Anti-Consumers in Action: Coping with the Challenges and Consequences of 'Drinking Sensibly'

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Introduction

A major contemporary challenge facing governments and health professionals is that of promoting sustainable and healthy approaches to alcohol consumption in a context where excessive alcohol consumption is the dominant trend (Plant and Plant, 2006).

The prevalence of excessive alcohol consumption—or binge drinking—is an issue within student populations globally and particularly within the UK (Wechsler, Lee, Kuo, Seibring, Nelson and Lee, 2002; Kuntsche, Rehm and Gmel, 2004; Banister and Piacentini, 2006; D'Alessio, Baiocco and Laghi, 2006), where the dominant social culture is one where excessive alcohol consumption is the accepted norm and practice (Treise, Wolburg and Otnes, 1997; Banister and Piacentini, 2006). This study examines the challenges and consequences faced by students in the United Kingdom who resist the prevailing norms and practices by choosing to consume little or no alcohol.

Literature

Studies have considered the circumstances around, and motivations for, excessive alcohol consumption with young people and students (e.g. Gofton, 1990; Darian, 1993; Liu and Kaplan, 1996; Webb, Ashton, Kelly and Kamal, 1996; Pavis et al., 1997; Thom and Francome, 2001; Gill 2002; Beccaria and Sande 2003). Recent research has focused on the unique position of alcohol in constructing and facilitating the social worlds of young people and students (e.g. Treise et al., 1997; Measham, 2004; Banister and Piacentini, 2006). Within the student context, non-participation in the prevailing alcohol culture could prevent full engagement with student social life (Nairn, Higgins, Thompson, Anderson and Fu, 2006), providing a source of tension for those choosing *not* to consume or to *consume comparatively little* alcohol. This research focuses on students who adopt what Nairn et al. (2006) term 'alternative subject positions', who become positioned as anti-consumers because of their opposition to the norms that predominate. This paper draws parallels with anti-consumption behavior (specifically the theories around voluntary simplicity and brand avoidance), in order to develop understanding of the consequences of the decision to 'opt out' of the dominant norm. The challenge for these consumers involves negotiating the tensions implicit in the assumption of a self-identification as an anti-consumer of alcohol whilst maintaining an acceptable social identity, as part of the broader student culture. Coping theory provides a means to examine the ways that non-drinkers manage these tensions, and this paper examines the coping strategies deployed in response to this tension (Folkman, 1986; Lazarus, 1991).

Research Design

One-to-one in-depth interviews were conducted, with undergraduate students from one research site. All participants identified themselves as 'not drinking alcohol', which represented a behavioral continuum from absolute non-consumption through to light/occasional consumption. A semi-structured interview guide was used to ensure the two researchers included similar topics, but the interviews were phenomenologically informed (Thompson, Locander and Pollio, 1989). Interview lasted between 45 and 89 minutes, and all were digitally recorded and transcribed. Both authors undertook the analysis, first separately and independently, followed by a phase of sharing to explore alternative explanations. Transcript analysis consisted of reading and re-reading, noting patterns and themes in a search for "patterns and recurring organizations" (Wetherall and Potter, 1988:177), accompanied by a process of categorization, abstraction, comparison and integration (Spiggle, 1994).

Findings

There were four main categories of antecedents of anti-excessive consumption in this context [personal experience of excessive alcohol consumption with serious personal consequence(s); close personal family experience of alcoholism; religious, political or cultural reasons; and general misgivings about alcohol] and these had an effect on the perceived challenges and the ways they were managed. Participants found their position on alcohol consumption ambivalent and at times difficult, especially since their social context is anchored in a culture of excessive alcohol consumption. The main challenges they faced related to: managing new social situations; challenging the stereotypes of the non-drinker; coping with drunker others; and the roles they are expected to assume around drunken friends. A number of coping strategies were deployed to manage these challenges, and our analysis elaborates these, relating them to the antecedents of behavior.

Conclusion

The practice of being an 'anti-consumer' in this context shared similarities with the practice of voluntary simplification. Consumers who wish to follow principles associated with voluntary simplification do not have the option of leaving the market (Kozinets, 2002); they tend to operate within the market but to their own guiding principles, hence the continuum of behaviors incorporated under the heading of voluntary simplification. The anti-consumers featured in this study could not or would not want to leave the student culture entirely. Some opted out of certain aspects of this culture, often by creating 'alternative leisure identities' (Nairn et al 2006) which did not involve alcohol. Others deployed a combination of planful problem solving coping strategies and emotion-focused strategies to manage this situation.

Implications for public policy in relation to alcohol consumption are discussed in the paper. Rather than focusing solely on discouraging excessive alcohol consumption, social marketing efforts should be directed at assisting in educating people, particularly the young, about the process of managing their choices. This study contributes primarily through identifying the various means by which anti-consumers of alcohol (i.e. non, light, responsible or occasional consumers) manage their behavior. As the findings revealed this process of managing the consequences of anti-consumption is not to be taken lightly and represents a very real issue, particularly within a culture that welcomes binge drinking.

The paper raises new questions and research directions, especially in terms of expanding research in this context to include anti-consumers as well as consumers. It would be sensible to extend this

investigation to other research sites, including young people not in education, as well as younger consumers in schools and colleges. In addition the approach adopted, that is an in-depth investigation of anti-consumers in a context where excessive consumption is a concern, could usefully apply in other social marketing contexts such as the consumption of unhealthy foods, drugs and smoking.

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