



**A SOCIAL NORMS APPROACH TO DRUG
PREVENTION IN SCHOOLS IN IRELAND— A
PRE-DEVELOPMENT STUDY**

Leighann Ryan

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

- High prevalence rates among school – going population who regularly binge drink and use illicit drugs (HBSC, 2006; ESPAD, 2009)
- There are many different approaches to the prevention of substance use.
- The most cost effective approach to preventing alcohol and substance use is developing and testing prevention strategies (Holder *et al.*, 1999).
- Schools are appropriate settings for alcohol, tobacco and illicit drug use prevention programs as they offer the most systematic and efficient way to reach a significant number of adolescents.



RESEARCH BACKGROUND

- Different types of prevention approaches have been developed and delivered in schools
- The **social influence model** has achieved some success in demonstrating an effect on student's behaviour when compared to most other types of programmes (Hansen, 1992; Tobler, 2000; Hawk *et al.*, 2002; Canning *et al.*, 2004)
- In particular the **normative education** component of the social influences model has been proven to be an essential element in reducing alcohol, tobacco and cannabis use (Taylor, 2000).
- Extensive reviews have documented the importance of normative beliefs on health behaviour's of youth through developing and implementing successful **social norms interventions** (Berkowitz, 2004)



SOCIAL NORMS

- The **Social Norms Theory** describes situations in which individuals incorrectly perceive the attitudes and/or behaviours of peers and other community members to be different from their own when in fact they are not '**Misperception Hypothesis**' (Perkins, 1997; Berkowitz, 2002; Berkowitz, 2004).
- The social norms theory predicts that interventions educating groups and communities of their actual norms results, thereby **Reducing Misperceptions** will have a beneficial effect on most individuals by reducing their participation in substance using behaviours (Perkins, 1997; Berkowitz, 2002; Berkowitz, 2004).



STUDY AIMS

- The aim of this research was to **assess the applicability of the social norms theory**, which has previously focused on the college and school going populations in the United States of America, to the school going population in Ireland.
- The research was conducted in the form of a **pre development study** as part of the researcher's job as Community Drugs Worker, and in order to be incorporated into the design of an Irish based social norms intervention.
- This feasibility assessment is useful so as to inform and guide localised youth substance use prevention approaches.



HYPOTHESIS

1. Misperceptions about alcohol, cigarettes and other drugs will exist among the sample.
2. Normative attitudes and behaviours will vary according to gender and school type.
3. After the sample is educated on actual group norms and the theory of social norms, the sample's attitudes will become more conservative than they were prior to receiving the information
4. After the sample is educated on actual substance using norms there will be an increase in the percentage of participants abstaining from cigarettes, alcohol, cannabis and other drug use prior to receiving the information.



METHODOLOGY - SAMPLE

- The intervention was implemented in 3 volunteering schools in Kilkenny/Carlow area
 1. Boys school ($n= 35$)
 2. Girls School ($n = 26$)
 3. Mixed School ($n = 19$)

- Participants age ranged from 15-17, all in transition year
 - 15 years ($n= 19$)
 - 16 years ($n = 57$)
 - 17 years ($n=4$)



METHODOLOGY – DESIGN / PROCEDURE

- **Step 1:** Gathering data prior to feedback session (Questionnaire)
- **Step 2:** Feedback session included providing the groups with data on actual and perceived norms for that group and information on the social norms theory (PowerPoint Presentation) (Far & Miller, 2003)
- **Step 3:** Gathering data after feedback session (questionnaire same as before)
- **Step 4:** Data Analysis to test hypothesis



METHODOLOGY – STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

- **Hypothesis 1: Misperception Hypothesis**
 - Chi Square tests
 - Descriptive statistics
- **Hypothesis 2: Gender and School effect**
 - Chi square test
 - Krustal Wallis test
- **Hypothesis 3: Conservative Normative attitudes**
 - Descriptive Statistics
- **Hypothesis 4: Normative behaviours**
 - Descriptive Statistics



RESULTS HYPOTHESES 1: MISPERCEPTION HYPOTHESIS

- Significant differences were found between the participants own personal attitudes and their perceptions of peers attitudes in relation to statements on smoking cigarettes, underage drinking, drunkenness, smoking cannabis, taking drugs to see what they are like and taking drugs once you don't become dependent on them
- Significant differences were found between participants personal self-reported substance use and their perceptions of peer substance use in relation to cigarettes, alcohol, cannabis and other drug usage.



RESULTS HYPOTHESIS 2: GENDER AND SCHOOL EFFECT

- No significant differences were found in regards to gender and school type
- That is normative attitudes and behaviours were similar among the three groups



RESULTS HYPOTHESIS 3: CONSERVATIVE NORMATIVE ATTITUDES

- After feedback session descriptive statistics illustrated small percentage differences towards more conservative attitudes in regards to statements on smoking cigarettes, underage drinking, drunkenness, smoking cannabis, and taking illicit drugs to find out what they are like



RESULTS HYPOTHESIS 4: CONSERVATIVE NORMATIVE BEHAVIOURS

- After feedback session descriptive statistics illustrated small difference in the percentage of participants who did not use cigarettes, alcohol, cannabis and other drugs.



DISCUSSION

- Misperceptions existed among the sample
- Of all the substances reported on, the participant's attitudes and behaviours towards alcohol were found to be much more permissive
- Study findings on group norms coincide with the ESPAD (2007), HBSC (2006) results which indicate high rates of Irish youth alcohol consumption.
- Compared to the participant's attitudes and behaviours on issues relating to alcohol, the participant's attitudes and behaviours in relation to cigarettes and other illegal drugs tended to more conservative.



A SOCIAL NORMS APPROACH IN IRISH SCHOOLS

- Following a review of the different types of social norms interventions, this study recommends the to development and implementation of a targeted social norms intervention in secondary schools in Ireland
 - ✓ The targeted approach can be delivered in a **time and cost effective way**, unlike other types of social norms approaches.
 - ✓ In addition, the targeted type intervention is very **flexible**
 - ✓ **Previous research** has found significant evidence that a targeted approach can **reduce binge drinking** (Michael *et al*, 2006), **quantity of alcohol consumed** (McNally & Palfai, 2003; Michael *et al*, 2006) and **misperceptions of drinking** (Far & Miller, 2003).



RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THIS STUDY

- Repeated exposure to normative messages
- Build into an existing prevention programme
- Include a more a more interactive approach of providing group norms to groups
- Encourage participants to become more involved in the intervention
e.g. **Snowball Survey Intervention**

