

THE BROKEN MYTH OF THE OPINION LEADER. A SOCIOLOGICAL SURVEY CONDUCTED AMONG UBB STUDENTS

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Abstract: The present paper reports the findings of a carefully prepared survey conducted in the student city Cluj-Napoca regarding an important factor of the "two-step flow of communication" model. The aim of the study is to find out who the influentials for the students enrolled in the Babeş-Bolyai University are, whether they are formal or rather informal opinion leaders, persons from the media or from their everyday life, but also to find out which values are appreciated nowadays by the respondents. The results of this survey, although far from definitive, seem to be revealing and encouraging for conducting further studies in this direction.

Keywords: Two-step communication flow, opinion leaders, values, characteristics, information, behaviour

1. Introduction

The two-step flow model has undergone many essential changes since the first studies about it were published, almost seven decades ago. It addressed the flow of information between the media and individuals, the tension between the power of the mass media and the power of individuals and the changing of behaviors.

About twenty years have passed since the sociologist Lazarsfeld and his colleagues introduced the "two-step flow of communication" model. (Lazarsfeld, 1948) The results of the study that Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet conducted in 1944, entitled "The People's Choice", surprised even the researchers themselves. One of the main conclusions of the research pointed out, that mass-media has only a slight influence on individual receivers. This result separated the communication science into two separate fields: "mass-communication" and "interpersonal communication". (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955) The present paper underlines the importance of interpersonal communication, starting from the premises of the communication model mentioned above.

The fundamental mechanism of the two-step communication model, the initial one, is the following: we are all social beings and are living in several groups, in each of these groups there is at least one opinion leader. Ideas often flow from the radio and print to the opinion leaders (step one) and from them to the less active sections of the population (step two). Ideas were later reformulated into information and influence. "Information" identified the link between mass media and opinion leaders, and "influence" is the link by which opinion leaders structured information to influence followers. (Nan, 1973) Other studies complement earlier findings and state that there is a rather a two-cycle flow of communication, rather than a two-step communication flow. One of these studies (Troidhal, 1966) has brought arguments in favour of this change

of concepts and has made a commendable attempt at empirically testing and scientifically validating it.

Several years later, other studies were conducted and the model was consequently extended. Studies have shown that there is also a direct link, a direct information flow between the media and the individuals who are not opinion leaders. "Initial mass media information on important events goes directly to people on the whole and is not relayed to any great extent." Very similar findings were obtained later in two more studies conducted by Deutschmann, regarding the communication through political campaigns. (Deutschmann, 1962)

Afterwards, special attention was given to the second step of the communication flow. The question which arose was who initiates the second step flow of communication. Merton, in his study of local and cosmopolitan influentials (Merton, 1957) suggested that the "influentials" might initiate the second-step flow of communication. He believed that influentials used news as a "commodity for exchange, to be traded for further increments of prestige." The hypothesis that opinion leaders are the ones who initiate the second-step flow seems inconsistent with the initial definition according to which they are defined as persons who are asked for advice.

A more recent study (Stone, 1999) focused on this specific part of the model and obtained the following results: when media information bypassed opinion leaders and went directly to the followers, the followers "would initiate the second-step flow of communication to seek advice from opinion leaders," especially when mass media content was inconsistent with their previous predispositions. Consequently, the role of the followers in the communication process was acknowledged as being more active than it was initially deemed.

The general conclusion regarding this model is that opinion leaders are more influential than the media and that their points of view are more important for the community they belong to. They are active people who collect information on various subjects, evaluate it and render it again in the form of personal opinions. They define, approve or support certain standards, sometimes having the role of "editors".

2. Who Are the Opinion Leaders?

„Opinion leaders are found at every level of society and are very similar to those they influence in age, occupation, and political opinions (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948). Researchers later (Lai Lee, 2010) found that opinion leaders and followers exchanged roles quite often. Both could possess the same attributes, such as relevant media exposure, similar information level, and social status, gregariousness, and perceived opinion leadership. They also belonged to the same primary groups of family, friends, and co-workers, which was the single most active type of exchange.

In Romania, the concept of "opinion leader", and that of "public opinion" were analyzed for the first time at the beginning of the last century, named by the famous Romanian sociologist, Septimiu Chelcea, *the century of public opinion*. At a global level, the first papers on this matter belong to Walter Lippman, Pierre Bourdieu, Sindy Verba and Jürgen Habermas.

The concept of "opinion leader" is ambiguous and it has been used in a wide range of definitions and theories. Chronologically speaking, the concept of "opinion leader" has not changed its profile very much, with the exception of certain features not

mentioned until a few years ago, which have recently proved their worth. The opinion leaders have been a key element in the flow of political information for a long time. Gaudet, Berelson, Lazarsfeld and Katz, have emphasized through their theory of the "two-step flow of communication" the fact that opinion leaders are mediators between media and individuals, and enjoy social power afforded by the possession of vital information and by its transmission.

The leader of a group, as a reference point, suggests that people expect the leader to be more influential than other members of a group, to have a privileged status, and to eventually become a public figure. The present paper focuses precisely on this erroneous perception which stems from the fact that sometimes we are not able to identify any other type of opinion leader.

J. Fenton and Th. Legget have identified two types of leaders within groups: official and unofficial leaders. The difference between them is that the official leaders justify their status by virtue of the authority vested in their position, while the unofficial leaders justify their status through suggestion or even command. In addition, an informal leader will never enjoy full authority. Perhaps because of that, we tend to choose an opinion leader with an important function, rather than someone close to us. People who are asked to identify an opinion leader often associate him or her with the features mentioned above and it does not occur to them to choose are not choosing people who are close, familiar to them, persons who can also be leaders. It is one of our goals to find out whether this is also the case in our day and age.

Over the years, studies have tried to discover the differences regarding the features of the opinion leaders as opposed to those of the followers. In order to reach a satisfactory result, researchers have tried to define and to establish a set of features (social, economic, political, etc) of the opinion leaders, which are different from those of non-opinion leaders.

Recent studies are shifting their attention towards the opinion leaders, their specific characteristics and their role in the communication process. The researchers Brosius and Weinemann (Heinemann, 1991) described the archetypal opinion leaders whose personal communication had an impact on agenda setting and controlled the flow of information: this study analyzed agenda setting with the two-step flow elements and found that the influentials collect and disseminate information from the media to the community. Other studies (Brosius, 1996) have found out that the influentials are elitists, not integrated within the community as the old theory suggested.

A general assumption regarding the era we are living in is that the opinion leaders of our society could be the bloggers, as their characteristics overlap with the attributes of opinion leaders. According to the latest definitions, opinion leaders are filters of information and ideas. Each industry, issue or ideology has its own opinion leader. They are constant media users, 'novelty' consumers, socially active. They shape businesses and industries, influence studies and debates, spread ideas, improve conversations and affect public policies. Nonetheless, when talking about opinion leaders, one must take into account the various categories of people who choose them as models. The present paper sets out to analyze the issue from the point of view of the group represented by students. Nowadays, these should be permanently connected to the media, because, as we all know, information is an important differentiating factor. However, there is one idea circulating (one is either aware of or

not), according to which young people do not choose their opinion leaders really 'correctly', as they are not aware of their possible impact of on their lives.

Opinion leaders could also be identified according to one's interests, hobbies, field of study. This complex aspect is the subject of our research.

The theories regarding the opinion leaders emphasize the importance of interpersonal communication in communication sciences. Nevertheless, every theory draws criticism as well. The German researcher Michael Schenk (Schenk, 1983) identified some weaknesses of the theory. In his opinion, the theory of opinion leaders relates only to the sources and channels of communication, without relating to the content of it.

Another aspect that was criticized is that opinion leaders get information from other opinion leaders themselves, which leads to a multi-step-flow not only a two-step-communication-flow. Furthermore, a clear difference between "information flow and influence" has been made.

Mainly, the criticism surrounding the two-step-communication-flow has the same source: disregarding the complexity of the communication processes.

3. Research Design

Our work aims to verify the hypothesis that students nowadays choose their opinion leaders according to superficial criteria (where "superficial" refers to the fact that they are guided by a person's level of notoriety or social position, etc.). While drafting our research design, inevitable questions arise: "Who are the opinion leaders for students?" "Which are the values students admire in a person?" "Do students identify themselves with the opinion leaders?" "Do the students choose their opinion leaders from their fields of study?" "Do the chosen opinion leaders correlate with the hobbies of the students?" In order to verify the previously mentioned hypothesis and the research questions, we chose the survey as a scientific method of collecting data and our questionnaires were filled out by a representative number of students from the Babeş-Bolyai University from Cluj-Napoca. The ages of the respondents range between 19 and 25.

The results proved to be surprising, as they are contrary to our expectations. Students seem to choose their leaders carefully and responsibly, they are aware of the fact that opinion leaders have a major impact on their lives and are not using superficial criteria for choosing them. Our research proves that students also identify themselves, to a certain degree, with the people whom they admire.

4. Sampling

As the city we conducted our survey in is a student city and our interest is to find out who the opinion leaders of young people are, we chose to collect answers from the students from the Babeş -Bolyai University, because this university is the most heterogeneous in Cluj-Napoca, as it includes 18 different faculties with different profiles. Consequently, all of our respondents were young people, students, with ages between 19 and 25, but with different interests and different fields of study. We created a detailed list with the 18 faculties/groups and decided to question 10 individuals from each group. The next step consisted in SRS (simple random sampling) and the number 7 came up. Consequently we have questioned every 7th person we have met

on the hallways of those faculties. Due to a human resource issue, the responses from one of the faculties could not be taken into consideration, consequently the current study focuses on 17 different fields of study, which are: Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, Geography, Environmental Science, History, Psychology, Political Science and Communication, Philology, Theatre and Television, Law, Economics, Sports, European Studies, Sociology, Business and Theology. The faculty, respectively the field which was excluded from the sample is that of biology. The gender division is fairly balanced, 56% female and 44% male.

The challenge regarding stratified samples is that this sampling method requires fairly detailed advance knowledge of the population characteristics and therefore are more difficult to construct. So we had to gather all necessary information and figures about our target group. We chose the stratified sampling because of its sociological advantage, as this method provides greater accuracy than a simple random sampling of the same size and may be less expensive because a smaller sample often provides greater precision.

5. Construction of the questionnaire. Guidelines for interpretation

Our questionnaire can be interpreted through 6 dominant dimensions, which include the factors indicated in the questionnaire.

The first dimension is that of *maturity* and includes the features *g*, *l*, *b* and *o*:

” **g.** realistic, pragmatic and not at all pretentious”

” **l.** mature”

” **b.** well-mannered”

” **o.** has enough life experience”.

The second dimension is that of *authority* and includes the factors *n* and *p*:

” **n.** makes you follow the rules”

” **p.** not afraid to state his/her opinion”.

The third dimension is that of *accessibility* of the leader and includes the factors *a*, *c*, *i*, *j* and *k*:

” **a.** enjoys life”

” **c.** belongs to the same social group as you”

” **i.** is available when you need him/her”

” **j.** resembles you”

” **k.** has a high degree of empathy towards others”.

The fourth dimension is that of *professionalism* and includes the factors *d*, *h*, *e*:

” **d.** is highly professional”

” **h.** evaluates you appropriately”

” **e.** has strong opinions in several fields”

” **t.** has an anticipatory spirit”.

The fifth dimension is that of *visibility* and includes the factors *q* and *r*:

” **q.** stands out in a crowd”

” **r.** is a public figure”.

The last dimension is the *self image* of the leader and includes the factors *f*, *m* and *s*:

” **f.** is not modest”

” **m.** has a high social status”

” **s.** enjoys giving advice to others”.

On the ground of these main elements, we analyzed the results provided by the questionnaire and found answers for two of our research questions. We determined the general features of the students' opinion leaders. Then we measured the level of identification between the students and their leaders on the basis of the answers we have collected from our respondents. Consequently we drafted a scale of values from 1 to 7, with 3 main dimensions. In the first one, between 1 and 3, we included the percentage of students who do not identify themselves at all with their leaders. In the second dimension, between 3 and 5, we included the respondents who partially identify themselves with their leaders, and in the last dimension, between 5 and 7, we included those who totally identify themselves with their leaders.

6. Findings. Descriptive Statistics

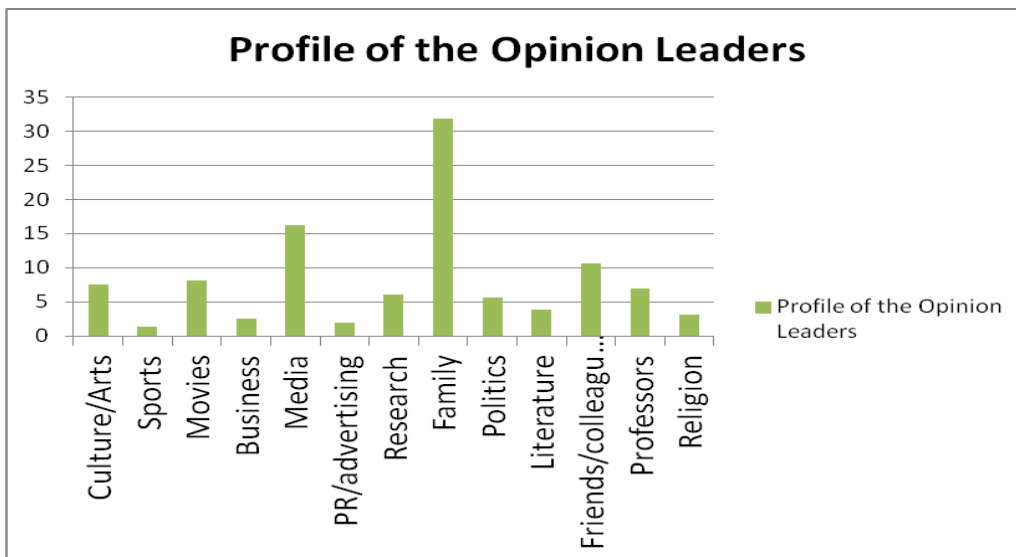


Figure 1. General profile (field) of the chosen opinion leaders expressed in percent

As expected, interpersonal communication is stronger than media communication, the opinion leaders for most of the students are family members, followed by persons they know from the media. The general situation is the following:

Percent of opinion leaders from the own family: 31.9. The family member who was mentioned the most is the mother, followed by the father and the brother.

- Percent of opinion leaders from the media: 16.3. (mostly Romanian TV stars, such as: Andi Moisescu, Antonia, Mihaela Rădulescu, Oreste, Andrea Raicu, Carmen Brumă, Oana Cuzino, Moise Guran)
- Percent of opinion leaders from everyday life: 10.6 (mostly friends)
- Percent of opinion leaders from the movie industry: 8.1 (characters and actors, such as: Dr. House, Ashton Kutcher, Charlie Sheen, Julia Roberts, Will Smith)
- Percent of opinion leaders from culture/arts: 7.5
- Least appreciated categories are from the fields of: religion (3.1), PR/advertising (1.9) and sports (1.3).

The person who was mentioned the most is the mother. The greatest surprise was that some respondents named the American president, Barack Obama, but even more often the Romanian president, Traian Băsescu was mentioned

As stated before, after finding out which field the opinion leaders belong to, we searched for more specific results, and asked about the characteristics which are appreciated the most by others. We grouped several characteristics into 6 dimensions; the following are the appreciated characteristics of the opinion leaders:

- Maturity
- Authority
- Accessibility
- Professionalism
- Visibility
- Self image

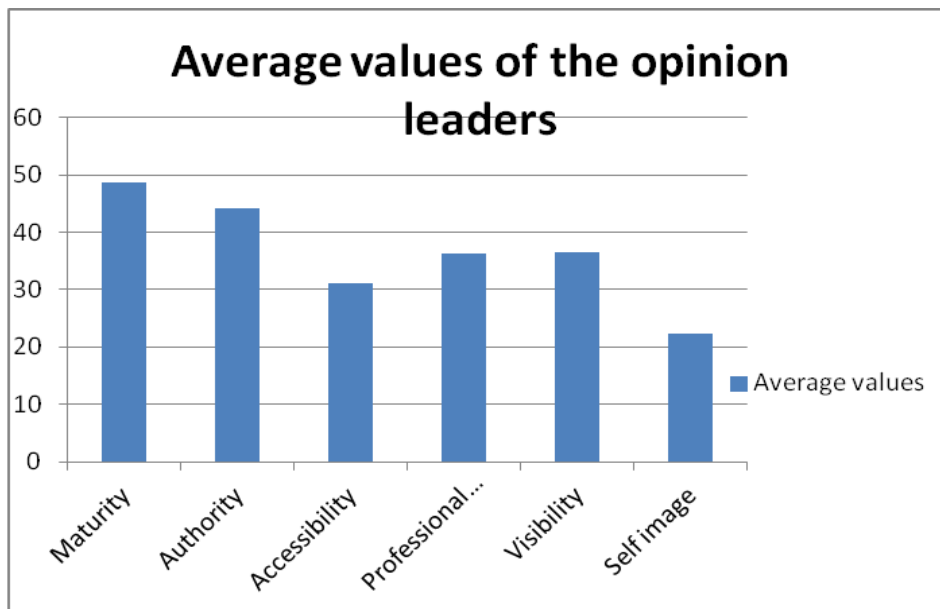


Figure 2. General characteristics of the opinion leaders, expressed in percent

Generally speaking, the most appreciated general characteristics are maturity (48.7%) and authority (44.1%) and the least appreciated are accessibility (31.2%) and self image (22.3%).

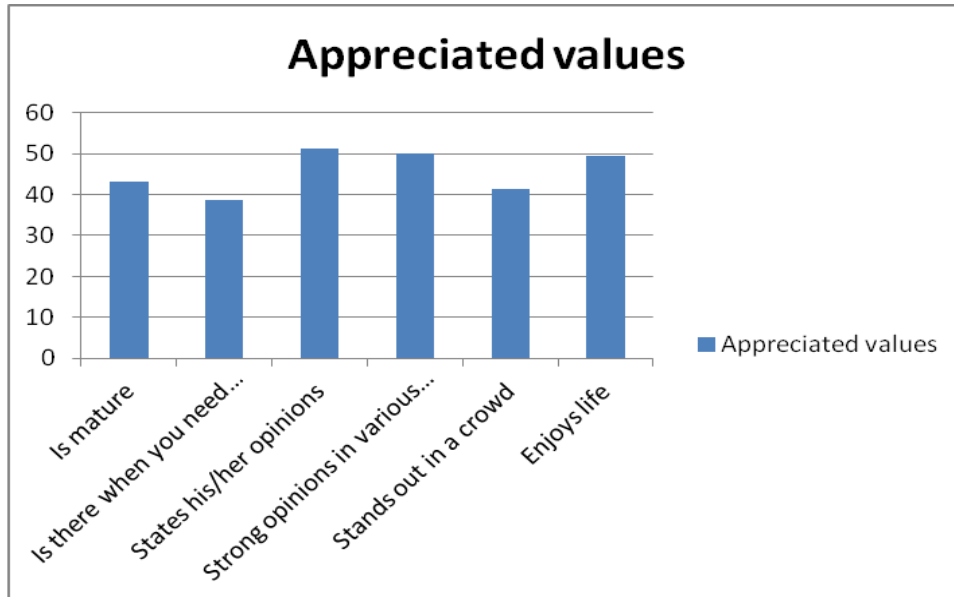


Figure 3. Comparison: Appreciated values expressed in percent

According to the questionnaire, we can describe the opinion leader of the students as a person who has knowledge and opinions in various fields, who is not afraid to express them, a person who enjoys life, but responsibly, is there when you need him/her, is mature, but has something which makes him/her special, which makes him/her stand out in a crowd.

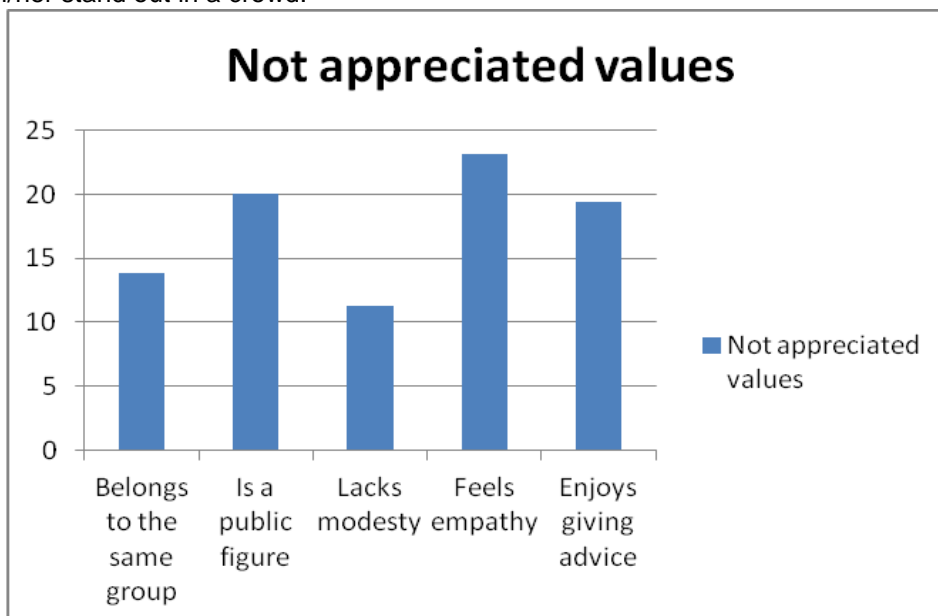


Figure 4. Comparison: Not appreciated values expressed in percent

According to the questionnaire, the opinion leader does not have to belong to the same social group as the respondents, but he or she does not have to be a public figure either. Students do not admire persons who lack modesty, who enjoy giving advice or who are empathic.

6.1 Correlation between Media Use and the Fields of the Chosen Opinion Leaders

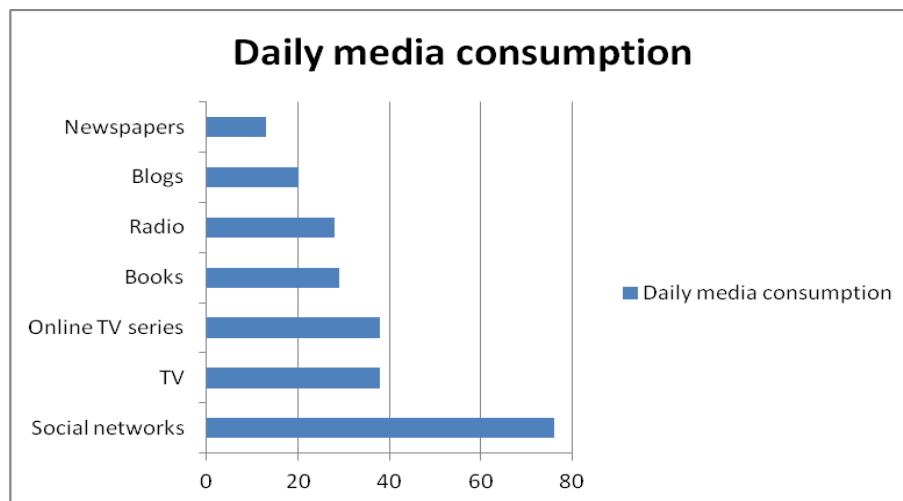


Figure 5. Daily media behaviour of respondents, expressed in percent

Regarding the media use, the following main considerations may be drawn:

The most opinion leaders of the respondents who watch TV daily are family members (23), followed by influentials from the media (16), friends (8) and teachers (5). The less time spent in front of the TV, the smaller the number of opinion leaders from the media, as they are replaced by those from the field of culture, literature and by friends.

Most of the opinion leaders for the respondents who read books on a daily basis are from their families (18), followed by influentials from literature (16). A basic characteristic of these respondents is that the number of people from the media whom they admire is very low.

People who enjoy reading newspapers and magazines daily are more pragmatic. Most of their opinion leaders are family members (9), followed by people from the fields of politics (2), business (2) and movies (2).

The profile of those who use social networks on a daily basis is similar to that of those who watch TV daily. Most of the opinion leaders for the respondents who use social networks daily are from their families (42), followed by influentials from the media (23), friends (10) and culture (10).

The only people who mostly appreciate the values and characteristics of people from the media (11) are the ones who are very active on the Internet and read blogs on a daily basis.

6.2 Correlation between hobbies and the fields of the chosen opinion leaders

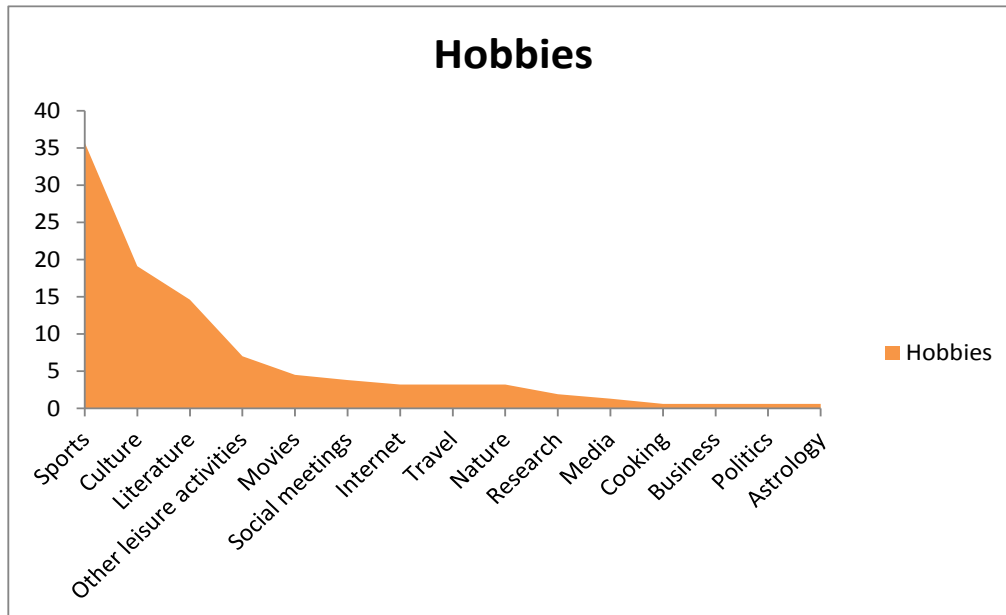


Figure 6. Hobbies of the respondents

The most interesting aspect about this correlation is the fact that although the favourite hobby of the respondents is sports, people whom they admire and whose ideas or advice they would take are not at all active in this particular field. Another interesting fact is that the young respondents spend a lot of time using media, watching TV or surfing the Internet, and although people they admire mostly stem from fields such as mass-media, movies and Internet, the majority of respondents do not regard these activities as main hobbies. Their main hobbies are from the fields of sports, culture, literature, movies and meeting friends. Either people are not aware of the fact that by liking an activity and pursuing it very often, it becomes a hobby, or activities such as surfing the Internet and using social networks on a daily basis are nowadays beyond the status of hobbies, having gained the status of needs. In our day and age such activities are indispensable and are considered to be as natural and basic as eating and sleeping.

There seems to be no conclusive correlation between the hobbies and the fields of the chosen opinion leaders. The most evident results, in this regard, are that the majority of those who enjoy sports, leisure and like arts look up to persons from their own families. Secondly, the majority of people who enjoy literature admire persons from this field; thirdly the majority of people who enjoy politics admire persons from this domain. On the other hand, people who enjoy social meetings very seldom indicated their friends as being opinion leaders, but persons from the movie industry. Data indicates that teachers are mostly appreciated by people who enjoy sports, arts and literature.

6.3 Correlation between study fields and the fields of the chosen opinion leaders

As stated in the chapter about the sampling, we chose the SRS (simple random sampling) and surveyed the same number of respondents from each of the 17 faculties of the UBB in Cluj-Napoca.

A positive correlation is that of theology and philology students who mostly admire persons from the field of religion. The students from the Faculty of Political Science and Communication, which also includes a Department of Journalism mostly admire persons from the media, whereas students of the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration mostly admire persons from the field of PR/advertising. Family members are equally appreciated by students from various fields, but mostly by those studying Psychology and Theatre. Political figures are appreciated mostly by the students of the Faculty of Political Science.

An unexpected result was to find out that friends are mostly appreciated by the students of the Faculty of Chemistry and also that at least one professor was indicated as opinion leader in almost all fields of study, especially by theology students. Another surprise was that persons activating in the field of arts and culture are mostly appreciated by law and mathematics students.

6.4 Identification with the Chosen Opinion Leaders

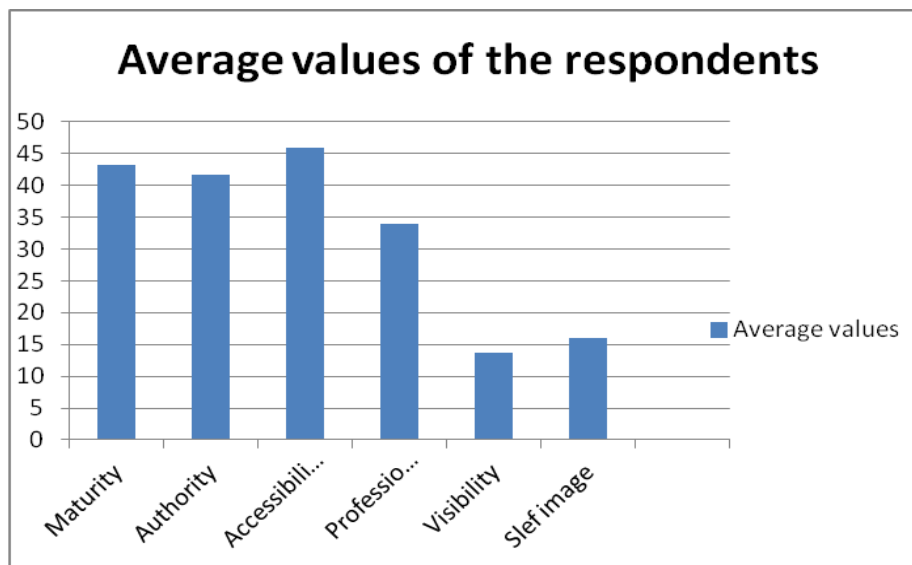


Figure 7. General characteristics of the respondents, expressed in percent

In a general sense, the respondents describe themselves as being accessible for those who need them, mature and professional, but also authoritarian. They do not stand out in a crowd, neither are they public figures, they do not have a high social status and are modest.

Looking at the specific data, it is extremely important for the young respondents that the opinion leaders be well mannered, enjoy life, not be afraid to state their own opinions and be available for those who need them. On the contrary, the respondents

describe themselves as not having a high social status, not being public figures, not having enough life experience or lacking modesty.

We can summarize the data introduced and analyzed in our code book in the following table:

| Place | Opinion Leaders | Students |
|-------|---|--|
| 1 | Realistic, pragmatic (63.1%) | Is well-mannered (75%) |
| 2 | Not afraid to state opinion (51.3%) | Is available when you need him (64.4%) |
| 3 | Enjoys life (50.6%) | Not afraid to state opinion (59.4%) |
| 4 | Highly professional (46.3%) Has enough life experience (46.3%) | Realistic, pragmatic (48.1%) |
| 5 | Strong opinions in various fields (45%) | You evaluate yourself correctly (46.9%) |
| 6 | Mature (43.1%) | You resemble influent persons from your life (38.8%) |
| 7 | Is well-mannered (42.5%) | Anticipative, innovative spirit (38.1%) |

Table 1. Comparative table of the main characteristics

The data from the table illustrate the 7 main characteristics of the opinion leaders and of the respondents, according to the questionnaires. Three characteristics out of these seven are defining the opinion leaders, as well as the students: to be realistic, to have the courage to state one's opinions and to be well mannered. Being in the top 7, these characteristics create a resemblance between the two categories.

Looking at the other characteristics, we can see that the portrait of the opinion leader is made out of two basic elements: maturity and professionalism, while the characteristics of the respondents are softer, of a more human nature: to be available to others and to be anticipative.

The question about the resemblance between the students and their opinion leaders was a control question, which we addressed in two different ways and formulated as a statement that the respondents could choose as being defining for them or not. The first statement was: The chosen opinion leader resembles you. Then there were several other questions, followed by the statement: You resemble the influent people in your life. While the score for the first statement is fairly low (28.8% of the respondents acknowledged that the chosen opinion leader resembles them), the score for the second statement is fairly high, being in the top 6 of the defining characteristics (38.8% of the respondents stated that they resemble the influential people in their lives).

These results show us that the values which seem important for the students are not superficial at all and are important characteristics of their opinion leaders, as well as of themselves. Other than that, the resemblance between the two groups is fairly low, as the opinion leaders are more mature, have more life experience and are more professional, while the majority of students define themselves to be first and foremost well-mannered. The control question mentioned above reveals the fact that there is a wish among the students to be like the persons they admire and, as we have seen in

the description of their characteristics, the necessary premises for such a development are there.

7. Conclusion

Living in the era of social networks and technical innovations, many could say that direct social relationships suffer in their intimacy, reciprocity and longevity. Apparently, one thing has not changed since the first studies about the opinion leaders were carried out: people still appreciate the opinions, values and characteristics of people they know, such as family members, friends, teachers etc, more than those of people or characters from the media. Our work emphasizes the importance of interpersonal communication, where direct contact is more influential, appreciated and trusted.

The aim of our work has been partially achieved. We say "partially" because in order for our results to be more relevant, we should apply our research methods to a wider scale and possibly on more dimensions, as we focused only on students as a compact group in this particular case.

On the one hand, we have partially destroyed "a myth" which stated that young people chose their leaders irresponsibly. Our results show the contrary. They choose their leaders carefully and responsibly, greatly appreciating values such as professionalism, innovation, and admiring those with very well formed opinions in various areas. Opinion leaders are chosen on grounds of possessing empathy, but also a dose of pragmatism combined with a sense of reality.

Finally, the identification of influentials has important implications for practical-minded scholars of politics, marketing, advertising, and public opinion in general. The identification of influentials for a certain target group may have substantive value to those who combine social research with persuasive communication. The development of such a scale is a crucial first step for an evaluation of this kind.

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