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Background

Public health campaigns which aim to educate individuals regarding the potential harms of alcohol and how to drink in a responsible manner are one of the first lines of defence against alcohol-related harms. However, no research to date has explored whether such changes in knowledge, belief or intention actually achieve their aim of making prospective drinking behaviour ‘more responsible’.

In a series of studies, utilising a simulated bar environment, we explored the effects of context and RDM media materials on young drinkers’ alcohol intake. The materials used were taken from a current national campaign in the UK, funded by the Drinkaware Trust. From 2011 onwards, this campaign is the only nationwide mass media campaign in the UK aiming to reduce alcohol-related harm amongst young people.

Method

Participants: Undergraduate students were recruited from a London University campus (Study 1: N = 35, M_{age} = 23.2, SD = 3.5, all female; Study 2: N = 80, M_{age} = 21.4, SD = 1.5, 30 male, 50 female)

Setting: Studies took part in a purpose-built simulated bar environment, with a separate lab room used in study 1 to allow for a comparison of the effects of environment on alcohol consumption.

Measures: The dependent variable in the study was volume of alcohol consumed during a Taste Preference Task (TPT). This involved participants tasting a range of different beverages (e.g. beer, wine) and then rating each according to a number of features. Participants were not aware that the true objective of the study was to determine the total volume of alcohol consumed during the study.

In study 2, half of the participants were also asked to read some brief information on the Drinkaware Trust website, which supplements the poster campaign. This allowed us to examine the effects of both elements of the Drinkaware Trust responsible drinking campaign.

Procedure: In both studies participants were invited to take part in a research project evaluating taste preference for various products, including beer and wine. On arrival to the laboratory, participants were randomly allocated to one of the study four conditions (Study 1: Bar & Posters; Bar & No Posters; Lab & Posters; Lab & No Posters. Study 2: Posters & Online Advice; Posters & No Advice; No Posters & Online Advice; No Posters & No Advice). All participants were asked to complete the TPT, and a funnelled debriefing protocol was utilised at the end of each study to determine whether participants were aware of the study’s true aim (i.e. to monitor volume of alcohol intake). Any participants who had realised the true aims would have been excluded from further analysis, though none were.

Figure 1: Effects of context and posters on alcohol consumption

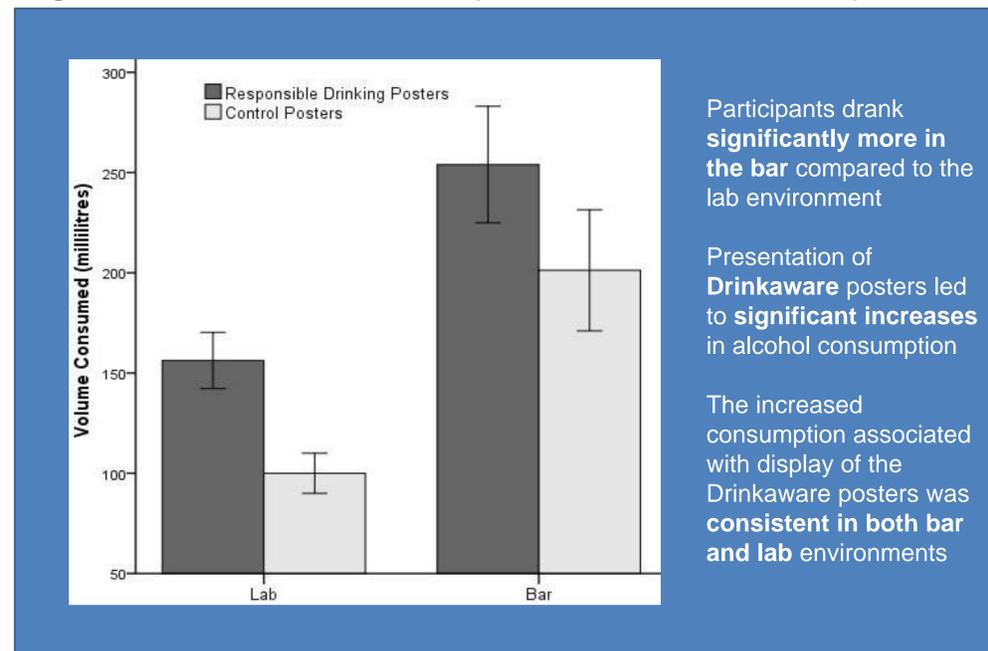
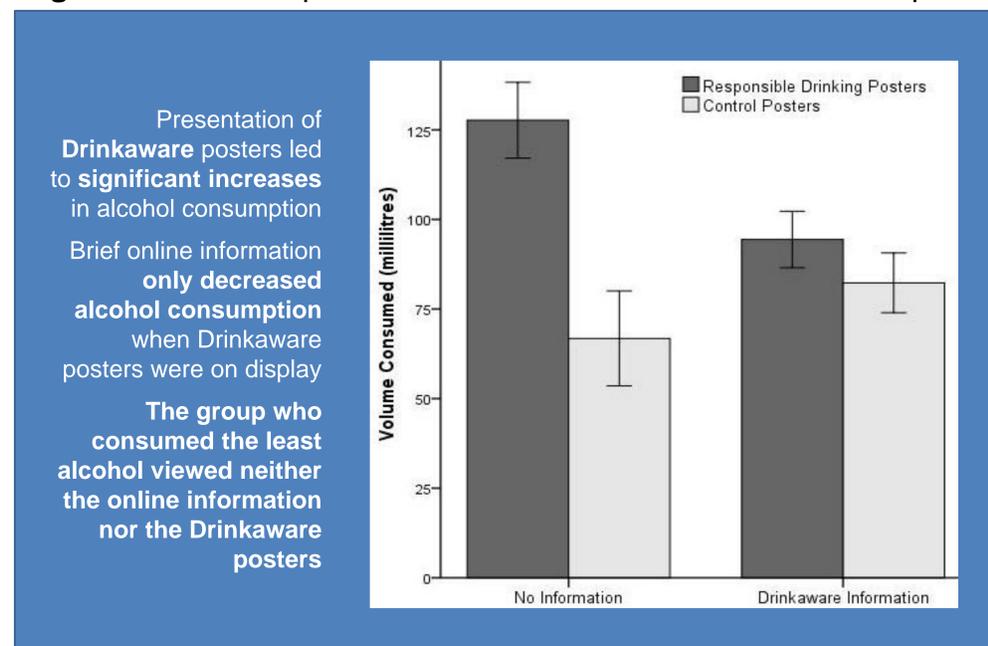


Figure 2: Effects of posters and brief advice on alcohol consumption



Findings

Study 1 (see Figure 1)

A significant effect of context was found [$F(1, 31) = 18.3, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI} = 52.1 \text{ to } 146.9\text{ml}$], with participants drinking more in the bar than the lab.

A significant effect of the Drinkaware Trust posters was also found [$F(1, 31) = 5.5, p < .05, 95\% \text{ CI} = 7.09 \text{ to } 101.91\text{ml}$], with participants drinking more when the Drinkaware posters were on display.

There was no significant interaction between context and the Drinkaware posters [$F(1,31)=0.006, p > .05$], suggesting each factor independently influenced drinking.

Study 2 (See Figure 2)

A significant effect of the Drinkaware Trust posters was found [$F(1, 76) = 12.7, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI} = 16.1 \text{ to } 56.9\text{ml}$], replicating the findings in Study 1 that the Drinkaware posters led to increased consumption.

Presentation of brief online information had no significant effect on drinking [$F(1, 76) = 0.76, p > .05, 95\% \text{ CI} = -11.5 \text{ to } 29.3\text{ml}$].

A significant Drinkaware poster x Online information interaction was identified [$F(1, 76) = 5.67, p < .02$]. Exploration of this interaction using simple effects analysis demonstrated that there were no significant increases in drinking when both the Drinkaware posters and brief online advice were presented, but the presentation of online information alone did not decrease alcohol intake.

Implications

Our present analyses indicate that alcohol consumption is increased when participants are exposed to media promoting responsible drinking in simulated drinking environments. Providing participants with online information on responsible drinking prior to drinking has no significant effect on drinking. Results from Study 2 show that while the effect of the overall Drinkaware campaign (i.e. when posters and online information were presented) was not negative, the participants who drank the least throughout these studies were those who were presented with no responsible drinking advice.

Our research suggests that more needs to be done to evaluate the potential negative consequences of such public health campaigns, and provides a novel methodology for doing so in a quick and cost effective manner. While the present work is obviously limited to the extent that the research was not conducted in the field, the findings are nonetheless compelling enough to suggest that larger scale evaluations of the current Drinkaware campaign are necessary, to ensure that harm is not being increased by it.