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Social norms theory based interventions: Testing the feasibility of a purported mechanism of action and a related hypothesis

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Abstract

Social norms based interventions targeting college student drinking behaviors have become increasingly popular. Perkins and Berkowitz¹ have suggested that exposure to campus specific normative alcohol use information may decrease student drinking. Purportedly, such interventions modify student misperceptions of fellow student drinking behaviors, which lead to changes in the individual's drinking behavior. Despite claims of successful interventions, research demonstrating that social norms based interventions modify student perceptions has been lacking. The purpose of the present study was to conduct a laboratory experiment examining the feasibility of this mechanism of action, and to determine the validity of the "campus specific" drinking norms hypothesis. Sixty students were assigned randomly to one of three research conditions: Alcohol 101 (national drinking norms); a didactic presentation of campus specific drinking norms; or a control condition. Study results indicated that both intervention groups modified student misperceptions regarding peer alcohol use, and these changes were sustained one week later.

Key Words: alcohol, perceptions, social norms, college student