Segmenting and Targeting American University Students to Promote Responsible Alcohol Use: a Case For Applying Social Marketing Principles

Sameer Deshpande, University of Lethbridge

Campaigns to promote responsible alcohol use on American university campuses lack a social marketing approach. Campaign managers do not attempt to satisfy students’ underlying need to drink, treat students as one undifferentiated group, and create homogeneous and ineffective social change campaigns. To overcome this weakness, the current study segmented freshmen and sophomores enrolled at a large mid-western university by their drinking habits. Each segment was profiled by demographic and binge drinking related Theory of Planned Behavior variables, and a strategy to promote responsible alcohol use for each segment was proposed using Rothschild’s (1999) framework of education, marketing, and law.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Binge drinking at American colleges is widespread, and so are its consequences (Wechsler et al. 1994). Colleges, lawmakers, and surrounding communities have employed a variety of educational, legal, and skill-oriented programs over the last two decades to convince students to improve their drinking behaviors, but with limited success (Wechsler et al. 2002). The number of binge drinkers across 140 American campuses has remained steady since 1993. The campaigns have proven to be ineffective, perhaps because the campaign managers do not attempt to satisfy students’ underlying need to drink, treat students as one undifferentiated group, and create homogeneous social change campaigns. To bring in a much needed target focus, this study employs social marketing principles. The author hopes that by segmenting students by their drinking habits and by profiling them by their reasons to drink, we would be able to evolve targeted social change solutions that effectively promote responsible alcohol use among university students.

An exploratory study of 37 freshmen and a survey among 294 freshmen and sophomores enrolled at a large mid-western university was conducted. Two alcohol-consumption behavior questions asked about “intention to consume a number of drinks in the next two-week period” and “frequency of intention to binge drink in the next two-week period.” In addition to demographics, students were also asked questions related to Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) (attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control). Students were segmented based on the intended frequency to binge drink in the next two-week period. Four clusters emerged: responsible drinkers who do not intend to binge drink (23.5%), light binge drinkers who intend to binge drink once (25.2%), moderate binge drinkers who intend to binge drink two to three times (34.4%), and heavy binge drinkers who intend to binge drink four or more times in the next two-week period (17.0%). If students were not segmented by their drinking habits, the average frequency to binge drink for all students as well as binge-drinking students would have been similar to moderate binge drinkers.

Segments were profiled based on demographic and binge drinking related TPB variables. All segments had a sizeable representation of women (around 66%). In terms of ethnicity, fewer Caucasians were represented among responsible drinkers than the light binge drinkers. Responsible drinkers, light and moderate binge drinkers tended to live in dorms, while heavy binge drinkers tended to live in houses or apartments or private residence halls. Moderate and heavy binge drinkers had a higher membership in fraternities or sororities than responsible drinkers and light binge drinkers. Moderate binge drinkers and responsible drinkers reported higher religious intensity than heavy binge drinkers. TPB variables displayed consistent statistical differences among segments. In general, responsible drinkers differed from the other three segments.

Correlation was calculated among demographic and TPB variables with intention to drink in the next two-week period. Across segments, gender was positively correlated with drinking habits. Within each segment, men were likely to drink more than women. Among responsible drinkers, two attitude variables (useful and moral) were positively correlated with drinking habits. These variables had a negative mean score, and the negative usefulness and moral association with drinking habits was having a desirable negative association with their drinking habits. Opinion of friends had a positive mean and was positively correlated with drinking habits. Finally, self-efficacy and presence of friends had a positive correlation with drinking habits of responsible drinkers. Similar to opinions of friends, presence of friends seemed to act as an encouragement to drink responsibly. This finding is contrary to the stereotype that friends only encourage drinking. Similarly, self-efficacy also played a positive role in promoting the responsible drinking habits among this segment.

Among light binge drinkers, opinions of friends, campus norms (percentage who drink same), and self-efficacy had a positive correlation with their drinking habits. Additionally, utility of binge drinking to socialize had a marginal positive relationship with drinking habits. Among moderate binge drinkers, religious intensity significantly negatively correlated with drinking habits. There was, however, a marginal negative relationship with morality to binge drink. Among both light and moderate binge drinkers, the association of the two campus norms scores with drinking habits revealed an interesting pattern. While the perception of students who drink the same had a positive association, the perception of students who drink more had a negative association. Students in these two segments are thus willing to drink at a level similar to others on the campus, but not more. Among heavy binge drinkers, self-efficacy had a positive significant correlation with their drinking habits. Perceived control was marginally associated.

Based on the group profiles, one can conclude that the primary reason why students drink is to socialize and conform with peers. Their beliefs about the utility of binge drinking to socialize were also built around perceptions that the majority of the students on the campus binge drink. Self-efficacy similarly had a strong association with drinking habits. Students seemed to have a strong sense of “I can do it” mentality with regard to their drinking habits. The exploratory study data also revealed that the perceptions about availability of alternative opportunities influence students’ binge drinking habits. Alcohol-free alternatives are considered boring and not useful to socialize. Students believe that the only way to socialize on campus on weekend evenings is to visit a bar or a house party.

Based on the reasons to binge drink, appropriate social change strategies are proposed using Rothschild’s (1999) framework of Education-Marketing-Law model. Among light binge drinkers, an education campaign rectifying social norms coupled with a marketing campaign promoting an alcohol-free dance club may be useful. Among moderate binge drinkers, it may be useful to run an education campaign that highlights the role of religion on practicing socially positive behaviors, and education campaign that rectifies social norms. Finally, for heavy binge drinkers it might be useful to promote counseling sessions based on personalized feedback and motivational interviewing.

REFERENCES
