the element related to opinion leadership in online contexts. Opinion leaders who participate in a greater number of communication activities are able to obtain information and connect easily, allowing them to expand their reach and influence others.

c. Social Consultation

Opinion leaders are skilled at redirecting negative experiences and helping people to think more positively and strategically to correct their particular issues and circumstances using empathy techniques.

Most of the opinion leaders relay the importance of empathy practices. They talked about empathy as a vital attribute, a tool for maintaining connections with the followers. It's just a matter of building up a trust relationship. Not only do techniques of empathy in interactions facilitate connections and relationships, but they are a source of developed expertise and authority. (Informant 2 & Informant 4)

Thus, opinion leaders as public health communicators need to be able to react by providing advice and engaging in a process or at risk of being left out. They may lose their followers if they do not make a commitment and others will intervene to fill the information gap because the flow of information is moving faster than before.

Online Opinion Leaders' Influence Attributes

Based on the interview findings, opinion leaders are characterised by their followers as knowledgeable, educators whose advice they appreciated receiving on health issues. The followers read comments posted by the opinion leaders to evaluate the credibility and viewers evaluate content based on peer comments. Focusing on the pages, the posts can change people's views and their perceptions of health issues. The findings revealed five attributes on opinion leaders, namely personality, authenticity, trust/credibility, professional knowledge and social position that influence their decision making.

a. Personality

Personal attributes refer to individual profile characteristics and personality factors. Opinion leaders are innovative, educated and focus on the quality of information resources. Li and Du (2011) introduced opinion leaders as influential, competent, knowledgeable, communicable and respectful.

The informants said that these opinion leaders have their own unique personalities, but appear to operate in the same manner. So, if we understand how a way of life works, we can understand how their character works. Based on the informants' feedback, they said that an opinion leader must be confident. The opinion leader not only trusts and assures their own-self, but also their viewers of their abilities. Besides, the opinion leader must be authentic, genuine and relatable with their followers.

b. Authenticity

For social media opinion leaders whose focus is on health issues, authenticity is the key (Jenkins, et. al., 2020). This study defined authenticity as the opinion leader being authentic, honest and open to his followers. Authenticity makes it possible for opinion leaders to communicate with followers in making connections between followers and health issues. Creating genuine Facebook content allows opinion leaders to share their personal views, thoughts and perceptions with their followers.

In a personal interview, Informant 10 explained that it is important to be authentic and this is what makes the opinion leader different compared to other opinion leaders. He said that is why the five opinion leaders selected became so famous, because all of their content is authentic. "We can feel that what they posted on social media is 100% authentic, there is no acting."

c. Trust/ Credibility

There is a growing awareness and concern about the credibility of health information available through the Internet. An increasing number of patients and followers are looking for medical advice everywhere from websites to social media sites (Jenkins et al., 2020). Of these, all informants reported that they were influenced by the health information provided by online opinion leaders. Seven of the informants said that their decision to trust the health information were influenced by online sources, while three others indicated that the online information affected their decision to seek medical attention.

Besides, informants found that the trustworthiness of a source had a significant impact on accepting the message and changing opinion. Trustworthiness is also significantly linked with the fairness of the presentation and justification of the conclusions. In addition, perceived expertise, fairness, truthfulness, accuracy, degree of use, depth of the message, past knowledge and quality of the message are all elements of credibility.

d. Professional Knowledge

The fourth attribute of opinion leaders is professional knowledge. The interviews showed that people with medical knowledge show much stronger opinion leadership on health issues on Facebook than people without that knowledge. Professional knowledge of opinion leaders on a certain topic may be essential for opinion leadership when the information flows follow the “two-step flow.”

Besides, these findings also mean that opinion leaders have been perceived by followers as having clear areas of expertise and the sphere of influence for health opinion leaders.

e. Social Position

The fifth attribute in this study is the opinion leaders’ social position on Facebook. Zhu, Yin and He (2014) confirmed that social position or reputation is another important personal factor that can make him or her an opinion leader. The results reveal that securing followership requires a well-connected position in the network and the number of followers is an important predictor. The number of followers is the number of Facebook users that will be directly exposed to his/her messages. The larger the amount of the opinion leader’s direct audience, the greater level of influence to the followers.

Moreover, opinion leadership depends not only on the quantity of its direct audience, but also on the quantity of sources of information on Facebook. Opinion leaders with wide audiences and numerous sources of information occupy well-connected positions in the network and have updated information on the subject, influencing the health decision making.

Online Opinion Leaders Model in the Health Promotion Digital Era

In online opinion leadership, two-step flow of communication model was identified with technological changes allowing messages to be sent directly to a target audience without any social mediation. This study showed that opinion leaders had a social impact in spreading their messages through others. Their messages have been frequently shared not only by the patients, but also by the followers of those opinion leaders. The social influence of opinion leaders supported by technological affordability, has enabled them to have more power over the formation and information of public opinion.

The conclusions from this content analysis demonstrate that language, interactivity and knowledge on different types of health topics are crucial for opinion leaders to possess when creating content on Facebook. When opinion leaders possess these three principles of communication, they are likely to be able to achieve followership goals.

In addition to principles of communication, the use of social media to influence the public as well as the involvement with the opinion leaders also affect the health decision making. For example, followers become more motivated to follow the opinion leader because of the leaders' social connectivity, social support and social consultation. These findings highlight the importance of understanding that although the content-driven is often used to influence followers' thoughts, the source of the message can also influence health decisions and should be considered.

The study also builds upon the findings by varying sources of experts and knowledge of content in an online environment. To obtain necessary understanding on how followers make decisions on health issues, this study found that opinion leaders' characteristics are also an important factor, such as personality, authenticity, trust/credibility, professional knowledge and social position. As suggested, people who post information online have varying levels of expertise and previous communication research suggests that personality and expertise are a key predictor of health decision making. Therefore, a model of online leaders in the health promotion digital era is developed based on the findings of this research (Figure 1).

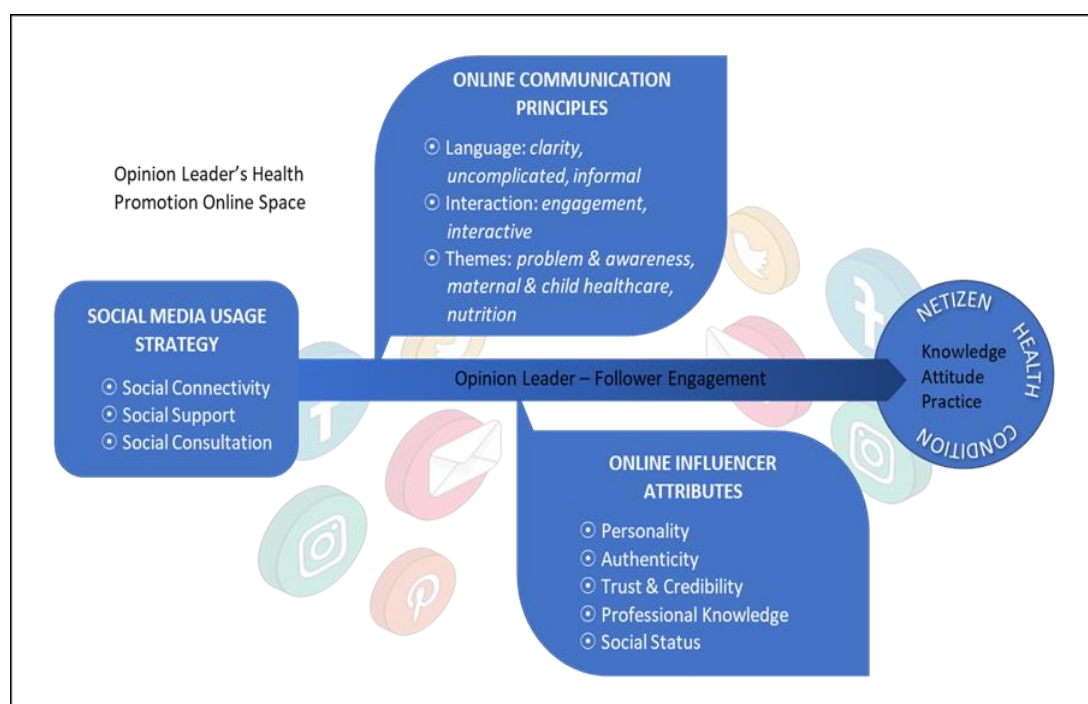


Figure 1: Online opinion leaders model in the health promotion digital era model

CONCLUSION

In the digital era, particularly with the rise and popularity of social media, online opinion leaders are playing an increasingly important role in dissemination of information and the influence of public opinion. While in the digital age of health promotion, health organisations attempt to use opinion leaders to influence and alter individual attitudes and behaviours. As

a result, this study conceptualised leaders as those who challenge the online communities by promoting communication and social interaction.

The findings indicate that social media is seen as a tool with no direct authority because the effectiveness depends on how the users use it. In the context of health opinion leaders, the effectiveness of social media sites like Facebook depends on whether opinion leaders are aware of the actual potentials of the media and whether they know how to present their views on issues effectively on those platforms. With easy to share features on social media sites, reaching a large number of audiences helps opinion leaders effectively spread health issues. In addition to the new communication technologies still developing in the country, it is considered as highly promising for the future of online health promotion, although many factors, including laws and legislation may in some way influence the dynamics of these discourses. However, given the ongoing demand for advanced communication technologies, it is expected that critical online discourse will continue to flourish within the Malaysian context.

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BIODATA

Joyce Cheah Lynn-Sze is currently a senior lecturer at the Communication Department, School of Multimedia Technology and Communication, College of Arts and Sciences, Universiti Utara Malaysia, Malaysia. Her research interests focus on leadership communication, with specific emphasis on the Chinese values from cross-cultural countries. Email: joycecheah@uum.edu.my

Azlina Kamaruddin is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Communication at School of Multimedia Technology and Communication, College of Arts and Science, Universiti Utara Malaysia. Her research interests focus on persuasive communication and qualitative research. Email: lyna@uum.edu.my

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