

Empowering students to respond to alcohol advertisements: results from a pilot study of an Australian media literacy intervention

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Given that early experimentation with alcohol increases the likelihood of developing serious health problems later in life,¹ early prevention of alcohol-related harms is essential for ensuring the healthy development of young people. A critical influence on students' alcohol-related attitudes and behaviours is the media.^{2,3} Through teaching students to access, analyse, evaluate and communicate messages in a variety of forms, media literacy education can challenge potentially harmful pro-alcohol media messages and have a positive impact on students' drinking attitudes and behaviours.^{4,5}

Currently, the majority of alcohol media literacy programs have been developed and evaluated in the United States.⁵ This formative pilot evaluation aimed to examine the potential impact of an alcohol media literacy program, *Media in the Spotlight*, for Australian children, and the barriers and facilitators to implementation. The 10-lesson program, developed by the authors of this paper, utilises Inoculation Theory,⁶ the Message Interpretation Process Model,⁷ and constructivist teaching principles.⁸ To our knowledge, the program is the first of its kind to be tailored to the Australian context by including Australian alcohol brands and media clips and links to the Australian school curriculum. The program aims to (i) build students' competence in reading and interpreting a broad range of multimodal alcohol advertisements; and (ii) target the upper-primary school age group in order

Abstract

Objective: Alcohol media literacy programs in the United States have increased students' media literacy skills and lowered pre-drinking behaviour. In Australia, no such programs have yet been implemented or evaluated. This pilot study aimed to examine the feasibility and potential impact of an alcohol media literacy program for Australian upper-primary school children.

Methods: Thirty-seven Year 5 and 6 students (aged 10-12) from one school in the Sydney region participated in 10 one-hour media lessons. Teacher interviews, student exit slips, teacher observations and a researcher reflective journal were analysed to examine the implementation process, while a pre- and post-questionnaire was analysed to measure outcome.

Results: Key factors in implementation were the importance of school context; attainment of English and PDHPE learning outcomes to differing extents; program's useability provided flexibility; perceived complexity and achievability of the lessons and program's engagement and relevance for the students. The program significantly increased media literacy skills and understanding of persuasive intent; decreased interest in alcohol branded merchandise; and lowered perception of drinking norms.

Conclusion and implications: An Australian alcohol media literacy program for upper-primary school children appears feasible, and has potential to lead to measurable outcomes.

Key words: pilot study, health literacy, program evaluation, schools, alcohol

to 'inoculate' students against pro-alcohol messages before they engage in drinking behaviours.

The program was based on findings from a systematic literature review of existing alcohol media literacy programs.⁵ Ten lessons (each about one hour in duration) focused on: the negative consequences of drinking, the broad nature and diversity of alcohol advertising in Australia, the persuasive techniques and hidden messages used by advertisers to make their products appealing, and the creation of counter-advertisements.^{9,10}

Method

It was hypothesised that following the program, students would have improved media literacy skills; a greater understanding of persuasive intent; less interest in alcohol branded merchandise; higher self-efficacy for refusing alcohol; and a lowered perception of social norms for teenage drinking.

A convenience sample of 57 Year 5 and Year 6 students (10-12 years) from one non-government religious school in NSW completed the program. Pre- and post-

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intervention data were collected from the 65% (n=37) of the 57 students who provided parent and student consent and completed both the pre- and post-test. One Year 5 teacher, one Year 6 teacher and one Year 6 casual teacher also provided data. The program was delivered to the Year 5 and Year 6 class over five weeks, with two lessons taught each week to each class by a qualified teacher (the first author of this paper) to increase implementation fidelity.

Semi-structured teacher interviews were conducted with the teachers before and after program implementation to explore their perceptions of the program; students' understanding of each lesson were obtained through student exit slips;¹¹ non-participant observations were completed by the teachers as they observed the researcher delivering each lesson to assess implementation fidelity and student engagement; and a researcher reflective journal was kept to provide a personal perspective on how effectively the program was implemented. A pre- and post-intervention questionnaire assessed students' preference for alcohol-branded merchandise (pre-drinking behaviour); media literacy skills; self-efficacy to refuse alcohol; perceived social norms for drinking alcohol; and understanding of persuasive intent. The scales were adapted from existing alcohol media literacy programs to ensure cultural relevance to Australia.⁵ An example of a question used to assess media literacy skills was, "what is the purpose of this ad?"

Thematic analysis approach was used to analyse the qualitative data using NVivo. Inductive coding of the transcribed teacher interviews was followed by deductive coding of the student exit slips, teacher observations and researcher reflective journal. Paired sample t-tests were used to determine significant differences between the pre and post scores for any of the variables, while repeated measures ANOVAs were conducted to determine significant differences in pre-post scores for the variables based on gender.

Results

Five key factors in implementation emerged from the multiple qualitative data sources.

These included the importance of school context; attainment of English and Personal Development and Health, Physical Education (PDHPE) learning outcomes to differing extents; program's useability provided

flexibility when delivering the program; perceived complexity and achievability of the lessons; and the program's engagement and relevance for the students.

Paired sample t-tests revealed that students had increased media literacy skills ($p=0.000$); greater understanding of persuasive intent ($p=0.000$); less interest in alcohol branded merchandise ($p=0.002$); and lowered perception of social norms ($p=0.000$) post-intervention. There was no significant difference on self-efficacy to refuse alcohol ($p=0.06$) (see Table 1).

Discussion

Overall, the program's feasibility was supported by the identified facilitators to implementation. While the complexity of the lessons was initially flagged as a barrier to implementation, multiple data sources confirmed the achievability of the lessons for the students. The school context was identified as a potential barrier to implementation, particularly if the program was to be implemented outside of a religious school setting where getting drunk is considered to be morally wrong. Program facilitators need to be aware of these potential differences and be ready to respond to students' opinions respectfully while teaching the content outlined in the program. Given the teachers' different perceptions of how the program fits within the school curriculum, it is recommended that the classroom teachers are given autonomy over when the program is taught based on where they believe it best fits within the school curriculum.

The quantitative results were in line with alcohol media literacy programs in other countries⁵ and supported the efficacy of the alcohol media literacy program. Increasing students' media literacy skills and understanding of persuasive intent can reduce the relationship between media

exposure and subsequent pro-alcohol attitudes and behaviours.⁴ Lowering students' perceptions of the numbers of teenagers that drink alcohol can lower the students' own intentions to drink, as the behaviour is seen as less prevalent and 'normative'.¹²

To our knowledge, this is the first study that evaluates the feasibility and impact of an alcohol media literacy program in an Australian context. The strength of the study is in its inclusion of both process and outcome data to respond to the research aims and hypotheses. Despite these strengths, the findings should be considered preliminary due to the small sample size, limitations inherent in a one-group pre-post trial, and possible limited generalizability beyond the pilot school. The results of the study suggest that there is now a need for a larger study to provide necessary evidence concerning the effectiveness of an Australian alcohol media literacy program for this age group.

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Table 1: Mean scores for items on the media literacy questionnaire.

Measure	Pre-test means (SD)	Post-test means (SD)
Media literacy skills	6.68 (1.72)	10.30 (2.72)
Persuasive intent	3.96 (.75)	4.65 (.48)
Branded merchandise	2.14 (.73)	1.75 (.74)
Self-efficacy	4.61 (.44)	4.66 (.47)
Social norms	3.14 (.49)	2.65 (.42)