

APPLICATION OF SOCIAL NORM CAMPAIGN IN HIGH SCHOOLS

Martina ROMANOVÁ, Tomáš SOLLÁR

Abstract: *The paper deals with the prevention strategy that was used in different types of high schools. The Social Norm campaign was chosen as a health promotion strategy and its aim was the correction of not accurately perceived peer norms related to substance use. The campaign was a part of the project and the cooperation of city Nitra and University of Illinois. The project consisted of two phases. Students of seven high schools (n=638) took part in the first phase and they completed the survey assessing substance use and perceived norms. For the second phase students (n=219) from four high schools were chosen. The sample consisted of three groups of students in every school: two experimental and one control group. They differed in the degree of intervention. After four weeks of campaign implementation no significant differences were found among the groups. One possible explanation of this finding is that the length of the campaign (four weeks) was not sufficient if we want to change students' misperception.*

Keywords: *norms, actual norm, perceived norm, misperception, correction of misperception*

In recent years the teachers have been frequently talking about the ways which would improve the quality of life, with paying much attention to coping with stressful situations. The necessity to search for more effective strategies which could reduce or even eliminate using alcohol, cigarettes and other substances has become one of the priorities not just in schools, but also in public policy.

In our country not used prevention strategy which uses the social norm approach, has been widely used in the US. The core idea is the finding that there is a tendency in young people to perceive the substance use as more frequent than it actually is (Berkowitz 2004; Perkins, Berkowitz 1986). The social norm approach belongs to the prevention strategies aimed at preventing substance abuse which can be confirmed by many studies and researches (Schultz, Neighbors, 2007; Thombs et al., 2007; Berkowitz, 2005; Lintonen, Konu, 2004; Perkins, 2002). The basic idea of this approach is to communicate actual student norm in terms of what most of the students do concerning substance use. In comparison with other strategies social norm approach is oriented on healthy decisions, using creative potential of the target group.

Due to the differences in terminology used in empirical investigations we shall pay attention to the classification of norms (Cialdini, Demaine, 2006; Elek et al., 2006; Borsari, Carey, 2003). There are two types of norms that are used in the literature dealing with prevention efforts:

- ⇒ Descriptive norms – refer to the perception of frequency and quantity of alcohol consumption or other substance use within some population.
- ⇒ Injunctive norm – refer to the extent to which students approve or disapprove of substance use.

Oleson (2004) distinguishes two dimensions of these two norms: actual norm and perceived norm. Actual norm consists of the actual average attitudes, beliefs and behaviors of people in the group. On the other hand the perceived norm consists of assumption within the group related to the extremity in the attitudes, beliefs and behavior of other people within the group. A perceived norm is different from actual norm because it relates to what people think a norm is. Neighbors et al. (2006) directs attention to the following findings:

- a. perceived norm is typically higher than actual norm,
- b. perceived norm positively correlates with alcohol consumption.

The phenomenon of not accurate actual norm perception was called misperception and it refers to the differences between the actual attitudes or behaviors and perceived attitudes and behaviors (Berkowitz, 2004). Berkowitz (2004) confirms that results of many researches indicate that peer influence is more based on what we think other people do and what they believe to rather than on their actual behaviors and beliefs. Beck and Treiman (in Perkins, 2002) affirm, that misperception can be found in high schools and universities as well. Theoretical explanation can be found on psychological, social and cultural level. In terms of cognitive level the psychologists demonstrate the tendency of people to attribute actions of other people to their dispositions rather than to environmental context (Zanden, 1987; Sollárová, 2004, 2008).

Social norm approach

Perkins (1995) claims that most of the students typically overestimate substance use and the permissiveness of their schoolmates or peers. He formulates basic points regarding the misperception:

1. The difference between actual and perceived norm exist in all types of drugs.
2. Misperceptions of peer norms exist in high schools, not just in universities.
3. Misperception exists in males and females, so it extends across gender.
4. Misperceptions affect the students' personal substance use.

Social norm approach is widely used strategy in various areas, not just in prevention efforts aimed at reduction of smoking, alcohol consumption or other substances use. Researchers in the social norm area focused mostly on alcohol consumption and other substance use, but in recent years they are paying attention also to risky sexual behavior, gambling or driving a vehicle when intoxicated.

This approach seems to be very popular because:

- Most of the strategies that are still used in our schools are not effective. The professionals keep searching for new, more effective ones. In many articles they draw attention to the mistakes and weaknesses of the programs and strategies used in our schools. They criticize weak effectiveness and no changes in attitudes and behaviors.
- There is a tendency in the prevention field toward evidence – based evaluations.

The social norm approach explains that most of the problems in young people are caused by their desire to conform to group norms, group patterns and expectations which are erroneously perceived (Perkins, 2003). This type of prevention strategy suggests the way to correct the misperceived norms: to shift the perceived norm closer to the actual norm. The basic idea is to gather credible data from the target population and then spread and expose this population to positive, data – based messages using health communication strategies. When we repeatedly expose the target population to these messages, people begin to behave in accordance with the more accurately perceived norm (Figure 1).

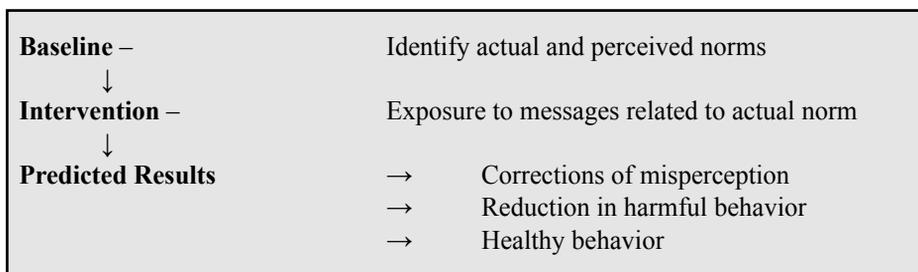


Figure 1. Model of Social Norm Approach (Haines et al., 2004)

It is important to emphasize that social norm approach focuses on the positive and the healthy decisions of the majority and it communicates only norms of non-use (Berkowitz, 2005).

In the research we focus on the universal level of prevention and the norm we used in campaign was descriptive on both levels: actual and perceived. We used Social norm campaign – the survey results contrasting misperceptions with actual norms were publicized in students posters. They provided others students the correct information about alcohol and other drug use and correct their erroneous perception (DeJong, Langford, 2002).

In planning the research design we followed this sequence: first we needed the data related to the level of actual and perceived norm, then we could identify the misperception. We investigate whether different extent of intervention will have impact on the perception of peer norms related to substance (alcohol, cigarettes and marijuana) use.



Figure 2. Sequence of misperception identification

Methods

Sample - participants

The research sample consisted of high school students who participated in the project. The project was conducted with the support of City of Nitra and University of Illinois. It consisted of two phases. The first phase was aimed at data collection from which we obtained the data regarding the actual norm, perceived norm and misperceptions related to substance use. Within the second phase we cooperated with four high schools and the focus of the work was placed on correction of misperceptions.

Table 1. High schools participating in the project and numbers of students

SCHOOL	1. phase		2. phase	
	n	%	n	%
1. Business Academy	165	25.9%	43	19.6%
2. Health Care High School	118	18.5%	52	23.7%
3. Electrotechnic High School.	69	10.8	40	18.3%
4. High School (“gymnasium”)	135	21.2%	84	38.4%
5. Sport High School	42	6.6%	-	-
6. Hotel Academy	96	15.0%	-	-
7. Technical Training High School	13	2.0%	-	-
TOTAL	638	100%	219	100%

Method- measures

To detect the actual norms, perceived norms, attitudes, preferences and parental behavior „Drug Use and Perception Survey“ was used. English version of the survey was provided by University of Illinois. The adapted Slovak version differs just slightly from the original - items that were irrelevant in our sample were left out. Administration of the survey takes approximately 20 minutes.

The answers regarding substance use in students were divided according the following key:

- a) If the students perceive themselves or others as using alcohol, marihuana or smoking cigarette at least three times a week and more often they were considered as users,
- b) If the students perceive themselves or others as using alcohol, marihuana or smoking cigarette never or once a year they were considered as non- users.

Research plan

The second phase aimed at Social Norm Campaign was carried out with cooperation of four high schools. Three classes were asked to participate in every school. Students consent was obtained and participation in the project was voluntary. Three

classes represented two experimental and one control group (Table 2). The first experimental group consisted of students who were enrolled in the Social Norm Campaign. The campaign began with the brief explanation of the project, we introduced the findings from the survey that was administered a year ago and finally the phenomenon called misperception was introduced in terms of information how misperception develop and what the causes and consequences of this phenomenon are. The students asked questions related to this issue; talk very openly about actual substance use, prevention programs they have already participated in. Within this first session we introduced the main idea to communicate normative message to large number of students. Students' task was to develop and prepare in the form of posters a number of normative messages that are simple, truthful and positive – simply defining what the healthy population does. The duration of the campaign was four weeks, we were in touch with students almost every day and once a week we had a session that was accompanied by discussions and conversation. At the end of this 4-week campaign students were asked to complete the „Drug Use and Perception Survey“. The sample in experimental group 2 consisted of the students who did not know anything about the project. Their involvement lasted one lesson (45 minutes) - the core idea of the project was introduced and their task was to see and assess the posters prepared by the students from experimental group 1 and write the feedback regarding their opinions about the posters and the messages on them. At the end of the lesson they were asked to complete the same survey as group 1.

Control group consisted of the students, who did not know anything about the project, nor they were asked to evaluate the posters – they just completed the same survey that was administered in previous two experimental groups.

Table 2 Division of males and females within the groups

GROUP	Gender		Total
	male	female	
Experimental group 1	42	27	69
Experimental group 2	31	51	82
Control group	28	40	68
Total	101	117	219

In the experiment, the baseline data was retrieved from the „Drug Use and Perception Survey“ that was administered to 638 high school students the previous academic year. Intentionally the test-retest design was not used in order to avoid retaking the same test in a relatively short time. At the same time due to precise clarification of the approach we tried to avoid such answers that could be labeled as socially desirable (Ott, Doyle, 2005; Ferjenčik 2000; Disman 2002). Different procedure was chosen: misperception in control group (2008) was compared with misperception that was obtained from the survey administered a year before (2007).

Results

Findings are analyzed in the following sequence: actual vs. perceived norm (indicator of misperception) and correction of misperception.

Actual vs. perceived norm – indicator of misperception

Table 3. Differences between actual norm (AN) and perceived norm (PN) in four high schools students - 2007

2007–Drug Use and Perception Survey	Substance	AN VN	N	AM (%)	SD	t	df	p
4 schools	cigarettes	AN	454	33	.471	27.798	453	< .001
		PN	454	98	.147			
4 schools	alcohol	AN	389	41	.492	22.133	388	< .001
		PN	389	98	.151			
4 schools	marihuana	AN	440	02	.142	16.468	439	< .001
		PN	440	41	.492			

Legend: AN – actual norm, PN – perceived norm

Findings indicate that actual substance use (cigarettes, alcohol and marihuana) is not identical with the perceived norm according to the results from „Drug Use and Perception Survey“ administered in 2007. Students were prone to overestimate the prevalence of these substances use in their schoolmates and students in general. This finding is valid for all four types of high schools and the difference between these two norms is considered as statistically significant.

The next step was to find out whether misperception of actual norms regarding the same substance use is observed in these schools a year later (2008). This finding will serve as a base or precondition for the campaign.

Table 4. Differences between actual norm (AN) and perceived norm (PN) in four high schools students - control groups (2008)

2008–Social Norm Campaign	Substance	AN PN	N	AM (%)	SD	t	df	p
Control group	cigarettes	AN	62	47	.503	7.350	61	< .001
		PN	62	97	.178			
Control group	alcohol	AN	55	16	.373	13.266	54	< .001
		PN	55	96	.189			
Control group	marihuana	AN	63	0	.000	6.601	62	< .001
		PN	63	41	.496			

Legend: AN – actual norm, PN – perceived norm

Statistically significant differences were found between actual norms and perceived norms of substance (alcohol, cigarettes and marihuana) use in all control groups after the survey administration. Students' greatest area of overestimation was in their perception of prevalence of alcohol consumption (at least 3 times a week). Ninety – six percent of the students in control groups estimated that their peers drink alcohol at least three times a week. This response is considered as overestimation when compared to the actual norm of 16%.

The findings regarding the misperception in high schools students in a year interval provide the precondition for Social Norm Campaign implementation. The perceived norm in all chosen substances was significantly higher than the actual norm was.

Correction of misperception

Used prevention strategy did not have an ambition to reduce the prevalence of those students who consume alcohol or marihuana, smoke cigarettes on a daily basis. Due to the duration of the campaign – four weeks – the aim was defined as correction of erroneously perceived norms of substance use. The indicator is the level of a perceived norm. Therefore in further interpretation we focus only on this norm related to perception.

Table 5. Differences in perceived norms among two experimental groups and one

Perceived norm	Substance	Exp. 1 Exp. 2 Control	N	AM (%)	SD	F	p
PN	Cigarettes smoking	E1	69	90	.304	2.218	.111
		E2	81	98	.156		
		C	67	96	.208		
PN	Alcohol consumption	E1	70	90	.302	1.545	.216
		E2	80	95	.219		
		C	65	97	.174		
PN	Marihuana use	E1	70	29	.455	1.236	.293
		E2	78	37	.486		
		C	63	41	.496		

Legend: PN – perceived norm, E1 – experimental group 1 (Social Norm Campaign), E2 – experimental group 2 (posters presentation), C – control group (without campaign, without seeing posters)

After four weeks of Social Norm Campaign no significant differences were found in perceived norms among the participants from two experimental and one control group. Students of all groups did not estimate the prevalence of cigarette smoking, alcohol and marihuana use accurately, since they still have a tendency to overestimate the prevalence of substance use. What is notable is the finding that the level of perceived norm is not identical in experimental and control groups. The lowest level can be observed in experimental group 1, where the Social Norm Campaign was implemented.

Discussion

Actual vs. perceived norm – indicator of misperception

Discrepancies between actual and perceived norm were discovered in high school students. Perceived norm was similar in all four types of high schools; they frequently overestimated the prevalence of cigarette smoking, alcohol, and marihuana consumption. The estimated percentage of those students who are involved in a risky behavior was in alcohol and cigarettes close to 100%. Misperception was discovered in the sample of Slovak students, therefore we can suppose that this phenomenon exists regardless the

type of a high school, or the country the students live in. Perkins (2003) summed up the factors influencing misperceptions into the following areas:

- a. attribution theory
- b. public behavior of young people
- c. conversations
- d. advertisements.

Attribution theory is a cover term for all approaches that account for the causes of people behavior. There is a tendency to attribute behavior of other people to their dispositions and to think erroneously that such behavior is typical for that particular person. We frequently consider the situation when evaluating or judging our own behavior. Attribution theory is focused on the process of causal explanation of a given behavior and various situations in our lives (Perkins, 1997; Sabini, 1992).

Public behavior means that not just young people but people in general are prone to remember the extremes of behavior. Conversation is another factor, in some aspects similar to the previous one, because we all use more than often the quantifiers “everybody or nobody”. So if some people were at the party, later on when talking about it, young people would probably say that *everybody* was there. That of course does not have to be true in all cases.

In the context of social norm approach, attribution theory help in explanation how people make judgments regarding their own as well as other people substance use.

Correction of misperception

The main intention of this experiment was the correction of not accurately perceived norms regarding alcohol and marihuana use, and cigarette smoking. We found out, that four week implementation of Social Norm Campaign did not result in a dramatic change in the perceived norm. The number of students who misperceived use of the substances mentioned above did not decrease - neither in the experimental group 1 (where the students were actively involved), nor in the experimental group 2 and control group change. What is considered as highly positive is the feedback of the students. Their positive comments indicate that this type of prevention is something different in comparison to the strategies they are used to. They were given the opportunity to see substance use from a different perspective. They did admit that we should not believe everything what we hear. Improving the campaign and making it more effective can be achieved by its combination with other strategies, for example peer programs.

The limitations of the project can account for results:

1. Number of students in classes and the type of a high school
2. The time of sessions or meetings with students.
3. The nature of questions regarding the actual norm – the students’ responses may not be honest. However, studies have demonstrated high degree of reliability of young people self-report of substance use in the case when responses are anonymous (Ott and Doyle, 2005).

Conclusion

The prevention strategy that was used in the experiment was kind of a challenge for us because a lot of scientific articles (Sollárová, 1999, 2000) emphasize and point to low effectiveness of those programs and strategies that are presented in our schools. This fact resulted in the process of searching for such prevention work which uses completely different methods. Despite our findings we think that Social Norm Campaign has great potential, because it does not point to negative consequences of substance use but gives support to the majority of students who prefer healthy choices in their lives. Presenting positive aspects of healthy decisions and choices together with enthusiastic people who really care about the future of the next generation can help young people not just to become more responsible, but to fully respect their lives.

APLIKÁCIA KAMPANE SOCIÁLNYCH NORIEM AKO PREVENTÍVNEJ STRATÉGIE UŽÍVANIA NÁVYKOVÝCH LÁTOK U ŠTUDENTOV SŠ

Abstrakt: Príspevok sa zaoberá problematikou prevencie závislosti u študentov stredných škôl. Na vybraných školách bola aplikovaná Kampaň sociálnych noriem, ktorej cieľom bola korekcia nesprávne vnímaných rovesníckych noriem užívania a ktorá bola súčasťou projektu realizovaného v spolupráci mesta Nitra a Illinoiskej univerzity. Projekt mal dve fázy. V prvej fáze, ktorej sa zúčastnili študenti siedmich škôl (n=638) bol administrovaný dotazník, ktorý tvoril podklad k samotnej Kampani sociálnych noriem. V druhej fáze, v ktorej sa vybrali štyri stredné školy (n=219) výskumnú vzorku tvorili tri triedy na každej škole: dve experimentálne a jedna kontrolná, ktoré sa medzi sebou líšili v intenzite intervencie. Po 4 – týždňovej implementácii Kampane sociálnych noriem neboli zistené významné posuny vo vnímaní. Vysvetlením zistenia môže byť skutočnosť, že štyri týždne je pomerne krátky čas na to, aby študenti zmenili nesprávne vnímané rovesnícke normy užívania, čo zodpovedá aj zisteniam zahraničných výskumov.

Kľúčová slová: normy, aktuálna norma, vnímaná norma, mispercepcia, korekcia mispercepcie