

Social Norms Theory and Public Health Communication Research: Case Studies of Food-Related Behavioral Changes

A Review of Professor Li Zhenyi's Lecture at MHM 2025

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On July 11, 2025, MHM2025 invited Professor Li Zhenyi from Royal Roads University to deliver a summer course lecture. Titled “Social Norms Theory and Public Health Communication Research: Case Studies of Food-Related Behavioral Changes”, the lecture was both academically profound and practically valuable. Focusing on the core proposition that “the core of health communication is behavioral change”, the lecture systematically explained the application logic of social norms theory in public health communication by integrating cross-cultural empirical research, theoretical model construction and specific case analysis. It provided a new perspective for understanding the complexity of food-related behaviors and formulating effective health intervention strategies.

At the beginning of the lecture, Professor Li clearly pointed out that the goal of health communication is behavioral change. Based on his own academic background, he shared the medical policies and life cultures of Canada and other countries in combination with the “KAB” (Knowledge-Attitude-Behavior) theoretical framework. Through vivid life experiences and practical knowledge, he elaborated: In health

communication, attention should be paid to the policy background in the real environment and the cultural backgrounds of different groups; as an important part of culture, social norms have an influence that cannot be ignored.

To further illustrate, Professor Li took the question “What is missing from Swiss food museums” as an example. He noted that the food industry has undergone continuous evolution in the development of human society, and has subtly yet profoundly formed a complex industrial structure. However, the exhibitions in museums focus on the presentation of the food industry chain, the display of food ingredients or the demonstration of cooking skills, while ignoring the social significance carried by the behavior of “dining” and this is exactly the core of cultural differences in people’s cognition of food.

After establishing the viewpoint “behavioral change is the core”, the lecture shifted its focus to “food” as a special carrier. Starting with the common saying “Food is the paramount necessity of the people”, Professor Li raised the key question “What exactly is food” He pointed out that besides the basic need of satisfying hunger, people’s food intake behavior involves more social and cultural factors, and different purposes of eating behavior can be analyzed by different theoretical models. Later, the professor pointed out that “we should focus on the functions of culture rather than the content of culture”. In health communication, food is a complex symbol connecting nature, culture and society.

To systematically analyze the complexity of food-related behaviors, he proposed the “Food-Cuisine-Dining (FCD) Model”:

- Food: Refers to the material attributes of food, including the nutritional components, sources and safety of ingredients. It is the most basic carrier for the function of “satisfying hunger”.

- Cuisine: Represents the culturally coded cooking system, including ingredient matching, cooking skills, taste preferences, etc. It carries the function of “savoring” and cultural identity.

- Dining: Emphasizes the situational nature of food consumption, with the core function of “social interaction”. It is an important link for maintaining social relationships.

This model reveals the threefold logic of food choice: from meeting physiological needs, to pursuing sensory experience, and then to building social connections.

After analyzing the multiple dimensions of food, Professor Li continued to explain why social norms theory is chosen to study food-related behaviors. He pointed out that social norms are an important force determining whether a group will change its behaviors, while conventional food-related behaviors are usually not within the scope of moral and legal discussions. Therefore, social norms are more close to daily life and serve as a key starting point for health communication practices to focus on food-related behaviors.

To put the theory into practice, Professor Li took “discouraging the consumption of wild mushrooms in Western Hunan” as an example and conducted an in-depth analysis. Due to the humid climate, Western Hunan is rich in wild mushrooms, but

cases of poisoning caused by eating toxic mushrooms occur frequently every year. Although local governments and health departments have carried out many communication activities such as “identification of toxic mushrooms” and “risk warnings”, the effect is not satisfactory. The underlying reason is that the local residents’ behavior of eating wild mushrooms is not only related to “seeking freshness”, but also closely linked to social norms such as the traditional cognition of “local specialties” and “gifts from mountains”, as well as social habits like “neighborhood sharing”, “group dinners” and “peer pressure”. Previous communication efforts mostly focused on information transmission but ignored these deep-seated social norms.

At the end of the course, Professor Li also used a number of food-related cases to demonstrate the practical application value of social norms theory in health communication. For instance, The excessive consumption of milk tea by female college students is essentially because milk tea serves as both a “source of taste pleasure” and a “social symbol”. The large-scale discard of nutritious breakfast packs by primary school students reflects that the function of breakfast packs in satisfying hunger does not match the students’ taste preferences, and there is also the scenario of peer conformity in social interactions.

These cases all show the flexible application of social norms theory in different scenarios and emphasize the importance of customizing communication information according to specific groups. Only when the information is consistent with the cognition and social norms of the target group can it arouse resonance and promote

positive behavioral changes.

Centered on “behavioral change”, Professor Li lecture clearly demonstrated the application path of social norms theory in food-related health communication practices, following the academic context of “theoretical construction-empirical support-case analysis-practical application”. Its core enlightenment lies in, make good use of “social norms”: Compared with coercion or preaching, activating the descriptive norms and injunctive norms that match the audience can promote behavioral changes more naturally. And the key to health communication is not to “correct” differences, but to find “health consensuses” in culture and embed communication information into the local meaning system.