

# Word-of-mouth communication in marketing: An exploratory study of motivations behind opinion leadership and opinion seeking

Zeynep Özdamar Ertekin

*İzmir University of Economics, Department of Business Administration*

*35330 Balçova-İzmir, Turkey*

*e-mail: ertekin.zeynep@std.izmirekonomi.edu.tr*

Deniz Atik

*İzmir University of Economics, Department of Business Administration*

*35330 Balçova-İzmir, Turkey*

*e-mail: deniz.atik@ieu.edu.tr*

## Abstract

With a qualitative approach, this research aims to gain a deeper understanding of the motivations behind both opinion leadership and opinion seeking, in a non-western context. Findings show that no one is exclusively an opinion leader or a seeker and that both opinion leaders and seekers are motivated by deeper psychological needs, which may have a critical role in theory and practice. In addition to previously identified motivations and characteristics of opinion leaders and opinion seekers, new dimensions have been revealed. The diversity of motivations identified in this study suggests that managers must consider a broad range of reasons and deeper psychological needs that lead consumers to engage in word-of-mouth communication. Future research guidelines are provided which we hope will inspire additional empirical work.

*Key words:* Opinion leadership; Opinion seeking; Word-of-mouth; Motivation; Qualitative research.

## 1. Introduction

Consumers often use informal or social sources when they seek information as they are inclined to trust the opinions of others more than they trust formal marketing sources (Flynn et al., 1996). Therefore, word-of-mouth communication and interpersonal influence have been considered to be important topics of study in consumer and marketing research

(Christiansen and Tax, 2000; Bertrandias and Goldsmith, 2006). Opinion leadership is regarded as a critical determinant of word-of-mouth communication (Childers, 1986) and due to its influential role in the market it has received considerable attention of marketing scholars (Venkatraman, 1989; Coulter et al., 2002; Bertrandias and Goldsmith, 2006).

Earlier studies on opinion leadership have focused on identifying opinion leaders, development and refinement of measurement scales (King and Summers, 1970; Childers, 1986; Flynn et al., 1996), and importance of their role in various fields such as fashion (Goldsmith and Clark, 2008), political science, and public relations. Others have highlighted demographic and social characteristics of opinion leaders (Venkatraman, 1990), their role in diffusion of innovations (Valente, 1996; Coulter et al., 2002; Iyengar et al., 2011; van Eck et al., 2011), and their role as information distributors (Feick and Price, 1987). Most of these earlier studies have concentrated on behavioural aspects of opinion leaders while studies on what drives opinion leadership are still scarce (Venkatraman, 1990). Therefore, this research seeks to gain a deeper understanding of the motivations behind opinion leadership, exploring the reasons why people share information.

Product, self, message, and other involvement (Dichter, 1966) have been given as some of the reasons for opinion leadership. Enduring product involvement has been assumed to drive opinion leadership, which in turn leads to gaining knowledge, information sharing, and exerting influence (Venkatraman, 1990). However, enduring involvement by itself may not be able to explain the tendency to share information and to influence others, and opinion leaders can be motivated by deeper psychological influences related to their social needs (Bertrandias and Goldsmith, 2006). Goldsmith and Clark (2008) furthermore stress that little attention has been paid to studying the motivational psychology of both opinion leadership and opinion seeking.

Even though some of the prior studies address psychological motivations for opinion leadership and opinion seeking, the authors use a single product category (fashion clothing). Furthermore, they focus only on few personality constructs, such as consumers' need for uniqueness and attention to social comparison information (Bertrandias and Goldsmith, 2006), and status consumption and role-relaxed consumption (Goldsmith and Clark, 2008). Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) explain the motives of consumers who share their opinions online and later Goldsmith and Horowitz (2006) complement their study by measuring consumer motivations for online opinion seeking. However, none of the prior studies provide a comprehensive framework to motivations behind both opinion leadership and opinion seeking.

Following a grounded theory approach (see Carson et al., 2001), the present exploratory research aims to fill this gap in literature by shedding light to further dynamics for the motivations of both opinion leadership and opinion seeking, investigating characteristics of opinion leaders, why they

engage in information sharing, and what kind of benefits they get from it. Since opinion leaders can also be opinion seekers, to complement our findings, we further examine the reasons behind opinion seeking. In this regard, the study first gives an overview of the literature on opinion leadership and characteristics of opinion leaders. It then highlights the factors influencing opinion leadership and opinion seeking.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. *Definitions of opinion leadership and opinion seeking*

Opinion leadership has been defined in different ways. Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) originally define opinion leaders as “individuals who are likely to influence other persons in their immediate environment.” Rogers defines it as the “degree to which an individual is able to informally influence other individuals' attitudes or overt behaviour in a desired way with relative frequency” (Rogers, 1995: 27). Flynn and colleagues (1996) apply the concept to marketing by stating that “opinion leadership occurs when individuals try to influence the purchasing behaviour of other consumers in specific product fields” (Flynn et al., 1996: 138).

Opinion leadership has taken an important place in diffusion of innovation (Menzel and Katz, 1955; Rogers, 1995; Valente, 1996) and marketing literatures (Coulter et al., 2002; Goldsmith and Clark, 2008). It is often associated with influence (Flynn et al., 1996) and information sharing (King and Summers, 1970). It can also be regarded as social communication between opinion givers and opinion seekers as interpersonal communication refers to an exchange of information between individuals (King and Summers, 1970). We find King and Summers' (1970) perspective of opinion leadership relevant for our study, as it is concerned with information sharing dimension of opinion leadership.

Compared to opinion leadership, opinion seeking is a more recent concept. Opinion seekers have been defined as “individuals who sought information or opinions from interpersonal sources in order to find out about and evaluate products, services, current affairs, or other areas of interest” (Feick et al., 1986). They seek information and advice from opinion leaders as they do not have the same interest in and knowledge of the product category (Flynn et al., 1996).

Feick and colleagues (1986) suggest an overlap between opinion giving and seeking. According to them, opinion seekers both seek and diffuse market information and therefore, opinion seekers, like opinion leaders, are important links in the flow of market information. Similarly, opinion leaders not only give advice and information, they also seek it to learn more (Goldsmith and Clark, 2008). Several studies have pointed at this overlap and relation between opinion leadership and opinion seeking (Flynn et al., 1996; Bertrandias and Goldsmith, 2006; Goldsmith and Clark, 2008).

Therefore, we include both of these concepts in our study rather than investigating one.

Traditional perspective on opinion leadership is based on Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1955) model of two-step flow of communication, which proposes that small group of influencers spread information, as they can influence the opinions of a large number of people. However, the process is not as clear, since it can be multi-step rather than two-step flow (Menzel and Katz, 1955). Moreover, two-way transfer of information and influence between opinion leadership and information seeking can be reciprocal as opinion leaders also tend to be information seekers (Reynolds and Darden, 1971). More recently, Watts and Dodds (2007) argue that rather than influentials, interaction among a group of easily influenced individuals drive influence.

Lately, new terminologies have been introduced in marketing literature such as innovator, market maven (Feick and Price, 1987), and influential (Keller and Berry, 2003). The innovator, the opinion leader, and the market maven are considered to be different types of influential consumers (Clark and Goldsmith, 2005), who all have a tendency to spread information in the marketplace. Innovators are defined as consumers who adopt products earlier than others (Rogers, 1995). Compared to innovators and opinion leaders, market maven concept is relatively recent in literature. Domain-specific opinion leaders and innovators are experts and influential in a specific category, in which they are perceived to be knowledgeable, whereas market mavens are influential across a broad range of products or subjects (Feick and Price, 1987; Flynn et al. 1996; Geissler and Edison, 2005). Many people are sources of information in specific fields; however, research shows that only about 10% can be thought of as general opinion leaders (Keller and Berry, 2003). The purpose of our study is not to compare these various terminologies in literature but we find it relevant to highlight the differences in order to better understand the characteristics and motivations of opinion leaders.

## *2.2. Characteristics of opinion leaders*

Opinion leaders are a major source of word-of-mouth communication, as they frequently communicate with others. They are regarded as valuable information sources because they have knowledge and expertise that will guide the decision making of opinion seekers (Feick et al., 1986; Feick and Price, 1987; Venkatraman, 1989; Bertrandias and Goldsmith, 2006). They are trusted to be credible as they share both positive and negative information (Schiffman and Kanuk, 1991). Self-confidence has also been shown among the characteristics of opinion leaders because when an individual has self-confidence, there is less need for him or her to seek information from others (Reynolds and Darden, 1971).

Another characteristic of opinion leaders is interpersonal influence, which can be related to knowledge and expertise acquired from being involved with the product (Feick and Price, 1987; Venkatraman, 1989, 1990). Opinion leaders exert both normative and informational influence (Van Eck et al., 2011). Informational influence is the tendency to accept information from others. Opinion leaders can directly influence other consumers by giving them advice about products (Flynn et al., 1996). Normative influence, on the other hand, is the tendency to conform to the expectations of others (Burnkrant and Cousineau, 1975). Normative opinion leaders influence decision-making processes of the consumers by exerting social pressure and support (Glock and Nicosia, 1964). Normative influence is less important to opinion leaders than it is for seekers (Van Eck et al., 2011).

Opinion leaders are often socially active and interconnected in their social system (Rogers, 1995). They act as role models whose behaviours can be imitated by others (Valente and Davis, 1999). They typically have higher status, education, and social standing (Venkatraman, 1989). Consequently, their influence can be based on their social standing and informal status as highly informed, respected, and connected individuals (Watts and Dodds, 2007). Furthermore, the degree of their influence also depends on their credibility and trustworthiness (Valente and Davis, 1999).

Opinion leaders tend to be more homophilous than heterophilous with other members of their social system (Rogers, 1995) because people are more likely to be influenced by other people who have similar values and beliefs to themselves (Venkatraman, 1989). Furthermore, despite their tendency to innovate and stimulate change, they are likely to be more conformist and more attentive to social cues compared to the rest of the population (Bertrandias and Goldsmith, 2006). On the other hand, they also need to be differentiated from others (Goldsmith and Clark, 2008). Therefore, they have a tendency to use products to define, enhance, and express their social and personal identity (Kestler, 2010).

Influential opinion leaders can accelerate or block the adoption of a product (Goldenberg et al., 2009; Van Eck et al., 2011). In addition to having a more central network position, they possess more accurate knowledge about a product and are more innovative (Feick and Price, 1987; Venkatraman, 1989; Van Eck et al., 2011). Moreover, opinion leaders tend to be early adopters and heavy users, and consequently they start influencing others sooner and more effectively than less connected people (Iyengar et al., 2011).

Findings of these earlier studies indicate that opinion leaders have a variety of different characteristics. We believe that understanding and investigating these characteristics will help us to gain a deeper insight of the motivations behind opinion leadership and opinion seeking.

### 2.3. *Motivations of opinion leaders and opinion seekers*

Opinion leaders do not have ulterior motives or monetary incentives for giving or sharing information as they are not being paid for it. However, they may be getting some personal benefits from engaging in the information exchange such as feeling valued (Fitzmaurice and Comegys, 2006).

Product involvement has been the most emphasized motivation behind opinion leadership (Ditcher, 1966; Feick and Price, 1987; Bristor, 1990; Venkatraman, 1990). People may want to talk about a product to express their satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Enduring involvement is the "on-going concern with a product that transcends situational influences" (Richins and Bloch, 1986: 280). Consumers who are low on enduring involvement are less likely to seek information on a continuous basis, engage in product related conversations, and buy new products earlier than others (Venkatraman, 1990). Involvement can also be self, message, or other related (Ditcher, 1966). Reducing post purchase dissonance, gaining attention or status, claiming superiority and expertise, feeling the power of convincing others, are examples of self-involvement motivations (Schiffman and Kanuk, 1991). Opinion leaders are also involved in and use product related conversations as a means for expressing friendship (Ditcher, 1966).

Another motivation highlighted in literature has been the need for uniqueness (Clark and Goldsmith, 2005; Bertrandias and Goldsmith, 2006; Goldsmith and Clark, 2008), which can explain their desire to be regarded as a leader in the specific product group (Clark and Goldsmith, 2005). The knowledge, expertise, and interest they have in a particular product class enable them to fulfill this need and stand out in groups by giving advice (Bertrandias, and Goldsmith, 2006). Anxiety reduction and identification with group standards are the other factors that are thought to motivate opinion leadership (Bristor, 1990).

If we consider opinion leaders and opinion seekers as two parties involved in interpersonal information exchange, it may not be sufficient to consider only the motives for opinion leadership. Motives for opinion seeking include gaining knowledge (Schiffman and Kanuk, 1991), risk reduction, and timesaving (Bristor, 1990). Individuals can also seek information and advice from a group to understand their values and beliefs, in order to become part of the group, comply with its norms (Bertrandias and Goldsmith, 2006), and gain approval and acceptance (Schiffman and Kanuk, 1991). Attending to other people's opinions and behaviours and desire for status are identified as drivers for both opinion leadership and opinion seeking for fashion (Goldsmith and Clark, 2008).

Consumers also give and seek opinions online. Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) identify five categories of eWOM communication motives, which are obtaining buying-related information, social orientation through information, community motive, remuneration, and to learn how a product is

to be consumed. Goldsmith and Horowitz (2006)'s study further reveals that consumers seek the opinions of others online to reduce their risk, to secure lower prices, and to get pre-purchase information easily.

Table 1 provides a summary of the literature on characteristics of opinion leaders, motivations for opinion seeking, and motivations for opinion leadership.

**Table 1**  
Summary of the Literature

<b>Characteristics of Opinion Leaders</b>	<b>Motivations for Opinion Seeking</b>	<b>Motivations for Opinion Leadership</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge power (Feick et al. 1986)</li> <li>• Expert power (Feick et al. 1986; Feick and Price 1987; Venkatraman 1989)</li> <li>• Involvement (Feick and Price 1987; Venkatraman 1989)</li> <li>• Credible and objective (Schiffman and Kanuk 1991; Valente and Davis 1999)</li> <li>• Trustworthy – emphasizing credibility based on knowledge and expertise (Valente and Davis 1999)</li> <li>• Interpersonal Influence (Venkatraman 1990)</li> <li>• Socially active and interconnected (Rogers 1995)</li> <li>• Innovative (Feick and Price 1987; Venkatraman 1989)</li> <li>• Homophilious with other members (Venkatraman 1989; Rogers 1995)</li> <li>• Self-confidence (Reynolds and Darden 1971).</li> <li>• Conformist and attentive to social cues (Bertrandias and Goldsmith 2006)</li> <li>• Physical proximity (Schiffman and Kanuk 1991)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gaining knowledge (Schiffman and Kanuk 1991; Flynn et al. 1996)</li> <li>• Gaining expertise (Schiffman and Kanuk 1991; Flynn et al. 1996)</li> <li>• Reducing risk of uncertainty (Bristor 1990)</li> <li>• Time saving (Bristor 1990)</li> <li>• Belonging to a group (Bertrandias and Goldsmith 2006)</li> <li>• Gaining approval and acceptance (Schiffman and Kanuk 1991)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Philanthropy: other involvement (Ditcher 1966); being helpful (Feick and Price 1987)</li> <li>• Need for power (Schiffman and Kanuk 1991).</li> <li>• Need for Uniqueness (Clark and Goldsmith 2005; Bertrandias and Goldsmith 2006; Goldsmith and Clark 2008)</li> <li>• Product Involvement (Ditcher 1966; Feick and Price 1987; Bristor 1990; Venkatraman 1990)</li> <li>• Anxiety reduction (Bristor 1990; Bertrandias and Goldsmith 2006)</li> <li>• Reduce post purchase dissonance (Schiffman and Kanuk 1991)</li> <li>• Identifying with group standards (Bristor 1990; Bertrandias and Goldsmith, 2006)</li> </ul>

Our literature review shows that opinion leadership is not a new construct and has been examined by a significant body of research. However, most of the prior studies carried out in this area have focused on identifying opinion leaders and defining their characteristics, and they were mostly conducted in Western contexts. Studies on what drives opinion

leadership is still limited (Goldsmith and Clark, 2008), and the existing ones either consider motives of opinion leaders or seekers. Therefore, the main purpose of our study is to shed further light on motivations of both opinion leadership and opinion seeking, in a non-western context.

### 3. Methodology

Considering the exploratory nature of this study, our objective was not to quantify or generalize the findings but to obtain rich data (Mariampolski, 2001). Therefore, we used a qualitative approach in order to gain insight and understand further dynamics on why people like sharing information.

#### 3.1. *Research context and sampling*

Research was carried out in a non-western context, with university students living in Izmir, Turkey, which is categorized as one of the emerging markets by FTSE (2010). One of our reasons for conducting research in an emerging market is that assumptions and theories developed in high income, industrialized Western countries may not be applicable across all cultures, since emerging markets can have different cultural values (Burgess and Steenkamp, 2006). For instance, respect for tradition, security, obedience, social power, authority, and social and relational identities are important in emerging market cultures (Burgess and Steenkamp, 2006). In fact, our findings reflect some of these differences. Furthermore, Hofstede's study (2003) reveals that Turkey is less individualistic and has a high uncertainty avoidance score. Thus, people may be more likely to seek consensus and advice of others.

University students were selected as a sampling group, as young people place special emphasis on word-of-mouth communication (Bertrandias and Goldsmith, 2006), and they make up a large portion of Generation Y, which is a desirable market segment due to its role in the consumption process. They represent both present and future buying power because of the influence they have on their parents' choices. Furthermore, university students have a tendency to be trendsetters and give shopping a high priority (Kinley et al., 2010). They also extensively use technology and engage in multiple media activities. Besides, they are more brand conscious compared to previous generations (Kinley et al., 2010). Considering the above mentioned factors and the critical role of word-of-mouth communication among youth, we found it relevant to conduct our research with university students. 127 students took part in the research project, among which, 54 were males and 73 were females. The age of the sample group ranged from 20 to 26.

#### 3.2. *Data collection*

We collected student essays, answering open-ended questions, which often have a less biasing influence on response compared to structured

questions (Malhotra, 2004). Essays were collected in Spring 2011, during class time. In each class, there were around 25 students who were given 30 to 45 minutes to complete the essays, which were anonymous, letting the participants to express themselves freely. Students were not allowed to talk among each other but they were able to ask questions to the researchers who were present throughout the study. Answers to each question were around half a page long. Table 2 presents the open-ended questions included in the study.

**Table 2**  
Open-ended Questions

Section	Questions
<b>A. Opinion Leadership</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Do people around you seek your opinion? If any, please state if they consult you on any specific areas or topics?</li> <li>2. What are the characteristics you possess which you believe encourage others to consult you?</li> <li>3. How does it make you feel sharing your opinions with others? What are your motivations behind sharing information? Please elaborate your answer by giving examples.</li> </ol>
<b>B. Opinion Seeking</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Do you often consult others? If any, please state if you seek information or advice on any specific areas or topics.</li> <li>2. What motivates you to seek opinion of others? Elaborate your answer by giving examples.</li> <li>3. What characteristics do you look for in people that you seek opinions from?</li> </ol>

Data collection, sampling and analysis continued until information from respondents became repetitive and no themes were emerging from the analysis (Carson et al., 2001).

### *3.3. Data analysis and interpretation*

Following a grounded theory approach (see Carson et al., 2001), we started our analysis as soon as we started collecting the data. We did not try to impose a prior framework on respondents' replies; instead categories were built while the data was being collected. Following the recommended steps by Strauss and Corbin (1998), we developed the categories through an

iterative process, examining their fit to the responses, and then modifying the categories or their definitions.

We started categorization in the initial stages of the analysis (open coding) and continued throughout the study. We then found connections between codes and sorted them into higher level categories (axial coding). We identified unified themes and grouped previously identified categories into more general classes (selective coding). For example, for their motivations behind sharing information (selective coding), various respondents talked about being useful to others, helping others, being happy to help others and to see them happy, and feeling guilty if not help others (open coding), all of which we grouped under “philanthropy” as a category (axial coding).

Following guidelines provided by Spiggle (1994), we constantly compared emerging themes and explored similarities and differences between responses. Iterations allowed us to refine the concepts and draw out theoretical implications. It also enabled us to verify our findings. Furthermore, in order to enhance the reliability and integrity of our findings, we conducted triangulation of researchers and sources (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Wallendorf and Belk, 1989). Triangulation has also been used to increase validity and to reduce bias and error (Mariampolski, 2001). Developing interpretations from several different informants, discussing our classification and conclusions with our peers, and constantly comparing our findings with existing theories, facilitated the credibility and integrity of our interpretations. We also took into account the cases that disconfirm with our emerging analysis. Using negative case analysis is also recommended to construct a credible interpretation of data (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

To facilitate the analysis process we kept a spreadsheet summarizing and integrating the data. After rounds of re-reading and discussing the responses, and re-examining the data to refine the categories, we finalized our main categories, among which there can still be overlapping concepts. Some of these constructs represented predefined themes or ideas, whereas others emerged from the analysis itself.

#### 4. Findings

Results of the analysis show that opinion leadership is more likely to be domain-specific as majority of the participants specified an area or few areas for opinion sharing and seeking. The findings highlight that participants both share and seek information mostly regarding clothing and technological products. Besides, more than half of the participants stressed that they consult and share information regarding social relations such as the relations they have with their boyfriends and girlfriends. Education is another category cited quite frequently possibly because the research was carried out with university students. Finally, participants also consult each

other regarding social and leisure activities such as sports, music, travel, and dining out.

Further analysis of the results reveals that the categories of opinion leadership vary depending on gender. Male participants tend to be opinion leaders mainly on technological products and issues, and on social relations whereas, females are opinion leaders mainly on clothing, shopping, and social relations. On the other hand, main categories of opinion seeking did not vary depending on gender. Both male and female participants seek opinion of others mainly on education and social relations.

Female (20): I am a very indecisive person. Therefore, I feel the need to ask the opinions of others almost on every issue and topic.

Only a small number of the participants mentioned that they seek opinion of others almost on every issue and topic. Similarly, a few of them pointed out that, people consult them on everything. Apart from few exceptions, in most of the replies, both opinion sharing and seeking were related to specific areas. This finding supports Keller and Berry's (2003) prior estimate that only a small percentage (about 10%) of the individuals can be thought of as general opinion leaders.

Female (22): Regarding make-up and diet, I consult my friend who is a model. When I need to buy clothes, I ask my sister's opinion because everyone admires her clothes. My friends ask my opinion on photography because of my interest in that area. They also consult me on tennis since I have been playing tennis for the last ten years.

Furthermore, the findings demonstrate that people can be opinion seekers and leaders at the same time, which supports Feick and colleagues suggestion (1986) that there is an overlap between opinion giving and seeking. A small number of the participants specified that they both share and seek information and opinion on the same area or product category, mainly due to their involvement and interest in that area. On the other hand, majority of the replies revealed that an opinion leader in one area may become an opinion seeker in another. These findings support Reynolds and Darden's (1971) suggestion that influence and transfer of information is often two-way and no one is exclusively an opinion leader or a seeker.

Main themes that emerged under the findings are presented in the following three sections: characteristics of opinion leaders, motivations for opinion seeking, and motivations for opinion leadership. Even though the main concern of our study is to identify drivers of opinion leadership and opinion seeking, we also examined the characteristics of opinion leaders in order to better understand their motivations.

#### *4.1. Characteristics of opinion leaders*

The leading characteristics of opinion leaders derived from our findings are knowledge and expert power, trustworthiness, high involvement, credibility, emotional proximity, good taste, and rationality.

Majority of the participants stressed that having knowledge and expertise are the most desired characteristics both when sharing and seeking opinion and information, which supports prior studies (e.g. Feick et al., 1986).

Male (22): Due to my interest and involvement with technological products, I follow the latest products and developments in the market, and therefore, have extensive knowledge in this regard. As people are aware of this fact, they consult me when they need information on these products.

Knowledge and expertise were often related to involvement with the subject of interest and high involvement was specified as one of the important characteristics of opinion leaders.

Male (25): Being trustworthy is very important. Even when someone has a lot of knowledge on the issue, if they cannot be trusted, I will not ask their opinion.

Trustworthiness was stressed as one of the most desired characteristics of opinion leaders, which was mainly associated with credibility and being objective in previous literature (Valente and Davis, 1999). However, the participant above emphasizes the trustworthiness of the person in a broader sense, like having confidence in the person him/herself with an emphasis on personal characteristics. Thus, having knowledge and expertise on a topic may not be enough if the person is not trustworthy.

Female (21): When I seek opinion, I choose people who I believe will tell me everything honestly. Having an objective perspective is also important. For instance, when I try something on, I want them to tell me if it really looks good or bad.

Moreover, the importance of being credible and objective was emphasized separately, supporting earlier studies which mentioned that opinion leaders are trusted to be credible as they share both positive and negative information (Schiffman and Kanuk, 1991).

Male (22): Generally, I consult my close friends and family. For instance, regarding clothing, opinions of my close friends are important. I also prefer to ask my friends whose styles and choices I appreciate.

Affiliation and emotional proximity were also underlined to be desired attributes by some of the participants, especially when seeking opinions of others. According to these participants, only ones who are emotionally close to them can know their likes and dislikes and suggest what is for their best interest. Few even highlighted that they only trust the opinions of their family, especially regarding critical issues. Earlier studies mentioned importance of physical proximity (Schiffman and Kanuk, 1991), rather than emotional proximity.

Female (22): My friends and family ask my opinion because they appreciate my taste and know that I follow fashion.

A number of participants specified having good taste as an important attribute, especially if the topic is concerning clothing and shopping. This was not mentioned in literature as a characteristic of opinion leaders.

Male (22): I believe that I am a good listener and have the ability to patiently listen to people. This is the main reason why people around me share their problems with me and seek my opinion.

Communication skills were found to be of importance for some, both when sharing and seeking opinion and information. The findings showed that for product specific opinion leadership this often meant being persuasive, which was highlighted as one of the characteristics of influential people in prior research (Goldenberg et al., 2009). Whereas, for relationship related opinion leadership, communication skills mostly involved being a good listener, which was not mentioned in earlier studies.

Even though prior studies underlined similarity of opinion leaders to those who seek their opinion (e.g. Rogers, 1995), only a few of the participants stressed opinion leaders to be similar to them in terms of values, beliefs, and social status. Interestingly, there were a few of them who believed that opinion leaders should have different perspectives.

Female (23): When I need a different perspective, I seek opinion of people who are able to think in a different way, so that they can show me the things I cannot think of. They need to have a different view or perspective.

Furthermore, other characteristics of opinion leaders that were mentioned less frequently in the findings but can be of importance in understanding opinion leadership were being empathetic, investigative, patient, and helpful. Success of prior advice and decisions was also pointed out occasionally.

Further analysis of the data showed that characteristics of opinion leaders and their relative importance varied across different products, services and issues. For instance, in case of clothing and shopping having good taste became prominent followed by knowledge power, high involvement, and expert power. Whereas, for technological products and issues, the most emphasized characteristics were high involvement and knowledge power. When the topic is education, expert power and knowledge power were stated as most important. In case of relationship and personal issues, trustworthiness, credibility, and being a good listener, became significant.

#### *4.2. Motivations for opinion seeking*

Our findings suggest that motivations for opinion seeking can be grouped under three main categories: lack of knowledge and expertise, reducing risk of uncertainty, and confirmation of own opinions and decisions. Sharing and socialising, which was less mentioned can also be regarded as another category. Prior reasons given for opinion seeking, such as saving time (Bristor, 1990) and belonging to a group (Bertrandias and Goldsmith, 2006), were less emphasized in the data.

Female (21): As I do not have a lot of knowledge on electrical appliances, I ask the advice of people who are knowledgeable on this issue

in order to make the right decision. For example, as computers are expensive, before buying one, you need to do a lot of research to gather information. However, as it is not one of my areas of interest, I prefer to ask someone with knowledge and expertise.

According to the findings, the most important reason for opinion seeking is the lack of knowledge and expertise, which is in line with earlier studies (e.g. Flynn et al., 1996). Almost half of the informants specified that they seek opinion of others when they need to gain further knowledge or expertise.

Male (22): I cannot always be sure if my decisions are correct. Therefore, I ask the opinion of others not to make a wrong decision. Besides, when someone else has the same opinion, I feel better about making that decision.

The second important reason for opinion seeking is to reduce the risk of uncertainty, which is among the motivations for opinion seeking given in literature (Schiffman and Kanuk, 1991). Many of the respondents mentioned that they want to get the opinion of others when they are uncertain or indecisive in order to reduce the perceived risk of their decision.

Female (22): I consult my family because getting their approval before I give my final decision is assuring. My best friends' opinions are also important for me. Even if I like to make my own decisions, I still want to hear that they agree with me and they support me.

Similarly, some participants highlighted that they seek the opinion of others to confirm their own decisions. Different from literature (Schiffman and Kanuk, 1991), relatively fewer of them stressed that attending to others' opinions for gaining approval is critical for them.

Female (22): Good or bad, I share everything with my friends and family because I like talking and communicating. Besides, sharing my experiences and problems with someone helps me to relax.

The last category, which is sharing, was only mentioned by few participants. Their intention was neither to gain knowledge nor to be confirmed or approved. Their motive was to share their feeling with others and to socialise.

Analysis of the findings further reveals that the motivations for opinion seeking and their relative importance differed for some of the main product and service categories and issues. Reducing risk of uncertainty became prominent in case of both clothing and social relations, whereas lack of knowledge and expertise was stated as the main motivation for technological products and issues, and education.

Results also show that motivations for opinion seeking can differ between females and males. For both genders, reducing risk of uncertainty is the main reason to seek opinion of others. The second main motivation is lack of knowledge and expertise for men, whereas it is confirmation of own opinions and decisions for women.

### 4.3. *Motivations for opinion leadership*

Motivations for opinion leadership derived from the findings can be grouped under five main categories: Enhancing self-confidence, philanthropy, need for power, need for affiliation, and need for uniqueness. Mutual learning can also be considered as another category, but it was less emphasized. Some of these categories represent earlier themes, whereas others emerged from the analysis.

Male (22): Being the person to be consulted in the group increases my self-confidence and makes me happy. When people appreciate my choices, it boosts my self-esteem.

Female (22): When my friends specifically seek my advice within a group of friends, I feel proud. It shows that my decisions and suggestions are important for them. I also feel proud when my family seeks my advice, despite the fact that I am much younger than them.

The biggest category we observed to be an important motivation for opinion leaders for sharing information is enhancing self-confidence. Almost half of the participants mentioned how being consulted by others enhances their self-confidence. Furthermore, they stressed that they felt proud and happy to be trusted by their friends and family. Therefore, opinion leadership can be regarded as a way to boost self-confidence. Even though self confidence has been related to opinion leadership (Reynolds and Darden, 1971) in literature and Engel, Blackwell and Miniard (1993) identified self-enhancement as one of the motives for WOM communication behaviour, it was less emphasized as an important motivation of opinion leadership. This is a critical finding of this study, shedding further light to the motivational psychology of opinion leadership.

Male (22): What you feel when you help other people is same as what I feel when I share my opinions with others. For example, when I recommend a product to a friend and he or she buys it and is satisfied with it, it makes me happy.

Female (22): It always feels good to help someone. If the person who consults me and benefits from my advice then my conscious is clear and I feel happy.

In this study, philanthropy comes to be the next biggest motivation of opinion leadership. As per the examples above, almost one third of the participants stated that they get happy by helping others. Some of the earlier studies also addressed this need to express friendship (Venkatraman, 1990) and being useful to others (Feick and Price, 1987).

Male (22): Being able to convince people and show them the right way makes me feel important. For example, when they are buying something that they do not need, if I can convince them and change their mind, I feel good.

Female (22): When people ask my opinion I feel like a leader. When they need my advice on the topics that I am interested in, it shows how good I am on those issues.

Need for power comes to be another important motivation behind opinion leadership. Almost one third of the participants stressed that they feel important when people consult them. Furthermore, they highlighted that they enjoy being consulted and feel good when they convince others. It is like a victory. In literature, power of convincing others was also associated with self-involvement (Schiffman and Kanuk, 1991).

Female (21): If my family consults me when buying something for the house and listens to my opinion, I feel more like a member of the family and feel valued.

Female (20): I think that giving advice and sharing my opinions with others makes me more social and enables me to have more friends. For instance, I give a lot of advice to people especially with regards to shopping. Therefore, my friends often want to go to shopping with me.

Another category is the need for affiliation. Some of the participants underlined that sharing opinions with others help them to feel part of the group and enable them to make stronger connections. It helps them to socialize and make friends. Moreover, a number of them stated that they feel valued when others consult them and few even stated that they feel be loved. Prior research also pointed out this need of belonging to a group (Bertrandias and Goldsmith, 2006); however, it was mostly stated as a motivational driver of opinion seeking rather than opinion leadership.

Male (21): Among everyone, if my friends choose to ask my opinion on what they will wear, it means that I stand out with what I wear, which makes me feel special.

Female (22): If people need my advice on issues related to my areas of interest, such as fashion, it proves that I am an expert on that topic. This makes me feel unique and special.

Need for uniqueness, which was emphasized in some of the earlier studies (Clark and Goldsmith, 2005; Bertrandias and Goldsmith, 2006), is also supported by our findings. Some of these participants highlighted that they feel special and unique when people prefer to ask their opinion. Their knowledge, expertise, and interest in a specific product domain enable them to stand out in groups by giving advice which in return can fulfill this need for uniqueness.

Female (21): I also make better decisions when I share my opinions with others as we both learn something and support each other. I also gain experience.

Apart from these main motivations behind sharing opinions, several participants pointed out that they consider sharing information and opinions with others as mutual learning since it enables them to gain experience and knowledge. Few also specified that when people consult them they get

motivated to follow trends and search for more information. Thus, sharing information can be beneficial to both sides, triggering more curiosity and need for research on the side of the opinion leader.

Male (21): When I share my opinions with others I feel be loved, respected, valued and mature but most of all I feel happy for helping others. When people get relieved by sharing their problems with me, seeing them happy also makes me happy.

There was not always a clear distinction between these categories because there is not only one motivation behind sharing opinion. As the above respondent stated, it can generate many feelings, which indicates that motivations of opinion leaders can be complex. We also found overlapping nuances among the need to enhance self-confidence, need for power, and need for uniqueness.

Male (23): Sometimes, it can be boring to be consulted. For instance, being the first one that comes to mind regarding electronics and IT related problems can be tiresome.

Female (20): It can be annoying to give opinion on clothing all the time. Moreover, I do not like to see my friends wearing the same clothes like me.

Majority of the participants mentioned that they enjoy sharing their opinions. However, few of them (mostly men) underlined that they get bored and tired of being consulted all the time. This was mostly regarding the technological issues. Few also stated that they do not like to be imitated. So, they are actually not motivated to share information or opinion.

Further analysis of the findings revealed that motivating factors for opinion leadership and their relative importance did not vary significantly between different product and service categories, and issues. For instance, when we consider the most stated categories of clothing, technological products and issues, social relations, and education, the most emphasized motivations in each were enhancing self-confidence and philanthropy.

Analysis of the results also show that motivations for opinion leadership can differ based on gender. Philanthropy and need for uniqueness are the main motivation for women participants followed by need for power. In case of men, need for power and philanthropy are the main motivations followed by enhancing self-confidence.

Table 3 presents a summary of our findings for the characteristics of opinion leaders, motivations behind opinion leadership and opinion seeking.

**Table 3**  
Highlights of the findings

	<b>Characteristics of Opinion Leaders</b>	<b>Motivations for Opinion Seeking</b>	<b>Motivations for Opinion Leadership</b>
<b>Constructs emphasized in literature and confirmed by our findings:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge power (Feick et al. 1986)</li> <li>• Expert power (Feick et al. 1986; Feick and Price 1987; Venkatraman 1989)</li> <li>• Involvement (Feick and Price 1987; Venkatraman 1989)</li> <li>• Credible (Schiffman and Kanuk 1991; Valente and Davis 1999) and objective</li> <li>• Trustworthy – emphasizing credibility (Valente and Davis 1999)</li> <li>• Interpersonal Influence (Venkatraman 1990)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gaining knowledge (Schiffman and Kanuk 1991; Flynn et al. 1996)</li> <li>• Gaining expertise (Schiffman and Kanuk 1991; Flynn et al. 1996)</li> <li>• Reducing risk of uncertainty (Bristor 1990)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Philanthropy – other involvement – (Ditcher 1966); –being helpful – (Feick and Price 1987)</li> <li>• Need for power (Schiffman and Kanuk 1991).</li> <li>• Need for Uniqueness (Clark and Goldsmith 2005; Bertrandias and Goldsmith 2006; Goldsmith and Clark 2008)</li> <li>• To enhance self-confidence (Engel et al. 1993)</li> </ul>
<b>New constructs emphasized in our findings:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trustworthy – emphasizing personality characteristics.</li> <li>• Emotional proximity</li> <li>• Good taste</li> <li>• Good listener</li> <li>• Different background than the opinion seeker (so the gain can be better)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confirmation of their own opinions and decisions</li> <li>• Sharing feelings and Socialising</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Need for affiliation</li> <li>• Mutual learning</li> <li>• Not motivated to share opinions because it becomes tiresome or they are being imitated.</li> </ul>

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

Although many empirical studies examined opinion leadership, vast majority of them has been directed at identifying opinion leaders and defining their characteristics. Motivations of opinion leadership and opinion seeking are less studied, and due to their quantitative nature, those studies mainly concentrated on few constructs. With this exploratory research, we offer insight on further characteristics and motivations behind opinion leadership and opinion seeking.

Our findings support earlier studies that opinion leadership is largely domain specific. This indicates that a person is less likely to be an opinion leader in all subjects. Instead, different individuals are regarded to be opinion leaders in different domains. Results of the study also reveal that opinion leadership and opinion seeking are overlapping, which is in line with prior studies (Flynn et al., 1996; Bertrandias and Goldsmith, 2006; Goldsmith and Clark, 2008). Therefore, it is unlikely for someone to be exclusively an opinion leader or an opinion seeker. Furthermore, this two-way transfer of information may occur between opinion leaders in the same

or different product categories. However, according to our findings, it is more likely for a person to be an opinion leader in one category and a seeker in another.

We also examine the characteristics of opinion leaders in order to understand their motivations better. Some of the characteristics identified are consistent with earlier studies such as higher knowledge, expertise, involvement, and credibility. However, additional attributes are also observed, among which are trustworthiness of the person (apart from his/her credibility based on knowledge and expertise), emotional proximity, having good taste, and being a good listener.

Our findings confirm that consumers engage in opinion leadership and opinion seeking for different reasons. As summarized in Table 3, some of these reasons complement earlier themes, whereas others are less or not mentioned in literature. The main motivations for sharing information which are underlined in prior studies and confirmed by our findings are; philanthropy, need for uniqueness, and need for power. Even though product involvement has been recognised as the most important driver of opinion leadership in literature (Venkatraman, 1990), it is not revealed as much in our results. Instead, other motivations are found to play a greater role such as enhancing self-confidence, need for affiliation, and mutual learning.

Furthermore, some people who are consulted for their opinions due to their expertise of the topic may be unwilling opinion leaders. They share information not because they want or enjoy to, but because others are demanding for it. For some, constant sharing of information may become tiresome while others may not like being imitated for their consumption choices. Thus, to begin with, it would be wrong to assume that all opinion leaders are motivated to share information.

The main motivations for opinion seeking addressed in earlier studies and confirmed by our findings are; gaining knowledge and expertise, and reducing risk of uncertainty. Moreover, our results also show that some people seek opinion of others in order to confirm their own decisions or for getting together and socializing.

### *5.1. Implications, limitations, and future research*

Consumers today are more educated and self-reliant compared to earlier generations. They have less time available to evaluate the alternatives and make decisions. They want to gather as much information as possible about a product or a service as quickly as possible (van der Merwe and van Heerden, 2009). They regard personal influence, especially friends and family, as more credible and trustworthy than commercial sources of information (Flynn et al., 1996). All these factors increase the importance of word-of-mouth communication and opinion leaders in influencing the attitudes, opinions, and behaviours of other consumers (Goldsmith and Clark, 2008). Therefore, opinion leadership and opinion seeking will

continue to be important topics of study both in consumer behaviour and marketing fields.

In order to succeed today, businesses need to develop ways to connect with opinion leaders. However, opinion leadership, being shared by diverse set of individuals in a community, makes it difficult for companies to identify opinion leaders and consider them as a market segment. In order to target and influence opinion leaders and to motivate positive word-of-mouth communication, companies and marketing managers need to understand the motivations and circumstances why opinion leaders engage in information sharing. Moreover, taking into account the reciprocal effects of interpersonal communication and the importance of interaction among those who are influenced, companies also need to consider opinion seekers.

Our study highlights that both opinion leaders and seekers are motivated by deeper psychological needs, which may have a critical role in theory and practice. Although the results are context dependent, they enable the readers to gain a deeper understanding on opinion leadership phenomenon. The study is original in that it approaches opinion leadership and opinion seeking from a qualitative point of view. Some of our findings confirm generalizations based on earlier studies; however, we also present new constructs as highlighted in Table 3 and in discussion section, which we hope will inspire additional empirical work.

The findings can be useful for marketers who seek to manage WOM. The variety of motivations for opinion leadership and opinion seeking identified in this study suggest that managers must consider a broad range of reasons that lead consumers to engage in WOM. Knowing what motivates this behaviour would be useful in developing strategies to influence opinion leadership and seeking behaviours. Rather than trying to locate only opinion leaders to disseminate information, marketers can encourage both opinion leaders and seekers to create “buzz” for the company, product, or brand, by engaging in conversations and sharing opinions.

The findings can also provide guidance for future studies which aim to better understand the motives for giving and seeking opinions online. For example, Facebook phenomenon could be considered as a great example where consumers boost their self confidence through sharing information. They constantly post in their Facebook wall what they do, where they have been, their desires and dislikes and more. Trying to enhance self-confidence has been found in this study as one of the major motivations of opinion leadership. From practitioners view point, enabling online or physical social sharing environments where consumers can boost their self-confidence may help to diffuse the information on a faster pace.

On the other hand, our study mainly questions the information sharing dimension of opinion leadership. Future research may look at the innovative dimension in order to examine if the motivations differ. There were also conflicting findings concerning the proximity of opinion leaders with the

people they influence. Differing from the common belief, only a few of the participants stressed opinion leaders to be similar to them in terms of values, beliefs, and social status. Some thought that opinion leaders should have a different view so that they will provide a different, richer perspective. Future research can investigate if opinion leaders are similar or not to the people they influence.

Future research can also extend findings by carrying out research with other groups of consumers apart from university students. Carrying out the research with university students may have influenced the categories and motives of opinion leadership and opinion seeking. Moreover, since this study, was conducted in a non-western context, it may have slightly higher emphasis on collectivist values, social and relational identities, which have become important in emerging market cultures (Burgess and Steenkamp, 2006). This may have influenced why motivations such as philanthropy, need for affiliation, joy of sharing, and mutual learning come forward. Conducting this research in other cultural settings may enable to check if the same motivations are seen across different consumer groups and whether there are cultural differences.

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## Özet

### Pazarlamada kulaktan kulağa iletişim: Fikir liderliği ve fikir alma motivasyonları üzerine keşifsel bir araştırma

Bu çalışmanın amacı, nitel yöntemler aracılığıyla, hem fikir liderliğinin hem de fikir alma eğiliminin nedenlerini, batı-dışı bir ortamda derinlemesine incelemektir. Bulgular, fikir liderliğinin daha çok belli bir alanda olduğunu ve aynı bireyin hem fikir lideri hem de fikir alan olabileceğini göstermektedir. Çalışma ayrıca, fikir liderleri ve fikir alanların psikolojik ihtiyaçlarına ışık tutarak teori ve uygulama alanında katkı sağlamaktadır. Önceki çalışmalarda belirtilen özellik ve motivasyonlara ilaveten yeni boyutlar da bulunmuştur. Araştırma sonucunda ortaya çıkan motivasyonların çeşitliliği, yöneticilerin, tüketicileri kulaktan kulağa iletişime yönelten nedenleri ve psikolojik ihtiyaçlarını dikkate almaları gerektiğini göstermektedir. İleride yapılacak çalışmalar için verilen önerilerin yeni ampirik araştırmalara yol göstermesi beklenmektedir.

*Anahtar kelimeler:* Fikir liderliği; Fikir alma; Kulaktan kulağa iletişim; Motivasyon; Nitel araştırma.