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## The role of the social-identity function of attitudes in consumer innovativeness and opinion leadership

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### Abstract

Attitudes serving the social-identity function relate nonsocial objects (e.g., products) to social objects (e.g., people). As new products tend to be more exciting than old, familiar products, the authors suggest that these attitudes influence innovativeness and opinion leadership. Based on recent research on attitude functions and adoption of consumer innovations, this research examines the relationship between the social-identity function, innovativeness, and opinion leadership, in addition to expertise and involvement; the two traditional antecedents of innovativeness and opinion leadership. The results across two product categories show that social-identity function exerts a strong impact on innovativeness and opinion leadership. © 2000 Elsevier Science B.V. All rights reserved.

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## **1. Introduction**

The recent resurgence of interest in the motivational underpinnings of cognitive constructs (Kruglanski, 1996) has stimulated interest in issues relating to the psychological needs served by attitudes (cf., Greenwald, 1989). One related and important stream of research concerns attitude functions (cf., Shavitt, 1992). Functional theories of attitudes (cf., Katz & Stotland, 1959; Sarnoff & Katz, 1954) ask the question: Why do people hold the attitudes they do? Development of new methods to measure attitude functions helped overcome the operational difficulties that have plagued research on attitude functions (Herek, 1987). We suggest that attitude functions may play an important role in the adoption and the diffusion of consumer innovations (Gatignon & Robertson, 1985). The success of new consumer products rests on the construct of innovativeness, which introduces the product (innovation) to the social system, and opinion leadership, which provides social legitimacy to the innovation. Thus, it is important to develop an understanding both innovativeness and opinion leadership.

## **2. Theoretical background and research hypothesis**

Functional theorists classify attitudes according to the functional needs that they meet (Snyder & DeBono, 1989; Shavitt, 1989a). General classifications categorize attitude functions as utilitarian, ego-defensive, knowledge, value-expressive, and social-adjustive (Smith, Bruner & White, 1956). One important objective of consumer psychology is to be able to persuade consumers and change their attitudes. According to the functional theorist, the prerequisite for changing an attitude is to determine the psychological need served by the attitude (Shavitt, 1989a).

This role of attitude functions opens a plethora of opportunities to investigate persuasion processes (Johar & Sirgy, 1991; Park, Milberg & Lawson, 1991; Shavitt, 1992). Indeed, most applications of attitude functions in consumer behavior investigate the persuasiveness of advertising messages (cf., Park, Jaworski & MacInnis, 1986; Snyder & DeBono, 1985). For example, Shavitt and Lowrey (1992) investigate the impact of product-related and audience-related factors on the persuasiveness of value-expressive and utilitarian advertising messages. Other applications examine objects serving different attitude functions (cf., Shavitt & Fazio, 1991; Sirgy, Johar, Samli & Clairborne, 1991). For instance, in their investigation of brand extensions,

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