

[DOI: 10.20472/BMC.2015.002.005](https://doi.org/10.20472/BMC.2015.002.005)

**AŞINA GÜLERARSLAN**

Selcuk University, Turkey

**M. BARIŞ YILMAZ**

İnönü University, Turkey

**YASEMIN YILMAZ**

İnönü University, Turkey

## **THE ROLE OF OPINION LEADERS WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF PURCHASING HERBAL PRODUCTS FOR HEALTH**

### **Abstract:**

According to definition of World Health Organization "Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity". Starting from this point in present society individuals not only purchasing products for health for any diseases which they suffer but also for sustaining their comfort and to feel themselves well. Herbal products appear as important consuming product in treatment period of diseases and also in protective health. In this study role of opinion leaders about purchasing attitude and behaviors of individuals having knowledge about herbal products somehow is questioned. Study aims to determine under which criteria attitudes occur about very important issue such as health determining the quality of life of individuals is about understanding by which references opinions occur about purchasing herbal products and influence of opinion leaders during purchasing process. Study particularly aims to present the role of opinion leaders within the context of high educated sample.

### **Keywords:**

Health Communication, Health Consumption, Purchasing Behavior, Opinion Leaders

**JEL Classification:** E29

## Introduction

One of the most important concepts for individuals determining their life quality and maintain continuance of their lives, is "health". From first human to present time individuals formed their life with this direction and paid attention to stay healthy not only for avoiding diseases but also for sustaining powerful and qualified life. Starting from this point World Health Organization which is affiliated with United Nations Society defines the health as not only absence of infirmity and disease but also to individual's feeling itself well as a whole ([www.tibbitermimoloji.com](http://www.tibbitermimoloji.com)). First condition for sustaining the activities which are encountered in daily life such as successfully managing daily works within a system routinely, performing social activities, sustaining business and family life completely is that human should be healthy.

According to Pill and Scott, health concept includes individual's spiritual structure too. To be happy and peaceful are the stages of to be health the more important thing is that to be spiritually well also effects the physical health status (1982:48). Even though first definitions of sophisticated health concept include simple structures, process progressing cumulatively brought correct definitions of health with itself.

First definition "Human who is not sick is healthy" is the first definition example and continue to diversify as the different science branches has become active. Definitions based on medicine and discuss the health as only absence of symptoms has maintained including social, psychological and cultural structures into health concept by contribution of psychology, sociology and social sciences such as communication (Baltaş, 2000: 34).

With this respect we can classify health under 3 main titles:

- Negatively: that is situation of absence of a disease,
- Functionally is managing the daily activities,
- Positively that is to be healthy and well (Cirhinlioğlu, 2012: 22).

As a result health concept is not a situation which can be discussed with medical respect and it is a concept which should be considered by many science branches and should be evaluated with respect to properties of each individual. In addition to this, even though health concept seems to have orientation specific for individuals, indeed it should be considered socially. Because social structures consist of individuals and these structures influence individuals and also individuals form the structure of society where they are present. Cultural structures of societies also influence the society's health perspective. Effects of social structures where individuals over cleaning, eating food habits, bathing types, being dirty concept cannot be denied (Giddens, 2010: 158). Also direction of individuals by social structures where they present while they are forming orienting to health attitude or forming an attitude towards health is inevitable. This section which is called as opinion leaders in society consists of structures of which ideas are paid attention and accepted as role model. These structures form their effect over individuals by communication and sustain their effect over society again by communication. Therefore firstly health communication concept should be discussed for understanding the effect of these structures.

## Health Communication

With basic meaning health communication is defined as how individuals approach issues regarding with health. Health communication presenting the interactions of people with operations, organizations, people related to health which are influencing

people is the interaction which forms related to health between individuals and exercising concept and theorems over operations (Tabak, 2006: 29). Starting with point that communication is a joint action; share of individual's knowledge and experience with others are inevitable. However important thing is that how much individuals effect each other and in which stage these influencing becomes attitude and behavior.

For an individual basis for qualified and sustainable life is to be healthy. Individual can sustain its daily life as much as better as he /she feels him/herself well both physically and spiritually. However motivation for accepting the advices which were directed from people around him/her is certainly need for protecting and improving his/her health. He/she uses communication for conveying this case to people around. Also individual also uses communication for sharing his/her problems about health. At this point recoveries of lost health or sustaining present healthy status are directly proportional with how much proper communication is established (Yılmaz, 2013: 44).

According to Guttman who has made studies about health communication, health communication is the communication established by individuals with their surrounding for sustaining healthier life. Communication has interventional aspect for health. Health Communication is an effective method for intervening individual for individual to canalize health properly (2000: 1). Because of its nature, individual has tendency to select interventions towards itself. While he/she presents less resistance against interventions coming from group or individuals whom she/he trust and give importance, he/she approaches sources which she/he does not trust more interrogatingly (Morgan, 2009: 57). Role of individuals who are called as opinion leaders is very important in this stage. Opinion leaders having effect from social behaviors to business life, social life to shopping preferences have also effective position in health behavior subject. Starting from this point it will be useful to discuss opinion leaders closer.

## **Opinion Leaders, Behavior, Attitude, Perception**

With general description opinion leaders are considered as person communicating the messages in communication process at a group after filtering (Bilgin, 2007: 187). These individuals who appear as individuals gained respectability with respect to several criteria has been effective at decision making process of people in every stage of life.

In their study which they had made in 1955 Katz and Lazarsfield who has important studies in communication field, determined that messages do not directly reach to individuals, a few people in this group process these messages and then provide them to reach the public and concluded that this intermediate factors are more effective over people (Bilgin, 2007: 187). At this point it appears that trust feeling is prominent and people orient to sources which they trust and know rather than foreign sources or sources which they do not know. If we consider that majority of messages related to health reach to people by mass communication tools, importance of opinion leaders about health communication can be understood.

One of the theories presented by psychologists making studies over learning and behavior of individuals is social learning model. According to this model which was introduced by Albert bandura et al in 1963 people takes the behaviors which he/she observe in surrounding as model and adopts these models into their lives. Particularly behaviors and advices of people whom they trust and respect are perceived as reference behaviors. As the individual gets benefits from results of these behaviors, its trust against person who was taken as role model gets higher and after a while he accepts him/her as opinion leader (Morgan, 2009: 296). In fact again some part of

defense mechanisms which provide individual to be away from his/her problems are realized by incorporating with opinion leaders. Also relationship can be established with respected individuals who have been accepted as role model at content of defense mechanisms such as Establishing identification, rationalization and elevation.

Opinion leader concept which is very important for individual basically effects the perception and behavior of individual as result behaviors. Attitude, behavior and perception processes successively effect each other and connects them closely with each other. Mental processes form the first stage in sensing stimulators. Individual forms the reactions against stimulants which were transferred to mental structure by means of five sensory organs and after this attitude occurs. Finally these attitudes and sensing process form the behavior of individual. Together with perceptions and attitudes individual creates a rational orientation in mental process and realizes its behaviors (Shaffer, 1991: 148). Important thing is that after which processes individuals gain said attitude, behavior and perceptions. Certainly role of communication cannot be denied in this stage.

There are several factors having role over transformation of behaviors into attitudes. These are strength level of attitude, environmental factors and expectations related to results of behaviors. Strength level of attitudes is the most important factor for orientation of individual towards behavior. The higher the strength level the higher possibility for transformation of behavior into attitude. Leading factor determining the strength level of behavior is the trust feeling felt against the source where individual has taken the message in communication process. If individual gets message from opinion leader, readily present trust feeling will effect attitudes positively.

Other factor effecting transformation of attitudes into behaviors is environmental factors. Negative or positive effects of environmental factors are determinative for behaviors. If environmental factors for attitude support the attitude of individuals, attitude will have stronger position for transforming into behavior. However if environmental factors have suppressive effect, individual will take these effects into account before passing into behavior. Expectations of individuals regarding with results of behaviors are also factors effecting transformation of attitudes into behaviors. While positive expectations related to improves behavior possibility positively, negative expectations will lower the possibility (Güney, 2000: 311). One of the most important points within these environmental factors is formed by opinion leaders. Important point is that with which ratio opinion leaders can effect this process within a process having crucial importance such as health communication. Considering behaviors which form observable aspect of attitudes and perceptions is important. Particularly role of opinion leaders for purchasing behavior of herbal product which is one aspect of health communication should be considered in marketing communication.

## **Role of Opinion Leaders in Consumer Behaviors**

Consumer behavior is defined as decisions and relevant activities of people for purchasing and using economic products and services (Odabaşı and Barış, 2003: 29). With broader perspective consumer behaviors are the activities performed for obtaining, using and consuming the products and services and include decision making process before and after it. (Engel et al 1995: 4). Opinion leaders who are one of the factors influencing he purchase decision taking and behavior of consumers are very effective in marketing and promotion fields recently. In behavior literature it seems that opinion leaders convey their ideas by communicating 1) News related to products 2)

recommendations related to products 3) Experiences related to products (Odabaşı and Barış, 2003: 279).

According to Philip Kotler; opinion leaders have great effect over decisions and behaviors of purchasing decisions of consumers and they may come from any part of society. An individual of which ideas are given importance may influence people around him at purchasing decision process and with this respect they may have opinion followers. The more opinion follower opinion leaders has the more importance his ideas have (Kotler ve Scheff, 1997: 74). Beyond the social activities opinion leaders play important role in consumption activities and also opinion leaders are important for adopting new products and popularizing its usage. At this point opinion leaders appear in a society as people or groups which people see closer to them, follow them with their own preference and directly effecting the individual purchasing behavior.

According to data obtained from World Health Organization (WHO) %80 of world's population are cured by herbal medications. In a study made by Koçtürk et al it was pointed out that interest for herbal medication and treatment has increased in time because of herbal richness and there are several factors effecting the interest of consumers. (Koçtürk et al, 2009: 209-214). In consideration of evaluations as result of researches

Opinion leaders are important in this stage as powerful factor effecting the preference of people since people feel the need for using herbal product and presents tendency for purchasing for whatsoever their purpose is.

## **Application**

Objective of the study is to present which sources are trusted by individuals having high education level for use of herbal products for health and determining the reference points supporting their purchasing behavior. Starting from this point media organs and role of opinion leaders who are accepted as more traditional information source which has become important information source in present society will be focused. Recently o see the media contents having medical subject completely as commercial good increasingly damages the trust of individuals against media with. Particular such programs where doctor and products recommendations are frequently present and which makes hidden health advertising in some manner means that individuals trust traditional information sources more but their confidence against media organs decreases. Therefore stud about this is important since it makes problem more understandable. Study has been limited within Lecturers who are working within İnönü University academic organization. Particularly behavior and purchasing criteria of individuals having high education level was tired to be presented. At this point time and materials constraints are determinative factors.

## **Research Method**

Research method questionnaire was applied in study and collected information was evaluated with SPSS 17.0 program.

When gender distribution of participants is examined it seem that participants responded this question and ratio has realized as %50 women, %50 men (Total 100).

**Table 1. Age of Participants**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
28-32	25	25,0	25,0	25,0
32-36	26	26,0	26,0	51,0
Over 36	49	49,0	49,0	100,0
Total	100	100,0	100,0	

Age below 28 was not included in stud since there is restriction of 28 or more and lecturer criteria at limitation of individuals for study and distribution was realized as 28-32 age %25, 32-36 age %26 and 36 age pr more as %49

**Table 2. Marital Status of Participants**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Married with children	56	56,0	56,0	56,0
Married –without children	12	12,0	12,0	68,0
Single	32	32,0	32,0	100,0
Total	100	100,0	100,0	

When marital status of participants are considered; proportional with age ratio of participants who are married with children is %56, married without children is %12 and ratio for single participants is %32

**Table 3. Financial Status of Participants**

Turkish Lira TL (Per Month)	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
2500-3500	9	9,0	9,0	9,0
3500-4500	42	42,0	42,0	51,0
4500 or more	49	49,0	49,0	100,0
Total	100	100,0	100,0	

There is not much deviation in financial income of participants because of property of sample selected for study. Accordingly with this ratio of participants having monthly income of 2500-3500 TL is 9%, ratio for monthly income 3500-4500 TL is 42% and ratio for participants having monthly income of 4500 TL or more is 49%

**Table 4. Chronic disease status of patients**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	31	31,0	31,0	31,0
No	69	69,0	69,0	100,0
Total	100	100,0	100,0	

When having chronic disease status which is one of the questions for basic objective of study it can be considered that %31 of them have chronic disease and %69 do not have chronic disease

**Table 5. Whether participants use medication regularly**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	32	32,0	32,0	32,0
No	68	68,0	68,0	100,0
Total	100	100,0	100,0	

When we consider the answers for this question which is related to question before, it can be seen that %32 of them use medication regularly and % 62 of them do not use and in fact this verifies the data from previous question. Because it can be predicted that individuals having chronic disease also use medication regularly.

**Table 6. Use of Herbal Products**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	47	47,0	47,0	47,0
No	53	53,0	53,0	100,0
Total	100	100,0	100,0	

Answers for this question measuring whether herbal product is used by participants of questionnaires indicate that important ratio such as %47 of participants use herbal products. Particularly when we consider that participants consist of lecturers who has completed Ph D. Use of herbal products by almost half of participants who have completed PH d is noteworthy.

**Table 7. The source of advise while purchasing herbal product**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Media Content	8	8,0	8,0	8,0
People whose ideas are appreciated	46	46,0	46,0	54,0
Herbalist recommendation	14	14,0	14,0	68,0
People who has used before	32	32,0	32,0	100,0
Total	100	100,0	100,0	

One of the most important questions was “whose recommendations do you consider while purchasing herbal product?” And presents important clues about question. Here we can see that recommendations of people in opinion leader position stay at highest level (%46). Second order is formed by people who has used before (%32)” Herbalist recommendation remains at third order (%14) and lowest ratio is Media content (%8) which is represented by very low ratio. Starting from this point it can be observed that



confidence of individuals against media about purchasing behavior is very low but opinions of opinion leaders remains at first rank with very high ratio.

**Table 8. “Ratio of exercising the advises of people around you whose ideas are appreciated about use of herbal products”**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Generally mostly	17	17,0	17,0	17,0
Sometimes, from time to time	37	37,0	37,0	54,0
In need and curiosity cases	34	34,0	34,0	88,0
Never	12	12,0	12,0	100,0
Total	100	100,0	100,0	

According to this question measuring the exercising ratio of individuals for the recommendations of people who appreciate, it can be observed that %88 of them exercise the recommendations of people who seems to be opinion leader at several level and %12 of them does not respect these ideas for any reason. Starting from this point we can see that majority of participants obey the recommendations of opinion leaders.

**Table 9. “Herbal Products are More Effective With Respect to Medical Medications”**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
I certainly do not agree	40	40,0	40,0	40,0
I do not agree	27	27,0	27,0	67,0
Neither I agree nor do not agree	25	25,0	25,0	92,0
I agree	6	6,0	6,0	98,0
I completely agree	2	2,0	2,0	100,0
Total	100	100,0	100,0	

Answer was sought with 5 element Likert Scale and interesting results were obtained, It was mentioned in previous questions that majority ratio such as %47 of participants have mentioned that they use herbal product but belief that herbal products are more effective with respect to medications remained only at %8 level. Starting from this point it can be mentioned that motivation for use of herbal products is not caused from being effective against diseases, they can be formed from different points. Different study can be implemented for determining what the motivations are.

**Table 10. "While purchasing herbal products I take notice the ideas of people who are considered as important"**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
I certainly do not agree	19	19,0	19,0	19,0
I do not agree	25	25,0	25,0	44,0
Neither I agree nor do not agree	29	29,0	29,0	73,0
I agree	17	17,0	17,0	90,0
I completely agree	10	10,0	10,0	100,0
Total	100	100,0	100,0	

When the answers for this question which is for measuring the purchasing behavior is considered, it can be seen that people who are considered as important that is accepted as opinion leader are effective with %27 ratio.

**Table 11. Confidence against media content about subjects related to health**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
I certainly do not agree	42	42,0	42,0	42,0
I do not agree	29	29,0	29,0	71,0
Neither I agree nor do not agree	16	16,0	16,0	87,0
I agree	11	11,0	11,0	98,0
I completely agree	2	2,0	2,0	100,0
Total	100	100,0	100,0	

When the answers of participants for the question how they trust the media content about their health is considered it can be observed that with very low ratio such as %13 have confidence with media content but majority of them such as %71 seem that they do not have confidence with media content

**Table 12. Confidence against physician advise**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
I certainly do not agree	7	7,0	7,0	7,0
I do not agree	24	24,0	24,0	31,0
Neither I agree nor do not agree	13	13,0	13,0	44,0
I agree	40	40,0	40,0	84,0
I completely agree	16	16,0	16,0	100,0
Total	100	100,0	100,0	

When Confidence against physician advises about herbal products is questioned it is observed that %56 section sees the physician advice as single source however %31 of them do not have confidence with even physician when herbal product advise is in question.

**Table 13. Confidence against advises of opinion leaders**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
I certainly do not agree	12	12,0	12,0	12,0
I do not agree	18	18,0	18,0	30,0
Neither I agree nor do not agree	19	19,0	19,0	49,0
I agree	43	43,0	43,0	92,0
I completely agree	8	8,0	8,0	100,0
Total	100	100,0	100,0	

One of the most striking results of the study seems to be answer for this question. While confidence against physicians seems to be %56 at previous question, it can be observed that confidence against opinion leaders is at substantial amount (%51) and reaches to physicians. With this respective we can say that well educated individuals have confidence with physicians and opinion leaders with almost same ratio.

**Table 14. Getting Information from Media about Herbal Products**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
I certainly do not agree	29	29,0	29,0	29,0
I do not agree	30	30,0	30,0	59,0
Neither I agree nor do not agree	14	14,0	14,0	73,0
I agree	25	25,0	25,0	98,0
I completely agree	2	2,0	2,0	100,0
Total	100	100,0	100,0	

When we have overall review about results of study, we can see the mistrust against media as an information source for health even though it is used as an important information source. Situation that %59 of participants are at opposite side for getting information from media obviously presents this case

**Table 15. Effect of Media over Purchasing Behavior**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
I certainly do not agree	48	48,0	48,0	48,0
I do not agree	35	35,0	35,0	83,0
Neither I agree nor do not agree	7	7,0	7,0	90,0
I agree	8	8,0	8,0	98,0
I completely agree	2	2,0	2,0	100,0
Total	100	100,0	100,0	

When we consider the answers for measuring the purchasing behavior it can be observed that purchasing level for products which are introduced in media organs is at very low level such as %10

## Conclusion

Striking results were obtained as result of this study which was implemented for the role of opinion leaders at use of herbal medications. For general wording we can say that tendency of individuals for orientation for use of herbal medications generally occurs in chronic disease case. In addition to this it can be observed that individuals using medication regularly also use herbal medications. Starting from this point we can say that individuals generally use herbal medications as supportive product.

Again one of the results which were obtained from results of the field study is that which sources are preferred by individuals as advices while they are using herbal medications. We see that opinion leaders are up most effective over highly educated individuals. Despite this, confidence against media is at very low level. When we consider the approach against herbal products with respect to purchasing behavior we can see that opinion leaders are more effective with respect to media.

Generally study indicates that opinion leaders are more reliable source at use of medication and purchasing behavior when compared with media and particularly individuals having higher education level are very decisive about this subject.

## References

- BALTAŞ, Z. (2000). Sağlık Psikolojisi, Halk Sağlığında Davranış Bilimleri, İstanbul, Remzi Kitabevi.
- BILGIN, N. (2007). Sosyal Psikoloji Sözlüğü, Kavramlar Yaklaşımlar, İstanbul.
- CIRHINLIOĞLU, Z. (2010). Sağlık Sosyolojisi, Ankara, Nobel Yayınları.

- ENGEL, J.F.; BLACKWELL, R. D. and MINIARD, P. W. (1995). Consumer Behavior, International Edition, USA, The Dryden Press.
- GIDDENS, A. (2010). Sosyoloji Başlangıç Okumaları, Çev: Günseli Altaylar, Say Yayınları.
- GUTTMAN N. (2000). Public Health Communication, Values and Ethical Dilemmas, California, Sage Publications.
- GÜNEY, S. (2000). Davranış Bilimleri, Ankara, Nobel Yayın Dağıtım.
- KOÇTÜRK, O. M.; KALAFATÇILAR, Ö.A.; ÖZBİLGİN, N, and ATABAY, H. (2009). Türkiye'de Bitkisel İlaçlara Bakış, Ege Üniversitesi Ziraat Fakültesi Dergisi, 46 (3), p:209-214.
- KOTLER, P. and SCHEFF, J. (1997). Standing Room Only: Strategies For Marketing The Performing Arts, Boston, Mass, Harvard Business School Press.
- CLIFFORD, M.T (2009). Psikolojiye Giriş, Ed. Sibel Karakaş, Rükzan Eski, Konya, Eğitim Kitabevi Yayınları.
- ODABAŞI, Y. and BARIŞ, G. (2007). Tüketici Davranışı, İstanbul, Media Cat Yayınları.
- PILL, R. and SCOTT, N. (1982). Concepts of Illness Causation and Responsibility: Some Preliminary Data From a sample Working Class Mothers, Social Science and Medicine, 16 (1), p:43-45.
- SHAFFER, A. J. (1991). Bilinç, Ruh ve Ötesi, Çev: Turan Koç, İstanbul, İz Yayıncılık.
- TABAK, R. S. (2006). Sağlık İletişimi, İstanbul, Literatür Yayınları.
- YILMAZ M.B.(2013). Planlanmış Davranış Teorisi Çerçevesinde Sağlık Amaçlı Bitkisel Ürün Kullanımı, Selçuk Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enst. Konya, Yayınlanmamış Doktora Tezi
- [www.tibbiterminoloji.com](http://www.tibbiterminoloji.com)