CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN CONFORMITY TO DESCRIPTIVE NORMS

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ABSTRACT

Using normative messages in social campaigns has become increasingly commonplace. Prior research has shown that messages using descriptive norms can lead to greater conformity than messages without such norms. Present research investigates how culture affects persuasion when individuals are presented with different descriptive norms. Based on extant literatures on culture as well as norms, we theorize that the degree of conformity to descriptive norms differs for Easterners versus Westerners. In laboratory and field experiments, we document cultural variation in conformity and persuasion as a function of the type of descriptive norm across different domains.

LAB EXPERIMENT

Cultural differences exist in the persuasive appeal of different types of descriptive norms

Sample: 239 American & 119 Korean undergrads

IV: 2 (Culture) x 3 (Messages)
  • Culture: independent, interdependent
  • Messages: control (standard environmental), global (citizen), provincial (same room guest)

DV: Willingness to reuse towels during a hotel stay

Results:

Importance of identities
  • Both Americans and Koreans view the same room hotel guests identity as less important than the citizen identity

Cultural differences in conformity (i.e., willingness to reuse towels)
  • Americans: Provincial norms were more persuasive than global norms
  • Koreans: Provincial norms were less persuasive than global norms

FIELD EXPERIMENT

For Easterners, provincial norms lead to lower persuasion than global norms

Sample: 513 respondents from room rentals in 11 motels in Seoul, South Korea

Context description: In Seoul, it is common practice for motels to rent out rooms during the day for a few hours at a time, and for a condom to be provided in the room

IV: 5 Normative messages (no norm, citizen global norm, motel guest global norm, gender global norm, same room guest provincial norm)
  • Example: No norm general safe sex message
    “PRACTICE SAFE SEX. You can reduce the risk of transmitting sexual diseases and avoid unwanted pregnancy by using condoms during sex.”
  
DV: Condom use during room rentals (Used/Not used)

Results:

Replication of lab experiment findings on Easterners
  • Koreans were least likely to use condoms after reading a message with a provincial norm
  • A control without any message condition was run separately and revealed condom usage rates of 45.1% (n=102)

Condom Usage Rates by Norms at Korean Motels

SELECTED REFERENCES


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