



Research Paper

Heroic journeys through sobriety: How temporary alcohol abstinence campaigns portray participant experiences

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ABSTRACT

Background: In Australia, recent years have seen a rise in the popularity of temporary abstinence campaigns, in which people pledge to abstain from alcohol for a month while raising funds for charity. In addition to their fundraising aims, such initiatives have been viewed as tools for broader behavioural and cultural change around alcohol, encouraging participants to reflect on their drinking and make longer-term changes to their behaviour. The extent to which these initiatives promote enduring change may depend on how they portray the experience of temporarily abstaining from alcohol, and how they position participants.

Method: We conducted a thematic discourse analysis of e-mails and website content from the 2016 editions of *Dry July*[™] and *Ocober*[™], two Australian temporary abstinence campaigns.

Results: Both campaigns featured an overarching portrayal of participation as a hero's journey through sobriety, with participants embarking on a quest to fundraise for their cause, and returning from their experience transformed. However, the campaigns differed in the way they positioned participants. *Dry July*[™] consistently positioned participants as heroes, promoting both fundraising and reflection on longer-term behaviour changes. In contrast, *Ocober*[™] offered varied and inconsistent positions which were less likely to engage participants or prompt enduring changes in behaviour, for example positioning participants as alcohol abusers or on a detox.

Conclusion: Our findings emphasise the need to attend to how campaigns materials position participants in order to strengthen the effectiveness of such campaigns as health promotion tools.

Introduction

Health promotion campaigns are one of a suite of measures policy-makers can employ to address harms from alcohol, and generally enjoy broad public acceptance, unlike more restrictive, albeit effective, measures targeting price or availability of alcohol (Room, Babor, & Rehm, 2005). One type of health promotion campaign that may assist individuals to reduce their drinking is a temporary abstinence fundraiser, such as the Australian campaigns *febfast*[™], *Dry July*[™], or *Ocober*[™]. Participants in such fundraisers pledge to abstain from alcohol for a limited period of time, typically one month, while raising funds for a nominated charity. These fundraisers have grown rapidly in popularity in recent years, and participation appears to have become an acceptable reason for declining a drink—at least temporarily (Bartram, Elliott, & Crabb, 2017; Cherrier & Gurrieri, 2013; Fry, 2011). This social acceptability makes these campaigns an interesting phenomenon to investigate, given that people in countries such as Australia more commonly find themselves stigmatised, not accepted, for violating social norms around alcohol consumption (Bartram et al., 2017; Romo,

2012).

There is some evidence that participation in temporary abstinence campaigns can lead to longer-term changes in alcohol consumption. To evaluate the impact of *febfast*[™] participation, Hillgrove and Thomson (2012) surveyed participants approximately four months after the 2011 event, finding that just over half of respondents (51%) self-reported reducing how often they drank following *febfast*[™] participation, and nearly half (49%) self-reported drinking less on each drinking occasion. Using a stronger pre-post survey design to evaluate *Dry January*, a similar British campaign, de Visser, Robinson, and Bond (2016) found that participants reported lower levels of drinking at six-month follow-up compared to their baseline consumption. These positive findings are particularly notable given the underwhelming impact of most alcohol-focused health promotion programs on people's drinking behaviour (Babor et al., 2003).

Participation in these temporary abstinence campaigns may lead to longer-term changes in alcohol consumption because they encourage participants to reflect critically on their drinking practices and how these are influenced by the broader drinking culture, as well as develop

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strategies to resist dominant norms of alcohol consumption (Cherrier & Gurrieri, 2014; Fry, 2011). This is in contrast to typical health promotion campaigns, which aim to increase awareness of negative health risks and encourage ‘responsible’ drinking. These aims construct drinking as a rational, cognitive, independent decision, and ignore the social context that can make reducing alcohol consumption difficult (Cherrier & Gurrieri, 2013). Participants described *febfast*[™], for example, as providing a ‘space for change,’ where they could (temporarily) reject alcohol without fear of being stigmatized, while developing their skills and confidence in making changes to their alcohol consumption beyond the month of abstinence (Cherrier & Gurrieri, 2014; Fry, 2011). Such increases in confidence through participation in *Dry January* have been found to relate to lower alcohol consumption six months later (de Visser et al., 2016).

However, there is uncertainty about whether the inclusion of a fundraising element within these campaigns may support or conflict with the campaign’s likelihood of promoting longer-term behaviour change. Some have argued that the option of fundraising is helpful, as it increases participants’ sense of commitment to stay abstinent for the month (Cherrier & Gurrieri, 2013; Robert, 2016) and because this altruistic element may explain why participation is viewed as socially acceptable (Bartram et al., 2017). However, Gilmore (in Hamilton & Gilmore, 2016) has expressed concerns that participants who view their participation primarily as a fundraising activity are likely to revert to their previous drinking patterns, without critically reflecting on the experience.

In this paper, we contend that the extent to which these campaigns promote critical reflection, and thus longer-term changes in alcohol consumption, might depend on how each campaign portrays the experience of abstaining from alcohol for a month, and how these portrayals position participants. We conceptualise health campaigns as providing discourses which people can draw on as resources in making sense of health in everyday life (Hodgetts & Chamberlain, 2002). According to positioning theory, discourses (talk or text, such as the messaging used in campaigns) make certain positions available to subjects, which offer rights and responsibilities that restrict how a person taking up that position may speak or act (van Langenhove & Harré, 1999). Positions are argued to be relational, in that where a person takes up a position in conversation, this also implies a positioning of the person addressed (van Langenhove & Harré, 1999). The campaign messaging used in temporary sobriety initiatives can be understood to offer positions to participants, which they can draw on to assign meaning to their experience of abstaining from alcohol (Robert, 2016).

Participants do not necessarily take up the positions offered in campaign materials uncritically. Positioning is a dynamic process, with initial positionings open to challenge and renegotiation by participants through second-order positioning (van Langenhove & Harré, 1999). For example, Hodgetts and Chamberlain (2002) demonstrated how men viewing a documentary on men’s health did not accept health messages passively, but negotiated, resisted and interpreted these messages with reference to other discourses available to them through their lives. Nonetheless, it is valuable to attend to the first-order positions made available by campaign materials, as these can be understood as aiming for certain preferred readings, narrowing down the potential meanings available for readers to be able to position themselves (Törrönen, 2001). For example, Robert (2016) found that *febfast*[™] messaging about past participants gaining health benefits (such as weight loss) cued new participants to reflect on the bodily impact of the experience for themselves.

Drawing on positioning theory as a theoretical framework, we examine how the 2016 editions of two popular Australian one-month abstinence fundraising campaigns, *Dry July*[™] and *Ocsober*[™] portray the experience of abstaining from alcohol for a month, how these portrayals position participants and others, and the implications of the positions made available to participants for promoting longer-term reductions in

alcohol consumption.

Method

The campaigns

Dry July[™] is an Australian fundraising campaign, which invites individuals to give up alcohol consumption for the month of July, and raise funds for projects which reduce stress and increase comfort for people diagnosed with cancer, their families, and carers (Dry July Australia, 2016). In 2016, 16,787 people registered to participate, raising a total of more than AUD3.7 million (Dry July Australia, 2016).

Ocsober[™] is a similar Australian fundraising campaign, which invites individuals to give up alcohol consumption for the month of October to raise funds for *Life Education*[™], a non-profit organisation that provides drug and health education to Australian children (Ocsober, 2016). In 2016, participants were asked to abstain from alcohol from 4 to 31 October, a period of 28 days (Ocsober, 2016). Approximately 3500 people participated in 2016 (T. Deakin, personal communication, 19 April 2017), raising more than AUD460,000 (Ocsober, 2016).

Procedure

This research did not require institutional ethics approval as it used publicly available materials. The materials were sourced from the websites of the two campaigns, www.dryjuly.com and www.ocsober.com.au, as well as generic e-mails sent to registered participants of the 2016 campaigns. In determining whether these e-mails were public communications, we followed Eysenbach and Till (2001) in considering it reasonable to treat content sent to large mailing lists as public, especially as authorship of these e-mails was attributed to the organisations (e.g. “The Ocsober team”), rather than individuals, and e-mail recipients were sometimes encouraged to forward the e-mails to others.

The first author used NCapture for Internet Explorer software (QSR International Pty Ltd, 2015a) to save copies of each webpage within these websites, excluding individual participant fundraiser pages and *Dry July*[™] Ambassador pages which only included a biography of the ambassador. This yielded a total of 28 pages for *Dry July*[™] and 34 pages for *Ocsober*[™]. To obtain copies of the e-mails, the first author registered as a participant for both campaigns, and saved all generic e-mails received across the campaigns until their official closure (1 September 2016 for *Dry July*[™] and 1 December 2016 for *Ocsober*[™]); e-mails regarding the receipt of individual donations were excluded as these were deemed personal). In total, the first author received 31 e-mails from *Dry July*[™] and 21 e-mails from *Ocsober*[™]. All webpages and e-mails were imported into the NVivo 11 software package (QSR International Pty Ltd, 2015b) for analysis.

The aim of our analysis was to identify ways in which sampled *Dry July*[™] and *Ocsober*[™] materials portray the experience of temporarily abstaining from alcohol as part of the campaign, and how these portrayals work to position participants (the recipients of the materials) and others. We initially took a thematic approach to analysis, following the guidelines suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). Although our analysis was guided by our theoretical framework of positioning theory, we approached it inductively, with no predefined coding scheme. The first author initially read and re-read the data, then systematically coded it into categories related to the experience of (temporarily) abstaining from alcohol. These codes were grouped to form broader themes and sub-themes. When reviewing these themes, we were struck by their resemblance to key elements of the hero’s journey: a classic narrative structure in which a hero receives a call to adventure to go on a journey through a special world. On this journey, the hero encounters temptations and trials, but is ultimately rewarded with a boon or treasure. The hero returns to the ordinary world, transformed by the experience, and uses the treasure they have received to benefit the world (Campbell, 1949/2008; Vogler, 1998/2007). Throughout the

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