The Strength of an Opinion Leader’s Supporters

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Abstract: Watts and Dodds (2007) showed that in a simulation, supporters of opinion leaders have larger influence than opinion leaders themselves. In this paper, a case analysis was done of an anonymous housewife who created a network and acquired supporters on a social network and then started an apparel brand. The analysis revealed that influence strengthens by having both (a) a network centered around an opinion leader and (b) a complete network with six hardcore fans acting as supporters.

Keywords: SNS, marketing, influential, word of mouth

Introduction

Kaz and Lazarsfeld (1955) proposed that opinion leaders are responsible for a two-step flow in which information is absorbed from

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mass media and conveyed to others by assimilation. Nonetheless, in a simulation, Watts and Dodds (2007) showed the growth in influence that occurs as a result of those around an opinion leader,\(^1\) rather than the opinion leader, supporting the opinions of that leader. The question then is, “What kind of network is created in actuality?”

“Yori” is an apparel brand that was started in June 2015\(^2\) and primarily relies on Internet shopping rather than physical stores for sales. Yori brand’s popular products sell out quickly as soon as they are available. Several times in a year the brand appears with a limited stock in department stores in Osaka, Tokyo, and Nagoya, and those shops allow only a limited number of customers via an entry ticket system. The brand’s popularity is such that these entry tickets are sold before the afternoon. Pricing for Yori clothing is relatively high, with the most common price range for shirts being from 10,000 to 20,000 yen and for skirts being from 20,000 to 40,000 yen, clearly distinguishing them from fast fashion.\(^3\)

### Case Study

@yoko915 is a Yori’s designer. As of April 2018, she had 166,000

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1. Acar and Polonsky (2007) noted that opinion leaders are more likely to communicate their brand use online. In addition, Marsteller (2001) showed the possibility that opinion leaders can exponentially influence others through the Internet.

2. According to the brand’s website, the brand was created out of a simple desire for high-quality materials and attention to detail for clothing made in Japan. The threads are made of twisted cotton, which makes them strong, and the combination of several strands of thread can be used to make a new thread. The brand was called “Yori” on the basis of this important initial twisting process, called “Yori” in Japanese. The brand concept is the “desire to have someone joyful over carefully crafted clothing because they like good things.”

3. The supply unit price dropped to one-third over a 20-year period (Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, 2016).
followers on Instagram. When she began using Instagram on December 24, 2011, she was a housewife. From that time until she started Yori in June 2015 (December 24, 2011 to June 30, 2015), she placed 931 posts on Instagram. As of April 2018, a survey of these posts showed that the average number of likes for these posts was 174.2, while the average number of characters used in the posts was 29.9, and the average number of comments was 1.4. This approximately 42-month timeframe can be divided into the following five periods.

Phase 1: Period of posting with only photos (December 2011 to September 2013)

During the first time period, posts were few, with no posts in some months. Likes for her posts rarely exceeded one. Most of the posted photos were related to children and had no comments from followers.

Phase 2: Period of posting with pictures and phrase (October 2013 to November 2013)

Posts started appearing in this period with words rather than mere photographs. However, the average number of characters per post during this time was still quite low (20.1). The average number of likes per post was 4.6, and the average number of comments on posts by followers was still low (0.8). Many of the posted photos were still related to children.

Phase 3: Period of posting with pictures, phrases, and hashtags (December 2013 to February 2014)

Hashtag use, and not simply characters and words, began in this period. Not only did the average number of characters per post increase to 30.4 but also the posts became easier to be searched because of the use of hashtags, and the average number of likes per post increased greatly to 34.3. The average number of follower comments also increased to 6.6. Posts on clothing outfits began to increase during this period. The comments show that many users were “mothers” and became followers out of attraction to fashionable outfits whether or not they played with children. In addition,
@yoko915 frequently replied to comments and was careful to reciprocate follows from other users.

Phase 4: Period of earning three digits of likes everyday (March 2014 to June 2014)

Having acquired a greater number of followers by responding to comments, reciprocal followings, and fashionable outfits in phase 3, the average number of likes in this phase increased to 141.4, and the average number of comments to 21.6 (the average number of characters per post was 27.4). This phase also saw continued posting of photographs of outfits, responses to comments, and reciprocal followings.

Phase 5: Starting a multi-brand store on the internet (July 2014 to June 2015)

Most of the followers acquired up till this point trusted the fashion sense of @yoko915 and can be considered her fans. With these “fans,” @yoko915 opened the multi-brand Internet store “THE DAY,” selling imported inexpensive clothing from South Korea. Before selling clothing, @yoko915 acted as a model wearing sample clothes and posted pictures on Instagram, gaining many likes in the process (an average of 336.8 per post). In this phase, the average number of characters per post was 48.9, perhaps because of the more detailed explanations of clothing items.

Many of the clothes sold in phase 5 appear to be inexpensive although at that time @yoko915 sometimes posted photographs of herself wearing more expensive (around 8,000 yen) clothing. If these had many comments stating “I want it!” she would directly ask customers whether they would like to buy those items although they were expensive than usual. If many people wanted to buy that item, she would start selling it. When many followers in comments told her that a product was sold out and asked when it would be back in stock, she knew that the product was popular. At the same time, she was aware of the inventory risk of a product stock-out and likely
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purchased quantities she was certain would get sold.

With many followers around the same age and among children, @yoko915 posted for customers facing similar circumstances and created clothes, which she wanted to wear, for such customers. She announced that she had gone to a clothing school and had previously worked in an apparel company. She posted her designs and followers responded by saying, “I want clothing like this!” While it may be natural to assume that followers are customers, @yoko915 continued to proactively engage her followers. If a followed lived nearby, she would often meet them. @kummy153 met @yoko915 on Instagram during this period and ended up starting Yori with her. After being introduced to a writer from the popular fashion magazine VERY, she first appeared on the pages of the magazine as a popular Instagrammer in August 2014, after which she began frequent appearances in the magazine and became famous.

The long-awaited kickoff of the original Yori apparel brand took place in May 2015. It used the same method as that employed for “THE DAY,” with @yoko915 directly asking users about things she did not know. On June 10, 2015, she posted this question:

We have to decide the production volumes of Yori items. I have no idea how well they will sell, and we are all worried....

Responses to this post included 538 likes and 40 comments. Most comments noted the desire for @yoko915 to manufacture lot of items. @yoko915 likely decided about the production volume on the basis of a comparison of likes and comments on the sales made in her multi-brand store.

In addition, @yoko915 appealed to her followers with her passionate thoughts on her brand, such as the following:

I’ve written a ton about the timeline of Yori and its concept, but if I
was to give one example, it would be that it is not about a genre or an age group, but rather how I want most of all to have people wear what they want to wear. Yori clothing is made in our own factory in Japan, and we have been able to reduce the prices a lot by selling only on the company’s website. I want to speak much more passionately about that, but I’ll stop here for today.

Analysis of an Opinion Leader’s Network

Because Instagram does not provide information about the time when someone starts following, we cannot confirm anything other than a network at a given point in time. An investigation of the network surrounding @yoko915 (No. 29) with the relationships⁴ of current followers on Instagram as of April 2018 shows that @yoko915 has around six hardcore fans (No. 23–No. 28) (Figure 1). Comments are frequently exchanged with @yoko915, and most posts are related to Yori. Surrounded by the hardcore fans is a more expansive network of general users that similarly have Yori clothing. A network of 2-step users based on hardcore fans is shown in Figure 1. The six hardcore fans, No. 23–No. 28, are completely graphed, along with their surrounding networks. The Instagram posts made by these six individuals are often related to Yori. For example, “80% of the clothes in my closet are Yori” or “I can’t wait for X [another hardcore fan] to try on Yori clothing.” As a result, some posts noted a real world connection among hardcore fans, with Yori exhibitions “attended by all those connected by Yori who get along well with each other.”

At the same time, all users in Figure 1 network are fans of Yori and followers of @yoko915; thus, we get Figure 2 by removing relationships with @yoko915 as seen in Figure 1.

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⁴ Users can read posts of their followers even without following a particular person; thus, posts do not differentiate between one-way and reciprocal followings.
Next, Figure 3 is a graph of a network of @yoko915 without hardcore fans. While @yoko915 is central to this network, there are few connections among other users.

In other words, general consumers who like Yori obtain information about it not only from @yoko915 but also by following hardcore
fans. Seeing Yori clothing worn by hardcore fans possibly causes a desire to purchase that clothing. There are numerous comments among hardcore fans of @yoko915, and hardcore fans appear to be aware of themselves as a “supporting group” and not just “general consumers” of Yori. In other words, they are supporters with an influence just as was noted by Watts and Dodds (2007).

Conclusion

In a simulation, Watts and Dodds (2007) showed that supporters of an opinion leader have a greater influence than opinion leaders themselves (in this case, @yoko915) who exert an influence on many. However, even in the case analyzed in this paper, six hardcore fans supported @yoko915 and allowed her to sell Yori clothing. In their network model, Watts and Dodds (2007) showed that information characteristically flows bi-directionally and in a two- or more-step process, although in the network of Yori consumers as well, information flows bi-directionally between hardcore fans and general
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consumers.\textsuperscript{5}

To date, there have been boundaries between apparel makers and consumers, with relationships delineating “myself, the maker, and you, the buyer.” However, most followers of @yoko915 are mothers, just like @yoko915, and are interested in fashion. By appealing to the social network followers of a similar profile, @yoko915 changes this relationship from “me and you” to “we,” creating an atmosphere featuring “clothing for us.” This is a success factor for Yori.

Acknowledgments

This work was supported by JSPS Grant-in-Aid for Publication of Scientific Research Results, Grant Number JP16HP2004.

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\textsuperscript{5} Cases where communication among consumers impacts sales have already been reported (Kuwashima, 2016, 2018a; Yamashiro, 2017).
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