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But I AM normal: safe? driving in Vietnam

Duong Trong Hue Linda Brennan Lukas Parker Michael Florian

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But I AM normal: safe? driving in Vietnam

But I AM
normal

Duong Trong Hue

*Centre of Communication and Design, RMIT University Vietnam,
Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam*

Linda Brennan

*Centre of Commerce and Management and School of Media and
Communication, RMIT University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam*

Lukas Parker

*Centre of Commerce and Management, RMIT University Vietnam,
Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, and*

Michael Florian

*Department of Monitoring and Evaluation,
Asia Injury Prevention Foundation, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam*

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to elucidate perceptions of safe driving and social norms in relation to driving motorbikes in the Vietnamese context.

Design/methodology/approach – A series of focus groups was undertaken in relation to driving practices from a number of groups: adolescents, families and adult males and females. The discussion centred on how driving behaviours were socialised within the various groups.

Findings – The research highlighted some very interesting social dynamics in relation to how safe driving habits are established and supported within the social context. In particular, the separation of descriptive and injunctive norms and the role such norms play in socialising driving behaviours, safe or otherwise.

Practical implications – The implications for social marketing practice are considerable, especially in the Vietnamese context where injunctive norms are difficult to portray, given the dynamics of the media landscape. Social marketing campaigns will need to have a broader consideration of how to establish descriptive norms, bearing in mind the social milieu in which the behaviours occur.

Originality/value – This research is the first of its kind in the Vietnamese context. While much practice-led innovation is occurring in the region, there is little extant research on the topic of social norms and the socialisation of behaviours within the Southeast Asian region.

Keywords Social marketing, Norms, Socialisation, Accident prevention, Road safety, Driving in Vietnam

Paper type Research paper



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Background Road safety in the social context

Road traffic injuries and deaths continue to be a serious worldwide health issue, especially in developing countries. Vietnam, a rapidly developing country, has seen major shifts to industrialisation and urbanisation. Car ownership remains low at around 1.3 vehicles per 100 households, whilst there are 96.1 motorbikes for every 100 households (General Statistics Office, 2010). According to the Ministry of Health (2011), around 1 million Vietnamese suffer from some form of road-related injury (or death) every year. This means around 3,000 road injuries (Ministry of Health, 2011) and over 30 deaths every day (World Health Organization, 2013). The statistics are possibly larger given that road-related injuries are difficult to estimate and because not all road-related injuries and deaths are reported. Thus, the scope of the problem is indefinitely “large” and affects many people.

To some extent Smeed's (1949) law may be at play here. With the rapid increase in motorised traffic over the past two decades, there has been a corresponding increase in the number of road fatalities. This increase in vehicles, along with road infrastructure improvements, may have led people to drive faster and more recklessly, and as a result, there are a greater number of road deaths. This, under Smeed's (1949) law, may at some point rise to a point that it becomes socially unacceptable, a point at which road safety becomes a greater priority and reckless driving becomes less tolerated. Some recent headway has been made with the introduction of compulsory safety helmet laws, but there is still a long way to go when it comes to road safety in Vietnam (Le and Blum, 2013).

Lack of public awareness of the importance of road safety has been argued as one of the main causes of road accidents in Vietnam (Tuoi Tre, 2013), and has led to a number of road safety campaigns using billboards, posters, television commercials, banners, integrated community-based teaching curricula and public parades. Inter-ministry efforts to curb the dramatic increase in road traffic incidents led to the formation of the National Traffic Safety Committee (NTSC) in 1997 to, along with other tasks, raise public awareness of road safety. In addition to government initiatives, a number of non-government organisations have been active in road injury prevention, notably, the Asia Injury Prevention Foundation (AIPF). The AIPF helped to successfully introduce a motorcycle helmet programme in the country by advocating for policy change (a law that made motorcycle helmets compulsory was introduced in 2007). In social marketing terms, this would be considered an upstream marketing activity (Niblett, 2005). The Vietnamese Government will also introduce a broad range of stricter road safety laws in 2014 as part of its wider efforts to reduce road injuries and fatalities (Ha and Anh, 2013).

Despite such efforts, top government officials were recently reported as acknowledging that raising traffic safety awareness was slow in progress and that road safety communications to the public was not effective enough (Tuoi Tre, 2013). Meanwhile, in recent years, the number of motorcycles has continued to increase to over 37 million motorcycles on Vietnamese roads (Anh, 2013a) and so have road injuries and fatalities.

Social marketing and driving safety

Road safety as a social marketing issue has been around for many years. A landmark long-lasting campaign is that of the Transport Accident Commission in Victoria,

Australia. Since 1989, it has worked in a multi-dimensional manner using all available social marketing tools and techniques to decrease accidents on the roads (see www.tac.vic.gov.au). Research conducted has indicated that parents set examples for safe driving throughout a young person's life (Graham *et al.*, 2006; Waylen and McKenna, 2008). Further research has demonstrated that speeding is the most common driving offence amongst young drivers (Tapp *et al.*, 2013, 2013b), while other studies have shown that young people learn about acceptable speed norms from their parents more than any other source (Gesser-Edelsburg and Guttman, 2013). However, this knowledge is not learned in the car while practicing to drive, it is learned by observing parents driving (Gesser-Edelsburg and Guttman, 2013). Other "bad habits" learned from parents include driving without seat belts, drink driving and road rage (De Pelsmacker and Janssens, 2007). Interestingly, young men learn more from their fathers driving and young women from their mothers, regardless of who does the majority of the driving (Gesser-Edelsburg and Guttman, 2013). Another major issue leading to young road deaths is the influence of peers, with young people being at much greater risk of crashes if they are carrying their friends (and males being more likely than females to have crashes if they have multiple passengers) (Mulvihill *et al.*, 2005; Smart *et al.*, 2005). It is not clear if this research is relevant to the Vietnamese context, as how young people interact in their social system in Western countries maybe entirely different in different cultures.

Culturally, Vietnam is widely considered to be a collectivist society (Jamieson, 1993; McCann *et al.*, 2004; Phuong-Mai *et al.*, 2005; Khanh and Hau, 2007) with a highly group-oriented culture. Group-oriented individuals have been found to be more likely to adhere to social norms (Lapinski *et al.*, 2007). Vietnam is also characterised as a masculine culture, driven by visible success and status, with a patriarchal attitude and an inherent strong male influence in social groups (Khanh and Hau, 2007). Above all, however, is the broadly accepted importance of social harmony and conflict avoidance in Vietnamese society (Smith and Pham, 1996).

Vietnam is considered to be high-context when it comes to communications (Smith and Pham, 1996). This means that the context – situation, place, attitude, non-verbal behaviour and gestures – is more important than the written word or words spoken (Smith and Pham, 1996). Thus, the interpretation of road rules or messages about road safety may be different given the context and time.

In Vietnam where there are usually only two wheels and limited protection when on the road, the occurrence of injury as a result of incidents is high (Falco *et al.*, 2013). In the main, however, it appears that while the idea of social marketing to improve road safety has been around a long time, there is still a continued focus on advertising – or shockvertising using mainly negative fear appeals (Parry *et al.*, 2013; Wauters and Brengman, 2013). Fear appeals have been shown to be efficacious in road safety advertising (Brennan and Binney, 2010). Nevertheless, fear appeals only work in certain circumstances (Yzer *et al.*, 2013) and overusing messages with fear appeals can backfire (Haines *et al.*, 2004). In Vietnam, although there is no publicly available research about the effectiveness of fear appeals in health campaigns and advertising, these appeals are commonly used. In this paper, we investigate the norms governing the attitude and behaviour of motorcyclists to suggest a possible new approach to road injury prevention to Vietnam.

The current state of road safety social marketing in Vietnam

The media in Vietnam is tightly controlled by the government with all lines of communication traced to the central communist party (Hill *et al.*, 2009). Government decrees and directives are disseminated through ministries, provincial and municipal governments and large collective organisations such as women's groups and youth groups. This hierarchy is also designed to facilitate implementation and reporting back to government on progress being made in response to decrees. Reporting in the news media will, therefore, often reinforce the government position on a particular topic (Hill *et al.*, 2009). Additionally, social advertising and social marketing efforts will be accepted only if they comply with government requirements and support the government position on the topic. Posters are a regular information source and the groups are often mobilised to undertake direct action and stage events supported by the street advertising. Mainstream media such as television and radio are accessible to social marketers because they are relatively inexpensive. However, radio is not widely used and while young people use social media extensively (Parker and Brennan, 2011), government restrictions on sharing of certain types of information can slow down the dissemination of non-approved messages (Thanh Nien Daily, 2013).

In addition to these "downstream" activities principally directed at individuals, organisations such as the World Health Organization and UNICEF are working upstream with the Vietnamese Government and mid-stream with local non-governmental organizations such as the AIPF to provide education, advocacy and support for safe driving practice (Hill *et al.*, 2009). Niblett (2005) stated that this type of upstream social marketing can be effective in addressing how we change the policies, laws, regulations and physical environments that can obstruct social marketers' best efforts at getting individuals to change their behaviours where there are high barriers. In this case, upstream social marketing strategy has now been combined with other and midstream and downstream social marketing activities (for example, advertisements on television and roadside billboards).

Norms and behaviours as choices people make

Much social marketing is premised on the idea that people can and do behave as individuals making active and rational choices about how to behave (Carvalho and Mazzon, 2013). However, recently, there has been a shift away from this conceptualisation, and increasingly, models of social marketing have incorporated considerations of socio-cultural/ecological models (Lindridge *et al.*, 2013; Panter *et al.*, 2013; Tapp *et al.*, 2013, 2013b), consumer socialisation (Sancho *et al.*, 2011; Watne and Brennan, 2012) and other social dimensions of human behaviour such as norms (Burchell *et al.*, 2013; Martin *et al.*, 2013). As a consequence of this shift, the concept of norm may need to be reconsidered for the purpose of social marketing research; especially as norms are established within the social context and much of the research into norms is conducted in the West.

Schwartz (1968) posited that personal (subjective) norms were motivating factors in social action whereby people were motivated to act (or not) based on their felt sense of obligation to act. That is, regardless of societal norms, people needed to have a personally felt sense of responsibility and awareness of consequences, as well as a personal obligation to behave in a certain way (Schwartz, 1968). The component "ascription of responsibility" is operationally related to the idea of "diffusion of

responsibility” – that is, a person must feel that they are wholly responsible to be motivated to act. If a person thinks it is someone else’s responsibility, not their responsibility or that someone else will step in and do the job, then they will not undertake the required action. Helping behaviour theories may also be relevant to this domain (Schwartz and David, 1976). That is, if people think they are helping others, they may behave differently than if they are only helping themselves.

While Schwartz differentiated between societal and personal norms, Cialdini *et al.*, 1990; Cialdini and Goldstein, 2004) proposed that norms come in two types: descriptive or injunctive. Descriptive norms are those that are displayed in the society around you. They provide cues as to the societal expectations of behaviour. Injunctive norms are those that tell people what they should or should not do in a particular circumstance. For example, most teenagers know they should not drive if they do not have a license but their desire to fit in with their peers is stronger than their desire to comply with a normative stricture and so some do drive while unlicensed. Cialdini’s Focus Theory of Normative Conduct (TNC) goes some way towards explaining how “norms” evolve over time from as people begin to ignore the injunctive norms and adopt the descriptive norms as the “real” norm (Kallgren *et al.*, 2000), often in the process of change creating other injunctive norms and adopting those.

Recent work in the USA using the TNC on binge drinking by teenagers led to an understanding that descriptive norms are more powerful than injunctive norms and that a combination of both was necessary to avoid a “boomerang effect” (Schultz *et al.*, 2007). An attempt to discredit the idea that “everyone” in college drinks to excess sometimes resulted in an increase in the undesirable behaviours. Their research showed that people were willing to deviate from injunctive norms but not descriptive norms, and the provision of information about descriptive norms in an effort to apply an injunctive norm simply resulted in more teenagers drinking. Dejong and Smith’s (2013) work demonstrated that if social marketing messaging is outweighed by commercial marketing messaging then the message is misperceived and college students drink more, not less. It is not clear if this idea can be extended to safe driving but if the cohort is similar in other ways, perhaps some lessons can be appropriated from one context to the other to avoid the potential for a boomerang effect.

Strongly related to the work of Cialdini and others on descriptive norms is that of Rimal who proposes a Theory of Normative Social Behaviour (TNSB) (Lapinski and Rimal, 2005; Rimal and Real, 2005). Rimal’s work incorporates many of the ideas of earlier theorists but sets them within the social psychology framework. That is, confirming that people make decisions as individuals but within a social context that cannot be ignored. Furthermore, there is research that suggests that misperceptions about health behaviours can lead to erroneous descriptive norms that govern individuals’ attitudes (Haines *et al.*, 2004), which in turn can influence their intention to produce actual behaviour, in this case, driving behaviour. Because social marketing aims to change unsafe behaviours using marketing tools and techniques, it has potential for use in enhancing road safety. To craft effective messages in road safety social marketing campaigns, the foundation for those attitudes and behaviours – underlying descriptive and injunctive norms – must be well understood and documented. Given the relative dearth of research available on road safety in Vietnam, an exploratory study was undertaken to initially understand the current norms governing knowledge, attitudes and behaviours in regard to road safety and motorcycle driving skills.

Approach

The overarching approach to this study is inductive: the gathering of observations for the purposes of description and explanation. Data for this study were collected from ten focus groups, organised by the AIPF. The groups contained 74 participants aged between 17 and 57 years. Each group consisted of six to eight members including gender-separate and some mixed sessions for high school students, university students, workers and parents with motorcycle driving and riding experience. Participants joined the study on a voluntary basis. While relatively unstructured, these focus groups centred on topics related to three major themes:

- (1) road safety in general;
- (2) perceptions about what were good driving behaviours and attitudes towards driving; and
- (3) social norm influences on driving behaviours.

The researchers were sensitive to the possibility that in asking participants to describe driving behaviours, they might inadvertently “cue” participants into providing socially acceptable or desirable responses (Strauss and Corbin, 1992). To limit potential normative bias, the AIPF researchers were excluded from facilitating the focus groups, and at least two discussions were held for each occupation group and parents, respectively. Furthermore, a research team of several people conducted the data analysis, including the principal authors to allow for multiple perspectives on the thematic analyses (Denzin, 1970).

MAXQDA software was used to support a “qualitative content analysis” of the data (Mayring, 2008). Structuring and explication techniques were applied to obtain a “holistic” picture of the data according to the suggested procedures of Mayring. This method of analysis requires that the analyst(s) reads the whole data set and develops a “holistic” picture of the data. At any stage of analysis, the analyst’s views of “the whole” may change (Laverty, 2003; Spiggle, 1994). The drawing of conclusions was undertaken by the authors, both independently and collaboratively where there were disputed meanings (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

Results and discussion

During the focus groups, a range of road safety-related topics were discussed to examine road users’ knowledge, attitudes and behaviours, but they could be mainly grouped into three broad themes:

- (1) participants’ perception of motorbike drivers’ responsibility;
- (2) unsafe and risky driving behaviour; and
- (3) acquisition of good driving norms within the social context.

In the following sections, we will discuss each of these themes accordingly.

Participant’s awareness of responsible driving

The first theme identified was that of participants’ awareness of motorbike drivers’ responsibility. The discussion sessions focussed on the existing perceptions of individuals on the issue of road safety responsibility. In addition, we explored the cultural sources of such perceptions in their discussion groups. The focus groups

revealed that people thought that their driving actions could impact on other people's lives, thereby accepting the necessity of safe driving. However, in the main, the responsibility for driving safely was seen as a collective one, that is, the individuals perceived that their own role as individuals in the ebb and flow of traffic in large cities was minimal in comparison to the responsibility of other drivers on the road. Thus, driving to protect yourself is insufficient; there is an expectation that you will also be driving to protect others, and that others will protect you: "We need to be mindful of what others are doing on the road. We are not in control of what others do". In other words, being alert to others was necessary, but in the main, it was seen that the other drivers' responsibility carried more weight than that of the individual driver. There appears to be an expectation that the *other* drivers should be aware of their responsibilities to community members by being considerate with their behaviours on the road. Thus, it seems that other's safe driving is considered to be more important than your own safe driving behaviours. In this case, no one might be protecting anyone if it is the *other* person's role to protect. Road safety in these circumstances extends to behaving in a way that is consistent and reliable and predictable within the context, so that others can adjust their driving to suit. The responsibility of the driver is to ensure that others can readily see where they are and can make inferences about what will happen next. This may not necessarily be within the law. It may be illegal, but if it is predictable, it will be acceptable. For example, cutting diagonally across the flow of traffic at an intersection could be tolerable as long as everyone can see you coming and adjust his or her speed and direction accordingly (Figure 1). Accidents are, therefore, the fault of the person who is behaving unpredictably or the one who has not taken sufficient notice of the others in the traffic (Loc, 2013).

Perceptions of road safety

The second theme explored was that of road safety as an issue. To explore perceptions of road safety issues, ideas were shared across the focus groups on the problematic topics related to road safety that would be addressed by the authorities rather than individuals. These can be categorised as:

- *Regulations*: Which were seen to be too loose.
- *Information and education*: Which were seen as insufficient.
- *Enforcement*: Which was widely believed to be inconsistent.

Furthermore, despite the recognition that road safety is problematic in their communities, the participants felt that unsafe driving was not commonly seen by others as a "serious problem". Thus, the responsibility for action devolved to the indeterminate "other" driver identified in the first theme. "Most drivers think that they know how to drive safely, but often drive incorrectly because of the road conditions". Young males, in particular, did not ascribe responsibility for road safety to themselves. They could readily identify risky or unsafe behaviours but did not accept that these behaviours were their concern. Responses from the young male adults group and the workers group's indicated that a typical young motorcyclist's behaviours would be considered as "risky", if they were "texting while driving", "speeding to show off" and "driving two or more abreast while talking to each other".



Figure 1.
Traffic conditions in
Ho Chi Minh City

As motorcycles are the main means of transportation in Vietnam, participants often reported taking family members as passengers on their motorbikes. However, as taking multiple passengers is an everyday practice, it is arguably not an inherently risky behaviour. The risk comes about when combined with other factors such as speeding,

driving unpredictably, driving without helmets or with peers. When it comes to high school students, risky practices were defined as when carrying two or more peers astride, being held or simply hanging on. According to the workers and parents groups, these young passengers were seen as vulnerable to incidents, especially if they were riding without helmets.

Other commonly cited unsafe behaviours identified by all groups included: distractions (listening to music with headphones, “looking at girls” and waving and talking to others). Indeed, motorbikes are very social affairs and conversations between cyclists and their passengers can take place at both speed and volume. Talking to the person next to you is quite common and it would seem rude to remain quiet or focussed on the traffic while someone is speaking to you as you drive along. As a consequence, the level of distraction is quite high. All groups specified that motorcyclists can be seen texting and using their mobile phones, in addition to changing channels on their portable radios, and speaking to others and so on.

Other unsafe behaviours uncovered were: the unpredictable poor behaviour of other drivers (turning without indicating, sudden braking), overloading motorbikes with too many passengers or other goods (see [Figure 2](#) for an example), driving alongside a friend, driving and passing others without alerting them with one’s horn.

The use of horns is a particular distraction that adds to the general busyness on the roads in Vietnam. Participants perceived the use of bike’s horn as a “mild”, not “urgent” claim for attention in Vietnam’s noisy streets and it is not a notice of alarm as it is in some countries. Therefore, a horn is a notice that must be paid attention to and as a result adds to the general level of distraction, especially if it is behind you, as is often the case. The use of the horn can have multiple meanings such as: “look at me”; “move aside, I am coming past”; “go faster, you are blocking the road”; “be careful, I am bigger/faster/more aggressive than you” and so on. The only method of knowing which of these meanings applies is by experience of the context and situation of use. Discerning the implied message requires a degree of familiarity with the environment in which the message occurs. As the majority of drivers acknowledged their use of horns for the primary purpose of getting attention to convey a message, just as others do, it seemed individual drivers’ attitude to using horns has been developed by the application of descriptive norms.

Acquisition of driving norms

When it comes to acquiring the skills and norms for good driving, participants described a culture of driving that was learned and passed down from their elders such as parents and other family members. For example, all groups admitted the importance of knowing street shortcuts and riding on pavements when traffic became congested, navigating gaps between trucks and cars, and other generally observed customs and conventions of driving. “Mounting the footpath safely when there is a traffic jam is a useful skill”. Use of the term “safe” for some of these less-than-safe behaviours was common. This behaviour is perhaps engendered from a very young age when the majority of children are transported to their kindergartens on the back of the motorbike and babies are held or ride on chairs on the front of their parents’ bikes until they are of an age to hang on by themselves. These norms are so deeply ingrained that it is often not possible to fully articulate “the rules of how the traffic game is played”. When describing a behaviour, participants can confirm “Yes, that is something we do, but no, we never noticed it before



Figure 2.
Motorcycles with
dangerous loads are
a common sight on
Vietnamese roads

you asked". For social marketers, this is likely to be problematic, as the first step in any social marketing campaign is to understand the consumer. This can be challenging if they do not understand themselves.

Young people indicated that they learned driving behaviour from their parents and our results support that of other road safety researchers where young people learn from their parents (Mulvihill *et al.*, 2005; Smart *et al.*, 2005). Indeed, it seems that injunctive norms may be learned from mothers and descriptive norms from fathers. That is, the mothers in our study reported that they told their children to behave in certain ways and are overtly concerned about safety, as they believed that "people who are afraid of damage and worry about their health will not break the laws". While the dads in the parents' group said "Should we obey the law or not in special circumstances, while the majority disobey the law?" This theme was echoed in the young people's (students and workers) responses to how they learned about good and bad driving. These groups indicated that they "always" obeyed the law when their mothers were with them and not as much when their dads were with them. In particular, young males were more likely to behave in a risky manner under their father's driving tutelage. For example, the young male driver group, recounted that actions such as cutting across lanes quickly, accelerating across lines of traffic and going through red lights, were more likely to be done when "I carried my father".

While the majority of participants (all groups) believed that good drivers know about and follow the road laws, are focussed on good driving, show awareness of other drivers and are emotionally in control, there was a widely held belief that if one obeyed road laws but others did not, the one who did abide by the rules was foolish. In this case, descriptive norms are more important than injunctive norms; especially if the injunctive norms come from public service advertising.

Public service advertisements in the form of roadside billboards commonly use cool colours, employ cartoon like characterisations and depict unrealistic road conditions in their visual imagery. These are meant to imply safety but as the typical road scene in [Figure 3](#) demonstrates, the conditions depicted in road safety posters are rarely found, especially in urban Vietnam where a majority of driving takes place. In the circumstances depicted in [Figure 3](#), injunctive norms are not strong enough to overcome the chaos that can occur if only one of the drivers is obeying the law.

For example, in one focus group, a participant described repeated attempts to obey traffic signals at an intersection close to their home before finally giving up because they were causing more traffic congestion than if they followed what others were doing. In his case, his perception of the social pressure applied was intense. To remain still at an intersection while all around you are pushing you forward in to the traffic in conditions such as those indicated in [Figure 3](#) would be a feat requiring a degree of courage.

Injunctive norms without enforcement versus descriptive norms with reinforcement

The focus groups also highlighted that people question the efficacy of laws and feel that laws are not always applicable to them. Further, they believe that laws only apply in certain circumstances. In particular, the existence of laws are questioned when it is perceived that the majority disobey the laws. An example cited was that if one did not run a red light when it had just changed, they would be "blamed" for blocking the road. In this case, an injunctive norm is counterweighted against the more powerful descriptive norms. That is, people will only obey the law when they feel that everyone



Figure 3.
Congestion is
common on the roads
of Ho Chi Minh City

else is obeying the law. To do otherwise is counter to collectivist tradition, and perhaps cultural context is a possible explanation for why an individual will disobey a law when faced with a majority decision to act contrarily to the law. The dominant motivator is that of conforming to the norms of the present group and not the more distanced legal repercussions.

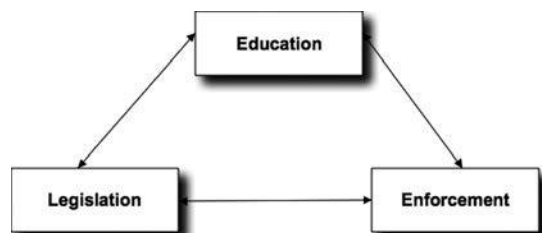
In addition, as a result of inconsistent policing and an overall lack of enforcement capability, laws are often breached because there may be no negative consequences associated with breaking the law. As illustrated by [Snitow and Brennan \(2011, Figure 4\)](#), legislation without enforcement and education in social marketing is of limited value when it comes to social marketing campaigns. For example, in this study, we have found that laws may be seen as minor distractions and only to be worried about when there is a police presence. Consequently, much still needs to be done to have self-regulating social change ([Sniehotta, 2009](#)).

When it comes to the development of driving norms, the socialisation of good skills in addition to bad was evident in the responses. Good skills that were identified in the research were: knowledge of shortcuts and one-way streets, how to “safely” drive on the pavement in traffic jams, knowledge of “police spots” and how to appropriately deal with police when pulled-over. Of course, driving safely on the footpath or pavement is oxymoronic and this outcome came as a surprise to the research team. It leads to the conclusion that concepts of what constitutes “safety” may not be universal. It may also be as a result of the illusory belief in one’s “superiority of skill” over the average person ([Horswill et al., 2004](#)).

A further surprise is that participants considered their knowledge of how to navigate the legal infrastructure as part of the requisite skills to be a good driver. Particularly, knowing how to avoid police would also seem to be more about not being caught, as opposed to being safer on the roads. This highlights that what is perceived to be “safe” driving may not be safe at all. It may actually be unsafe (from a physical safety perspective), but by being invisible to the police it may lead to social safety. In the focus groups, participants conflated skilful driving with being safe and avoiding being caught breaking the law. In social marketing, understanding relative concepts of safety may be important in promoting safe driving behaviours. Moreover, understanding how to respond to being pulled over by police is important in the Vietnamese cultural context where an orderly society is a foundation social principle.

Similarly, technical infrastructure was seen by groups as a major reason to justify their unsafe or illegal driving behaviours: poor road conditions, excessive traffic, unsecured road construction sites, poor signage, lack of divisions for motorcycles and larger vehicles and street flooding were cited as motivations for breaking the law. It was seen as infeasible to comply with the law when there were so many barriers to doing so. To comply with the law could bring a flooded, crowded and busy city to a standstill [...] “The business of life must go on”.

Whether one should obey the law (injunctive norms) or follow what one sees as a socially appropriate choice, for example, driving on pavements when there is traffic congestion, seemed to be a minor issue to the focus group participants. This is particularly difficult when injunctive norms may be conflicted or competing, for instance, what one’s father or mother says one should do may not be consistent with the law. This is further exacerbated by inconsistent enforcement. For example, when a line of motorbike drivers ride on pavements to avoid a traffic jam area and no one is stopped or challenged, it is then not a surprise that participants considered this and other situational behaviours as a valuable part of their driving knowledge. What is most important here is the widely approved attitude of participants to such illegal driving behaviours. It is clear that descriptive norms, in this case, outweigh injunctive norms. This finding is consistent with the literature on social norms and social marketing in that individuals tend to exaggerate unhealthy or unsafe behaviour, which leads to the misperceived descriptive norms (Perkins, 2002). As mentioned in the introduction, the recent motorbike safe driving campaigns in Vietnam have tried to correct the misperceptions of the norms engendered by the perceived descriptive norms. However, in those campaigns, the level of activity was low in terms of scope and scale while messages were not frequently repeated and sources of information were often



Source: Snitow and Brennan (2011)

Figure 4.
The tripartite model
of behavioural
compliance for
effective social
marketing
campaigns

ambiguous. Additionally, there is no publicly available evaluation of the efficacy of these campaigns.

Descriptive norms develop within the social system

The focus group findings highlighted that the safe or unsafe driving behavioural norms were learned and imitated based on genders, particularly among young male adults. That is, young male motorbike drivers are more likely to have risky driving behaviours while they are with their fathers and less so while with their mothers. Mothers were more likely to exhort their children to behave legally at all times than fathers were. Fathers were more likely to be “pragmatic” and to encourage their children to learn how to work around traffic and other road safety issues. Perhaps, the Vietnamese masculine dominant culture allows certain levels of tolerance from the fathers to behaving in a risky manner to adhere to the social code of masculinity. In addition to that peer influence, although not clearly voiced in the high school group, seemed to play a role in encouraging unsafe driving behaviours. This was most evident in the other groups. In fact, newspapers in the country widely reported teenagers, both male and female, carrying more than one passenger on their motorbikes without helmets at high speed on the road (Anh, 2013b; Long, 2013; Pham, 2013). This has led to the tightening of motorbike bans at many high schools.

Conclusions and implications for social marketing

In this study, we attempted to understand the underlying social norms conducive to safe driving behaviours of motorbike drivers in Vietnam. We investigated the role of injunctive and descriptive norms because the research and application of social norms theories in motorcycle driving behaviour is scant; particularly in developing countries where motorbikes are often the primary means of transportation. We acknowledge that this research has limitations in its essentially exploratory form but we hope that this work will lay a theoretical background for future research in social norms and particular safe/unsafe driving behaviour. Norms-based strategies are often critical in social marketing campaigns (Cialdini, 2007) and researchers have urged campaigners to clearly understand and differentiate descriptive norms and injunctive norms underlying the problem behaviour to make the target audience susceptible (Rimal *et al.*, 2007).

Further research on the maladaptive aspect of acquiring descriptive norms across cultural settings and multiple demographics in the country is needed. This will provide more insights into motorbike drivers' behaviour, notably young adults, as the research found that they were perceived to be the most risky group. This finding is consistent with other research findings and road incident reports (Le and Blum, 2013). However, the maladaptive descriptive norms described by our groups are not helpful if they are the main method of acquiring knowledge and skill about road safety. If the general environment is not conducive to being safe, no amount of social marketing will overcome the problem.

The results of this research also suggest practical implications for social marketing campaigns in Vietnam in the field of road injury prevention. An important finding from this research is that descriptive norms (overt behaviours; what people actually do) outweigh injunctive norms (what people *should* do). As a consequence, social marketing campaigns will need to be cognisant that no amount of “telling” will resolve the problem

if people are still “doing” the thing being proscribed. To delineate the next step in developing a suitable social marketing campaign which takes into account the unique characteristics of Vietnam, further investigations into commonly held descriptive and injunctive norms is needed.

In addition, road safety as an issue seems to be self-evidently a “fear-message” with people being motivated to be safe from a physical risk perspective. Where does social marketing go when there are different types of safety at play with potentially mutually exclusive trade-offs being made? Social risk in this case may be more salient than physical risk.

Downstream social marketing of the indirect and semiotically obscure nature currently used is unlikely to make a difference. Messages focussed on legal compliance (injunctive norms) are less likely to be effective, given that there is sporadic and unreliable enforcement. Road law knowledge cannot be assumed, and what is known is regularly blurred with what is actually done by the majority of road users (descriptive norms). Road safety communication needs to be specific about laws, or the correct behaviours, and highlight potential benefits or reduced costs associated with following them. Communications that rationalise or demonstrate that safe driving behaviour is beneficial for *everyone* could potentially be more effective. For instance, demonstrating that stopping at the traffic lights reduces the likelihood of intersections being blocked and, therefore, traffic jams which result in *everyone* being delayed.

Furthermore, from a practical social marketing perspective, “safety” has no clear positioning in the Vietnam market place primarily, as safety is a multi-dimensional concept. Positioning safe driving as an alternative is difficult if all the safety messages lead to less mobility, less money and less social participation; in these circumstances, the potential benefits do not clearly outweigh the apparent costs. Given that social marketing in a developing country is contingent on government support and funding, gaining sufficient media weight to change behaviours will be problematic. However, as well-intentioned the [Vietnam Breweries Limited \(VBL\) \(2013\)](#) corporate social responsibility posters are, they are not powerful enough to motivate change (see the [Worldwide Brewing Alliance](#) website for examples of the VBL corporate social responsibility campaign and their widely distributed posters and billboards). Consequently, there is a strong need for a coherent campaign incorporating the whole marketing mix with campaign strategies based on a sound theoretical approach.

Norm activation theory, first proposed by [Schwartz \(1968\)](#), posits that personal (subjective) norms are motivating factors in social action whereby people are motivated to act (or not) based on their felt sense of obligation to act. Our research demonstrates that there is a long way to go before social marketing at an individual choice level can be effective; the individual has to accept that there is something they can and should do about the problem before they will take action.

In conclusion, social marketing can aim to shift attitudes, intentions and behaviours of individuals within the social setting. However, if the behaviours are based on descriptive norms that are in juxtaposition to the injunctive norms that social marketers seek to implement, the campaign will be destined to fail. Shifting descriptive norms becomes the greater challenge for social marketers looking to change deeply engrained, socially moulded, behaviours.

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About the authors

Duong Trong Hue is Lecturer in Centre of Communication and Design at RMIT University Vietnam. He teaches communication and contextual courses to undergraduate students. His research interests are in health communication and communication strategies in non-profit sector.

Linda Brennan is the Head of Centre, Commerce and Management at RMIT International University Vietnam where she is on secondment from the School of Media and Communication at RMIT in Melbourne. Her research interests are social and government marketing and especially the influence of marketing communications and advertising on behaviour.

Lukas Parker is an Assistant Professor in the Centre of Commerce & Management at RMIT University Vietnam. He lectures in advertising and marketing to undergraduate students and supervises postgraduate research students. His research interests are in social marketing and in marketing communications. Lukas Parker is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: lukas.parker@rmit.edu.vn

Michael Florian began working for the Asia Injury Prevention (AIP) Foundation as a consultant in early 2011 before he permanently joined the team. Based in HCMC, he is responsible for research, monitoring and evaluation in the countries where AIP Foundation is active. His work enables AIP Foundation to have a research-based approach and ensures the continuous improvement and effective localisation of programmes in different local and national contexts.

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