Me, we, and vegetables: The effect of descriptive norm information on vegetable consumption

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Background

Past research[1] has shown that descriptive norm information (i.e. information about the prevalence of a particular behaviour within a group) has the ability to influence behaviour in people who identify strongly with the referent group. Besides strength of social identification, self-identity (i.e. the degree to which a behaviour is perceived as important to one's identity) may have an influence on the impact of descriptive norm information.

Objective

The aim of this study was to examine the role of self-identity next to social identity in the effect of a descriptive norm manipulation on vegetable intake.

Methods

Participants were 57 university students (86% women, mean age 20.89 yrs) who completed a short questionnaire with questions on past vegetable intake (no. of days/week min. 200 g vegetables), self-identity (2 items, α=.85) and social identity (3 items, α=.87). This was followed by information that vegetable intake was either low (neg. norm condition, n=29) or high (pos. norm condition, n=28) among the referent group (students). Intention (4 items, α=.87) was assessed directly after the manipulation, and vegetable intake (1 item) 1 week later.

Results

A randomisation check showed no sig. differences between the two norm conditions in age, gender, past vegetable intake and self-identity.

Table 1 Means and standard deviations of the variables by condition and in total sample

	Neg. norm		Pos. norm		Total	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Past vegetable intake	4.00	1.83	4.36	1.37	4.18	1.61
Self-identity	3.39	0.80	3.66	0.79	3.53	0.80
Social identity	2.93	0.80	3.11	0.87	3.02	0.84
Intention	3.73	0.59	4.03	0.57	3.89	0.59
Vegetable intake	4.25	1.82	4.90	1.37	4.58	1.63

Note. All variables were measured on a 5-point scale, except for (past) vegetable intake that was measured on a 7-point scale
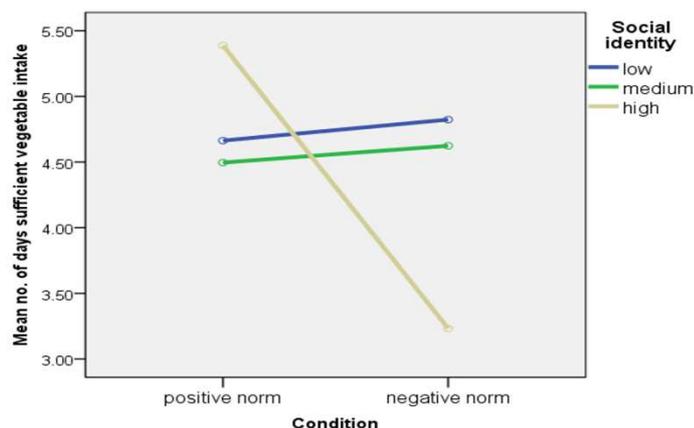

Figure 1. The interaction effect of social identity and norm information on vegetable intake, controlled for self-identity.

ANOVA results revealed a main effect of self-identity on intention, $F_{(1,50)}=66.74$, $p<.001$, and vegetable intake, $F_{(1,50)}=34.19$, $p<.001$, but no interaction of self-identity with norm condition nor with social identity. An interaction did occur between social identity and norm condition in the prediction of vegetable intake, $F_{(2,50)}=4.08$, $p=.023$); the norm manipulation was effective among strong social identifiers ($M>1$ SD), but not among medium ($M\pm1$ SD) or low social identifiers ($M<1$ SD) (see fig. 1). This effect remained when controlling for intention and self-identity.

Conclusion

A simple norm manipulation appears capable of influencing vegetable intake among strong group identifiers, independent of the individual's strength of self-identification with the behaviour.

Reference

Stok, F. M., de Ridder, D. T., de Vet, E., de Wit, J. B. (2012). Minority talks: the influence of descriptive social norms on fruit intake. *Psychology and Health*, *27*, 956-70.