



# Using descriptive norm appeals effectively to promote green behavior<sup>☆</sup>



Leila Elgaaied-Gambier<sup>a,\*</sup>, Elisa Monnot<sup>a</sup>, Fanny Reniou<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Cergy-Pontoise – Thema (UMR CNRS 8184), 33 boulevard du Port, 95011 Cergy-Pontoise cedex, France

<sup>b</sup> University of Paris-Est Créteil – IRG (EA 2354), 61 Avenue du Général de Gaulle, 94010 Créteil cedex, France

## ARTICLE INFO

### Keywords:

Green behavior  
Social norms  
Ad credibility  
Endorsement  
Overpackaging

## ABSTRACT

Considering that descriptive norm appeals are only effective when they are framed positively, this research investigates the efficacy of such norms in a context in which the prevalent behavior is not environmentally friendly. Using an infomercial promoting purchasing of non-overpackaged products, three studies attempt to manipulate the presence and valence of a descriptive norm, an endorser's presence, and his or her profile. The findings show that triggering a positive descriptive norm results in the adoption of pro-environmental behavior, even when this norm does not reflect the behavior of the majority, provided that consumers perceive the ad as credible. Ad credibility influences intention to avoid overpackaging and, in turn, is influenced by a descriptive norm and a celebrity endorser's profile. The presence of a typical-consumer testimonial, however, influences behavioral intention directly, and the profile of this non-famous endorser influences ad credibility and intention through identification.

## 1. Introduction

Every year, the United Nations hold the Climate Change Conference, which highlights governments' responsibility for adopting pro-environmental regulatory measures to reduce industries' and individuals' ecological footprint. Beyond the implementation of such measures, governments also have a duty to inform and educate the public to adopt an environmentally responsible lifestyle. Among relevant strategies to encourage green behavior, previous research emphasizes the crucial roles of social influence and, in particular, social norms (Goldstein, Cialdini, & Griskevicius, 2008; Kallgren, Reno, & Cialdini, 2000; Schultz, 1999).

Social norms refer to “rules and standards that are understood by members of a group, and that guide and/or constrain social behavior without the force of laws” (Cialdini & Trost, 1998, p. 152). Research indeed acknowledges that social norms influence consumer behavior in general and green behavior in particular, such as intention to purchase sustainable products (e.g., Melnyk, van Herpen, Fischer, & van Trijp, 2011, 2013). However, to reach optimal effects, advertising should activate two facets of social norms: injunctive norms, which refer to what most people approve of, and descriptive norms, which refer to what people typically do (Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990).

While injunctive norms are usually well understood and are used appropriately, descriptive norms are sometimes employed

inadequately, which may lead to counter-productive effects. Cialdini (2003, p. 105) decries advertisers' “tendency to try to mobilize action against a problem by depicting it as regrettably frequent” because doing so can activate a descriptive norm that contradicts the promoted behavior. He provides an example of this advertising practice by describing an anti-littering public service announcement broadcast in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s (i.e. The Iron Eyes Cody spot), but this approach is unfortunately still typical in many countries. In France, for example, the government promotes waste reduction by explaining that waste production has doubled in 40 years and that every French citizen currently generates an average of 590 k of waste every year.<sup>1</sup> Further, the city of Paris uses a campaign against cigarette littering, stressing that 350 tons of cigarette butts are discarded every year (to illustrate the message, a picture shows a large pile of cigarette butts on a sidewalk). Although these assertions may be accurate, they implicitly convey that many people are actually adopting these harmful behaviors, indirectly suggesting that littering or producing a large amount of waste is acceptable.

As such, Cialdini (2003) suggests that the valence of social norms should always be positive (i.e., consistent with expected behavior). He thus concludes that priming descriptive norms is only effective when the pro-environmental behavior at stake is predominant among the population. Paradoxically, however, advertising is less critical for pro-environmental practices that the majority already adopts. Governments

<sup>☆</sup> This research is part of the Movida research program, funded by the French Ministry of Ecology, Sustainable Development and Energy (Movida 1).

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [leila.elgaaied@u-cergy.fr](mailto:leila.elgaaied@u-cergy.fr) (L. Elgaaied-Gambier), [elisa.monnot@u-cergy.fr](mailto:elisa.monnot@u-cergy.fr) (E. Monnot), [fanny.reniou@u-pec.fr](mailto:fanny.reniou@u-pec.fr) (F. Reniou).

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.casuffitelegachis.fr/particuliers/je-m-informe> Accessed 10 September 2017.

and other stakeholders engaged in environmental preservation are logically more prone to try to raise awareness of environmentally friendly actions that are not yet widespread. How should campaign developers promote environmentally beneficial behavior using social norms when environmentally harmful behavior is actually prevalent? In this case, should they avoid highlighting descriptive norms? Or can they provide clues about a potential positive descriptive norm (which does not totally reflect reality)?

The general proposition of this research is as follows: when environmentally harmful behavior is prevalent, the use of a positive descriptive norm has a negative effect on perceived ad credibility because the norm does not reflect the behavior of the majority. Nevertheless, this research suggests that such a negative effect on ad credibility can be overcome through certain execution techniques that reinforce the weight of the descriptive norm, in particular through the presence of an endorser. More specifically, this research aims to investigate the circumstances under which descriptive norms can lead to pro-environmental behaviors, through the effect of ad credibility. Pro-environmental behaviors refer to “the purchase of environmentally responsible products; products that minimize environmental impact; products from firms with good environmental reputations, or products whose production implies biodegradable, carbon neutral, or recycled inputs” (Grimmer, Kilburn, & Miles, 2016, p. 1582).

We focus on a particular environmentally friendly behavior, namely the purchasing of non-overpackaged products (e.g., toothpaste tubes without typical cardboard boxes). Overpackaging refers to outer packaging that surrounds the primary packaging (i.e., the one in direct contact with the product) but, unlike secondary packaging, is not used to gather several units of primary packages (Elgaaid-Gambier, 2016; Monnot, Parguel, & Reniou, 2015). Because overpackaging uses resources but has no functional purpose (a containing or grouping function), the purchasing of overpackaged products can be deemed an environmentally unfriendly behavior. However, while recycling is becoming a widespread practice in many industrialized countries, consumers are not sufficiently familiar with pre-cycling strategies to reduce household waste. Packaging sustainability also is often reduced to recycling or use of recycled material (Dang & Chu, 2016), with individuals seemingly less aware of the amount of resources used. In this case, focusing on a less familiar environmental behavior is more appropriate because the informational value of descriptive norm appeals is higher in ambiguous or unfamiliar contexts (White & Simpson, 2013).

To answer the research questions and test the effect of descriptive norms on ad credibility and intention to purchase non-overpackaged products, three experimental studies manipulate (1) the presence (vs. absence) of a descriptive norm and its valence (positive vs. negative), (2) the presence (vs. absence) of an endorser and his or her similarity (vs. dissimilarity) to the receiver in terms of age, and (3) the type of endorser (celebrity vs. typical consumer) and his or her connection (vs. no connection) with environmental issues. To develop the hypotheses, we rely on a broader theoretical background—namely, that of social influence.

## 2. Conceptual framework

### 2.1. From social influence theory to social norms theory

This research relies on social influence theory to identify whether social influence can enhance persuasion in the context of green advertising. In the following paragraphs, we present social influence theory and explain why we focus on the specific concept of social norms within this framework.

#### 2.1.1. Sub-theories of social influence

Social influence can be viewed a meta-theory that comprises a network of sub-theories focusing on the study of “change in an individual's thoughts, feelings, attitudes, or behaviors that results from

interaction with another individual or a group” (Rashotte, 2007, p. 4426). Although these sub-theories are intertwined, major clusters can be identified.

The first cluster of research highlights the effect of the mere presence of other people on behavior. For example, according to social facilitation and social inhibition theories (Zajonc & Sales, 1966), individuals tend to perform differently when they are in the presence of others than when they are alone. The second cluster deals with identity issues and includes social comparison theory, identification, and social identity theory. Here, individuals tend to compare themselves with others to determine their opinions and abilities and define their self-concept (Festinger, 1954). According to social identity theory, individuals' self-concept depends on the groups to which they belong (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The third cluster highlights the role of social rules and the processes that lead to compliance—and even obedience if the influence comes from an authority figure (see Milgram, 1965). According to social norms theory (Cialdini et al., 1990; Sherif, 1936), interactions between members of a social group lead to the emergence of social rules and standards. When faced with social norms, individuals tend to conform either because they internalized the norm, to gain approval or avoid punishment, or for self-defining purposes (Kelman, 1961). Finally, another significant research cluster is dedicated exclusively to the study of the influence of a specific category of individuals (e.g., celebrities). From a persuasion perspective, the profile and attributes of a celebrity endorser draw attention to the message and transfer image values to the message (Escalas & Bettman, 2017; Miller & Allen, 2012; Rudolph, 1947). Furthermore, the image of the celebrity endorser must fit the characteristics of the promoted product or cause (Friedman & Friedman, 1979; Kamins, 1990). Finally, individuals tend to conform to the attitudes and behaviors of a celebrity endorser when they perceive his or her image as congruent with their ideal self-image (Choi & Rifon, 2012).

This classification is not exhaustive and some theories fall in several categories or rely on various psychological mechanisms. The dynamic social impact theory (Latané, 1996), for example, is based on the idea that the strength, immediacy, and number of sources of influence determine social influence. The sources of influence are also an important factor to distinguish among the sub-theories. The aforementioned research clusters indeed differ in terms of who exerts the influence. Social influence is likely to emanate from significant others (Wind, 1976), peer and reference groups (Bearden & Etzel, 1982), authority figures (Milgram, 1965), experts and opinion leaders (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955), celebrities (Atkin & Block, 1983), and even society as a whole. Although we directly or indirectly use most of the concepts and mechanisms of social influence in this research to justify the hypotheses, we focus mainly on the concept of social norms.

#### 2.1.2. Building on social influence theory to enhance persuasion: the role of social norms

We can further categorize studies conducted within the framework of social influence depending on the objective they pursue: (1) identifying the determinants of social influence and compliance, (2) uncovering the mechanisms through which social influence operates, and (3) understanding how to use social influence optimally in a persuasion perspective. We ground our work in the third research stream.

Using social influence for persuasion purposes necessitates increasing awareness of the social context and the potential social pressure to adopt the promoted behavior—in our case, an environmentally friendly behavior. One way to achieve this is through the activation of social norms (Cialdini, 2003; Cialdini et al., 1990; Goldstein et al., 2008). Cialdini et al. (1990) show that social norms only affect behavior if they are salient. In other words, advertisers may adopt a strategy geared toward increasing the salience of existing social norms that are favorable to the promoted behavior. They can do so merely by emphasizing the existence of social norms through simple elicitation or personification techniques. Personification generally takes the form of

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/5109319>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/5109319>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)