



Unpopular Norms Among Undergraduate Students

Sara Lieber, University of Oregon

Research Question

Bicchieri and Fukui (1999) theorize about a peculiar phenomenon that occurs in human societies: the persistence of unpopular norms, which are rules about behavior that people widely follow in public yet disagree with privately. The purpose of the current study was to examine unpopular norms and their characteristics among undergraduate students.

Methods

Undergraduates at the University of Oregon were asked to identify norms from different areas that that they did not personally agree with.

- Think of a behavior related to one of the following areas most people do or that most people think everyone should do that you don't think people should do or be expected to do.
 - Personal appearance
 - Interpersonal interactions
 - Technology
 - Expressing one's ideas to others
- What group of people does this norm apply to?
- Do most people in this group engage in this behavior?
- Do you engage in this behavior?
- Did you start engaging in this behavior because other people did, or because you independently decided to?
- Would you describe this behavior as stable and long-lasting or unstable and not long-lasting?
- Do people in this group expect that most other people in this group will engage in this behavior?
- Do most people think that people *should* engage in this behavior?
- Are there consequences for people who do not engage in this behavior? (e.g., social, legal, other)

Results: Unpopular Norms

The most commonly reported norms by undergraduates that they believed most people followed, yet disagreed that people should be expected to follow, were:

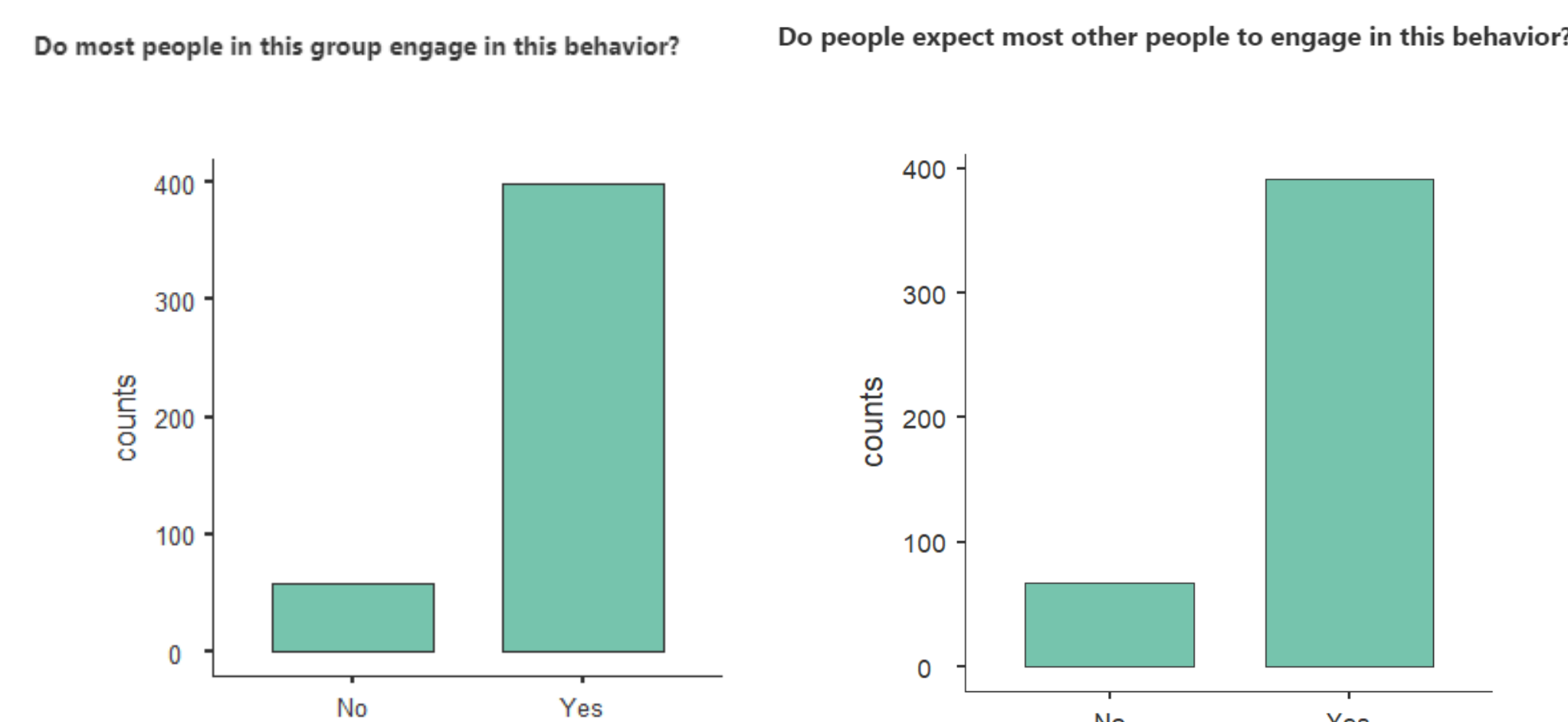
- Using social media regularly**
 - Example: "Be on social media constantly."
- Dressing and behaving in ways that are trendy**
 - Example: "That you always have to look cute and dress like whatever trend is in"
- Dressing and behaving in ways that follow gender norms**
 - Example: "Its a social norm for guys not to act feminine, which I disagree with, I think we should all act however we want to act."
- Not expressing one's true ideas in conversations with others.**
 - Example: "Not saying what you really think when talking to others"

Participants

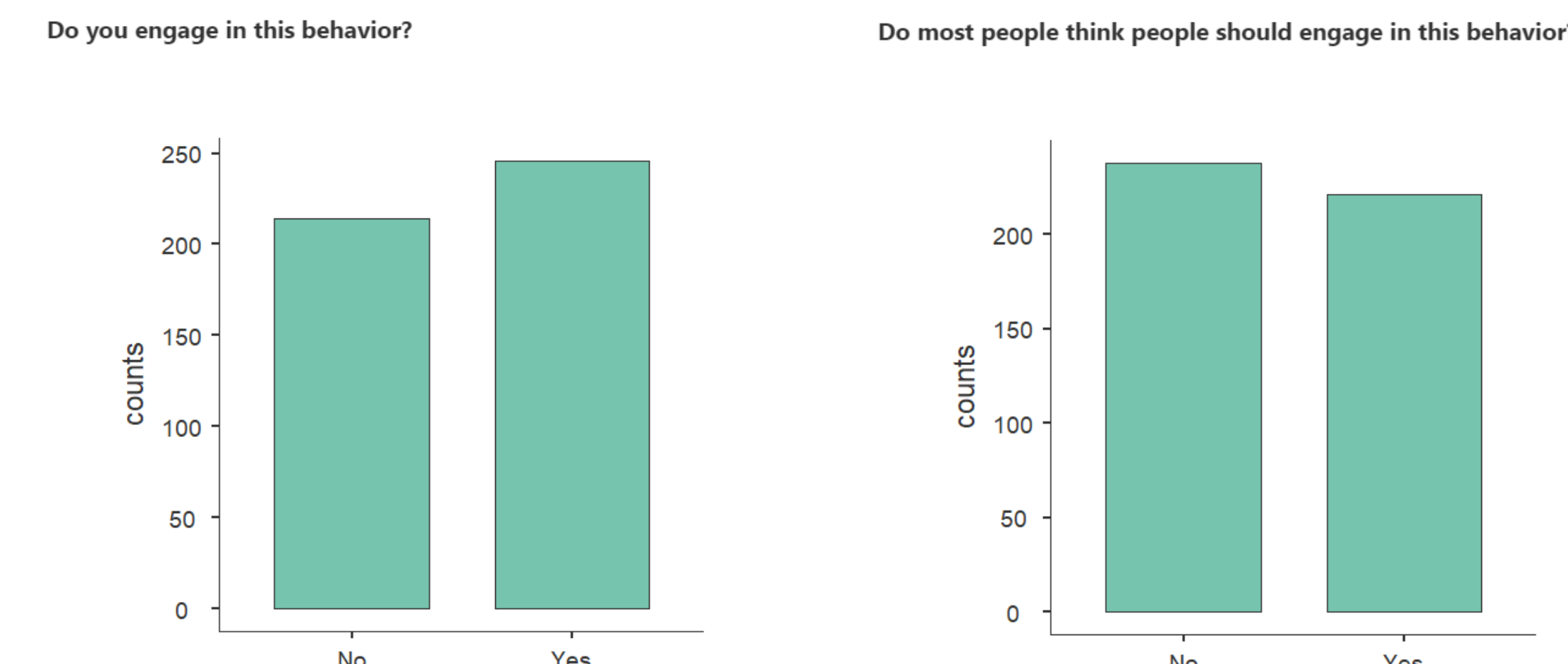
- Sample Size: $n = 234$
- Gender: 169 females, 61 males, 3 non-binary
- Age: $M_{age} = 19.63$ ($SD = 2.79$)
- Ethnic backgrounds:
 - 134 (57%) Caucasian
 - 34 (15%) Asian
 - 31 (13%) Hispanic, Latinx, or Spanish
 - 15 (6%) Black or African American
 - 15 (6%) American Indian or Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, Middle Eastern or North African, or another ethnicity

Results: Descriptive Statistics

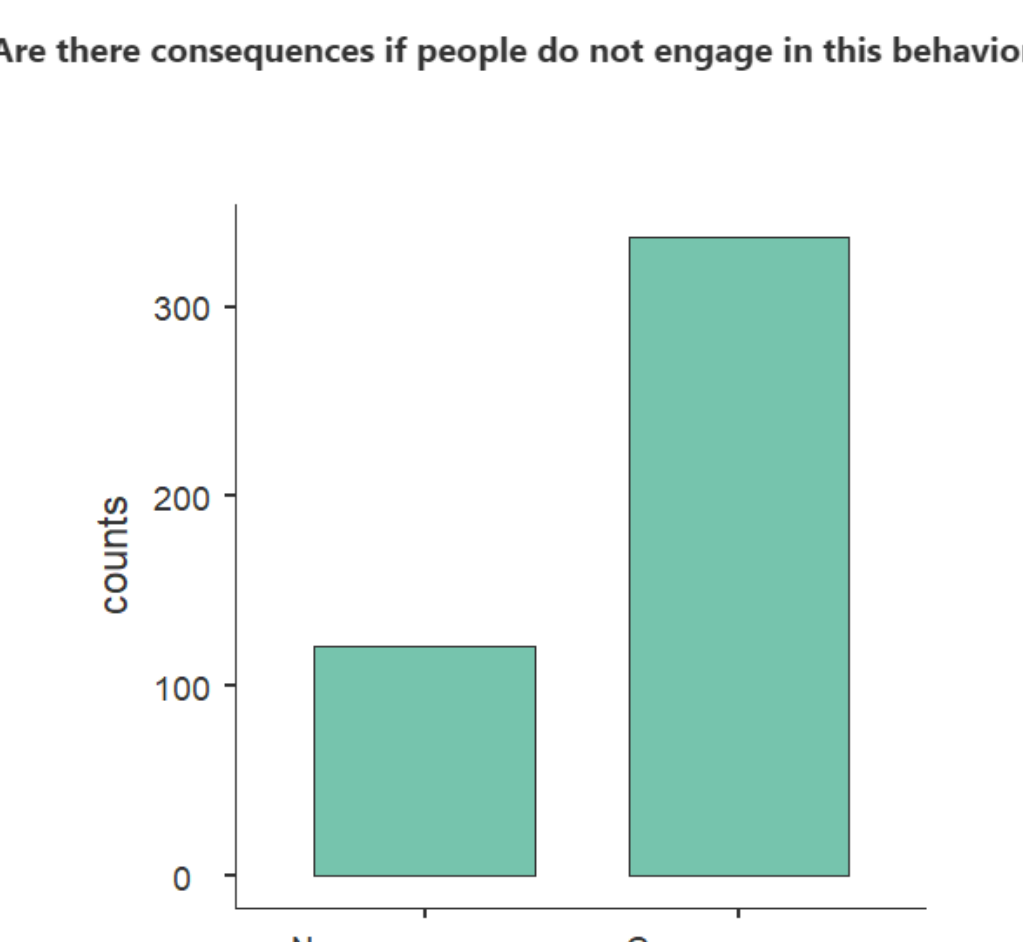
Most participants believed the norm they identified was followed by most people (87%) and that most people expected others to also follow the norm (85%).



Only about half of participants said they themselves follow the norm they identified (53%), and less than half thought that most people believed others *should* follow the norm (48%).



A majority of the participants believed there were consequences for people who did not follow the norm (74%).



Results: Factor Analysis

A factor analysis was performed to analyze the dimensionality of participants' beliefs about these unpopular norms.

- Extraction method: Principal axis factoring
- Rotation: Varimax

Factor Loadings

	Factor			
	1	2	3	4
Most people in this group engage in this behavior	0.78703			
Most people expect most other people to engage in this behavior	0.63101			
The behavior is stable and long-lasting		0.51889		
The participant engages in this behavior		0.42420		
Most people think that people should engage in this behavior			0.50320	
There are consequences for not engaging in this behavior				
Participant decided to engage in this behavior independently				0.49368

Discussion

- Undergraduate students were able to identify unpopular norms, or in other words, behaviors that are perceived as being widely shared, yet that respondents personally disagreed with
 - Included social media use, dressing in trendy ways, following gender norms, and not expressing one's true ideas
- A factor analysis on participants' beliefs about these unpopular norms revealed four factors. Norms high on each of the factors had the following qualities:
 - 1) Behaviors perceived as being engaged in by most people and most people expecting others to engage in it
 - 2) Behaviors that participants themselves say they engage in and that are perceived as being stable over time
 - 3) Behaviors that participants believed most people thought people should engage in
 - 4) Behaviors that participants decided to engage in independently, rather than because others did

References

Bicchieri, C., & Fukui, Y. (1999). The great illusion: Ignorance, informational cascades, and the persistence of unpopular norms. *Business Ethics Quarterly*, 9(1), 127-155.