



SOCIAL NORMS AND COMMUNICATION INFLUENCE

Social norms can be understood as either “what most people think and do” or, alternatively, “what individuals believe most people think and do.” As such, social norms are about what’s considered *normal* or *ought to be normal* in a given context and situation. Stated differently, norms reflect real or perceived majority opinion and behavior.

Social norms exert influence on people’s attitudes and behavior. This influence is strongest when individuals are uncertain about the “right way” to think and/or act. In these situations, people tend to survey their social and physical environments for attitudinal and behavioral cues or consider what they believe others think they should do. While the research literature includes many types of norms and discusses them from various perspectives, the intersection of social psychology and communication provides promising opportunities for increased understanding of the ways in which norms operate on the ground. The reason for this is simple: for norms to exert social influence, they must be communicated between and among people.

Definitions

Formally, “norms are of an informational nature, they help to understand and define situations and specific events within that situation.”¹ Norms spread through social interaction; they “. . . are social phenomena propagated among group members through communication.”²

It is important to differentiate between *actual* and *perceived norms*. Actual norms (or what some scholars refer to as “collective norms”) are codes of conduct that are, in reality, shared by the group, community, or culture. These types of norms indicate which behaviors members of a group can and should enact, and emerge through interaction among members of a group or collective. Since collective norms are rarely codified, they are open to misrepresentation and misperception by individuals. The fact that actual norms are often misinterpreted underscores the importance of perceived norms, which are individuals’ interpretations, often incorrect,³ of prevailing collective or actual norms.

Social science researchers have made various attempts to study and change perceived norms, whether to bring them more in line with actual norms⁴ so that people are better informed or to persuade people to avoid risky behavior, such as binge drinking or illicit drug use. Studies have found that influencing two types of norms is particularly effective in efforts toward changing people’s attitudes and behavior: injunctive and descriptive norms.⁵ Understanding these types of norms leads to practical options in crafting persuasive messages and harnessing the power of normative influence.

1 Fazio, R. H. (1990). Multiple processes by which attitudes guide behaviors: The MODE model as an integrative framework. In M. P. Zanna (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 23, pp. 75–109). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.

2 Kincaid, D. L. (2004). From innovation to social norm: Bounded normative influence. *Journal of Health Communication*, 9, 37–57.

3 For which reason simply adding up the perceived norms of individuals (as is done in opinion polls) is not likely to result in an accurate reflection of actual or collective norms.

4 To mitigate misinformed individual and aggregated opinion (e.g., “pluralistic ignorance,” “false consensus,” “false uniqueness”).

Injunctive norms refer to people’s beliefs about what “ought to be done.”⁶ Individuals act in accordance with that norm out of fear of social sanctions. Similar to injunctive norms are what some scholars call “subjective norms,”⁷ which are essentially what others (particular people deemed important by the individual) think ought to be done.

Descriptive norms, in contrast, do not refer to what individuals think ought to be done, but what most people do. As such, these norms merely “describe” what may be popular in the social environment. More specifically, these are based on perceptions of what is done by most members of one’s social group. Unlike injunctive norms, there are typically no social sanctions for non-compliance with descriptive norms.

Norms and Behavior

It is no surprise that human action is guided, in large part, by perceptions of the popularity of certain behaviors. Key determinants of whether an individual will engage in a behavior is whether others also engage in that behavior (descriptive norm) and/or whether others believe one should engage in the behavior (injunctive norm). Taking stock of one’s social environment helps individuals live their day-to-day lives more efficiently, but it can also lead to the adoption of negative behaviors. Nevertheless, evidence suggests that conforming to social norms is often a good choice because “collective wisdom tends to serve the individual, and the group, well.”⁸ Norms aid people in decision making by allowing them to take into account what most people do or what the majority thinks should be done. By following the group, we are able to make decisions more quickly, reduce our own anxiety, and on balance, make fewer mistakes because what most people usually do is likely to be socially acceptable behavior. The influence of these descriptive norms on behavior is stronger when they are in line with injunctive norms. This is not to say that what is “usually done” is morally or ethically sound, important judgments which are beyond the scope of this paper.

Research has found that the influence norms exert on behavior is either strengthened or weakened by the following factors: outcome expectations; group identity; and ego involvement.⁹

Outcome expectations refer to the belief that a specific behavior will lead to desired benefits. Roughly speaking, these expectations are based on a weighing of the costs and benefits associated with behaving in a certain way: “when the high prevalence of a behavior is accompanied by beliefs that the behavior results in significant benefits, individuals are more likely to engage in the behavior.”¹⁰

Group identity: When individuals feel connected to a group, the descriptive norms of that “reference group” influence how they act. Conformity with group norms is likely because it makes people feel good (also called positive affect). In addition, it is assumed that if one does not act in accordance with the norm, this will be known by other members of the group, leading to ostracism and social sanctions.

Ego involvement refers to the extent to which a person’s sense of self (or self-concept) is related to one’s position on a particular issue. When a certain behavior is strongly associated with one’s self-concept, descriptive norms have more influence on behavior.

5 Lapinski, M. K. & Rimal, R. N. (2005, pp. 129–133). An explication of social norms. *Communication Theory*, 15(2), 127–147.

6 Cialdini, R. B., Reno, R. R., & Kallgren, C. A. (1990). A focus theory of normative conduct: Recycling the concept of norms to reduce littering in public places. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 58, 1015–1026.

7 Ajzen, I. & Fishbein, M. (1980). *Theory of Reasoned Action*; Ajzen, I. (1988). *Theory of Planned Behavior*.

8 Cialdini, R. B. (2001), as cited in Lapinski, M. K. & Rimal, R. N. (2005, p. 128). An explication of social norms. *Communication Theory*, 15(2), 127–147.

9 Lapinski, M. K. & Rimal, R. N. (2005, pp. 134–137). An explication of social norms. *Communication Theory*, 15(2), 127–147.

10 Rimal, R. N. & Real, K. (2003), as cited in Lapinski, M. K. & Rimal, R. N. (2005, p. 134). An explication of social norms. *Communication Theory*, 15(2), 127–147.

Norms and Communication

Communication is directly relevant to “formulating perceptions about norms” (e.g., people judge from what they see in the media how prevalent a behavior is).¹¹ It is also reasonable to argue that the very basis of norm adoption is communication, which acts “as a ‘conduit of influence.’”¹² People base their behavioral decisions on perceived social support or opposition communicated through the social environment.

However, people often misperceive norms, and the extent of this misperception is affected by the extent of interpersonal communication among people about a given norm.¹³ Incorrect information about true collective norms is often circulated through interpersonal communication, and “individual communication patterns play a key role in the development of normative perceptions.”¹⁴

Communication approaches applicable to the spread of norms in society include the following: Cultivation Theory; Diffusion of Innovations; Social Cognitive Theory; and Uncertainty Reduction Theory.

*Social Cognitive Theory*¹⁵: Individuals learn about behaviors through exposure and attention to media messages.

Cultivation Theory: Exposure to media messages, over time, affects the perceived prevalence of certain actions.¹⁶ For example, heavy television viewers, compared to light viewers, assume that behaviors most often depicted on television are indeed most prevalent in society.¹⁷

*Diffusion of Innovations*¹⁸: Most people learn about new ideas and behaviors from individuals they consider knowledgeable and credible (also called “opinion leaders”). Interpersonal communication is therefore crucial in the spread and wide adoption of norms.

Uncertainty Reduction Theory^{19,20}: People find the experience of uncertainty unpleasant and are motivated to reduce it through interpersonal communication. An important “factor which reduces uncertainty between communicators is the degree of similarity individuals perceive in each other (e.g., background, attitudes, and appearance).”²¹

11 Lapinski, M. K. & Rimal, R. N. (2005, p. 127). An explication of social norms. *Communication Theory*, 15(2), 127–147.

12 Ibid. p. 127.

13 Ibid. p. 132.

14 Ibid. p. 137.

15 Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

16 Gerbner, G., Gross, L., Morgan, M., & Signorielli, N. (1994). Growing up with television: The cultivation perspective. In J. Bryant & D. Zillmann (Eds.), *Media effects: Advances in theory and research* (pp. 17–41). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

17 Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1994.

18 Rogers, E. M. (1995). *Diffusion of innovations*. (4th ed.). New York: Free Press.

19 Berger, C. R. (1987). Communicating under uncertainty. In M. E. Roloff & G. R. Miller (Eds.), *Interpersonal processes* (pp. 39–62). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

20 Berger, C. R. & Calabrese, R. (1975). Some explorations in initial interactions and beyond: Toward a development theory of interpersonal communication. *Human Communication Research*, 1, 99–112.

21 http://www.tcw.utwente.nl/theorieenoverzicht/Theory%20clusters/Interpersonal%20Communication%20and%20Relations/Uncertainty_Reduction_Theory.doc/

Changing Norms through Communication Influence

Changing norms through communication campaigns is most prevalent in the health communication literature. Examples revolve around efforts to reduce risky behavior, such as binge drinking, smoking, and unsafe sexual practices. Guided by what we have learned about the links between communication and normative influence, these communication campaigns are often designed to “correct misperceptions about the prevalence of behaviors with the belief that correcting these misperceptions will result in behavior change.”²² For a review of communication campaigns targeting descriptive norms, please see Borsari & Carey.²³

The same authors²⁴ carried out a meta-analysis of 23 studies on the role of norms in alcohol consumption at the college level in the United States. Communication campaigns have sought to change norms of students who, in general, initially tend to believe that most of their peers drink more than they do or think that it’s socially acceptable to do so. Here are some promising results:

- Communication campaigns were able to reduce the perception among college students that most others drink more than they do (changing descriptive norms).
- Communication campaigns that targeted descriptive norms reduced self-reported alcohol use (changing self-reported behavior through changing descriptive norms).
- A month after exposure to a communication campaign targeting students who live in dormitories and fraternities/sororities, these students self-reported decreases in perceived approval of drinking among friends and the “typical student”²⁵ (changing injunctive norms).
- Perceived norms about groups whose members are deemed similar to oneself (a sense of shared or group identity) are more influential in attitude and behavior change than perceived norms about groups which are considered different.

22 Berkowitz, A. D. (2004), as cited in Lapinski, M. K. & Rimal, R. N. (2005, p. 137). An explication of social norms. *Communication Theory*, 15(2), 127–147.

23 Borsari, B. & Carey, K. B. (2001). Peer influences on college drinking: A review of the research. *Journal of Substance Abuse*, 13, 391–424.

24 Borsari, B. & Carey, K. B. (2003). Descriptive and injunctive norms in college drinking: A metaanalytic integration. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol*, 64, 331–341.

25 Barnett et al. (1996), as cited in Borsari & Carey (2003). Descriptive and injunctive norms in college drinking: A metaanalytic integration. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol*, 64, 331–341.

CommGAP

The **Communication for Governance and Accountability Program (CommGAP)**, a global program at the World Bank, seeks to confront the challenges inherent in the political economy of development. By applying innovative communication approaches that improve the quality of the public sphere – by amplifying citizen voice; promoting free, independent, and plural media systems; and helping government institutions communicate better with their citizens – the program aims to demonstrate the power of communication principles, processes and structures in promoting good and accountable governance, and hence better development results.

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