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.

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 (\(M>1 \text{ SD}\)), but not among medium (\(M \pm 1 \text{ SD}\)) or low social identifiers (\(M<1 \text{ SD}\)) (see fig. 1). This effect remained when controlling for intention and self-identity.

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, \(\alpha=.85\)) and social identity (3 items, \(\alpha=.87\)). 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, \(\alpha=.87\)) 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>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Neg. norm</th>
<th>Pos. norm</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Past vegetable intake</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>4.36</td>
<td>4.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-identity</td>
<td>3.39</td>
<td>3.66</td>
<td>3.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social identity</td>
<td>2.93</td>
<td>3.11</td>
<td>3.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intention</td>
<td>3.73</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>3.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vegetable intake</td>
<td>4.25</td>
<td>4.90</td>
<td>4.58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

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

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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