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Normative Influence of Citizen Participation: Increasing Positive Evaluation of Trash Cans

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Abstract

Citizen participation is a widely used tool by national and local governments to increase acceptability of projects that tackle contemporary challenges (Van Hoesel & Van Engelenburg, 2023). This has shown to increase project acceptability among participants of the participation process (Liu et al., 2019), but how does it affect people that did not participate? This research investigates whether a message about citizen participation can function as a social heuristic that increases people's positive evaluation of the outcome and their interest to join a cleaning activity. This was tested in an experimental design in which bypassers could evaluate a trash can. People were either prompted with a simple message about the new trash cans (control condition) or with information about a participation process (experimental condition). Results for the evaluation of the trash can revealed no significant difference between the experimental and control condition, indicating that providing little information about the participation process is not sufficient for achieving a positive effect on the evaluation of the trash can. The opposite effect was found for people's interest in joining a cleaning activity where people in the control condition had more interest into joining a cleaning activity than people in the experimental condition. These results indicate that limited communication about citizen participation does not yield positive effects and can even be counterproductive.

Key words: Citizen Participation, Social Proof, Evaluation, Communication, Injunctive Norms

Normative Influence of Citizen Participation: Increasing Positive Evaluation of Trash Cans

Citizen participation is becoming a more common instrument for policy-makers to increase legitimacy of the policy-making process, identify problems that would otherwise go unnoticed and creating a sense of ownership and responsibility among the public (Van Hoesel & Van Engelenburg, 2023). The municipality of Groningen employed citizen participation for choosing a design for a new trash can for the city center. This is in line with the larger renewal plan, *ruimte voor jou* (see www.ruimtevoorjou.groningen.nl/en/ for more info), of the city center where citizen participation was one of the key components.

In the field of environmental/social psychology few research exists on how people perceive citizen participation and whether it can enhance project acceptability (Liu et al., 2019; Liu et al, 2021). This study wants to expand on this research and look at the communication about citizen participation as a social heuristic. For the municipality of Groningen valuable insights can be generated for how to communicate about their efforts to involve citizens in the decision-making process.

For the design of the new trash cans for the city center of Groningen a participation process was employed. It is likely that those that participated in the participation process are more satisfied with the final design, but what about people that did not participate? Are people who are informed about participation of others in the design process more satisfied with the final design?

Theoretical Background

Citizen Participation

When people are informed about the participation of others it may influence them depending on how beneficial they think citizen participation is for societal developments. How beneficial the participation process can be to societal developments does not only

depend on the alignment of the outcome and the interests of the stakeholders that are part of the participation process. For example, positive side-effects of participation can be the increased trust among participants of the participation process (Schroeter et al., 2016), voluntary contributions to public goods in a public good game increases when citizen's participation for choosing a public good is employed (Centofanti & Murugesan, 2022), or higher project acceptability when participants have more influence over specific aspects of a renewable energy project (Liu et al., 2019). In sum, when participants feel that they have influence over a decision-making process, it can increase their satisfaction with the outcome.

Apart from the benefits of citizen participation for the participants, it can also influence the perception of people that do not participate in the process itself (i.e. the broader public or public opinion). For example, decision-making processes for wind energy projects in the USA were perceived as fairer, by those not involved in the consultation, when residents were consulted and their opinions were incorporated into the final decisions as compared to only being informed (Firestone et al., 2018), trust in a municipal government was higher among participants who were informed about citizen participation for the formulation of energy policies than among participants who were not informed (Boulianne, 2018), and public support for climate change policies increases when citizen participation in the form of a citizen assembly is employed (Kuntze & Fesenfeld, 2021). Thus, citizen participation can result in positive outcomes, ranging from increased trust to increased policy support.

The effects of citizen participation can rely on the form/method that is used to involve citizens in the decision-making process and the degrees of influence that the participants have. The different forms of citizen participation are often categorized on Arnstein's (1969) ladder of participation, which originally consists of eight steps but was simplified to four steps: no influence, little influence, shared influence and full influence (Liu et al., 2021). In most scientific literature, it is found that the less influence people have, the lower policy

acceptability is. For example, if designing a participation process is limited to information provision (no influence), it could backfire and result in a decrease in policy acceptability (Colvin et al., 2016; Terwel et al., 2012). On the other hand, Liu et al. (2021) found that there were no significant differences in policy acceptability between two different degrees of public participation¹ (i.e. shared influence and full influence). Here, shared influence was a collaborative final decision with residents and employees of the energy company and full influence was a final decision made only by the residents. Overall, there seems to be a difference between having influence on decision making (shared influence and full influence) and only providing input or receiving information (no influence and little influence). An interesting question arises about how this distinction affects people that did not participate in the participation process. Therefore, this study will compare providing information about citizen participation to not providing information about citizen participation to people that were never involved in the participation process. In this way, it can be investigated whether the communication about citizen participation can function as a social heuristic.

Social Proof

The influence that information about citizen participation can have on people's evaluation of the outcome can be explained by the social proof principle. The social proof principle posits that if other people do something, it serves as evidence that it is the appropriate behaviour and consequently one mimicks the behaviour (Cialdini, 2009). For example, when participants are prompted with a message that the majority of hotel guests reuse their towels, it increases the likelihood that participants also reuse their towels (Goldstein et al., 2008). This social proof effect is also found when people evaluate products and share their opinion rather than performing a behaviour. People give more positive

¹ The authors referenced used 'public' instead of 'citizen' before participation. In this paper the term citizen participation is used, but public participation refers to the same method, namely the active involvement of citizens in decision-making processes, allowing them to contribute to decisions (Baum, 2001).

evaluations of hotels if other people evaluate the hotel positively (Sridhar & Srinivasan, 2012) and Facebook-users give more positive evaluations of organic food after reading positive comments about it (Hilverda et al., 2018). When people read/see information about citizen participation in the design process for a trash can, it communicates that a group of people actively participated in achieving the outcome and chose that outcome. Accordingly, it may be inferred that the participants of the participation process evaluate the outcome positively, otherwise they would not have chosen it. This can be perceived as social proof for evaluating the outcome positively.

Furthermore, it is found that if the observed people are part of one's ingroup the social proof effect is stronger (Stangor et al, 2001). In other words, if citizens of Groningen learn that their fellow citizens participated in designing adjustments to the city center, or more specific, a new trash can, they are more likely to be influenced by that behaviour.

All in all, we expect that when people (that did not participate in the process itself) perceive the citizen participation as a positive evaluation of the outcome it can increase their positive evaluation of the outcome. The act of citizen participation does not necessarily mean that the participants of the participation process evaluated the final outcome positively, but we expect that this is implicitly communicated by the message about citizen participation. So, for the evaluation of a certain product, in this study a trash can, I expect that people will evaluate the trash can more positively if they are informed about a participation process that preceded the design of the trash can. Thus, the first hypothesis is that *communicating about participation of other citizens in designing a trash can, increases positive evaluation of that trash can (H1)*.

Injunctive Norms

The participation in designing a trash can may not only show that people positively evaluate a trash can, but also signal that other people think a clean environment is important,

or that it is important to participate in community activities. Research shows that when people observe behavior that shows care for a clean environment the likelihood of littering decreases (Cialdini et al., 1991), even when this care is signaled via a message rather than observed behavior (Merkelbach et al., 2021). One study found that messages that communicate norms via the design of a trash can decrease littering behaviour by 50 % and this applied to messages that included implicit and explicit norms (De Kort et al., 2008). This means that communication about citizen participation, signalling an implicit norm about what people think is important, can induce similar behaviours if people interpret it as a group of people that care for a litter-free environment.

For injunctive norms the effect, similar to the social proof principle, tends to be larger when the norms are displayed by the participants' reference group. Smith and Louis (2008) found that participants in their study were more influenced by normative information if the information concerned the opinions and behaviors of other students of their own university as compared to other students of a different university. In the current research this is taken into account by emphasizing that citizens of Groningen were involved in the participation process and the expectation is that most participants are also residents of Groningen.

Thus, a message about citizen participation of fellow citizens could induce normative behaviour that aligns with the care for a litter-free environment. Consequently, the care for a litter-free environment can also be signified by people's interest to participate in a clean-up activity, rather than observing the actual behaviour. Therefore, I propose a second hypothesis: *communicating about participation of other citizens in the design of the trash can results in higher interest to participate in a cleaning activity (H2).*

Methods

Background

In a current renewal plan for the city center the municipality of Groningen employed citizen participation for the design of new public trash cans. Bypassers were able to give suggestions for how the trash can could be changed. In terms of the participation ladder by Arnstein (1969), this meant that they had ‘little influence’ in the participation process. However, the actual manipulation in this study framed the citizen participation as ‘shared influence’ by saying that the trash cans were codesigned by citizens of Groningen.

The trash can that figured in the current study is not the final result of the participation process. In other words, the suggestions that were made by bypassers in the participation process were not yet incorporated into the design of the trash can that was installed on the street where the surveys were conducted.

Participants

The sample consisted of 206 bypassers that were recruited in a shopping street in Groningen where the new trash can was installed. 7 participants had to be removed from the dataset due to unfinished surveys, so 199 participants remained. This number is approximately in line with the required number from the power analysis that was conducted. The effect size in a study by Liu et al. (2019) was $\eta^2=0.27$ and $\eta^2=0.10$, considered to be a small effect size, according to Cohen’s (1988) criteria. With an alpha = .05 and power = 0.80, the projected required sample size with this effect size was 205 to find a similar effect in the current research. The participants ranged in age from 17 to 77 ($M = 37.54, SD = 17.69$). The participants were individuals or groups of people who were approached by an interviewer. A group of people could only answer the questionnaire once to ensure independence of observations. Participants were excluded if they answered questions about the trash can before in the participation process or on the day before. The minimum age for participation is 16 years. Most participants were residents of Groningen ($N = 141, 71\%$) and the majority of the surveys were conducted in Dutch ($N = 166, 83\%$). Participation was on a voluntary basis.

Procedure

The surveys were conducted on a tablet on a street where a new trash can is installed. The location was an intersection of a pedestrian street and a bicycle street in Groningen (see figure 1). The data collection took place on two days, a Friday and a Saturday, to increase the likelihood of the presence of bypassers. The city center of Groningen is more crowded on those days and it is expected that bypassers are more likely to be there for leisure activities and willing to spend time on filling in a survey. Before the interviewing started the trash can was cleaned to guarantee an equal setting for both days. Before the interview, participants signed a consent form and were randomly assigned to either the control or experimental condition. When the questionnaire was finished by the participant, there was a debrief about the current state of the participation process. After an interview, the interviewer waited 30 seconds before approaching a new bypasser to ensure independence of observations.

Figure 1

Location of the Trash Can on the Zwanestraat



Measures

Independent variable

All participants were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions with the Qualtrics ‘randomizer’ option. In both conditions a message was displayed on the tablet before they started the questionnaire. In the control condition the participants received the message that the trash cans are new and part of the renewal plan for the city center of Groningen. This message was accompanied by a picture of the trash can at a different location. This picture was visible throughout the survey, but participants could also look at the trash can on the street, as they were filling in the survey standing next to the trash can. In the experimental condition additional information was provided about participation of other citizens: ‘the design of the new trash can is the outcome of a decision-making process in which citizens of Groningen participated’. The picture of the trash can at a different location was adjusted to emphasize the participation process, including a message that the trash can was ‘co-designed by citizens of Groningen’ (see Figure 2). Thus, the message about citizen participation communicated that participants of the participation process had ‘shared influence’. The manipulation is expected to work better if the participants are part of the same in-group (i.e. resident of Groningen), so this is checked by asking them if they are a resident of Groningen at the end of the questionnaire.

Figure 2

Photograph of Trash Can in the Experimental Condition



Dependent variables

Evaluation of trash can (H1) was measured on a 5-point Likert scale (completely disagree - completely agree) with 5 items for appearance and 3 items for usage of the trash can. The items are statements about the trash can and are similar to the questions that were asked to the citizens in the participation process of the design of the trash can. The value for Cronbach's Alpha of appearance was $\alpha = .70$ and for usage $\alpha = .68$. Examples are 'the trash cans are beautiful/the trash cans look easy to use'. The overall score for the evaluation of the trash can is an average of all the items for appearance and usage and the higher the score the more satisfied participants are with the trash can. The value for Cronbach's Alpha of the overall scale was $\alpha = .76$.

Interest to join cleaning activity (H2) was measured with 2 items on a 7-point scale ranging from *completely disagree* to *completely agree*. The cleaning activity described in the scale is a country-wide event that is organized by a Dutch organization that tries to increase awareness about littering. Participants get the following statements: 'I am interested in the national cleaning day' and 'I plan to join the national cleaning day in the future'. The items are adapted from a study on community energy initiatives (Sloot et al., 2019) and the value for Cronbach's Alpha was $\alpha = 0.69$. The phrasing is adjusted to make it apply to the national cleaning day. The score for *interest to join cleaning activity* is the average of the 2 items and the higher the score the more interest the participant has to join the national cleaning day.

Results

Hypothesis 1

Preliminary analyses

The homogeneity of variances was checked for *Evaluation of Trash Can* with a Levene's test and was met ($F = .785, p = .377$). Observation of a QQ-plot gives no cause to question the normal distribution of the variable.

In Table 1 an overview of the means of all the items of the *Evaluation of trash can* variable can be found. For most items the respondents had higher scores in the experimental condition. The only items where this was not the case were the question whether the trash can stands out and whether it is hygienic.

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations for the Items of the Evaluation of Trash Can Variable

	Control	Experimental
	M (SD)	M (SD)
Beautiful	2.91 (1.02)	3.05 (.95)
Recognizable	3.60 (1.03)	3.71 (.99)
Stands out	2.76 (.96)	2.69 (.87)
City center	3.63 (.98)	3.67 (.85)
Groningen	3.16 (1.00)	3.21 (.86)
Easy to use	3.67 (1.11)	3.69 (1.12)
Inviting	3.25 (.99)	3.40 (.97)
Hygienic	3.33 (1.06)	3.30 (1.05)

Note: M= mean, SD= standard deviation.

Main analyses

To see whether the first hypothesis (i.e. *communicating about participation of other citizens in designing a trash can, increases positive evaluation of that trash can (H1)*) can be confirmed an independent samples t-test was carried out for the *Evaluation of trash can* variable. Table 3 shows that the experimental group ($M = 3.36, SD = .61$) scored higher than the control group ($M = 3.31, SD = .64$) and), but this was not a significant difference, $t(197)=-.57, p = .568$. Also, it represented a very small effect size, $r = .04$. This means that we have to reject the first hypothesis.

An additional t-test was carried out with an adjusted *Evaluation of trash can* variable. In the overall score the item with the question that asks whether the trash can stands out is left out for several reasons. First, during the data collection some participants commented that they would perceive the trash can more positive if it does not stand out. Esthetically, it would be better if the trash can fits into the architectural design of the city center, according to one participant. Second, it is the only item that has a higher score in the control group than in the experimental group (see Table 1). Third, for the appearance scale Cronbach's α would increase if the item on standing out is left out. If the adjusted *Evaluation of trash can* variable is used for comparison the difference becomes larger between the control group ($M = 3.36$, $SD = .66$) and the experimental group ($M = 3.43$, $SD = .60$), but it is still not significant, $t(197) = -.77, p = .44$. It also still represents a very small effect size, $r = .05$

Hypothesis 2

Preliminary analyses

The homogeneity of variance assumption was not met for the *Interest to join cleaning activity* variable ($F = 10.98, p = .001$). Furthermore, a Kolmogorov-Smirnov test indicates that the experimental and the control condition do not follow a normal distribution, $D(100) = .150, p < .001$ (control group) and $D(99) = .164, p < .001$ (experimental group). The violation of the homogeneity of variances and the normality distribution problematizes the interpretation of the results for the *Interest to join cleaning activity* variable.

In Table 2 an overview of the means of the items of the *Interest to join cleaning activity* variable can be found

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations for the Items that are Part of the Interest to Join Cleaning Activity Variable

	Control	Experimental
	M (SD)	M (SD)
Interest	5.46 (2.36)	4.85 (1.55)
Future	4.83 (2.40)	4.33 (1.71)

Note: M= mean, SD= standard deviation.

Main Analyses

An independent samples t-test was carried out for the *Interest to join cleaning activity* variable to test the hypothesis whether *communicating about participation of other citizens in the design of the trash can result in higher interest to participate in a cleaning activity (H2)*. The difference between the control group ($M = 5.15$, $SD = 2.02$) and the experimental group ($M = 4.59$, $SD = 1.49$) was significant, $t(197) = 2.20$, $p = .03$, with a small effect size, $r = 0.15$, but in the opposite direction that was hypothesized. This means that we have to reject the second hypothesis as well. However, the assumptions of the homogeneity of variances and normal distribution were violated, which makes the interpretation of the results troublesome. Simulation studies have shown that an independent samples t-test is robust to violations of the assumption of normality (Rasch & Guiard, 2004; Pagano, 2010; Wilcox, 2012), but because the assumption of the homogeneity of variances is also violated a non-parametric test was conducted. Non-parametric tests make fewer assumptions and are suitable to overcome problems with the shape of the distribution of data (Field, 2013).

A Mann-Whitney test also showed that the interest to participate in a cleaning activity in the control group ($Mdn = 5.5$) was significantly higher than the experimental group

($Mdn = 4.5$), $U = 3999.5$, $z = -2.35$, $p = .019$, $r = -0.17$. This still means that we have to reject the second hypothesis, but it gives more evidence that there is an opposite effect.

Table 3

Means and Standard Deviations of Satisfaction with trash can and Interest to join cleaning activity for Control Group and Experimental Group

	Control	Experimental
	M (SD)	M (SD)
<i>Satisfaction with trash can</i>	3.31 (.64)	3.36 (.61)
(H1)		
<i>Interest to join cleaning activity</i> (H2)	5.15 (2.02)	4.59 (1.49)

Exploratory analyses

Of the 199 participants, 141 (72,36 %) were residents of Groningen and 58 reported that they were visitors. When only the residents of Groningen (N=141) are included in the sample the experimental group ($M = 3.36$, $SD = .60$) scores higher than the control group ($M = 3.31$, $SD = .62$) for the *Satisfaction with trash can* variable. However, this was remained not significant, $t(139) = -.48$, $p = .635$. For the *Interest to join cleaning activity* the control group ($M = 4.98$, $SD = 2.0007$) scored higher than the experimental group ($M = 4.47$, $p = 1.57$), but it was not significant, $t(139) = 1.67$, $p = .097$), in contrast with the main analysis.

Discussion

In this study we investigated the influence of a message about citizen participation on the evaluation of a trash can and participants' interest to join a cleaning activity. We expected that *communicating about participation of other citizens in designing a trash can, increases positive evaluation of that trash can (H1) and increases interest to participate in a cleaning*

activity (H2). We extended the previous research on the effects of citizen participation by experimentally testing its normative influence on people that did not participate in the participation process itself.

We failed to find evidence for confirming the first hypothesis. There can be several explanations for this. First, providing only a brief message about citizen participation might not function as a social heuristic if limited details about the participation process are shared. Earlier research found that citizen participation is not necessarily beneficial to people's attitude towards the outcome and can even backfire (Colvin et al., 2016; Terwel et al., 2012). Even though the manipulation signified shared influence for the citizens of Groningen, the limited amount of information about the participation process could have made people skeptical. Consequently, this might have nullified the potential beneficial effect. Individuals can either have negative or positive experiences with citizen participation, which might determine how they are influenced by a message about citizen participation. As this can work in both directions the potential effect of a message about citizen participation wears down.

Second, the perceptions that participants have about the municipality of Groningen could have played a role in distrusting the message about a participation process. In previous research trust in the executing agent did not affect the increase of policy acceptability caused by citizen participation (Liu et al, 2019), but the information about the participation process contained more details than in this study. However, trust was found to be associated with policy acceptability if citizen participation did not play a role (Liu et al., 2022). Past experiences with the municipality of Groningen could have affected trust and result in a suspicious attitude towards the good intentions of the municipality. As the manipulation did not share details about the degree of influence given to participants of the participation process, people with low trust in the municipality could have expected that little influence was granted to them.

Third, previous research on citizen participation mostly covered topics that were more impactful to participants than the design of trash cans. Topics ranged from wind turbine projects (Firestone et al., 2018; Colvin et al., 2016), Carbon Capture Storage projects (Terwel et al., 2012), solar panel projects (Liu et al., 2019) to moving the university buildings (Liu et al., 2021). People could think that deciding what the trash can looks like is not very impactful to citizens' lives, which makes a participation process superfluous. Therefore, participants could have been less sensitive to information about the participation process. It was found that cultural differences play a role in the size of the effect of citizen participation on project acceptability: people in China were more influenced by information about citizen participation than people in the Netherlands (Liu et al., 2019). The authors explained this by pointing to the lack of public participation in the recent past in the Chinese society, whereas in the Netherlands it is taken for granted for a longer time. Consequently, Dutch people might tend to think that a participation process for a trash can is more superfluous than for a wind turbine park next to their house.

Fourth, the effect of communicating about citizen participation depended partly on viewing the participants of the participation process as ingroup members performed. In this study this was manipulated by mentioning that the participants of the participation process were 'citizens of Groningen'. This was checked by asking whether the participant was a resident or a visitor of Groningen. The main analysis was run on both visitors and residents of Groningen, but when the analysis was run on the residents of Groningen only, it produced the same non-significant results. Thus, it is questionable whether participants who were citizens of Groningen really identified with the participants of the participation process.

Finally, the manipulation could have lost strength, because participants only focused on the trash can that they were standing next to, rather than the picture of the trash can

containing the message about citizen participation. By doing this, the message about citizen participation could have become less salient, reducing the social proof effect.

We also failed to find evidence for our second hypothesis (*communicating about participation of other citizens in the design of the trash can result in higher interest to participate in a cleaning activity*). Interestingly, the opposite effect was found where the experimental group had a significant lower score on the *interest to join cleaning activity* variable. In other words, when the participants were prompted with a message about citizen participation it decreased their interest in joining a cleaning activity.

An explanation for the rejection of the second hypothesis might be the counter effect of moral licensing on a group level. Originally, moral licensing is the mechanism where one inhibits their moral behaviour, because of performing moral behaviour in the past (Blanken et al, 2015). Having reached a moral balance, the individual does not feel the need to engage in more moral behaviour. Some have suggested that this can also occur on a group-level, which is coined social ingroup licensing (Lasarov & Hoffmann, 2018). Applied to this research, it can mean that participants perceived the engagement of citizens of Groningen in designing the new trash cans as a display of moral behaviour. This helped the in-group (i.e. citizens of Groningen) attain a moral balance, which inhibited participants' intentions to join a cleaning activity.

Second, previous research found that employing citizen participation can backfire (Colvin et al., 2016; Terwel et al., 2012) and this finding supports this. Perceptions of the agent that employs the citizen participation and perceptions of the degree of influence that participants in the participation process had can play a major role in nullifying the effect or even causing an adverse effect.

Theoretical implications

The rejection of the first hypothesis shows that the positive influence that a message about citizen participation has on people that did not participate in the participation process itself might be less functional than how it influences the participants of the participation process. This is not in line with previous research that did manage to find a positive influence of communication about citizen participation (Boulianne, 2018; Kuntze & Fesenfeld, 2021). Therefore, it weakens the claim that the effect of citizen participation as such has an obvious direction of influence.

The opposite effect that was found for the second hypothesis is in line with research that reported a backfiring effect of citizen participation (Colvin et al., 2016; Terwel et al., 2012). Interestingly enough, the manipulation in this study framed the degree of citizen participation as giving ‘shared influence’ to the participants of the participation process, which was not the case in the research that reported a backfiring effect. The participation process in those studies granted little or no influence to participants, whereas this study communicated that participants of the participation process had shared influence on the outcome. Liu et al. (2021) suggested that if people are consulted and their input is disregarded, it can be perceived as ‘fake’ participation. The backfiring effect that was found in this study suggests that even if the degree of influence is at ‘shared influence’, implementing citizen participation and not properly communicating about it could be counterproductive.

Practical implications

The findings of this research provide governmental institutions with valuable information. When large projects are developed that implement citizen participation as a key component of the process, like the renewal plan of the city center of Groningen, it is important to not communicate about this with only a simple message. Simply mentioning that citizen participation was part of the process does not have an effect. Therefore,

municipalities/local governments should consider to communicate about the citizen participation projects in a more extensive manner to exploit its beneficial effects exhaustively.

For the municipality of Groningen specifically, not finding an effect of citizen participation means that they should reconsider how to communicate about their citizen participation efforts. There are multiple means they use to share how they implement citizen participation for the renewal plan of the city center. For example, they designed a website (<https://ruimtevoorjou.groningen.nl/>) that gives information about the citizen participation process. However, the degree of influence that participants of the participation process are granted is not specified. They mention that citizens can 'join the conversation' and that comments are taken into consideration and implemented into the overall plan if possible (Gemeente Groningen, n.d.). For people that do not take part in the participation process this information does not make a difference or can even be counterproductive, based on the current research findings. Instead, the municipality should reconsider the degree of influence that is granted in the participation process or scale down on their communication efforts.

In sum, this research provides an interesting insight on how one should not communicate about citizen participation. How one should communicate and what degree of citizen participation is desirable are beyond the scope of the current research project.

Directions for future research

From the current research project a few directions for future research can be distilled that can help in institutions to improve the methods they employ in developing projects.

First, if one explanation for the null effect is the limited degree of details that were shared about the participation process, a future direction for research could be to investigate whether providing more details with social cues can induce an effect. For example, sharing the opinions of the participants of the participation process and thereby revealing what they think of the outcome could induce more normative influence. This could be a message about a

participant evaluating the outcome positively by giving it a grade. Furthermore, sharing details about the nature of the participation process can be an additional factor that is worthwhile to investigate. In this study it was decided to leave out information about the participation process to investigate whether a simple message about citizen participation could already have a normative effect.

Second, future research should pursue to strengthen the in-group manipulation by first, emphasizing that citizens of Groningen are part of the same in-group as the one that the participants are part of and second, asking to what degree they identify with being a citizen of Groningen. For example, Groningen has a high population of students of whom a majority comes from outside of Groningen city, but are residents of Groningen. These people might identify with citizens of Groningen to a lesser degree than people who have lived here for a longer period.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study is the first attempt to experimentally study the normative influence a message about citizen participation can have. Interestingly enough, the beneficial effects that were expected were not found and for the interest to participate in a cleaning activity even an adverse effect was reported. This provides evidence for local and national governments that simple communication about citizen participation is not automatically an improvement to the public perception of the outcome of a project. Instead, there should be careful consideration about how the participation process is executed and how it is communicated to the population at large.

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