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Study of Influence Tactics upon Opinion Leaders: A Case Analysis of Medical Science Liaisons' Influence on Healthcare Opinion Leaders in China

（Thesis submitted for the degree of Executive Doctorate in Business Administration）

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ABSTRACT

Opinion leaders (OLs) have emerged as a highly relevant and widely discussed topic today. They play a crucial role across various areas, including marketing, agriculture, education, literature, sports, diffusion of innovation, political elections, public decision-making, policy implementation, public affairs, diplomacy, management, tourism, fashion, healthcare, and more. Despite their significance, the tactics that influence opinion leaders remain largely unexplored, making it an area of general importance to investigate the mechanisms underlying their influence.

The purpose of this research is to investigate the common tactics that influence opinion leaders, as well as the decision-making model for selecting tactics to influence opinion leaders. By comprehensively understanding the tactics used to influence opinion leaders, this research seeks to offer valuable insights and actionable recommendations on the role positioning of Medical Science Liaisons (MSLs), as well as the management and enhancement strategies for influencing opinion leaders.

In this research, we have employed a grounded theory approach as a core research method. To gather data, we selected a sample of 43 MSLs from pharmaceutical companies using purposive sampling, theoretical sampling, and convenience sampling techniques. We utilized the critical incident technique to conduct in-depth interviews to capture the MSLs' experiences of successes or failures in influencing Opinion Leaders. Each interview was meticulously transcribed verbatim and stored as electronic files. For the qualitative analysis stage, we employed three levels of coding (open coding, axial coding, and selective coding) and other analytical techniques, such as questioning and constant comparison, along with analytical tools like the coding paradigm. Throughout the process, we documented our analytical progress by writing memos. These memos helped us to progressively form categories and establish relationships between them, eventually leading to the construction of a theoretical model centering on the selection of influencing tactics upon opinion leaders within the Chinese cultural context. Additionally, we utilized an exploratory quantitative approach based on the frequency counts of coding to study the preferences of influencing tactics choices and the factors affecting these preferences.

Through qualitative analysis, eleven influence tactics were discovered, including role identity, rational persuasion, information exchange, coalition, inspiration appeal, collaboration, building

development opportunities, ingratiation, apprising, relationship-based tactics, and threats. Role identity and building development opportunities are newly discovered influence strategies. These tactic behaviors are in line with the Chinese cultural context of "Renqing", "Guanxi", and "Mianzi". And a decision-making model was constructed for the agents to select tactics to influence opinion leaders. This model starts with MSLs, as the agent determining the purpose of influencing target opinion leaders. Prior to exerting influence, factors on the target opinion leaders' side are assessed, including needs, impact, and personality traits of OLs. On the MSLs' side, factors like attitudinal, resource feasibility and professionalism are considered, along with the dynamics of the relationship between the agent and the target， then proceed with the matching. These factors collectively affect the agent's decision-making process, guiding their choice of influence tactics. Once the influence tactic is implemented, the agent evaluates its effectiveness and receives feedback in the form of positive, negative, or neutral responses. This feedback loop helps refine the agent's purpose of influence and assessment, ultimately contributing to the advancement of future tactic choices. The cycle continues, leading to the selection pattern of appropriate influence tactics upon OLs. Of course, all the above decision choices must comply with social norms.

Based on the interviews, a total of 81 cases were collected, with 46 cases achieving successful outcomes by influencing opinion leaders and 35 unsuccess cases despite their influence. The quantitative analysis revealed the following key findings:

(1) Among the successful cases, MSLs utilized influence tactics such as role identity, rational persuasion, coalition, inspiration appeal, collaboration, and building development opportunities more frequently. The use of role identity, inspiration appeal, collaboration, and building development opportunities was strongly correlated with successful influence, all of which were statistically significant ($p < 0.01$). Additionally, rational persuasion, coalition, and apprising showed a moderate and significant association with influence success ($p < 0.05$). Additionally, information exchange, as the initial tactic of influencing OLs, was highly prevalent among MSLs in both successful and unsuccessful cases, with no significant difference in usage rates between the two, and a weak correlation with influence success. In both successful and unsuccessful cases, MSLs used apprising, relationship-based tactic, and threat in less than 40% cases, significantly less than the tactics of role identity, rational persuasion, information exchange, coalition, inspiration appeal, collaboration, building development opportunities, and ingratiation ($p<0.001$). Overall, MSLs in successful cases employed a more complex combination of influence tactics, while MSLs in unsuccessful cases utilized a simpler one.

(2) The importance of professionalism is moderately correlated with the use of role identity and building development opportunities tactics and is strongly correlated with the use of the collaboration tactic; the importance of objectivity is moderately correlated with the use of role identity tactic and strongly correlated with the use of collaboration tactic. Consistent matching is strongly correlated with the use of role identity, inspiration appeal, collaboration, and building development opportunities tactics and is moderately correlated with the use of rational persuasion tactic. The adequacy of assessment is moderately correlated with role identity, rational persuasion, and coalition tactics, and strongly correlated with the use of inspiration appeal, collaboration, building development opportunities, and ingratiating tactics. The closeness of the relationship with opinion leaders is strongly correlated with the use of rational persuasion and inspiration appeal tactics.

(3) Logistic regression analysis of factors related to the use of role identity tactic, such as whether the matching is consistent, the importance of objectivity, and the adequacy of assessment, showed that the accuracy of the predictive model for role identity tactics usage is 0.741. Logistic regression analysis of factors related to the use of the building development opportunities tactic, such as whether the matching is consistent, the importance of professionalism, the adequacy of assessment, and influence purpose, showed that the accuracy of the predictive model for building development opportunities strategy usage is 0.716.

In summary, this research successfully developed a theoretical model of agents' tactic choices on how to influence opinion leaders. It also identified the tactic preferences for influencing opinion leaders, leading to the discovery of a new predictive model related to the use of role identity and building developmental opportunities tactics. These findings have contributed to the expansion of opinion leader theory and have enriched the research perspective on influence tactics. Furthermore, the research offers valuable insights for the role positioning of MSLs in pharmaceutical companies and provides useful management and enhancement strategies to influence OLs. However, it is important to note that due to the small sample size, further large-scale quantitative research is necessary to validate the theoretical model derived from this research.

Keywords: Medical Science Liaisons (MSLs); Opinion Leaders (OLs); Influence Tactic; Grounded Theory; Critical Incident Technique (CIT)

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