

Confusion Surrounding Social Marketing Strategies and Social Norm Theory: To Prevent High-Risk Drinking Among College Students

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Abstract

High-risk drinking, the consumption of 5 or more drinks on one occasion, constitutes a serious public health issue among young adults, particularly college students. In an attempt to address this issue in a cost-effective manner, many universities have implemented social marketing interventions sometimes utilizing social norm theory and in other cases using more traditional strategies. However, some practitioners, school officials, and even researchers incorrectly use the terms social marketing and social norms marketing, interchangeably. Social marketing influences health behavior through the use of marketing principles, such as the use of the 4Ps (product, price, placement, and promotion) to increase knowledge, change attitudes, and motivate individual or societal change. Conversely, social norms represents a specific theory which can be applied using social marketing principles. Social norm interventions are designed to correct peoples' misconceptions concerning the prevalence of a particular behavior. Theorists assert that by providing accurate information concerning the prevalence of the behavior of interest people will alter their behavior to fit the "norm." Using social marketing approaches with or without social norms theory represents a promising cost-effective strategy for addressing high-risk drinking among college students. However, failing to understand and appreciate the conceptual underpinnings of how these two concepts relate to one another may result in ineffective interventions and conclusions concerning the efficacy of social marketing and/or social norms theory.