Tell Me What to Do When I Am in a Good Mood. Show Me What to Do When I Am in a Bad Mood: Mood As a Moderator of Social Norm’s Influence

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This paper investigates the differential effect of mood for both descriptive and injunctive norms. Results show that injunctive norms lead to more positive attitudes and intentions under positive (vs. negative) mood, and descriptive norms is more effective under negative mood. We show that this effect translates to actual behavior.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Social norms are an influential driver of consumers’ preferences in different domains of everyday life (Cialdini et al., 2006; Melnyk et al., 2009) and are extensively used in marketing campaigns. The influence of social norms may depend on the mood that consumers experience while being exposed to them (Bless et al., 1990), but also on the formulation of the social norm. Social norms can be formulated as descriptive or injunctive norms (Cialdini et al. 1990). Descriptive norms describe the typical behavior of others, and set behavioral standards from which people may not want to deviate (Schultz et al. 2007). Injunctive norms prescribe a behavior, and refer to what people should do in a given situation.

Despite a large body of research on social norms (see Goldstein & Cialdini, 2009) and on the role of mood in consumer behavior (see Gardner, 1985) little is known about the effect of mood on social norms’ influence. This paper argues and shows that each norm formulation can be differently affected by mood due to mood-protection and the mood-repair mechanisms. That is, individuals are motivated to maintain the mood when they are already in positive mood, but engage in mood repair when they are in negative mood (Hirt & McCrea, 2000).

Importantly, because of these mechanisms, positive and negative moods can result in different effects on the amount of cognitive effort that people exert (Isen et al., 1985). When in positive mood, individuals avoid investing cognitive effort unless doing so promises to enhance their positive mood (Bohner et al., 1992; Wegener et al., 1995), and they show more compliance with requests, compared to negative mood (Forgas, 1998). In contrast, when in negative mood mood-repair mechanism stimulates individuals to invest cognitive effort to find ways of improving their mood (Clore et al., 1994; Hirt & McCrea, 2000).

This difference in the amount of cognitive deliberation under positive and negative mood can lead to different perceptions of injunctive compared to descriptive social norms. Previous research has shown that injunctive norms have a smaller influence on the advocated behavior, when consumers cognitively deliberate upon them (Melnyk et al., 2011). This is because injunctive norms by conveying an explicit and straightforward request can be perceived by consumers as a limitation to their freedom and can therefore trigger them to counter-argue (Mann & Hill, 1984). In contrast, in positive mood the mood-protection mechanism should decrease the likelihood of thoughts against such a request (Batra & Stayman, 1990). Therefore we expect a higher responsiveness towards injunctive norms in positive mood compared to negative mood.

Hypothesis 1: Injunctive norms have a greater influence on attitudes, behavioral intentions and behavior under positive than under negative mood.

For descriptive norms negative mood should not decreases their influence, because due to the mood-repair mechanism consumers are more likely to cognitively deliberate upon the messages (Clore et al., 1994), and this can increase the influence of descriptive norms (Melnyk et al., 2011). The mood-repair mechanism also simulates consumers to think about solutions to improve their mood. Descriptive norms can present such a solution, by providing “social proof” of what is likely to be effective behavior (Cialdini, 2006; Reno et al., 1993) and beneficial behavior (Schultz et al., 2007). Furthermore, Griskevicius et al. (2009) showed that a descriptive norm message with a social proof appeal (“most popular”), was persuasive when people experienced negative feelings (fear), but was counter persuasive when people experienced pleasant feelings (romantic desire). This can make descriptive norms more influential under negative than positive mood.

Hypothesis 2: Descriptive norms have a greater influence on attitudes, behavioral intentions and behavior under negative than under positive mood.

These hypotheses are tested in two experiments.

Experiment 1 (N = 140) had a 2 (mood induction: negative vs. positive) × 3 (norm formulation: descriptive vs. injunctive vs. no norm) between subjects design. For mood manipulation, participants were asked to recall either a negative life event (negative mood condition), or a positive life event (positive mood condition). Norm formulation was manipulated by a short statement on the background of a neutral picture with chocolate: “Did you know that nowadays most WUR students buy fair trade chocolate?” (descriptive norm condition), “Did you know that nowadays most WUR students think you should buy fair trade chocolate?” (injunctive norm condition), and “Did you know that nowadays there is a possibility to buy fair trade chocolate in any supermarket?” (no norm condition). At the end of the experiment participants were offered an opportunity to make a donation to a well-known fair trade organization “Oxfam-Novib” from their monetary reward for participation.

Experiment 2 (N = 160) examines the proposed underlying mechanism of cognitive deliberation by testing if preventing people from deliberating decreases the moderating effect of mood. It had a 2 (mood induction: negative vs. positive) × 2 (norm formulation: descriptive vs. injunctive) × 2 (cognitive load: high vs. low) between subjects design. The manipulations of mood and norm formulation were similar to Experiment 1. Cognitive load was manipulated by asking participants to either remember a 7-digit number (high cognitive load) or a 1-digit number (low cognitive load).

Consistent with our expectation the results obtained from the two experiments show a fundamental difference between injunctive and descriptive norms. Injunctive norms lead to more positive attitudes and intentions under positive (vs. negative) mood, whereas descriptive norms lead to more positive attitudes and intentions under negative (vs. positive) mood. Furthermore, we show that this effect translates to actual (donations) behavior. Experiment 2 shows that the effect is due to cognitive deliberation, as the effects disappear when cognitive deliberation is hindered.

Our results indicate that social norms should be carefully chosen, and used depending on the context in which the information supported by the norm is processed by the consumer. The study has
theoretical implications as well. Previously, negative mood was shown to decrease consumer’s evaluations of received information and persuasive messages (Miniard et al., 1992). This paper shows that mood not only changes the responsiveness of consumers to social norms for attitudes and intentions, but it does so differently for the two norm formulations. In particular, the negative effect of bad mood on responsiveness to persuasive information can be reversed by using descriptive norm formulations rather than injunctive norms.

This research contributes to our understanding of the influence of social norms on decision making by showing how mood affects the influence of descriptive compared to injunctive norm formulations on consumers’ attitudes, purchase intentions, as well as on real behavior.

REFERENCES