

How the psychology of social norms, social comparison, and theory of planned behavior impact individual behavior

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Abstract

This paper explores how social norms, theory of planned behavior, and social comparison can influence human behavior, specifically in contexts related to smoking and mental health. The theory of planned behavior explains how attitudes, social pressures, and self-control can shape intentions and actions, providing a blueprint to predict and influence behavior. Social norms impact decisions, self perception, and well-being through descriptive and prescriptive norms. The theory of social comparison theory expands on how upward, downward, and lateral comparison can affect motivation, self-esteem, and mental health. Case studies on smoking and depression demonstrate how these comparisons can be used in realistic scenarios. Upward social comparison can create positive change, while downward social comparison can provide comfort when coping. Interventions such as cognitive behavior therapy, norm-based movements, and supportive social environments are all talked about as strategies to improve mental health behaviors and well-being by applying these psychological theories. By understanding and applying these psychological theories, we can develop interventions and social procedures that encourage healthier behaviors, reduce harmful behaviors, and improve overall mental well-being.

Introduction

Human behavior is shaped by internal attitudes, external social pressures, and psychological mechanisms. Understanding these influences is crucial for promoting healthier lifestyles and improving mental health outcomes and encouraging prosocial behavior. Psychological theories such as the theory of planned behavior, social norms, and social comparison provide us an informational layout for understanding depression. These theories also help explain prosocial behaviors such as charitable donations. These theories focus on one's thinking process and social influences, making them crucial for understanding the thinking patterns associated with depression and how it can be treated. The theory of planned behavior suggests that actions, shaped by attitudes toward a behavior, perceived social pressures, and perceived self-control are the key predictors of actual behavior. Social norms, both descriptive (what people do) and prescriptive (what people should do), play a striking role in influencing decisions and self-perception, affecting an individual's well-being and societal outcomes. Additionally, social comparison theory expands this understanding by examining how individuals evaluate themselves through upward, downward, or lateral comparisons, which can motivate positive change or provide emotional relief. All together, these theories explicitly explain how depression can develop or continue while also accounting for behaviors that promote empathy and generosity but gives numerous pathways for interventions.

Behavioral contexts such as smoking, mental health, and prosocial behavior demonstrate how these theories can be applied to real-world settings. For example, smoking is seen to be influenced by peer behaviors and societal expectation, while mental health is heavily affected by both social comparison and perceived norms. Charitable giving through online platforms such as

GoFundMe represents another behavioral context shaped by these same psychological processes. These topics are important today because both smoking and depression are problems that continue to rise. Smoking continues to contribute to the number of preventable diseases and death while depression has increased, especially among the youth exposed to social media pressures. At the same time, online fundraising has become an increasingly common way individuals engage in prosocial behavior. By looking into these scenarios, researchers can better understand mechanisms essential in behavior and create interventions to support individuals. Interventions formed based on these theories have shown evidence of effectiveness in promoting positive behavior change and improving psychological well-being in people. This understanding provides us a better platform to bring awareness to and create interventions that improve psychological well-being and lead us toward a path of positive behavior change.

This paper examines how social norms, theory of planned behavior, and social comparison theory can come together to influence human behavior, while focusing on smoking and depression. It also explores how these theories apply to charitable donations. By connecting ideas from all three theories to everyday life, we can identify and look at the ways to encourage healthier behaviors and improve quality of life

Psychological Theories

Social Norms Theory

We look at other people like peers or experts for what we should do (Wendel, 2013). For example, we might pick what to order at a restaurant based on what we see others choosing—using their decisions as a kind of guide. In other instances, we look towards the experts such as doctors whenever health issues arise. Social norms can be broken down into descriptive and prescriptive norms, which portray society's expectations on how people should behave.

Descriptive norms explain the process behind the judgements and decisions people make. They are crucial for the researchers to understand common behaviors and how these behaviors fluctuate depending on who you surround yourself with. Studying descriptive norms can allow researchers to find ways to identify patterns that improve judgements and decisions to reduce, which lead to biases. Understanding descriptive norms can allow our society to encourage healthier behaviors by showing how basic actions are commonly done and using that information can lead to a positive change in our world. Prescriptive norms focus on designing improvements in our society, influencing people to lean more towards rational decisions. While

descriptive norms inform us what people are doing, prescriptive norms try to move us towards healthier and more open-minded behaviors. Tools such as decision analysis, educational strategies, and “choice architecture” are used to influence our behavior. For example, when people listen to inaccurate judgments, they would be taught alternate strategies to reduce common decision-making biases. In many cases, people struggling with mental health issues often compare themselves to others for validation, reassurance, and more which can lead to unhealthy thoughts. For example, people with depression often find themselves believing prescriptive norms that they should appear happy and productive to be well-rounded, which often leads to self-stigma. These negative beliefs can cause one to neglect the idea of seeking help and lower their overall self esteem (Corrigan, Larson, Rüsch, 2009; Fung et al., 2007). Another example is people suffering with social anxiety disorder can often feel pressured to act “normally” due to prescriptive norms and expectations of behavior in social settings. When they don’t believe they were successful, their thoughts can lead to shame and self-criticism. Research finds that individuals are recognized for having control over their mental illness, like social anxiety disorder, their symptoms can be seen as a poor reflection of their character. This realization adds a layer of blame to an existing layer of shame, social isolation, etc. (Corrigan, 2000; Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998; Goffman, 1963; Jones et al., 1984). Social norms can show how people perceive themselves and how easily influenced they can become.

Theory of Planned Behavior

Theory of planned behavior is a psychological model which explains how our intentions are formed based on our attitudes toward the behavior, social pressures felt, and control we have over the behavior (Fishbein 1967). This theory allows one to feel how much control they have over their behavior based on attitude, social pressures, etc. It influences when a person wants to act and when they actually complete it (Ajzen, 1985, 1987). Perceived behavior control is a key part of the theory of planned behavior and helps explain how hard or easy it will be for a person to carry out a behavior. There are two key predictors that affect the behavior: attitudes towards the behavior and subjective norms. Attitudes towards the behavior tell us how one positively or negatively feels about doing the action and subjective normals are the social pressures they feel from peers to do it. With these three important factors, it can help us predict if a person plans on doing something. Over the years, research has shown that this model can help explain a vast range of behavior and is considered a strong framework to understand how one can process information and control their behaviors, especially compared to personality traits or general attitudes, which are the “less reliable” behaviors in predictions.

Social Comparison Theory

Social comparison theory is when we feel the need to evaluate our opinions and abilities in order to act a way in the world (Festinger, 1954). Social comparison theory is categorized into 3 parts such as upward, downward, and lateral social comparison. Upward social comparison is when we compare ourselves to someone who seems more better off than you. For example,

you might feel this comparison if someone is more wealthy than you or seems more physically attractive, etc. Oftentimes, this may make one feel worse about themselves, feel inferior, or have negative feelings towards someone or themselves. However, upward comparison can also serve as strong motivation for positive changes and give inspiration, especially for those who have closer relationships with the person they're comparing themselves to. Downward social comparison is when we compare ourselves with someone who is judged to be worse off. This might make one feel better about themselves because they feel as if they're more gifted than the person they're comparing themselves to. Lateral social comparison is when we compare ourselves to someone who we consider is equal to us. This comparison allows one to see where they stand more realistically, rather than focusing on comparisons to people who are better or worse off.

Case Studies

Smoking

Smoking among youth is on the rise, with individuals as young as middle schoolers taking part in this behavior. According to the Truth Initiative, young people who have used e-cigarettes are seven times more likely to become smokers within a year. E-cigarettes contain harmful substances such as formaldehyde, benzene, and other toxic chemicals. Not only does smoking impair your lung functions, it also increases the risk of death from chronic diseases such as cancer and stroke. The Truth Initiative also reports that smoking is linked to 12 different types of cancer, increased blood pressure, and a doubled risk of heart attack. When focusing on smoking, social comparison might look like a tobacco user observing that non-smokers have more energy, solid academic performance, and better relationships with family. This can cause one to ponder, "What if I quit so I can achieve these goals?"

Though upward social comparison can make us feel jealous, it can also give the motivation we need for change. Seeing people around us change, especially those who are close, can activate a desire to improve ourselves in different ways, like quitting smoking. Quitting can sometimes be a long, difficult battle, especially over time. Nicotine creates a strong addiction, which is why smoking can become a daily habit, stress reliever, or a way to socialize for some people. This goes to show that even people who are trying to quit often struggle at trying to take the next step toward recovery. With a little extra motivation from upward social comparison, quitting can seem like an easier challenge to overcome and make the efforts feel more rewarding. Gerrard et al. (2005) demonstrated this in their study, finding that adult smokers who preferred to be in groups with other smokers who were having relatively little difficulty quitting were more likely to succeed in their own quitting efforts. This study showed that the positive effect of preferring more successful individuals was arbitrated by psychological distancing. Smokers used upward social comparison by comparing themselves to those who seemed successful as motivation to change their own behavior.

While upward comparison can act as a catalyst to motive change and lead us toward our goals, downward social comparison can provide a different type of benefit, offering comfort and

relief by highlighting how our situation may be better than others. When looking at downward social comparison, it works a little differently, often playing a quiet, comforting role in our life. We compare ourselves with someone who is judged to be worse off (Festinger, 1954). A non-smoker might notice that a tobacco user has more financial stress, strained family relationships, or even find that their health is deteriorating with constant coughs and breathing problems. Problems like financial stress can be caused from the ongoing charge of cigarettes, or strained family relationships can come from over health concerns and unhealthy habits. Observations like these might make a non-smoker come to a conclusion like, "I'm so glad I don't have to deal with all that. My life seems better because I don't smoke." Instead of giving motivation for change, downward comparison can give us a wave of relief and confidence in the choices that we make, especially for those who don't smoke. In Lando & McGovern's (1990) study, they found that smokers with more severe addictions preferred to be in groups of individuals with more severe addictions, using downward social comparison as a coping mechanism to psychologically distance themselves from the "typical smoker." Individuals cope with their addiction by comparing themselves to others who are struggling more than they are, which can help them feel better about their situation. But, as the smoker's addictions improved, their preference for downward social comparison decreased. Additionally, this study indicates psychologically distancing oneself from the typical prototype associated with problematic behaviors and engaging with others who have made great progress in quitting smoking can be an effective strategy for behavior change. This study shows us that social comparison can play a major role in behavior change, bringing people closer towards the path of recovery.

Many people, especially teenagers and young adults, often follow behaviors like smoking because they feel as if everyone around them is doing it. This social pressure can create an environment where smoking seems like a normal, expected act, especially among youth. Seeing friends, family, or celebrities smoking can make someone feel like they're obligated to do it too. This can create unrealistic expectations that people feel like they have to follow, otherwise they risk being left out. The belief that "everyone is smoking" is just a misconception that makes more people partake in it, since it seems normal. By correcting these misconceptions about how many people smoke, or who smokes, we can make a positive impact in our community. Raising awareness and providing accurate data on smoking can make people realize both how common it is and the serious health risks that come with it. When people realize it shouldn't be the norm, they can feel less drawn towards it, and for smokers, provide the motivation needed to quit. With this, we can break a cycle of false social beliefs and standards.

With respect to smoking cessation, principles of social norms can also be used. Injunctive and subjective are more influential than descriptive social norms (van den Putte et al., 2004), and an important consideration when enacting a norm-based intervention for smoking cessation is to prioritize social inclusion over stigmatization (Wallace-Williams et al., 2023).

Attitude is something that affects our daily life, whether it's positive or negative. When it comes to smoking, it may be seen as a way to relax after a long day or something that damages our lungs, brain, and overall health. When smoking is seen as a positive thing, it makes quitting

difficult as there's no reason to stop. Others may see it as a way to ruin our health, giving them a reason to avoid or quit smoking. But, there is more to the Theory of Planned Behavior than just attitude. Subjective norms are the social pressures we feel from peers engaging in certain behaviors. If we believe that everyone around us approves of smoking, we may feel a pressure to abide by these norms, even if our personal attitude is the opposite. On the other hand, disapproval of smoking from our community can provide us the attitude needed to quit and make it feel more possible. Perceived behavior Control (PBC) makes one think about how much control they have over quitting or avoiding smoking. People with higher PBC can conclude that they'll successfully be able to quit smoking, despite any challenges but, someone with a lower PBC may feel like they can't. Low PBC can lead to feelings like helplessness, which will not lead to one quitting. The Theory of Planned behavior depends on all three components: attitude, subjective norms, and Perceived Behavioral control. These elements together give us the power to shape opinions, influence communities, and support people on their journey to quitting smoking.

Mental Health

Though there are many mental health disorders occurring around the world, depression is one of the most common mental health disorders. Depression affects one's everyday life by lowering one's mood, decreasing self-esteem, and disrupting simple tasks like getting out of bed. According to the Mayo Clinic, depression affects over 280 million people worldwide, whether it's mild or severe. In its most severe cases, it can endanger one's life; the mortality risk for suicide in patients with depression is 20 times greater than the general population.

Social comparison theory can play a significant role in this, as many people compare themselves to others in ways that can exacerbate symptoms. On the other hand, social comparison can act as a positive role, since seeing others improving with treatment may give one a kickstart to seek help themselves. CBT is one promising intervention that can help individuals toward a path of improvement in their overall well-being and break through the cycle of negativity. When looking at depression through social comparison, individuals might compare themselves to others, which can lead to their symptoms worsening. For example, if an individual compares themselves to someone they think is smarter, prettier, or happier, it can make them feel worse about their own life. In contrast, if an individual notices someone improving through therapy, it might encourage them to also attend. But, with resources such as cognitive behavior therapy (CBT), it may be possible to reduce these negative thoughts forming from upward comparison. According to the National Institute of Health, cognitive behavioral therapy had higher response rates for various mental disorders like depression (Hoffman et al, 2013). CBT helps control and recognize the distorted thoughts and beliefs associated with one's disorder. When people see others benefiting from therapy, like gaining more confidence or enjoying life more, it can lead to inspiring examples of comparison. Instead of discouraging, these upward comparisons can motivate individuals to attend CBT themselves, in hopes of reaching similar results. Not only can CBT help individuals break free from the cycle of negative thoughts, but it

can also improve overall well-being by boosting self-esteem, lifting their spirits, and helping them see life from a more positive perspective.

Individuals who create opinions using downward comparison may seem like they're happier, smarter, or better than others which can be a coping mechanism for some because it can improve mental wellbeing and their quality of life. Studies from the American Psychological Association show that people experiencing depressive symptoms feel better after seeing others worse off, but only when individuals are feeling down themselves. Comparing lives with others can allow one to feel relief, thinking they're in a better situation than the others [3]. Gibbons (1989) conducted an examination on individuals who faced serious problems and trouble coping. Results indicated that downward comparison significantly improved low-self esteem and mood states. This goes to show that downward comparison can be a way for individuals to improve their mental state and wellbeing. Though it can be a short-term solution, relying too much on other people's lives can prevent the individual from truly knowing themselves and restrict personal growth. Techniques like CBT could be long-term solutions for individuals to reduce the reliance on others and find their self-worth.

Though there are strategies for individuals to manage their mental health, like downward comparison and CBT, pressures from societal standards like body image, academic validation, and social media norms can negatively influence one's depressive symptoms and their self worth; these pressures can be ways that people shape themselves in order to "fit in." When individuals feel like they haven't met these goals, it can lead to overthinking and belief that there's something wrong with them. This pressure can cause symptoms of depression to worsen like anxiety, worthlessness, low mood, appetite change, and more. For example, seeing a favorite influencer on social media claiming they only eat once a day can cause the individual to believe they should be following this same action. This might lead to unhealthy eating habits and permanent damage to the body's metabolism. Additionally, pressure to gain academic validation can make someone believe they're not good enough, making them lose interest in the activities and subjects they once loved. The feeling of being worthlessness isn't healthy and often leads to a harmful, hostile mindset. One way to counter these concerning standards is to promote positivity through social media, school presentations, and mental health professionals. Since many toxic norms come from social media, using these platforms to raise awareness about the dangers of unrealistic standards can be influential. Influencers, educators, and leaders emphasizing that academic success and body image do not define self-worth can create a turning point for individuals seeking personal growth. Additionally, social norms theory can encourage people to seek therapy by correcting the misperceptions that therapy is shameful or for the "weak", emphasizing that it's a socially accepted behavior. With this, the stigma around therapy and mental health can be reduced and allow individuals to feel comfortable with the idea of it. Sharing stories of people's experiences with therapy can make others feel the support they need to follow through with help.

The Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) explains how a person's desire to seek help for depression is based on the behavior from peers, perceived social norms, and their own

confidence in handling the situation. For example, if someone believed that therapy could help them with their depression, but family members or peers discouraged it, they might think twice about getting the help they wanted. Additionally, if individuals believe they're all alone with no support, it can reduce their confidence in treatment over time. Bohon et al. (2017) showed through a model that students' intentions to seek mental health services increased with the more positive attitudes they received about care. Addressing different treatments and services with individuals can not only build their confidence to seek support but also persuade those who were hesitant to consider getting help. If we normalize therapy and support, it can encourage individuals to take action on their struggles like depression. Providing multiple options like therapy, medications, or even support groups can give individuals the boost they need to take that first step.

Charitable Donations

GoFundMe is an online fundraising platform that has helped over 190 million people, raising over 40 billion dollars since 2010. Widely used for medical expenses, relief from natural disasters, education aid, and memorial funds, this platform is moved by social media and encourages individuals to share campaigns with people they know. By making efforts visible to family, friends, and the online community, this platform strengthens the motivation for individuals to contribute to others' campaigns.

Upward comparison can be encouraged through these campaigns: if someone sees a fundraiser going really well, they might feel as if they want to contribute to it, to feel better about themselves. Donors may also be people they know which can inspire one to donate just as much money, or even more. Research shows that GoFundMe campaigns using third-person narratives tend to raise more money than first-person appeals, as donors perceive them as more credible. This pattern can encourage upward social comparison as donors may feel more motivated to match or increase their contributions, especially if they see others donating and engaging in prosocial behavior. They may also be influenced by society in desire to show status; donating money may make them appear more generous and morally responsible than others.

Downward comparison can also influence donor behavior, but in a different way. For example, if a donor sees a campaign that points out individuals with more urgent situations than themselves, they may feel fortunate for their own circumstances and feel more drawn to help. This feeling can increase generosity and empathy towards others, encouraging donations as a way to improve one's situation. If a campaign is set up for a family facing massive medical expenses, donors who are financially stable may be encouraged to donate as they're in a better position and can make a difference in the family's life. This goes to show that downward social comparison strengthens prosocial behavior by connecting feelings of gratitude to donating.

Social norms play a vital role in shaping behavior of donors. Seeing a campaign that already has numerous donations can encourage more contributions, as individuals can change their behavior to fit into a group (van Teunenbroek et al., 2021). When friends, family, or online communities post a campaign, donors may feel the societal expectation to participate, to

support the cause and to show one's moral compass. These behaviors and expectations can create a strong environment where donating becomes an increased social action, motivating individuals to contribute not only for personal relief, but also to move with perceived societal standards of generosity.

The theory of planned behavior explains how donors decide to donate to GoFundMe Campaigns. An individual's attitude towards donating can heavily motivate their behavior. For example, if someone believes it's a nice and meaningful way to feel good and support a cause, they will be more likely to donate to a campaign. Perceived social norms can also play a role, as donors can feel pressures from family, friends, or social media to participate. Perceived behavior control affects whether donors will follow through with their thought; if an individual feels they're financially capable and confident in their decision, they're more likely to donate. TPB can help show us why some campaigns succeed while others don't and it highlights how peers, interventions, and morals can create positive donor behavior.

Conclusion

Social norms, the theory of planned behavior, and social comparison theory all provide us important insights into how human behavior is shaped by attitudes, pressures in society, and social evaluation. Although these influences can sometimes contribute to harmful outcomes, such as increasing negative self-comparison, they can also be used to encourage healthier behaviors and improve the outcomes for problems such as smoking and depression as well as promote prosocial behaviors like charitable donations. Looking at examples like smoking and mental health and online charitable giving shows that these ideas can be applied in real life to predict behavior and shape helpful changes. Understanding how people compare themselves to others, follow social norms, and feel in control of their actions can assist us when creating programs and encourage healthier choices while also encouraging generosity and empathy toward others.

In the future, not only can these theories help reduce harmful behaviors, but they can provide a stronger support system for people struggling with depression, strengthening communities and encouraging support through prosocial actions such as donating to individuals in need. Researchers can continue to explore how these ideas work in different settings and spaces, like online or offline, where most of the social influence lies including digital fundraising platforms. By applying these insights, schools, communities, health organizations, and individuals can facilitate interventions and support systems to improve everyday life and strengthen social responsibility and community engagement.

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