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Using Social Media Marketing to Tackle Alcohol Abuse among Young People

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Introduction/Background

Drinking is an important part of adolescent culture (ONS, 2016). Frequently, drinking and associated activities are shared with friends using social media (Leyshon, 2011). Social marketing campaigns through social media was an effective approach to tackling tobacco consumption among young people (Hastings *et al.* 2008), therefore, a similar approach can be used to prevent alcohol abuse.

Perceived norms and peer influence are very important in alcohol consumption as can affect young people behaviour (Oostveen *et al.*, 1996; Borsari & Carey, 2001). In addition, according to Fox *et al.* (1998), the context of a message can have a great impact on its effectiveness. It follows that the sharing, via social media, of photos associating social activities with heavy drinking may act to normalise, and even encourage, alcohol abuse. Therefore, we investigate the link between alcohol abuse and social media use by young people, and evaluate the likely effectiveness of online safe-drinking social marketing to help the development of effective online social marketing messages.

The research objectives include to investigate: (1) the impact of a Facebook safe-drinking message on young adults alcohol consumption intentions; (2) the impact of Facebook photos showing people socialising while drinking alcohol on intention to consume alcohol in the future, and the mediating role of a safe-drinking message; (3) the moderating impact of relevant individual difference variables (4) the effectiveness of the safe-drinking message.

Method

The study focused on those aged 18-24 as they are known to be heavy alcohol users; a primary target for alcohol industry marketing; prone to peer influence when consuming alcohol (Seaman & Ikegwonu 2010; Hastings 2009); and, heavy users of social media, particularly Facebook (Barnett 2011). The study involved a three-condition experiment (30 participants per condition; N=90) using eye-tracking technology (Tobii X2-30) with a quantitative questionnaire and qualitative follow-up interviews designed to probe the reasons for their questionnaire responses. The Change4Life safe drinking advertisement was used for the purposes of this study.

Results

Using univariate ANCOVA analysis we found that there is no direct relationship between the presence or absence of alcohol in Facebook user generated images and respondent's intention to consume less alcohol ($F(2,90) = .008, p = .992$), and no direct relationship between intention to reduce drinking and the presence or absence of a safe-drinking message embedded in the Facebook page ($F(1, 60) = .131, p = 0.719$). However, visual attention is found to mediate the response to the safe-drinking message, and the presence of the safe-drinking message is found to reduce the visual attention paid to the user generated image of alcohol consumption ($F(1, 90) = 4.665, p = 0.034$). Change4Life safe-drinking advertisement got low positive evaluations and a considerably high proportion of the participants did not notice it, however, it was more positively evaluated when the user-generated images contained alcohol ($F(1, 43) = 4.106, p = 0.050$).

Discussion

Despite Change4Life safe-drinking advertisements low effectiveness, it was found that these advertisements are more positively evaluated when combined with user-generated images containing alcohol compared to those without alcohol. This could be because the youth alcohol culture is primed, triggering the audience to consider the relevance and need for such social marketing initiatives. Although Change4Life advertisements are not found to directly impact intention to reduce drinking, they lead to lower visual attention paid to the user-generated images. Therefore, if the aim of policy makers is to reduce online peer pressure and influence of social media images on young consumers, placing a social marketing advertisement has an indirect impact by moving attention away from images containing alcohol. However, it is vital to identify and design adverts that can be effective in the social media context.

Keywords

alcohol abuse; Facebook; eye-tracking ; safe-drinking message; young people; experimental design

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