To Think Or Not to Think: the Effect of Cognitive Deliberation on Social Norm Influence

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This study examines the effect of descriptive and injunctive norms under different levels of cognitive deliberation. Results show that whereas cognitive load limits the influence of both norms, cognitive deliberation increases the effect of descriptive and decreases the effect of injunctive norms due to the valence of activated thoughts.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Marketers have realized the potential of social norms to influence consumers’ attitudes and preferences, and use norms frequently in marketing campaigns (Berkowitz 2005). Consumers can process norm information at different levels of cognitive deliberation. Sometimes their thinking is inhibited by, for example, time pressure or fatigue, whereas at other times consumers may freely and actively think about social norms. As the depth of deliberation is often seen as key to attitude change (Petty, Haugtvedt, and Smith 1995), it is likely that this will also affect the influence of social norms.

Despite a large body of research on social norms and on the role of cognitive deliberation in persuasion little is known about the effect of cognitive deliberation on social norms messages, and whether this influence differs between injunctive and descriptive norms. The effect of cognitive deliberation on different norm formulations is particularly interesting because it can explain a fundamental difference between injunctive and descriptive norms. This study thus provides an understanding about how and why social norms influence decision making, and focuses on the role of cognitive deliberation.

Social norms can be formulated in two distinct ways: (1) through giving information about the behavior of other people—descriptive norms (what most people do), and (2) through highlighting social rules—injunctive norms (what ought to be done). Descriptive norms are generally supported by the belief of consumers that others act in an effective way (Cialdini 2006), and therefore in a process of deliberation consumers are likely to come up with arguments in favor of the behavioral patterns observed in others. In contrast, injunctive norms contain an explicit request of what one should do. These norms do not convey information about behavioral effectiveness, and therefore can stimulate both thoughts in favor and against the behavior. For example, consumers may perceive an injunctive norm as a limitation of their freedom to choose and while deliberating on this injunctive social norm, they are more likely to come up with reasons which would help to overcome this request (Mann and Hill 1984). Thus the effect of cognitive deliberation would be different, and even opposite for the two norm formulations.

The experimental study (N=1010) had a 2 (norm formulation: injunctive vs. descriptive) x 3 (cognitive deliberation level: cognitive load vs. control vs. cognitive deliberation) between subject design and a two level measured factor (belief in the content of the message: non-believers vs. believers). Formulation of the social norm was manipulated in a fictitious short newspaper article entitled “Study among Dutch consumer”, which manipulated either a descriptive norm (“Yes, I always buy environmentally-friendly processed potatoes”), or an injunctive norm (“Everybody should buy environmentally-friendly processed potatoes”). Participants in the cognitive load condition were instructed to count how many times their thinking is inhibited by, for example, time pressure or fatigue, whereas at other times consumers may freely and actively think about social norms. As the depth of deliberation is often seen as key to attitude change (Petty, Haugtvedt, and Smith 1995), it is likely that this will also affect the influence of social norms.

To test the types of thoughts that the different social norms activate, an open question was added, asking participants to list all the thoughts that they had in separate boxes. Subsequently, participants were asked to answer a number of questions about their attitudes and purchase intentions towards environmentally-friendly processed potatoes.

Results showed that when consumers have limited cognitive capacity to process a normative message their attitudes and intentions are less in favor of the advocated behavior, compared to when they can process the message without cognitive limitations. Furthermore, and interestingly, the effect of cognitive deliberation depends on norm formulation. Cognitive deliberation on a descriptive norm makes attitudes and intentions more congruent with the normative message, whereas deliberation on injunctive norms has a negative effect on attitudes and intentions in favor of the advocated behavior. Cognitive deliberation appears to suppress either negative or positive thoughts depending on norm formulation. In particular, deliberation suppresses negative thought for descriptive norms and suppresses positive thought for injunctive norms.

Our study has several implications. First, it reveals a fundamental difference between descriptive and injunctive norms and explains the different effect of cognitive deliberation between these. This effect is not due to the number of thoughts, but is fully mediated by the difference in valence of the thoughts that each norm formulation triggers. Second, norm formulation can influence the thought generation process, which is in line with the reasoning that, depending on information characteristics, cognitive deliberation can produce thinking that is biased either in favor or against (e.g., when reactance is instilled) an advocated position (Petty and Briñol 2008). By switching the formulation of a persuasive message from injunctive to descriptive it is possible to partially compensate for or even reverse the effect of cognitive deliberation. Therefore when using descriptive norms one should make sure that it is used in situations where consumers are stimulated to deliberate upon this norm message. In contrast, messages using injunctive norms should be simple and straightforward to avoid cognitive deliberation upon this message. Third, consumers who are cognitively loaded in the process of reading a social norm message are less susceptible to social norm influence. Future research may shed light on how and to what extent this can be generalized to situations in which consumers are cognitively depleted prior to reading the message (compared to cognitively loaded while reading the message).

This study increases our understanding of the influence of social norms on decision making by showing how the level of cognitive deliberation with which norms are being processed in combination with norm formulation affects the influence of social norms on both attitudes and purchase intentions.

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