Friends or foes: Group influence effects on moderate drinking behaviors

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ABSTRACT

Drunkenness and the addictive consumption of alcohol remains a key social and public health concern. Advancing beyond traditional individualized prevention approaches, this research explores the role of social influences in determining individual and group influence in moderate-drinking decision-making and participatory actions. A social influence model of intentional moderate drinking actions is conceptualized and validated. Results show group norm as the single social influence predictor of intentions and desire to drink moderately, as opposed to well-known social influence factors (e.g., subjective norm, social identity and drinking contextual effects). Significantly, the peer-group is identified as a key influencer supporting moderate drinking practices, and i-intentions to drink moderately predict group-related we-intentions, which suggests that moderate drinking is a shared goal. These findings advance alcohol prevention research drawing attention to the power of group dynamics to support positive changes in youth drinking behaviors.

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1. Introduction

Problem drinking, smoking and gambling have long been social and health concerns and moral opprobrium in Western cultures. Over the past few decades however, momentum from the public health movement focuses debate about the consumption of these products on the need for increased government intervention, de-marketing and regulatory strategies to protect vulnerable groups in society from potential problems that could occur from their overconsumption. Categorized as "sin" products in need of intervention, the health and societal valuation placed on alcohol, smoking tobacco and gambling differ substantially. Arguably, tobacco presently holds the distinction of being the most dangerous 'merchant-of-death'. Alcohol and gambling are being increasingly scrutinized because of the social, physical and psychological harms associated with their overconsumption and concomitant negative consequences on individual and community safety and well-being. Alcohol drinking in particular is identified as a problem that has reached global 'epidemic' status, with health advocates pointing to rising rates of youth alcohol-related problems and prevalence of binge drinking behavior (FARE, 2014). Contextualized primarily as a youth issue, binge drinking denotes a harmful pattern of drinking, which is defined in Australia's

health and medical research guidelines as 'drinking too much on a single occasion of drinking' (NH&MRC, 2009).

The research here focuses on alcohol consumption and positions it as a paradoxical product, because it is perceived to benefit as well as harm those who consume it (Stimson, 2006). For example, reports on alcohol have noted the reduced prevalence of coronary heart disease in countries where red wine is consumed, with other reports, such as the recent notice from the Cancer Council of Australia, stating there is no safe threshold of alcohol consumption for avoiding cancer (Winstanley et al., 2011). Studies of moderate drinking, in comparison to studies of heavy and risky drinking, identify alternative consumer practices that describe intentional social actions such as monitoring the number of drinks consumed on an occasion, drinking soda from a champagne glass, or drinking slowly. These drinking practices are contextualized with positive socialization and ability to participate in a safer and healthier drinking culture (Fry, Drennan, Previte, White, & Tjondronegoro, 2014).

Most alcohol research on drinking behavior examines outcomes of decisions for drinking made by the individual and is largely dominated by understanding excessive drinking (e.g., Manning, Smith, & Mazerolle, 2013; McCreanor et al., 2013; Szmigin, Bengry-Howell, Griffin, Hackley, & Mistral, 2011). Undoubtedly, drunkenness and the addictive influence of alcohol remain key social and public health concerns. At the same time however, the boundaries of acceptable and unacceptable drunkenness have become culturally contestable. This is because excessive alcohol consumption is considered harmful and anti-social, while at the same time *a big night out* involving excessive drinking is associated with pleasure, an escape from work pressures, as well being a key symbol in celebratory occasions to identify togetherness (Pettigrew,

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Ryan, & Ogilvie, 2000). This insight into alcohol consumption talks to the broader attitudinal change and cultural acceptability of *determined drunkenness* and the desired state of intoxication for drinkers (Measham & Brain, 2005). Arguably, this notion of intoxication identifies a state of alcohol consumption that has little to do with gaining any utility from its purchase, such as taste, and aligns more closely with O'Guinn and Faber's (1989) early explanation of compulsive consumption. Compulsive alcohol consumption is thus defined by an individual's desire to obtain and experience feelings that lead to repetitively engaging in a behavior that ultimately causes harm to the individual and/or to others. It is this insight into alcohol consumption that concerns health practitioners, social marketing scholars, and policy regulators in society.

Further contributing to these concerns is the contested perspective of drunkenness, which at least in public may attract disapproval and legal sanction. Nevertheless, drinking to intoxication is still an expected aspect of youth leisure (Keane, 2009). Discussion in this paper focuses on the role of marketing in compulsive consumption by examining a sample of young binge drinkers' desires to drink moderately. Legally, young people in Australia can purchase alcoholic beverages at 18 years of age. By exploring youth-moderate drinking intentions, this paper challenges the current status quo of government social marketing campaigns that implement simple notions of individual control and personal responsibility to put forward the benefits of reduced alcohol consumption. Arguing for a deeper general understanding of the alcohol problem, this research draws upon an understanding of intoxication as a behavior inclusive of both harm and pleasure to highlight the complexity of youth alcohol consumption.

The research focus is also informed by Menzel Baker, Gentry, and Rittenburg's (2005) vulnerability research that conceptualizes vulnerability as a dynamic, transitive state arising from interactions of personal states, personal characteristics, and external conditions consumers on occasion will experience. Thus, a young drinker may experience events such as being out of control, because the motivation to drink is driven by psycho-social factors (e.g., self-confidence, peer-pressure in social situations) or, experiencing a sense of being over-whelmed by conflicting marketing messages (e.g., anti-drinking vs alcohol marketing). Yet, this same young consumer may also participate in regular, controlled drinking events. Thus, achieving a balance whereby the social and health benefits of moderate drinking can be communicated to young consumers, while the harm that alcohol causes are also acknowledged, is a challenge that to date is yet to be successfully addressed (Ellison & Martinic, 2007).

Social influence theory (Bagozzi & Lee, 2002) is applied to the study of youth alcohol consumption in this research as an alternative to studying binge drinkers' individual intentions towards moderate drinking actions. Taking this approach responds to current critiques of social marketing that note its over-reliance on the study of individual-behavior change approaches (French, Spotswood, Tapp, & Stead, 2012; Szmigin et al., 2011). Also criticized are the lack of engagement with evidence that identifies other environmental cues, such as group influences and drinking social situations, which impact drinking consumption. This study aims to address these limitations in current social marketing scholarship by proposing and testing a social influence model of intentional moderate drinking actions. Thus the remaining discussion in this paper turns to an outline of the theoretical background, the research model and hypotheses; the next section explains the research methods and study results. The final section of the paper brings together a general discussion of the research findings, theoretical and practical implications, and directions for future research.

2. Theoretical background and hypothesis development

To examine binge drinkers' moderate drinking desires, individual and group intentions to engage in moderate drinking practices are explored. Currently social marketing and health consumer researchers

rely heavily on social-psychology models to operationalize individual-level variables explaining behavioral intentions as a function of personal evaluations of binge drinking intentions and behaviors (e.g., Ajzen's original Theory of Planned Behavior and its various theoretical extensions such as the Model of Goal Directed Behavior). These classic approaches use individual-based models (i-intention models) to explain for example: the alignment between individual positive attitudes towards binge drinking and planned intentions to engage in risky drinking (Cooke, Sniehotta, & Schuz, 2007), the habit of binge drinking in undergraduate students (Norman, 2011), and youth responses to drinking messages (Wechsler et al., 2003). Primarily, these and other studies of youth binge drinking assume that a number of individual-level variables act separately to influence youth decision-making about the risks associated with binge drinking.

Social Influence Theory (Bagozzi & Lee, 2002) is used to extend this body of research and explore additional social determinants of drinking practices that may also influence alcohol drinkers' behaviors. Specifically, the objective in this study is to develop and empirically validate a research model (see Fig. 1) of *intentional moderate drinking actions* in alcohol drinkers. The model extends beyond individual-based intentions (i-intentions) to incorporate the influence of *collective intentions* (we-intentions) on alcohol drinking. Integration of group influences within the model is informed by research about youth alcohol consumption and group socialization (e.g., Szmigin et al., 2011), as well as marketplace observations of alcohol marketing that regularly capitalizing on group socialization in advertising appeals and promotional events to positively position alcohol products and brands to youth segments. Bagozzi and colleagues' social influence measures are incorporated to develop a collective intentions model of moderate drinking (Bagozzi & Lee, 2002). While Bagozzi and colleagues in the past have theorized this process through we-intentions specifically, this paper also includes i-intention variables to enable exploration of both intra-individual process and group effects that may influence an individual's purposeful, moderate drinking actions.

2.1. Social influence variables: a framework for understanding group drinking

The constructs of interest to this study align with examining the impact of social influences on moderate drinking decision-making and participatory actions. While social influence theory has been widely used to explain group and collective behavior in settings such as online social networks and virtual communities (Cheung & Lee, 2010; Dholakia, Bagozzi, & Pearo, 2004), it has not been applied to explore alcohol-related contexts. In this study of binge drinkers' moderate drinking intentions, we demonstrate the value of the model to guide exploration of the social influence process based on the original three distinct processes as proposed by Kelman (1958): the role of compliance (social norms), internalization (group norms) and identification (social identity). An additional construct, *Drinking Contextual Effects* (DCEs), is included in the theorization to explore consumer responses to environment cues and drinking situations that may influence their moderate drinking intentions.

Firstly, drawing on Kelman's theoretical devices of compliance, internalization and identification informs the proposition that there may be differing degrees of influence in drinking contexts for young drinkers. Compliance may occur when a drinker responds to the social influence of a drinking-peer, and seeks approval from significant others in their friendship group during a night out. In this regard, subjective norm reflects the influence of important others. A number of studies have noted weak support for the role of subjective norm in the prediction of binge drinking behavioral intentions (Johnston & White, 2003). Subjective norm is included in this study of moderate drinking because, as Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) contend, the importance of social norm as a predictor of intention will vary as a function of the specific population and behavior under consideration. Thus, because it remains to be seen