Summary Brief

**Do Early Adopters Walk the Opinion Leadership Talk? A Meta-Analysis**

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*Early adopters are the first to adopt innovative products and to encourage adoption by others. Research has found that early adopters are indeed influential, yet, the chasm theory posits that there is a communication break between early adopters and other consumers. This research presents a meta-analysis of early adopters, and specifically examines whether they are opinion leaders. The results suggest that, being innovation enthusiasts, early adopters may overestimate their role as opinion leaders. Yet, when they have actually adopted a high-risk innovation, they can correctly estimate that their influence on others may not be as high.*

**Introduction**

Early adopters are the first to adopt an innovation, and, even more importantly, they spread word-of-mouth and influence other consumers (Mahajan, Muller, and Srivastava 1990). Much research on the extent of early adopters’ influence has consistently shown that they rate high on opinion leadership (Bartels and Reinders 2011(. However, these findings contradict the chasm theory (Moore 2014), that presents a communication break between early adopters and the main market. The chasm theory implies that early adopters are *not* opinion leaders.

This paper presents a meta-analysis to explore who early adopters are and whether they walk the opinion leadership talk. The results suggest that early adopters may be *innovation enthusiasts*: consumers who are highly involved in the product at hand and believe that they are opinion leaders. However, when analyzing early adopters who have actually adopted the innovation, and specifically high-risk innovations, the correlation between early adoption and opinion leadership is dramatically reduced.

***Actual Versus Dispositional Early Adoption***

The literature presented two main approaches to identify early adopters. The first is based on innovators’ *behavior*:the early purchase of new products, or *actual* *early adoption*. The second is based on the early adoption *trait* and their attraction to new products, or *dispositional early adoption* (Midgley and Dowling 1978). This scale may capture a broader construct of *innovation enthusiasts*: consumers who love innovations and show high product involvement and knowledge. They tend to adopt early, and they believe that they are opinion leaders.

**H1**: The correlations between early adoption and the consumption-related traits and demographics will be moderated by the type of early adopter, such that the correlations will be stronger for *dispositional early adopters* compared to *actual* *early adopters*.

***Risk Level of the Product***

Early adopters are expected to show favorable attitudes towards risk, while non-early adopters are risk-averse (Childers 1986; Gatignon and Robertson 1985). Opinion leaders, on the other hand, are not inclined to take risks more than the non-leaders (Childers 1986). I suggest that for high-risk innovations, early adopters will *not* serve as opinion leaders, as people are less likely to trust them and follow their advice.

**H2**: The correlations between early adoption and opinion leadership will be stronger for low-risk compared with high-risk innovations.

**Data and Results**

The meta-analysis used 181 unique studies reported in 130 papers published between 1967 and 2019, involving 49,196 participants. The meta-analysis explored the correlations of early adoption with nine traits and behaviors (see Table 1). For each correlation, type of early adopter (*dispositional* or *actual*) and type of product (low- or high-risk innovation) were marked for the moderation analysis.

The weighted average correlations are presented in Table 1. Results of the meta-analysis showed a high correlation between early adoption and opinion leadership, and the other consumption-related traits and demographics. In addition, moderation analyses confirmed that the type of early adopter moderates the consumption-related traits, supporting H1 and that early adoption and opinion leadership had a higher correlation for low-risk innovations compared to high-risk innovations, confirming H2. In addition, the interaction between the two moderators was marginally significant (*F*(1,63) = 3.09, *p* = .084): *Dispositional* early adoption is highly correlated with opinion leadership regardless of the level of product risk (*rlow-risk* = .50, *rhigh-risk* = .42, *F*(1,63) = 1.62, *p* = .208). However, *actual* early adoption is highly correlated with opinion leadership for low-risk innovations (*r* = .56), but is less correlated with opinion leadership for high-risk innovations (*r* = .30, *F*(1,63) = 7.55, *p* = .007).

**Table 1: Meta-Analysis Results**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  |  | Hedges & Olkin method | | | |  | Hunter & Schmidt method | | | |
| Characteristic | *n* | *k* | *r* a | *LCL* | *UCL* | *Q* a |  | *r* a | *LCL* | *UCL* | % *EV* |
| 1. Opinion leadership | 25,568 | 82 | .47 | .46 | .48 | 3,688 |  | .43 | .37 | .48 | 4% |
| 1. Product involvement | 21,952 | 65 | .49 | .48 | .50 | 1,807 |  | .46 | .41 | .51 | 4% |
| 1. Purchase intentions | 21,106 | 54 | .37 | .36 | .38 | 1,055 |  | .35 | .30 | .40 | 6% |
| 1. Subjective knowledge | 8,636 | 30 | .54 | .53 | .56 | 1,264 |  | .49 | .42 | .56 | 5% |
| 1. Age | 15,455 | 38 | -.11 | -.13 | -.10 | 331 |  | -.11 | -.15 | -.07 | 12% |
| 1. Socioeconomic status | 9,230 | 17 | .17 | .15 | .19 | 197 |  | .16 | .10 | .22 | 10% |

a All *r* and *Q*’s are significant at the .05 level.

*n* is the number of participants across studies for each characteristic; *k* is the number of studies (samples) in each characteristic; *r* is the average weighted corrected correlation across all studies

**Discussion**

This research uses a meta-analysis to resolve the contradiction between chasm theory and findings of early adopters as opinion leaders. The results suggest that the *dispositional* early adoption scale may capture innovation enthusiasts, highly involved and knowledgeable innovation lovers who would like to adopt early and believe that they are opinion leaders. However, when early adopters are asked to recall their actual adoption experiences, they may admit that for high-risk innovations they are not as influential as they wish to be.

**References**

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