Understanding Social Norms: Applications for Social Marketers

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Norms well established

- Either directly or indirectly
  - Theory of Reasoned Action
  - Theory of Planned Behaviour
  - Social Learning Theory
  - Social Comparison Theory
  - Spiral of Silence Theory
  - Social Network Theory

- Inconsistent terminology

Types of social norms

- Descriptive: what others do

- Prescriptive
  - Subjective: what is acceptable to significant others
  - Injunctive: what is generally socially acceptable

- May be mutually reinforcing or contradictory
Norms are misperceived

- Perkins et al. (2005) 76,145 students, 130 campuses
  - Norm of 4 drinks, 70% overestimate it; 35% thought it was 7 or more
- McAlaney and McMahon (2007)
  - 52% thought norm was drunk twice per week
  - Only 12% drunk twice per week or more
- American College Health Association (2003)
  - Most assumed peers had 3+ sexual partners in 12 months
  - 71% had 0 or 1 sexual partner

Misperceptions influence behaviour

- Alcohol consumption
- Littering
- Sexual behaviour
- Gambling
- Tax compliance
- Eating and dieting
- Opinion formation

- More significant than most other factors
- The young and those susceptible to social influence
Social norms assumptions

- People act on the basis of misperceptions
- Misperceptions believed to be real have real consequences
- Misperceptions perpetuate a spiral of silence
- Many people are carriers of misperception
- Correcting the misperception may reverse this process

Downstream applications
The social norms approach

71% of UAlbany students do not use tobacco.

67% of UA students have four or fewer or no drinks when they go out.

Health & Wellness Survey 2005 (2,038 respondents) administered to a random sample of undergraduate classes at UAlbany.
Alleged effectiveness

- Northern Illinois University
  - 44% decline in heavy episodic drinking over 10 years
- Michigan State University
  - 18% decrease in students having 6 or more drinks over 8 years
- University of Wisconsin
  - 33% reduction in numbers smoking over 2 years
The medium matters

- Moreira et al. (2009) systematic review
  - 7,275 students across 22 social norm intervention random control trials
  - Most effective if delivered over internet or through software
  - Less evidence of effectiveness face to face
  - Inconclusive on the effectiveness of marketing campaigns

Approach remains controversial

- Significant funding from alcohol industry
- Harm reduction, not elimination
- Few control groups
- Which norm is salient?
- Potential boomerang effect
Failure to apply theory

- *Descriptive* norm interventions, not social norm interventions
- Focus Theory of Normative Conduct
  - Injunctive norms have a powerful trans-situational influence
- Theory of Normative Social Behaviour
  - Injunctive norms interact with descriptive norms in complex ways
Using injunctive norms

- Fewer examples but do seem to have an influence
- Not seemingly endorsing unhealthy behaviour

Counter the boomerang effect

- Perkins et al (2005)
  - Up to one fifth of students in some colleges underestimated
- Sometimes the norm itself may be unhealthy
Schultz et al. (2007)

- Energy use in California
- 2 groups
- Descriptive norm information about energy usage in their area
- Those above the norm reduced usage, but those below the norm increased
- Half received injunctive norm information about usage
- No boomerang effect in this group

Upstream applications

- Go upstream to prevent people jumping in
- Where do the misperceptions come from?
We see lots of this...

and this...
...but not so much of this

We also see quite a bit of this
And also this

Potential sources of misperception

- Visual
- Interpersonal communication
- Laws and public policy
- Media and marketing
Cultivation theory

- Media presents a distorted view of reality
- Heavy TV usage related to perceptual distortions
- Availability heuristic
  - People use easily accessible information in making social judgements
  - If it’s easily accessible, it must be common
- Simulation heuristic
  - Estimate prevalence of behaviour from ease of imagining it

In addition to their direct effects on tobacco use, tobacco advertisements and promotion activities may also serve as data for adolescents to modify their perceived smoking norms, which in turn, may affect their smoking behavior. If this were the case, adolescents who have been exposed to, or have increased receptivity of, pro-tobacco media may be more likely to perceive that there are more peer smokers around them: therefore, these adolescents would be more likely to smoke themselves.

(Chen et al., 2006)
Conclusion

- Combine *both* descriptive and injunctive norms
- Which norms are most salient?
- Insight into debate about marketing and behaviour
- Policy and regulatory implications