

# Report on a social norm intervention at a South Australian university

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## Issues addressed

The false beliefs of university students concerning the drug and alcohol use of their student peers.

## Methods

The development and implementation of a Social Norm Marketing project at a university in South Australia targeting the false beliefs of students (established by use of a prior survey) through the use of positive, normative messages using a number of marketing approaches.

## Results

Inconclusive

## Conclusions

Social norm marketing strategies require multiple levels of attack for the messages to be believed.

## So what?

As a strategy for targeting 'risk taking' behaviour associated with alcohol and other drugs of tertiary students in the US it is being seen as highly successful. It is worthy of further development and exploration in the Australian tertiary sector as a health prevention strategy.

## Key words

Social norm marketing, university students

In 2001, a campaign using the principles of social norm marketing (SNM) was implemented at a university in South Australia. In 1979, Perkins and Berkowitz developed a model known initially as the Misperceived-Norms model based on their findings from survey work among university and college students in the United States (US).<sup>1,2</sup> They found that while most students reported moderate attitudes to alcohol use, they also consistently reported that their peers held more permissive attitudes towards its use. Their work, and subsequent work by others, continues to refine the model and its application to health promotion at universities and colleges. The two key features of the SNM model are: its emphasis on providing accurate information about specific communities and their normative environments; and its focus on the healthy, positive attitudes and behaviours of community members.<sup>1</sup> The work of Berkowitz, Perkins and others<sup>3-5</sup> informed the intervention reported in this article.

Information gathered in 1999<sup>6</sup> from a representative sample of students from two South Australian universities provided the baseline information against which the effectiveness of a SNM intervention could be measured. The students at the second university provided the control group in the absence of an intervention.

The campaign's purpose was to measure the effect of an SNM campaign on students' beliefs concerning their student peers' alcohol and tobacco use. Results from the 1999 survey revealed a disparity between the self-reported use of alcohol and tobacco of university students and the belief they held with regards to their peers' alcohol and tobacco use, a finding consistent with work in the US. The degree of the disparity is illustrated by the following. The self-reported non-use of tobacco at the target university was 65.5% of surveyed students. The survey found, however, that 2.8% of surveyed students reported holding the belief that the typical student was a non-smoker.<sup>6</sup>

The normative messages promoted through the campaign were developed in consultation with several university students and were designed to reflect the normative healthy behaviour of the students from the target university as found in the 1999 survey. The messengers chosen for transmission of the normative messages were: posters; highlighter pens; key rings; and advertisements in the student-run weekly newspaper. Four

messages were developed and then used during the campaign. The messages were:

- 77.2% of X university students are light drinkers (drink between 0 and 5 drinks per week).
- The average number of drinks per week for X university students is 3.5.
- 87.8% of X university students do not let their alcohol choices affect their studies.
- Believe it or not, 7 out of 10 X university students are tobacco free.

The posters were placed in areas of heavy student traffic throughout the campuses of the university. The highlighter pens and key rings were shared between two central student service areas within the university for distribution to students. They were also distributed from two high-profile student service areas within the student union. The advertisements appeared fortnightly in the student newspaper.

The alcohol component of the campaign commenced in April 2000 and the tobacco component commenced in February 2001. An evaluation of the campaign at the target university was conducted in May 2001 and in July 2001 for the control university. A repeat of the instrument used in the 1999 survey was posted to a randomly selected group of students drawn from the total student population of both universities. Replies were anonymous and follow-up of non-respondents disallowed under a research ethics committee ruling. The reply rate was lower for the 2001 survey with a return rate of 30% (n=182) from the target university and 27.8% (n=139) from the control group. The returned surveys were posted to the US for electronic scanning and the results returned to the researcher in late August.

## Results

The 2001 survey of students revealed a slight increase to 7.5% in the number of students at the target university reporting an (accurate) belief that their typical student peers were non-users of tobacco. There was almost no reported alteration in perception among the students surveyed from the control university. The numbers of respondents who indicated themselves to be non-users of tobacco (annually) increased at the target university by almost 10%. The figures from the control group over the same period were almost constant. The reported changes were found to be small and in a positive direction for accuracy of perception among students from the target university.

The change in belief anticipated from the intervention focused on alcohol use among students at the target university was not realised. The 2001 sample results found no alteration that reflected a more accurate belief among the surveyed students. There appeared, instead, to be a slight shift among students believing their student peers to be more frequent drinkers.

## Discussion

The changes observed from the data gathered in 2001 were small. One explanation for the outcome would need to include the differences between the 2001 and the 1999 respondents. The percentage of postgraduate student respondents at the target university was higher in the 2001 sample as was the number of students studying part-time. The ethnic profile was also different for the target university between the two sampling periods. There were fewer Asian/Malaysian students and more students of Anglo-Celtic origin in the 2001 sample from the target university. The older student profile and the increased numbers of Anglo-Celtic students in the 2001 were an unexpected skew in the sample.

Linkenbach<sup>7</sup> and others have identified several strategies needed for conducting successful SNM campaigns. The intervention under discussion did not attempt to include environmental changes, an important strategy identified by Linkenbach. While planning and research did occur, testing of the messages and the mediums did not and such strategies would also assist in determining that the messages were reaching the audience being targeted and whether there was a need to re-word or re-design them.

Hellstrom<sup>8</sup> makes a case for the inclusion of a wide number of student leaders in the development and design phases of a social norm campaign. While the campaign under discussion did have student involvement and input, the numbers were small and possibly not representative.

## Conclusion

The growing use of social norm marketing strategies at universities and colleges in the US<sup>9</sup> and the strategy's apparent success at altering alcohol and other drug use behaviours among student populations must make SNM a health promotion strategy worthy of further exploration within the Australian university context. The project described in this report was a small attempt that yielded disappointing results. Such an outcome should only act as a challenge to investigate in considered and informed detail the model of health promotion known as social norm marketing.

## References

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