

The Effects of Social Norms and Educational Information on Pro-Environmental Behaviors
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¹ Humanity is using natural resources at an unsustainable rate and must take immediate action to reduce the amount of resources we are consuming. As environmental degradation worsens and awareness grows, scientists are exploring all options to reduce human impact on the environment. The field of psychology has a wealth of knowledge to lend in the department of understanding human behavior, what influences behaviors, and how to shape decisions.

In an effort to promote environmental conservation, this study examined the effectiveness of social norms and environmental education on pro-environmental decisions. Many factors contribute to the likelihood that a particular behavior will occur; among these are perception of social norms, education about a particular behavior, and the consequences of that behavior. Previous research shows that either education or social norms have the ability to persuade individuals to act in a desirable manner; however, there is little research into which is more effective, or if a combination of the two is more influential.

To test this, 120 undergraduate students from a mid-sized, Midwest, university were given a prompt with a control message, social normative message, educational message, or combination message. This experiment used a between-subjects design. The independent variable was which prompt the participant received. There were a total of 4 conditions established by the use of prompts at the bottom of the informed consent form. There was an equal distribution of participants in each condition. After reading the prompt, they were given the opportunity to participate in paper conservation.

I predicted that both the social normative message and the educational message would increase the likelihood of a pro-environmental decision, with a combination of both messages being the most influential. I found support for this hypothesis. The experimental manipulation (the prompts) were effective in getting individuals to participate in the paper conservation program, $X^2(3, N = 120) = 49.193, p = < .001, \Phi_c = .640$. The proportion of participants that selected “yes” in the experimental conditions, combination (96.7%), education/information (90%), and social normative (90%), was much higher than the proportion of participants that selected “no”. Further, in the control condition, the proportion of participants that selected “yes” (30%) was significantly lower than the proportion of participants that selected “no” ..

I also calculated odds ratios to compare the conditions. Participants were 20.98 times more likely to participate in the conservation program when given the social normative or educational/information prompt versus the control. Participants were 67.599 times more likely to participate if given the combination prompt versus the control. There were no differences between the social normative condition and education/information condition. The odds ratio for the social normative condition and the educational information was the same; however, higher proportions of the combination group selected “yes” and choose to participate. Participants were 3.22 times more likely to participate when given the combination versus the social normative prompt or educational information prompt.

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