

Social Norms Guidebook

A guide to implementing the social norms
approach in the UK

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June 2010

Citation

McAlaney, J., Bewick, B. M., and Bauerle, J. (2010) *Social Norms Guidebook: A Guide to Implementing the Social Norms Approach in the UK*. University of Bradford, University of Leeds, Department of Health: West Yorkshire, UK.

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Background

About social norms

Social norms refer to our perceptions of how our peers behave. As has been demonstrated by research in social psychology, perceptions of social norms strongly influence how we behave as individuals¹. Research has found however that we are often inaccurate in these perceptions, and tend to assume others to behave in a less healthy and socially responsible manner than is actually the case. For example, studies in the American college system have noted that students overestimate how heavily and frequently their peers drink alcohol². Furthermore, this misperception can lead individuals to drink more alcohol themselves in an attempt to match what they see to be the group norm³. These misperceptions have become the basis of an increasingly popular and widely used technique called the social norms approach. This approach seeks to correct such misperceptions through the dissemination of information on the actual norms in a population⁴.

Key features of social norms interventions

The social norms approach differs from traditional approaches to behaviour change strategies in several ways:

- It does not use 'health terrorism' or similar techniques. That is, it does not attempt to change behaviour by using depictions of negative consequences of behaviour, a technique that research increasingly suggests is ineffective⁵
- It is a participatory process in which members of population become actively involved in the collection of data and the design of the intervention materials
- It involves no moralistic undertones or directions to the intended population about how they 'should' behave. It is instead based on the principle of presenting information about actual (healthy) norms of a population back to that population

Purpose of this guide

Social norms interventions offer a new evidence based approach to changing behaviour. One of the appeals of the approach is that it is based on a straightforward and simple premise. As with any type of behaviour change strategy, the application of the approach to real life settings requires careful planning and an understanding of the principles involved. This guidebook has been written to provide those interested in the approach with support on how to apply the approach and how to address some of the commonly encountered challenges. The information contained within the guide is based on the experiences of social norms practitioners.

Contributors

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Stage I – Preparation

Define the problem

The first step of a social norms campaign is to clearly identify the issue to be addressed. It is important to consider how the issue can be defined in terms of specific and tangible behaviours and attitudes. For instance, alcohol use of students on a university campus could be approached in terms of the frequency of drinking, the typical amount drunk in a session, the attitudes of students towards the social acceptability of public drunkenness, or the negative consequences experienced as a result of alcohol use. It is important that target behaviours can be translated into a measurable goal. Ensuring that the issue is explicitly identified is a vital pre-requisite in the process of a social norms intervention as it will inform the implementation and evaluation of the project.

Understand the population

The social norms approach was originally developed in the American college system and thus the majority of projects have taken place at colleges, schools or universities. Projects conducted in these settings benefit from having a clearly defined population who can be reached through a number of established channels. In contrast projects conducted in community settings can be more challenging, as the intended population can be harder to define and access.

Regardless of the setting it is important to research the intended population prior to introducing a social norms intervention. It may be useful to speak to people in the population about who they identify as their peers; what type of health or social education they have previously been exposed to; where they spend their social time; and in the case of community projects, which areas they would consider to be part of their neighbourhood.

Include descriptive and injunctive norms

There are broadly two different types of social norms which are used in the approach. Descriptive norms refer to what individuals do. For example how frequently they drink or whether or not they smoke. Injunctive norms on the other hand refer to individual's beliefs about what is socially acceptable to their peer group. For example, whether or not they think their peers approve of heavy drinking in public places. The majority of social norms projects have focussed on descriptive norms but recent work has begun to incorporate injunctive norms. Incorporating both types of social norms can be useful in creating a more holistic social norms project. These projects can address not only misperceptions about rates of behaviour but also misperceptions about peer attitudes.

Involve stakeholders

It is important to acknowledge that the social norms approach is a very different technique that stakeholders may not have encountered. Stakeholders may understandably therefore have concerns

and questions about how the approach functions. For example, parents may express unhappiness with norms messages about alcohol use being displayed to their children at school (even if the norms message is that most pupils do not drink alcohol). Conversely stakeholders may view a positive norms message as a tacit endorsement that no problems exist. It is paramount to the success of a social norms project to emphasise to stakeholders that whilst an unhealthy behaviour may not be the norm, it does not mean there is not an issue to be addressed. With this in mind it can be useful to ensure that stakeholders are fully involved and briefed about how the social norms approach operates. When conducting a school project for instance the project co-ordinators could meet with parents, teachers, governors, local youth clubs, and health educators to outline the social norms approach and to address any queries. The 'Frequently Asked Questions' section in this document includes some of the questions that stakeholders may raise.

Choose a reference group

Social norms interventions operate by disseminating norms messages about a reference group to that group, such as for example students at a college. However there are normally several different reference groups that could be used in an intervention. Instead of using 'other students at the college' alternative possibilities in college projects could include 'other students in the halls of residence' or 'other students in [city name]'. It is of course possible for projects to include more than one reference group, although this does increase the complexity of both data collection and the intervention. It can be challenging to identify which reference group should be used. Research suggests that the more socially distant a group is from the individual the greater the misperception of that group will be. A group that is too socially distant will however have very little influence over the individual. Conversely a group close to the individual may be more influential, but the individual misperceptions about that group may be minor. For example, a student at college may be heavily influenced by their close friends and have largely accurate perceptions of the behaviours of this group. As such the group could not be used as the basis of a social norms intervention as there is no real misperception for the intervention to act upon. Similarly the student may have large misperceptions about the much more socially distant and abstract group of students in the UK in general. Since this group have little direct social influence over the individual, correction of misperceptions about them may have little impact on personal behaviour.

Social norms projects have tended to use either the reference group of other students at the same university, college, school or alternatively other residents in the same neighbourhood in the case of a community project. There is movement towards attempting to use reference groups which are more relevant to individuals, for example breaking the intended population down into sub-groups. This has been aided in part by the increasing use of online technologies which can quickly and automatically provide individuals with tailored norms messages; this is discussed in greater detail in the intervention section of this guide.

It is important to note that the most influential peer group may not always be the most obvious one. For example, the EUDAP project (see appendix three) asked 12 – 14 year old respondents about their perceptions of 16 year olds, rather than their classmates. The reasoning behind this was that

adolescents of this age see older adolescents as aspirational figures, and are in fact more socially influenced by their perceptions of them than they are by others of their own age group.

Stage II – Data collection

Planning data collection

Baseline data will be the basis for creating the norms messages that will underpin the intervention. When the norms messages are first presented to the population they may be questioned and challenged. If messages are to be credible it is vital that the data collection is conducted in a comprehensive and transparent way. Care should be taken to ensure that a representative sample is obtained, using the most appropriate means for the chosen population.

Creating the social norms questions

Social norms items

The baseline social norms survey provides evidence of the actual norms of the population and the perceived norms that individuals hold about others. When constructing the survey the following should be considered. First, the questions and response options should be simple and easily conceptualised. When answering questions, about their perceptions of others, respondents should be able to answer quickly. If the complexity of the question requires individuals to consider their response for an extended time they may provide a reasoned answer which does not reflect the actual, largely unconscious, belief on which their own behaviour is based. The use of simple question items can lead to criticisms that social norms surveys fail to fully assess the behaviour or attitude in question. For example, a social norms survey of alcohol may use simple items where more precise and clinical (and more complex) questions of alcohol consumption are available. It is important to stress however that the purpose of such surveys is to assess perception; they are not intended to be comprehensive alcohol consumption measures.

Second, it is important that the questions about personal behaviour are as similar to questions about perceived behaviour as possible. Assuming that the project is based on a single reference group (e.g. other pupils in the same school year) this means that the social norms questions in the survey will consist of pairs of items. For example, the 'frequency of drinking' pair of questions may consist of 'How often in a typical month do you drink alcohol?' and 'How often in a typical month do you think most of the pupils in your year drink alcohol?'

It is also recommended that, where appropriate, surveys contain items about the negative consequences of the behaviour. A survey on alcohol, for example, could ask if the individual has ever had negative experiences from drinking (e.g. getting into a fight, having an accident, losing their possessions, missing a class or work). Including questions of this type can be useful in demonstrating to stakeholders the need for an intervention to take place. They can also be used as part of the process evaluation.

Third, respondents should be asked in both the baseline and follow-up surveys if they recall previously seeing norms messages as part of any kind of advertising campaign. At baseline this can indicate if there have been any other social norms projects conducted in the population. This is important as conflicting norms messages from previous interventions may undermine any new project. At follow-up respondents recall of the norms messages can be used as part of the evaluation process. A sample social norms questionnaire from an alcohol project is given in appendix one.

Additional items

In addition to social norms items the survey will typically contain other items such as age and gender. Previous research in the USA has found that there tends to be a gender effect on misperceptions, with for example females having greater misperceptions around alcohol misuse than males. This has led to the use of gender specific norms messages in some social norms interventions. Work in the UK however has found there to be no gender effect on misperceptions of alcohol use, this may suggest that gender specific messages are not needed⁶. Nevertheless, it is recommended that a gender item is included in all baseline and follow-up surveys so that comparisons can be made between the perceptions of male and female respondents. This allows for an informed decision on whether gender specific norms messages are necessary.

Those involved in social norms projects may also wish to include extra items into the survey. This may especially be the case if it is felt that there are sub-groups in the population who could have different levels of misperceptions. For example, social norms studies of college students populations in the USA will often ask if the individual is a member of a fraternity or sorority, as research suggests that this can have an impact on level of misperception of substance use⁷. When including additional items it is important to keep in mind the overall length of the questionnaire. In general the longer a questionnaire is the less likely respondents are to complete it. There is also a growing call by ethical committees for surveys to avoid unnecessary questions that ask participants to disclose personal information which may not then be used.

Data collection options

Early social norms studies collected data through either mailed surveys or printed surveys handed out to respondents, for example in a college lecture. Other options include telephone surveying or street interviewing, where researchers stop people in busy locations such as shopping centres and ask them to complete the survey. Each of these methods requires the project workers to later enter the data from the printed surveys into a spreadsheet for data analysis. This can be a time consuming task, especially for those inexperienced, and time should be included in the schedule of the project. Recently it has become increasingly common for social norms surveys to be collected online⁸. These surveys tend to be low cost and it is normally possible for the data collected to be copied directly into the spreadsheets used for analysis, eliminating the data input stage. It should be acknowledged that there are occasions when online data collection is unsuitable. This is particularly the case in situations where some members of the intended group are unlikely to frequently use the internet, as may be the case in certain community-based projects. Studies that have successfully used online data tend to be based at schools, colleges and universities where the students are known to have regular access to the internet and can be assumed to be experienced in computer use. Research also

suggests that, particularly in adolescent populations, online surveys are seen by the respondents to be more anonymous than a written survey would be. This can be helpful when asking about sensitive topics such as sexual health or illegal substance use.

Incentivising surveys

One method to improve response rate can be to include an incentive for taking part in the survey. For example, the University and College Social Norms Study (see appendix three) offered student respondents the opportunity to be entered into a prize draw where they could win prizes such as mountain bikes or laptops. If this technique is used then it is important to stress to the respondents that their prize choice and contact details will be recorded separately from their survey responses to ensure that anonymity is maintained. If a written survey is used then anonymity can be reinforced by having the prize selection and contact details of the respondent on a detachable front sheet that can be removed from the main survey responses.

Involving the intended population

It is good practice to pilot the survey with members of the intended population to ensure that the questions are clear and relevant. Population members should be given the opportunity to provide feedback on the survey and to suggest any additional areas or questions that they feel would be relevant. This could be done through meetings with members of the intended populations or more formal focus groups; although if doing the latter it is recommended that a professionally trained focus group facilitator is involved.

Stage III - Data analysis of baseline data

The data analysis stage of the process consists of two main steps: i) the identification of the actual reported norms; and ii) confirmation that there is a significant misperception between personal behaviour or attitude and the perceived behaviour or attitude of others.

It should be noted that data analysis is a complicated process that typically requires specialist knowledge and training. Social norms projects being conducted by workers who do not have experience in this area may wish to consider involving social science or health researchers to aide them in this aspect of the process.

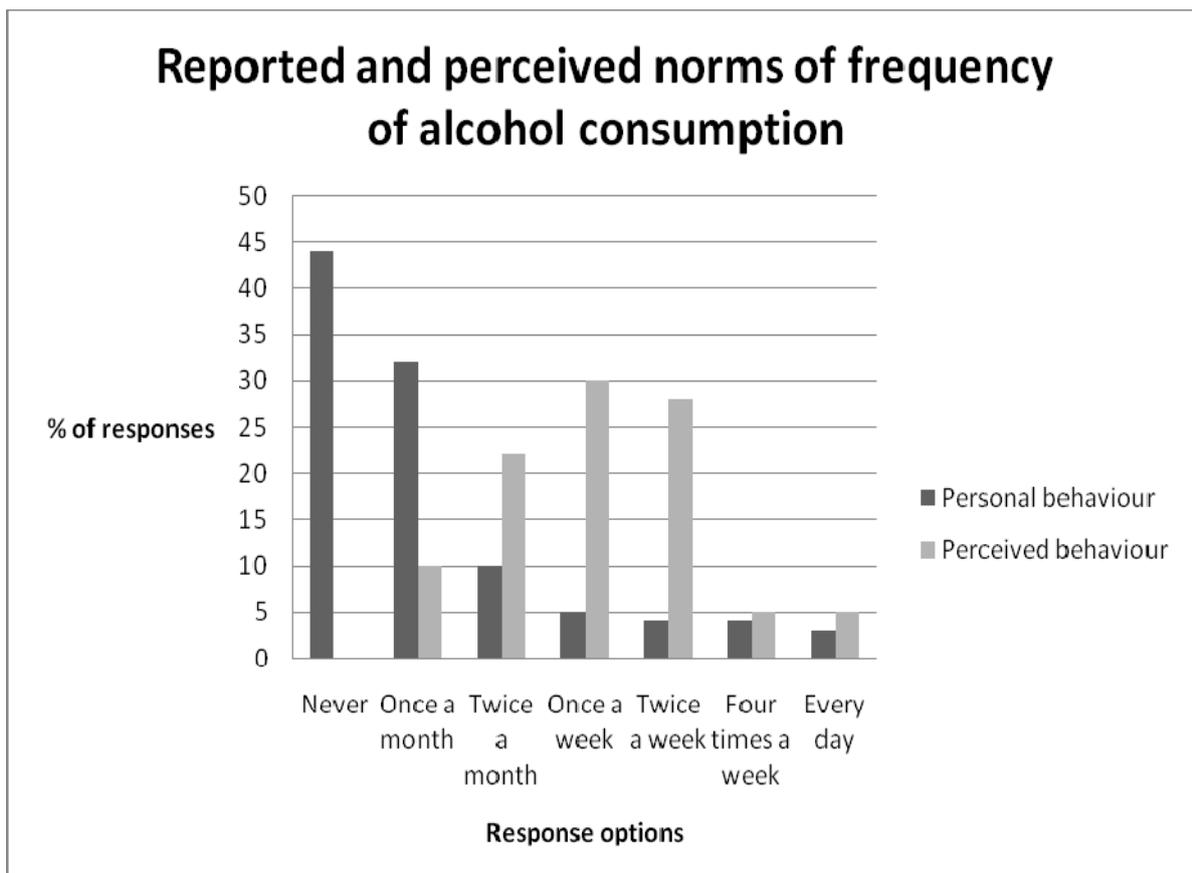
Identification of the reported norms

There are several different ways of identifying what the reported behavioural or attitudinal norm is. One of the most common is to identify the median value, which is the middle value when all the data from a single question is ranked in ascending order. This has several advantages over the mean value (the value which is commonly described as the 'average'), including the fact that it is not influenced by extreme scores and will always represent an actual response option. This can be calculated by statistical software packages or Excel.

In some cases it can also be useful to look at the frequencies of each of the response options. For example, if a social norms survey has asked about frequency of alcohol use in a population then the median response option may be once a week. However only 30% of the respondents may have given this response. In this case it would be suitable to create a social norms message based on the percentage of people who state that they drink alcohol once a week *or less*, provided that the total combined percentage for these groups is greater than 50%.

Evidence of misperceptions

To establish if misperceptions are present in the population the reported behaviour or attitude should be compared against the matching perception of others. How this is done will depend on the response options used and the way the data was collected. As an initial step it can be useful to plot the two sets scores against one another, as demonstrated below using one of the graph functions available in Excel.



Stage IV – Intervention

Creating norms messages

Creating the text

When creating and choosing the social norms messages to be used in an intervention there will typically be several possible messages for each behaviour. For example, based on the data two equally valid messages could be created: 'Most (62%) students at XXXX do not drink alcohol', and 'Most (81%) students at XXXX only drink alcohol once a month or less often'. Which message is chosen will depend on the context of the intervention and the intended population. In the above example the percentage in the second message is higher, which creates a more persuasive message. If this project were being carried out with an adolescent population of 14 year olds it could be considered that the second norms message would be inappropriate, as it would not be considered suitable for people in this age group to have any kind of alcohol consumption. In this case the first norms message would be the better choice, as it based on complete abstinence.

The use of norms messages around protective behaviours should also be considered. Examples of this could include 'Most (94%) students at XXXX would NEVER get in a car where the driver had been drinking', 'Most (92%) students at XXXX make sure they NEVER leave their drinks unattended when they are in a pub or club', or 'Most (85%) students at XXXX ALWAYS make sure that their friends don't travel home alone after a night out'.

Choosing a background image

Many of the channels that can be used for the dissemination of messages will also require some type of visual background. When choosing these images it is important to use an image salient to the intended population. For example, when conducting an intervention on a college campus an image of a well known landmark on that campus could be used as the background on posters with the norms message. It is of course also possible to use images that contain individuals, but it would be inadvisable to do this if the intended population consists of under-age adolescents and the behaviour being addressed is illegal for that age group. A simple technique that can be used with any image for a college, university or school project is to include the logo of the organisation on the poster, which reinforces the salience of the image to the students.

If no images are available of the actual setting then it is possible to use royalty-free images that are available from the internet. If doing so it is however important to choose images that will be relevant to the intended population. An image that shows a group of students on a campus for instance could be useful in a college project, but only if the students in the image are similar in terms of age and ethnic diversity of the actual students at the college and landscape resembles that of the campus.

It is also important to stress that images should not contain any conflicting information. A common error when choosing images to be used for norms messages about alcohol for example is to use an

image that depicts individuals sitting in a bar or holding alcoholic drinks. The inclusion of alcohol in the image undermines the norms message that most members of the population do not drink alcohol frequently or heavily. Similarly images should not contain any scenes designed to shock individuals. Shocking images, sometimes used in traditional health education, are counter-productive when using a social norms approach as they usually undermine the normative message. The images used should of course be eye-catching and attractive to the intended population, but not to the point that they distract from the norms message. It can be that the most effective norm messages posters are those which are simple and straightforward.

Using branding

Branding can be used to provide a sense of consistency to norms images and messages. This can be done through the use of fonts, designs, and if possible a project logo that appears on all intervention materials. If this is done then it is highly recommended that feedback is sought from the intended population before materials are produced. As with any with form of advertisement it can be easy to misjudge what will be popular amongst a group of people.

Dissemination

The key goal in conducting a social norms intervention is to disseminate the norms messages through as many different channels as possible. It is also important to ensure that these messages remain fresh so that they continue to draw the attention of the intended population.

Global approaches

The above techniques demonstrate some general ways of disseminating norms messages amongst the intended population. As the approach has developed in the college setting social norms practitioners have come up with a number of innovative ways to disseminate norms, including:

- Employing students to dress up as the Blues Brothers and offer a reward of \$1 to other students on campus who could correctly state the actual alcohol norms on campus (Northern Illinois University, USA)
- Displaying posters with the apparently incorrect statement ' $2/3 = 1/4$ ' to prompt student discussion, before displaying a second poster stating that two thirds of the alcohol on campus was drunk by one quarter of the students (Hobart and William Smith Colleges, USA)
- Holding classroom discussions with school pupils on misperceptions and how media portrayals exaggerate negative behaviours, a discussion facilitated by the school teacher beginning with an example of a behaviour they have personally misperceived (EUDAP, Europe)

Personalised approaches

Recently there has been an increase in the use of online technologies in disseminating normative messages. These operate on the same principle as global approaches, except that the gap between the individual's perception and the actual norm is explicitly identified. This can be done through an interactive website, where the individual enters information about their own behaviour and

perceptions of others and then receives instant, sometimes personalised, feedback. For example, a young person may be presented with the message:

Your feedback -

You said that you have **4** alcoholic drinks on a night out and that you think a typical young person in XXXX has **6** alcoholic drinks

Actually most (72%) of the young people in XXXX have **3** alcoholic drinks or less on a night out'

An example of a UK online tool that includes personalised social norms feedback is Unitcheck (see appendix three).

Inclusion of the intended population

As has been stated it is important to have members of the intended population involved throughout the process of planning and implementing a social norms project, and this is especially the case when it comes to the intervention stage. As members of the population they have a unique insight into what types of norm messages, images, and activities are likely to be effective. They will also be able to offer advice on where to place printed materials such as posters. Overall the more work the intended population do themselves in disseminating the norms messages the more effective the intervention will be.

Duration of intervention

It is important to recognise that a social norms intervention is an ongoing process. For a project to be evaluated it could be argued that the intervention should continue for at least one year, but this does depend on the characteristics of the population. It is important to manage the expectations of stakeholders. A social norms intervention will not change behaviours or perceptions overnight. Instead it will gradually begin to correct misperceptions, which will then be followed by behaviour change. Research suggests that if a social norms project comes to an end then any behaviour change will tend to be lost shortly afterwards. This is of course particularly pronounced in school or college settings where the population is transient. Although the social norms intervention must be maintained it will become easier to do this once the mechanisms are in place and the approach has become part of the organisational or community culture. It is worth noting that traditional approaches to areas like alcohol and drug education also require continual application but do not offer the evidence of effectiveness⁵ that the social norms approach does⁹.

Social Marketing

Social marketing is an approach that uses marketing techniques to achieve specific behaviour goals for an overall social good. It shares many similarities with the social norms approach, and social norms campaigns are often implemented using a social marketing framework. The two approaches are sometimes presented in conjunction as a single strategy, referred to as social norms marketing. Whilst the two approaches can complement each other extremely well it is important to keep in mind that they are distinct. If the social norms project is considered to be the product then social marketing is best thought of as the delivery mechanism for that product.

An emergent area of social marketing that may be of interest to social norms researchers is social media marketing; this refers to the use of online social media such as Facebook and YouTube as marketing tools. These resources provide the potential for conducting social norms projects in new and targeted ways, and would seem likely to be one of the main areas in which the approach will develop in coming years. To date examples of social norms interventions that have used social media marketing are limited, although work is underway on a number of projects (see appendix three).

Stage V – Follow-up

The follow-up stage in many ways replicates the baseline data collection, and should be conducted in as similar a way as possible using the same data collection method to ensure that the results can be compared. In addition to the general question about exposure to previous social norms projects the follow-up survey can also include more specific questions about exposure to specific posters or events. There can be several follow-ups depending on the duration of the project, but at least one of these should be at the same point in the year as the original baseline survey. This helps to rule out differences being attributed to seasonal changes in behaviour. Previous research has often used the follow-up dates of 3 months, 6 months, and 12 months from baseline data collection.

An additional point to consider is whether the follow-up surveys responses will be sought from a new random sample, or if the same respondents from baseline will be tracked across time. The advantage to asking the same individuals is that within individual changes in attitudes or behaviour can be directly tracked. The alternative of using two or more different samples means differences between the two time points could be attributed to differences in respondents – therefore this approach is not considered as strong a design. Tracking individuals requires them to be identified in some way so that their responses can be matched from baseline to follow-up. This should ideally be done in a way that provides anonymity, but even when anonymity is assured the respondents may be more cautious about providing honest answers to sensitive questions. Attrition of respondents at each follow-up is also likely, a factor that should be taken into consideration when planning the initial baseline data collection.

Stage VI – Evaluation

Behaviour and perception change

The first step in the evaluation of a social norms project is to establish if the expected perception and behaviour change has occurred. This is done by comparing the data at baseline to that from at least one follow-up survey to see if there have been any statistically significant changes. It is recommended that this process is conducted by an individual experienced in data analysis. It is important to note that at short-term follow-up changes are more likely to be observed in perception rather than behaviour. Furthermore, any change in behaviour should only be accredited to the social norms intervention if there has also been a change in misperception. Accepting that the intervention could bring about behaviour change without first changing perception is incompatible with the fundamental principles of the social norms approach. Care must also be taken to consider any groups within the population who are of particular interest. For example, if the concern is for high risk drinkers on a campus, these high risk drinkers must first be identified and then analysis run to see if there have been any changes in perception or behaviour.

Process evaluation

The social norms approach is an ongoing process and regardless of the success of an intervention it is important to question how the project could have been improved. Once the project has finished or reached a significant follow-up stage the project co-ordinators should evaluate the process through which the project was developed and implemented. It is very rare for any project to run perfectly. With the approach being relatively new to the UK it is likely that there will be a degree of trial and error involved.

The project co-ordinators may wish to consider having this evaluation stage of the process managed by an external party, such as an expert in the social norms field. This can provide a greater degree of objectivity and help identify aspects of the project that can be built upon and developed.

Some of the questions that could be asked as the starting point for a process evaluation include:

- Were the norms messages disseminated as planned? For example, if posters were used were checks carried out to ensure that these had been placed correctly and not covered up?
- Did the chosen population have an opportunity to contribute in the design of norms messages and images?
- Did the chosen population recall seeing the norms messages when questioned at follow-up?
- If an online intervention such as a website was used how many hits were recorded?

Future directions

The social norms approach is growing in popularity in the UK and around Europe. A number of research studies have confirmed the existence of normative misperceptions in a range of populations across Europe^{6, 10-12}. Furthermore, the approach is being expanded to cover a wide array of different behaviours beyond the substance misuse field, such as bullying in schools¹³ and pro-environmental activities¹⁴. Like all new approaches to behaviour change it will require time to develop and will need to be tailored to the different contexts and cultures to which it is applied. It is not by any means an overnight or guaranteed solution to the health and social issues in a population. The growing evidence base for the approach merits continued exploration of the potential of social norms projects, and project outcomes of them should be used to inform future policy in the UK.

Contacts

For queries relating to work in the UK please contact Dr John McAlaney (University of Bradford, University and College Social Norms Study) at j.mcalaney@bradford.ac.uk or Bridgette Bewick (Leeds Institute of Health Sciences, Unitcheck) at b.m.bewick@leeds.ac.uk. Queries about work in the USA can be addressed to Dr Jennifer Bauerle at the National Social Norms Institute at the University of Virginia on bauerle@virginia.edu.

You can also take advantage of the international social norms mailing list to seek advice from a diverse group of social norms researchers and practitioners. Please see the European Social Norms Repository in appendix one.

FAQs

Is the approach limited to addressing alcohol and drug use in college students?

The social norms approach was originally developed in the American college system and in the early days primarily focussed on alcohol and drug use in student populations. Studies cited to demonstrate the efficacy of the approach are therefore often based on this area. In recent years however the approach has been investigated in a diverse range of behaviours, including health topics (e.g. body image¹⁵ and cancer screening¹⁶) and other areas such as social issues (e.g. bullying¹³, and energy conservation¹⁴).

How do you know people are being honest in the surveys?

As is often the case when assessment relies on self-report it is likely there will be a degree of inaccuracy. Such inaccuracies could be due to respondents incorrectly recalling their behaviour or providing answers which they think are more socially acceptable. Research in the alcohol field does suggest that individuals tend to be far more honest when answering survey questions than is perhaps assumed¹⁷. This appears to be the case particularly when the respondent is confident that the information they are providing is anonymous and confidential.

What if there are no misperceptions of the behaviour?

Normative misperceptions have now been documented in a wide range of behaviours. Despite this, it should not be assumed that misperceptions will be evident in every behaviour or every population. This is why it is important to research the intended population prior to implementing the main campaign.

What if the norm is unhealthy?

It has to be accepted that in some instances the norm in a population is in fact an unhealthy one. This does not mean that the social norms approach cannot be used. Even if the norm of one aspect of a behaviour is unhealthy it is possible that alternative norms messages can be used which are based on the other aspects of that behaviour (e.g. using frequency of drinking norms messages instead of amount of alcohol consumed messages). Another alternative may be to use norms messages based on injunctive norms rather than descriptive norms. Furthermore, misperceptions about a behaviour are likely to exist regardless of whether the actual norm is healthy or not. The norm may be unhealthy but it is likely that the perception in the population will be that the norm is even healthier still. If this is the case then there is the potential for the social norms approach to be used as the first step in making behaviour healthier by correcting this misperception.

In keeping with the social norms approach it is of course important to stress that it should not be assumed that the norm in a population is an unhealthy one, even if this appears self-evident. This is one of the reasons why it is important to understand a population and to conduct pilot work.

What if the norms messages encourage unhealthy or socially irresponsible behaviour?

Stakeholders may be concerned about the potential for a norms message to have an unintended

effect on those who already behave healthily. For example, students who abstain from alcohol may feel pressurised to do so if they see norms messages about the typical frequency of alcohol use on campus. There is currently no evidence that norms messages do have this kind of effect. Nevertheless it is important to carefully word the norms message. A properly constructed norms message would not state for instance that the majority of students on a campus drink alcohol once a fortnight, instead it would state that majority of students drink alcohol once a fortnight or less. By adding the 'or less' the message therefore become inclusive of those students who drink alcohol rarely or not at all.

How do you work with younger adolescent or child populations?

The social norms approach has been used with school age children, such as for example in the large scale EUDAP project (see appendix three). There can be challenges in applying the social norms approach to populations of young people, particularly when the behaviours and attitudes being addressed involve topics such as substance misuse or sexual health. Parents and other stakeholders may object to norms messages being disseminated to young adults. This may be particularly the case if these messages refer to behaviours that are illegal for young adults. It is therefore important to involve stakeholders from the beginning of the process to allow these concerns to be identified and addressed. If it is the case that certain norms messages are not considered appropriate for an intended population then it may be possible to use an alternative norms message. For example, if it is not considered suitable to use norms messages about rates of safer sex practices (a descriptive norm) with an adolescent population then it may instead be possible to use norms messages about attitudes towards safer sex (an injunctive norm).

Additional resources and further reading

There are a range of resources available to support social norms interventions.

Online

National Social Norms Institute (NSNI)

NSNI is based at the University of Virginia in the USA and provides a diverse range of resources and materials for social norms practitioners, which can be freely accessed through the website (www.socialnorm.org). This includes a series of topical bibliographies which can be used to locate information on studies of specific behaviours. The organisation also arranges an annual conference on the social norms approach which attracts a range of academics, educators and community workers.

European Social Norms Repository

This online repository is maintained at the University of Bradford in the UK and includes social norms resources and information relevant to European researchers and practitioners (www.normativebeliefs.org.uk). It also hosts the international social norms mailing list, which provides an opportunity for those new to the field to share their experiences and queries with a range of social norms experts and practitioners.

Publications

The Social Norms Approach to Preventing School and College Age Substance Abuse: A Handbook for Educators, Counselors, and Clinicians

(2003) Wesley Perkins (Editor), Jossey-Bass, San Francisco

This edited book covers the early development of the social norms approach and gives a detailed account of various social norms projects conducted in the USA, including school, college and community settings.

A Guide to Marketing Social Norms for Health Promotion in Schools and Communities (2005)

Michael Haines, Wesley Perkins, Richard Rice and Gregory Baker

This widely used comprehensive guide to the social norms approach provides in-depth information on the development and implementation of the social norms approach and includes a variety of case studies and sample materials. It is freely available for download on the website of the National Social Norms Institute (www.socialnorm.org).

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Appendix One - Sample survey

A sample social norms survey based on the suggestions above is shown below. It should be noted that an actual survey that is developed will be more extensive than this example and will take into account the information gathered in the initial stages of the project and discussions with stake holders.

Social norms survey

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this survey. Please read each question below and answer honestly. We are interested in understanding your behaviour and beliefs, there are no right or wrong answers. All of the information that you provide will be kept confidential.

Q1: Are you male or female?

Male Female

Q2: How old are you?

..... years

Q3: How often in a typical month do you drink alcohol?

Never	<input type="checkbox"/>	Once a week	<input type="checkbox"/>	Four days a week	<input type="checkbox"/>
Once a month	<input type="checkbox"/>	Twice a week	<input type="checkbox"/>	Five days a week	<input type="checkbox"/>
Twice a month	<input type="checkbox"/>	Three days a week	<input type="checkbox"/>	Every day	<input type="checkbox"/>

Q4: How often do you think most of the students at XXXX College drink alcohol in a typical month?

Never	<input type="checkbox"/>	Once a week	<input type="checkbox"/>	Four days a week	<input type="checkbox"/>
Once a month	<input type="checkbox"/>	Twice a week	<input type="checkbox"/>	Five days a week	<input type="checkbox"/>
Twice a month	<input type="checkbox"/>	Three days a week	<input type="checkbox"/>	Every day	<input type="checkbox"/>

Q5: How many alcoholic drinks will you normally have on a night out?

..... drinks

Q6: How many alcoholic drinks do you think most of the students at XXXX College have on a night out?

..... drinks

Q7: How do you feel about other students drinking heavily in public?

Strongly disapprove	<input type="checkbox"/>
Disapprove	<input type="checkbox"/>
Neither approve nor disapprove	<input type="checkbox"/>
Approve	<input type="checkbox"/>
Strongly approve	<input type="checkbox"/>

Q10: What do you think most of the students at XXXX College feel about other students drinking heavily in public?

Strongly disapprove	<input type="checkbox"/>
Disapprove	<input type="checkbox"/>
Neither approve nor disapprove	<input type="checkbox"/>
Approve	<input type="checkbox"/>
Strongly approve	<input type="checkbox"/>

Q11: How often do you leave a drink unattended, even for a moment, when in a bar or club?

Never <input type="checkbox"/>	Rarely <input type="checkbox"/>	Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/>	Often <input type="checkbox"/>	Always <input type="checkbox"/>
--------------------------------	---------------------------------	------------------------------------	--------------------------------	---------------------------------

Q13: How often do you think most of the students at XXXX College drink unattended, even for a moment, when in a bar of club?

Never <input type="checkbox"/>	Rarely <input type="checkbox"/>	Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/>	Often <input type="checkbox"/>	Always <input type="checkbox"/>
--------------------------------	---------------------------------	------------------------------------	--------------------------------	---------------------------------

Q14: How often in the past year has the following happened to you because of drinking?

	Never	1 – 2 times	3 – 4 times	5 – 6 times	7 or more
Had a hangover?					
Been involved in an argument?					
Been involved in a fight?					
Lost money or belongings?					
Had an accident?					
Missed a lecture or tutorial?					
Been late in submitting work?					

Q15: Do you recall seeing any messages recently about how other students on campus use alcohol?

No

Yes

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey

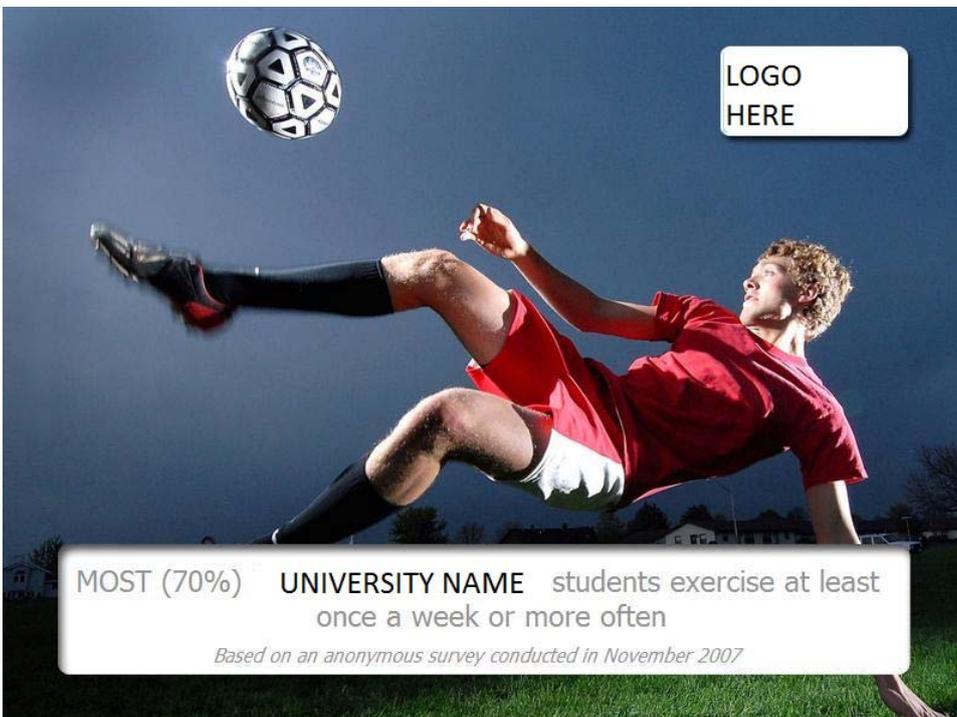
Appendix Two – Example of norms messages and images



LOGO
HERE

MOST (73%) UNIVERSITY NAME students NEVER have unsafe sex

Based on an anonymous survey conducted in November 2007



LOGO
HERE

MOST (70%) UNIVERSITY NAME students exercise at least once a week or more often

Based on an anonymous survey conducted in November 2007

Appendix Three – Selected social norms projects

UK

- **Project CHARM** (www.projectcharm.info)

CHARM uses digital technologies to provide individuals with feedback about their own and others' sustainability behaviours. The three-year project investigates the 'social norm' approach - telling people what other people do - and evaluates its potential to change individual practices and behaviours in socially desirable ways. CHARM is funded by the EPSRC Digital Economies programme.

- **Unitcheck** (www.unitcheck.co.uk)

Unitcheck is a web-based tool, developed at the University of Leeds, which provides personalised feedback and social norms information on alcohol consumption. Use of the tool by UK university and sixth form students has seen reductions in alcohol consumption. Although originally developed for students, the website also provides feedback for the general population. The potential to customise the tool for other populations is currently being explored.

- **University and College Student Norms Study** (www.normativebeliefs.org.uk/ucsns)

UCSNS is an ongoing project being conducted by Youth Media and the University of Bradford that aims to apply the social norms approach to a wide range of universities and college in the UK using desktop messaging and printed media.

Europe

- **EUDAP** (www.eudap.net)

EUDAP was a large scale study which looked at the effectiveness of an alcohol and drug education programme for pupils aged 12 – 14 across countries in Europe. The programme included several sessions on social norms, misperceptions, and how to evaluate negative media portrayals of youth alcohol use. The materials used in these sessions are freely available from the project website.

