

How social norms influence consumer behavior

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Researchers from Universidad Carlos III de Madrid, HEC Montréal, and University of New South Wales, UNSW Sydney published a new paper in the *Journal of Marketing* that performs a meta-analysis of extant

research on social norms to establish several new empirical generalizations.

The study, forthcoming in the *Journal of Marketing*, is titled "The Influence of Social Norms on Consumer Behavior: A Meta-Analysis" and is authored by Vladimir Melnyk, François A. Carrillat, and Valentyna Melnyk.

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in several new behaviors that health experts want to discourage, such as reusing the same mask, because they are detrimental to society. The good news is that social norms, which consists in communicating what others do (e.g., "2/3 of people avoid reusing the same mask") or what one should do (e.g., "not reusing the same mask is essential"), are most useful to prevent people from adopting these behaviors. Defined by researchers as "rules and standards that are understood by members of a group, and that guide and/or constrain [social behavior](#) without the force of laws," social norms influence various forms of everyday consumption, including food choices, responses to new products, and loyalty.

For example, signs in a hotel stating that other hotel guests reuse their towels increase towel reuse. Social norms are often leveraged by marketers and policy makers to encourage various socially approved behaviors, such as conserving energy, complying with product recalls, and making tax payments. They are also used to discourage socially disapproved behaviors, such as polluting the environment, smoking, and excessive alcohol or drug use. In this study, the researchers specify the effects of social norms for a broad spectrum of consumer behaviors and detail how practitioners and [government officials](#) can utilize actionable moderators, such as using appropriate communication elements for certain behaviors, countries, and consumers. This should improve the success of such policies and recommendations, which has been mixed to date. They also uncover how [cultural differences](#) can determine the

effects of social norms on both socially approved and disapproved behaviors.

Communication strategies for marketers

The content of communications should feature descriptive rather than injunctive forms of social norms, (i.e., describe what (most) people actually do rather than what they should do). Vladimir Melnyk adds that "We also recommend that marketers avoid specifying explicit sanctions and rewards associated with social norms. Instead, strategies that highlight benefits to others or to consumer freedom, for example a communication with a postscript that says "it's your decision," may mitigate resistance and thus be more effective at inducing the target behavior."

Practitioners might worry about highlighting a specific organization when communicating about social norms, but the results suggest that referring to a specific firm, governmental body, or NGO can make communications about social norms more influential. Social norms are also more powerful when they cite people who are perceived as close to the target consumers. In contrast, the results indicate that references to authority figures does not enhance the influence of social norms on consumer behavior.

When communicating norms, marketers can acknowledge the monetary costs associated with the targeted behaviors. François Carrillat explains that "Although a financial barrier, monetary costs seem to also increase the desirability of the behavior, so social norms can be particularly effective for promoting costly behaviors like donations or buying (more expensive) organic food. Furthermore, social norms are equally effective irrespective of required effort and the time investment in complying."

Cultural differences between countries

The impact of social norms on socially disapproved behaviors varies significantly depending on the country of implementation, but it is stable across countries for socially approved behaviors. Social norms have weaker influences on socially disapproved behaviors in countries where religion is less important, that value variety and self-expression, and where people are freer to make choices for themselves (i.e., most Western countries).

These findings have important public health implications when group behavior is essential. To encourage mask wearing in most Western countries, for example, public officials should communicate that wearing a mask is a socially approved [behavior](#) that others close to them adopt. In most developing countries, the communications should highlight that not wearing a mask is socially disapproved.

"These findings offer insights for marketers and public [policy makers](#) by identifying effective, and some commonly used but ineffective, strategies for enhancing the impact of social norms on [consumer behavior](#)," says Valentyna Melnyk. The results also suggest that the influence of social norms can prompt private acceptance. Thus, this research can assist marketers and policymakers to leverage [social norms](#) to encourage both private and public behaviors.

More information: Vladimir Melnyk et al, EXPRESS: The Influence of Social Norms on Consumer Behavior: A Meta-Analysis, *Journal of Marketing* (2021). [DOI: 10.1177/00222429211029199](https://doi.org/10.1177/00222429211029199)

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