



# Unique but integrated: The role of individuation and assimilation processes in teen opinion leadership<sup>☆</sup>

Elodie Gentina<sup>a,d,\*</sup>, Raphaëlle Butori<sup>b</sup>, Timothy B. Heath<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Skema Business School, Avenue Willy Brandt, 59 777 Euralille, France

<sup>b</sup> ESSEC Business School, Avenue Bernard Hirsch, B.P. 50105, 95021 Cergy-Pontoise, France

<sup>c</sup> HEC, 1, rue de la Libération, 78351 Jouy en Josas, France

<sup>d</sup> Skema Business School, University Lille Nord de France, F-59000 Lille, France

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## ABSTRACT

Opinion leaders propel the diffusion of innovation and exert a significant influence on the marketplace. This influence is especially pronounced during adolescence, a period marked by increasing reliance on peers and the emergence of a tension between two countervailing needs: assimilation and individuation. A survey of 1142 adolescents reveals that these developmental needs affect adolescent opinion leadership in the critical clothing market. Adolescent opinion leadership relies on a balance between desires for assimilation (i.e., centrality within the peer network) and individuation (i.e., need for uniqueness); adolescents' susceptibility to peers' normative influence and gender moderate these relationships. Adolescents who occupy central positions within their peer network tend to be opinion leaders, though only if they are not susceptible to normative influence. Position within the peer network is a key for girls, whereas need for uniqueness is a key for boys. These differences implicate different approaches for managers targeting adolescent males and females.

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## 1. Introduction

Of all the transitions that occur in life, adolescence is one of the most crucial because this is the time when adolescents emerge from the family setting in order to establish an identity separate from parents (Erikson, 1968; Yang & Laroche, 2011). To do so, they increasingly rely on new significant others: their peers (Goodrich & Mangleburg, 2010; Mangleburg, Doney, & Bristol, 2004). Apart from providing emotional support (Buhrmester, 1996), peer group membership helps adolescents reconcile two competing needs essential to the transition from adolescence to adulthood: the need for assimilation and the need for individuation (Brewer, 1991; Bristol & Mangleburg, 2005). The aim of this research is to show that the expression of these two needs translates into a disposition particularly interesting to marketers, that of opinion leaders.

Opinion leaders are members of a social system who pass the information they receive from the source on to the other members of the social system (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1965).

Because they are significant contributors to the diffusion and adoption of innovations (Childers, 1986; Watts & Dodds, 2007), they have

inspired a large body of empirical studies. Most of these studies provide a better understanding of the opinion leadership concept and map the positions that opinion leaders occupy within their social networks (Kratzer & Lettl, 2009; Lee, Cotte, & Noseworthy, 2010). However, these studies suffer from two limitations. First, they focus on adults or children, not on adolescents. Therefore, they overlook a segment whose vast purchasing power renders it particularly worthy of investigation. Second, they study assimilation and individuation motives separately (Chan, Berger, & Van Boven, 2012), thereby failing to investigate the question of how these two conflicting motives may *combine* in the opinion leadership process.

In response, the current study develops an integrative perspective that examines how two variables associated with the needs for assimilation and individuation—the adolescent's position in a peer network and her/his need for uniqueness—shape adolescent opinion leadership. In addition, because conformity to a peer group is particularly salient during adolescence, and adolescent boys and girls proceed along different developmental pathways (Chodorow, 1978), the present study also incorporates two moderators whose influence on adolescent opinion leadership has been ignored: susceptibility to peers' normative influence and gender. Results indicate that centrality in a network is associated with opinion leadership, but only among adolescents with low levels of susceptibility to peer influence. In addition, opinion leadership is associated with need for uniqueness but only among teenage boys. These findings extend existing research on opinion leadership and gender differences, as well as provide concrete guidelines for the implementation of efficient marketing strategies.

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\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +33 6 88 78 84 47.

E-mail addresses: elodie.gentina@skema.edu (E. Gentina), butori@essec.edu (R. Butori), heath@hec.fr (T.B. Heath).

The next section (Section 2) develops theory based on prior assimilation and individuation research. Sections 3 and 4 detail, respectively, the method and results of a study conducted among 1142 adolescents. Because adolescence is a time when individuals are particularly concerned with their appearance (they need to incorporate the changes that their bodies undergo in their views of themselves, Piacentini, 2010; Rose, Boush, & Friestad, 1998), this study examines opinion leadership in the context of clothing. Finally, Section 5 discusses the theoretical and practical implications of this study, as well as provides managerial suggestions for practitioners wishing to target adolescent consumers.

## 2. Theoretical framework and hypotheses

The formation of a strong and coherent sense of identity is the primary task associated with the transition from adolescence to adulthood (Erikson, 1968). The development of the self hinges on two related processes: (1) assimilation with peers who help define the individual within a social context and (2) individuation through the recognition of the self as a distinct entity and corresponding independence in behaviors (Brewer, 1991). Whereas the need for assimilation can be satisfied through one's group membership and identifying with this in-group, the need for individuation can be fulfilled by distinguishing the in-group from out-groups (Brewer, 1991). The proposed framework suggests that both needs for assimilation and individuation affect adolescents' opinion leadership.

### 2.1. Need for assimilation and opinion leadership

During adolescence, the construction of the self takes place through significant relationships with peers (Gecas & Steff, 1990). As parental influence fades, peer groups become important socialization agents that provide new rules, standards and beliefs about appropriate conducts (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). Group membership also relieves the pain associated with teens' narcissistic vulnerability, and provides a transitional sense of comfort and security (O'Donnell & Wardlow, 2000).

By adopting the rules of the group to which they aspire to belong, adolescents *assimilate* with the peer group and come to occupy strategic positions within the group (Mangleburg et al., 2004; Valente, Unger, & Johnson, 2005). Therefore, the position that an adolescent occupies within the peer network is a reflection of underlying assimilation concerns. This position, in turn, can be characterized by its degree of centrality, the number of ties that directly link a person within a network to the other members of this network adjusted for the total number of people in the network (Freeman, 1979).

High *degree centrality* in a friendship network means that the individual is popular, such that degree centrality connotes a high level of acceptance within the network (Wasserman & Faust, 1994). It also provides focal individuals with the advantage of accumulating higher quality information (Lee et al., 2010), which reinforces their expertise and credibility in the field (Hinz, Schulze, & Takac, forthcoming). By occupying central positions, adolescents not only develop an ability to influence others, but also have access to a network of peers through which they can exercise this ability. We thus expect to replicate, on an adolescent population, the relationship that Kratzer and Lettl (2009) and Lee et al. (2010) identified on children and adults respectively:

**H1.** Adolescent degree centrality relates positively to opinion leadership.

However, because during their adolescence, people depend heavily on peers, this relationship may be moderated by susceptibility to normative influence (SNI), that is, the extent to which people hope to conform to the expectations of others to attain a desired image (Bearden & Etzel, 1982; Bearden, Netemeyer, & Teel, 1989). In a consumer context, several studies show that adolescents' product preferences depend on those of peers (e.g., Bachmann, John, & Rao, 1993;

Childers & Rao, 1992; Mascarenhas & Higby, 1993). Friends help adolescents evaluate products, brands, and stores in ways that enhance each teen's sense of belonging while also establishing an identity separate from parents and from out-groups (Goodrich & Mangleburg, 2010). Accordingly, SNI has a primary influence on adolescent consumers' behaviors (Kurt, Inman, & Argo, 2011).

Although being central in a network enables teens to gather and update relevant information, it is unlikely that such central teens will be opinion leaders if they fail to transcend the normative influence of their peers and instead seek validation from their peers. It is difficult to be an opinion leader if one's opinions derive from the opinions of others, as is the case with people high on SNI (Mangleburg et al., 2004). In contrast, central adolescents that are low on SNI are more likely to think and act independently and thus share opinions that they have developed on their own. These consumers combine two assets essential to the expression of opinion leadership: access to relevant information (and credibility) in the field and independence from others, which provides enough confidence to engage in product and brand conversations. Accordingly, SNI should moderate the relationship between degree centrality and opinion leadership.

**H2.** The positive relationship between adolescent degree centrality and opinion leadership is stronger for adolescents with low rather than high SNI.

### 2.2. Need for individuation and opinion leadership

In addition to the need for social assimilation, people seek to differentiate themselves from others to define the self as a unique entity, distinct from others (White & Argo, 2009). This need for individuation emerges as adolescents break away from parental influence (Nuttall and Tinson, 2008; Yang & Laroche, 2011) as they think and act more independently (Piacentini, 2010). Such individuation balances with assimilation as adolescents evolve into adults, in part by becoming independent thinkers but also by meshing with their cohort and groups.

Because the need for individuation involves seeking and recognizing unique features, this study uses consumer need for uniqueness (CNFU) (Tian, Bearden, & Hunter, 2001) to operationalize the need for individuation. Adolescents high in CNFU should desire unique, counter-normative, or unconventional options (Tian & McKenzie, 2001; Tian et al., 2001) while avoiding products with significant mass appeal (Berger & Heath, 2007). Therefore, CNFU links closely to the maintenance and display of individuation. By wearing unique products or their combinations, adolescents with high CNFU signal a clear sense of their own personal identity and sufficient confidence to express that identity. That is, a high level of CNFU contributes to the development of desirable identities that others are likely to admire and consult. Consistent with previous research (e.g., Chan & Misra, 1990; Fromkin, 1971; Snyder & Fromkin, 1980), we therefore hypothesize that the willingness to publicly individuate oneself is a necessary trait of an effective opinion leader.

**H3.** Adolescent CNFU relates positively to opinion leadership.

SNI, however, should again moderate this relationship. Credibility is a key to the development of opinion leadership, and opinion leaders must send coherent signals. By simultaneously pursuing uniqueness (high CNFU) and detaching from the norms of their peer groups (low SNI), adolescents send such signals and demonstrate confidence in their choices, which further increases the desirability of their opinions and preferences. In contrast, when adolescents pursue uniqueness (high CNFU) but need the approval of peers (high SNI), perceived credibility as an independent thinker wanes, thereby blunting the individual's impact on others. Accordingly:

**H4.** The positive relationship between CNFU and opinion leadership is stronger for adolescents with low rather than high SNI.

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