A Room with a Viewpoint: Using Social Norms to Motivate Environmental Conservation in Hotels presented by Amin Javari and Hecheng Sun on March 11th, 2020

Professor started the discussion during the result section of the first experiment. According to the authors of the paper, they only record guests' first eligible day of participation because they do not want a guest participating in the experiment more than once. The reason for this decision, according to Professor Sundaram, is to avoid the situation that the final result skews toward the guests who stay multiple days in the hotel.

The next thing that the professor pointed out on the histogram is that the graph may exaggerate the difference between the traditional and the new approach by not starting the y-axis from zero.

On the slides talking about the shortcoming of experiment 1's result, there is a discrepancy between the 75% that the card seller's original claim and the 35.1% that the authors actually got from the experiment. Besides the two explanations from the paper, the Professor and other students gave an additional potential explanation. That is, the card sellers lied about the actual reuse rate so that hotels are more willing to buy the cards.

The class also discussed the structural difference between the two experiments. The motivation of the first experiment is that all previous studies on social norms are all lab experiments. To show the effectiveness of social norms, the author conducted the first experiment as a field experiment. However, in the second experiment, the authors conducted a lab experiment again, without even acknowledging this difference. In fact, the difference in the experiment settings can lead to inaccurate conclusions.

Later, when Amin connected the content of this paper to some data mining techniques, professor Sundaram pointed out that while the experiment in the paper can explain causality, the models Amin described rely on correlation. That is, the importance of context has been investigated in correlation-based models (indeed, data mining techniques are mostly correlation-based models, designed for prediction), however, the paper studies the importance of context from the causality perspective. In practice, many CS students mix correlation and causation when doing their research and treat correlation as causation.

Additionally, even though causation is more important and useful than correlation in many tasks, correlation can also be beneficial when making predictions.

At the end of the presentation, the professor gave some thoughts on the connection between this paper with Tversky & Kahneman's papers about persuasion discussed previously. The most crucial difference is that the towel reuse program/experiment focuses on distance, non-exclusive reward, which aims to motivate environmental conservation while Tversky's paper focuses on exclusive immediate reward and targets consumption. Moreover, it can be said that Goldstein's paper relies on expensive field experiments, which makes the paper quite valuable.

Moreover, professor Sundaram mentioned the role of computer science in the context of social science. For computer scientists, it is crucial to create infrastructures to make social scientists do what they want to do. In fact, conducting field experiments is very expensive in social science. However, computing has also changed our life and makes communication cost almost zero, so we can have a better understanding of how people make decisions.

Also, one student mentioned that the content of the reuse signs used in the experiments did not follow the same structure, which could influence the results of the experiment.

Professor also pointed out that the critical difference between the video at the beginning of the presentation and the experiments in the paper is that all decisions made by the participants in the paper are private decisions, while the decisions in the video are non-private. One student pointed out that if the decisions are revealed, the result might be reversed.

Professor proceeded to give the class some open-ended questions:

1. What if the norm is negative? In other words, how people would respond if they realize other people in a similar situation have chosen not to adhere to a certain behavior.
We think in such situations, the response of the target individual depends on the similarity of the individual to the reference group. In fact, if the similarity is negative, this negative norm indeed can motivate the individual to adhere to the norm. However, if the similarity is positive, it may encourage the individual not to follow the norm.

2. What percentage of adherence to the norm do we need among the reference group for its effectiveness? That is, how the popularity of the target norm among the reference group can contribute to the adherence level of target individuals? We think again the level of popularity depends on the context. For example, for a certain norm and a certain reference group, even small popularity can create substantial motivation in the target individual.

Also, the professor pointed out that our identities are very fluid and change with respect to different situations and mentioned that indeed the notion of fluid identity is aligned with the discussion of the paper where it was emphasized that our identities have different importance/information in different situations.

Some students also gave some thought on how the ideas of this paper parallel people's reactions to COVID-19.