

Seeing green and becoming green: Applying normative social influence to foster environmental engagement

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Introduction

Intervention programmes promoting pro-environmental behaviours typically rely on information-only appeals. However, research has shown that information-based interventions do not often lead to behaviour change, presenting instead the use of social norms as a better catalyst for change (e.g., Schultz et al., 2008). The current research adds to a growing body of research that employs normative messages (information regarding behaviour commonly conducted by others and socially approved) to promote pro-environmental behaviour.

Two experimental studies compared the effectiveness of normative information with information-only environmental messages. Study 1 used a survey questionnaire to measure participants' self-reports of household energy efficiency and Study 2 used a field experiment to directly measure hotel guests' towel reuse. The two studies extend existing research to a New Zealand context (a country synonymous for its 'clean and green' image) while considering two distinct methodologies across two behavioural domains. Overall, it was predicted that the introduction of normative information would lead to greater willingness to engage in household energy efficiency (Study 1) and a significant increase in towel reuse (Study 2).

Method

Four conditions were employed in each of the two studies: a control condition (serving as a baseline with no normative information), an environmental condition (drawing participants' attention to the environmental effect of their behaviour), a global normative condition (combining a descriptive and injunctive normative message with more general reference group information), and a

provincial normative condition (relating the normative message to a more specific reference group). A total of 190 participants took part in Study 1 (101 female; $M_{age} = 30.48$, $SD = 12.50$), and indicated their willingness to engage in household energy efficiency behaviours. Study 2 relied on indirect behavioural observations of towel reuse across 170 hotel stays in 111 rooms (randomly assigned to one of the four experimental conditions).

Results

Consistent with predictions, participants exposed to normative messages showed greater willingness to engage in energy efficiency than those in the control condition (Study 1), and hotel guests exposed to normative messages showed greater towel reuse than those in the control condition (Study 2). Contrary to expectations, the global normative message had a greater effect on energy efficiency behaviours and towel reuse than the provincial normative message.

Discussion

In line with extant research, these two experimental studies suggest that normative information is a more effective method for promoting pro-environmental behaviour than typical approaches that rely solely on information-based interventions. The results have wider applications for promoting pro-environmental behaviour across separate domains (e.g., in the home and within a hotel context), opening avenues for policy development and implementation.

Reference

Schultz, P. W., Khazian, A. M., & Zaleski, A. C. (2008). Using normative social influence to promote conservation among hotel guests. *Social Influence*, 3, 4-23.