

Developing a brief media literacy intervention targeting adolescent alcohol use: The impact of formative research*

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Background

Media literacy-based interventions provide promise in preventing adolescent substance abuse, but identified gaps show that they tend to take extensive curriculum time (and sometimes specialized equipment), have not always been evaluated rigorously, when evaluated have not thoroughly measured mechanisms of change, and have not evaluated optimal modes of teaching to identify key activating components (i.e., production versus analysis).

The project is based on an activation model of media literacy that includes components of inoculation theory that tracks the cognitive process underlying change.

This presentation describes formative research that begins to address identified gaps in the context of a feasibility test of a brief media literacy intervention to prevent alcohol use in early high school students (mid-adolescence).

Methods

Design

Three steps were involved in formative research, based on the draft brief *Youth Message Development* (YMD) curriculum:

- (1) 148 10th grade high school students (44 male, 104 female, 63% white, ages 14-17, from 32 schools) in Pennsylvania participated in pilot testing the draft curriculum comparing a poster planning/production session with an analysis only control activity; adult mentors (N = 40, 12 male, 28 female, 64% were teachers) also provided feedback via open ended written questions and oral feedback;
- (2) Twenty 10th grade students (12 male, 8 female, 40% white, 35% black, 20% Hispanic, 5% bi-racial) completed interviews focused on curriculum wording changes, advertisements utilized, and refinements to measures;
- (3) Fourteen 10th grade students (8 males, 6 females) and 13 high school teachers (6 males, 7 females) participated in four focus groups to refine the curriculum.

Data analyses

- Thematic analyses using grounded theory approach.

Contact and Citation Information

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Results

Student Feedback

Analyses of oral feedback from students after the YMD workshop and open-ended written feedback on the surveys also resulted in curriculum refinement. The interactive nature of the YMD activities was viewed positively. Pilot feedback indicated a need to provide more balance in the presentation of pro- and anti-alcohol ads, revise timing of the lesson, and modify activity sheets. Student quotes included:

- “I liked how the workshop was hand-on. It kept my attention and me realize the truth about advertising.”
- “The making of the posters was fun.”
- “Try ads about other things. There are other effects of ads that are not alcohol, even though it is the easiest to do.”

Mentor Feedback

Mentors also liked the interactive components of YMD and provided suggestions. Mentors recommended that two ads be eliminated (of nearly 50 group activity ads), and we replaced these ads. They also recommended that some of the main curriculum ads ($n = 9$, seen by participants in both workshops) be replaced with non-alcohol ads (all activity ads are alcohol based), and about half of them were replaced with non-beer advertisements (e.g., Coke, Chevy) to better balance the curriculum goals and focus on critical analysis skills. Quotes from mentors included:

- “It used a lot of examples, got the kids involved. I liked how they had an activity to practice what they learned.”
- “I didn’t like how it was all centered around alcohol advertising.”
- “It was all about alcohol, I think we could’ve looked at other ads that have the same effects other than using alcohol. We are trying to persuade students not to use it and by focusing on these ads, I don’t think that was accomplished.”
- “Hands-on advertisements and activities made it easier to grasp the concepts being presented. Also using ads/companies that the students were familiar with made it more identifiable as well as effective.”

Student Interviews

Based on student interviews, changes were made to instructions as well as specific item wording. For example, students identified specific terms that they found confusing (e.g., nuance). Interviews with students also highlighted inconsistencies between what students’ perceived definitions/understanding of words/phrases and the conceptual and operational definitions (e.g., “truthfulness of advertising”).

Student quote included:

- “I had to read questions once or twice because some of the words were kind of big ... Show current trends. I didn’t understand that.”

The second purpose of the student interviews was related to advertisement selection. Student interviews identified magazines that would be good sources for example ads (magazines read), and they gave feedback on existing curriculum advertisements. For example, most students were able to accurately identify Taylor Swift (used to demonstrate the “celebrity endorsement” persuasion technique), but most students could not identify Kasey Kane (NASCAR driver sponsored by Budweiser).

- “Well for one it’s Taylor Swift and a lot of my friends find her as a role model...Taylor Swift’s got milk, they’ll think it’s really cool to have milk too.”

Focus Group Results

Student Focus Groups

In general, students were enthusiastic about the poster making activity because of the “hands on” nature of the activity. Students were less interested in the first activity (group discussion and analysis of an ad). Student quotes included:

- [Comment on liking the planning activity] “Yeah, you do more for it and stuff. It’s just like—you’re learning either way, but it’s like you’re actually doing something, so it makes it more interactive, I guess.”

Teacher Focus Groups

Teacher focus groups identified changes to supplemental activity sheets to encourage use (e.g., use bullet lists or make more visually appealing, consistent with student focus group results).

Teachers had several suggestions pertaining to the ads themselves. Specifically, teachers suggesting starting with an engaging visual example at the outset of the curriculum, and we added a popular ad from the 2011 Superbowl early to introduce the curriculum (we chose for 2011 the Volkswagen family-oriented ad with the child dressed as Darth Vader using “superpowers”).

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