# Are Online Opinion Leaders and Seekers Distinct? A Study on Consumer Electronics Industry in India

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Chakraborty, U., & Bhat, S. (2019). Are Online Opinion Leaders and Seekers Distinct? A Study on Consumer Electronics Industry in India. *Global Business Review*, *20*(3), 813-825. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0972150919837093

**Abstract**

In various social media platforms like brand communities, brand page etc., one segment of consumers shares product knowledge and another segment of consumers seek product knowledge. The former is called online opinion leader and the latter is called online opinion seeker. Given the importance of opinion leaders as low cost marketing tools for marketers, there is an impending need to determine whether opinion leaders and opinion seekers are distinct constructs in online context. This study addressed this issue by analyzing a relatively large sample of 1432 respondents from India. The present study adopted a novel approach to collect data. Data has been collected from select e-commerce site's brand pages in Facebook social media platform through Google form application. The study focuses on three consumer electronic product categories namely, smartphone, laptop and tablet. Exploratory factor analysis was performed to examine the unidimensionality of the variables and confirmatory factor analysis was performed to validate the variable scales. In all the three product categories online opinion leader and online opinion seeker scales turn out to be unidimensional. Further, the results of the analyses prove that online opinion leader and online opinion seeker are distinct. This study provides evidence that in the context of an emerging market, namely, India, online opinion leader and online opinion seeker are distinct.

Keywords: Online opinion leader; Online opinion seeker; Structural equations modeling; Consumer electronic products; India.

## Introduction

Online social media is a unique vehicle of marketing. The traffic in the online social media platforms is escalating continuously (Heinrichs, Lim & Lim, 2011; Sam & Chatwin, 2015). Hence, companies are adopting online social media platforms for product or brand promotions (Jha & Ye, 2016). Consumers are sharing their product related knowledge with others through various social media platforms (Kaiser, Johannes & Freimut, 2013). They are also considering different online social media platforms for acquiring product knowledge. Thus, in the online environment, some knowledgeable consumers are sharing product related information and influencing purchase decisions of other consumers (Lien, Wen, Huang & Wu, 2015). In other words, consumer's opinions on products affect purchase behavior of other prospective consumers (Roy, Datta & Basu, 2017; Sicilia, Delgado-Ballester & Palazon, 2016)

In various online social media platforms like brand communities and brand pages, the segments of consumers that share product knowledge are considered to be online opinion leaders (Harris & Dennis, 2011). The other segments of consumers that seek product knowledge are considered to be online opinion seekers. Companies are interested to include opinion leaders in their marketing mix because opinion leaders can promote the company's products without being compensated for the same (Stokburger-Sauer & Hoyer, 2009). Hence, opinion leaders are considered as low cost marketing tools. In addition, other consumers consider opinion leaders as reliable sources of information since the latter are non-paid advertisers of the products.

In the marketing literature, the opinion leadership concept has got its due importance. At the same time, the literature also acknowledges the importance of the opinion seeker concept. Opinion seekers are the future customers for the companies. They are the ones who generally

seek opinions from opinion leaders so as to reduce the risk of wrong purchases (Goldsmith & Horowitz, 2006). Hence, the concept of opinion seeker has also occupied a distinct place in the marketing research. Nevertheless, researchers feel that opinion seeker concept should get still more importance in the marketing research (Lyons & Henderson, 2005), and both opinion leader and seeker should be tested in a larger sample base through online survey. Thus, to use opinion leadership concept as effective marketing tool it is important that one distinctly identifies opinion leaders from opinion seekers. Several researchers have tried to understand whether one can distinguish between opinion leaders and seekers in both offline and online contexts (Bertrandias & Goldsmith, 2006; Lyons & Henderson, 2005). However, their findings are mixed. In the online context, research articles like Lassar, Manolis and Lassar (2005) observe that online opinion leaders and online opinion seekers are distinct for sample drawn from online banking scenario. Vishwanath (2006) supports this argument and note that online opinion leaders and online opinion seekers are distinct in the context of information and communication technology (ICT) in mobile phones. On the other hand, Sun, Youn, Wu and Kuntaraporn (2006) note that online opinion leader and online opinion seeker are not distinct constructs in the context of music.

Thus, previous studies have failed to provide a clear picture regarding the distinctiveness of online opinion leader and online opinion seeker. Hence, there is an impending need to determine whether opinion leaders and opinion seekers are distinct constructs in online context. This study addressed this issue by analyzing a relatively large sample of 1432 respondents from India, which is an emerging market and world's second largest Facebook user (Dhir, Kaur, Chen & Lonka, 2016).

Marketers in India are looking for opinion leaders in various brand communities, pages or other social media platforms to promote their products (Pandey & Khare, 2015). In these

online brand communities, online opinion leaders influence the online opinion seekers in their purchase decisions. It is very important to determine the distinctiveness of opinion leaders and opinion seekers in various social media platforms like brand communities, pages etc., so that marketers can identify them and utilize them for product promotion. This study concentrates on differentiating between online opinion leaders and online opinion seekers, which in turn can help the marketers to make strategy to capture both these segments of consumers. The focus of this study is consumer electronic products as it is the highest online selling product category in India (Pwc, 2014). Thus, the objective of this study is to examine the distinctiveness of online opinion leader and online opinion seeker in the context of consumer electronic products in India.

The remaining of the paper is organized as follows. This study first reviews the literature on opinion leader and opinion seeker concepts. The subsequent sections deal with the methodology, analysis, results and discussions. The last section gives the conclusion and implications of this study.

## Literature review

### *Opinion Leader*

The opinion leadership concept was first introduced in the work of Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet (1944) in the context of 1940's U.S. presidential election. They observed that interpersonal communication and personal influence are more effective than mass media to attract voters. Later, Katz and Lazerfeld (1955) noted that mass media was first exposed to the opinion leaders and then through them it reached others. This model of communication is popularly known as two step flow of communication. Flynn, Goldsmith and Eastman (1996) applied opinion leadership concept in marketing research with an intention to determine a scale that can identify opinion leaders across various product categories. They noted that

"opinion leadership occurs when individuals try to influence the purchasing behavior of other consumers in specific product fields" (Flynn et al., 1996, p. 138). Shoham and Ruvio (2008) adopted and modified Flynn et al.'s (1996) opinion leadership scale in the context of computer and software in Israel. They noted that Flynn et al.'s (1996) opinion leadership scale is distinct from opinion seeker. Chakrabarti (2013) also adopted Flynn et al.'s (1996) opinion leadership scale in the context of high end smartphone products in India and observed that opinion leadership scale was distinct from non opinion leaders. Moreover, Chakrabarti (2013) reported that there is a significant difference between opinion leader and non opinion leader in a computer mediated environment. The present study concentrated on opinion leadership concept and modified Flynn et al.'s (1996) opinion leadership scale to adopt it in online context.

Rogers (2003) suggested four techniques to detect opinion leaders. These are: (1) sociometric method where researchers ask the respondents whose advice they look for, (2) informant's ratings where researchers identify key informant within a system, (3) observation techniques where researchers scrutinize the communication pattern in a system to identify the opinion leaders, and (4) self designated method where researchers examine the degree of opinion leadership that the respondent possesses. Tsang and Zhou (2005) studied opinion leader and seeker concept in the context of internet newsgroups. They observed that psychographic factors are more useful than demographic factors to spot the opinion leaders and seekers. They also noted that self designated method is an efficient method to identify opinion leaders. Hence, this study follows self designated method to identify opinion leaders. Further, the proposed opinion leadership scale contains psychographic elements.

*Opinion Seeker*

According to the view point of two step flow of communication, opinion seekers are the message receivers. Fieck, Price and Higie (1986) are probably the first to introduce opinion seeker concept in the area of marketing research. This was in the context of various durable and non durable product categories. They described opinion seekers 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" (Fieck et al. 1986, p. 302). They tested the opinion seeker concept for 1531 residents of USA. They found that opinion seekers are more prone to seeking and diffusing information. Flynn et al. (1996) believed that opinion seekers have to co-exist with opinion leaders. Hence, they developed another scale, apart from opinion leader scale, that could identify opinion seekers across various product categories. Shoham and Ruvio (2008) noted that opinion seekers rely on product related information of opinion leaders, which in turn affects the purchase behavior of opinion seekers. They adopted Flynn et al.'s (1996) opinion seeker scale and found it to be a distinct scale in the context of computer and software in Israel. Hence, the present study adopts and modifies Flynn et al.'s (1996) opinion seeker scale in online context for India.

*Distinctiveness of Opinion Leaders and Opinion Seekers*

There are some studies that try to explore whether opinion leaders can be distinctly identified from opinion seekers. However, the results of these studies are not conclusive. Girardi, Soutar and Ward (2005) study OECD nations in the context of wine consumption. They observe that the correlation between composite measure of opinion leader and opinion seeker is -0.35 which shows that both the constructs are distinct. Another recent study, again in wine industry, also finds similar results (Vigar-Ellis, Pitt & Caruana, 2015). Tsang and Zhou (2005) study online opinion leaders and seekers in the context of internet newsgroup and find that both the constructs are distinct. Further, they notice that opinion seekers are

more active in online environment than offline. Lyons and Henderson (2005) study online opinion leader and non leader in the context of e-commerce. They note that online opinion leaders possess higher levels of innovativeness, enduring involvement, exploratory behavior, self perceived knowledge and computer skills as compared to non leaders. In the context of ICT in mobile phones, Vishwanath (2006) believes that technology influences opinion seekers more than leaders.

At the same time, Bertrandias and Goldsmith (2006) observe that fashion opinion leaders and fashion opinion seekers are not distinct. Clark, Zboja and Goldsmith (2007) also strengthens this argument in the context of fashionable clothing in the US. Thus, prior research articles fail to provide concrete evidence on the distinctiveness of online opinion leader and online opinion seeker scales. Hence, based on the above discussions, this study attempts to examine the distinctiveness between online opinion leader and online opinion seeker in the context of consumer electronics industry in India:

## Sample and methodology

*Online opinion (reviews) and consumer electronics products*

A study by PricewaterhouseCoopers shows that, in India, the highest selling product category in online context is consumer electronic products (Pwc, 2014). Moreover, consumer electronic products has 34 percent market share in e-commerce sector. Moreover, those who buy online products generally seek online product reviews (Hansen & Møller Jensen, 2009). Hence, consumer electronic is the best product category to evaluate the distinctiveness between online opinion leader and online opinion seeker.

Chan and Ngai (2011) study reveals that consumer electronics product category has got highest consumer's reviews compared to other product categories. Before purchase, consumers generally look for updated information of consumer electronic products to avoid

wrong purchase decision (Park & Kim, 2008). Hence, this study concentrates on consumer electronic products.

*Online brand pages of e-commerce sites in Facebook*

The present study considers e-commerce sites because e-commerce sites are one of the very important channels of online sales (Goldsmith & Flynn, 2004). A report by the Department of Consumer Affairs, Government of India indicates that top five e-commerce sites in India are Flipkart, Jabong, Myntra, Snapdeal and Amazon (Dca, 2014). However, Jabong has very limited electronics product line and Myntra concentrates only on apparel. Hence, this study considers three e-commerce sites namely, Flipkart, Snapdeal and Amazon.

India is the world's second largest Facebook user (Dhir et al., 2016). Consumers in India prefer Facebook social media platform over any other social media platform (Bcg, 2015). An online brand page is treated as an internet tool which is used by the consumers to exchange information on products and brands (Cvijikj & Michahelles, 2013). In Facebook, Flipkart, Snapdeal and Amazon's Indian brand pages are present. All these brand pages are authenticated by the Facebook which means these brand pages are real e-commerce sites' brand pages. Customers of e-commerce sites' write reviews in the e-commerce sites' brand pages. Hence, to get data this study considers Facebook's Flipkart, Snapdeal and Amazon's Indian brand pages.

*Sample size*

A report by internet and mobile association of India (IAMAI) indicates that in India, 40 million people use online reviews (Iamai, 2015). This study applies Slovin's (1960) formula to determine sample size (Tejada & Punzalan, 2012).

Slovin's formula is given as: n= N / (1+ N × $e^2$), where n= sample size, N= total population and e= margin of error. This study determines its sample size with 95percent confidence level with a margin of error of 5 percent.

40 millions / (1 + 40 millions × $0.05^2$) = 400. Hence, a sample size of 400 is required to generalize the study.

*Data collection procedure*

The survey tool (questionnaire) was prepared in Google docs and the link of the questionnaire was posted in the message box of the respondents of Flipkart, Snapdeal and Amazon's Indian brand pages in Facebook. All the brand pages are authenticated by Facebook, which shows that the brand pages are actual Flipkart, Snapdeal and Amazon's Indian brand pages.

*Measures*

This study adopted and modified Flynn et al.'s (1996) opinion leader and seeker scales in the online context.

*Methods*

To test whether the scales can be generalized across various product categories of consumer electronic products, three different studies were performed for three consumer electronic product categories. These product categories were smartphone, laptop and tablet. It was ensured that in each of the product categories the number of respondents were more than 400.

The study followed Zaichkowsky (1985) to perform content validity of the scales. The questionnaire was discussed with three professional experts who are working in the field of online communication. Further, the questionnaire was examined by two senior researchers for each item's distinctiveness and clarity. Pilot study was performed with 302 offline

respondents to identify unclear and difficult questions. Then the questionnaire was purified and used for final online data collection.

*Pilot study*

Pilot study has been performed to validate the questionnaire and to select the consumer electronic brands for the final study. Three studies were performed for three product categories namely, smartphone, laptop and tablet. Exploratory factor analysis (principle component analysis extraction method and varimax rotation method) was performed to check the unidimensionality of the variables in the context of three product categories namely, smartphone, laptop and tablet. For the pilot study 302 respondents were considered.

*Final study*

Three studies were performed for three product categories namely, smartphone, laptop and tablet. 1432 respondents were considered for final study. This study first determined the reliability of the online opinion leader and online opinion seeker scales. Confirmatory factor analysis was used to validate the opinion leader and opinion seeker scale constructs. Confirmatory factor analysis was performed using maximum likelihood method since it gives valid and stable results (Hair, Black, Babin & Anderson, 2009).

To examine the distinctiveness between online opinion leader and online opinion seeker scales, correlation was performed.

**Results and discussions**

*Pilot study*

Pilot study was performed with 302 respondents. The various consumer electronics brands' online reviews given and seen by the respondents in last one year were HP, Micromax, Lenevo, LG, Samsung, Canon, Nikon, Sony, Dell, Asus, Toshiba, Google, Microsoft,

Karbonn, Motorola, HTC, Xiaomi and Acer. Therefore, the present study considers all those brands for final study.

*Final study*

In the questionnaire, instruction was given to the respondents that recently did they saw or gave any online reviews on smartphones, laptops and tablets which are the products of these brands' "HP, Micromax, Lenevo, LG, Samsung, Canon, Nikon, Sony, Dell, Asus, Toshiba, Google, Microsoft, Karbonn, Motorola, HTC, Xiaomi and Acer"? If yes, then they can answer the questionnaire.

As mentioned earlier, three studies were performed for three consumer electronic products namely, smartphone, laptop and tablet. Table I shows the demographic profile of the respondents of all the three studies.

**Table 1**. Demographic profile of the respondents

| Demographic profile | | Study one (Smartphone) | Study two (Laptop) | Study three (Tablet) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Total Respondents | | 536 | 473 | 423 |
| Total Male Respondents | | 376 | 319 | 382 |
| Total Female Respondents | | 160 | 154 | 41 |
| Age | 18 - 29 | 314 | 302 | 204 |
| | 30 - 39 | 146 | 118 | 135 |
| | 40 and above | 76 | 53 | 84 |
| Education qualification | Diploma | 54 | 18 | 08 |
| | Under graduate | 87 | 54 | 22 |
| | Graduate | 248 | 228 | 213 |
| | Post graduate | 147 | 173 | 180 |

Table 2. The comparative analysis of the results of all the three studies

| Particulars | | Study one (Smartphone) | Study two (Laptop) | Study three (Tablet) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Reliability (Cronbach's alpha) | Online opinion leader | 0.882 | 0.915 | 0.832 |
| | Online opinion seeker | 0.873 | 0.894 | 7.94 |
| Normed chi square ($\chi^2$) | Online opinion leader | 2.473 | 2.342 | 2.782 |
| | Online opinion seeker | 2.321 | 2.234 | 2.212 |
| Goodness of fit index (GFI) | Online opinion leader | 0.971 | 0.951 | 0.972 |
| | Online opinion seeker | 0.962 | 0.953 | 0.957 |
| Comparative fit index (CFI) | Online opinion leader | 0.981 | 0.962 | 0.979 |
| | Online opinion seeker | 0.971 | 0.959 | 0.965 |
| Root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) | Online opinion leader | 0.055 | 0.036 | 0.034 |
| | Online opinion seeker | 0.051 | 0.031 | 0.032 |
| Distinctiveness of online opinion leader and seeker scales | | Correlation between composite measures of online opinion leader and seeker scales is -0.38. Significance level is 0.01. | Correlation between composite measures of online opinion leader and seeker scales is -0.21. Significance level is 0.05. | Correlation between composite measures of online opinion leader and seeker scales is -0.31. Significance level is 0.05. |

*Study one*

Study one focuses on smartphone. Survey instrument (questionnaire) was posted in the message box of 1000 people. Data was collected from Flipkart, Snapdeal and Amazon's Indian brand pages on Facebook. Of these 1000 people, 536 responded, which is quite above 400 (minimum sample size requirement). Reliability alpha of online opinion leader and online opinion seeker were 0.882 and 0.873. Reliability alpha values are acceptable (Nunally, 1978).

Confirmatory factor analysis also shows acceptable results (Hair et al., 2009). Various indices of confirmatory factor analysis in online opinion leader perspective were (1) normed chi square ($\chi^2$) with a value of 2.473; (2) goodness of fit index (GFI) with a value of 0.971; (3) comparative fit index (CFI) with a value of 0.981 and; (4) root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) with a value of 0.055. In the context of online opinion seeker, various indices of confirmatory factor analysis were (1) normed chi square ($\chi^2$) with a value of 2.321; (2) goodness of fit index (GFI) with a value of 0.962; (3) comparative fit index (CFI) with a value of 0.971 and; (4) root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) with a value of 0.051. Hence, results of confirmatory factor analysis show that online opinion leader and online opinion seeker scales are unidimensional.

In the context of smartphone products in India, correlation between composite measures of online opinion leader and online opinion seeker scales was found to be -0.38. Significance level is 0.01. Negative correlation satisfied discriminant validity of online opinion leader and online opinion seeker scales.

*Study two*

Study two focuses on laptop. Survey instrument (questionnaire) was posted in the message box of 1000 people. Data was collected from Flipkart, Snapdeal and Amazon's Indian brand

pages on Facebook. Of these 1000 people, 473 responded, which is quite above 400 (minimum sample size requirement). Reliability alpha of online opinion leader and online opinion seeker were 0.915 and 0.894. Reliability alpha values are acceptable (Nunally, 1978). Confirmatory factor analysis also shows acceptable results (Hair et al., 2009).

Various indices of confirmatory factor analysis in online opinion leader perspective were (1) normed chi square ($\chi^2$) with a value of 2.342; (2) goodness of fit index (GFI) with a value of 0.951; (3) comparative fit index (CFI) with a value of 0.962 and; (4) root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) with a value of 0.036. In the context of online opinion seeker, various indices of confirmatory factor analysis were (1) normed chi square ($\chi^2$) with a value of 2.234; (2) goodness of fit index (GFI) with a value of 0.953; (3) comparative fit index (CFI) with a value of 0.959 and; (4) root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) with a value of 0.031. Hence, results of confirmatory factor analysis show that online opinion leader and online opinion seeker scales are unidimensional.

In the context of laptop products in India, correlation between composite measures of online opinion leader and online opinion seeker scales was -0.21. Significance level is 0.05. Negative correlation satisfied discriminant validity of online opinion leader and online opinion seeker scales.

*Study three*

Study three focuses on tablet. Survey instrument (questionnaire) was posted in the message box of 1000 people. Data was collected from Flipkart, Snapdeal and Amazon's Indian brand pages on Facebook. Of these 1000 people, 423 responded, which is quite above 400 (minimum sample size requirement). Reliability alpha of online opinion leader and online opinion seeker were 0.832 and 0.776. Reliability alpha values are acceptable (Nunally, 1978).

Confirmatory factor analysis also shows acceptable results (Hair et al., 2009). Various indices of confirmatory factor analysis in online opinion leader perspective were (1) normed chi square ($\chi^2$) with a value of 2.782; (2) goodness of fit index (GFI) with a value of 0.972; (3) comparative fit index (CFI) with a value of 0.979 and; (4) root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) with a value of 0.034. In the context of online opinion seeker, various indices of confirmatory factor analysis were (1) normed chi square ($\chi^2$) with a value of 2.212; (2) goodness of fit index (GFI) with a value of 0.957; (3) comparative fit index (CFI) with a value of 0.965 and; (4) root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) with a value of 0.032. Hence, results of exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis show that online opinion leader and online opinion seeker scales are unidimensional.

In the context of tablet products in India too, correlation between composite measures of online opinion leader and online opinion seeker was -0.31. Significance level is 0.05. Negative correlation satisfied discriminant validity of online opinion leader and online opinion seeker scales.

**Conclusions and implications**

The objective of this study was to examine the distinctiveness of online opinion leader and online opinion seeker scales in the context of electronic products in India. The study focused on three consumer electronic product categories namely, smartphone, laptop and tablet. In all the three product categories, online opinion leader and online opinion seeker scales turned out to be unidimensional. Further, the results of the analyses proved that online opinion leader and online opinion seeker are distinct.

Thus, this study provides evidence that in the context of an emerging market, namely, India, online opinion leader and online opinion seeker are distinct. In India, managers can include the low cost opinion leadership concept in their online marketing mix strategies.

Managers can use observational method to identify opinion leaders from various brand pages. Once the opinion leaders are identified, the managers can then try to persuade them to give their reviews on the products. Managers can run consumer education campaigns to educate the opinion leaders, who in turn can become more effective positive influencers for the products. Since, opinion seekers consider opinion leaders as non-paid advertisers of the product, the latters' opinions would be considered reliable by them. Marketers themselves can act as opinion leaders in various online brand communities, pages or any other online social platforms to fulfil the information needs of other opinion leaders and the opinion seekers.

Although, this study is limited to consumer electronic products on Indian Facebook brand pages, it can easily be replicated on other online social media platforms like Twitter. This would help researchers to do comparative study between different social media platforms and help the marketers to determine their social media marketing strategies. Researchers can also test the distinctiveness of opinion leaders and opinion seekers in some other product categories in online context. Further, other techniques like online ethnography study (netnography) can be used to identify opinion leaders and seekers in various online social media platforms. Longitudinal study can be done to determine the evolution of opinion leaders and seekers over time.

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## Appendix

*1 Scale used for the study*

*1.1 Online opinion leadership scale*

Item1- My opinion on (product) seems not to count by the other respondents of online brand pages.

Item2- When respondents of online brand pages choose (product) they do not turn to me for advice.

Item3- Respondents of online brand pages rarely come to me for advice about choosing (product).

Item4- Respondents of online brand pages pick (product) based on what I have told them.

Item5- I often persuade other respondents of online brand pages to buy the (product) that I like.

Item6- I often influence people's opinions about (product).

*1.2 Online opinion seeker scale*

Item1- When I consider buying (product) I ask other respondents of online brand pages for advice.

Item2- I don't need to talk to others before I buy (product).

Item3- I rarely ask other respondents of online brand pages which (product) to buy.

Item4- I like to get opinions of other respondents of online brand pages before I buy (product).

Item5- I feel more comfortable buying (product) when I have got opinions of other respondents of online brand pages on it.

Item6- When choosing (product) opinions of other respondents of online brand pages are not important to me.