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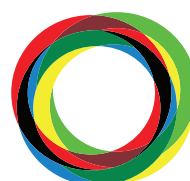
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Curriculum, Collateral and Collaboration: Addressing Alcohol and Social Norms in an Australian High School Setting

Kelly Andrews[1], Stephen Hudson[3], Hayley Dean[3], Danika Hall[2], Ashleigh Kunze[2], Sandra C Jones[1]

[1] Centre for Health and Social Research, Mary MacKillop Institute for Health, Australian Catholic University

[2] Centre for Health Initiatives, University of Wollongong

[3] Kiama High School, Kiama

Corresponding author:
Kelly Andrews
Centre for Health and Social Research

Mary MacKillop Institute for Health, Australian Catholic University
215 Spring St, East Melbourne, VIC, 3002
kelly.andrews@acu.edu.au

Aims and objectives

There is a commonly held perception that the majority of Australian teenagers drink alcohol, and a perceived 'social norm' among teenagers that their peers are drinkers and expect them to be drinkers. However, results of the Australian Secondary Schools Alcohol and Drug (ASSAD) Survey, conducted every three years since 1984, show a decline in the proportion of teenagers who are regular drinkers; from 30% of 12-15 year olds in 1984 to 11% in 2011, and 50% of 16-17 years olds in 1984 down to 33% in 2011 (White & Bariola, 2012).

The 'Alcohol and Social Norms Project' conducted in a municipal high school aims to correct misperceptions held by students and the school community regarding teenagers and alcohol and to foster an environment which supports young people's decisions not to drink. That is, this social norms campaign is based on the evidence that the harmful behaviour of underage drinking occurs far less than what most people believe; it is indeed these beliefs themselves which have been found to be the precursor to behavioural intention and behaviour (Azjen, 1981) which is the focus of this paper.

Behavioural Objectives and Target Group

The behavioural goal for the project was to reduce underage drinking by changing the perceived cultural acceptance of underage drinking. For behaviours that are high-involvement and planned, the precursor to behavioural change is attitudinal change and, informed by the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Azjen, 1981) thus the objective of the social norms curriculum was to impact on the behavioural and normative beliefs of young people in order to influence behaviour change. By engaging students and the school community in a comprehensive social marketing campaign supported by targeted strategies, the project aims to:

(1) Decrease the proportion that agree that it is okay to drink alcohol regularly by 10%; from 5.5% to 4.95%

(2) Decrease the proportion that agree that other teens think it is okay to drink alcohol regularly by 10%; from 23.6% to 21.24%

(3) Decrease the proportion that agree that adults in the community think it is okay for young people to drink regularly by 10%; from 10.5% to 9.45%.

The primary target group are students at a municipal high school in years seven through to ten (aged 12 – 16 years). The secondary target audiences are the broader school community, including parents. It is important to note that this project was one component of a broader whole-of-community intervention to address underage drinking using a social norms approach within the municipal area. This paper reports early findings of a long term strategy to reduce underage drinking.

Citizen/customer orientation

In 2013, comprehensive formative research and community consultation took place including a CATI survey (n= 610), online baseline survey (n=513), school survey (n=241), stakeholder interviews (n=9) and focus groups (four groups of teens (n= 27), two groups of parents of teens (n = 12) and two groups of community members (n=15).

A social norms approach attempts to correct widely held misperceptions about a behaviour (Perkins, 2003), in this case underage drinking. Our formative research demonstrated that all of the target audiences over-estimated the proportion of teens who drink alcohol. In our stakeholder interviews and focus groups, for example, most thought that between 50-80% of the town's 16-17 year-olds were drinkers (compared to the 33% reported by ASSAD in 2011). In our school survey only 39% of Year 11 students thought it was definitely ok to get drunk occasionally, but on average they believed that 77% of their peers thought it was definitely ok.

Key messages, images and taglines were tested in additional focus groups: seven with teens (n= 34), three with parents of teens (n=27) and two with community members (n=13) and these informed the social marketing strategies, including the social norms curricula and school/community communications campaign.

The Social Offering

The social offering is the development of a supportive culture and environment in which young people feel it is okay to not drink. The school-based components specifically provide students with the opportunity to engage with others and develop awareness of perceived and actual social norms in relation to underage drinking. The curriculum was designed to help students to develop knowledge and skills in an applied learning environment, including problem solving skills, reflective practice and critical thinking in relation to alcohol and social norms. Finally, elements of the curriculum such as role plays, case studies and building skills to refuse alcohol when offered, were designed to address control beliefs which are predicted to impact on their perceived behavioural control.

Academic researchers and the Head Teachers, 'Personal Development, Health and Physical Education' (PDHPE) and 'Secondary Studies' developed, implemented and evaluated the Alcohol and Social Norms Curriculum, "It's OK not to drink". Curricula were developed for Years 7 and 8 (combined) and Years 9 and 10 (combined) in 2013. The curricula included 10 lesson plans and accompanying resources and were taught in Term 1, 2014 in Health classes to all students in years 7-10 (n=738). Pre and post data was collected for this intervention as well as process data collected from students after each lesson. Teachers (n=6) from the PDHPE department also provided process evaluation data (via focus groups) at two time points throughout the teaching term.

Throughout the intervention, outdoor and convenience advertisements (which were part of the broader community campaign) featuring the messages: "Kiama Doesn't Support Underage Drinking" and "Stand Your Ground" were placed around the school grounds. Campaign posters (approx. 100) were placed in classrooms, offices, storerooms and on the back of toilet doors. The television in the school foyer displayed campaign images, taglines and messages and a large 'pop up' banner in the foyer also served as a prominent visual cue for the campaign's presence. Technology staff at the school enabled the campaign logo and tagline to become the default opening screen and screen saver on all school computers (n= 250). Finally, a comprehensive project website was established containing Fact Sheets and other links and resources; and a Facebook page for ongoing information, updates and, importantly, as a method for consumer involvement.

Teachers and project staff used the weekly school newsletter to regularly communicate social norms messages about teens and alcohol. Specific school initiatives, combined with local data, helped to personalise the information, making it relevant to students. For example, project staff delivered audio-visual presentations to both parents and students on Study Skills Days and Parent Information Nights throughout the year to reinforce social norms messages and de-bunk myths.

Engagement and Exchange

Key stakeholders critical to the success of the school implementation were (1) teachers within the PDHPE faculty, (2) administrative staff and (3) student leadership teams. The alliance of these stakeholders ensured timely execution of all aspects of the project and message credibility for the various target audiences. PDHPE teachers contributed to the development of the two 'Alcohol and Social Norms' curricula through faculty meetings facilitated by the head teacher. When the curricula were finalised, a more detailed briefing took place to provide teachers with further background about the social norms approach. School executive staff also supplied regular project information for inclusion in school newsletters, website links, emails for staff as well as mail outs for students.

The engagement of the Student Representative Council and the school's Volunteer Committee also ensured student participation in activities such as poster placement as well as an avenue for feedback to project staff about the relevance and acceptability of planned activities. One student is now a paid employee of the broader community project, assisting with community events and other campaign related activities.

Competition analysis

The pervasive marketing of alcohol brands in Australia creates a competitive environment in which to challenge the 'social norm'. Alcohol marketing aims to create strong brand identity (Casswell, 2004) and there is substantive evidence that children (and teens) both recall (Lieberman and Orlandi, 1987) and enjoy ads for alcohol (Grube, 1993). Today, young people are exposed to alcohol advertising through traditional television, magazine and billboard advertising but also social media pages, competitions, alcohol branded merchandise and sponsorship of sports events and music festivals, all of which play a central role in young people's lives and aspirations. The curriculum helped students to identify the influence of the alcohol industry on the drinking culture, and think critically about industry related marketing.

Competition also includes underage drinkers who promote the incorrect social norm that everyone drinks and who encourage their peers to drink. While the proportion of underage drinkers is declining, those who do drink are drinking more. The 2011 ASSAD survey reported that of those who had drunk alcohol in the previous twelve months, 36.2% did so at risky levels for short-term harm, up from 29.7% in 2008. The curriculum and school-based communication materials helped students to identify high-risk situations and develop skills to resist social pressure to drink.

Segmentation and Insight

The key market segments for this project were the municipal high school students in Yrs 7-10 and the broader school community, including parents. The CATI survey indicated that 73.3% of adults in the town think it is ok for a 16-year-old to have a sip of alcohol; 57.4% think it is ok for them to have a weak drink of alcohol, and 21.9% to have a full drink of alcohol. Data from focus groups identified that parents generally didn't support providing alcohol to teens to take to parties- however, they drew a distinction between this and 'sips and tastes' at home. Similarly, in the baseline survey, 60.4% of 12-17 year olds (n=154) agreed that a 15 year old should be allowed to drink alcohol, under parental supervision in their homes; the figure rose to 88.3% when the scenario considered was a 17 year old.

One of the key insights gained from the qualitative research was that we need to address social norm misperceptions – but to do this carefully and incrementally (as students and parents believe that their own views are more conservative than their peers, and are cynical and doubtful of the facts about how many people are opposed to teen drinking).

Integrated Intervention Mix

The Project has a core product of social acceptance of not drinking alcohol. The actual product is the school curriculum and the messages and strategies taught to students to enable them to address misperceptions and be confident in their decisions not to drink (and relevant adults in their decisions not to provide alcohol). The augmented products include the merchandise, materials and resources distributed to students and the school community.

The price associated with adopting the desired behaviour (not drinking) is intangible and perception driven. There are substantial costs associated with rejecting perceived norms, often due to perceived social consequences such as image and acceptance (Prentice and Miller, 1993). The perceived cost of not drinking therefore is likely to be high when underage drinking is believed to be the norm. Beginning with what the target audience(s) believe and understand, perceived costs associated with drinking were increased by portraying the consequences associated with the consumption of alcohol including the effect on the brain, social impacts and legal implications. Conversely, the 'costs' of not drinking were decreased by educating students about actual social norms of teen alcohol consumption, as well as providing skills and resources to help students to abstain. Changing social norms is a complex and slow process, and unlikely to be achieved via a single intervention. Implementing a curriculum that reflects back facts and local statistics

on the community's (and peers') attitudes and values, we begin to challenge young people's misperceptions about these norms, reducing perceived psychosocial costs and increasing perceived benefits of not drinking.

The promotional aspects of the campaign within the school were diverse and ongoing. This primarily involved ambient media as previously described. In terms of placement, the intervention occurred within the school setting, with the main component of the curriculum taking place in PDHPE classes. This helped to promote discussion among teens about social norms of underage drinking with peers in a routine and safe environment. The connection of the campaign to the ongoing community intervention – including using many of the same images and taglines – meant that the messages taught in the curriculum were reinforced in the community. For example, the local bus company (which provides the school bus service) offered free placement of the campaign posters on the rear windows of buses; and paid advertising was prominent in the local shopping centre and community venues.

Co creation through social markets

Key stakeholders and consumers were actively consulted prior to, and during, the development of the curricula and campaign materials. One of the driving key insights gained from this experience was that both teens and parents are entrenched in the societal misunderstanding (and acceptance) that most teens drink, and that there are situation-dependent occasions where this is acceptable to adults. We used this local data (CATI surveys, school surveys etc) in the development of creative resources such as infographics, whereby the data was co-presented with 'factual' data from ASSAD data for example, to illustrate the difference between perceptions and reality. The multiple rounds of focus groups and interviews, and the establishment of a community consultative committee, ensured that the intervention messages themselves were co-created by the target audiences. Additionally, co-creation was demonstrated by the involvement of teachers in the development, implementation and evaluation of the curriculum.

Systematic planning

A comprehensive program planning phase based on the concepts and techniques of social marketing (Kotler and Lee, 2008) was carried out which included detailed multi-dimensional methodologies, project based and school based timelines, budgets, project logic model and ethics approval by the University. Specific phases were: organisation and planning (Jan-Jun 2013); formative research and community consultation/market research (Jan-Aug 2013); baseline data collection and CATI (Mar-Sep 2013); intervention, including audience segmentation, marketing mix, production of materials (Oct 2013 – Sep 2015); process evaluation and monitoring (Oct 2013 – Sep 2015); post-intervention data collection (Oct – Dec 2015); analysis and reporting (Oct – Dec 2015).

Additionally, the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1988) which encompasses attitudes (e.g: the pros and cons of engaging in underage drinking), subjective norms (e.g: the belief that peers, friends and family condone the engagement in underage drinking) and perceived behavioural control (the degree of difficulty in being able to control the behavioural intention – not drinking) was incorporated in the planning process. These elements were carefully considered when designing the formative research questions and strategies, the development of campaign collateral, and the preferred methods of working within the local environment.

Results and Learning

Process measures to assess any impact of the curriculum included lesson evaluations completed by students at the end of each lesson and ongoing feedback from teachers. As well as stating what they liked and disliked about each lesson, students responded to different statements designed to measure the stated outcomes for each lesson. Overall the lesson evaluations reflected that the majority of students engaged with the objectives of each lesson and that the lessons improved their understanding of social norms.

Outcome measures to asses any impact of the curricula consisted primarily of pre and post surveys. Students were asked to respond to statements about drinking alcohol, specifically what they thought, what they believed their peers thought, and what they believed adults in the community thought. For example, a shift in the perception of social norms is demonstrated by the proportion of students (from 145

surveys) who answered 'Definitely OK" in response to the following statements: "I think it is ok to drink alcohol regularly (1 or more times per month), decreased from 5.5% (pre) to 0.9% (post); "I believe other teens my age think -   It is ok to drink alcohol regularly" decreased from 23.6% (pre) to 7.4% (post) and "I believe adults in my community think - It is ok to drink alcohol regularly" decreased from 10.5% (pre) to 3.7% (post). The reduction in the perception by teens that other teens drink is one example of how this project is meeting its initial objectives of facilitating and establishing the precursor to a behavioural outcome. That is, changes in beliefs and attitudes, given the significant relationship between normative beliefs, social norms and alcohol consumption (Maddock and Glanz, 2005), is a positive step towards a reduction in underage drinking.

Process measures and anecdotal evidence (obtained through the Student Representative Council and staff meetings) suggest that the project tagline and materials have good reach, recognition and are stimulating debate and conversation. From a teaching point of view, teachers have reviewed lesson length, success of particular resources and activities and the overall application of the unit to the New South Wales PDHPE curriculum.

Despite the majority of students expressing an understanding of the principles of social norms, there is still work to be done in correcting misperceptions. Out of a total 266 responses, just over half of students (52%) agreed or strongly agreed that the lesson helped them realise most Australian teenagers don't drink. Future work in the latter part of this project (for example, student visualisation projects in Art classes in Term 4, 2014) will seek to further enforce the message that most teens don't drink to build on the foundation of the unit taught in term one. The ongoing collaboration also provides an opportunity to address a barrier identified in the evaluation that, despite expressing enjoyment of in-class peer interactions, only a small proportion of students indicated any likelihood of engaging with their peers on these topics outside of a classroom.

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Appendix – Examples of social norms campaign visuals