



An exploration into the existence of social norms around substance use among students: a mixed-methods approach

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### ABSTRACT

This research aims firstly, to develop an understanding of why social norms exist among students for substance use and secondly, to understand from the student's point of view, the effectiveness of social norms interventions. Using a mixed-method approach it was carried out in two phases. Phase 1 involved a quantitative questionnaire (N=222) to establish descriptive statistic. These results showed student's overestimate substance use in their peers. Phase 2 used three qualitative focus groups to discuss the findings from the questionnaire and develop an understanding of why social norms exist. Using thematic analysis on the focus group transcripts, three core themes were established: *awareness of the norm*, *drinking in the young* and *effectiveness of interventions*. The analysis highlighted the importance of identity surrounding social norms, along with influences from the media. From this research, it is possible to conclude, that in order to create effective interventions it is necessary to examine what it is that influences behaviours and what is creating social norms.

KEY WORDS:	SOCIAL NORMS	SUBSTANCE USE	STUDENTS	INTERVENTIONS	PERCEPTION
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## **Introduction**

### **Prevalence of Substance Use in Students**

There seems to be a generalised perception that substance use among students is problematic. Some of this is promulgated via the media (see The Huffington Post, 2013 [Online]. The Guardian, 2012a [Online]). This perception is also prevalent in some research which suggests substance use among students is substantially high, particularly for alcohol and cannabis use (Silva et al., 2006. Leatherdale and Burkhalter, 2012. Drug Scope, 2013).

Ironically the very media which highlights problematic substance use among students is also targeting young people via advertising campaigns, which encourage a culture of alcohol use (Ross et al., 2014. Paschall et al., 2014). Mistral (2014) also suggests that the media targets the young generation, particularly regarding alcohol use. Measham and Brain (2005) have highlighted a move in alcohol marketing which targets young people and encourages them to engage in excessive alcohol consumption. Young people are encouraged to drink in town centres by incentives which offer cheap drinks and increased availability over longer hours. Furthermore, the authors argue that this culture is central for the profitability and sustainability of night time economies.

### **Social Norms Background Information**

Social norms are simply the “unwritten rules about how to behave” (McLeod, 2008). They define what is acceptable and what is not within a group or society (Bicchieri, 2006). For many, the most intriguing norms to study are those that occur regardless of individual’s interactions as it is crucial to understand how the norms came into existence (Schelling, 1978). Coleman (1989) suggests that social norms are crucial to keeping economies alive, preventing market failure and are therefore upholding to social capital. This echoes the work by both Measham and Brain (2005) and Mistral (2014) who focus on how the change in the marketing and consumption of alcohol now targets a young impressionable audience.

For any given social norm it is assumed conformity will occur and that these internalised normative beliefs will in turn influence behaviour. Bicchieri and Muldoon (2011) identified three major theories which are important in assessing whether an individual will conform to a norm: socialisation, social identity and rational choice. Firstly, it is suggested that through socialisation we learn the common principles in society and through internalising these we are motivated to conform (Parsons, 1951). On a more individual level, social identity highlights an individual’s social relations as a key motivating factor to conform, based on the individual’s own awareness of their role within a group. This is supported by Smith and Louis (2008) who highlight the importance of an individual’s group on directly influencing the individual performing a behaviour. This research also suggests the group influences the belief the individual has about whether the behaviour would be approved or not. This supports the final notion of rational choice which suggests that as long as conforming to a norm promotes approval it is the most rational thing to do. With this in mind the question arises as to what specifically influences our behaviour in terms of substance use?

## **Social Norms and Substance Use - Influences on Behaviour**

Considering the generalised perception that students drink more heavily than other people, a number of studies have established existing social norms among students. Arbour-Nicitopoulos et al. (2010) compared Canadian university students' actual and perceived substance use to the results obtained by many studies from the USA. The most common substances used were alcohol, followed by cannabis. The authors found that Canadian students were more likely to overestimate their peer substance use, suggesting that their peers drank more than they actually did. It is suggested that these perceptions may have influenced the student's own substance use. This corresponds with a number of research studies carried out, which suggest individuals overestimate their peers' substance use and this in turn influences their own use (Borasari and Carey, 2012).

Patrick and Schulenberg (2014) carried out research on adolescents to establish the most common predictors of alcohol use. A crucial predictor of substance use was the move away from parents towards an individual's involvement with their peers. This, along with previous research by Patrick and Schulenberg (2010), indicates that peers are the strongest predictors for substance use. The authors further suggest an important predictor of substance use was whether an individual's attitudes towards using substances was positive or not. The older a student was the more likely they were to have disapproving attitudes towards excessive alcohol consumption, thus highlighting the importance age has on influencing behaviour.

Further research by Rinker and Neighbors (2013) looked at reasons students decided not to drink. It was suggested that disapproval and lack of interest were the most common reasons for not drinking among the students. They concluded that the most important factor in ensuring a student stays abstinent is the way their personal values inform their identity.

Research from Fry (2011) proposes excessive alcohol consumption in young people is representative of their identity. It certifies their identity of becoming an adult, promotes a fun lifestyle and confirms their identity within a group. For Fry (2011) these factors are influenced by modern marketing around alcohol as the research reported alcohol being promoted as desirable and fashionable.

The media is a powerful tool which can widely influence societies' norms and values (Raza, 2014). Slater and Henry (2013) examined the influence music-related media content found in magazines, the internet or on the television, had on youth substance use. They found music-related media content to be a high risk factor in influencing substance use due to it normalising substance using groups. This highlights how influential the media can be on behaviours.

Whilst these studies do show some of the influences on our behaviour and some of the behaviour patterns which exist among students, there is limited research in the UK. The research also fails to address the concept of social norms in terms of how or why they are created. Furthermore, these studies fail to show how to prevent any problematic behaviour, such as excessive substance use, by implementing an intervention.

## Utilisation of Social Norms Interventions

Before social norms interventions, public health media campaigns were used to try and reduce problematic behaviour by the use of advertisements (Wakefield et al., 2010. Lancaster et al., 2011). However, there is a suggestion that these are not taken seriously as they use extreme negative cases where the individual is likely to think 'well it's not going to happen to me' and in turn encourages the problematic behaviour (McAlaney, 2011). Social norms interventions are said to have originated with Perkins and Berkowitz (1986). The aim of these types of interventions is to correct perceptions and thereby reduce the problem behaviour (Cox, 2008). There is a positive response to social norms interventions and marketing with students which has shown a reduction in the overestimation of peer use and therefore their own use of alcohol and drugs (Neighbors et al., 2011. The Guardian, 2012b). Whilst challenging a stereotypical view of young people and substances, the interventions accept that substances are a problem but that they need to be kept in perspective (McAlaney et al., 2011).

Numerous social norms interventions have been used with students around substance use in order to prevent and reduce problematic behaviour. Research by Bewick et al. (2008) used web based surveys as a form of intervention and found a significant decrease for the average number of drinks consumed per occasion compared to the control group. However, Moreira et al. (2009) suggests online feedback is less effective than face-to-face feedback. LaBrie et al. (2008) also set out to correct perceptions. They presented students with correct statistics in graphical form and compared to the control group they found a reduction in drinking behaviour and an overestimation of norms.

Further research by LaBrie et al. (2010) aimed to establish whether a BLING (brief, live, interactive, normative group) intervention would immediately reduce perceived discrepancies as students were reporting significantly different actual drinking levels to perceived drinking levels. The authors saw an immediate reduction in overestimation after using the BLING intervention. A study by Perkins et al. (2005) found that students nationwide overestimated alcohol use by their peers. They also found that students attending schools which used less extreme alcohol prevention campaigns had the highest reduction of risky and problematic drinking. All this research suggests, more often than not, students will overestimate substance use by their peers, and therefore this is a trend that should be expected when conducting research in this area. The studies also suggest support for social norms interventions.

The interventions established in these studies have had a positive impact on changing perception and behaviour in some cases. However, they do not explain why social norms have come in to being and this could potentially limit interventions. Furthermore, much of this research has been undertaken using quantitative methodology. Whilst the data obtained through these methods is significant it only provides a snapshot of what is being looked at and as a result does not reflect an individual's subjective reality (Crotty, 1998).

## **Developing Social Norms Intervention Research**

This research aims to gain a comprehensive understanding of how and why social norms exist and how these influence student behaviour by using a mixed-method approach. Secondly, it aims to establish the effectiveness of social norms interventions by assessing whether increasing student awareness of existing social norms will impact their thoughts or behaviour. It is to be hoped that including a qualitative method will provide a deeper insight into student perceptions and their world view.

### **Method**

#### **Overview**

This research was conducted in two phases by using a mixed-methods approach. The use of a mixed-method approach ensured a better understanding of complex social phenomenon which allowed the researcher to delve deeper into the research question (Creswell et al., 2003. Bryman, 2006). Mixed-methods have been a controversial research design over the years. However, more researchers are accepting the fact that, despite both designs having different epistemological and ontological positions, they do in fact work well together and strengthen each other (Bryman, 2006. Creswell and Clark, 2011). A mixed-methods approach allows for a pragmatic perspective to be taken as it values the objective and subjective knowledge mixed-methods provides (Morgan, 2007).

Phase 1 of this research took a quantitative approach which was necessary in order to establish any discrepancies in what student's do and what they perceive others to do. This data was important as it allowed for further discussion in Phase 2, which took a qualitative approach to derive a deeper understanding into the existence of social norms.

#### **Phase 1**

##### **Design**

Findings for Phase 1 were gathered via a questionnaire. Descriptive statistics were produced to show the mean data in order to establish existing social norms among Year 1 and Year 2 students, regarding substance use.

##### **Participants**

Participants were Year 1 and Year 2 Psychology students at Manchester Metropolitan University. There was a total of 276 participants consisting of both males (N=56) and females (N=222). The mean age of the participants was 19. The sample for this size research was the most appropriate and accessible sample and is a good representative for these students. However, it is limited in its generalizability as it is only representative of Psychology students (Flick, 2014).

## **Materials**

An information sheet (Appendix 1) clearly outlining the purpose of the study, a consent form (Appendix 2) to enable participants to give fully informed consent, a questionnaire (Appendix 3) and debrief sheet (Appendix 4) to provide any further information about the study, or contact numbers for students if they felt they needed them, were used in this phase.

The questionnaire was developed based on a social norms questionnaire from a research project that is ongoing (Dr John McAlaney – University of Bradford). Other than the demographic characteristic questions, each question had two parts – what the student's actual behaviour was and what they thought other student's behaviour was. Each set of questions had varying sized Likert scales subject to what each question was asking. This enabled the researcher to produce scales covering all potential answers (LaMarca, 2011).

## **Procedure**

After gaining access to Year 1 and Year 2 lectures through tutors on Manchester Metropolitan Campus, the researcher explained to the students the nature of the study. Questionnaires along with the other materials were given out for the students to fill in, if they wished to do so. Questionnaires were then collected back by the researcher after each student had finished.

Phase 2 of the research was also explained to the students at the beginning of the questionnaire. The questionnaire had a small section on Phase 2 and space to allow students to leave their email if they wished to take part in the next phase.

## **Phase 2**

### **Design / theoretical**

Subsequent to Phase 1, semi-structured focus groups were conducted to show students the results from the first phase in order to discuss and try to establish why social norms exist. Rabiee (2004) suggests qualitative focus groups are gaining in popularity and allow for in depth discussions on a given topic that is not particularly sensitive or private. Therefore, participants will be happy to share their views and experiences with the group establishing a shared meaning (Gramatikov et al., 2010). As a result of this, Phase 2 lends itself to a subjective epistemology with an ontology that denies an external reality in order to understand the individual's experience (Summer, 2003).

## **Respondents**

Three focus groups took place as a result of people signing up to them after completing the questionnaire for Phase 1. There was a total of 11 participants across all three focus groups (3 male and 8 female). This form of sampling was advantageous as it allowed for participants to be gathered relatively quickly and easily. It ensured that each participant had taken part in Phase 1, which meant the

data would hopefully be more meaningful to participants when presented in Phase 2, allowing for a more in-depth analysis (Jupp, 2006).

### **Research Process**

An invitation email (Appendix 5) was sent to all participants who responded to taking part in Phase 2 from the questionnaire specifying the date and time of the focus group. This also included an information sheet (Appendix 6) for Phase 2. Once participants had responded to this, a follow up email was sent to confirm the time and the place. At the interview the researcher reiterated what was on the information sheet, making participants aware of the nature of Phase 2. A consent form (Appendix 7) was given to each participant before the interview started, and a debrief sheet (Appendix 8) was also produced for the participants after the interview.

An interview schedule (Appendix 9) was devised based on what the research was aiming to do and what past literature into social norms had suggested. This schedule was used in all of the focus groups; however, it took different directions depending on where the discussion went. The interview itself lasted around an hour for each group. Once the interviews were complete each one was transcribed.

### **Data Analysis**

After the focus groups were transcribed they were subjected to thematic analysis. This flexible approach enabled the researcher to establish rich and detailed descriptions of the entire data set using a theoretical thematic analysis as it considered previous literature (Braun and Clarke, 2006. Willig, 2013). The thematic analysis took a number of stages. Firstly, the researcher was required to familiarise their self with the data by reading each transcript numerous times. Secondly, the transcripts were coded according to labels relevant to the research question. This led to the construction of themes which then needed to be reviewed to make sure they were in line with the data sets as a whole before the themes were finally named in order to be reported (Braun and Clarke, 2006) (See Appendix 10 for sample transcript).

### **The Researcher**

The researcher is a twenty-one year old female who is a student at Manchester Metropolitan University. As the researcher is the primary 'agent' within qualitative research it is essential to acknowledge that any psychological research will always be influenced by the researcher's own experience and construction of reality (Watt, 2007). Specifically, when interpreting participant's own views and experiences within the analysis of qualitative data, it is crucial for the researcher to consider any presumptions which can occur as a result of certain demographics (Roller, 2012). Consequently, every effort was made in order to limit researcher bias.



## **Ethical Consideration**

Ethical approval was gained before undertaking the research (Appendix 11) in accordance with the BPS ethical guidelines (The British Psychological Society, 2009). Asking students about their substance use was potentially a sensitive area. However, the students were not required to give their name and therefore were anonymous. The questions in the questionnaire were also relatively general, therefore not too personal for the participants. There were also ethical issues specific to focus groups (Gibbs, 1997). Gibbs (1997) suggests as there is always going to be more than one participant and expectation to share personal views and opinions, it is important for participants to be made aware of their confidentiality and to ensure participants do not share what others say outside the group. The focus groups addressed issues raised in the questionnaire relevant to social norms research rather than personal specific questions. The students volunteered to take part once fully aware of the nature of the research. They were made aware of their rights throughout and that their participation was voluntary.

## Phase 1: Questionnaire Results

Descriptive statistics were produced to discover the mean data for reported personal and perceived alcohol, cannabis and other drug use for both year 1 and year 2. The below table shows this along with what each mean represents in terms of the questionnaire in blue:

**Table 1**  
**Personal and Perceived Mean Data for Substance for Year 1 and Year 2**

	Year 1		Year 2	
	Personal	Perceived	Personal	Perceived
How often alcohol is consumed	6.57 Twice a Month	9.22 Three to Four Days a Week	6.58 Twice a Month	9.19 Three to Four Days a Week
How many alcoholic drinks consumed on a night out	6.40 7 Drinks	9.33 10 Drinks	6.98 8 Drinks	10.18 11 Drinks
How often cannabis is used	2.25 Very Rarely	5.96 Once a Month	2.35 Very Rarely	5.78 Once a Month
How often other drugs are used	1.54 Very Rarely	4.36 Three to Four Times a Year	1.94 Very Rarely	4.65 Five to Six Times a Year

## Summary of Descriptive Statistics

As can be seen there was a clear difference in what the students actually do and what they think other students do. Students were much more likely to overestimate other students' behaviour. This was consistent throughout the whole questionnaire.

## Phase 1: Questionnaire Data Discussion

The above descriptive data has established reported personal and perceived alcohol, cannabis and other drug use among students. The difference in the personal and perceived data supports the idea of social norms, and is in line with previous literature which has shown students to overestimate substance use in their peers (Perkins, 2012. Sanders et al., 2013).

The questionnaire data is extremely valuable to this research. It shows the existing social norms among students and acts as a stepping stone to try and understand, from the student's point of view, why excessive drinking and drug taking is normalised.

## Phase 2: Qualitative Analysis and Discussion

The questionnaire data was shown to the students in the focus groups to show the differences in actual and perceived thinking (Appendix 12). This was to initiate conversation around why they think social norms exist as well as understanding their views on effective health interventions. Thematic analysis was conducted on all three focus group transcripts to establish comprehensive and purposeful themes. Themes are important to establish a common pattern within the data relating to the research question and reflecting reality (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The data from the focus groups gave an extensive and sometimes differing comprehension around students' perception and understanding of social norms and substance misuse. Three key themes were identified from the three interviews which will be discussed below: *awareness of the norm, drinking in the young, effectiveness of interventions.*

### Awareness of the Norm – A Student Identity

The need to belong is a concept which originated with Maslow suggesting we need to belong to a group and in not doing so it affects our self-esteem. Baumeister and Leary (1995) were one of the first psychologists to promote this theory suggesting the need to belong is innate in all individuals. Their work sparked numerous research into this area (Selterman, 2012). The need to belong was evident throughout each of the focus groups. When asked why these discrepancies in perception existed the concept of feeling “pressured”, “abnormal” or even “isolated” for choosing to not go out or drink a lot was a common phenomenon from all of the interviewees. The theme of needing to belong was continually related to age, with the idea that with age one becomes more self-aware and more “confident” within oneself. The following excerpt highlights this notion:

“no I think [alcohol] changes over time obviously at different times in your life you're more inclined to join in with what you think is the norm...at other times you've got a little bit more confidence and more self-awareness and more inclined to say no actually this is my life this is how I do things and everyone else does things that way...” (John)

“...if you don’t go out people are like oh why are you not going out and it’s very like I wouldn’t say peer pressure but sort of like the normal thing to do...if everyone is going out...people don’t just like to sit in by themselves do they cos you don’t want to be isolated...” (Marie)

These comments from both John and Marie reveal issues around the importance of needing to belong. It is clear from them both that they are aware that themselves and others behave according to what they believe is the norm, even if that behaviour is risky. Marie’s comments highlight the difficulties in needing to resist due to “peer pressure”. This reinforces the idea of being more self-aware and confident in order to lessen the pressures to conform. The idea that age impacts an individual’s need to belong is also related to the idea of an individual’s social group. The student’s perceptions were that the younger a person is the more likely they are to be in a close group, and they suggest that it is “friends” which “affect you more”.

“...there’s more of a tendency when you’re between the sort of [age of] 15 and 25 to be moving in a group and doing things in a structured way whereas beyond that you’re going out on your own a little bit more and there are other pressures that work on you individually rather than you as a group so there are less outside pressures because you have other things to do...when I was younger as the people who were around me were under the same pressures as me we experienced similar things...” (John)

Above, John highlights the importance of our social groups on our behaviour and the pressures around needing to belong to these groups. This understanding is in line with past literature. One study which examined young people’s drinking patterns and why they exist found that an individual’s friends were a strong indicator into an individual’s own drinking (Bremner et al., 2011). Further discussion emphasised the relationship between the need to belong and denial, through assumptions made around substance use in students. The views of the students here suggest that although they know that the overestimation of substance use in students is not the norm they would still much rather believe it, as it is in keeping with what they believe others will think. This intensifies this concept of needing to belong through trying to justify their behaviour.

“I think we’ll have [the perception] that every one single student without exception will do cannabis regularly...it’s quite a mild drug there are no major effects of it...the way I think of it I’m ok with people taking any drugs that won’t affect me so people can smoke cannabis all day for all I care but I don’t think people should drink till they’re absolutely drunk because well they might start fights so I don’t care what other people do as long as it doesn’t affect me... people don’t like to be wrong do they so they’d rather take note of something which supports their views of students than admit they don’t have the right view...” (Will)

“...I didn’t think about the fact that some people don’t go out I think it’s just because I do I think well if I do...then surely everyone does it” (Marie)

Individuals do not like to think they are “not normal” or carry out behaviours considered “not normal” and the above extracts evidence this. From both Marie and Will it is clear that there is a reluctance to accept that substance use is not as normalised as they think. Therefore, by believing the misperception that excessive substance use in students is prevalent, it perhaps allows them to justify their own behaviour or perceived ideology. This lends itself to the cognitive dissonance theory introduced by Festinger (1957) suggesting that in order to maintain harmony in our cognition we allow ourselves to carry out irrational behaviours. Previous studies support the idea of cognitive dissonance surrounding substance use (Mettile, 2008. Mäkelä, 1997). Sherman et al. (1983) took this further and found a relationship to age. The authors found that adolescents were more likely to overestimate their peers’ substance use than adults were.

This theme has shown a clear issue around student identity. It has suggested that the younger a person is the less self-aware they are and therefore they feel there is a much stronger need to belong. So, no matter how risky a behaviour is or how much they try to resist the social norm, their perceived identity of a student and peer pressure makes it too difficult. This in turn leads to them normalising their own behaviour to avoid conflict in their own attitudes.

### **Drinking in the Young – A Cultural Shift**

The key idea here is that there is a trend around substance use particularly alcohol and that there are various factors influencing this. One of these factors is the media. Research suggests the more frequently substance use is seen via media the more likely the individual is to believe this is normative and carry out the behaviour (Litt and Stock, 2011). This was echoed in the participants’ responses. There was a common impression, which suggests that the students’ assumptions and the “stereotypes” they had regarding substance use in students, was a result of the media influencing them as a group rather than them individually.

“...it’s the media and stuff isn’t it it’s how they portray us...one of those things where if TV and films show students getting drunk at university people turn up at university expecting to get drunk all the time so they get drunk all the time so that’s what the media shows so it’s a circle” (Will)

“...learn from a young age that when you go to uni people let loose and uh you know your last years before you go to adulthood...get the idea from everything like how people talk and the TV...I mean with TV programmes and films like university you just see them all out their skulls don’t you...I mean media affects everybody generally but when it comes to

yourself I'd say yeah other people around you can affect you more than a TV programme could" (Chris)

Chris and Will both highlight that the perceived assumptions that students have are based on what they have seen in the media. Chris's comments also propose the importance the media has on the group, suggesting media influences group "opinion rather than behaviour" therefore it is the social group that influences the individual's behaviour. There is also a clear passivity from the students. Even though they appear fully aware of what the media is presenting to them they do not seem to challenge it and just internalise what they are told – that substance use in students is extremely prevalent. This may be due to students underestimating their own behaviour as they do not want to position their behaviour as extreme. Therefore, they construct what they see in the media as reality to allow them to overestimate the behaviour of others. The student's also suggest that a trend is apparent due to a "change of the role alcohol plays" within society. They put forward the idea that over time the way alcohol is viewed and used within society has gradually changed and has become "socially acceptable". This idea may reiterate the previous point suggesting the media could be the reason for the change.

"...people are less discriminated by what they drink and...the social role of alcohol has changed people would go out with families previously...to social clubs children themselves aren't drinking but when they get to the age to they're drinking within the family group and they're all carefully monitored whereas families move around more now so they're socialising with their own group rather than their family...so the norms are changing to try and impress each other and there is less scrutiny or disapproval" (John)

The above extract brings to light John's own experience of alcohol over a length of time highlighting the move from alcohol within the family to alcohol with peers. It also promotes the idea that alcohol is in its "own sort of category" separate to drugs "because they're socially acceptable". Although research has found friends to be a good predictor of alcohol use, family is valued as the strongest indicator. Therefore, the move away from family towards peer groups, may have led to the discrepancies currently held (Bremner et al., 2011). Work by Measham and Brain (2005) support the idea of a cultural shift. They suggest there has been an increasing focus on alcohol consumption in young people since the 1990s moving away from pubs to town centres. This concept is also relevant to the way substances are branded within society at this time (Mistral, 2014). Measham and Brain (2005) also note that the industry is encouraging and targeting young people by producing sweet flavoured and pop like drinks, along with bar staff actually going and selling drinks within the crowd. Throughout all the interviews the students put forward the issues around the availability of alcohol and the impact this has on individuals.

"I think drinks are dead cheap aren't they so that encourages people to drink more students especially well younger people..." (Kate)

“...alcohol is definitely cheaper...and alcohol from what I can see is even sweeter than it used to be...got to do with manufacturers making good sales and profits” (John)

“and I think sweeter drinks are aimed at a lot younger” (Victoria)

The above excerpts identify specific branding issues which the student's believe are one of many factors involved in creating social norms around substance use. Although the students seem aware that drinking is being targeted at young people they again do not seem to challenge this. This may be because they enjoy it – therefore, is it a problem? There is a plethora of cross-cultural research which is in line with this finding, suggesting the more available alcohol is the more likely it is to be consumed (Komro et al., 2007. Alcohol Research UK, 2012). The view around branding and availability of alcohol could also relate to the previous issues around the media, further proposing this idea of a trend around substance use.

This concept of a cultural shift for alcohol has been shown to have numerous influencing factors. The key ideas are that the media and particularly how substances are branded are fundamental in creating a cultural shift and constructing normative behaviours. However, it is clear that although the students are aware of these issues they fail to challenge them and continue to accept them. So how effective can interventions be if students are so passive?

### **Effectiveness of Interventions – A Need for Change**

On asking the students whether being aware of the discrepancies in perceptions they had would impact their thoughts or behaviour, the students suggested the notion of realisation. Most social norms research which shows individuals' perceptions may act as an intervention in itself as it allows them to rethink their previous internalised construction of reality. All interviewees showed willingness to rethink, and suggested seeing the data made them realise that substance use is not as prevalent as they first thought and therefore it had changed their views.

“I might feel less impelled to do what other people are doing because like it's shown up there that not everybody is doing it anyway...” (Elizabeth)

“...it's made me realise maybe that not that many people actually do it...maybe I've blown it out of proportion” (Marie)

Elizabeth and Marie's comments support the intervention side to this study in that the students are now aware of the prevalence of substance use for themselves and their peers. Further supporting research and theory around using these relatively new social norm interventions as seen by Mattern and Neighbors (2004) and McAvoy (2009). However, the latter study proposes a debate around whether individual or group face-to-face feedback is more effective. Nevertheless, even though the students did show willingness to rethink it is not necessarily going to change their behaviour taking into

account previous issues around peer pressure and passivity to the media. So how easily can their behaviour be changed? Further comments from the students around health campaigns (scare tactics vs statistics), stress the importance of educating and bringing about awareness around substance use for students.

“...like the statistics you were saying it would probably be useful to put those out there more about drugs cos like I say if you don't hear that or see that as much well I don't notice them...so it might be more useful to have more education on it...” (Emma)

“I think particularly in the past 10 years people are aware of being manipulated because they've seen behind the scenes of advertisement and persuasion and I think if people think they're being manipulated they're less likely to take the message given to them whereas if you give people facts they can base arguments on that and people feel like they're getting something” (John)

“...like if you said you saw a person passed out on a poster I think I'd probably laugh at it...” (Chris)

The above excerpts promote the concept that a lack of awareness around social norms and individual interpretations of the current health campaign interventions – such as posters – can further encourage social norms around substance use. Therefore, what kind of information would students take note of? The students also highlight the importance of being able to relate to interventions in order to reduce or prevent perceived social norms occurring. For the students it is about having something which reflects their reality.

“there is that mentality that oh it's not going to happen to me...I think it's until it happens to someone you know you just don't think it's gonna happen to you...you feel something rather than just a poster...” (Marie)

“...real is more effective and when you see some people die from alcohol consumption and when people um see a documentary about this kind of thing it is better more effective” (Anya)

Marie and Anya's comments show the importance they attach to a concept of being able to relate to something if behaviour is to change. This is consistent with research around change campaigns which suggests in order to change attitudes, models need to reflect an individual's reality (Crawley, 2009). However, developing interventions based on reality may prove difficult if they have already constructed their reality based on internalising what they have viewed in the media.

This theme has shown the importance of education around social norms. It has also highlighted the need for an individual to be able to relate to the information given and to acknowledge the relevance of this in their lives, if



behaviours are to change. Throughout the research process it was evident that students had begun to readjust their perceptions.

### **Summary of Analysis**

This research aimed to develop an understanding of why social norms exist and how effective social norms interventions are. This analysis has highlighted the importance of an individual's self-awareness and pressure to belong to a group as fundamental to the creation and continuation of social norms. It has also suggested wider factors such as the media and societies' acceptance of substance use as crucial to upholding social norms and creating perceived discrepancies. Whilst the three themes are important in their own right, it is possible to see how they may be interrelated.

It would seem that this research has itself acted as an intervention. Presenting the students with statistics which were relevant to them challenged their perceptions and allowed them to rethink their view of reality. However, a follow up study would be necessary to see how effective the research actually was on their behaviour.

The data obtained encompasses a plethora of information around social norms and substance use. There are a number of directions future research could go. The importance of belonging to a group was a significant factor in the research findings. Further research might include undertaking a mixture of individual interviews as well as focus groups, in order to see if using a focus group affects the data. Furthermore, this research could act as a springboard for developing effective interventions which address an individual's self-awareness, identity and wider factors.

### **Reflexive Account**

My desire to conduct research on social norms and substance use was influenced by my own experience through being a student at university. I came to university with preconceptions around substance use which sparked a conflict in my opinions, and left me feeling isolated as I had little interest in alcohol and drugs; I bought into the stereotype placed on students that excessive substance use is the norm. Over time I began to realise that most people I spoke to also had no interest substance use, but still did it. This made me question why this behaviour is considered 'normal', and why I felt pressured into doing something which did not reflect myself. I am aware that my own opinions and experiences of social norms may have affected the subjectivity of the study and was mindful of this in the design of the research.

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