The CHARM social norms approach

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CHARM compared the impact of feedback containing information about individual behaviour (individual feedback) with feedback that also contained information on the average behaviour of others (social norms feedback). It did this in three studies: one that used web and email feedback to reduce domestic energy consumption; one that used a mobile phone application to increase walking, and one that used a Facebook app to encourage pro-environmental behaviours. Our research design was influenced by the social norms approach (SNA) and employed quasi-randomised controlled experiments to compare individual feedback with no feedback (the control) and a combination of individual and social norms feedback.

This short paper provides an introduction to the SNA and describes how we applied it in the CHARM studies. For further details of the SNA, see our paper *Marketing social norms: Social marketing and the 'social norm approach'*[1] and the guidebook produced by John McAlaney and colleagues.[2]

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The SNA is based on research by Asch and others that showed *that people tend to conform to what other people do*. SNA interventions exploit this tendency to conform, using communication about what most people do as a nudge to change behaviour. The traditional SNA approach emerged in the late 1980s in US campaigns designed to reduce the abuse of cigarettes, alcohol and drugs among university students.[3] More recently the approach has also been applied in sustainability contexts. Typically, SNA interventions use *descriptive norms*, which are statements of what most other people do. These are sometimes used in combination with *injunctive norms,* which are statements of what most people believe people *ought* to do. In a *personalised* social norms approach, people are provided with feedback on their own behaviour as well as with statements about social norms.

The SNA is usually explained in one of two ways. The traditional explanation emphasises *misconceptions* of social norms and holds that the communication of social norms influences behaviour by correcting these misperceptions. SNA interventions that are based on this explanation typically begin with surveys that are designed to identify misperceptions and gather data that can subsequently be used in advertising campaigns to challenge these misperceptions. The alternative approach (which is more commonly used in sustainability contexts) holds that the communication of social norms increases the salience of a relevant norm and this makes people more likely to follow the norm.

[1] Burchell, K., Rettie, R. & Patel, K. (2013), 'Marketing social norms: Social marketing and the 'social norm approach''. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, 12: 1–9.

[2] McAlaney, J., Bewick, B. M. & Bauerle, J. (2010) *Social Norms Guidebook: A Guide to Implementing the Social Norms Approach in the UK.* West Yorkshire, UK: University of Bradford, University of Leeds, Department of Health. Available at http://www.normativebeliefs.org.uk/Guidebook.pdf.

[3] Perkins, H. W. (ed.), *The Social Norms Approach to Preventing School and College Age Substance Abuse: A Handbook for Educators, Counsellors, and Clinicians,* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Although the results of some social norms campaigns are impressive, the approach is not a panacea. A review of the research indicates that SNA campaigns are more effective when they feature an appropriate reference group with which the target group can identify and when the social norms they communicate are perceived by the audience as credible.

CHARM developed a version of the SNA that used digital technologies (i.e. energy monitors, smart phone apps, websites, social networking platforms, email and SMS) to collect and feed back behaviour data. This was an example of a *personalised* SNA: those participants who received social norms feedback (i.e. average and best 20% figures for a group of others) also received feedback about their own behaviour. In addition, we used *injunctive norms*, in the form of 'smiley face' emoticons, to discourage regression to the norm.[4] Our approach differed from most previous work in a number of ways: 1) feedback was based on actual behaviour rather than claimed behaviour; 2) as well as snapshots of behaviour, feedback included graphs showing how behaviour changed over time; 3) we compared two types of feedback: one that only included individual-level data and one that also included social-level data, and 4) evaluation included analysis of behavioural data and substantial qualitative research as well as the analysis of survey data.

There are many different ways of applying the SNA. Figure 1 lists the options we identified, together with some of our findings. Given the many design permutations available, our finding that the social norms feedback had no incremental effect on behaviour is specific to the particular designs used in the study.

- Medium for communicating the feedback – e.g. email; SMS; mobile phone app or password-protected personal websites
  (In this research we found that the former three worked well; the latter, less well)
- Reference group for the comparisons used in the social norms feedback
  (Digital collection and display facilitate the customisation of the reference group)
- Feedback period – i.e. whether feedback is displayed in weekly hourly, daily, weekly segments etc.
- Feedback structure – i.e. whether users are given figures showing total consumption for the household, consumption by appliance, consumption by practice or consumption by household member
- Feedback design and format
  (In this research, bar-graphs and line-graphs both worked well)
- Fixed scales vs. automatic scaling
  (We found that it becomes harder to understand trends and patterns if individual and average data have very different maximum values)
- The relative prominence given to individual feedback and social norms feedback in the presentation of the data

Figure 1: Options in the implementation of the Social Norms Approach by CHARM

The analysis of interviews and focus groups conducted as part of CHARM suggests that participants generally found social norms feedback to be interesting and engaging. However, the effect on

[4] Schultz, W., Nolan, J., Cialdini, R., Goldstein, N. & Griskevicius, V. (2007). 'The Constructive, Destructive, and Reconstructive Power of Social Norms', *Psychological Science* 18, 429–434.

participants was very different in each of the three studies. While participants in the energy study sometimes tried to match the social average, those in the walking study seemed more likely to react in a competitive manner and to try to 'beat' the average and those in the Facebook study seemed much less engaged by the social norms feedback. The qualitative research also suggests that people find it easy to discount social norms feedback and use their personal circumstances to account for differences between themselves and others (for instance, home-working was used to explain both high energy use and low step-counts).

As a result of the CHARM study, we reach two main conclusions about the social norms approach. Firstly, that it is easy to confuse the effects of individual feedback with those of social norms feedback, and is therefore important to compare the impacts of the two types of feedback. Secondly, individual feedback may be as effective at prompting behaviour change as social norms feedback.