The Effect of Regulatory Focus on the Influence of Injunctive and Descriptive Social Norms

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Consumers face social norms in a variety of situations and contexts where different goals can be dominant. This research examines the differential effect of regulatory focus for both descriptive and injunctive norms. Results show that the effect of descriptive norms on attitudes and behavioral intentions is lower when prevention goals are salient than when promotion goals are salient, whereas injunctive norms are not affected by regulatory focus.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consumers encounter marketing messages using social norms in a variety of situations and contexts where different goals can be dominant. These goals can relate to their hopes and aspirations (i.e., promotion focus) or to their potential losses and duties (i.e., prevention focus) (Avnet and Higgins 2006; Freitas and Higgins 2002). These two focuses prime different routes of motivation for product choice, and may determine the effectiveness of social norms. The influence of norms on actual behavior may depend on its congruence with the consumer’s self-regulatory focus.

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.

Depending on which regulatory focus is activated at the moment of facing social norms, consumers can be more responsive to either of the norm’s formulations. Descriptive norms provide social proof that indicates possible beneficial behaviors (Cialdini 2006; Schultz et al. 2007), and therefore, these norms relate to the achievement of goals. In contrast, injunctive norms provide a request, and following this request is a way to avoid negative consequences (e.g., social disapproval or punishment) (Cialdini et al. 1990). Therefore, injunctive norms relate to prevention focus. The aim of this paper is to investigate the effect of compatibility between injunctive versus descriptive social norms on the one hand, and promotion versus prevention regulatory focus on the other hand to determine which formulation of social norms is the most effective under prevention and promotion focus.

Although social norms can provide a powerful instrument to influence consumers’ attitudes, intentions, and product choice, the marketing literature has surprisingly few papers on the topic. Yet, to make optimal use of social norms, it is crucial for marketers to understand under which conditions the effect of social norms can increase the desired behavior or can backfire, and more specifically how to use different social norms in different situations.

Two experiments examine the consequences for attitudes and behavioral intentions of the different norms under prevention and promotion focus. Experiment 1 (N = 100) had a 2 (norm formulation: descriptive vs. injunctive) x 2 (primed regulatory focus: prevention vs. promotion) between subject design. Formulation of the social norm was manipulated in a fictitious webpage with promoted either a descriptive norm (“Wageningen students buy Fair Trade coffee”) or an injunctive norm (“Wageningen students should buy Fair Trade coffee”). To prime regulatory focus participants were asked to write down one or several positive situations that they would like to achieve (vs. negative situations they would like to avoid, for prevention focus condition) within the next few weeks, and describe strategies that they could use to successfully promote this goal (vs. prevent those negative situations, for prevention condition). Experiment 2 (N = 109) had 2 (norm formulation: descriptive vs. injunctive) x 2 (ingrained regulatory focus: prevention vs. promotion) between subject design. The manipulation of norm formulation was similar to Experiment 1 except that it was about organic milk. Regulatory focus was incorporated within the message by providing either prevention- or promotion-related statements. For example, the title of the message ended either with a prevention statement “….to prevent harm to the environment” or with a promotion statement “….for a better environment”. Consistent with our expectations results of both experiments show that the effect of descriptive norms is lower when prevention goals are salient than when promotion goals are salient. Unlike descriptive norms, injunctive norms are not affected by regulatory focus.

This study has several managerial implications. In particular it shows that descriptive norms are most successful when a goal approach focus rather than a loss avoidance focus is present. The research also shows that the wording of a normative message can activate a gain or loss avoidance focus. A marketer should therefore carefully design the wording of normative messages, the context in which such a message is received by consumers, as well as the channels of communication. Messages which are focused on problem avoidance may not be very well suited for descriptive norms and should use injunctive norms as a default. Messages using descriptive norms, such as campaigns based on communicating a favorable statistic of the majority of others that perform a behavior, should be conveyed in the context of achieving goals.

This research increases our understanding of the influence of social norms on decision making by showing differential effect of regulatory focus for descriptive and injunctive norms in the promotion of sustainable products, which occurs because different formulations of social norms are compatible to promotion or prevention focus. More specifically, descriptive norms are oriented towards benefits and have a better fit with a promotion than prevention focus, while this is not so for injunctive norms.

REFERENCES


