

Tailoring social feedback: the role of reference group relevancy

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Many behavior-change campaigns provide information about the behavior of some reference group with the goal to influence behavior. For example, campaigns aimed at reducing alcohol consumption among students often provide information about the drinking behavior of other students. Although popular, the results of using reference group information are mixed.

Commonly, it is assumed that individuals are only influenced by information from a reference group that is relevant to oneself (Kruglanski & Mayseless, 1990). The extent to which a reference group is relevant to an individual and can influence this individual has been conceptualized in different ways in literature, e.g. that a reference group is only relevant when it is similar, or when it is a majority or when it concerns a proximate reference group like friends and parents (e.g. Stapel & Marx, 2006). Although these factors play a role, they can not explain the often found mixed results. For example, Gilbert, Giesler and Morris (1995) found that people sometimes compare themselves to and are influenced by dissimilar reference groups as well. So, there is still much unknown as to what determines whether a reference group is considered relevant, and how reference group relevancy determines whether a reference group is able to influence a person. We argue that the use of reference group information can have mixed results, because the same reference group can be perceived as either relevant or irrelevant for the same person depending on the situation. Based on findings by Göckeritz et al. (2010) that show that beliefs about other people's behavior are more influential when one is low involved

regarding a certain behavior, we argue that a person's involvement is an individual factor in whether a reference group is perceived as relevant. So, we propose that whether a reference group is relevant and can influence a person depends on how the reference group is perceived by this person in a particular situation which in turn is moderated by the person's involvement.

We conducted an experiment using a university student sample to obtain more insights into what makes a reference group relevant by testing whether involvement has a moderating role in whether a reference group is perceived as relevant in a particular situation and influences a person in this situation. These insights can be used to more effectively tailor social feedback to different target groups in campaigns to stimulate desired attitudes and/ or behavior. The results of the study will be presented at the congress.

References

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