

Is the Follower the Leader?

How the First Follower Establishes the Social Norm in Sequential Behavior

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Abstract

Our research examines how social norms are determined in a sequential choice setting. When people in groups make decisions sequentially, they are conforming to social norms as they develop. We show that the social norm is determined by the behavior of the second person (i.e. the first follower) relative to the first person (i.e. the leader). In Study 1, we use a secondary data set of online reviews to demonstrate that group variation in review valence depends on the comparison of the first follower's review relative to the leader's review. In Study 2, we replicate the findings in an experimental setting and show that perceptions of a social norm mediate the effect of the first follower on within-group variation. In a restaurant field study, we show that people either order to fulfill uniformity or variety depending on the behavior of the first follower relative to the group leader. When the first follower chooses similarly (differently) to the leader, the rest of the group seeks uniformity (variety). Implications for research and practice are discussed.

Keywords: sequential choice, social norms, self-presentation, variety, sentiment analysis