

Why people continue to binge drink psychology essay



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Binge drinking is defined by the NHS (2011) as the consumption of “ eight or more units in a single session for men and six or more for women”. It has been argued to have negative effects upon the health of individuals as well as negative effects upon society, such as causing accidents, unsafe sex and violence (Norman, Bennett and Lewis, 1998). The behaviour of binge drinking shows us that people in certain situations are willing to over consume despite the clear negative effects upon their health, lives and society. It is a massive issue currently facing the western world and is one that governments are actively trying to tackle, especially through the use of social marketing campaigns. The social marketing campaigns in use aim to present factual warnings and information to discourage binge drinking, they also aim to reduce the harm done directly to the individual as well as indirectly to the rest of society (Griffin and O’Cass, 2004). In 2009/10 the UK government spent £17. 6m on alcohol information and education campaigns (House of Commons Health Committee, 2010), but with the statistics showing little decrease in binge drinking (Institute of Alcohol Studies, 2010), it appears that this tactic is having only a limited effect on changing the behaviour.

The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991) is a suitable framework for examining why people continue to binge drink in spite of social marketing campaigns. It aims to explain the various underlying factors behind an intention by taking mainly internal elements into account. The theory then assumes that people generally will engage in a behaviour if they are intending to perform it. The TPB is an enhancement of the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) which was developed by Fishbein and Ajzen (1975),

the main differing factor is the addition of perceived behavioural control which is said to cover non volitional behaviour. The central element in the theory is a person's "intention to perform a given behaviour", this "capture[s] the motivational factors that influence a behaviour" (Ajzen, 1991: 181) and is a result of three key factors. The key factors behind a behavioural intention, according to the TPB, are: a person's attitude towards a behaviour, a person's perception of the subjective norm about a behaviour and a person's perceived behavioural control. Perceived behavioural control has a slightly different role to the other two factors in the TPB as it can influence behaviour as well as intention. Each of these factors also has beliefs that underlie them, these are behavioural beliefs, normative beliefs and control beliefs, respectively.

The first component of the TPB is a person's attitude towards the behaviour and underlying this their behavioural beliefs. A person's behavioural beliefs are their beliefs of the positive or negative consequences of a certain behaviour, in this case binge drinking. The influence of these beliefs on the person's attitude is affected by the likelihood of them occurring. The result of these behavioural beliefs is a general positive or negative evaluation of the behaviour, known as the person's attitude towards the behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). One key limitation of the TPB in this respect is that although it takes a person's attitude into account it does not take their personality traits into account. Kuntsche, Knibbe, Gmel and Engels (2006) found that in their review of several studies, motives to drink were also related to specific personality traits and so from this it could be assumed that the TPB does not take all relevant contributing factors of binge drinking into account.

Johnston and White (2004) found in their study of young women that although those that took part in binge drinking had the belief that a hangover was a likely negative consequence of binge drinking, they did not see this to be a significantly unpleasant consequence in comparison to those who did not binge drink. The study also found the main positive behavioural beliefs about binge drinking were having fun/socialising and reducing inhibitions. A further study by Johnston and White (2003) also confirmed these results within the male population. These results show the positive attitude which binge drinkers have about the behaviour and that these attitudes have a significant effect upon their decision to binge drink. Social marketing campaigns may not be currently very effective if they do not focus enough on either attempting to reduce the positivism attached to these positive beliefs or increasing the negativism attached to these negative beliefs, such as hangovers and other health effects. Focusing more on these beliefs may result in changing the attitude of binge drinkers and in turn changing their intention to binge drink.

The second component of the TPB is a person's perceived subjective norms about the behaviour, which are caused by their normative beliefs. A person's normative beliefs are their beliefs about whether people important to them (referents), such as friends, colleagues, parents etc. will approve or disapprove of a behaviour. The influence these beliefs have on the subjective norm depends upon how motivated the person is to comply with their referents.

These beliefs result in a person's subjective norms. These are their perceptions of the social pressures to perform a specific behaviour, in this <https://assignbuster.com/why-people-continue-to-binge-drink-psychology-essay/>

case binge drinking (Ajzen, 1991). Ajzen (1991: 199) himself acknowledged that a possible limitation related to the subjective norms is that “ personal feelings of moral obligation or responsibility to perform ... a certain behaviour” should be considered as well as social pressures and argues that these personal moral issues could “ add predictive power to the model”. Although, in the case of binge drinking, it is unlikely that moral obligations would have as much of an effect as social pressures but nevertheless they may still have an impact on the intention to binge drink. Johnston and White (2003: 73) found that although some studies (see Armitage and Conner, 2001) have shown “ the failure of subjective norms to predict behavioural intentions” they are in fact a good predictor of behavioural intention, suggesting that “ for behaviours like binge drinking, perceived pressure from a range of important others is a strong and independent predictor of intentions to engage in the behaviour”.

Borsari and Carey (2001) also found that subjective norms support binge drinking and have a significant effect on why people binge drink. They found as well that the influence of a normative belief depended on where it came from. For example, they found that people- based norms (friends and relatives) were more influential than institutional-based norms (health authorities and government officials) in the case of binge drinking. An important point which can be taken from this is that people appear to be more influenced by their friend’s opinions than those expressed by the government, for example, through social marketing aimed at binge drinkers. This may partly explain why social marketing has had little effect in curbing binge drinking as many people still perceive their friends opinions towards

binge drinking to be positive and this outweighs the messages from social marketing.

A study demonstrating the effects of subjective norms on student binge drinkers was conducted by Haines (1996). In his study he found that the perceived binge drinking rate (70% in 1988) was substantially different to the actual binge drinking rate (43% in 1988), and therefore the perceived social norm was substantially different to the actual social norm. He was able to demonstrate how big an effect perceived social norms played upon binge drinking through the use of social marketing within the university. Over a period of 7 years the university managed to lower the perceived social norms of binge drinking and this led to the actual binge drinking rate falling at a similar pace year on year. This study not only showed the strength which social norms have on the behaviour of binge drinkers, but also the potential power that social marketing can have to influence and change these social norms, especially in students. The experiment by Haines (1996) was effective because he used various activities (e. g. the “ Money Brothers” (Haines, 1996: 9)) alongside traditional social marketing media (e. g. posters) so that the binge drinkers themselves became aware that their friends and peers did not in fact see binge drinking as the norm and so therefore their behaviour gradually changed. This shows that social marketing can be effective in changing subjective norms if done in the correct way, it also shows that current social marketing campaigns targeting subjective norms may not be utilising all of the available media which may be limiting their effectiveness at changing behavioural intentions.

The final component of the TPB is a person's perceived behavioural control, which is caused by their control beliefs. A person's control beliefs are their beliefs about the "presence or absence of requisite resources and opportunities" (Ajzen, 1991: 196) for example, money needed to purchase drink or co-operation of others to go out drinking. In the case of binge drinking, these beliefs may also be very much based on past experiences. Each control belief's influence on the perceived behavioural control depends upon how big an effect it is perceived to have upon the behaviour. The control beliefs of a person result in their perceived behavioural control, this is their "perceived ease or difficulty of performing the behaviour" (Ajzen, 1991: 188). Ajzen (1991: 196) argued that "the more resources and opportunities individuals possess, and the fewer obstacles or impediments they anticipate, the greater their perceived behavioural control over the behaviour". A limitation in relation to this is that the TPB assumes that all consumers are rational thinkers, this is in contrast to cognitive theories which argue that consumers are not always rational. The theory does not consider the possibility of irrational thoughts even though they may explain some of the reasons for binge drinking.

Norman et al (1998: 168) found that control beliefs and perceived behavioural control were important factors as determinants of binge drinking. They found that "frequent binge drinkers were less likely to believe that the decision to engage in binge drinking was under their control" and they also recognised a number of external influences that were more likely to make binge drinking behaviour occur. Interestingly, Johnston and White (2004) found that control factors were not significant as determinants of

binge drinking. Although, they acknowledge that the differences between the two studies may be due to their study only including discouraging control beliefs compared with Norman et al (1998) who included both discouraging and encouraging control beliefs. It seems that more research into this part of the theory in relation to binge drinking may need to be conducted before any conclusions about the effects of perceived behavioural control on binge drinking can be made. Therefore, it is not clear whether perceived behavioural control has a significant affect upon the intention to binge drink and so targeting the monetary cost of binge drinking through social marketing may not have much of an effect on binge drinkers.

In conclusion, it appears that despite the various limitations of the TPB it is still a good theory to explain and understand why people continue to binge drink in spite of social marketing campaigns. The TPB is not perfect though and is limited in general by the fact that it assumes all consumers are rational and does not include personality traits or personal moral issues. Some general criticisms of the theory such as the little significance of subjective norms do not seem to be true for binge drinking behaviour as they actually seem to explain a large part of the background behind the intention to binge drink. It also appears that more research needs to be conducted into the perceived behavioural control element of the theory in relation to binge drinking so that more conclusive results are found. Overall it seems that people binge drink mainly due to the influence of their perceived subjective norms upon them as well as due to their positive attitudes towards the behaviour. Social marketing campaigns may not focus enough on trying to change people's behavioural beliefs and especially trying to

change their normative beliefs and this limits their effectiveness. It has been shown in studies such as Haines (1996) that it is possible to change normative beliefs, but more than just conventional social marketing may be needed to do this. According to the TPB, people continue to binge drink in spite of social marketing campaigns due to the strong effect of their perceived subjective norms as well as their positive attitude towards binge drinking.