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ANALYSIS OF DECISION MAKING STYLES OF SOCIAL MEDIA OPINION LEADERS AND SEEKERS

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Abstract

Theory and practice both recognize the importance of opinion leadership and seeking constructs within informational interpersonal interaction. However, researches in this area do not concentrate on profiling social media opinion leaders and seekers. The purpose of this study is to describe the decision-making styles of social media opinion leaders and seekers via Consumer Styles Inventory. The empirical application is carried out on a sample of 257 undergraduate students. As a result, ten different decision making styles were found and the analysis confirm that several styles differ for high and low “social media opinion leaders” and “social media opinion seekers”.

Keywords: *Consumer Styles Inventory, Social Media, Opinion Leaders/Seekers.*

SOSYAL MEDYADA YER ALAN FİKİR LİDERLERİNİN VE FİKİR ARAYANLARIN KARAR VERME TARZLARININ İNCELENMESİ

Öz

Teori ve pratikteki uygulamalar, fikir liderliği ve fikir arama kavramlarının kişilerarası bilgilendirici etkileşimindeki önemini vurgulamaktadır. Buna karşın, bu alandaki literatür sosyal medyada yer alan fikir liderlerinin ve fikir arayanların profilini çıkarma konusuna odaklanmamıştır. Bu çalışmanın amacı, Tüketici Tarzları Ölçeği'ni kullanarak sosyal medyada yer alan fikir liderlerinin ve fikir arayanların karar verme tarzlarını belirlemektir. Çalışmanın ampirik uygulaması 257 lisans öğrencisinden oluşan bir örneklem üzerinde gerçekleştirilmiştir. Sonuç olarak, on farklı karar verme tarzı ortaya çıkarılmış ve bu karar verme tarzlarının bir kısmının yüksek düzeyde ve düşük düzeyde “sosyal medyada fikir liderleri” ve “sosyal medyada fikir arayanlar”a göre farklılaştığı görülmüştür.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Tüketici Tarzları Ölçeği, Sosyal Medya, Fikir Liderleri/Arayanlar.*

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INTRODUCTION

Opinion leaders are important actors in marketing communication because, as interpersonal sources, consumers consider their opinions more credible and influential than marketer-dominated sources of information such as advertising. Marketers exert attempts in identifying and influencing opinion leaders and making them serve as a source of positive word-of-mouth for their products/services. Opinion seeking behavior is also another critical issue for marketers. One of the reasons underlying this fact is that the existence of opinion leadership also requires the existence of opinion seeking (Flynn et al., 1996). Additionally, opinion seeking happens when consumers have an intention to purchase, which makes them potential customers.

Due to the advancements in Internet and mobile technologies, particularly involvement in social media through these channels, social networking is becoming increasingly important for marketers. Recent OECD report on the future of the internet economy revealed that this concept has gained significance as nearly 50% of OECD Internet users are active social network users. In 2010, top four countries (Poland, Portugal, Turkey and the United States) engaged in social networking on the web with their at least 60% of Internet users. Specifically in Turkey, the reasons for high social media involvement can be explained by high proportion of the generation who was born after 1970s and grew up in the information age. Consequently, the increasing trend for social networking resulted in the utilization of social media as an attractive platform for consumers to especially disseminate their product experiences and opinions. Marketers can take advantage of social media platforms more effectively through analysis of social media opinion leadership and seeking behavior and distinctive characteristics of social media opinion leaders/seekers.

The present study aims to extend current opinion leadership and seeking literature to social media platform. Moving a step further, this study also attempts to reveal the differences of decision-making styles of social media opinion leaders and seekers. Therefore, this study addresses the following questions: (1) Do decision making styles of high and low “social media opinion leaders” differ? 2) Do decision-making styles of high and low “social media opinion seekers” differ?

Consequently, in this study theoretical framework pertaining to consumer decision-making styles, opinion leadership and seeking through social media are reviewed. This is followed by description of the research methods employed and presentation of findings and conclusion followed by implications and recommendations for further studies.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Consumer Styles Inventory

According to Sproles and Kendall (1986: 268), consumer decision-making style is defined as “a mental orientation characterizing a consumer’s approach to making choices”. The consumer decision-making is analyzed on three aspects (Sproles and Kendall, 1986): 1) consumer typology approach (Darden and Ashton, 1975; Moschis, 1976), 2) psychographic/lifestyle approach (Lastovicka, 1982; Wells, 1975), and 3) consumer characteristics approach (Sproles, 1985; Sproles and Kendall, 1986; Sproles and Sproles, 1990). Related to consumer decision making, in one of the initial studies conducted by Stone (1954), shopper orientation typologies have been analyzed and categorized into four types: 1) economic shopper, 2) personalizing shopper, 3) ethical shopper, and 4) apathetic shopper. Identification of shopping styles has been analyzed by several researchers (e.g. Darden and Reynolds, 1971; Moschis, 1976; Stephenson and Willett, 1969; Darden and Ashton, 1975; Bellenger and Korgaonkar, 1980; Westbrook and Black, 1985). When the literature related to consumer decision-making styles is reviewed, it can be seen that the Consumer Styles Inventory (CSI) developed by Sproles and Kendall (1986) has been widely used and accepted by researchers despite several critiques. In particular, several critiques have been directed towards the applicability of this scale in other cultures, but while at the same time CSI has been the most widely applied scale by the marketers (Walsh, Mitchell and Henning-Thurau, 2001). CSI analyzes consumer decision-making through eight decision traits (Sproles and Kendall, 1986): 1) “perfectionist, high quality conscious consumers” shop more carefully, more systematically, or by comparison and they are not satisfied with the “good enough” product, 2) “brand conscious, “price equals quality” consumers” prefer more expensive, well-known national brands and believe that higher price means better quality, 3) “novelty-fashion conscious consumers” are excited and feel pleasure from seeking out new things and keep up-to-date with styles, 4) “recreational, hedonistic consumers” find shopping pleasant and shop just for the fun of it, 5) “price conscious, “value for money” consumers” look for sale prices and try to get the best value for their money, 6) “impulsive, careless consumers” do not plan their shopping and are unconcerned about how much they spend, 7) “confused by over choice consumers” are confused due to their perception of many brands and stores from which to choose and have difficulty making choices, 8) “habitual, brand loyal consumers” have favorite brands and store and they habitually choose these brands and stores.

Sproles and Sproles (1990) tested the relationship between CSI and learning styles and found a causal relationship. Shim (1996) found a relationship between consumer socialization and CSI through variables such as gender, ethnicity, main reason for working, and the amount of parental allowance. Bakewell and Mitchell (2003) aimed to segment Generation Y through CSI and, through cluster analysis, five decision meaningful and distinct decision-making

groups; “recreational quality seekers”, “recreational discount seekers”, “trend setting loyals”, “shopping and fashion uninterested” and “confused time/money conserving”. CSI has also been widely applied in other cultures. Hafstrom, Chae and Chung (1992) compared the decision-making styles of Korean and American consumer via CSI and in this study “novelty-fashion conscious consumers” has not been confirmed but “time-energy conserving” has been found as a new decision trait. It is stated that Korean consumers are more brand conscious, perfectionist and recreational than American consumers. Durvasula, Lysonski and Andrews (1993) applied CSI on consumers in New Zealand and confirmed the applicability of CSI in other cultures. Lysonski, Durvasula, and Zotos (1996) analyzed consumer decision-making styles of consumers in four countries (USA, New Zealand, Greece, India) and revealed three common factors; brand conscious consumers, novelty/fashion conscious consumers, habitual, brand loyal consumers for these countries but also mentioned about the cultural sensitivity of the scale. Fan and Xiao (1998) compared the findings of Sproles and Kendall (1986)’s study conducted in USA and Hafstrom et.al. (1992)’s study conducted in Korea with Chinese consumer decision-making styles and found that the factors “impulsive, careless consumers”, “habitual, brand loyal consumers” did not reflect Chinese consumers. Mitchell and Bates (1998) applied CSI on 401 undergraduate students and added “time-energy conserving consumers” and “store loyalty” to the original scale. Walsh et.al. (2001) investigated and supported CSI through analysis of German consumers’ decision making styles. Hiu, Siu, Wang and Chang (2001) tested CSI on Chinese consumers and except for the “impulsive, careless consumers” factor; all factors have been revealed and simplified the scale into 18 items. Several researches have also been conducted in Turkey aiming to analyze Turkish consumer decision-making styles. Gönen and Özmete (2006) analyzed undergraduate students’ decision making styles and found five factors; brand consciousness, time consciousness, high quality consciousness/perfectionist, price consciousness, information utilization/confused by over choice. Kavas and Yeşilada (2007) applied CSI on Turkish undergraduate students and found seven of the eight decision making styles as significant except for the “novelty-fashion conscious consumers” and added “shopping avoider, non-perfectionist consumer” as a new factor. Lastly, Ünal and Erciş (2007) found six decision making styles (brand conscious, “price equals quality, confused by over choice consumers, habitual, brand loyal consumers, novelty-fashion conscious consumers, perfectionist, high quality conscious consumers, and price conscious, “value for money”) as a result of its application on undergraduate students.

Opinion Leadership and Opinion Seeking

The importance of informational interpersonal influence in consumer decision-making has been investigated since many years and opinion leadership has been the focal point of considerable amount of researches (Feick, Price and Higie, 1986). Rogers and Cartano (1962: 435) describe opinion leaders as consumers “who exert an unequal amount of influence on the decisions of others”.

Moreover, consumers who actively seek information and advice about product or service from interpersonal sources are called as opinion seekers (Wright and Cantor, 1967; Schiffman and Kanuk, 2007) and opinion seeking has taken less attention relatively to the opinion leadership in the literature (Flynn, Goldsmith, and Eastman, 1996). Some of the studies analyze the opinion leadership and seeking constructs related to product types (Feick, Price, and Higie, 1986; Pice and Feick, 1984), on the other hand some others focus on characteristics and motivations of opinion leaders and seekers (Chan and Misra, 1990; Tai, 2005). Although some researchers view opinion leading and seeking as separate concepts, some support that these concepts are separate but related concepts (Flynn, Goldsmith, and Eastman, 1996; Shoham and Ruvio, 2008). In other words, opinion leaders may also have opinion seeking orientation. For that reason, taking these two constructs into consideration jointly is important for practitioners.

Internet and social media is a relatively new channel that opinion leaders and seekers use in influencing other consumers and to gather information. Social media creates a platform for people to connect with each other which enables them more control over the messages they receive, generate and share (Okazaki, 2009), in other words, social media participants use social media as a tool for online word of mouth (WOM). Since online WOM is more influential due to its speed, convenience, one-to-many reach, and its absence of face-to-face human pressure (Phelps, Lewis, Mobilio, Perry and Raman, 2004), describing decision making styles of social media opinion leaders and seekers, who are critical players in creating online WOM, is crucial for especially marketers. In this context, online interpersonal influence has become an important topic for marketers and recently studies have started to scrutinize online opinion leaders/seekers during the last decade (Lyons and Henderson, 2005; Sun, Youn, Wu and Kuntaraporn, 2006; Tsang and Zhou, 2005). On the other hand, any specific application on social media opinion leadership or seeking has not been found whereas social media interest is escalating gradually. In the light of the foregoing, the research questions (RQ1-2) are proposed as follows:

RQ₁: Do decision-making styles of high and low “social media opinion leaders” differ?

RQ₂: Do decision-making styles of high and low “social media opinion seekers” differ?

METHODOLOGY

In this study, decision-making styles of respondents were measured by using the 40 items original CSI scale of Sproles and Kendall (1986). In the questionnaire, twelve items that assess social media opinion leadership and seeking behavior were also applied. Scale items developed originally by Flynn, Goldsmith, Eastman (1996) in order to measure opinion leadership/seeking were adapted to the

research purpose. An example of items for social media opinion leadership scale is “I often persuade other people to buy the product that I like in social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, blogs, forums etc.”, for social media opinion seeking is “When I consider buying a product, I ask other people for advice in social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, blogs, forums etc.”. All the items were scored on 7-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. All questions were translated to Turkish and back translation was conducted to ensure comparability. Cronbach's alphas of the scales had satisfactory reliabilities which are; .808 for CSI, .818 for social media opinion leadership, .856 for social media opinion seeking. SPSS 16.0 software program was utilized for statistical analysis of data.

Quantitative data were gathered from a convenience sample of undergraduate students because of their high internet and social media usage rates in Turkey (TSI, 2011). The questionnaire was administered in social activity center of Dokuz Eylül University campus (located in Izmir, third biggest city of Turkey) during October 2011. 265 respondents were surveyed of which 257 of responses were usable for analysis. The selected sample's main characteristics were female (50.4%) with moderate monthly household income (86.5%). 32.5% of respondents were sophomores, 26.9% were freshmen, 25.2% were juniors and 15.4% were seniors. Over half (61.6%) of the sample spends at least two hours daily for social media.

FINDINGS

Bartlett's test of sphericity leads to significant result ($p = .000$) with acceptable value of the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy (0.795) which indicates that conducting factor analysis on the data is appropriate. Exploratory principal components factor analysis (PCA) with a varimax rotation was performed to identify the dimensions of the CSI. All factor loadings of 0.40 or above were identified in the factor matrix which is the same level used by Sproles and Kendall (1986). Some factors were dropped because they consisted of limited number of items or conflicting items that could not be interpreted meaningfully. The 10-factor solution explained 61.52% of the variance in the correlation matrix compared to the 46% obtained by Sproles and Kendall (1986). Eight of the ten factors corresponded exactly to Sproles and Kendall's (1996) study discussed earlier: Perfectionist, high quality conscious consumer (Factor 1), Brand conscious, “price equals quality” consumer (Factor 2), Recreational, hedonistic consumer (Factor 3), Novelty-fashion conscious consumer (Factor 4), Confused by over choice consumer (Factor 5), Impulsive, careless consumer (Factor 6), Habitual, brand loyal consumer (Factor 7), Price conscious, “value for money” consumer (Factor 9). One of the additional two factors is “Shopping avoider consumer” (Factor 8) which complies with Kavas and Yesilada's (2007) research. The last factor, which covers the item of “The lower price products are usually my choice”

was labeled as “Lower price seeking consumer” (Factor 10). The reason behind this result, which reflects a price conscious consumer, is that a consumer may look for sale prices but this does not necessarily mean that s/he focuses on only lower price products. Therefore the finding of the mentioned item as a new separate factor seems reasonable. All ten factors showed reliable results ($\alpha \geq .622$). Table 1 contains the factor loadings for the rotated PCA solution and Cronbach’s α values for each of the factors.

Table 1: Consumer Decision Making Styles

Factors	Items	Factor Loadings	Eigenvalues	Cumulative Explained Variance (%)	α
Factor 1: Perfectionist, high quality conscious consumer	Item 3: In general, I usually try to buy the best overall quality.	.876	6.975	9.32	.874
	Item 2: When it comes to purchasing products, I try to get the very best or perfect choice.	.870			
	Item 4: I make special effort to choose the very best quality products.	.787			
	Item 1: Getting very good quality is very important to me.	.776			
	Item 6: My standards and expectations for products I buy are very high.	.601			
Factor 2: Brand conscious, “price equals quality” consumer	Item 11: The higher the price of a product, the better its quality.	.772	3.397	18.09	.834
	Item 10: The more expensive brands are usually my choices.	.757			
	Item 13: I prefer buying the best-selling brands.	.728			
	Item 12: Nice department and specialty stores offer me the best products.	.711			
	Item 14: The most advertised brands are usually very good choices.	.700			
	Item 9: The well-known national brands are best for me.	.549			
Factor 3: Recreational, hedonistic consumer	Item 21: Going shopping is one of the enjoyable activities of my life	.798	3.337	24.91	.797
	Item 20: Shopping is not a pleasant activity to me	.774			
	Item 23: I enjoy shopping just for the fun of it	.711			
	Item 24: I make my shopping trips fast	.645			
Factor 4: Novelty-fashion conscious consumer	Item 16: I keep my wardrobe up-to-date with the changing fashions.	.768	2.238	31.67	.813
	Item 17: Fashionable, attractive styling is very important to me.	.735			
	Item 15: I usually have one or more outfits of the very newest style.	.641			
	Item 18: To get variety, I shop different stores and choose different brands.	.604			
Factor 5: Confused by over choice consumer	Item 34: Sometimes it's hard to choose which stores to shop.	.757	2.100	38.23	.778
	Item 36: All the information I get on different products confuses me	.756			
	Item 33: There are so many brands to choose from that I often feel confused.	.746			
	Item 35: The more I learn about products; the harder it seems to choose the best.	.727			
Factor 6: Impulsive, careless consumer	Item 32: I carefully watch how much I spend.	-.756	1.778	44.29	.622
	Item 31: I take the time to shop carefully for the best buys.	-.668			
	Item 30: Often I make careless purchases I later wish I had not.	-.572			

Factor 7: Habitual, brand loyal consumer	Item 39: I go to the same stores each time I shop.	.797	1.551	49.61	.688
	Item 38: Once I find a product or brand I like, I stick with it.	.771			
	Item 37: I have favorite brands I buy over and over.	.606			
Factor 8: Shopping avoider consumer	Item 8: A product doesn't have to be perfect, or the best, to satisfy me.	.765	1.270	54.06	.783
	Item 5: I really don't give my purchases much thought or care.	.586			
	Item 29: I am impulsive when purchasing.	-.503			
Factor 9: Price conscious, "value for money" consumer	Item 25: I buy as much as possible at sale prices.	.746	1.238	58.17	.657
	Item 27: I look carefully to find the best value for the money.	.535			
Factor 10: Lower price seeking consumer	Item 26: The lower price products are usually my choice.	.768	1.056	61.53	-
Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis, Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization, Rotation converged in 14 iterations.					

Exploratory analyses were applied to test the dimensionality of social media opinion leader/seeker scales, which resulted in unidimensional factors for each of the constructs. The consumer decision making style differences of opinion leaders and opinion seekers in social media were examined by employing one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) through grouping the opinion leaders and seekers into two categories (high and low) (Tables 2 and 3) because ANOVA helps to examine the significant mean differences among two or more groups on an interval or ratio scaled dependent variable. Grouping was done by a median-split on their opinion leadership/seeking scores. The subjects on the median were excluded for more accurate analyses. The high "social media opinion leader" group consisted of 48.0 % of the subjects, and the low "social media opinion leader" group consisted of 52 % of the subjects. The high "social media opinion seeker" group consisted of 46.2 % of the subjects, and the low "social media opinion seeker" group consisted of 53.8 % of the subjects.

Table 2: One-way ANOVA of High and Low Opinion Leaders' Decision Making Styles

	Opinion Leader			
	μ (Low) (σ)	μ (High) (σ)	F	p
Factor 1: Perfectionist, high quality conscious consumer	4.95 (1.24)	5.29 (1.23)	3.882	.050
Factor 3: Recreational, hedonistic consumer	3.86 (1.50)	4.57 (1.71)	10.117	.020
Factor 4: Novelty-fashion conscious consumer	3.43 (1.36)	3.97 (1.45)	8.016	.050
Factor 6: Impulsive, careless consumer	3.78 (0.77)	3.44 (0.95)	9.069	.030
Factor 7: Habitual, brand loyal consumer	4.32 (1.32)	4.77 (1.29)	6.381	.012
Factor 9: Price conscious, "value for money" consumer	4.87 (1.26)	5.21 (1.20)	4.344	.038
Factor 10: Lower price seeking consumer	3.54 (1.47)	3.11 (1.49)	4.449	.036
p < .05				

Table 3: One-way ANOVA of High and Low Opinion Seekers’ Decision Making Styles

	Opinion Seeker			
	μ (Low) (σ)	μ (High) (σ)	F	p
Factor 1: Perfectionist, high quality conscious consumer	5.03 (1.29)	5.38 (1.09)	4.581	.033
Factor 2: Brand conscious, “price equals quality” consumer	3.11 (1.11)	3.50 (1.31)	5.381	.021
Factor 4: Novelty-fashion conscious consumer	3.43 (1.39)	4.01 (1.47)	8.999	.003
Factor 5: Confused by over choice consumer	3.60 (1.27)	3.98 (1.42)	4.436	.036
Factor 9: Price conscious, “value for money” consumer	4.82 (1.37)	5.36 (1.10)	10.014	.002
p < .05				

The high and low “social media opinion leaders” do not significantly differ with respect to brand consciousness, confusion and shopping avoidance ($p > .05$). Respondents who are high “social media opinion leaders” are more perfectionist, recreational and hedonistic, novelty-fashion conscious, habitual-brand loyal, price conscious consumers where as less impulsive and lower price seeking consumers compared to low opinion leaders. On the other hand, the decision-making styles of high and low “social media opinion seekers” significantly differ through perfectionism, brand consciousness, novelty-fashion consciousness, confusion and price consciousness. ANOVA also demonstrated that high “social media opinion seekers” are more perfectionist, brand conscious, novelty-fashion conscious, confused and price conscious consumers than low “social media opinion seekers”.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Conclusion

This study attempts to enrich the research area of consumer decision making styles and explains how these decision traits differ between high and low “social media opinion leaders/seekers” in social media. Ten decision-making styles were found relevant to undergraduate students and two new decision-making styles which are “shopping avoidance” and “lower price seeking” were proposed. These findings were used to analyze the decision-making styles of high and low “social media opinion leaders/seekers”.

The results of the analysis reveal that social media opinion leaders shop more carefully, more systematically and by comparing other alternatives. These consumers are not satisfied with only “good enough” products/services, enjoy shopping and feel excitement and pleasure from buying new products. In other words, variety-seeking behavior seems an important aspect for social media opinion leaders. Similarly, Woratschek and Horbel (2006) also revealed that opinion leaders in tourism seem to be variety-seeking tourists at the same time.

Additionally, social media opinion leaders have favorite brands and this result is also compatible with Hoyer and Stokburger-Sauer's (2007) study stating that opinion leaders are more loyal than other consumers. Moreover, in the literature, level of price consciousness of social media opinion leaders is not differentiated and some studies support the proposition that opinion leaders can show the characteristic of price consciousness (e.g. Tigert and Arnold, 1971). It is interesting to note that social media opinion leaders plan their shopping and look for sale prices but they do not put emphasis on lower prices as much as low "social media opinion leaders" do.

Opinion seekers search for more information related to shopping through social media. They have a tendency to buy best selling, well known national brands, which is compatible with their variety seeking style. Additionally, they are more concerned with getting best value for their money. Tai (2005) also found supportive results, which reveal that opinion seekers consider product quality and value for money as important decision criteria. Notably, high "social media opinion seekers" are more confused which intensely triggers information seeking tendency via social media.

Managerial Implications

A goal of this study is also to provide marketing insights to practitioners in terms of online interpersonal influences by understanding the decision-making styles of social media opinion leaders/seekers. Due to widespread usage of internet and social media among young generation and high tendency to communicate within each other in social media, marketers should carefully examine the social media opinion leaders and seekers. Marketers should inform social media opinion leaders about new products/campaigns in order to reach social media information seekers and create favorable WOM. However, this informative content should cover not only emotional appeals but also rational appeals such as price, quality. This content of the marketing messages is also critical for social media opinion seekers to eliminate the opinion seeker-specific confusion. Consequently, since social media opinion leaders and seekers are the most important actors in managing and utilizing online WOM as a tool for generating online communities, profiling their decision making styles will create a valuable opportunity to the marketers in order to gain advantage in highly competitive computer-mediated environment.

LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

The generalizability of the study is limited by the use of a convenience sample of undergraduate students only in third biggest city of Turkey, which cannot be the reflection of overall Turkey. Further work should replicate and extend the findings of this study in other cultures by adding some other variables such as social media involvement.

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