

# The importance of self-regulatory and goal-conflicting processes in the avoidance of drunk driving among Greek young drivers

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## Abstract

The present study examined self-regulatory and goal-conflicting processes in the avoidance of drunk driving among Greek young drivers. A total of 361 university students in Greece completed a questionnaire, using a retrospective cross-sectional survey design. One-third reported to have driven under the influence of alcohol. Although prior intentions were clearly related to actual avoidance of drunk driving, one out of five respondents had not complied with their intention. An examination of post-intentional correlates of avoidance of drunk driving among positive intenders showed that avoidance of drunk driving was positively related to alcohol limitation plans and alcohol limitation self-efficacy, whereas negative relations were found for goal conflict and behavioural willingness. The present study suggests that people should not only be motivated but also be equipped with self-regulatory strategies aiming at the avoidance of drinking. Finally, goal commitment should be enhanced by increasing the salience of the avoidance goal.

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## 1. Introduction

Drunk driving poses a serious health threat. Driving under the influence of alcohol is strongly related to accidents (e.g., Connor et al., 2004; Horwood and Fergusson, 2000; Levitt and Porter, 1999; Movig et al., 2004). In addition, it has been found that drunk driving is mainly prevalent among young drivers aged 21–24 years (National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, 2000). In an international study among university students from 23 countries, Steptoe et al. (2004) showed that approximately 20% of the men and 7% of the women reported having driven under the influence of alcohol. In Greece, the drunk driving prevalence among this target population is even higher, with 30% of the male and 12% of the female university students having reported driving under the influence of alcohol within the last year (Steptoe et al., 2004).

Reducing the alcohol intake to a blood alcohol content (BAC) below 0.03 mg/ml has shown to lead to a dramatic reduction in the number of accidents (35%, Connor et al., 2004). As such, promoting the avoidance of driving under the influence of alcohol is a very important behaviour to reduce the number of traffic accidents. In the present paper we will examine drunk driving among Greek university students, integrating models on goal achievement relating to motivational, social reactive and self-regulatory processes.

### 1.1. Goal intention

Social cognitive theories, such as the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), generally agree that intention formation is the most proximal antecedent of actual behaviour (e.g., Abraham et al., 1998; Ajzen, 1991; Rogers, 1983). A meta-analysis of meta-analyses, examining the relationship between intentions and actions, showed that there is a reasonably good correspondence between intentions and actions (28% of explained variance in prospective behaviour, Sheeran, 2002). This analysis, however, also suggests that despite the intention–action correspondence, there is a gap between intentions and actions. Researchers have pointed out that the social cognitive models

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have failed to account for self-regulatory processes in translating intentions into actions, more specifically the importance of action planning (Bagozzi, 1992; Gollwitzer, 1990; Schwarzer, 1992) and phase-specific self-efficacy (Schwarzer and Renner, 2000).

### 1.2. Goal striving: action planning and action-specific efficacy

The model of action phases (Gollwitzer, 1990), the health action process approach (HAPA) model (Schwarzer, 1992) and the volitional model of goal-directed behaviour (Bagozzi, 1992) all propose multiple behavioural stages, suggesting that after a motivational stage, there is a volitional stage, where people should engage in self-regulatory activities in order to ensure goal attainment. A common component of the volition stage that these models share is action planning (cf. Abraham et al., 1998). Action planning (i.e., detailed plans on when, where and how to act on a goal intention) has proven to be a strong self-regulatory tool, able to accelerate action initiation and to promote goal achievement further beyond positive goal intentions (Brandstatter et al., 2001; Gollwitzer, 1993; Gollwitzer and Brandstatter, 1997; Orbell et al., 1997; Sheeran, 2002). It should be noticed that an important prerequisite for action planning is a positive goal intention (Sheeran et al., 2005).

Furthermore, it has been shown that action planning mediates the intention–behaviour relationship for various health behaviours (e.g., Abraham et al., 1999; Jones et al., 2001; Luszczynska and Schwarzer, 2003; Sniehotta et al., 2005). In the case of drunk driving, two major actions to avoid driving under the influence of alcohol have been suggested: limiting alcohol consumption and using alternatives to driving after excessive alcohol consumption ( $\geq 3$  alcoholic drinks) (Brown, 1997; Kulick and Rosenberg, 2000). As such, it is important to examine action planning in relation to both drunk driving avoidance strategies.

In addition, it seems important to take into account action-specific self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is expected to regulate both motivation and behaviour. In the action phase of the HAPA model, perceived self-efficacy has a direct effect on the cognitive construction of specific action plans as well as on action control for the perseverance of effort and the maintenance of the behaviour (Schwarzer, 1992; Schwarzer and Fuchs, 1996). Recently, Luszczynska and Schwarzer (2003) and Schwarzer and Renner (2000) showed that action-specific self-efficacy was able to make a difference in the formation of an intention, the translation of intention into action and the recovery from setback. Within the present context we will examine self-efficacy towards reducing alcohol and towards taking transportation alternatives when being drunk.

Thus, in accordance with the self-regulatory processes we expect people who have planned the avoidance of drunk driving more carefully, and perceive themselves to be capable to stick to their plans are more likely to act on their intention.

### 1.3. Goal disengagement

Finally, it is noteworthy to recognize that people may disengage from the goal of avoiding drunk driving, because the goal itself may be in conflict with other valued goals, or the goal itself may not be very strongly imbedded. Goal conflict may result from having multiple goals (Abraham and Sheeran, 2003b; Austin and Vancouver, 1996; Gebhardt and Maes, 2001). Whether people act in accordance with their intention may depend on the salience of a specific goal. Indeed, Kruglanski et al. (2002) mentioned that activation of alternative goals may deduct resources from the focal goal and consequently undermine goal commitment. These goals may thus *conflict* with the focal one and as the conflict increases, the latter is less likely to be attained (Sheeran, Orbell & Norman, 1998 in Sheeran, 2002). In a study on condom use, Abraham et al. (1999) showed that relative importance of a goal, as a measure of conflicting goals was the strongest discriminator between those who used condom (actors) and those who did not (nonactors). It should be noted that multiple conflicts may arise in the context of drunk driving, namely the goal to drink, the goal to drive, and the goal to avoid drunk driving.

As mentioned, goal disengagement is also likely when people have not given much thought to the goal. Gibbons et al. (1998, 2003) suggested that intentions are less likely to predict impulsive behaviours, but rather these behaviours are driven by behavioural willingness. In other words, people may not have rationally decided to strive for a goal, even more so any forethought may be lacking, but when an opportunity is presented to them they may react to that opportunity. Gibbons et al. (1998) showed that behavioural willingness was a good predictor of involvement in drunk driving. Hence, people may have good intentions, but the intention–behaviour relationship is likely to be negatively affected by behavioural willingness.

### 1.4. Present study and hypotheses

In the present study we tried to integrate several theoretical models on goal achievement in order to understand the avoidance of drunk driving by Greek university students. Our main interest in the present study was to examine how the intention–behaviour gap of avoiding drunk driving might be bridged, taking into account self-regulatory and goal-conflicting processes.

First, we expected that intention (i.e., *prior intention*) would be a significant determinant, able to differentiate between those who engaged in risky behaviour and those who did not. We expected that intention to avoid drunk driving is related to actual avoidance of alcohol (hypothesis 1). However, in addition, we hypothesized that among positive intenders (favouring avoidance of drunk driving) those people who acted on their intention would have planned or better thought through their behaviour, and would be more self-efficacious (hypothesis 2). Finally, we expected that people who were more willing to engage in risky behaviour and who attached less importance or felt commitment to the goal of avoiding driving under the influence of alcohol were less likely to have acted on their intention to avoid drunk driving (hypothesis 3).

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