Kevin Kryston
Research Statement

Why do people watch what others watch and like what others like? To answer these questions, my research explicates the effect of social influences – namely social norms, the predominant and sanctioned behaviors shared within a group to which an individual belongs[1] – on media's appeal. In sum, my research suggests that social norms explain viewers' selection and enjoyment of content in public and private settings. My work has contributed to the field in two ways. First, the findings explicate ways group identity and belonging affect media appraisals, preferences, and subsequent media effects. Second, my research has supported and generated concrete predictions about social cue effects in a media setting and the implications of these effects. These predictions may eventually constitute a complete, nuanced theoretical model of social cue effects in the context of media. In this research statement, I describe my research program, discuss its implications, and preview future directions.

The first steps in my research program focused on establishing that norms influence media selection and enjoyment. Specifically, two studies examined normative influences predicting preferences for media featuring one's in-group and avoidance of media featuring out-group members. The first, which was published in *Psychology of Popular Media*, found that Asians' preference for films with Asian casts was explained by social norms, and the second, which is currently under review at a peer-reviewed journal, showed not only that men's and women's preference for films featuring a cast of the same gender is also explained by normative influence, but also highlighted nuanced ways in norms interact with gender identity. I am conducting additional studies stemming from these projects. The first, which is under review, helped determine the relative and interactive influence of norms versus content cues by examining whether injunctive norms explain audiences' avoidance of a film starring a censured actor (e.g., Kevin Spacey), even when that film is critically acclaimed. The second combines the perspectives of affective disposition theory, social identity theory, and social norms to explore ways that racial in- versus out-group characters are evaluated in narratives. This project is in its infancy, but my team has already discussed follow-up studies that apply other theoretical frameworks (e.g., TEBOTS model, norms approach) to improve out-group character evaluations.

Building on these findings, I also explored whether norms influence audiences' enjoyment. The first study in this line (published in *Mass Communication & Society*) was an online experiment wherein participants watched a pretested trailer for a low-quality 'bad' movie and saw a norm cue indicating whether others liked or disliked the film, or saw no normative information. Results showed that enjoyment co-varied with norm cues: those told that others liked the film enjoyed the trailer more than those told that others did not like it. A follow-up study further explored the mechanisms of the effects, demonstrating that norm cues affect narrative appraisal processes by reinforcing or conflicting with narrative cues. For example, others' positive opinions seem to make thought-provoking or unengaging ('bad') films more enjoyable. By contrast, when norms conflict with narrative appeal (e.g., finding out that friends hate a movie you liked), enjoyment decreases while deliberation about the consumption experience increases. Other data collected as part of this project found that social and narrative cues interact to predict other outcomes, such as viewers' life satisfaction and participants' social sharing via a discussion board. I plan to explore the underlying mechanisms of social norm cue effects in a media context and the potential for social cues to foster inter- and intra-group discussion about content.

My research program has various theoretical, social, and practical implications. Theoretically, these projects demonstrate that norms play a key role in enjoyment, a conclusion that should excite media and social influence scholars alike. For media scholars, studying the norms

approach provides a route comprehensive framework by which to study how group consensus, specifically acceptable and sanctioned behaviors shared by an in-group, affects selection and enjoyment independently and in tandem with other influences (e.g., content cues, social identity). For social influence scholars, my work suggests that norms influence not only behaviors but also attitudes and affective responses by moderating media appraisal processes.

These theoretical implications come with various social and practical implications, but three are particularly noteworthy. First, my research on racial and gender norms reveals an important role of norms in in-group biases and potential bias correction. For example, my work examining gendered media preferences showed that men strongly prefer films with mostly male casts and abhor mostly female-cast films. However, men were more likely to watch female-cast films when others approved of them watching. The result shows norms' ability to inhibit or facilitate diverse media palates. My ongoing projects include an examination of in- versus out-group character evaluations and norm effects, and I plan to explore these and other avenues to use norms and narratives to mitigate out-group bias in the context of race, gender, and politics.

Second, normative influence might be heavily linked to viral sensations, bandwagon effects[3], and viewers' gravitation toward media based on group belonging (e.g., Catholics watching *Passion of The Christ*). The perception that most others in their group (e.g., one's social network, moviegoers, Catholics, respectively) watch certain content may lead individuals to consume that content based on a need for belonging or fear of sanctions. If so, my research can help marketers, content creators, and industry professionals better promote their products by understanding social and content cues' impact on media appeal. Third, the creation and effects of media-related norms on production and consumption trends within a culture or morality subculture[2] merit attention.

I have identified three paths for my research program. First, a series of studies will further explicate the role of social norm cues in narrative processing by determining (1) the characteristics of social norm cues, (2) how they moderate narrative perceptions, especially those associated with the satisfaction or thwarting of moral values, and appraisals, and (3) the effects of normative influence in a media context. Second, my work has examined norms as an informational cue (i.e., other people watched the film, so it must be a good idea), but future work will integrate norms messages communicating social rewards or punishment (i.e., my friends watched this film, and if I don't, I'll be ostracized). In this vein, scholars suggest that creating and maintaining meaningful relationships is intrinsically rewarding[4], central to self-concept and self-esteem[5], and serves basic evolutionary and metabolic functions[6][7]. Since norms communicate the potential to maintain or lose group relationships with others, studying the potential social sanctions associated with norms can illuminate how adhering to norms can improve individuals' well-being. Third, content analyses and field experiments will determine the impact of norm cues such as online reviews and crowded theaters on selection and enjoyment in real-world settings.

As a final note, I am a curious, enthusiastic researcher who values mentorship and collaboration. My CV includes collaborative projects studying entertainment phenomena such as reactions to narratives and whether spoilers influence selection and enjoyment, and social influence research that applied norms to promote prosocial behaviors (e.g. vaccination, sustainable pet adoption). Likewise, I was a research mentor for graduate and undergraduate students at Michigan State, and advise undergraduate honors projects at Sam Houston State. However, whether I am working on my research program or with others, my emphasis on theoretical and methodological diversity and rigor, collaboration, and mentoring demonstrate that I can help students, pursue funded collaboration opportunities, and regularly publish meaningful research.

References

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