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## **Self-perception of wellbeing: Implications for social marketing strategies to tackle young adult binge drinking**

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## Background

Risky alcohol use is a growing public health concern in Australia. It is the second largest contributor to drug related harm after tobacco. It has both short and long term implications for health, including unintentional injury and violence as immediate harms and in the long term it can result in serious health issues such as liver disease or cancer (ABS, 2008; Chikritzhs, Jonas, Stockwell, Heale, & Dietze, 2001). Young adults aged 18-25 years are more likely than others to drink frequently and at greater quantities (ABS, 2008). Alcohol related harm is one of the major causes of death in this population with four Australians aged under 25 dying due to alcohol related injuries each week (National Drug Research Institute, 2008). Alcohol misuse is one of the priority action areas in Australia, however, despite government efforts to tackle the issue it continues to grow as is evident in the increase in alcohol-related hospitalisations nationally (Ministerial Council on Drug Strategy, 2011).

In recent years social marketing strategies have been used to address Australia's drinking culture. Formative research shows that young people tend to highlight the positives of drinking which they see as enabling having a good time or relieving stress, while they struggle to identify with the risks involved in its excessive use. The *'Don't turn a night out into a nightmare'* social marketing campaign was introduced to encourage youth to think about the choices they make about alcohol with a strong emphasis on the negative consequences of excessive drinking, such as violence, injury and humiliation.

While informing youth about the risks related to excessive alcohol use is very important, such a focus on risk ignores the meaning young people themselves place on alcohol. It also does not offer nor promote healthy alternatives that could replace binge drinking, which according to young people themselves is an activity important to increase their sense of wellness. We argue that it is not only necessary to educate young people about the consequences of their drinking, but it is also important to consider complementary strategies or messages which could motivate young people to avoid engaging in such behaviours.

One way to do this is to look at the issue through the lens of wellbeing. There is a growing body of literature that identifies self-perception of wellbeing as one of the factors that influence lifestyle behaviour choices. In particular, some recent research shows that young people with higher levels of wellbeing are less likely to engage in risky behaviours (e.g. drink driving), suggesting that perceived wellbeing is a protective factor (Ravert et al., 2013; Ritchie et al., 2013; Schwartz et al., 2011). However, this link has only recently attracted research attention and has not been fully exploited in the promotion of health of young adults. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to discuss the role of self-perception of wellbeing in shaping lifestyle behaviours among youth and how a better understanding of wellness could influence future marketing campaigns.

## Conceptual Model

Wellbeing is a multidimensional concept that incorporates eudaimonic and hedonic aspects of human wellness. Eudaimonic wellbeing refers to positive human functioning, such as psychological wellness and hedonic wellbeing refers to affective or emotional wellness like happiness, satisfaction with life and balance between positive and negative emotions (Keyes, Shmotkin, & Ryff, 2002). Research on youth perspectives on health and wellbeing shows that they place emphasis on happiness, pleasure, feeling good about oneself and having a social life (Bourke & Geldens, 2007; Easthope & White, 2006).

Although a healthy lifestyle is acknowledged as important to physical health, young people usually do not place emphasis on it when discussing wellbeing perhaps this is because most youth feel physically healthy.

According to youth research, young people are increasingly managing their wellbeing, but in doing so may paradoxically engage in behaviours that are harmful (Wyn, 2009). Binge drinking is a good example of such a behaviour. Research shows that some young people binge drink with their friends to increase their sense of belonging (Järvinen & Gundelach, 2007) - an important aspect of social wellness. This finding suggests the potential role of sense of wellbeing in moderating the relationship between affiliation and binge drinking intentions. Studies in the United States of America found that higher levels of perceived wellbeing were associated with lower levels of risk taking, such as impaired driving, illicit drug use and risky sexual activity (Ritchie et al., 2013; Schwartz et al., 2011). A longitudinal study found that positive wellbeing, including happiness and enjoyment in life, hopefulness about the future during adolescence predicted fewer risky behaviours, including binge drinking, during young adulthood (Hoyt, Chase-Lansdale, McDade, & Adam, 2012). Some explain that the reasons young people with lower levels of wellbeing engage in risky behaviours are peer-pressure, self-medication, boredom or self-harm, and those with higher wellbeing may perceive themselves as having more to lose or be in a better place to resist peer pressure. The relationship between low levels of wellbeing and intensity sensation seeking, which is linked to risky behaviours has also been documented (Ravert et al., 2013). It can be explained that those with lower levels of wellbeing may seek stimulation through engagement in behaviours considered to be risky and pleasurable.

### **Implications for Theory**

Therefore, because wellbeing can serve as a protective factor or a strength within young people themselves, this could be considered in conjunction with or as an alternative to risk when designing social marketing campaigns to tackle binge drinking. If engagement in risky behaviours is paradoxically driven by the motivation to increase wellbeing this needs to be addressed. Informing about risk as a strategy to influence individual behaviour on its own is unlikely to be very successful as young people place importance on pleasure and fun when discussing wellbeing, and 'risky' activities such as binge drinking are often portrayed as enhancing sense of wellness.

It is also important to note that preventive messages about the negative aspects of drinking are conveyed in the media environment saturated with the positives of drinking via alcohol advertising. Alcohol advertisements emphasise aspects that are important to young people's wellbeing, such as having fun with friends. Risk focused campaigns to some extent suggest the removal of behaviours which yield pleasure without offering positive alternatives that young people can relate to.

### **Implications for Practice**

The concept discussed in this paper could be used in broadening social marketing campaigns and programs to address the issue of excessive drinking among young adults. Social marketing campaigns could be improved by shifting the focus to positive messages or strengths within young people themselves, which can prevent their engagement in risky behaviours. One of the social marketing principles in promoting voluntary behaviour change is to offer the benefits people want.

Therefore, in addition to informing young people about the risks of binge drinking, promoting positive healthy alternatives by representing them as fun and enjoyable could potentially increase the effectiveness of social marketing campaigns aimed at bringing about behaviour change in young adults.

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