Give ‘Em a Boost: Descriptive Norms Encourage Booster Seat Use With Low Involvement Parents

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Although researchers have argued that injunctive norms are more impactful than descriptive norms at encouraging desired behaviours, we argue that descriptive norms can still be a valuable tool. In particular, we demonstrate that descriptive norms are particularly effective at changing behavioural intentions when targeting an uninvolved consumer segment.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1017420/volumes/v42/NA-42

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Social marketing campaigns frequently tell consumers that “other people are doing it, so should you,” using descriptive norms to motivate compliance with the advocated behaviour (Cialdini 2003). We identify a previously overlooked benefit; namely, that descriptive norms can significantly affect behavioural intentions when consumers are uninvolved in the topic.

Social norms are “(a) what is commonly done or (b) what is commonly approved or disapproved” (Kallgren et al. 2000, pg. 1002). The former is a descriptive norm, given it describes what consumers actually do. Descriptive norms provide a quick and efficient way to determine the best course of action; if everyone else is doing it, it is probably right (Cialdini et al. 1990). The latter is an injunctive norm, describing what consumers ought to be doing (Reno et al. 1993), and require more effortful processing.

One factor that may influence the relative effectiveness of each norm type is topic involvement (Göckeritz et al. 2010; Smith and Louis 2008). Highly involved individuals will review messages carefully (Petty and Cacioppo 1986), and injunctive norms should prove particularly effective. However, in public health campaigns committed consumers are not the target. Instead, efforts focus on changing behaviours of the disengaged. These individuals know what they should be doing, and yet lack the interest in doing so. Given low involvement leads to superficial message processing (Petty and Cacioppo 1986), we expect descriptive norms to be particularly impactful for this segment. Formally:

Hypothesis 1: Positive (negative) descriptive norms will increase (decrease) overall behavioural intentions.

Hypothesis 2: Topic involvement will moderate these effects; individuals with low topic involvement (high involvement) will be more persuaded (unaffected) by descriptive norms.

We examine these hypotheses in a novel but important research context: booster seat use. Motor vehicle accidents kill more children than any other hazard (Cunningham et al. 2011), and most at risk are children aged 4 – 8 (Snowdon et al. 2009). There exists a “high risk” segment of the population who will be particularly swayed by descriptive norms – the uninvolved – providing social marketers a way “to boost” these high risk individuals in the right direction.

told that, “booster seats are required by law…many parents comply with BC provincial regulations,” and in Alberta that “booster seats are not required…most parents choose to use a seat belt alone”. Parents then reviewed the poster outlining the benefits of booster seats, and data was collected on behavioural intentions, topic involvement, and demographics prior to debriefing. To minimize the social desirability bias of the intention measure, “imagine that” questions were crafted based on scenarios taken from the literature of when parents might forgo using a booster seat (for example, “imagine your child was being bullied for using a booster seat”; Cunningham et al. 2011).

Seven, seven-point likelihood questions were created and summed to form a composite behavioural intention score (α=.88) which served as the main dependent variable. A small pre-test conducted in the same sample population (n = 64) revealed no correlation between our intentions scale and the Marlowe-Crowne social desirability scale (r=.036, p>.1; Crowne and Marlowe 1960). This suggests our scale is not susceptible to social desirability bias effects (Kidwell et al. 2008), making it an attractive alternative to more standard behavioural intention measures. Topic involvement was measured using a single item sliding scale, where participants indicated how “involved they felt in the topic” (0 = not at all to 100 = extremely).

A series of t-tests comparing groups revealed no significant between-group differences on age, gender, or number of children (all ps > .1). Most parents (92%) owned a booster seat. To test our hypotheses, we regressed intentions on condition (positive norm (BC) = 0; negative norm (AB) = 1), the continuous topic involvement scale, and the interaction of the two (Hayes 2013). In support of hypothesis 1, results show a significant main effect of descriptive norm (β= -.10, t(140) = -2.88, p < .01), with British Columbia parents showing a positive descriptive norm indicating higher intentions to use booster seats (M = 44.4) than Alberta parents shown a negative descriptive norm (M = 41.2). There was no main effect of topic involvement (β = .02, t(140) = .54). More importantly, there was a significant interaction of descriptive norm condition and topic involvement (β = .1079, t(140) = 2.17, p < .05). To interpret the interaction, further analysis was conducted at one standard deviation above and below the mean of involvement (Aiken and West 1991).

For participants who reported low involvement, positive descriptive norms significantly increased overall intentions as compared to participants shown negative descriptive norms (MPositive = 43.9, MNegative = 38.5; t(140) = -3.46, p < .01). For participants reporting high involvement, descriptive norms had no impact on intentions (MPositive = 44.7, MNegative = 44.2; t(140) = -3.7).

Public health campaigns are not designed to target the committed; after all, they are already conforming. Motivating the disinterested can be a time-consuming, frustrating, and challenging endeavour, and yet these findings suggest that descriptive norms may be an easy and efficient solution. It appears that there is an important segment of the population who will be particularly swayed by descriptive norms – the uninvolved – providing social marketers a way to “boost” these high risk individuals in the right direction.

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