The Influence of Social Norms in Consumer Decision Making: a Meta-Analysis

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Although social norms can substantially impact consumer decision making, understanding of how the specification of the norm determines its impact is limited. This meta-analysis (200 independent studies, 659 effect sizes) examines how aspects of social norm specification determine the effect of norms on attitudes, behavioral intentions, and behavior. It argues and shows that descriptive norms have a larger impact on behavior than injunctive norms, whereas injunctive norms have a larger impact on attitudes than descriptive norms. Effects on behavior are also stronger when norms come from close and concrete sources (vs. authority figures or abstract others) and when the behavior is public (vs. private). No effects were found for specifications of the expected behavior, the consequences, or the target person.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Social norms are major drivers of human behavior and crucial in consumer decision making. Consumers often take expectations and behavior of others into consideration when they decide what is appropriate and social norms thus profoundly influence their preferences and behavior (Cialdini, Reno, and Kallgren 1990). How much to drink at a party, whether to subscribe to a fitness club and how much to eat are all decisions that are at least partly guided by social norms. Although social norms can substantially influence consumer decision making, understanding of how the specification of the norm determines its effect is limited. Despite a large body of research on social norms, empirical findings about their effect in consumer decision making are not consistent (Schultz et al. 2007). For example, Sheeran, Abraham, and Orbell (1999), in their meta-analysis of the willingness to use condoms (121 studies out of which 21 include social norms) find that subjective norms are weak predictors of intentions (r=.26), whereas Rivis and Sheeran (2003) in their meta-analysis of the theory of planned behavior (21 studies) find a more substantial correlation between norms and intentions (r=.44).

This meta-analysis examines the association between social norms on the one hand and consumer’s attitudes, behavioral intentions, and behavior on the other hand, while accounting for study characteristics (study domain, gender and age of participants, type of culture) and methodological factors. We expect that several aspects of norm specification will influence the strength of these associations. First, norms can be specified in a descriptive or prescriptive (i.e., injunctive) way, a distinction which has previously been shown to determine their influence on consumer decision making (Cialdini et al. 1990). Injunctive norms focus consumers on what is approved and may activate the typical attitudes associated with the group, whereas descriptive norms specify the behavior of others, and consumers may follow such norms without giving it much thought. Thus we expect descriptive norms have a larger effect on behavior but a smaller effect on attitudes than an injunctive norms. Second, the influence of social norms may depend on the concreteness with which the required behavior, the consequences of following or deviating from the norm, and the target person are specified (Shaffer 1983). Concrete information is generally more engaging and memorable than abstract information, and could therefore be more persuasive. Third, norms may be more relevant, and hence more influential, when these come from persons with whom the consumer can easily identify. Fourth, because public behavior is noticed and corrected by others, norms relating to public behavior should have more influence than norms relating to private behavior.

The sample consisted of 200 studies, producing 659 effect sizes. As a measure for effect sizes, we chose the Pearson correlation coefficient, converted to the normally distributed Fisher’s z scores. Because attitudes are both strongly correlated with norms and have a strong influence on intentions (behavior), the total correlation between norms and intentions (behavior) may contain some of the effect of attitudes and thus overestimate the effect of social norms. To account for this, we also examined partial correlations between norms and intentions (behavior), controlling for attitudes.

Results showed that effect sizes obtained from partial correlations were significantly lower than effect sizes obtained from total correlations for both behavioral intentions and behavior. This implies that indeed a substantial part of the effect of social norms on intentions and behavior can be accounted for by the covariation between attitudes and social norms. Descriptive norms were shown to have a larger effect on behavior than injunctive norms, whereas injunctive norms have a larger effect on attitudes than descriptive norms. Hence, for changing attitudes, injunctive norms may be more effective, whereas for changing behavior, descriptive norms are more appropriate. Effects on behavior are also stronger when norms come from close and concrete sources (vs. authority figures or abstract others) and when the behavior is public (vs. private). No effects were found for specifications of the expected behavior, the consequences, or the target person. In addition, we examined interaction effects between independent variables and no significant effects were found.

The study also demonstrated that the effect of social norms differed across domains. Compared with decisions related to healthy lifestyle, social responsibility, or sex, everyday consumption decisions such as choices between food, drinks, and leisure time activities showed a high consistency between social norms and attitudes. Interestingly, social norms had a relatively large effect on social responsible behaviors. These are behaviors where societal benefits are involved, and where social norms should drive human behavior to prevent free-riding problems. Our study showed that social norms indeed are relatively influential for consumer behavior in this domain.

Our study has several implications. The meta-analysis reveals a high association between social norms and attitudes, and one possible extension to theoretical models that include normative components is to examine this relationship. It has recently been posited that social norms influence attitudes (Terry et al. 2000), and our study shows that the strength of this influence depends on the specification of norm aspects.

Additionally, consumers respond differently to injunctive versus descriptive norms, and, more importantly, an injunctive specification of a norm leads to stronger effects on attitudes but weaker effects on behavior than a descriptive formulation. This implies that an investigation of the effect of social norms which examines only attitudes or only behavior does not provide a complete picture of the effect of social norms. To truly understand the effect of social norms, attitudes, behavioral intentions, and behavior need all be examined. In addition, further research could examine other aspects of social norms, such as group size, or uncertainty, which could influence their effectiveness. This meta-analysis is obviously bound to prior research that has been conducted, but more aspects remain to be investigated. We hope that our study presents a stepping stone towards a deeper understanding of when and how social norms drive consumer attitudes, intentions, and behavior.

REFERENCES


