

SOCIAL NORMS-BASED MESSAGING

INCORPORATING BEHAVIOURAL ADD-ONS INTO
CASH TRANSFER PROGRAMMES

BY PAUL BRIMBLE & LUKAS HENSEL

Mitigating the socio-economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic needs to go hand-in-hand with high levels of compliance with government advice or orders to slow the spread of COVID-19. We provide an overview of how social norms-based messaging strategies - messages describing how the majority of people behave or reflecting their approval of certain behaviours - can be used as add-ons to cash transfer programmes by governments and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to increase compliance with public health guidelines.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

To increase compliance with public health guidelines, cash transfers can be accompanied by targeted messages which appeal to or correct misperceptions of social-norms.

Messages should include both positive descriptive norms (information on desirable typical behaviour) and prescriptive injunctive norms (social approval for such behaviour).

Messages should describe reference groups with which the recipient identifies and should be context specific.

Messages should be targeted at groups that are particularly likely to change their behaviour and tailored to be relevant for the targeted groups.

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

Governments all around the world have implemented measures to slow the spread of COVID-19 ([Hale et al. 2020](#)). These measures range from complete lockdowns to general advice on practicing social distancing. Such policies are more effective if adhered to at scale. While adherence to such measures is relatively high in high-income countries (Everett et al. 2020; Barari et al. 2020), compliance in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) might be

significantly more difficult or costly.¹ For example, limited access to water might prevent regular handwashing.

Changing perceptions of social norms around health behaviour has the potential to increase compliance with mitigation policies (Reid et al. 2010).² We focus in this brief on LMICs, although lessons may be relevant elsewhere. This so-called “social norms” approach is particularly promising if individuals misperceive their peers’ behaviours and attitudes (Dempsey et al. 2018).

Over and underestimation of the health behaviour of peers has been documented (Berkowitz 2005; Dickie et al. 2018; Miller and Prentice 1996) and has been found to influence behaviour in many contexts. While there is no representative data on such perceptions with regards to COVID-19 in low-and middle-income countries yet, Fetzer et al. (2020) provide evidence that there might be widespread underestimation of compliance with preventive behaviours globally.³ They find that individual perceptions of social norms are strongly correlated with self-reported intentions to adhere to preventative behaviours. This suggests that messages appealing to social norms have the potential to increase compliance with public health guidelines.

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM EXISTING EVIDENCE?

When designing effective and persuasive social-norms based messages to increase compliance, there are several key factors to consider.

1. Messages should provide information on aligned descriptive social norms (describing typical behaviour) and/or injunctive social norms (describing desirable behaviour)

Combining both types of social norms can have the largest effect on behaviour (Cialdini 2003, Schultz et al. 2008). Information on *descriptive norms* (messages like “90% of people are wearing face masks in public”) can induce norm-consistent behaviour in a wide range of settings such as littering (Cialdini et al. 1990), towel usage (Goldstein et al. 2008), recycling (Shultz 1999) electricity usage (Nolan et al. 2008), tax evasion (Kahan 1997), dietary choices (Robinson et al. 2014) amongst others.

In addition, information on *injunctive norms* (messages like “90% of your neighbours think that everyone should stay at home”) have also been shown to change behaviour. For example,

Bursztyn et al. (2018) show that correcting perceptions of husbands about the social approval of female labour force participation in Saudi Arabia led to higher labour force participation of their

¹ Alison Andrew, Alex Armand, Britta Augsburg, and Iván Kim Taveras, 30 March 2020. [Challenges of adopting coronavirus precautions in low-income countries](#).

² First studies have tested messages appealing to pro-sociality, mentioning health risks, and making moral arguments in high-income countries (Barari et al. 2020; Everett et al. 2020; Utych and Fowler 2020). However, effect sizes on intended behaviour are modest at best, which is partially due to very high average levels of compliance.

³ Fetzer et al. (2020) recruited more than 100,000 respondents in 50 countries, including several low- and middle-income countries, via social and traditional media to answer an online survey on social norms and COVID-19. They find that a vast majority of respondents underestimate the fraction of people in their country who think that others should comply with COVID-19 prevention behaviour. The authors use survey weights to account for the non-representativeness of their sample, but it is likely that it is still skewed towards richer and more urban households. Representative data from LMICs are needed to confirm their hypothesis with poorer and more rural populations.

wives. When designing these messages it is important to provide truthful information, both for ethical reasons and to ensure the credibility of the information. This might require data collection prior to the messaging.⁴

Pairing descriptive social norms with prescriptive social norms, that is conveying social approval can further improve the effectiveness. Gerber and Rogers (2007) find that in the context of voter turnout, *positive* descriptions of social norms lead to better outcomes than *negative* descriptions, even when both were paired with an injunctive norm.⁵ Kromos et al. 2014 provides further evidence that descriptive social norms should highlight positive behaviour and where possible, should be accompanied by a prescriptive injunctive norm in the context of sustainable transportation. Therefore, “90% of people are washing hands frequently (positive descriptive norm), please continue to wash your hands frequently (prescriptive injunctive norm)” would likely perform better than either of the messages alone.

2. Information on descriptive norms should promote positive behaviour

There is evidence that descriptive norms describing undesirable behaviour alone may have unintended consequences by normalising such behaviour, leading to worse outcomes and a boomerang effect (Nolan 2017; Yamin et al. 2019). Examples of this include descriptions of widespread theft in a national park (Cialdini et al. 2006) and descriptions of average electricity consumption (Schultz et al. 2007; Alcott 2011) leading to an increase in undesirable behaviour, especially amongst compliers.⁶ This means one should say “90% of people stay at home” rather than “10% of people do not stay at home”. The negative effect of describing undesirable behaviour can often be mitigated when turned into a proscriptive injunctive norm - conveying social disapproval - such as “a majority of people think that you should not visit your relatives over the next few weeks” (Cialdini et al. 1991; Schultz et al. 2007).

3. Messages should describe reference groups with which the recipient identifies and should be context specific

When deciding on which social norms to promote, it is important to pick an effective reference group. People who have a strong identification with a specific reference group are more likely to comply with that group’s social norms (Phua 2013; Christensen et al. 2004). Therefore, providing information about neighbours might be more effective than providing information about population averages (Dempsey et al. 2018).⁷

⁴ Where available, existing online panels provide a relatively cheap and fast way of doing so. In lower-income countries, phone surveys with pre-existing samples might be more practical. Market research companies might also have existing samples of the population.

⁵ Gerber and Rogers (2007) compare pairs of injunctive norms with descriptive norms about voter turnout that are positive, such as “nearly 20% more...citizens voted than in the previous...election” with those that are negative, such as “less than 10% of...citizens actually voted” and find that the positive descriptive norms were more effective at motivating voters.

⁶ In the context of electricity consumption, Schultz et al. (2007) and Alcott (2011) find that subgroups with relatively low electricity usage rates (the compliers) actually increased their electricity usage towards the norm.

⁷ However, providing such information truthfully can be a challenge especially when messages need to go out quickly. In this case, focussing on larger demographic or geographic subgroups can be an alternative.

Additionally, these messages should be context specific to the recipients in order to resonate more powerfully.⁸ Goldstein et al. (2008) find that context-specific descriptive statements targeted at hotel guests like “the majority of guests in this room reuse their towels” were more effective at changing behaviour than other appeals. Fornara et al. (2011) find that context-specific norms about recycling at the neighbourhood level performed well. Furthermore, the targeted behavior needs to be relevant and realistic to change. For example, messages about avoiding crowded public transport systems would be more relevant in urban settings and less relevant in rural settings.

4. Targeting messages can increase the reach and increase the effectiveness of messaging campaigns

Cash transfer recipients are the obvious target for messages conveyed with cash-transfers, however, messages can be spread through social networks and reach an audience beyond immediate recipients (Christakis et al. 2013). Kim et al. (2018) find that targeting health interventions at individuals nominated by friends did increase health knowledge and behaviour among non-targeted individuals. Moreover, groups that are particularly unlikely to comply with guidelines or that are particularly receptive to social norms messaging are the most promising target. In the context of COVID-19, evidence from high-income countries suggests that these are often young and to a lesser extent male individuals (Barari et al. 2020; Utych and Fowler 2020). When targeting specific groups, thinking about the means of delivery is also important. Messages could be conveyed in-person or through leaflets to cash transfer recipients when funds are dispersed in person. If funds are dispersed electronically (repeated) digital communication might be more adequate. This has important implications for the implementation of targeting and the design of messages, particularly for illiterate populations.

⁸ These context specific norms are sometimes referred to as local or provincial norms.

REFERENCES

- Allcott, Hunt. "Social norms and energy conservation." *Journal of Public Economics* 95, no. 9-10 (2011): 1082-1095.
- Barari, S., Caria, S., Davola, A., Falco, P., Fetzer, T., Fiorin, S., Hensel, L., Ivchenko, A., Jachimowicz, J., King, G. and Kraft-Todd, G., 2020. "Evaluating COVID-19 Public Health Messaging in Italy: Self-Reported Compliance and Growing Mental Health Concerns". *medRxiv Preprints*.
- Berkowitz, A. D., 2005. "An Overview of the Social Norms Approach". in *Changing the Culture of College Drinking: A Socially Situated Health Communication Campaign*, 193-214.
- Bursztyjn, L., González, A. L., and Yanagizawa-Drott, D., 2018. "Misperceived Social Norms: Female Labor Force Participation in Saudi Arabia". *NBER Working Paper 24736*.
- Cialdini, R. B., Kallgren, C. A. and Reno, R. R., 1991. "A focus theory of normative conduct: A theoretical refinement and reevaluation of the role of norms in human behavior". *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 24, pp. 201-234). Academic Press.
- Christensen, P. N., Rothgerber, H., Wood, W., & Matz, D. C., 2004. "Social norms and identity relevance: A motivational approach to normative behavior". *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 30(10), 1295-1309.
- Christakis, N.A. and Fowler, J.H., 2013. Social contagion theory: examining dynamic social networks and human behavior. *Statistics in medicine*, 32(4), 556-577.
- Cialdini, R. B., Demaine, L. J., Sagarin, B. J., Barrett, D. W., Rhoads, K., and P. L. Winter, 2006. "Managing Social Norms for Persuasive Impact." *Social Influence* 1, no. 1: 3-15.
- Dempsey, R. C., McAlaney, J., & Bewick, B. M., 2018. "A Critical Appraisal of the Social Norms Approach as an Interventional Strategy for Health-Related Behavior and Attitude Change". *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9(Nov), 1–16.
- Dickie, R., Rasmussen, S., Cain, R., Williams, L., and MacKay, W., 2018. "The effects of Perceived Social Norms on Handwashing Behaviour in Students". *Psychol. Health Med.* **23**, 154–159.
- Everett J. A. C., Colombatto C., Chituc, V., William, J. B., and Crockett, M. J., 2020. "The effectiveness of moral messages on public health behavioral intentions during the COVID-19 pandemic". *PsyArXiv Preprints*
- Fetzer, T., Witte, M., Hensel, L., Jachimowicz, J. M., Haushofer, J., Ivchenko, A., ... Yoeli, E., 2020. "Global Behaviors and Perceptions in the COVID-19 Pandemic". *PsyArXiv Preprints*
- Fornara, F., Carrus, G., Passafaro, P., & Bonnes, M., 2011. "Distinguishing the sources of normative influence on pro environmental behaviors: The role of local norms in household waste recycling". *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, 14(5), 623-635.
- Gerber, A.S. and Rogers, T., 2009. "Descriptive social norms and motivation to vote: Everybody's voting and so should you". *The Journal of Politics*, 71(1), pp.178-191.
- Goldstein, N. J., Cialdini, R. B., and V. Griskevicius. "A Room With a Viewpoint: Using Social Norms to Motivate Environmental Conservation in Hotels." *Journal of Consumer Research* 35, no. 3 (2008): 472-482.

- Hale, T., Webster S., Petherick A., and Phillips T. 2020. "Variation in government responses to COVID-19". Working Paper, Blavatnik School of Government.
- Kahan, D. M., 1997. "Social influence, social meaning, and deterrence". *Virginia Law Review*, 349-395.
- Kim, D.A., Hwong, A.R., Stafford, D., Hughes, D.A., O'Malley, A.J., Fowler, J.H. and Christakis, N.A., 2015. A Randomised Controlled Trial of Social Network Targeting to Maximise Population Behaviour Change. *Lancet*, 386(9989), p.145.
- Kormos, C., Gifford, R., & Brown, E., 2015. "The influence of descriptive social norm information on sustainable transportation behavior: A field experiment". *Environment and Behavior*, 47(5), 479-501.
- Miller, D. T. and Prentice, D. A., 1996. "The Construction of Social Norms and Standards". in *Social psychology: Handbook of Basic Principles*, Guilford Press, 799–829.
- Nolan, J. M., 2017. "Social Norms and Their Enforcement". *The Oxford handbook of social influence*, 147.
- Nolan, J. M., Schultz, P. W., Cialdini, R. B., Goldstein, N. J., & Griskevicius, V., 2008. "Normative social influence is underdetected". *Personality and social psychology bulletin*, 34(7), 913-923.
- Phua, J. J., 2013. "The reference group perspective for smoking cessation: An examination of the influence of social norms and social identification with reference groups on smoking cessation self-efficacy". *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors*, 27(1), 102.
- Reid, A. E., Cialdini, R. B., and Aiken, L. S., 2010. "Social Norms and Health Behavior". In *Handbook of Behavioral Medicine*, 263–274.
- Robinson, E., Thomas, J., Aveyard, P., & Higgs, S., 2014. "What everyone else is eating: a systematic review and meta-analysis of the effect of informational eating norms on eating behavior". *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics*, 114(3), 414-429.
- Schultz, P. W., 1999. "Changing behavior with normative feedback interventions: A field experiment on curbside recycling". *Basic and applied social psychology*, 21(1), 25-36.
- Schultz, W. P., Khazian, A. M., & Zaleski, A. C., 2008. "Using normative social influence to promote conservation among hotel guests". *Social influence*, 3(1), 4-23.
- Schultz, P. W., Nolan, J. M., Cialdini, R. B., Goldstein, N. J., & Griskevicius, V., 2007. "The Constructive, Destructive, and Reconstructive Power of Social Norms". *Psychological Science*, 18(5), 429–434.
- Utych, S. M., and Fowler, L., 2020. "Age-based messaging strategies for communication about COVID-19". *Journal of Behavioral Public Administration*, 3(1).
- Yamin, P., Fei, M., Lahlou, S., & Levy, S., 2019. "Using Social Norms to Change Behavior and Increase Sustainability in the Real World: a Systematic Review of the Literature". *Sustainability*, 11(20), 5847.