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## **Minority Matters: the Influence of Minority and Majority Descriptive Norms on Product Choice**

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The influence of descriptive norms (what most others do) has been demonstrated in prior research for majorities. This study shows that minority norms (what some others do) can also stimulate consumers to follow, especially when the group is growing in size, whereas an increasing majority fails to stimulate behavior.

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# Minority Matters: The Influence of Minority And Majority Descriptive Norms on Product Choice

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Social norms often have a substantial impact on human behavior (Cialdini et al. 1990; Melnyk et al. 2010). In fact, the influence of descriptive norms is much higher than that of other types of information, even though consumers themselves rate descriptive norms as least important in energy conservation behavior and campaigns using these norms as least motivating (Nolan et al. 2008). Such descriptive norms communicate what is typical in a situation and thereby provide “social proof” of what is effective behavior (Jacobson et al. 2011). They have been successfully applied in marketing campaigns to improve health and safety (e.g., [www.mostofus.org](http://www.mostofus.org)).

Studies on these descriptive norms have examined campaigns communicating the behavior of a majority of others. In their study on the reuse of hotel towels, Goldstein et al. (2008) communicated that 75 % of guests participate in the resource saving program, and in a study on energy saving, Nolan et al. (2008) used doorhangers communicating behavior of 99 % of people in the community. These are powerful descriptive norms changing consumer behavior. Yet, sometimes an advocated behavior is performed by only a minority of people: the market share of organic products is low ([www.ota.com](http://www.ota.com)) and most people fail to eat enough fruit and vegetables according to dietary guidelines ([www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)). Communicating that most people fail to perform an advocated behavior typically undermines this behavior (Cialdini 2003; Stok et al. 2011). So are descriptive social norms never effective in advocating a desired behavior when this behavior is performed only by a minority of people?

Ample research on minority influence shows that sources advocating minority options can exert influence, albeit less strong and less direct (Horcajo et al. 2010; Wood et al. 1994). Applying this to descriptive norms, this would suggest that descriptive norms of minorities might be able to initiate the desired behavior when the emphasis is not on the failure to perform this behavior by the majority (“people should eat two pieces of fruit each day but only a minority does so”) but instead on the advocated behavior itself (“some people eat two pieces of fruit each day”). The latter could activate personal norms and stimulate consumers to focus on the desirability of the behavior. The effectiveness of minority norms could be further enhanced when consumers perceive that the group performing the behavior is growing. After all, economic research on information cascades suggests that the tendency to follow the behavior of others is stronger when the group who is performing a behavior grows (Banerjee 1992; Bikhchandani et al. 1998).

In contrast, the effectiveness of majority norms might not be enhanced by information that the group performing the behavior is growing. A message involving a growing majority may be perceived as ‘pushy’ and evoke the perception of social pressure. This perceived pressure can undermine the effectiveness of the norm: when consumers perceive a persuasion attempt they tend to counteract this attempt (Clee and Wicklund 1980; Laran et al. 2011).

The two main objectives of the current study are thus to determine (a) whether weak descriptive norms (minority norms) can nonetheless enhance an advocated behavior, and (b) whether especially strong descriptive norms (a growing majority) are indeed less effective in stimulating behavior. We expect that information that a growing group of people are performing a behavior will enhance the

influence of minority norms but weaken the influence of majority norms. This is tested in three experiments.

The first experiment (n = 91 students) employed a taste test. Participants chose between organic and regular orange juice, in a 3-group design with no information, majority, or minority norm information (e.g., 20 % of students in a prior study chose the organic juice). Results showed that choice for organic juice was significantly higher for both norms than in the control condition, indicating that minority norms can indeed stimulate behavior.

In the second experiment, students (n = 245) were asked to pick rewards for a series of unrelated studies. They could choose between more or less healthful options (e.g. Vitamin Water vs. Coca Cola). In a 2 by 2 design plus control condition, it was indicated that either a majority or a minority picked healthy snacks, and that this group was growing versus no trend information. Compared to the control condition, all norm conditions raised the number healthy options that were chosen. Additionally, the growing minority and majority norms raised the number of healthy options chosen more than the minority and growing majority norms, as expected. There was no difference between conditions in perceptions of how clear, reliable, and realistic the information was.

Experiment 3 employed a virtual environment with a train station stand of snacks and a quota sample of the general population to validate results. Additionally, time pressure was manipulated. Participants made three store visits, the first without norm information and the latter two with a shelf advertisement promoting fruit and using a similar 2 x 2 between subjects design as in experiment 2. Time pressure was applied in the instructions for one of the two latter visits. Results showed that choice of healthy products was higher for visits with the descriptive norm present rather than absent. Additionally, we found a significant three-way interaction between the type of norm, trend, and time pressure. With time pressure, all norms increased healthy choice, but without time pressure participants returned to unhealthy choices when the shelf advertisement featured a growing majority.

These results have important implications for norm theory. When ability to process information is low, descriptive norms appear to be a heuristic cue triggering behavior (c.f. Jacobson 2010), but when ability to process information is high, the formulation of the descriptive norm matters. Specifically, our results indicate that the band width in which descriptive norms are effective is both more extensive than previously assumed (i.e., minority norms can advocate a desired behavior) and more restrictive (i.e., norms using a growing majority are ineffective).

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