



Boosting safety behaviour: Descriptive norms encourage child booster seat usage amongst low involvement parents



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ABSTRACT

Campaigns advocating behavioural changes often employ social norms as a motivating technique, favouring injunctive norms (what is typically approved or disapproved) over descriptive norms (what is typically done). Here, we investigate an upside to including descriptive norms in health and safety appeals. Because descriptive norms are easy to process and understand, they should provide a heuristic to guide behaviour in those individuals who lack the interest or motivation to reflect on the advocated behaviour more deeply. When those descriptive norms are positive – suggesting that what is done is consistent with what ought to be done – including them in campaigns should be particularly beneficial at influencing this low-involvement segment. We test this proposition via research examining booster seat use amongst parents with children of booster seat age, and find that incorporating positive descriptive norms into a related campaign is particularly impactful for parents who report low involvement in the topic of booster seat safety. Descriptive norms are easy to state and easy to understand, and our research suggests that these norms resonate with low involvement individuals. As a result, we recommend incorporating descriptive norms when possible into health and safety campaigns.

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1. Introduction

“Motor vehicle crashes remain a leading cause of death for children. In 2011, almost two children under the age of 13 were killed and 338 were injured every day while riding in cars, SUVs, pickups and vans. . .”

– Tanya Mohn, Forbes, 2013 (emphasis added)

Motor vehicle accidents injure and kill more children every year in North America than any other cause, with children aged four to eight the most vulnerable (Snowdon et al., 2009). This segment of children is particularly at risk because parents frequently forgo the recommended booster seats, transitioning their children too quickly from car seats to seat belts; effectively increasing their children's risk of injury by 153% (Durbin et al., 2003; Snowdon et al., 2008). Although research on how to reduce booster seat misuse through social marketing interventions is of clear value from a

public health standpoint, to date little consumer behaviour-based research has been situated in this important context. This study takes a first step in addressing this gap, investigating the impact that descriptive norms have on encouraging higher booster seat usage intentions amongst parents who otherwise report feeling uninvolved in the topic of booster seats.

Social marketing campaigns frequently tell individuals that “other people are doing it, and so should you,” in the hopes of motivating compliance with whatever positive behaviour is being advocated. Promoting descriptive norms – those which highlight what behaviours others are engaging in – has been examined as a motivating driver across a range of situations aimed at improving behaviours both at the individual and societal level (Cialdini 2003; Goldstein et al., 2008; Terry and Hogg, 1996). Although descriptive norms have proven helpful, they are also situation-specific, in that a range of factors can hamper their effectiveness (Cialdini, 2003; Schultz et al., 2007). As a result, some researchers have argued that adopting other norms-based approaches in social marketing campaigns is preferred (Reno et al., 1993), and much of the research on social norms has shifted in focus accordingly. In this paper, we argue that descriptive norms offer a previously overlooked benefit. Specifically, we demonstrate that descriptive norms can signifi-

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cantly affect behavioural intentions when individuals are otherwise uninvolved in the topic at hand, likely as a result of those individuals using the descriptive norms as a behavioural shortcut to minimize cognitive effort.

Our research makes several contributions. To begin, we demonstrate that descriptive norms, which are easy to incorporate and easy for consumers to understand, are also able to influence behavioural intentions. Our research finds that they are of particular value in modifying behaviours in those individuals who report low levels of involvement in the topic of booster seats, a group which would typically be categorized as “high risk” for booster seat misuse. Finally, we develop a unique method of measuring intentions to use booster seats. Our method is not subject to socially desirable responding and the general approach may be easily modified for other high-risk behaviors. In sum, our research provides public policy makers with a simple yet effective technique for influencing an otherwise disengaged and frequently high-risk population segment, as well as a tool for measuring its effectiveness.

2. Conceptual foundation

2.1. Descriptive and injunctive norms

Social norms are commonly known rules or customs that guide and restrict an individual’s behaviours, based on his or her perception of what activities socially-relevant others are engaging in and/or are socially desirable (Cialdini, 2003). Social norms can be either descriptive or injunctive. Descriptive norms involve perceptions of behaviours that are typically performed in a particular situation and/or adopted by many others (e.g., “parents typically use (or do not use) booster seats while driving”). In contrast, injunctive norms involve perceptions of behaviours that are typically approved or disapproved of in a particular setting (e.g., “parents typically believe booster seats should be used while driving”). Whereas descriptive norms highlight what typically *is* done, injunctive norms highlight what *ought* to be done (Kallgren et al., 2000).

Both types of norms can be powerful agents of social change, albeit for different reasons. Descriptive norms provide individuals with a quick and efficient way to determine what should be the best course of action; after all, if others are behaving in a particular way, there is likely some merit in doing so as well (Cialdini et al., 1990). Injunctive norms, on the other hand, motivate compliance because of the social rewards and punishments associated with doing what ought to be done (Smith et al., 2012). In that regard, injunctive norms incorporate social sanctions (Cialdini et al., 1990), suggesting that individuals who comply with the norm will be judged favourably by others whereas those who do not will be judged negatively.

When it comes to social marketing initiatives, descriptive norms carry a degree of risk, in that they can sometimes inadvertently validate an undesired behaviour. For example, imagine a poster highlighting that “many parents do not use booster seats,” prior to touting the safety benefits of booster seats. Although the goal of this kind of campaign is to change behaviours by increasing booster seat use, researchers have found that by suggesting the undesired behavior is the norm, individuals actually hear the message that “not using booster seats is normal” (Cialdini, 2003). We refer to this situation as a *negative descriptive norm*, given that the norm highlights that an undesired behaviour is the norm. In contrast, *positive descriptive norms* are those which highlight that the preferred or desired action is the norm (e.g., “many parents do use booster seats”). Since injunctive norms highlight the approved or socially sanctioned behaviours, they are not subject to this same limitation. Irrespective of what behaviours people are engaging in, injunctive norms highlight what ought to be done, and consequently are fre-

quently recommended for social marketing initiatives (Reno et al., 1993).

2.2. The moderating role of topic involvement

While there are no doubt merits to injunctive norms, we believe that there remains an important place in social marketing campaigns for descriptive norms. Importantly, we posit that descriptive norms might be particularly effective when the target audience is otherwise uninvolved in the topic being promoted. Topic involvement refers to the extent to which the individual perceives that the topic being highlighted is personally relevant (Celsi and Olson, 1988; Zaichkowsky, 1985). When involvement in a topic is high, individuals pay more attention to messages associated with the topic, elaborate on arguments more deeply, and ultimately form more strongly held topic-related attitudes (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986). In contrast, when involvement is low, individuals spend little time reflecting on the message, instead relying on peripheral cues to guide their attitudes and behaviours (Johnson and Eagly, 1989).

For booster seat campaigns, involved parents are not the target. These parents will have reviewed the relevant information, reflected upon it, and incorporated proper booster seat use into their household routine. Instead, social marketing efforts are largely directed toward the “high risk” segment of parents who do not use booster seats consistently or correctly. Though this segment reports receiving extensive booster seat information from healthcare providers and claims that booster seat information is easy to access, they, for a variety of reasons, remain uninvolved (Cunningham et al., 2011). Given the tendency for low involvement individuals to look for heuristic cues to guide behaviours (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986), we posit that descriptive norms might serve as a potentially impactful cue for this segment. Conversely, we do not believe that descriptive norms will have any impact on highly involved parents, since they will have already reflected on the topic in some depth and formed their own strongly held attitudes, which should be resistant to change. Preliminary support for our predictions comes from research which demonstrates that descriptive norms require less cognitive effort to process than injunctive norms (Kredentser et al., 2012) and survey research which suggests that the relationship between descriptive normative beliefs (defined as an individual’s internally-held perceptions of what others are doing, absent any external prompts or information) and behavioural intentions is strongest for those individuals low in topic involvement (Göckeritz et al., 2010). What has yet to be established, and the focus of this research, is whether the effect of descriptive norms on behavioural intentions is moderated by involvement. Stated formally, we predict:

H₁: Positive descriptive norms will increase intentions to use booster seats.

H₂: Topic involvement will moderate the effect of positive descriptive norms on intentions to use booster seats; individuals with low levels of topic involvement will be more persuaded by positive descriptive norms whereas individuals with high levels of topic involvement will be unaffected by positive descriptive norms.

3. Materials and methods

3.1. Pretest

One of the challenges in collecting accurate self-reported data on booster seat use is that parents are reluctant to admit that they either do not use booster seats for their children or that they use them inconsistently (Cunningham et al., 2011). Thus, we began by developing a measure of behavioural intentions not subject to social

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