

CHARM: The social norm approach to sustainable behaviour change

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ABSTRACT

The CHARM project, funded by the RCUK Digital Economy Programme, employs digital technologies as a means of providing individuals with feedback about their own and others' sustainability behaviours. Thus, the three-year project examines the potential for *telling people what other people do* - the so-called 'social norm' approach - to change individual practices and behaviours in sustainable ways.

Keywords

Sustainability, behaviour change, the social norm approach, digital technologies, energy, active lifestyles, Facebook.

1. INTRODUCTION

CHARM aims to develop, evaluate and understand the ways in which a range of digital technologies can be used to shape individual behaviour. Much of what people do is based on shared habits and conventions. Sociological practice theory suggests that everyday practices are grounded in taken-for-granted assumptions about 'normal' practices, e.g. that one should wash bedding every two weeks, leave kitchen appliances plugged in and switched on, drive children to school, etc. This sort of behaviour is often not a deliberate choice, but taken-for-

granted, as an inherent aspect of everyday life. This helps to explain why traditional approaches that try to change behaviour by directly influencing attitudes and intentions often prove ineffective. Research in social psychology suggests that, rather than telling people what to do, it may be more effective to use the social norm approach, influencing behaviour by showing people what others do. This three-year project will explore, develop and evaluate this approach in the context of sustainable development, using digital technology as a non-invasive interface in three case studies: 1) electricity consumption, 2) active lifestyle and 3) Facebook.

The project draws on complementary research from four disciplines: sociological practice theory, behavioural economics, social psychology and social marketing. The four approaches all contribute to understanding the complexity that underlies normative behaviour, the potential influence of information about what other people do, and the way in which what are seen as 'normal' practices evolve and change. The CHARM project uses these multi-disciplinary resources, but focuses on understanding how social group feedback can be used to shape individual behaviour by informing and challenging conceptions of 'normal' practices, and on understanding how conceptions of what is taken-for-granted as 'normal' can be changed.

2. THE CHARM APPROACH

CHARM takes its inspiration from the social norm approach as it has been applied to sustainable behaviours. The social norm approach attempts to influence behaviour through the communication of descriptive social norms, i.e. by telling people what other people do. The social norm approach has been widely and successfully used to reduce alcohol and substance abuse among young people and more recently, to encourage pro-

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environmental behaviours. Participants' behaviour is monitored over a set period, during which participants receive feedback about their own behaviour and the average behaviour of all of the participants. The CHARM approach is distinctive in three important ways. First, CHARM employs a range of digital technologies - including mobile phones, the internet, energy monitors, activity monitors, GPS and social networking applications - to provide feedback to participants that is more sophisticated, detailed and graphically engaging than has been previously employed. Second, in CHARM, we compare the impact on behaviour of individual feedback on its own with the impact of both individual and social group feedback. Where possible these intervention groups will be complemented by comparison with a control group that will receive no feedback at all; this will enable us to control for a variety of external factors in ways that have not been possible before. In addition, in CHARM the quantitative data and questionnaires that are typical of the social norm approach will be complemented by extensive longitudinal ethnographic interviews and focus groups. These activities will facilitate in-depth understanding of the sociotechnical contexts and practices that underlie sustainable and unsustainable behaviours. Each of the three CHARM studies will follow this general approach.

3. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

CHARM aims to develop, evaluate and understand the use of digital technology to shape individual behaviour by informing and thereby challenging conceptions of 'normal' practices. This overall aim can be divided into four overlapping objectives:

- 1) To evaluate the impact of social group feedback in three different contexts.
- 2) To understand the taken-for-granted conceptions that underlie normal practices, their susceptibility to revision, the ways in which they are informed and contested by social group feedback, and the potential role of digital technology in shaping 'normal' practices.
- 3) To develop effective and efficient digital technologies for collecting and displaying individual and social group feedback.
- 4) To identify potential areas where social group feedback can be used to shape individual behaviour.

4. THE ENERGY STUDY

We are developing digital technology that captures, transmits and provides online feedback of household energy consumption data. Following two pilot studies, the main study will include 420 participants in Bristol. The study will take place over

eighteen weeks: following a two week benchmarking period, participants will receive energy consumption feedback in weekly emails and through a dedicated web site. The research will compare the energy consumption of three groups of households: households that receive no feedback, households that receive feedback only about their own energy consumption, and households that receive feedback about their own energy consumption and that of the other households in the study. In the energy study, data will include energy consumption data over time, pre- and post-intervention questionnaires, approximately 35 semi-structured household interviews and six focus groups.

5. THE ACTIVE LIFESTYLE STUDY

We are developing mobile telephone technology that will capture, transmit and display activity level data. Following two pilot studies, the main study will feature approximately 150 participants in a single UK city. The research will compare the activity levels over time of three groups of participants: a control group that will receive no feedback, participants that receive feedback only about their own energy consumption, and participants that receive feedback about their own energy consumption and that of the other participants in the study. In the active lifestyle study, data will include activity level data over time, pre- and post-intervention questionnaires, approximately 35 semi-structured interviews and three focus groups.

6. THE FACEBOOK STUDY

We are developing a special Facebook application featuring a quiz relating to the sustainability aspects of contemporary lifestyles as well as seven entertaining sustainability games. Participants will be encouraged to complete the sustainability quiz each week or fortnight over a period of two to three months, encouraged by the release of new games. Participants will be randomly assigned to one of three groups: a control group will receive no quiz score feedback, a second group will receive repeated feedback about their own quiz scores only, and a third group will receive this individual feedback plus feedback about the average quiz score of their Facebook friendship group. In the Facebook study, data will include quiz responses and scores over time, an end-of-study online questionnaire and approximately 30 semi-structured interviews.