

**IDENTIFICATION OF OPINION LEADERS
ACROSS CULTURES: AN ASSESSMENT
FOR USE IN THE DIFFUSION
OF INNOVATIONS AND IDEAS**

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Abstract. The objectives of this paper were: 1) to determine if there exists an underlying dimensionality of opinion leadership across different cultural groups, and 2) to determine if this underlying structure can be used to identify opinion leaders for the purpose of targeting communications by multinational businesses to assist them in the diffusion of innovations and ideas. Opinion leaders were rated by students representing five different cultural backgrounds. Results tended to show that there is a set of common dimensions by which opinion leaders are evaluated, but that different cultures assign different weights to the dimensions.

INTRODUCTION

■ Multinational corporations have long been aware that one means of bolstering sagging or static demand for their product is by expanding into markets where the product is perceived as new. This expansion usually assumes the form of crossing international or psychological boundaries and often involves populations which are qualitatively different from current consumers. Yet, this movement across cultures is not easy, nor has it been without problems.¹ These problems have been attributed by some to a lack of a sound theoretical base by which corporations can diffuse information, innovations, and ideas,² or a lack of insight into the diffusion process.

One area of research which could offer an insight to firms in their diffusion process is the construct of opinion leadership. A primary means of facilitating an orderly diffusion of innovations and ideas is through the use of opinion leaders. Opinion leaders effect a country's propensity to change or its receptivity in seeking change and alternative means of consumption.³

Therefore, this research serves two purposes: one is to identify the dimensionality of opinion leadership across cultures; the other purpose is to provide guidance to firms in using opinion leaders to diffuse their products and services.

RELEVANT LITERATURE

Research on opinion leadership to date can be classified into three distinct categories: (1) involves whether opinion leadership is specific to a product, idea, or issue, or if it is generalized across products, ideas, or issues⁴; (2) involves the issue of whether opinion leaders are different from followers⁵; and (3) involves the issue of how opinion leaders are utilized in the flow of communications among people.⁶

One common thread across studies in these three areas is the measurement and scaling used to identify opinion leaders.⁷ All three areas through either observation or questioning limit the scaling of opinion leadership to a dyadic interaction

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with respect to a specific issue, product, or idea. It seems that the identification of opinion leaders may be unnecessarily constrained in terms of research investigation,⁸ particularly in cross-cultural research. Therefore, an opinion leader was defined, for the purpose of this study, as someone whose opinions are highly respected and utilized by the respondents to help in making decisions across a variety of situations such as what types of clothes to wear, where to have major household items repaired, how to discipline children, and for whom to vote in political elections. This person can be someone with whom the respondents have personal contacts (a friend, priest, member of a social group, relative, or someone in public life whose advice is derived from his/her public statements). This definition differs sharply from the one provided by the Columbia sociologists.⁹

The second objective was to determine if it would be possible to map opinion leadership as an n-dimensional construct without being constrained by the specificity of the situation or product, and therefore, to determine if the perception of opinion leadership is consistent across cultures. In more precise terms, this objective deals with exploration of whether there are cross-cultural similarities in the perception of opinion leadership and whether people belonging to one culture evaluate opinion leaders in the same way (utilize the same choice criteria or assign the same weights to the dimension of opinion leadership) as people belonging to another culture.

The research for this study consisted of several steps.

RESEARCH METHOD

One, students representing five cultural groups were probed through unstructured Delphi-type interviews¹⁰ to determine what attributes were important in an opinion leader.

Two, specific dimensions in the measurement of opinion leaders by other researchers were reviewed.¹¹ This review along with the solicitation of characteristics from respondents contributed to the final selection of attributes used to determine the dimensionality of opinion leaders across cultures.

Three, the questionnaire was decentered to English by means of a panel of respondents from the five cultural groups as recommended by Warner and Campbell.¹² The reason English was chosen as the language of the questionnaire is that all the cultural groups possessed a proficiency in English.

Finally, a list of 24 attributes of an opinion leader was developed and pretested. The respondents were then asked through a self-administered questionnaire to designate a list of persons they had used, or were using, as advisers. Next, the respondents were asked to rate that person whose opinions they respected most from the self-generated list of opinion leaders. As a further control, the foreign students in the sample were told they could use someone from their home country whom they had used as an opinion leader before coming to the U.S., and therefore, were not forced into a choice of individuals from their new environment. The list of general statements about an opinion leader which respondents rated on a Likert-type seven-point agree/disagree scale are shown in Table 1.

A sample of 35 individuals was drawn from five different cultural groups resulting in 25 usable questionnaires from each group for a total sample of 125 individuals. The five cultural groups consisted of American White and Black graduate students, Indian graduate students, and Chinese and British exchange students. This sample was drawn from among the student population at the University of Illinois. In addition, the foreign students represented those students who had only recently arrived on the campus and as yet had not been assimilated into their new environment.

Description of Sample

TABLE 1
Attributes of Opinion Leadership

1. Enjoys life	13. Has all around knowledge
2. Has common sense	14. Evaluates you fairly
3. Utilizes you to test his or her ideas	15. Is available when you need him or her
4. Motivates you to follow his or her advice	16. Looks like you
5. Does not care what social group you associate with	17. Expresses empathy towards others; identifies with them
6. Belongs to the same social group as you do	18. Is wealthy
7. Can easily evaluate you for what you are	19. Is mature
8. Has high degree of professionalism	20. Makes you follow rules; enforces norms on you
9. Has strong opinions on many things	21. Quite experienced about life
10. Is not modest	22. Likes to give advice so others will do those things he or she is afraid to do
11. Is down to earth, practical or pragmatic, not pretentious	23. Not afraid to give an opinion
12. Gets jealous of other opinion leaders	24. Does not stand out in a crowd

Research Techniques

In order to assess the perceptual dimensionality of opinion leadership, a principal components analysis with varimax orthogonal rotation was performed on the total sample of 125 individuals using the prewritten BMD 08M package.¹³ The principal components analysis was used to determine the underlying structure of opinion leadership by finding a set of factors or dimensions which account for the relationship among the variables in this study.¹⁴ In addition, a varimax rotation was used to insure more distinct and interpretable factors.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the factor analysis are summarized in Table 2. A total of 9 factors were found to be significant, explaining 63-66 percent of the total variance. The rotated factor loadings matrix provided interpretable dimensions of opinion leadership. The first dimension, labeled *maturity*, consisted of items reflecting common sense and maturity. The second dimension, labeled *authoritarian*, consisted of items such as "makes you follow rules" and "likes to give advice so that others will do things he or she is afraid to do." The third dimension, labeled *self-centered*, consisted of items which reflected jealousy and lack of other-directedness. The fourth dimension, labeled *opinionated*, consisted of items such as "not afraid to give an opinion" and "has a strong opinion on many things." The fifth dimension, labeled *accessible*, included items of outwardness and availability of the opinion leader. The sixth dimension, labeled *practical*, consisted of items reflecting a realistic or pragmatic posture of the opinion leader. The seventh dimension, labeled *peer expertise*, consisted of items reflecting the expertise of the opinion leader who belonged to the same social group as the follower. The eighth and ninth dimensions, each consisting of a single item, were labeled respectively, *general expertise*, which reflected general professionalism, and *visibility* which reflected the item "does not stand out in a crowd."

In order to assess the weights, each culture was assigned to the 9 dimensions of opinion leadership, and a BMD 07M stepwise multiple discriminant analysis was performed among the five groups of respondents utilizing the rotated factor scores from the 9 dimensions as the discriminating variables.¹⁵ The discriminant analysis produced two significant axes as reported in Table 3.

Out of the 9 dimensions only 7 were found to be significant in terms of providing dimensions by which the cultural groups assigned different weights. The dimensions on which there were no differences were: *maturity* and *visibility*. The first discriminant axis has strong positive weights with respect to *practical* (.52) and

TABLE 2
Perceived Factors of Opinion Leadership

	Factor Loading		Factor Loading	Factor Loading
(1) <i>Maturity (9.2%)</i>		(4) <i>Opinionated (8.0%)</i>		(7) <i>Practical (6.2%)</i>
Enjoys life	.78	Not afraid to give an opinion	.76	Motivates you to follow his/her advice
Has common sense	.65	Has a strong opinion on many things	.61	Is down to earth
Is mature	.52	Has all around knowledge	.48	
(2) <i>Authoritarian (8.0%)</i>		Quite experienced about life	.45	(8) <i>Peer Expert (6.1%)</i>
Makes you follow rules, enforces norms on you	.81			Can easily evaluate you for what you are
Likes to give advice so that others will do things that he/she is afraid to do	.73	(5) <i>Accessible (7.2%)</i>		Belongs to same social class as you do
(3) <i>Self-centered (7.6%)</i>		Is not modest	.74	
Utilizes you to test his/her ideas	.57	Is available when you need him/her	.40	(9) <i>Visibility (5.4%)</i>
Gets jealous of other opinion leaders	.56	(6) <i>General Expert (6.0%)</i>		Does not stand out in a crowd
Evaluates you fairly	-.54	Has high degree of professionalism	.79	

TABLE 3
Stepwise Discriminant Analysis of OL Dimensions across Five Cultures

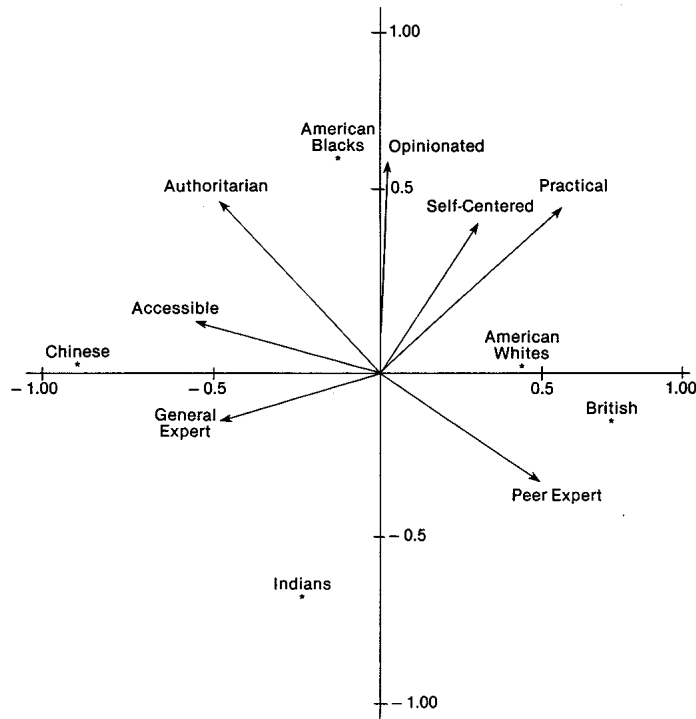
Discriminating Dimensions	Discriminant Function	
	I	II
1. Practical	.52	.49
2. Authoritarian	-.49	.52
3. General Expert	-.49	-.14
4. Accessible	-.54	.16
5. Peer Expert	.45	-.26
6. Self-Centered	.28	.45
7. Opinionated	.01	.55
	λ , .37	.17
	$p < .01$	$< .05$
Group Means		
	I	II
British	.78	-.18
American Whites	.48	.06
Blacks	-.03	.65
Indians	-.32	-.59
Chinese	-.90	.06

peer expertise (.45) and strong negative weights for *authoritarian* (-.49), *general expertise* (-.49), and *accessible* (-.54). The groups with positive discriminant scores are the British and the American Whites, and the groups with the negative scores are the Indian and Chinese with American Blacks at the centroid of the distribution of the first discriminant axis. This implied that the American White and British groups believe in a peer group motivation process whereas those identified with the Far East cultures believe in an authoritarian agent with general expertise. This was generally supported by the type of people chosen as opinion leaders by the groups. The American and British White groups usually chose close friends of similar age, whereas the Far East group chose opinion leaders who had obtained authority through public stature and were considered to be group standard bearers or senior male members of their family.

The second discriminant function has the highest positive weights with respect to *opinionated* (.55), *self-centered* (.45), *authoritarian* (.52), and *practical* (.49). The negative weights are small with respect to *peer expertise* (-.26) and *general expertise* (-.14). The American Blacks have the highest positive mean discriminant score on this dimension and the Indians have the highest negative mean score. This implies that, with respect to the second dimension, American Blacks and Indians are far apart. The first group believes in opinion leadership due to personal attributes of the leader while the second group believes in his general expertise. This was brought out quite early by the types of opinion leaders chosen by each group. The American Blacks tended to pick people in public life who have been characterized by the popular press as charismatic. On the other hand, the Indians generally picked opinion leaders who, in public life, were usually considered philosophical in their outlook.

In order to obtain better insights into the group differences a dimensional discriminant map is plotted in Figure 1. The discriminating dimensions are plotted as vectors in the space (the combination of weights from the two discriminant

FIGURE 1



functions), and the groups as points in space (the combination of group centroids from the two discriminant functions). As can be seen from the map, British and American Whites are homogeneous in their views about what constitutes an opinion leader. Both believe in essentially a peer level expert who is practical as an opinion leader. The Indians tend to differ sharply from others in their view of an opinion leader having either general or specific expertise. Finally, the Chinese believe in an opinion leader who has general knowledge and is accessible.

To conclude, this was only an exploratory study which was carried out to examine the feasibility of measuring perceptions of opinion leadership as a multidimensional construct in a cross-cultural setting. To this extent, it appears that people within and across cultures do use some basic dimensions to evaluate their opinion leaders. And among these dimensions, different cultures apply different degrees of importance. Whether other dimensions are used, or more are used, are subjects for further research.

CONCLUSIONS

It appears also that the more similar cultures are, the more similar are the dimensions used to evaluate opinion leaders. This was brought out quite clearly by the American and British Whites who to some degree possess similar cultural experiences. Also, from looking at Figure 1, it appears that even though American Blacks share a common geographical setting with American Whites, they are not

similar to them in their perceptions of opinion leadership. This would suggest that geographical boundaries are not always the best criterion for studying cultures,¹⁶ or for choosing markets.

IMPLICATIONS As for implications, this study seems to suggest that it might be wise for those businesses interested in using opinion leaders for the diffusion of products or ideas to reflect upon the characteristics used by followers to choose opinion leaders by expertise or position in a community. If this is the case, the diffusion of products and ideas across cultures may be facilitated better through the use of general as opposed to specific opinion leaders. Firms may have to direct their communications to a select few who have a broad appeal, as might be the case with the Indians, rather than a larger number. It may also be the case that the firm may have to maintain a low profile in the communications with the selected opinion leaders so as not to damage the credibility of an opinion leader who is considered a general expert and is at the time a public figure.

In conclusion, this research attempted to provide some guidelines for the selection of opinion leaders across cultures. Further, the results suggest that opinion leadership may be a multidimensional construct which is utilized in different ways by different groups both within and across traditionally defined cultures.

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