Dear participants,

In Semester 1, you participated in a study titled “Social Decision Making and Sun Protection Behaviours”. This study was conducted as part of a fourth year Honours project by Harriet Bodimeade under the supervision of Dr. Winnifred Louis. Thank you very much for participating, we really appreciate it! Below we’ve included a brief summary of the results. If you would like to ask any questions about the research or findings, you can contact Harriet at harrietb@psy.uq.edu.au or Winnifred at w.louis@psy.uq.edu.au. If you are interested in reading other similar studies on decision making, check out http://www.psy.uq.edu.au/~wloius.

Purpose of the study
The main aim of this study was to examine the role of norms, which are informal standards or rules that guide behaviour, in influencing intentions to use sun protection and reported sun protection behaviour (e.g., wearing sunscreen, hats, sunglasses, etc.).

We used three theoretical models. The “theory of planned behaviour” (Ajzen, 1991) says that people will do a particular behaviour based on three factors: their favourable or unfavourable attitudes towards the behaviour; whether or not they think that important people in the life approve of them doing the behaviour (the ‘subjective norm’); and whether or not they feel they have control over the behavior. “Norm focus theory” (Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990) says that two different types of norms are important—descriptive norms (what other people do) and injunctive norms (what other people approve of). Also, the “referent informational influence” model (Terry & Hogg, 1996) says that group level variables need to be measured as they are more important than individual factors (e.g., what other students think and do about sun protection could be more important than what family and non-uni friends do).

As well as looking at the models from past research, we wanted to see if embarrassment about sun protection (e.g., fear of looking daggy if you wear a hat) would influence intentions to use sun protection behaviour and self-reported sun protection behaviour two weeks later. So we ran a study!

Demographic information about participants
From April to June 2008, 219 University of Queensland students completed the study; of these, 143 completed a second questionnaire 2 weeks later. Some people participated for course credit in undergraduate psychology courses, while others were approached in the UQ refectory and Great Court at St Lucia. Participants’ ages ranged from 17 to 47, although the majority were 21 or younger (average age = 19.35). Most participants (63%) were female.

Preliminary results of the study
Planned Behaviour Variables. An overwhelming majority (92%) had positive attitudes to using sun protection. Similarly, most participants (92%) believed that using sun protection was something they could personally control. A large number of participants (73%) believed that important people in their lives want and approve of them using sun protection. However, only a small number of participants (37%) believed their significant others would use sun protection themselves. As predicted, there was a discrepancy between approval from significant others and the actions of significant others.

Group Norms. At the group level, only 38% of participants thought that other UQ students would want them to use sun protection, and only 14% believed that other UQ students actually use sun protection themselves. Clearly, as predicted, people perceived other UQ students are slack at using sun protection behaviours!

Intentions and Past Behaviour. Most participants (61%) intended to use sun protection over the next two weeks. However, only 23% of participants reported they consistently used sun protection in the past.

Results of Experimental Manipulations
As well as just measuring what people thought, we also tried to manipulate the perceived student norm and participants’ fear of embarrassment. For the norm manipulation, half of the participants were told that the majority of UQ students do not regularly engage in sun protection behaviours, and the other half received no information. Participants who were given an explicit statement about the low rate of behaviour in their group perceived a significantly more negative descriptive norm than participants in the control condition. But the norm manipulation did not directly influence any other measures. So that was disappointing for us.

For the embarrassment manipulation, one third of participants (in the embarrassment condition) read a script about a UQ student who used sun protection and was teased by her friends. One third read about a UQ student who used sun protection over the next two weeks. However, only 23% of participants reported they consistently used sun protection in the past.

Conclusion
Overall, the importance of looking at injunctive and descriptive norms separately was supported in the present study. For example, approval for using sun protection was seen as higher from both significant others and from UQ students than was actual sun protection behaviour. The theory of planned behaviour variables (attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived control) were predictors of sun protection intentions and behaviour two weeks later, as we expected. In addition, the value of looking at group level norms over and above the individualistic norms
was supported in this study. Interestingly, it was also found that embarrassment could be an important variable to consider, as people who cared a lot about being a UQ student and who read about someone being teased for using sun protection reported lower intentions to use sun protection themselves. This is an important and novel finding, which deserves future research attention!

Thanks again!

Thank you so much for your participation in the study. We really appreciate it! If you have any questions or comments, please contact Harriet or Winnifred at the email address supplied above. We would be more than happy to hear from you!

Suggested References for Future Reading:

