

Research Article

“Share and scare”: Solving the communication dilemma of early adopters with a high need for uniqueness

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Abstract

Early adopters are considered essential to new product success due to their role in encouraging others to adopt. In this paper, we show that this may not always be true. Early adopters with a high need for uniqueness may experience a communication dilemma of whether or not to communicate about innovations they adopt. The dilemma derives from the clash between their need to flaunt the innovation they adopted and their desire to preserve their uniqueness by preventing imitation by others. We suggest that this dilemma might be resolved by a “share and scare” strategy, in which early adopters share information about their adoption with others yet scare them out of adopting it. In a series of four studies, we demonstrate early adopters’ communication dilemma, the “share and scare” strategy, and three moderators that confirm our theory.

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Introduction

Early adopters are the first to adopt an innovation and recommend it to later adopters. The literature (and practice) has therefore treated early adopters as the “social salespeople” of new products (Goldsmith & Flynn, 1992; Mahajan, Muller, & Srivastava, 1990; Midgley & Dowling, 1993; Rogers, 2003). This, however, may not always be true. As we demonstrate in this paper, in some cases, early adopters may be reluctant to promote the innovation they adopt, and consequently become an obstacle to new product success.

In this research, we explore some early adopters’ reluctance to recommend innovations to others. Specifically, we propose that early adopters may face a dilemma between their inherent desire to spread the word about the innovations they adopt and their desire to prevent imitation by others. We expect this dilemma to manifest among early adopters with a high need for

uniqueness. Although these consumers wish to display and discuss the innovations they adopt, they also wish to restrict others’ use or possession of these innovations in order to preserve their own uniqueness. Therefore, early adopters with a high need for uniqueness may intentionally discourage others from adopting the innovation by employing what we term here a “share and scare” strategy.

The “share and scare” strategy reflects the tendency to pseudo-recommend the innovation by describing it in a manner that dissuades others from purchasing it. As an example, consider a gadget lover who often buys new, distinctive electronic devices. When enthusiastically discussing her new purchases in detail, she might focus on their numerous, complex functions. In doing so, she *shares* the innovation with her friends, but at the same time *scares* them out of adopting it. We propose that by focusing on features that diminish the innovation’s appeal for later adopters, such as its complexity, high price, or radicalness (Jager, 2001; Mukherjee & Hoyer, 2001; Ram, 1989), early adopters intentionally discourage others from adopting.

Past literature has acknowledged possible problems in the communication between early and later adopters that could

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adversely affect the diffusion process (Moore, 1999), but it has not discussed early adopters' unwillingness to promote new products or moreover to intentionally reduce new products' popularity and subsequent success.

Studies have, however, discussed potential concerns that consumers who adopt innovations might have when facing their followers, as a result of fear of imitation. These concerns may be related to potential loss of uniqueness (Cheema & Kaikati, 2010), leadership (Amaldoss & Jain, 2008), status (Fisher & Price, 1992), or desired identity (Berger & Heath, 2008). However, these studies have not fully considered the process, its underlying mechanisms, or coping methods of consumers. They also did not focus on early adopters, whose tendency to communicate innovations to others is well known, and whose influence is considered essential to the success of new products.

The premise of our research is that early adopters encounter a communication dilemma and respond with a "share and scare" strategy. It is driven by past research showing that consumers with a high need for uniqueness address their fear of imitation by sharing informative rather than favorable product information (Cheema & Kaikati, 2010). We extend this research by focusing on early adopters, who are central to the diffusion process. We suggest that Cheema and Kaikati's (2010) findings may not apply to early adopters, because early adopters have an inherent need to talk about innovations they adopt, and therefore cannot hide the innovation or avoid recommending it, as Cheema and Kaikati (2010) show. Early adopters with a high need for uniqueness therefore experience a communication dilemma between their need to talk about their adopted innovations (e.g., Midgley, 1987; Rogers, 2003) and their need to hide the innovation to prevent imitation, which is grounded in their need for uniqueness (Cheema & Kaikati, 2010). Thus, unlike Cheema and Kaikati (2010), who show that individuals with a high need for uniqueness will avoid recommending publicly consumed products, we show that early adopters with a high need for uniqueness will be happy to recommend publicly or privately consumed products, because they have a need to brag, but at the same time they will actively discourage others from adopting those products. Moreover, Cheema and Kaikati (2010) have focused on the moderating role of need for uniqueness on word of mouth; our research also considers the moderating role of early adoption among those who have a high need for uniqueness.

The current research further contributes to the literature on fear of imitation, which indicates that individuals strive to prevent others from copying them (White & Argo, 2011). We show a new dilemma that consumers face and a new strategy to prevent imitation. We also contribute to the literature on word of mouth, which divides word of mouth into either positive or negative valence (Harrison-Walker, 2001). By proposing the pseudo-recommendation (scare) strategy, we show that word of mouth can appear to be positive when the intention is dissuading others. In addition, focusing on early adopters also extends the literature on early adoption and diffusion of innovations. This literature shows that early adopters are central in spreading information about innovations (e.g., Midgley, 1987; Rogers, 2003). We suggest that early adopters might spread dissuasive word of mouth when they believe others are likely to

imitate them. Consequently, such behavior might delay the diffusion process of new products.

Next, we elaborate on the role of early adoption and need for uniqueness in the communication dilemma, and the consequent "share and scare" strategy.

Theoretical background

Early adopters

Early adopters are the first individuals in the market to adopt a new idea, procedure, or product (Rogers, 2003). By adopting an innovation and conveying their subjective evaluation of it, early adopters help reduce the perceived risks and uncertainty associated with purchasing a new product, consequently enhancing its appeal to later adopters (Rogers, 2003). Early adopters are therefore perceived to be highly influential in the adoption process (e.g., Rogers, 2003; Van den Bulte & Joshi, 2007) and central to the successful diffusion of innovations (Midgley & Dowling, 1993; Rogers, 2003).

However, early adopters are not always helpful in encouraging others to adopt. For example, in some cases, early adopters may use technical jargon, express that others cannot handle or afford the innovation, or avoid helping others use a complex product. While in certain situations, early adopters may have legitimate reasons for dissuading others from using innovations, such as when they believe that an innovation is genuinely unsuitable for later adopters, in this research we focus on situations where this is not the case. Thus, we consider innovations that are perceived as friendly, affordable, and easy to use; and we show that early adopters may nonetheless discourage others by communicating about product complexity and high price. Specifically, we focus on the intentional actions of some early adopters to discourage others from adopting innovative products, not because they believe that others cannot use the products but due to their desire to prevent others from imitating them. We propose that this behavior derives from a high need for uniqueness, which may have been the motivation for early adoption (Vandecasteele & Geuens, 2010).

Vandecasteele and Geuens (2010) suggest four types of motivations for adopting innovations: (1) functional motivations, which may drive early adopters to look for better and improved products that currently exist in the market; (2) hedonic motivations, which may reflect the joy of innovation and the fun that accompanies the adoption of new products; (3) cognitive motivations, which are driven by curiosity and a desire for knowledge; and (4) social motivations, which may drive early adoption as a means of enhancing status and prestige by possessing items that others do not (or cannot) have.

In this research, we focus on early adopters who are driven by social motivations, specifically a need for uniqueness. We propose that these early adopters experience an inherent conflict between their early adoption tendency and their need for uniqueness.

One prominent trait of early adopters is their leadership: they are influential, highly sociable, and willing to spread word of mouth (e.g., Midgley, 1987; Rogers, 2003). Therefore, they are

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