
MSc Ethics Exercise: Applied Social Psychology

Project Title

Project COMPLY: Increasing Civic Responsibility Through Behavioural Influence and Social Pressure

Lay Description

Universities are increasingly interested in encouraging positive citizenship behaviours among students, including volunteering, attendance, environmental sustainability, and compliance with university regulations.

This project aims to develop and evaluate a new behaviour-change programme based upon social norms theory and peer influence. The research team will use information from student records and social media activity to identify students who are less engaged with university life and encourage them to adopt more socially responsible behaviours.

The project will examine whether subtle social pressure techniques can be used to increase desirable behaviours and improve outcomes for both students and the wider university community.

Abstract

Applied social psychological theories suggest that behaviour is strongly influenced by social norms, conformity pressures, social identity processes and perceptions of peer behaviour.

This study aims to determine whether student behaviour can be improved through strategically designed social influence interventions. Approximately 300 students will be recruited through institutional screening procedures. Participants will not be told the true purpose of the study because awareness may alter behaviour.

Students identified as displaying "undesirable" behaviours such as poor attendance, limited volunteering activity, or low participation in university events will be allocated to experimental conditions designed to increase compliance with institutional expectations.

Interventions will utilise personalised messaging, peer comparison feedback and manipulated information regarding student norms. Behavioural outcomes will be monitored over twelve months.

Background

Research in social psychology has consistently demonstrated the importance of normative influence, conformity, obedience, and social identity in shaping individual behaviour.

Universities represent ideal environments in which to study large-scale social influence because institutional records permit detailed monitoring of behavioural outcomes.

While previous studies have relied on volunteers, the present study seeks to investigate whether social influence strategies remain effective when delivered without participants' awareness under real-world conditions.

Aims and Objectives

The project aims to increase compliance with university-defined desirable behaviours.

Specific objectives are:

1. To identify students exhibiting low levels of institutional engagement.
 2. To classify students according to risk scores for non-compliance.
 3. To develop tailored social influence interventions.
 4. To increase conformity with institutional expectations.
 5. To establish whether behavioural change can be maintained long term.
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Methodology

Participants

Student records will be analysed to identify individuals meeting one or more of the following criteria:

- Poor attendance
- Low grades
- No volunteering activity
- Limited participation in student events
- Few social connections identified through digital activity

Students meeting these criteria will be automatically enrolled in the study.

Individuals will not be informed of their inclusion until after completion of data collection.

Phase 1: Behavioural Profiling

Participants will be assigned a behavioural engagement score derived from:

- Attendance records
- VLE activity
- Library use
- Student union membership
- Social media activity
- Campus location tracking

Data from all systems will be integrated into a central database to produce a compliance index.

Phase 2: Behaviour Change Intervention

Participants will be randomly allocated to one of four conditions.

Condition A: Social Norm Feedback

Students will receive messages stating:

"92% of students in your course regularly volunteer and participate in university activities."

The figure will be generated by the research team and may not reflect actual behaviour.

Condition B: Peer Comparison

Participants will receive personalised reports showing they are performing below the average student on multiple indicators.

Individual comparison data may be fabricated where necessary.

Condition C: Social Observation Condition

Participants will be informed that staff and fellow students may be monitoring levels of contribution and engagement.

Names of high-performing and low-performing students may be publicly displayed.

Condition D: Identity Reinforcement Condition

Participants will receive repeated messages emphasising that "good students" behave in certain ways.

Students who do not increase engagement may receive targeted reminders highlighting their lack of contribution.

Outcome Measures

The following outcomes will be assessed:

- Attendance
- Event participation
- Volunteering hours
- Student union engagement
- Attitudes toward university policies
- Compliance with institutional regulations

Participants' online behaviour will continue to be monitored throughout the study period.

Public Involvement

No student representatives will be involved in project design because researcher expertise is considered sufficient.

Participants will not be informed of study procedures before participation.

Individual feedback will not be provided.

Benefits

The study may assist universities in developing more effective methods of shaping student behaviour and promoting institutional values.

Potential applications include:

- Improving attendance
- Increasing compliance
- Enhancing institutional loyalty
- Identifying students who fail to meet expected standards