

The Effect of Social Norms and Cultural Context on Pro-environmental Behaviors

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INTRODUCTION

Environmental sustainability has been discussed in various disciplines such as politics, economics, and sociology (Bonniface & Henley, 2008). Also, given that it is human behavior that contributes to environmental pollution (IPCC, 2007), a myriad of organizations have tried to increase individuals' pro-environmental behaviors to prevent environmental damage and conserve remaining natural resources (Winer, Cialdini, Bator, Rhoads, & Sagarin, 1998). These movements may imply that environmentally collective actions are needed for existing and future generations.

Reflecting the importance of environmental issues, extensive research on key factors to influence individuals' changes toward pro-environmental behaviors has been conducted over the years. They include individuals' attitudes (e.g., Bassili, 2011), values (e.g., Schultz & Zelezny, 2003), personal and collective efficacy (e.g., Bonniface & Henley, 2008) and social norms (e.g., Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgreen, 1990). Among these, in particular, many studies demonstrate that social norms such as injunctive and descriptive norms are important predictors of pro-environmental behaviors (Cialdini, 2003; Smith et al., 2012). These two norms are found to be influential in energy conservation (Gockeritz et al., 2010; Nolan et al., 2008; Smith et al., 2012), environmental theft (Cialdini et al., 2006), and recycling (Cialdini et al., 2003; Schultz, 1999).

To date, however, findings on the relationship between social norms and pro-environmental behaviors have focused on individualistic cultures. Past studies show that the impact of social norms can vary in different cultural contexts (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Fischer et al., 2009; Lapinski et al., 2007). Thus, this study aims to investigate the influence of social norms and cultures on pro-environmental behaviors. In addition, a study by Cialdini and

colleagues (2003) implies that the effect of a descriptive norm can differ by the characteristics of the prevalent behaviors (negative vs. positive behavior). Therefore, this study further examines how the relationship between social norms and cultures vary by types of prevalent behaviors.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Injunctive vs. Descriptive Norms

Social norms can be categorized into two types: injunctive norms and descriptive norms (Cialdini, 2003; Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990). Injunctive norms refer to perceptions of what other people typically approve of or disapprove of, whereas descriptive norms involve perceptions of what others actually perform (Smith et al., 2012).

Previous research shows that injunctive norms are more superior to descriptive norms for changing individuals' behaviors (Cialdini, 2003; Cialdini et al., 1990, 2006; Reno et al., 1993). For example, Cialdini and colleagues (1990) explored the effect of norm salience and descriptive norms on individuals' littering behavior. Results showed that there was an interaction effect of norm salience and descriptive norm. That is, in the clean environment (anti-littering descriptive norm), those who saw a model litter were less likely to discard trash, whereas in the littered environment (pro-littering descriptive norm), those who saw a model drop trash into the environment were highly likely to throw away trash. The findings demonstrate that descriptive norms may result in a boomerang effect.

Interestingly, Cialdini et al. (2003) argue that a descriptive norm will be effective when the prevalent behavior is environmentally beneficial. To explore this, the researchers conducted an experiment for college students in terms of recycling. The message was manipulated as follows: "recycling is prevalent" vs. "recycling is approved." Results showed that the effect of descriptive norms was less than that of the injunctive norms, but descriptive norms had a positive

influence on message persuasiveness. Results indicate that descriptive norms may play a different role in changing individuals' behavior according to characteristics of widespread actions.

Individualistic vs. Collectivistic Cultures

In an individualistic culture, individuals tend to be independent, placing an emphasis on separateness and uniqueness. Meanwhile, in a collectivistic culture, individuals are likely to be interdependent, focusing on connectedness and social context (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Past studies reveal that the importance of social norms may be different by cultures (e.g., Bagozzi et al., 2000; Lapinski et al., 2007; Park & Levine, 1999). In particular, the findings by Lapinski and colleagues (2007) imply that the effect size of descriptive norms may be greater in a collective culture (e.g., China) than an individualistic culture (e.g., the U.S.).

METHOD

A 2 (social norms: injunctive vs. descriptive) x 2 (cultures: individualistic vs. collectivistic) x 2 (types of descriptive norms: negative vs. positive) factorial experimental design will be employed. A total of 160 subjects will participate in each culture (U.S. vs. Korea). A total of four stimuli will be created and randomly assigned to subjects in each country. Recycling will be used as a pro-environmental behavior. Based on Cialdini et al. (2003) and Smith et al. (2012), messages will be adopted and revised in terms of recycling. After exposed to stimuli, subject will be asked about message persuasiveness and behavioral intention of recycling. As a covariate, prior experience of recycling will be measured. A series of pre-tests will be conducted to ensure manipulations are secured.

EXPECTED RESULTS AND IMPLICATIONS

It is expected that the effect of descriptive norms on pro-environmental behavior intention will be greater than that of injunctive norms in a collectivistic culture than an individualistic culture. In addition, when a prevalent behavior is environmentally harmful, the negative effect of descriptive norms on pro-environmental behavior intention will be greater in a collectivistic culture than an individualistic culture. Also, when a prevalent behavior is environmentally beneficial, the positive effect of descriptive norms on pro-environmental behavior intention will be greater in a collectivistic culture than an individualistic culture. Expected interaction effects can be seen as Figure 1.

Theoretically, results from the research will provide insights on pro-environmental behavior change due to social norms and cultural context. Managerially, the study gives guidelines for appropriate messages of environmental campaigns to increase message persuasion.

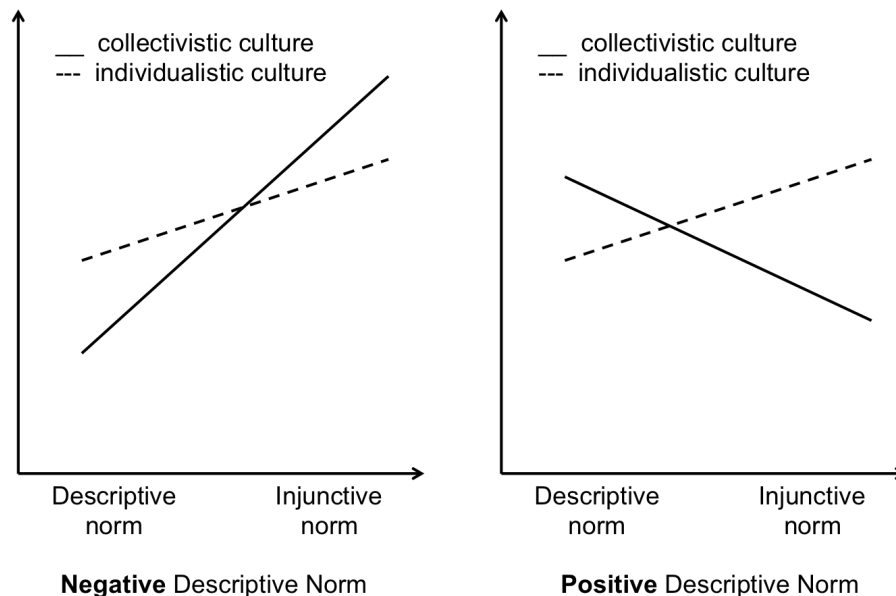


Figure 1. Expected Interaction Effects of Social Norms and Cultures

Note: A complete list of references is available upon request.