Marketing a Hard-to-Swallow Message

Recommendations for the Design of Media Campaigns to Increase Awareness about the Risks of Binge Drinking

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ABSTRACT

Background: Binge drinking, commonly defined as having more than five drinks on a single occasion, is a public health issue affecting two thirds of Canadian young adults between the ages of 19-24 years. To educate young adults about alcohol poisoning, a network of 16 Ontario Health Units developed and implemented a mass-media campaign. The focus of this article is to report on post-secondary students' perceptions about key media campaign strategies, elements and messages for future campaigns designed to increase awareness about the risks of binge drinking.

Methods: As part of a multi-method process evaluation, nine focus groups were facilitated to explore the young adults' knowledge, attitudes and beliefs about binge drinking and the campaign messages. Participants were also asked to identify specific marketing messages and techniques that would increase their level of awareness about the risks of binge drinking.

Results: Participants recommended that campaigns be targeted towards parents and high school and post-secondary school students. Participants provided recommendations for the types of messages, images, and language they perceived would capture the attention of young adults. Television, posters and the internet were identified as key media channels for disseminating health information about the risks associated with excessive alcohol consumption.

Conclusion: The problem of binge drinking is pervasive across Canadian campuses and students are largely unaware of the risks associated with excessive alcohol consumption. To reach this target population, it is important for future media campaign developers to utilize language, definitions, graphics and channels of communication to which this group relates.

MeSH terms: Mass media; evaluation studies; alcohol drinking; adult

La traduction du résumé se trouve à la fin de l'article.

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Sources of support: Funding for the media campaign came from the Substance Abuse Prevention Network of Central West and Southwest Ontario and for the evaluation from the Hamilton Public Health and Social Services and Middlesex-London Health Unit PHRED programs. The results of this study do not necessarily reflect the beliefs of those in the supporting health departments.

Binge drinking has traditionally been defined as the consumption of five or more drinks (5+) during a single occasion.¹ Wechsler and Austin² suggest that a gender-specific definition, 5+ drinks for men and four or more (4+) for women, is a more accurate definition that considers differences in alcohol metabolism rates. Using the 5+ measure, results from the Canadian Campus Survey³ indicate that, over a single fall term, 62.4% of undergraduate University students (72.1% of drinkers) report at least one binge-drinking episode. Among drinkers, the mean frequency of consuming 5+ drinks per occasion over the term was almost 5 times.³ Heavy, episodic drinking is a significant contributor to the morbidity and mortality of young adults.⁴ Students who drink excessively are at increased risk of experiencing alcohol-related-injury deaths, including motor vehicle accidents, or unintentional injuries.⁵ Additional consequences include: experiencing hangovers, missing classes, regretting their actions, and memory loss.⁶ Non-drinking peers residing on campuses report secondary effects related to the actions of binge drinkers, including being assaulted, experiencing an unwanted sexual advance or being a victim of property theft or damage.⁷

Ontario Health Units are mandated to provide educational information to targeted groups regarding alcohol use and health status.⁸ Despite inconsistent evidence regarding the effectiveness of mass-media campaigns in reducing binge-drinking behaviours,⁹ health units are required to launch annual community events and multi-media campaigns. To educate young adults about alcohol poisoning, a network of 16 Ontario Health Units developed and implemented a mass-media campaign. The purpose of the campaign was to increase knowledge among 19-24 year olds of: a) the risks associated with binge drinking, b) the number of drinks that constitutes binge drinking, and c) strategies that can be used to avoid binge drinking. The campaign consisted of the development and mass distribution of a poster, a postcard, the placement of purchased radio advertisements and media releases. Health unit staff also participated in local community events to increase awareness about the dangers of binge drinking and sought opportunities for unpaid advertising, such as radio and television interviews.

As this was the first collaborative public health campaign in this region, researchers from two Public Health Research, Education and Development Programs (PHRED) developed and conducted an extensive process evaluation of the media campaign that included a web-based survey of post-secondary students, focus groups, tracking information and a survey of Network members. Results from the web survey indicate that almost one third of the respondents were aware of the media campaign and that only 30.4% were able to accurately define binge drinking. In a measurement of attitudes towards binge drinking, 93.1% of respondents agreed that it was alright to get drunk occasionally.¹⁰ The purpose of this article is to report findings from focus group participants about their recommendations for future mass-media campaigns developed to increase awareness about the risks of binge drinking.

METHODS

Design

The overall process evaluation utilized a mixed methods approach to data collection. The full report containing detailed descriptions of the methods and results can be accessed electronically.¹⁰ A descriptive, qualitative design¹¹ was selected to explore the participants' knowledge, attitudes and beliefs about binge drinking and the campaign messages. Participants were also asked to identify specific marketing messages and techniques that would increase their level of awareness about the risks of binge drinking. The study proposal was submitted and approved by the Research Ethics Boards of McMaster University and the University of Western Ontario.

Sample

As part of the larger process evaluation, 3,767 students recruited from three universities and one college in Southwest and Central West Ontario, completed a web survey. All survey respondents 19-24 years of age were asked to indicate their interest in participating in a focus group. The 1,002 (27%) survey respondents who expressed an interest were then sent an e-mail message inviting them to participate in one of the local focus groups. Responses were received from 195 (19.5%) respondents. In anticipation that some people

TABLE I

Sample Focus Group Questions

1. When you hear the words 'binge drinking', what are the images that come to mind?
2. In your opinion, what are some of the reasons that people binge drink?
3. What needs to be done to get people 'at-risk' (frequent binge-drinkers) to pay attention to the advertising [increasing awareness of alcohol poisoning and consequences of binge drinking]?
4. How would you like to get information about alcohol?
5. What is the best way to reach 19-24 year olds with messages about alcohol?

would not attend on the specified date, 15 participants for each focus group were recruited on a first-come-first-serve basis. In total, nine focus groups (five female and four male groups) were conducted. Due to an overwhelming interest in participating, respondents were turned away at three institutions; conversely, due to insufficient interest at the fourth institution, the scheduled focus group was cancelled.

Data collection and analysis

Focus group data were collected in November 2001. The Project Coordinator (MSB), with the assistance of a staff member from each local Public Health Unit, facilitated each focus group. Semi-structured interview guides (Table I) were used to structure all group interviews. Each group met for approximately 1.0-1.5 hours. A \$10.00 gift certificate to the local bookstore was given to each participant in appreciation of his or her attendance. All focus groups were tape recorded and transcribed. The focus groups yielded 371 typed pages of raw data. Following each focus group, the facilitators completed a written summary and reflection of the process.

Data analysis was conducted by two research team members with extensive experience in the development and conduct of qualitative public health research (MSB and SJ). Prior to commencing data analysis, the researchers participated in a reflexive exercise where they identified and discussed their perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes about binge drinking. To guide data analysis, a preliminary codebook was developed using the semi-structured interview guides, facilitator notes and theoretical concepts derived from the literature. Each transcript was coded to identify meaningful segments of text, which were then sorted and organized into categories or predominant themes. The codebook was continually revised as new themes emerged. The two researchers then met to discuss the categories and to identify the patterns and processes connecting them. Coding and

data analysis were facilitated through the use of the software N-Vivo 1.2.

RESULTS

A total of 66 students participated in the focus groups. The average age of the female participants was 20 years old, and of the male participants, 21.

Elements of message design

In the marketing of health promotion concepts and ideas, participants identified that campaigns need to be "extreme" with a "twist" or involve unique features in order to catch and hold their attention. They recommended that campaigns be developed to target not only college/university students, but also parents and high school students.

Message type (Table II)

Participants stressed that campaigns should not condemn drinking but instead promote responsible drinking. Participants requested information on strategies to decrease the effects of excessive alcohol intake and to help an intoxicated friend. They stressed the importance of educating drinkers about the immediate threats to physical health and safety and perceived it would be ineffective to focus on the long-term consequences associated with excessive alcohol consumption. However, several participants did recommend that it is important to educate students about the broader social and health costs related to binge drinking by identifying that excessive drinking can impair their academic success and perhaps their future economic well-being.

The participants also discussed the economic impact related to the excessive consumption of alcohol. While most participants identified that students are not dissuaded from drinking due to the costs of alcohol, they are more likely to consume large quantities of alcohol in their homes or residences prior to going to a bar, in order to reduce the need to buy large num-

TABLE II

Young Adult Recommendations for Types of Messages to be Incorporated into Media Campaigns Educating About the Risks of Binge Drinking

Key Recommendations	Participant Quotes
Focus on responsible drinking and do not condemn alcohol consumption.	
Focus on harm reduction strategies: provide information on how to reduce the effects of alcohol consumption (i.e., when drinking, have something to eat or alternate alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages).	"I don't think the goal should be to try and stop [drinking].... But maybe identifying some of the risks that they should be looking out for, like drinking and driving and ...watching out for the sexual encounters that you don't want, look out for your buddies kind of thing. That's the kind of thing that people will go for."
Provide information on "how to be a good friend" when caring for and monitoring intoxicated peers. Suggestions included: educating about the signs of alcohol poisoning, showing how to place intoxicated individual in the recovery position, the need to ensure peers arrive home safely, and the importance of not encouraging visibly intoxicated individuals to consume more alcohol.	
Messages should encourage young adults to "drink moderately" and "know your limit."	"It's about promoting that you know your limit. I think that is probably going to be most effective, to say 'know your limit, once you reach there don't let anybody force you into anything more.' Don't try and push it or anything."
Focus on both the economic and social costs associated with binge drinking.	
Focus on immediate threats to physical health and safety (sprains and head injuries caused by falls) versus long-term health consequences (liver damage).	"We don't think, 'Oh we'll get damage to our liver.' We're too young to damage our liver or get an ulcer."
Focus on emotional appeals: Campaign messages should encourage young adults to stop and reflect on the impact that their excessive alcohol consumption may have on their friends or family members.	"Most people don't care so much about themselves as they do for others. If you say, 'You're going to die' you say, 'Okay, fine.' If you say, 'You're going to die and it's going to affect someone else', then you feel bad."

TABLE III

Design Element Recommendations for Media Campaign Strategies to Educate About the Risks Associated with Binge Drinking

Key Recommendations	Participant Quotes
Language: Utilize terms more familiar to students, such as 'funneling' or 'chugging' instead of 'binge drinking'.	
Spokesperson: Celebrity or an individual with a personal story to share about the consequences of binge drinking.	"When we go out we don't say, 'we're going out binge drinking.' We say, 'we're going to go party, we're going out, going to the bar, going clubbing.' We never say, 'binge drinking' because it has a negative connotation."
Graphics: Should portray realistic situations, but should not include scenarios where it appears that young adults are having 'fun' participating in excessive drinking activities.	
Statistics: Incorporate local statistics related to consequences or health risks associated with binge drinking.	"Have him chugging in one picture . . . then have another picture of him on the ground, passed out with a bunch of bottles around."

TABLE IV

Recommended Dissemination Strategies for Media Campaigns to Educate About the Risks Associated with Binge Drinking

Preferred Media Channels:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Television: music/video stations • Posters in: bars, washrooms, campus residences' elevators, buses/trains, beer/liquor stores, and university/college orientation packages • Internet banners on websites frequented by students
Target Audiences:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High school students • Post-secondary students

bers of drinks. Most participants agreed that a media campaign with an emotional appeal would encourage them to reflect on their decisions to binge drink.

Design elements (Table III)

The participants stressed the importance of language used in the messages. The participants did not relate to the term 'binge drinking', nor would they define binge drinking using a specific drink limit

(i.e., 5+). Instead, they recommended it be defined by an individual's tolerance level, intent to get drunk, and the speed of drinking. The participants stressed the importance of including appropriate images and spokespersons in television or print campaigns. It was reinforced that whatever images are used, they should be realistic and the target audience should be able to relate to the scene being depicted. To increase the realism of the situation and

to increase students' sense of personal vulnerability to the risks of binge drinking, it was recommended that current, local statistics be integrated into the campaign message and that real, personal stories be relayed; that the campaign not show individuals who appear to be having fun participating in the targeted risk behaviour (i.e., binge drinking with a group of friends), as viewers may then disregard the key message.

The participants recommended that multiple channels or media varieties be used to disseminate health messages, including television, the internet and posters (Table IV). Participants suggested that television advertisements be played on channels watched by a high proportion of the target audience and that posters be placed in areas with high-volume traffic.

DISCUSSION

To engage an audience that is exposed daily to numerous advertisements and marketing campaigns through a wide variety of media, it is important to design messages that will catch their attention. Participants recommended the use of provocative and emotional appeals to motivate individuals who drink excessively to reflect on the impact and consequences associated with their behaviours. The goal of using emotionally charged and provocative statements in a campaign is to create a reaction that will initiate discussion of the issue among high-risk peers.¹² Emotional appeals are most effective when the target audience's awareness of the problem is high and when the interest in changing the behaviour is low.¹³ These types of campaigns may be an important strategy to educate a population who perceive binge drinking as a social norm and a rite of passage. If students' perceptions around binge drinking can be altered and if they can be convinced that binge drinking is not the norm, then the actual incidence of the negative behaviours may subsequently be reduced.¹⁴

This campaign focussed on providing information related to the risks of binge drinking. It has been argued, however, that disseminating information with the sole purpose of increasing awareness is a strategy that is least likely to result in behaviour changes.⁹ Public health media campaigns that are multifaceted may have the greatest impact on behaviour changes among young adults. De Jong⁹ recommends integrating information and social norm campaigns with strategic approaches to develop policies that create environments where students are empowered to make healthy decisions regarding alcohol intake.

Study strengths and limitations

Focus group participants were recruited from individuals who responded to a web-based survey and expressed an interest in participating. As a result, we were not able to select participants based on attitudinal or behavioural characteristics. Although there was a broad range of participants in the focus groups – from those who actively engaged in weekly binge drinking to those who abstained completely – there was a sense that the focus groups may have had

an over-representation of individuals who drank no or only small amounts of alcohol. However, a number of strategies were implemented to increase the credibility of the findings, including: the use of multiple researchers, identification of negative cases, member checking during the focus groups, establishment of an audit trail, reflexive analysis, and the researchers' attention to their personal biases. Furthermore, conducting the focus groups at multiple sites and with both males and females increased the data sources.

Data presented in this article represent findings from only one objective of the campaign. We have data on numerous topics from the variety of data collection methods used in the process evaluation, including: a web survey from 3,767 students; focus groups; tracking of information regarding dissemination of campaign materials; and surveys of all network members.

CONCLUSION

The use of media campaigns is a common health promotion strategy used to disseminate health information. The problem of binge drinking is pervasive across Canadian campuses and students appear both immune to the messages being disseminated and largely unaware of the risks associated with excessive alcohol consumption. As part of this process evaluation, student perceptions and opinions were sought

to identify key messages and elements that they would pay attention to in future media campaigns. To increase the likelihood that young adults will pay attention to the 'hard to swallow' messages about the risks associated with the excessive consumption of alcohol, it is important for future media campaign developers to utilize language, definitions, graphics and channels of communication suitable for influencing behaviour changes among this population.

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RÉSUMÉ

Contexte : L'alcoolisme périodique, et plus particulièrement les accès de forte consommation qui y sont associés (plus de cinq verres par épisode), sont un problème de santé publique qui touche les deux tiers des jeunes adultes canadiens de 19 à 24 ans. Pour sensibiliser les jeunes adultes à l'intoxication alcoolique, un réseau de 16 bureaux de santé ontariens a élaboré et mis en œuvre une campagne dans les médias. Le présent article porte sur les perceptions d'étudiants de niveau postsecondaire à l'égard des stratégies, des éléments et des messages clés de futures campagnes de sensibilisation aux risques de l'alcoolisme périodique.

Méthode : Dans le cadre d'une évaluation faisant appel à plusieurs méthodes, nous avons organisé neuf groupes de discussion pour analyser les connaissances, les attitudes et les convictions de jeunes adultes à propos de l'alcoolisme périodique et des messages de la campagne envisagée. Nous avons demandé aux participants de nous indiquer avec précision les messages et les techniques de marketing pouvant rehausser leur niveau de sensibilisation aux risques de l'alcoolisme périodique.

Résultats : Les participants nous ont recommandé d'axer les campagnes sur les parents et les élèves de niveau secondaire et postsecondaire. Ils ont formulé des recommandations sur le genre de messages, d'images et de langage qui captent le mieux, à leur avis, l'attention des jeunes adultes. Ainsi, la télévision, les affiches et l'Internet seraient les voies de communication à privilégier pour diffuser l'information sanitaire sur les risques associés à l'abus d'alcool.

Conclusion : Le problème de l'alcoolisme périodique est omniprésent sur les campus canadiens, et les élèves ignorent pour la plupart les risques associés à l'abus d'alcool. Pour atteindre la population cible, il est important pour les créateurs de campagnes d'information d'utiliser un langage, des définitions, des images et des voies de communication auxquels cette population s'identifie.

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