

OPINION LEADERS: IMPACT OF FOLLOWERS SUSTAINABLE BEHAVIOURAL INTENTION AND MODERATING EFFECT OF PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIP WITH OPINION LEADER CHARACTERISTICS

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ABSTRACT

Social media marketing has evolved as a predominant way for marketers to interact with customers, which enables the marketers to reach the potential consumers through digital platforms using opinion leaders. The social media usage among people has grown exponentially and also the rise in opinion leaders promoting brands through social media have become new strategies for marketers to attain their business goals. The objective of the present study is to explore the influence of opinion leader characteristics among their millennial followers' intention to adopt sustainable behaviour practices. Parasocial relationship is considered as an important factor as a moderator between Opinion leader characteristic and followers' sustainable behavioural intention. From the results of SEM, it is found that Opinion leader characteristics such as message credibility, congruency, attitude towards environmental living and Perceived similarity is positively related to the sustainable behavioural intention. Further, the findings also revealed that parasocial relationship is moderating the opinion leader characteristics on sustainable behavioural intention. Opinion leaders should strategise ways to improve parasocial relationship with their followers as it leads to change in behavioural intention.

KEYWORDS: Message credibility, Opinion leaders, Parasocial relationship, Perceived Similarity, Sustainable Behavioural Intention.

1. INTRODUCTION

Digital media has revolutionized the way marketers communicate with their consumers. Due to the availability of diverse digital media across different platforms, social media has become the crucial medium for the business to make the target customers aware of their products and services. Social media is a powerful tool to convey messages and make people take actions promptly. Reaching out to opinion leaders in social media by marketers is now significantly increasing due to its wide reach among the followers. Opinion leaders are key experts in their field whose suggestions and opinion can impact the choices and decision of the potential target market. Often opinion leaders also take the role of influencers where marketers and brands use these opinion leaders to influence the decision which leads to a change in consumer shopping behaviour. Opinion leader plays a vital role in making significant changes in the consumer choices because they are claimed as trustworthy in their field of expertise. They also hold the key positions in shaping the market and consumer trends by becoming the first to use a new good or service.

Opinion leaders share their knowledge, expertise and experience through their social media page which helps the followers in decision making in choosing a product or service that better suits their needs. They also become a reliable source for seeking opinion in their field of proficiency.

Opinion leaders who are actively involved in engaging their followers regularly through their posts and other user generated contents that are better able to connect with their audience than others whose engagement rates are low. Having higher engagement rates with the followers by providing contents on their field of expertise helps them in taking the right information to their audience thus enabling followers' decision making much easier. Furthermore, active engagement is an easy way to connect with their followers frequently. Opinion leaders in social media play a crucial role in promoting sustainable behaviour among their followers. As influential individuals with significant number of followings and a strong online presence, they can shape attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours related to sustainability and environmental consciousness.

Many digital campaigns are initiated by the companies through opinion leaders in social media to promote sustainable lifestyle practices. These campaigns help in improving the awareness on environmental sustainability and aids as a guiding tool in making decisions related to adopting sustainable lifestyle behaviour among the targeted audience.

However, it is essential to consider that opinion leaders may create a fabricated message to influence sustainable behaviour among their followers. For personal gain, some thought leaders may advocate green washing or unsustainable methods, which might deceive their followers. As a result, it's important that both opinion leaders and their followers exercise critical thinking and double-check the accuracy of information before making sustainability related decisions.

1.1 MILLENNIALS AND SUSTAINABLE BEHAVIOUR INTENTION

For the purpose of research, the structure of demographic population is classified into different generations according to age. As mentioned by the Center for Generational Kinetics currently our society consists of five generations – 1) People those who are born between 1996-2015 are referred to as GenZ, iGen or Centennials 2) Millienials or Gen Y are the generation born approximately around 1977-1995 3) Generation between the years 1965 -1976 are considered as Generation X 4) The Baby Boomers are born between 1946-1964 5) People born during 1945 and before are the Traditionalists or Silent Generation.

India has one of the largest millennial population comprising of 440 million which is around 34% of the nation's overall population. By 2030, GenZ and millennial population together estimates to 50 percent of the India's population. Being the majority of the population category the buying behaviour of the millennial group as a consumer is critical to predict the current and future lifestyle trends for decision making. According to the survey conducted by Deloitte Global in 2023 among Gen Z and Millennial titled "2023 Gen Z and Millennial Survey Waves of change: acknowledging progress, confronting setbacks" climate change is a major concern for Gen Z's and millennial, however the willingness to prioritise sustainability as a part of their lifestyle depends on their financial situation. As stated by the survey 1 in 10 respondents believe that their lifestyle decisions have minimal consequences on the environment. It is also mentioned that nearly 80% of

the millennials use social media as their priority source to get news and to connect with friends and family. Further, the survey stated that 60% of the millennials are prepared to pay extra for products and services that are sustainable in nature.

A survey piloted by McKinsey states that millennials are considered as the fastest growing consumer segment in the rising economy like India. The survey added that the buying behaviour of the rapidly growing millennial consumer segment is significantly influenced by digital medium. Furthermore, millennials are keen on making lifestyle changes that reduce the carbon foot print and willing to use their purchasing power to support companies that prioritise environmentally responsible practices.

Millennials are more likely to be concerned about environmental issues and climate change according to a research survey. As concluded by the survey done by Credit Suisse research institute, Gen Z and millennials in emerging economies like India and China are more prospective in using environmentally sustainable products as they are more environmentally conscious. Additionally the survey stated that consumers from millennial generation and GenZ are more supportive in policies laid by government to prohibit products that are unsustainable in nature and forbidding them from the markets.

Recently, brands concentrate on promoting sustainable living among their consumers through contents curated by social media influencers. Unilever has collaborated with behavioural science institute to investigate how social media messages and content helps people in making choices leading to sustainable lifestyle. The findings of the research revealed that content shared through social media turns as the most persuasive tools that lead people to change their behaviour that results in achieving sustainability goals.

A study report by Forbes India states that the consumers are greatly impacted by the influencers, around 50% of millennials consider the social media influencers as familiar than their known friends and relatives. Further, the findings also concluded that out of 10, 7 consumers believe the influencer endorsements. The millennials are the largest demographic that uses social media. In a recent survey conducted by Accenture on an average 8 respondents out of 10 social media users have agreed that they use social commerce sites while making decisions related to purchase.

2.LITERATURE REVIEW

Opinion Leadership theory originates from the research, done by Lazarsfeld et al., in 1948. The results of the theory states that opinion leaders receive information from mass media and then publicize the information through word –of –mouth. This result was in contrary to the previous studies where it is mentioned as mass communication influence people directly.

The two-step communication model states that information and messages in mass media are not reaching and directly impacting the end audience instead these message becomes influential and get better reach when interpreted and shared by opinion leaders to a wider population. Paul

Lazarsfeld et al., was the first to explore this two-step communication model in 1944 and in 1955 it was further elaborated by Elihu Katz and Lazarsfeld.

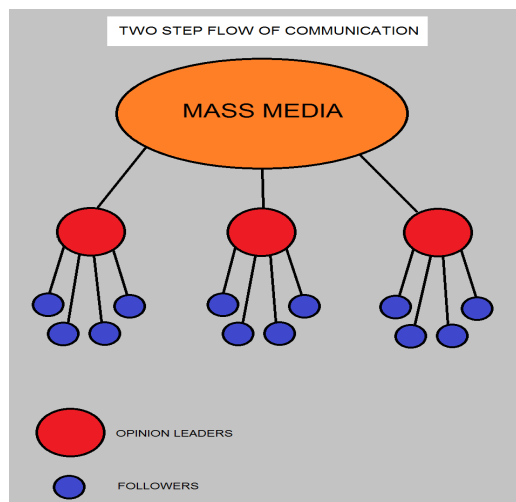


Figure 1: Two-step model of communication - Lazarsfeld and Katz

The credibility of the message shared by the opinion leaders has a significant impact on the followers. For influencers, credibility is essential because it fosters a good perception of the social media opinion leaders (influencer) and has a beneficial influence on consumers' attitudes, beliefs, and actions as concluded by Breves et al., 2019 and Stubb & Colliander, 2019. Few studies state the perception of credibility as a whole, while other studies focus on certain aspects of endorser credibility, such as reliability, skill and attraction - Breves et al., 2019 and Ohanian, 1990.

According to product-match up model, a congruence information is considered as more credible than an incongruent information. Influencers have demonstrated to be even more successful endorsers. They are more effective at persuading consumers to choose a brand and instigating behavioural changes than traditional endorsers because they are more relatable, credible, trustworthy, and authentic - Schouten et al., 2021, Campbell & Farrell, 2020, Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017.

Message Congruence is crucial because followers pay attention to the information about the endorser, their earlier messages and behaviour to understand the motivation behind endorsing the product or service. Congruency in messages is highly essential while endorsing a product that is sustainable in nature. Additionally, research by Sparkman & Attari in 2020 has demonstrated that the behaviour of the endorsers' are reflected in the consistency of the messages shared through social media, this raises the source's credibility, whereas inconsistency leads to suspicion as explained by Stone and Fernandez, 2008. As a result, the public image of the influencers is not trustworthy if there is an inconsistent endorsement (Dwivedi & Johnson 2013; Lee & Koo 2015), since they could be seen as having ulterior reasons or business objectives (Koernig & Boyd, 2009). The credibility of the influencer may be harmed if there are discrepancies between the message and the implied intentions behind this communication.

Martensen et al., in 2018 stated that similarity is the resemblance between the sender and the receiver. When consumers feel they have common ground with an influencer in terms of values, interests, or other traits, they are more inclined to act on their attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs (Cialdini, 1993). This is mostly accomplished, in the opinions of Chapple and Cownie (2017). Alexander et al., (2020) argued that when influencers share their personal content on the social media page the followers feel that they are more reliable, ordinary and authentic. In other terms, social media opinion leaders (influencers) who "downplay" their position and emphasize more banal parts of their everyday lives make themselves seem more relatable to their followers. Some followers see similarities between the influencer and themselves, while others think they share a lot of traits with the opinion leaders as stated by Hoffner & Buchanan (2005) and Gräve, (2017).

The Parasocial interaction (PSI) theory by Horton and Wohl (1956) explains the relationship between the spectator and the performer. Dibble et al., in 2016 argued that this illusion can sometimes be felt as a real interpersonal relationship. This self-established relationship is imaginary and the other person (influencers/opinion leaders) is unaware about the existence of this relationship (Kelman, 2017). According to Kim et al. (2015), the creation of a PSR with celebrities was favourably correlated with the use of social networking sites. By following bloggers on social media and subscribing to their blogs or channels, users of online social networking sites can establish a similar kind of relationship with them (Kefi and Sokolova, 2020). Several studies have suggested that parasocial interaction between opinion leaders (influencers) and followers affects the propensity to make purchases (Lee & Watkins, 2016, Dibble & Cho, 2017).

Since millennials have intense sustainable behaviour intention and only few studies have considered the parasocial relationship as a moderating factor to study the variations of intention in digital platform context, the current study is aimed at exploring the moderating effect of parasocial relationship between opinion leader characteristics and sustainable behaviour intention of the millennial followers.

3. METHODOLOGY USED FOR RESEARCH

3.1 RESEARCH DESIGN AND DATA SOURCES

The current study employs descriptive research which involves gathering information about a particular group or phenomenon. The aim of the current research is to examine the effect of opinion leader characteristics namely message credibility, congruency, attitude towards sustainable living and perceived similarity on sustainable behaviour intention and also to inspect whether parasocial relationship plays a moderating role between opinion leader characteristics and sustainable behaviour intention among the millennial population. The primary source of data is collected using a well framed structured questionnaire and the secondary data sources are influencer marketing trend reports 2022 and survey reports based on social media influencers and opinion leaders.

3.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

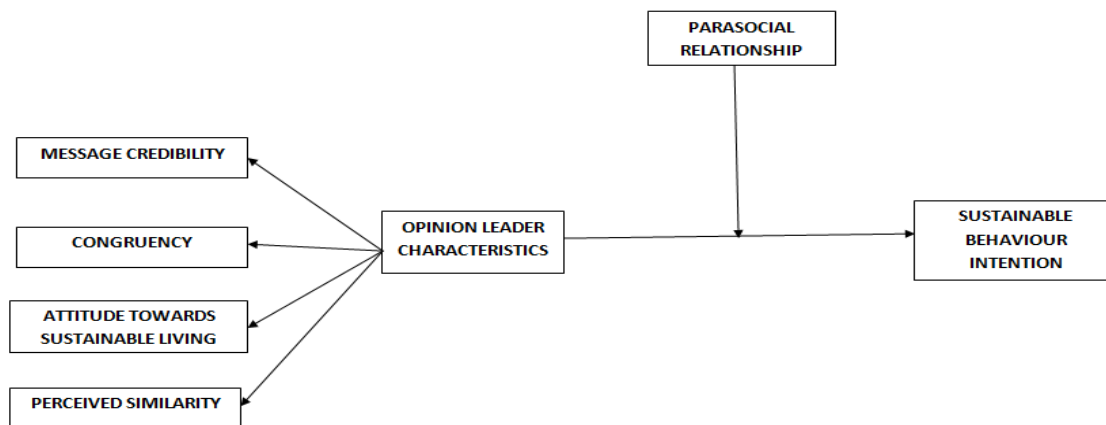


Figure 2: Theoretical framework: Opinion Leader Characteristics and its impact on Sustainable Behaviour Intention with moderating effect of parasocial relationship

3.3 SAMPLING AND SAMPLE SIZE

To arrive at the required sample size for the current study, 384 was considered as minimum required sample for infinite population with reference to the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) table. The final sample of 410 respondents has been considered for the study. The researcher had used a non-probability sampling technique from which Snowball sampling method was adopted which involves identifying the potential respondents who meet the sample criteria with the help of initial set of respondents.

3.4 SURVEY INSTRUMENT

The survey is conducted among the target respondents using structured questionnaire to understand the impact of opinion leader characteristics on sustainable behaviour intention and moderating effect of parasocial relationship between opinion leader characteristics and sustainable behaviour intention of the respondents.

The Questionnaire has 4 sections:

Section 1 – Basic demographic questions and questions related to Social media usage and sustainability living.

Section 2 – Opinion leader characteristics measured using 5 point likert scale – 1) Message Credibility - Kamatchi (a) Preethi (2021) 2) Congruency - Xu and Pratt (2018) 3) Attitude towards environmental living - Sophie C. Boerman et al., (2022) 4) Perceived similarity - Chen Lou and Shupeiyuan (2019), Dreifaldt et al., (2019), Martensen et al., (2018).

Section 3 – Parasocial relationship measured using 5 point likert scale - Hisashi Masuda et al., (2021)

Section 4 – Sustainable behaviour intention measured using 5 point likert scale - Sophie C. Boerman et al., (2022); Haina Zhang and Thanh Ha Nuyen (2020)

3.5 RELIABILITY

The reliability of the questionnaire is confirmed based on the internal consistency reliability. The Cronbach's coefficient value 0.803 attained from the results of reliability tests indicates that the items in the questionnaire is found to be reliable for further study.

3.6 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To analyse the influence of opinion leader characteristics on sustainable behaviour intention
2. To test the moderating role of parasocial relationship between the opinion leader characteristics and sustainable behaviour intention

3.7 TOOLS USED FOR THE STUDY

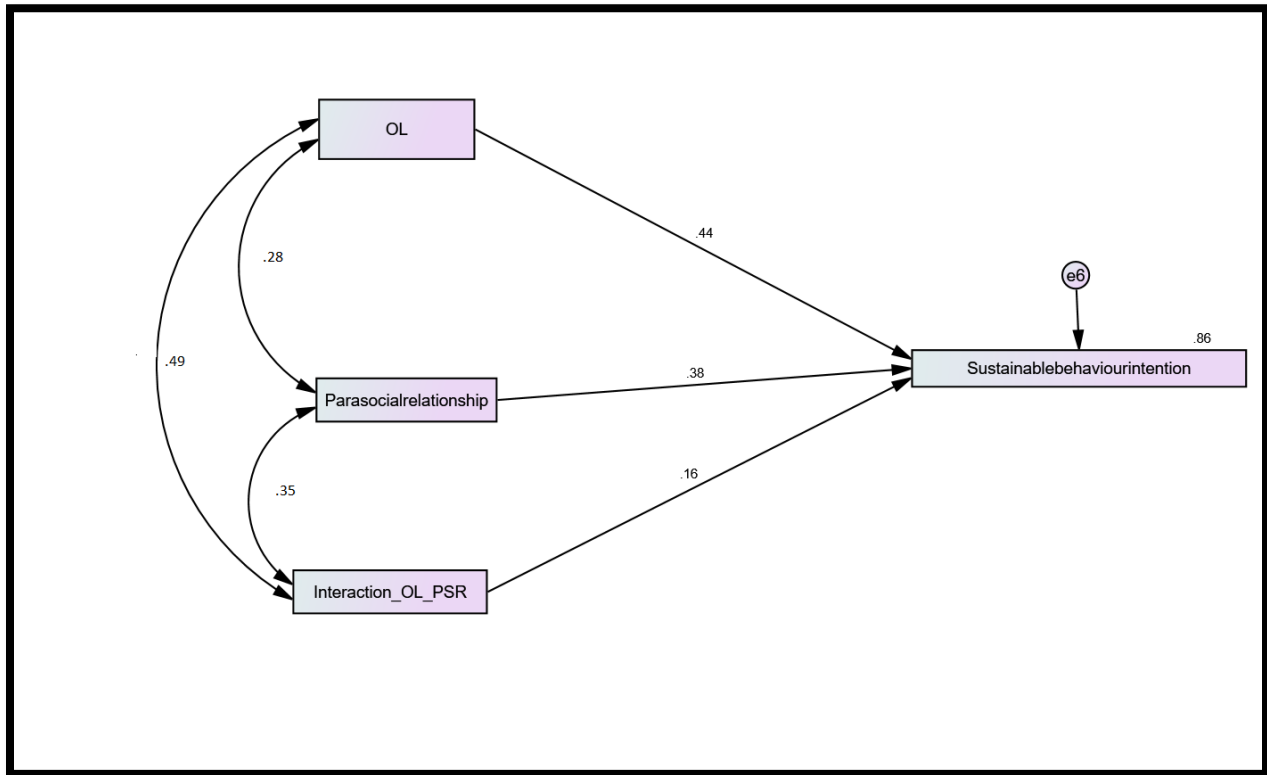
SEM (Structural Equation Modeling) analysis is used to analyse the influence of opinion leader characteristics on sustainable behaviour intention. The moderating role of parasocial relationship was also studied.

3.8 HYPOTHESIS

H1: Significant relationship exists between opinion leader characteristics and sustainable behaviour intention

H2: Parasocial relationship significantly moderates the opinion leader characteristics and sustainable behaviour intention

Figure 3: Results of model of Opinion Leader Characteristics and Sustainable Behaviour



Intention with moderating effect of parasocial relationship

OL: Opinion Leader Characteristics; PSR :Parasocial Relation

Particulars	Model GFI	Criteria for GFI
CMIN/DF	1.334	3:01
GFI	.948	≥ 0.9
AGFI	.976	≥ 0.9
CFI	.998	≥ 0.9
RMSEA	.056	≤ 0.09

Table 1: Model fit Summary

			Estimates	Std. Error.	Critical Ratio	P
Sustainable behaviour intention	<---	Para social relationship	.547	.166	3.291	.001
Sustainable behaviour intention	<---	Interaction effect : Opinion Leadership & Parasocial Relationship	.444	.176	2.515	.012
Sustainable behaviour intention	<---	Opinion Leadership	.210	.056	3.742	***

Table 2- Regression Weights: (Group number 1 - Default model)

			Estimate
Sustainable behaviour intention	<---	Para social relationship	.376
Sustainable behaviour intention	<---	Interaction effect : Opinion Leadership & Parasocial Relationship	.162
Sustainable behaviour intention	<---	Opinion Leadership	.443

Table 3-Standardized Regression Weights: (Group number 1 - Default model)

	Estimate
Sustainable behaviour intention	.859

Table 4 -Squared Multiple Correlations: (Group number 1 - Default model)

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the results of table no 1, the values from the structural equation model confirms that the values of fit indices are within the onset limit for model fitness as suggested by Hair *et al.*, 2010. Hence, the present model tested from the study is considered as a model with good fit.

From the results of table no 2, 3, 4, it is evident that parasocial relationship is significantly moderating the effect of opinion leader characteristics on sustainable behaviour intention among the millennial respondents as the p value is less than 0.05 for Interaction path (Sustainable behaviour intention <--- Interaction_OpinionLeadership: ParasocialRelationship, sig at 1% level). Also the Opinion leader and parasocial relationship has significant impact on sustainable behavioural intention since the significant p value is 0.001 and 0.012 which is less than 0.05. Hence both the hypothesis are accepted resulting to the existence of relationship between opinion leader characteristics and sustainable behaviour intention and parasocial relationship significantly moderates the opinion leader characteristics and sustainable behaviour intention

The standardized regression weights (table no 3) shows the relationship between the study variables. From the values it is inferred that Para social relationship has 37.6% (0.376) of relationship with sustainable behaviour intention. The opinion leadership has 44.3% (0.443) of relationship with sustainable behaviour intention.

More precisely, from the multiple correlation value of 0.859 (85%) it can be concluded that the impact of opinion leader characteristics is even stronger on sustainable behaviour intention when followers experience the existence of parasocial relationship with the opinion leader and the follower with the multiple correlation of 0.859 i.e., 85.9%.

The above results provide practical insights for the marketers while using opinion leaders for promoting sustainable lifestyle practices among their followers. The opinion leader characteristics such as message credibility, congruency, attitude towards environmental living and perceived similarity leads to change in followers' sustainable behaviour intention. However, the presence of parasocial interaction between the opinion leader and follower triggers stronger intention among the followers. Forming stronger parasocial relationships with the follower can foster the change in behaviour intentions and makes the task of achieving sustainability goals among the audience even easier. For opinion leaders, not only their characteristics (such as message credibility, Congruency, Attitude towards environmental living and perceived similarity) building strong relationships with their followers can also act as a competitive advantage. This competitive advantage will make the opinion leader exceptional among other opinion leaders in social media thus enabling the selection by marketers for brand endorsements.

5. LIMITATIONS AND SCOPE FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

In addition to the practical implications, this study has few limitations which can be taken as recommendations for future research. This study is carried out only among the millennial population cohort, which restricts the generalizability of the results. So, the study can

be extended to other demographic cohorts such as GenZ, as the intention for adopting sustainable behaviour is higher among Gen Z followed by millennial. Additionally this study has considered only a few opinion characteristics namely message credibility, Congruency, Attitude towards environmental living and perceived similarity. In future studies other characteristics such as perceived familiarity, Content quality, perceived risk, Physical and social attractiveness, attitude homophily can be considered to gain more insights on their effect on change in behaviour intention among their followers. Finally, this study has considered only parasocial relationship as a moderator. Future researchers can consider other moderators such as influencer type (micro influencer, nano influencer, mega influencer and Top star/celebrity influencer) and influencer category (Eg: Lifestyle, Fitness, Fashion) that could moderate the underlying relationship between opinion leader characteristics and change in behaviour intentions.

6. CONCLUSION

Opinion leaders have become a widely accepted way of approaching targeted audiences through social media. It is believed that opinion leaders can carry the message in a stronger way to their followers to foster the changes in behaviour rapidly. Sustainable behaviour changes can also be influenced by the green opinion leaders by endorsing products / practices that promote sustainability. The current study is an attempt to explore the moderating effect of parasocial relationship between opinion leader characteristics and their impact on sustainable behaviour intention. Developing parasocial relationship can help the opinion leaders to bring out stronger behavioural changes among their followers. Hence, the marketers should consider this insight along with opinion leader characteristics while selecting opinion leaders to endorse their products.

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