



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH IN BUSINESS & SOCIAL SCIENCES



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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v8-i13/4817>

DOI: 10.6007/IJARBSS/v8-i13/4817

Received: 22 Sept 2018, Revised: 19 Oct 2018, Accepted: 29 Oct 2018

Published Online: 12 Nov 2018

In-Text Citation: (Saad, Salman, Abdullah, Lyndon, Azima & Zaimah 2018)

To Cite this Article: Saad, S., Salman, A., Abdullah, M. Y., Lyndon, N., Azima, A. M., Zaimah, R. & Sarmila, M.S. (2018). Personal Characteristics of Opinion Leader in Influencing Youth Involvement in Oil Palm Industry. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 8(13 Special Issue: Community Development & Social Mobility), 130–141.

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Vol. 8, No. 13 – Special Issue: Community Development & Social Mobility, 2018, Pg. 130 - 141

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Personal Characteristics of Opinion Leader in Influencing Youth Involvement in Oil Palm Industry

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Abstract

This study analyzed the influence of opinion leaders based on their personal characteristics at the village level which is still not fully exposed to latest information technology. Opinion leader should be individual who is important and influential for the success of village development programs and attract youth to engage in the oil palm industry. In this study, data collected are both primary and secondary. Primary data were collected using a qualitative approach through face to face interviews with four informants comprising of entrepreneur, the village chief, a member of Village Development and Security Committee (VDSC) and an acting head of the village in northern part of Johor, Malaysia. The study found that personal traits such as personality and demographic are important in attracting youth to engage in the oil palm industry. Individuals with social status, high income, innovative, knowledgeable in agriculture and have high social mobility are more likely to have followers among the youth. This means that formal education is no longer a main criterion for someone to gain followers because what matters is the personality, experiences and expertise in the field. Other important features are media habits, product-related characteristics, social attributes, and also having characteristics of an opinion seeker. In addition, the study found that opinion leaders who are directly involved in the oil palm industry are more trusted by the youth as compared to the leaders who hold key positions at the village level but partially involved in the sector.

Keywords: *Opinion Leaders, Communication, Oil Palm, Social Mobility, Youth*

Introduction

Social intervention in development is designed to transform society through the acceptance and involvement of the public in various programs and projects implemented. The programs and projects are communicated to the public via dissemination of messages either by media or interpersonal source. Regardless of the media used, an effective message dissemination must take into account the social structure of a society. The social structure of society formed a vital network of interdependence between individuals and eventually will become an important determinant in the success of a community development program (Aizul Fidy and Suhana Saad 2017). Therefore, experts who are similar in the target beneficiary's social environment will be perceived as more familiar and easier to influence others than if an idea is disseminated by outsiders.

In this study, individuals who are influential in the social environment or opinion leaders are examined with the aim to understand the degree of personal characteristics possessed by these individuals in affecting the influence of a leader. In the context of village communities who are mostly oil palm smallholders the opinion leaders have an effect on individuals who are around them. What makes these individuals influential? Therefore, the study of personal characteristics of opinion leaders is important to understand their ability to influence the youth to engage in the oil palm industry. Previous researches have found that many individual successes are based on sustainability of businesses, make full use of the opportunities, take risks, research, creative and innovative, self-interest and high motivation. In addition, they also have the experience, network and asset ownership.

Small farmers who are successful is because of their ability to control the diversification of economic opportunities. The secret of their success can be used as icons for others, especially the younger generations, who are already exposed to this sector, but what is important is to create awareness and enthusiasm for success through participation in oil palm agriculture. Thus, identifying the characteristics of opinion leaders in the traditional environment is important because of the possibility of significant differences or new dimensions possessed by those who are less exposed to the latest information technology.

Method of Study

The study involved data collection from both primary and secondary source. Primary data obtained through face to face interviews with informants identified as opinion leaders consisting of an entrepreneur, the village chief, the Village Development and Security Committee (JKKK) and an acting head of the village. Indicators of opinion leaders in this study are oil palm smallholders, leader of the village, entrepreneurs, have won several awards for excellent smallholders, and also highly respected by the villagers. Interviews were also conducted with officials of MPOB, to get their views on the role played by opinion leaders in helping young people to take up agriculture, especially palm oil. Two locations were identified for the study, Kluang and Kulai Jaya both in North Johor. Johor State has the most number of smallholders in Peninsular Malaysia followed by Perak, Selangor and Pahang. Secondary data collection is dependent on resources such as books, journals and reports and bulletins published by the MPOB (Malaysian Palm Oil Board).

Early study on opinion leader

The study of opinion leaders began in 1940 when sociologist Paul Lazarsfeld conducted a survey on the presidential election in the United States to find out how mass media affect political opinion of voters. The results showed that voters are not influenced by the mainstream media, but it is through their friends. Thus, a theory of the so-called Two-Step Flow was introduced to see how a particular information moved from mass media to opinion leaders, and from opinion leaders to the entire population. In 1960, this idea has been expanded by Everett Rogers et al, which puts it in the context of the theory of diffusion of innovation in society. The use of technological innovation starts slowly and then accelerates suddenly as it accepted by the majority.

Since then, there are numerous definitions of opinion leaders. Opinion leaders are defined as those in the social network and has a strong influence on the acceptance of others (Cho, Hwang & Lee 2012). Opinion leaders is how far one can influence the unofficial attitude or behavior of other individuals outright in a desired manner (Rogers 2003). Opinion leaders are described as the deputy speaker's mouth who are influential and their influence have a substantial impact on the decision making process of other users (Valente and Davis 1995).

An opinion leader is an individual who serves as a source of information, advice and service to the people (Rogers 1983). They are made up of individuals who either hold official positions or not, but their influence is informal, through face to face communication in a relaxed atmosphere. In addition, people who seek advice and information from opinion leaders will be affected in decision-making and behavior. Opinion leaders are more exposed to the media, more cosmopolitan, more friendly and accessible, often involved in community relations, high in socio-economic status and education and firm as compared to the individual who is not a leader.

Being an opinion leader requires maintaining technical competence of an individual, social accessibility and adherence to the norms of the system. When the social system is change-oriented, opinion leaders will be more innovative and vice versa if the social system is against changes, the behavior of opinion leaders will reflect a similar fashion. The social system is generally comprised of opinion leaders who innovate and promote change and opinion leaders who resist change. However, the influence of opinion leaders will diminish if their behavior is not consistent with the existing norms of the social system.

Opinion leaders will not exist without opinion seekers because opinion leaders give advice as requested by the opinion seekers. Opinion leaders creates a feeling of enthusiasm, guidance, awareness and assurance to his followers that will reduce uncertainty in decision-making by his followers (Clement, Proppe and Rott 2007). Based on the interest and awareness of a particular product introduced by opinion leaders, the followers will be interested in the product. Opinion leaders have a variety of functions and responsibilities in a community. Opinion leaders act as the intermediary for communication between the community and the agencies that implement the program.

Opinion leader and influence on society

Opinion leaders play an important role in understanding the potential of technology and communicate it to the wider social network. Opinion leaders should have a high esteem for anyone who accepts their ideas. The effects of competition in attracting followers by opinion leaders in social

groups based on four characteristics identified opinion: leaders' reputation, stubbornness, extreme levels of appeal and use bounded confidence model. He found that opinion leaders have a reputation for stubbornness and extreme high levels can cause difficulties for a group to reach a consensus but a strong opinion leader makes it more appealing. Opinion leaders who are successful are usually less stubborn, more appealing and less extreme to attract more followers and competitive environment (Chen, David, Glass and McCartney 2016).

The importance of the involvement of opinion leaders in the medical field were examined to determine their effectiveness. However, it difficult to reach consensus on who the opinion leaders are and what are their roles. The credibility, authority and influence of opinion leaders not only born of personality, skills and their dynamic relationship with others, but also other factors. Opinion leaders made up of professionals and peers play important role (Louise, Dopson, Chambers and Gabbay 2001). However, opinion leaders such as peers are seen as more convincing and taken to as role model by their colleagues. Thus, the opinion leader is someone who has the ability to informally influencing the attitudes or behavior of individuals through methods require. This study uses the theory of diffusion of innovation to see the effect of one's personal criteria that have been successful in the community to be appointed as opinion leaders and their ability to spread the impact and intensity of these effects to attract the youth to engage in oil palm agriculture sector.

Findings and Discussions

There are four informants who have been interviewed in this study (Table 1). They are comprised of entrepreneur, the village chief, a member of Village Development and Security Committee (VDSC) and an acting head of the village in northern part of Johor, Malaysia.

Table 1. Background of informants

Informant	Position	Achievement/award	Experience
i1 age 55 (PayaLayang-Layang Village)	Village Head	-	-palm oil smallholder -two years as village head -involved in a group chilli farming. -contractor
i2 (Seri Paya Village)	-acting village head -retiree of Malaysian Airline Cargo	-	-palm oil smallholder -homestay and Restaurant operator
i3 age 60 (Parit Tengah Village)	Village development and safety committee	Malaysian palm oil award 2016	-palm oil smallholder -involved in pineapple planting integration -contractor -sewing shop -homestay

<p>i4 Age 60 (ParitKassan Village)</p>	<p>-entrepreneur -President of North Johor Fruit Sellers</p>	<p>Malaysian palm oil award 2013</p>	<p>-Palm oil smallholder -Owner of weighing Centre -Retail shop and restaurant owner -Contractor -Palm oil nursery owner -President of North Johor Fruit Sellers Association -Livestock (Cattle and Sheep) Farmer -District Meat Supplier -Integrated Farming</p>
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Characteristics of the opinion leader from the traditional perspective

Personality

Opinion leaders have been reported to be less dogmatic, more innovative, more venturesome, confident in their appraisal of the product category, and more socially active. Self-confidence is probably a function of greater knowledge of product features as a result of higher level involvement in the product category (Suhana Saad et.al. 2017) Social activity is probably a function of a general tendency to be more gregarious and cosmopolitan (Chan and Misra 1990). Personality also refers to people who dare to introduce new ideas to his followers. Thus, an opinion leader must understand the aspirations of youth. If the idea is contrary, he will not be able to attract many followers. i1,

"I've created a youth wiring program for youth who have been expelled from school. Taking wiring course can get allowance but they do not want ... after that sending the youth to safety and security course in Rapid Pengerang, but had little support, meanwhile there are many job opportunities. Now considering entrepreneurial activities through mini-RTC (Rural Transformation Center) under the SimpangRenggam parliamentary"(interview February 6, 2017).

The personality and charisma of a person is important in influencing followers, but a successful opinion leader should be part of the community in which he tried to find influence. i1 is a village leader and oil palm smallholder, but changes he brought is not in his field of expertise, moreover he never participated in the wiring safety & security course. So this program can be seen not attract many followers. The situation is different with i4, youth is not only an oil palm smallholders but is well-known entrepreneur and has won several awards such as the Farmers' heights. His efforts attracted more followers because youth need a simple icon that can prove they have been successful in the sector they want to get followers.

An opinion leader is also a good motivator. He will encourage others in addition to sharing the knowledge he has. i4 engaging young workers in the population and his relatives to work in the companies and the palm oil fields. He has proven that agriculture is a profitable business if done in earnest and dedicated. Now his skills and expertise are inherited by his children. To encourage the

children involved in the cultivation of oil palm, he divided the land and livestock to be worked on. In addition, motivation is always given so that the younger generation will buy land for survival in the future.

Demographics

Few demographic characteristics have been found to differentiate opinion leaders from followers. Some characteristic maybe a younger, higher level of education, earning high income, and showing greater social mobility (Riecken and Yavas 1983). Their impact is greatest when they are socio-demographically similar to recipients (Danko & MacLachlan 1983). In this study, formal education did not play an important role. Followers who have traditionally lived in the village place more value on the experience and expertise of an individual to be opinion leader. Only i2 are found to have a level of education better than i1, i3 and i4 who just graduated from secondary school. i4 a successful and well-known entrepreneur, he has 98 employees working on the farm and his company. e only has a secondary school education. He started his business as a teenager and made friends with an experienced businessman. After managing to raise some funds, he bought land and planted oil palm. Efforts to develop his business continued by rearing cattle and sheep, a supplier of beef, opened a restaurant, working as a contractor, and also established an oil palm nursery. Although he has only a primary education, i4 he is high in social mobility and respected by the locals, especially the youth. His success in agriculture, livestock and business made him to achieve high income and is able to employ more workers. Mostly at the village within the social system, the society is still traditional, the elderly are still respected for their experience and cultural values of local communities. In this context, individuals who have become opinion leaders are among adults aged 50 years and above.

Social attributes

Social attributes are associated with individuals who have good social interactions within their social environment. They must be favoured by their followers and others. Social attributes will ensure an intensity of influence by opinion leaders to gain followers. They must be people who are willing to help, not stingy of their knowledge and have a good interaction with the locals. Generally they are recognizable and approachable by the public. These characteristics are shown by i3 who called the young people who are interested to learn more about palm oil. He will teach the entire work process from the early stages of oil palm cultivation, which began with the determination of suitable sites, palm seed selection, site clearing, planting, the work of cleaning the garden, fertilizing and harvesting. Although it is not entirely welcome, but it has managed to involve the four youths to be involved in this effort. Leadership opinion views in the diffusion of innovation model that aims to explain how new ideas and practices spread or between communities (Rogers 2003). Leaders do not necessarily represent the opinion of the early adopters of an innovation as such action is too risky that would eventually bring down their reputation. Instead, they will monitor the opinion around and only when benefits will begin to affect new ideas introduced very significant and the existing social norms starting to change. As i3, his success has attracted youth formerly working factory but now the oil palm smallholders and shape them giving rise to a keen interest to engage in this career.

Media habits

Early research seems to support the notion that although opinion leader are more exposed to mass media in general. However, there is empirical evidence which suggests that opinion leader may differ in level of exposure to print media such as magazines or news paper, which are more information (Danko and Yavas (1983). For the village community, newspaper, radio and television are their main source of information. Efforts to search for information through the internet is still less. For a village far from the city center, they do not have the internet to get information. Thus, reliance on sources of information is not fully developed. Although there are constraints in obtaining information via websites, social media are important intermediaries for all the informants interviewed. For i1, his fellow villagers have whatsapp for JKKK (Village development and safety committee), women, the Yasin union (a religious union) and relationship in the village also use Whatsapp application to promote activities and programs conducted in the village on Facebook. This effort is conducted by almost all the opinion leaders, especially those who become leaders in the village. In that case of i3, he has use whatsapp to connect with the youth under his guidance. He will be in touch with them every day to provide tutoring. This method is considered quicker and easier to do than face to face communication. Just sometimes problems occur due to slow Internet access. Overall, the use of whatsapp is the most popular among the villagers as compared to websites. The next application is the use of Facebook to promote the activities of the village. Social networking sites such as Facebook offer various opportunities to express opinions on politics or public affairs, raise awareness of specific topics, and send links to media contents to the whole friend list (Ali Salman et.al. 2016; Suhana Saad et. al. 2017; Emma Mohamad and Wan Chooi Han 2017).

Product-related Characteristics

Opinion leaders have been found to be more knowledgeable about, and enduringly involved with the relevant product. Individuals who are highly involved with a product are more likely to be interested in and accumulate knowledge about the product (Danko & Yavas 1983). All informants of this study are still doing the farm work themselves, even though they have workers. The aim is to monitor and provide guidance in terms of cultivation methods, spraying against insecticides and use of fertilizers. These farm owners are skilled in what they are doing and still are directly involved and not just leave the farmwork to the employers alone. Knowledge related to products such as the purchase of seeds, the use of the suitable pesticides, the latest breed of palm oil, fertilizers and the latest technologies related to oil palm should be known by an opinion leader. i3 will monitor and ensure that the use of fertilizers, pesticides, seeds should be communicated to him. i3 also learn about marketing methods, where to buy the latest products and is often referred to by the youth under his guidance for information. Hence, an opinion leader should have a broad knowledge compared to his followers about products related to the oil palm industry. In addition, they also have to know how to promote and expand the market for their products.

Innovative

Innovative is one of the important features that determine the intensity of influence of an opinion leader. An opinion leader who is innovative is the first to get new products, survey if there are new products that will appear and know about the development of a product. However, this innovative

concept is more appropriate in the study related to the marketing of the product or in a community whose members have been exposed widely to the media. Innovative features exist among the informants interviewed, but they are not early adopters as mentioned by Rogers in the theory of diffusion of innovation. This is due to a lack of exposure to the latest communication technologies that causes these opinion leaders to be opinion seekers, i.e. a complementary rotation between opinion leaders in the search of opinion.

Opinion seekers

Opinion leaders can not exist without the opinion seekers as opinion leaders give advice requested by the opinion seekers (Rogers 1983). Therefore, opinion leadership may be an indication of innovativeness; opinion leaders may be created from early adopters to persuade later adopters to try a new product or service (Danko and Yavas 1983). The study found that an opinion leader is also an opinion seeker. Despite all the informants were successful as entrepreneurs and oil palm smallholders, they still ask for advice from the government agency responsible for oil palm such as the Malaysian Palm Oil Board (MPOB) and Area Farmers' Organization. MPOB still plays a major role because all the informants are oil palm smallholders registered under the agency. Therefore, they are the opinion seekers who will get an information source from relevant agencies regarding the process of planting until harvesting. Although one important feature of the opinion leader is innovative, a precursor to new products, at the same time they are opinion seekers before introducing products to others. A desire to be a member of a group is a motivating factor in adopting the values and beliefs of the group's leaders. By looking the leaders for opinions on products, the seekers also place themselves within a social group. Considering the situation, this is like a circle which is interrelated among opinion leaders who are also the opinion seekers (Bode 2016).

Conclusion

Opinion leaders are successful individuals who play a key role in nurturing confidence in the future of the youth towards a career in the oil palm industry. From the findings, it is quite clear that formal education is no longer a guarantee for someone to gain followers because what matters is the experience and expertise in the field. This applies to opinion leaders who are seen as the bearers of new invention and ways of doing things. In addition, other features such as media habits, product-related characteristics, social attributes, and having characteristics of an opinion seeker are also vital in attracting followers to the opinion leader. In addition, the study found that opinion leaders who are directly involved in the oil palm industry are more trusted by the youth as compared to the leaders who hold key positions at the village level but partially involved in the sector.

Acknowledgement

The authors gratefully acknowledge the support of UKM research grant EP-2016-032 and Centre of Research Instrumentation Management (CRIM), UKM for this publication.

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