

The CHARM project

CHARM is an inter-disciplinary, collaborative research project funded by the RCUK Digital Economy Programme. It ran from September 2009 to February 2013 and involved the following academic contributors:

- Professor Ruth Rettie (Principal Investigator), Dr Tim Harries, Dr Kevin Burchell and Kavita Patel – Behaviour and Practice Research Group, Kingston University
- Dr Parisa Eslambolchilar (Co- Investigator), Dr Simon Walton and Richard Byrne – Computer Science Department, Swansea University
- Dr Matt Studley (Co- Investigator) and Simon Chambers – Department of Engineering, Design and Mathematics, University of the West of England

CHARM investigated whether the day-to-day behaviour of individuals can be changed by providing them with digital feedback on their own behaviour and that of others. It drew on the understanding that rather than being based on calculated choice, everyday practices are often influenced by social factors.

Research indicates that everyday practices are not always influenced by changes in attitudes or intentions but can sometimes be nudged in socially desirable directions by subtle forms of social influence. Some research suggests that this can be achieved by providing individuals with feedback on their levels of performance/consumption and that this effect is enhanced if feedback on the performance of a salient social group is also included. CHARM evaluated this approach by developing and testing non-invasive, low-cost digital technologies that facilitated the capture and feedback of individual and group information. The three CHARM studies were: 1) *The Home Energy Study*, which attempted to reduce domestic energy consumption; 2) *bActive*, which used a mobile phone app to attempt to increase walking, and 3) *iGreen*, which used a Facebook app to attempt to encourage more sustainable practices. The design and analysis of the studies used two main theoretical approaches:

1. The social norms approach

Developed in the 1980s in the US, the social norms approach attempts to influence behaviour by providing individuals with information about what most people do, or think should be done.

CHARM ran quasi-randomised controlled trials to measure the changes that occur when people are provided with feedback either about their own behaviour or about their own behavior and that of others. In addition, the CHARM research included interviews and focus groups that explored participants' responses to the feedback interventions.

2. Practice theory

Practice theory treats practices rather than individuals or societies as the primary unit of social analysis. Although authors differ on the issue, practices are generally understood as interlinked 'bundles' of behaviours, meanings, rules, things and skills. For example, the practice of doing the laundry includes rules (e.g. 'wash similar colours together'), things (e.g. washing machines), meanings (e.g. 'clean' and 'dirty') and skills (e.g. recognising that something is 'dirty'). CHARM employed practice theory as an analytical frame, using it to understand how participants responded to the digital interventions in the three studies.