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ABSTRACT

People consume and enjoy similar media entertainment as their friends and close others do. Yet the underlying psychological processes driving selection and consumption of entertainment considered "mainstream" within a group are still unclear. Given that individuals' behaviors and attitudes are influenced by the perceived prevalence of others' behaviors (descriptive norms) and perceptions of what others approve (injunctive norms), we examined the role of descriptive and injunctive norms in media selection and enjoyment. In an online experiment, we tested whether norm messages affected perceptions of group norms, and whether these perceptions influenced the enjoyment of a movie trailer and intention to watch the full film. We also tested the moderating roles of group identity and proximity on perceived norms and subsequent effects. Results showed that norm messages predicted perceived descriptive norms, which in turn predicted enjoyment of the trailer and intention to watch the film. Norm messages also predicted perceived injunctive norms, and the effect of injunctive norms on outcome variables was strengthened by group proximity and identity. The discussion highlights ways that social norms can inform understandings of socially-influenced media enjoyment and selection in future work and unique opportunities to study normative influence in a media setting.

Social affiliations can influence individuals' media selection and appraisals; within tight-knit friend groups (Lin & Pao, 2011), national and gender groups (Banerjee et al., 2008; Bowman et al., 2012), and social classes (Bourdieu, 1984), group members tend to watch and prefer similar media content. However, media scholars have not adopted or created a cohesive theory that captures why and

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how others' opinions of content can affect media appraisals. We suggest that accounting for the role of social norms, perceptions of what is either *common* or *correct* in a given social group (Lapinski & Rimal, 2005), may help us understand the role of other peoples' preferences in a viewer's media selection and appraisal.

We begin by discussing the role of social influences on media entertainment, and then introduce a norms-based framework to understand media appraisal and selection. We present an online experiment testing how film evaluations and reviews from members of both close (proximal) and further away (distal) groups impact the enjoyment of film trailers and intention to watch a film. We examine the moderating effects of group identity and proximity on perceptions of norms around a film trailer and anticipated enjoyment of that film. Results are discussed in terms of the relevance of incorporating normative understanding into media appraisals, as well as what understanding norms in a media context can do to better explicate how and when norms affect behavior.

Social influences on media enjoyment

Social influences on exposure and enjoyment have been explored by media scholars. The research focuses mainly on how consensus, identification with a group, and social context (e.g., being in a crowd) lead to congruent selections and enjoyment among individuals. On the whole, findings suggest that media selections can be affected by perceptions of what other group members consume (Katz et al., 1974; Park et al., 2020) and that group membership and identity (Trepte, 2006) and social context (where or with whom one consumes media; Denham, 2004) affect media selection behaviors. For example, films with overwhelming consensus regarding viewership (e.g., box office hits, cult classics) or acclaim (e.g., "Certified Fresh" films on *RottenTomatoes*) are more positively evaluated by audiences (Jacobs et al., 2015; Waddell & Sundar, 2020). In terms of social context, consuming media in the presence of others (e.g., crowded public theaters, at home with friends) can increase enjoyment (Hanich, 2018; Raney & Ji, 2017). However, the underlying reasons why collective behaviors and opinions may influence individuals have garnered less attention. We propose using social norms to help streamline the study of social influences on media cognition and behavior.

Social norms

Social norms are a given individual's perception of what most people in a group do or think, or can otherwise be considered as a group's predominant behaviors and thoughts (Lapinski & Rimal, 2005). Despite inconsistent definitions in the norms literature (Shulman et al., 2017), recent work clearly defines social norms as a perceived consensus of behaviors (or approval of behaviors) of a referent group that consists of more than one member (Lapinski & Rimal, 2005).

The effect of social norms on human behavior has been well-documented, and the effects of normative influence have been observed seen across a wide number of domains, including health (Borsari & Carey, 2003; Neighbors et al., 2008) and environmental behaviors (Goldstein et al., 2008). Norms are descriptive information about a group's behaviors. Since actual norms can be difficult to quantify and measure (for both researchers and group members), most norm research relies on a participant's perception of norms or normative behavior (Shulman et al., 2017). Broadly, research on perceived norms and behavior suggests that individuals act in accordance with the perceived expectations of others (Rhodes et al., 2020), mostly due to a desire for belonging (Lapinski & Rimal, 2005) or based on a presumption that the behavior of the masses is the "right" choice to make in a given situation (Cialdini, 1993). Norms lead people to behave consistently with what is perceived to be the predominant group behavior (Rhodes et al., 2020).

We focus here on two frequently-researched types of norms. *Descriptive norms* are perceptions of the prevalent behaviors of a group (Lapinski & Rimal, 2005). People adhere to descriptive norms because they provide a decision-making shortcut or heuristic for acceptable behavior (Chung & Rimal, 2016). *Injunctive norms* are perceptions about what the group thinks its members ought (and ought not) to do, regardless of their actual behaviors (Cialdini et al., 1990; Lapinski & Rimal, 2005). Often, group behaviors (descriptive norms) and their code of conduct (injunctive norms) are one and the same, but injunctive norms communicate a sense of "should" to members, and lead group members to adhere to injunctive norms out of fear of undesirable social sanctions (Chung & Rimal, 2016).

Individuals learn about group norms via observation and communication from a referent group of important others. Thus, normative effects are especially strong with increased proximity of the referent group (Borsari & Carey, 2003). Simply put, individuals are more likely to follow the norms of their close friends, family, or school/workplace than the norms of broad, distal groups (e.g., most Americans, college students). Furthermore, proximal injunctive norms have a stronger influence on individuals' behaviors, especially when an individual strongly identifies with that proximal group (Neighbors et al., 2008). Norms are capable of influencing media selection behaviors, and the processes associated with consumption should act similarly to the way they affect behavioral processes for those behaviors featured in the norms literature.

Supporting the potential for norms to influence media selection and processing, social norms predictions and effects are consistent with existing media psychology theories (e.g., Katz et al., 1974; Trepte, 2006; Waddell & Sundar, 2020). However, entertainment research concerning the role of social factors on outcomes mostly examines direct relationships. For example, bandwagon effect research argues that consensus cues (e.g., number of viewers or "likes" for an online video) have a direct influence on enjoyment (Waddell & Sundar, 2020). Other research looked at the effect of critical endorsements (Jacobs et al., 2015) or

audience reviews (Shedlosky-Shoemaker et al., 2011). Scholars argue that environmental cues can create expectations about content when presented (Shedlosky-Shoemaker et al., 2011) or confirm expectations when presented afterward (Tiede & Appel, 2020), suggesting that group consensus affects media appraisals because it changes the way people process entertainment content. However, it is also possible that elements of an audience member's social environment have both unique and moderating effects on enjoyment and selection behavior. Given the various and sometimes dissimilar ways that group influence has been conceptualized in the literature, entertainment research would benefit from an established, cohesive overarching framework that captures the mechanisms of social influences.

In the social influence literature, social norms approaches are among the most well-developed and established framework of social influence. Norms scholars have extensively explored the mechanisms by which groups affect individuals. They argue that the effects of various forms of normative information are mediated by perceived norms (Carey et al., 2010). We similarly argue that a wide array of consensus or social context cues (e.g., number of viewers, the proportion of positive evaluations, cheering crowd) affect perceived norms, but perceived norms affect enjoyment and selection similarly across contexts (Lapinski & Rimal, 2005). Likewise, although media research has examined the direct relationship between identity strength and entertainment preference (Trepte, 2006), norms scholars argue that group identity and context moderate normative effects on behaviors (Chung & Rimal, 2016). In other words, norms tie together group membership and social influence in ways that can afford greater cohesion and explanatory power for those interested in understanding social influences on media behavior and cognition.

Applying a norms framework could reframe the findings of previous research under an overarching theory and provide concrete predictions about the way that social cues influence entertainment appraisals and behaviors. Thus, the current paper examines the way a group's collective liking of a trailer (descriptive norm information) influences perceived descriptive norms, and how these norms influence individuals' appraisals of the trailer and intention to watch the film. We focus on descriptive norm messages because descriptive norms have been well-studied and effective in dozens of experimental studies, whereas experimental injunctive norms inductions are rarer (Rhodes et al., 2020). Likewise, injunctive norms are more difficult to manipulate experimentally, as they are the product of repeated exposure to group standards of conduct and subsequent rewards and sanctions for those behaviors (Lapinski & Rimal, 2005). We use trailers because trailers can be an effective stimulus to examine how norms affect media appraisals while controlling for other elements of content that might affect appraisals. Additionally, people often decide whether to watch a full

film based on the quality of a trailer (Bakar et al., 2017) and knowledge of others' viewing behaviors (Waddell & Sundar, 2020). This leads to the following hypotheses[1]

H1: Descriptive norm information about liking a film will be positively related to perceived descriptive norms.

H2: Perceived descriptive norms will be positively related to (a) enjoyment of the trailer for that film and (b) intention to watch the film.

H3: The relationship between normative information and (a) enjoyment of the trailer and (b) intention to watch the film will be mediated by perceived descriptive norms.

Various moderating factors must be accounted for to better understand normative influence (Chung & Rimal, 2016). We focus on two moderators named in both the social influence and entertainment media literature. First, group identity is argued to be a central moderator to normative mechanisms (Chung & Rimal, 2016) including media selection (Park et al., 2020). Group identity consists of the parts of one's self-identity that are shaped by group affinity and similarity (Hogg et al., 2017). Individuals who are high in-group identity are motivated to (1) to strengthen or maintain relationships with others and/or (2) to avoid ostracization from the group (Lapinski & Rimal, 2005). More precisely, one becomes more likely to adhere to norms when that person strongly identifies with the group imparting normative influence. This logic is reflected in the following hypothesis:

H4: The positive relationship between normative information and (a) enjoyment of the trailer and (b) intention to watch the film will be stronger as identity with the referent group increases.

Second, normative effects should also be stronger when the referent group is more proximal. The norms of intimate groups (e.g., friends, family, fraternity/sorority brothers/sisters) have a stronger effect on individuals' behaviors than the norms of distant groups with whom the individual is more socially detached (e.g., all people of your nationality or age group; Borsari & Carey, 2003). Proximal norms have a stronger influence on an individual's behavior because individuals generally have stronger attitudes toward proximal referents (Hogg et al., 1995). Also, since individuals interact more frequently with proximal groups than distal

[1]H1, H2 and H3 differ slightly from those in the study's preregistration but were re-written for clarity (see https://osf.io/2xrw5?mode=&view_only=).:

groups, the potential social rewards or punishments resulting from norm adherence or disobedience are more concrete, salient, and impactful (Neighbors et al., 2008). This leads to the following hypothesis:

H5: Normative information about liking a film will have a stronger effect on (a) enjoyment of the trailer and (b) intention to watch when norms are communicated by a proximal referent group than a distal group.

Identity's moderating effect on norms should increase with increased proximity of the referent group. Proximal group identity is often highly salient and central to individuals' self-perception, and thus proximal groups are usually more relevant to identity and social comparison processes than distal groups (Hogg et al., 1995). To this end, past research found that proximal norms have stronger effects among high-identity members (Neighbors et al., 2008). Thus, the following hypothesis is posed:

H6: The moderating effect of group identity on the effect of normative information will be stronger when norms are communicated by a proximal versus a distal group.

Scholars argue that the effects of descriptive norms and injunctive norms are moderated by the same behavioral, individual, and contextual factors (Chung & Rimal, 2016). However, injunctive norms influence behaviors due to people's motivation to adhere to a group's code of conduct and fear of violating that code rather than the desire to be like the group. Therefore, group proximity and identity may moderate the effect of injunctive norms differently than they do descriptive norms, especially the perceived norms of proximal groups (Neighbors et al., 2008). Since individuals often perceive an injunctive norm based on descriptive norm information (Rhodes et al., 2020), especially for novel behaviors or under ambiguous circumstances (e.g., norms for a new film; Lapinski & Rimal, 2005), by measuring perceived injunctive norms, our study can answer the following research question:

RQ1: Are there differences in the way group identity and proximity moderate the effects of perceived proximal injunctive norms?

In sum, people's perceptions of what their group will like and find valuable will shape their behaviors and appraisals. Perceived social norms should affect an individual's enjoyment such that the viewer should enjoy content when they perceive a positive descriptive norm for it (i.e., others like it) as opposed to a negative norm (i.e., others don't like it) or no normative information. We

predict the same effects on intention to watch. Normative effects should be stronger when communicated by proximal groups or as a function of group identity.

Method

Participants

Participants (n = 416) were recruited from undergraduate communication courses at Michigan State University for course credit. 86 participants failed the attention check, and an additional seven cases (n = 7) were removed because they failed to follow instructions. The final sample consisted of 323 participants who completed all measures (M_{age} = 20.11, SD_{age} = 2.55; 61.4% female, 74.4% White, 11.9% Asian, 5.9% Black/African American, 3.1% Hispanic).[2]

Procedure

All procedures were approved by the Michigan State institutional review board in 2019 (IRB ID STUDY00003274). After providing informed consent, participants were randomly assigned to an experimental condition where they were exposed to descriptive norm information about, and subsequently watched, a trailer for a movie. Normative information was presented either before or after watching, and communicated either positive or negative appraisals from others. These messages varied in terms of the proximity of the referent group such that the message was from either students at the participant's university (proximal) or all college students (distal). A manipulation check for norms immediately followed exposure to the norms message. After watching the trailer, participants indicated their enjoyment of the trailer and intention to watch the full film, followed by measures of group identity, other measures (not reported[3]), and demographic information. Thus, the design is a 2 (normative information: like, don't like) x 2 (group: proximal, distal) x 2 (time: before watching, after watching)[4] design with a no-norm message control group. After completing experimental procedures, participants were dismissed and thanked.

[2]Seven participants reported seeing the film before the study. Prior viewing was not significantly associated with any variables of interest, and excluding participants who had seen the film did not affect the results. Thus, these seven were retained for hypothesis testing.

[3]This manuscript represents a section of a larger project which included examination of the role of accuracy motive and social motivation on outcomes. Neither were not significant moderators (full report available on request).

[4]The time condition was.added to control for order effects and – if order effects were observed – understand if norms affect appraisals by creating anticipation about content (before) or retroactively changing appraisals (after).

Stimuli

Film trailer and assessment

To identify films that may be particularly susceptible to group influences, we selected films with low-quality content. In this way, we attempted to control for content effects (especially novel plot, special effects, or other content features) in viewers' evaluations. We compiled a list of movies released after 2003 that received average to below-average ratings on IMDB (M_{rating} = 6.38 circa 2009; Johnston, 2009). We selected 23 films for an initial pretest assessment based on their viewership and audience/critic ratings. Twenty-eight participants were recruited from Michigan State University for the pretest. Participants (n = 28, 67.8% female; M_{age} = 24.68, SD_{age} = 8.14), rated four trailers each. Films were rated on *social desirability* (Park & Smith, 2007), *perceived quality* (Schneider, 2017), and *enjoyment* (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010). Trailers for *Cellular* (n = 4, M = 2.83, SD = 2.35), *Daddy's Little Girls* (n = 5, M = 3.13, SD = 1.57), and *Supercross* (n = 5, M = 3.20, SD = 1.98) were the three lowest-rated in terms of enjoyment, and *Cellular* (M = 2.50, SD = 1.73), *Daddy's Little Girls* (M = 2.60, SD = 2.07), and *God's Not Dead* (n = 3, M = 2.67, SD = 2.08) were rated lowest in perceived liking of the full film. Subjective quality measures were mostly in line with enjoyment and liking scores, with *Cellular* rated in the bottom four across all measures. The social desirability scores also indicated that *Cellular* was also not particularly socially desirable to watch, and none of the participants had seen the film (see https://bit.ly/32K2l9d for full results). Thus, the *Cellular* trailer was used in the main study.

Trailer pretest

After selecting the *Cellular* trailer for use in the study, a second pretest was conducted. Participants (n = 58; M_{age} = 19.88, SD_{age} = 1.56; 57.9% female; 75.4% White, 12.3% Black/African American, 10.5% Asian) watched each trailer and completed scales for perceived quality of the trailer and the full film using the four subscales from the pretest (Schneider, 2017) and perceived *corniness* of the trailer (M = 2.64. SD = 0.62 on five-point scale; Appel et al., 2019). Descriptive statistics are reported in Table 1. Of the five scales indicating quality, only perceived recommendation of others for the trailer was significantly lower than the midpoint, t (57) = −3.45, p = .001. The perceived quality of the trailer and the full film were highly correlated ($.51 \leq r \leq .90$). We proceeded with the *Cellular* trailer as our stimulus based on the low recommendation score and middling quality ratings.

Norm manipulation

Descriptive normative information was manipulated by giving participants information about what percentage of students liked *Cellular*. The screen displayed a manipulated evaluation bar (91% for *liked* and 9% for *don't like*), modeled off the rating bar from *RottenTomatoes.com*. The screen also featured the film's title and poster (see Figure 1). This type of induction is similar to others that have manipulated descriptive norms (Smith et al., 2012). We refer to this manipulation as "norm message."

Table 1. Means and standard deviations for trailer pretest.

	M	*SD*
Perceived corniness	2.64	0.62
Perceived quality of the trailer		
Story innovation	4.41	0.98
Cinematography	4.66	1.17
Special effects	4.70	1.11
Recommendation	4.00	1.10
Perceived quality of the full film		
Story innovation	4.24	1.06
Cinematography	4.44	1.34
Special effects	4.44	1.24
Recommendation	3.85	1.14

$n = 58$

Group proximity manipulation

Proximal versus distal norms were manipulated by varying the group imparting the norm message to be either students from Michigan State (*proximal*) or other college students (*distal*). We used these groups because seminal literature examining group proximity's effect on norms considers college groups (and subgroups) as proximal (Neighbors et al., 2008).

Time of normative message manipulation

Participants were randomly assigned to either see the norm message *before watching* the trailer or *after watching* the trailer.

Measures

Means and standard deviations can be found in Table 2. All items are measured on a seven-point scale (1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree) unless noted.

Enjoyment

Enjoyment was measured using Oliver and Bartsch (2010) three-item enjoyment scale ($\alpha = .92$). High scores indicate more enjoyment.

Intention to watch

Intention to watch was measured using a four-item scale adapted from Park and Smith (2007; $\alpha = .97$). The scale assesses the extent to which participants intend to watch the full film (e.g., "I will watch Cellular in the future"). High scores indicate a stronger intention to watch.

Perceived norms

Perceived norms were measured using Park and Smith (2007) scales for descriptive norms (e.g., "Most people at Michigan State like this movie") and injunctive norms (e.g., "Most Michigan State students would

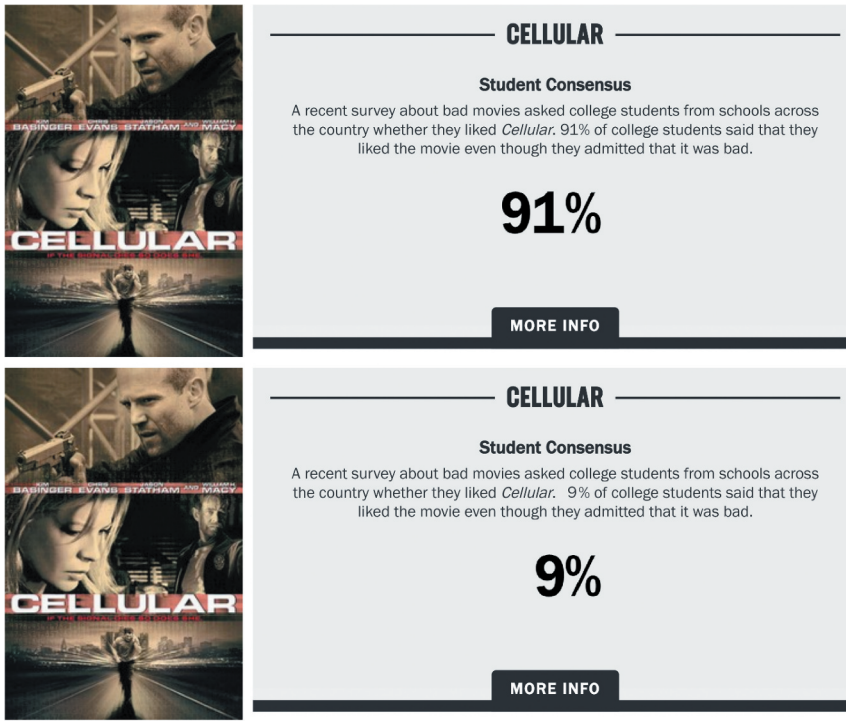

Figure 1. Sample norm message stimulus.

The two pictures represent sample stimuli shown to participants before or after watching the trailer for Cellular. The first is a positive norm (like), and the second is a negative norm (don't like). Identical messages were shown to the proximal group, aside from changing the wording such that 91% or 9% of Michigan State students liked the movie.

Table 2. Means and standard deviations in main study.

	n	*M*	*SD*
Proximal descriptive norms	323	3.77	1.76
Proximal injunctive norms	322	4.12	1.59
Distal descriptive norms	323	3.86	1.78
Distal descriptive norms	322	4.12	1.60
Enjoyment	321	4.95	1.48
Anticipated liking	321	4.53	1.69
Intention to watch	321	3.43	1.78
Proximal group identity	318	5.91	2.14
Distal group identity	319	5.80	2.17
Believability	277	4.29	1.27

approve of me liking *Cellular*"). All participants completed measures of perceived proximal norms (students at their university) and distal norms (most college students) in counterbalanced order, resulting in four distinct three-item scales. All items for each scale were averaged to form

four measures: *proximal descriptive norms* (α = .97), *proximal injunctive norms* (α = .94), *distal descriptive norms* (α = .96), and *distal injunctive norms* (α = .94). High scores indicate stronger perceived norms.

Believability

Participants rated the believability of the norm message using a ten-item measure (α_{prox} = .94; α_{dist} = .95; Beltramini, 1988). Consistent with previous norms research demonstrating that norms messages often do not alter perceived norms (Lapinski et al., 2013), message believability was modeled as a covariate in initial analyses.

Group identification

Identification with the referent group was measured using a one-item measure with concentric circles (Tropp & Wright, 2001). The measure shows two circles (one labeled "you" and one with the group of interest) on two ends of the screen. The circles progressively overlap over nine photographs. Higher scores (more overlap) indicate stronger group identification. Group identity was measured for both the proximal (Michigan State) and distal (college) groups for all participants.

Demographics

Age, gender, ethnicity, and whether participants had seen *Cellular* before (1 = Definitely yes, 5 = Definitely not; M = 4.74, SD = 0.77) were measured at the end of the survey.

Results

Manipulation check and initial analyses

Neither age, gender, nor ethnicity was significantly related to perceived norms or any dependent measures (Table 3). Although we found that prior viewing and intention to watch were significantly correlated (r = –.13, p = .02), norm effects on intention to watch remained significant and substantial when prior viewing

Table 3. Correlation matrix for variables in main study.

	Prox. DN	Prox. IN	Dist. DN	Dist. IN	Enj.	Int.	Prox. ID	Dist. ID
Prox. IN	.83**	–						
Dist. DN	.80**	.68**	–					
Dist. IN	.72**	.81**	.81**	–				
Enjoyment	.39**	.38**	.34**	.36**	–			
Intention	.40**	.37**	.35**	.38**	.66**	–		
Prox. ID	.05	.04	.02	.01	.12*	.05	–	
Dist. ID	.05	.05	.04	.02	.09	.01	.75**	–
Bel.$^{+}$	.05	.08	.05	.06	.05	.11	.08	.09

*$p \leq .05$, **$p \leq .01$

+: n = 277 for believability (participants in the control condition did not complete the believability scale because they did not see the norms message)

was added to a regression model (see https://bit.ly/32K2l9d). Seeing *Cellular* before was not significantly correlated with norms or enjoyment. Thus, no covariates were added to manipulation checks or hypothesis tests.

We assessed manipulations using two one-way MANOVAs. The first MANOVA assessed the norm manipulation comparing with the true control with a posthoc Bonferroni test to probe pairwise comparisons, followed by a 2 (*norm*: like, don't like) x 2 (*group proximity*: proximal, distal) x 2 (*time*: before watching, after watching) analysis. The control condition could not be added to the second MANOVA because the control was shared across factors (estimated marginal means by condition in Table 4). Perceived proximal and distal descriptive norms, enjoyment, and intention to watch were the dependent variables in each analysis. Significant main and interaction effects are reported below.

Regarding the effect of norm messages on perceived norms, there were significant differences between groups in perceived proximal descriptive norms, $F(2, 320) = 137.49$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .46$, and distal descriptive norms, $F(2, 320) = 150.04$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .48$. A post-hoc Bonferroni revealed significantly higher descriptive norm scores in the *like* condition ($M_{prox} = 5.04$, $SD_{prox} = 1.21$, $M_{dist} = 5.16$, $SD_{dist} = 1.26$) than the control group ($M_{prox} = 4.11$, $SD_{prox} = 1.47$, $M_{dist} = 4.27$, $SD_{dist} = 1.39$) and the *don't like* group ($M_{prox} = 2.47$, $SD_{prox} = 1.32$, $M_{dist} = 2.52$, $SD_{dist} = 1.27$). The results indicate that participants in the *liked* condition perceived that others liked the films more than the *don't like* condition and the control group. The control group also had a significantly stronger belief that most others like the film than the *don't like* group. Thus, our norms manipulation had the intended effect.

There was a significant interaction of the norm message and group proximity condition on proximal descriptive norms, $F(1, 269) = 9.89$, $p = .002$, $\eta^2 = .02$, and distal descriptive norms, $F(1, 269) = 15.76$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .03$. Perceived descriptive norms were higher in the *like* condition than the *don't like* condition. However, the difference between proximal descriptive norms in the *like* versus *don't like* condition was larger in the *proximal* condition (*M difference* = 3.06) than in the *distal* condition (*M difference* = 2.01). Likewise, the difference in distal descriptive norms was larger in the distal group (*M difference* = 3.07) than the proximal group (*M difference* = 2.05). This interaction indicates a successful manipulation

Table 4. Multivariate differences by condition.

	Norm		Group		Time	
	Like $M_{est}(SE)$	Don't like $M_{est}(SE)$	Proximal $M_{est}(SE)$	Distal $M_{est}(SE)$	Before $M_{est}(SE)$	After $M_{est}(SE)$
Prox. Desc. Norm	5.04^{A} (0.11)	2.47^{B} (0.11)	3.76 (0.11)	3.75 (0.11)	3.85 (0.11)	3.66 (0.11)
Dist. Desc. Norm	5.14^{A} (0.11)	2.52^{B} (0.11)	3.71 (0.11)	3.95 (0.10)	3.91 (0.11)	3.75 (0.11)
Enjoyment	5.28^{A} (0.13)	4.55^{B} (0.12)	4.88 (0.13)	4.95 (0.12)	4.93 (0.12)	4.89 (0.12)
Intention to watch	3.82^{A} (0.15)	2.94^{B} (0.14)	3.27 (0.15)	3.50 (0.14)	3.50 (0.15)	3.26 (0.14)

Significant main effects reported using superscripts. See text for test statistics and interaction effect reporting.

of group proximity. Norm messages were more effective in influencing perceived norms of the group featured in the message compared to the group not featured in the message (e.g., proximal norm messages influenced perceived proximal norms more than they influenced perceived distal norms).

Finally, there were significant main effects of norm messages on enjoyment, $F(2, 316) = 9.97$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .05$, and intention to watch, $F(2, 316) = 10.58$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .06$ (Table 4), such that participants in the *like* condition enjoyed the trailer more and had stronger intention to watch than participants in the *don't like* condition. Neither time nor believability influenced outcomes and were dropped from the mediation analysis.

Hypothesis testing

Our hypothesized model concerned the effect of norm messages on enjoyment and intention to watch through perceived norms (H1-H3) and further proposed that norms would be moderated by group proximity (H4), group identity (H5), and the interaction of group proximity and identity (H6). As such, H1 through H6 were tested using PROCESS v3.2 models in SPSS (Hayes, 2017) with 10,000 bootstrap samples. Norm message condition was entered as an exogenous multicategorical indicator variable (Figure 2). The simple mediation model was tested first before adding moderators in subsequent model tests. Each model was run four times: with proximal and distal norms as the mediator, and enjoyment and intention to watch as the dependent variable.[5]

H1 through H3 concerned the mediated effect of norm messages on enjoyment and intention to watch through perceived norms (PROCESS Model 4). The results follow a consistent pattern across models and are summarized here (see Table 5 for coefficients). At step 1, there was a significant effect of norm messages on perceived proximal and distal norms such that perceived norm scores were significantly higher in the *like* condition than both the control and the *don't like* condition, supporting H1. The result indicates that those in the *like* condition had a significantly stronger perception that other students at their university, and college students in general, liked the film compared to the control and the *don't like* condition. At step 2, both proximal and distal descriptive norms were significant positive predictors of (a) enjoyment and (b) intention to watch, providing support for H2. There were no significant direct effects of norm messages on enjoyment or intention. The indirect effect was significant when comparing the *like* to the *don't like* group and comparing the *like* to the control condition. Total effects were only significant comparing the *like* to the *don't like* condition (Table 5). Thus, H3 was supported.

[5]All coefficients are unstandardized, and we did not mean-center variables.

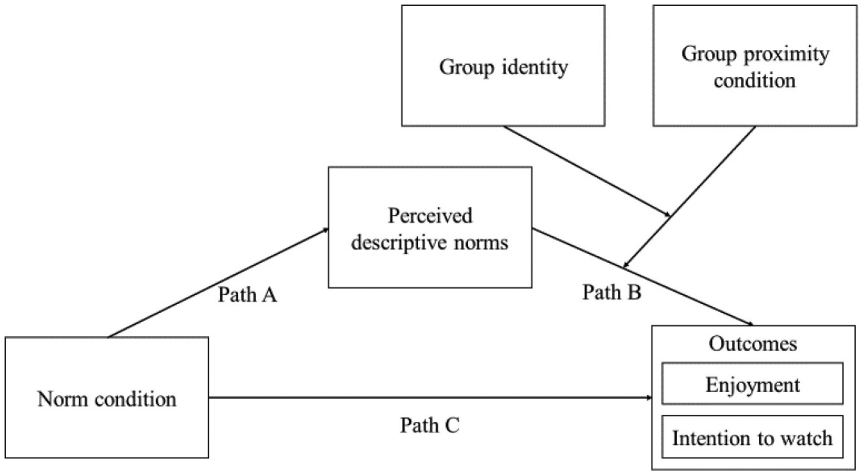

Figure 2. Moderated mediation model for hypothesis tests.

Table 5. Mediation models for the effect of norms on appraisals and intention to watch.

	Enjoyment	Intention to watch
Effect	*b* (*SE*) [95% CI]	*b* (*SE*) [95% CI]
A1: Pos. vs Control→ Prox. DN	0.94** (0.23)	0.96** (0.23)
A2: Pos. vs Control→ Dist. DN	0.93** (0.23)	0.93** (0.23)
A3: Pos. vs Neg.→ Prox. DN	2.50** (0.16)	2.50** (0.16)
A4: Pos. vs Neg.→ Dist. DN	2.58** (0.16)	2.58** (0.16)
B1: Prox. DN → DV	0.36** (0.06)	0.47** (0.07)
B2: Dist. DN → DV	0.29** (0.06)	0.39** (0.07)
C1: Pos. vs Control→DV (Prox.)	0.32 (0.24)	0.51 (0.29)
C2: Pos. vs Control→DV (Dist.)	0.26 (0.25)	0.15 (0.27)
C3: Pos. vs Neg.→DV (Prox.)	0.17 (0.22)	0.33 (0.26)
C4: Pos. vs Neg.→DV (Dist.)	0.03 (0.22)	0.43 (0.30)
C'1: Pos. vs Control (Prox.)	0.02 (0.25)	−0.07 (0.30)
C'2: Pos. vs Control (Dist.)	0.02 (0.25)	−0.07 (0.30)
C'3: Pos. vs Neg. (Prox.)	0.72** (0.12)	0.84** (0.21)
C'4: Pos. vs Neg. (Dist.)	0.72** (0.17)	0.84** (0.21)
Indirect: Pos. vs Control→Prox. DN→DV	0.34 [0.15, 0.57]	0.44 [0.20, 0.74]
Indirect: Pos. vs Control → Dist. DN→DV	0.27 [0.11, 0.48]	0.36 [0.16, 0.63]
Indirect: Pos. vs Neg.→Prox. DN→DV	0.90 [0.60, 1.21]	1.17 [0.80, 1.57]
Indirect: Pos. vs Neg.→Dist. DN→DV	0.75 [0.44, 1.07]	0.99 [0.64, 1.36]
Total model R^2 (Prox.)	.06**	.06**
Total model R^2 (Dist.)	.06**	.06**

Indirect effects were tested with 10,000 bootstrap samples. Unstandardized coefficients.
*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$. Pos. = Positive (like) norm condition, Neg. = Negative (don't like) norm condition, Prox. = Proximal norms, Dist. = Distal norms, DN = descriptive norms. Refer to Figure 2 for visual representation of the model.

H4 was tested by adding group proximity condition (*proximal, distal*) as a moderator to the effect of perceived norms on outcomes (PROCESS Model 14) among only participants who received normative information ($n = 277$). Like tests of H1, norm messages significantly affected perceived norms at step 1 such

that the *like* condition had higher perceived norms than the *don't like* condition, and perceived norms were a significant positive predictor of enjoyment and intention to watch at step 2. Neither condition had a direct effect on enjoyment or intention to watch, and group proximity did not interact with perceived norms in predicting enjoyment (p_{prox} = .22; p_{dist} = .88) or intention to watch (p_{prox} = .41; p_{dist} = .26). The test for moderated mediation was not significant, thus, H4 was not supported.

H5 stated that the positive effect of perceived descriptive norms on outcomes would be stronger as identification with the referent group increases. H5 was tested using PROCESS Model 14 first with proximal identity moderating the effect of proximal norms, and then with distal identity moderating the effect of distal norms on outcomes. Step 1 was identical to the tests of H4. At step 2, there were no significant interactions of proximal identity and perceived proximal norms, nor did distal identity moderate the effect of perceived distal norms on enjoyment. Distal identity moderated the effect of distal norms on intention to watch (b_{dist} = 0.05, p = .04). The effect of descriptive norms was stronger as identification with college students increased. The mediation of norms messages on intention was stronger for those 1 *SD* above the mean of college identity (b = 1.16, 95% CI = [0.65, 1.66]) than those at the mean (b = 0.85, 95% CI = [0.43, 1.27]) and those 1 *SD* below the mean (b = 0.55, 95% CI = [0.01, 1.06]) (see Figure 3). Thus, H5 was not supported, except for in the case of distal identity.

To test H6, group identity was added as a moderator to the effects of group proximity (PROCESS Model 18). There were no significant interactions between group condition, identity, and perceived descriptive norms across the four model tests. H6 was not supported.

Research question: Injunctive versus descriptive norms

To examine RQ1, which asked if there were differences in descriptive versus injunctive norms on enjoyment and intention to watch, we repeated the analyses of H6, but with perceived injunctive norms as the mediator. There was a significant interaction of perceived injunctive and group proximity condition (b_{prox} = .69, p = .04) such that the effect of injunctive norms on intention was stronger when norms were communicated from distal rather than proximal groups. The three-way interaction was significant in predicting intention to watch (b_{prox} = −0.14, p = .03). Injunctive norms had a stronger effect as identity was higher in the proximal message group and a weaker effect as identity was higher for the distal message group. The overall index of moderated mediation was significant (b = −0.29, 95% CI = [−0.56, −0.03]), but the mediation model was only significant for only those 1 *SD* below the mean of identity (b = 0.86, 95% CI = [0.06, 1.64]). Effects on enjoyment were not significant. In sum, group identity strengthens the effect of injunctive norms on intention to watch for messages communicated by proximal groups.

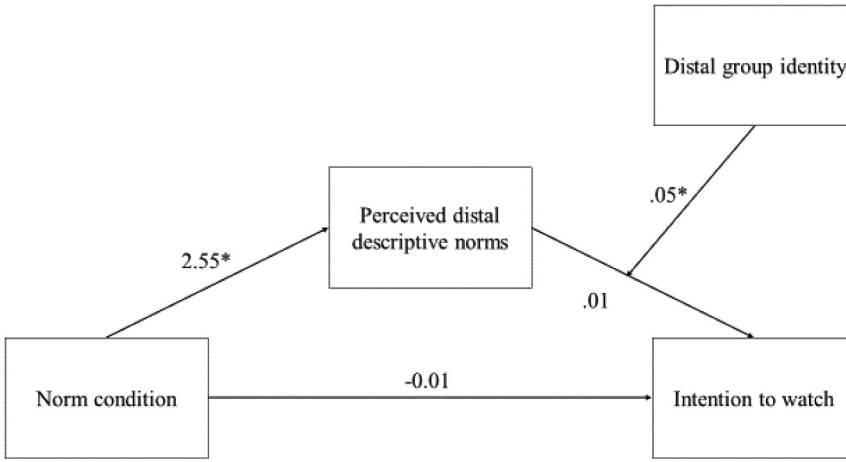

Figure 3. Moderated mediation of distal group identity on distal norm effects.
Conditional effects of norms: at 1 *SD* < *M* ID = 0.20 (*SE* = .10; 95% CI = [0.02, 0.40]; at *M* ID = 0.32 (*SE* = .08; 95% CI = [0.17, 0.48]); at 1 *SD* > *M*ID = 0.44 (*SE* = 0.10; 95% CI = [0.25, 0.63])Conditional indirect effects on intention: at 1 *SD* < *M* ID = −0.55 (*SE* = 0.27; 95% CI = [−1.06, = 0.01]; at *M* ID = −0.86 (*SE* = 0.22; 95% CI = [−1.27, −0.43]); at 1 *SD* > *M* ID = −1.16 (*SE* = 0.25; 95% CI = [−1.66, −0.65])

Discussion

This study tested the utility of social norms as an explanatory mechanism to explain the appraisal of film trailers and the intention to watch the full film. In line with hypotheses from social norms theory, results show that descriptive norm messages influenced film appraisals via perceptions of both descriptive and injunctive norms. Both descriptive and injunctive normative perceptions led to increased enjoyment of the trailer and increased intentions to watch the full film. Neither the group communicating these norms (*proximal/distal*) nor group identity moderated the effects of descriptive norms, but these factors did moderate injunctive norm effects. First, we discuss these results in terms of their implications for media appraisals, and then implications for normative theory. Limitations of the current study are discussed, and we close with suggestions for future research.

Implications for media appraisals

First and foremost, the results show that including an understanding of social normative processes in media appraisal can increase the predictive ability of our models in explaining enjoyment and subsequent intention to view films. This is consistent with past arguments that social influences (e.g., messages from friends, contextual cues) can influence entertainment selection and outcomes (Bourdieu,

1984; Katz et al., 1974), as well as research suggesting that people tend to consume and positively evaluate media popular with others co-present (Jacobs et al., 2015). However, past research examining social influences on media appraisals has mostly focused on how content depicts group members (Appiah et al., 2013) or how media can serve as social lubricant (e.g., arousal responses to horror; Tamborini, 2003). Bandwagon effects research has examined how the sheer number of viewers and their approval directly affect appraisals (Waddell & Sundar, 2020), but has not examined how and why these effects emerge. Our results suggest that including perceptions of norms into explanations of group evaluation effects can help clarify and improve our understanding of existing effects.

For example, the bandwagon effect suggests a simple numeracy claim; the more people that watch a film, the more likely viewers are to evaluate it positively. However, in our findings, the same numeracy information was stronger when communicated by a smaller proximal group (the participants' university) than a larger group (all university students). The finding is more supportive of a norms-based claim than a simple numeracy claim and offers a parsimonious normative argument for why group opinions affect an individual's media appraisal (e.g., proximal groups are more likely to directly affect behavior via norms).

Likewise, the social identity literature argues for a direct relationship of identity strength on outcomes (Trepte, 2006); however, in the current study, direct effects of identity were not observed on intention and enjoyment outcomes. This may be because our groups were not sufficiently distinct from one another; all college students versus students from a particular university may have seemed equivalent to our participants. To make group identity and proximity more distinct, future work could compare the effect of messages communicated by a specific demographic group (e.g., age, gender, race/ethnicity) to which participants belong (i.e., an in-group) compared to a group they do not belong to (i.e., an out-group; Trepte & Loy, 2017).

Alternatively, perhaps identity works in a more nuanced fashion than has been previously suggested in the media literature. We did not find a direct effect of group identity on outcomes, but we did find that group identity and proximity moderated the strength of perceived injunctive norm effects on appraisal and intention. The effects of perceived proximal injunctive norms were strengthened by proximal group identity and by seeing normative information from a proximal group. These findings are in line with the predictions of norms theory (Chung & Rimal, 2016; Neighbors et al., 2008), but run contrary to social identity research that found that both in- and out-group norms can override audience preference for identity-congruent entertainment (e.g., media featuring their racial in-group; Park et al., 2020; Weaver & Frampton, 2019). Since identity and norms seem to be important influences on audience preferences, especially race- or gender-biased selections, our research helps bring nuance to the discussion of social identity in media appraisals by highlighting the salience of group

influence on behavior. However, more work examining the intersection of in- and out-group identity and norms on entertainment selection behaviors and enjoyment is warranted.

As noted above, there was almost no evidence that either group proximity or identity moderated the effect of descriptive norms in our study. These findings could be due to the specific descriptive norm manipulation used in this study. The norms literature defines descriptive norms only in terms of the prevalence of a behavior (Lapinski & Rimal, 2005). However, the norm in the current study referred to a *collective attitude* from a group. Collective attitudes are not explicated as norms in the literature, and it could be argued that descriptive norm messages framed as collective attitudes are perceived instead as injunctive norms (i.e. the collective dis/approval of a performing a behavior). The data also suggest that variance in perceived descriptive norms across message conditions was far greater than variance in perceived injunctive norms — $F_{DN\text{-}PROX}$ (2, 321) = 136.00, $F_{DN\text{-}DIST}$ (2, 321) = 243.35, $F_{IN\text{-}PROX}$ (2, 321) = 102.38, $F_{IN\text{-}DIST}$ (2, 321) = 109.99. In other words, the manipulation and subsequent perception of descriptive norms were distinct from the manipulation's effect on perceived injunctive norms. Therefore, there may be something unique about how individuals perceive descriptive and injunctive norms in a media context compared to health or environmental behaviors. These differences in perceived norms should be explored further, perhaps by examining norm effects for in- and out-groups or measuring injunctive norms as both dis/approval and perceived social sanctions (Liu, 2017) to separate collective attitudes from normative mechanisms related to group belonging.

Implications for normative theories

Although generally our results support predictions from social norms theory, unlike most studies examining normative effects, we also extend understandings of normative work by examining norms in media selection. This study focused on a relatively private behavior (e.g., film selection) and had a relatively subtle manipulation (e.g., norm messages). In private situations where norms are not particularly salient or important, norms are argued to play a smaller role than in public situations (Lapinski & Rimal, 2005). In certain situations where norms are more salient (e.g., watching with co-present others) or perhaps when decisions are public, norms may have considerably more of an effect than we observed in our study. Thus, considering how metrics like number of viewers and ratings influence perceived norms, or how identity, norms, and content features interact to predict selection behaviors and enjoyment are potentially fruitful avenues for future research. Additionally, unlike many behaviors often studied in norms work (e.g., safe sex, smoking), film viewing is rarely a stigmatized behavior in our society. Therefore, focusing on media selection may be a way to test norms predictions, using a non-stigmatized behavioral context.

Additionally, although we used a mediocre film in our study, perceived norms may be particularly likely to play a role in the love of "trash" films (cf., Sarkhosh & Menninghaus, 2016), or films that are "so bad they're good." Countless movies that were considered low-quality by critics and audiences alike have become cult hits and commercial successes (e.g., *Sharknado*, 2012; Clark, 2018) despite low-quality content. Understanding normative influences on stigmatized behaviors may help explain why cult films are so powerful in terms of fan liking and behaviors. Some cult classics (e.g., *Rocky Horror Picture Show, Pink Flamingos*) have capitalized on normative influence by featuring audience testimony in advertising, in some cases (e.g., *Pink Flamingos*) forgoing any preview of the content itself in the trailer. Future work should examine how norms affect the enjoyment of various forms of content to corroborate our results regarding the role of norms in the enjoyment of "trash" films.

Limitations

We would note the following limitations to our study. First, we used a college student sample, despite the known idiosyncrasies of college students (Henrich et al., 2010). Given that the effects of norms have been demonstrated among samples of various socio-economic backgrounds and demographics (Rhodes et al., 2020), future work should use a more diverse sample. Second, in regards to our stimulus, we selected a low-quality film for this study. It was our considered opinion that removing perceived quality as a factor may have increased the salience of normative information. However, future work should use multiple stimuli of varying quality to test the moderating factor of specific film content and quality. Finally, the distinction of distal versus proximal groups is naturally confounded with group size; distal groups are often (if not always) composed of more people than proximal groups (see examples in Neighbors et al., 2008). The purpose of our group proximity manipulation was to examine normative mechanisms by seeing if a known moderator of normative influence also plays a role in media appraisals and selection behaviors, not to unpack the concept of group proximity. That said, determining whether size and closeness to the individual are functionally distinct and relevant components of social groups remains an important endeavor that should be addressed in future work.

Conclusion and future directions

A norms-based approach to entertainment selection could provide a unifying framework to answer unanswered questions regarding the effect of group membership, consensus, and belonging on appraisals of media. It is compatible with and extends theoretical perspectives on social influences on media. Yet, this study is only a first step, and more work is needed. First, studies need to probe the

necessary, sufficient, and boundary conditions of norms and normative influence in a media setting. Experimental studies can tackle these issues by manipulating in- versus out-group norms, varying norm strength and social context, and finding ways that audiences infer norms from social cues. Second, a closer examination of the interplay of norm cues and content cues is needed. Social elements of one's viewing environment influence appraisals and cognition about the media, and may have huge implications in how (and whether) audiences derive enjoyment and/or appreciation from exposure (see Bartsch et al., 2008; Tamborini, 2013 for discussion). Most of the entertainment literature has looked primarily at the role of the content itself in shaping the audience appraisals. Including social forces and information in selection could provide great clarity to the study of media psychology, especially the selection and enjoyment of film and television.

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