Assignment 4: Revised Message Report

Background

Driving under the influence remains a significant public health concern on college campuses. According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (2021), approximately 1,825 college students between the ages of 18 and 24 die each year from alcohol-related unintentional injuries, including motor-vehicle crashes. Preventing alcohol-impaired driving among college students is a critical goal for campus safety initiatives. One of the most effective approaches for influencing behavior is Social Norms Theory, which suggests that individuals' actions are influenced by their perceptions of peer behavior (Perkins & Berkowitz, 1986). By correcting misperceptions and emphasizing that most students act responsibly, communication campaigns can reinforce and normalize positive behaviors.

With this theoretical foundation, I developed a social norms poster targeting Washington State University (WSU) students, aiming to encourage the use of rideshare services, campus shuttles, and other safe alternatives rather than driving under the influence. The original design focused on delivering a message that was direct, empowering, and slightly fear-based to capture attention without overwhelming the viewer. Visual elements included a lonely, dark road illuminated by faint blue police lights and a prominently displayed rideshare symbol to suggest safer alternatives. The poster featured the statistic, "9 out of 10 WSU students haven't driven while under the influence of alcohol," which framed responsible behavior as the social norm.

The development of the original message prioritized action-oriented language and relatable nighttime imagery, creating a sense of realism and urgency while maintaining a positive and accessible tone. Following the initial focus group testing, revisions were made to address feedback. Changes included enhancing the visibility of the rideshare app icon, bolding the call-to-action text, and increasing the intensity of the blue police lights behind the car to subtly reinforce the law enforcement presence. These modifications were intended to make the poster more immediately engaging and persuasive.

The revised version of the poster, reflecting these updates, was used for additional testing with a second focus group.

Method

The project involved two stages of qualitative data collection to assess and refine the poster's effectiveness. In the first round, two focus groups were conducted, each including four to five WSU students, for a total of nine participants. Participants were recruited through personal networks, student organizations, and campus listservs to ensure diverse representation across academic years and fields of study. Participants ranged from 18 to 24 years old and included both underclassmen and upperclassmen, aligning closely with the target audience of students who might attend social gatherings where alcohol is present.

The first round of focus groups centered on gathering initial reactions to the poster. Participants were asked open-ended questions, including their first impressions of the

poster, their understanding of the main message, their assessment of the poster's effectiveness in influencing behavior, their perceptions of the clarity of the visuals and text, and their suggestions for improvements. The discussions were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed qualitatively by identifying recurring themes, key phrases, and patterns of sentiment across participants.

After revising the poster based on first-round feedback, a second round of testing was conducted. A new small focus group consisting of five WSU students was recruited similarly to the first group. This group evaluated the revised poster and was asked specific questions related to the changes made, including whether the rideshare option was more noticeable, whether the increased blue lighting enhanced the message, and whether the poster overall was more engaging and effective. As with the first round, the second focus group was recorded and analyzed for common feedback themes and overall impressions.

Results

The first round of focus groups yielded several important insights. All nine participants correctly interpreted the main message of the poster, understanding that it encouraged students to avoid driving under the influence and instead use safer transportation options. The nighttime imagery and subtle use of blue police lights were praised for effectively creating a sense of realism and urgency without overwhelming fear. Participants noted that the use of the statistic, "9 out of 10 WSU students haven't driven while under the influence of alcohol," helped them feel that making safe transportation choices was the campus norm.

However, several areas for improvement were also identified. Some participants commented that the rideshare app logo and the call-to-action text were too small and could be easily overlooked. Others recommended increasing the contrast of key text elements and enhancing the depiction of the police presence to strengthen the fear-based component of the message. Participants expressed that minor visual adjustments could make the poster more immediately impactful, especially for students passing by quickly in campus settings.

After incorporating these revisions, the second focus group reviewed the updated poster. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive. Participants agreed that the rideshare app logo and call-to-action text were now much more visible and immediately noticeable. The increased blue lighting behind the car was noted as more effectively reinforcing the consequences of driving under the influence without feeling overly aggressive or punitive. Participants described the revised poster as clearer, more direct, and more engaging overall.

Implications

The results of both rounds of testing demonstrate that small but deliberate adjustments can significantly strengthen the effectiveness of public health messaging. Enhancing the visual prominence of the rideshare options and slightly intensifying the fear-based imagery made the poster clearer, more actionable, and more emotionally resonant for the target audience. The results reinforce the importance of clarity, emotional engagement, and positive reinforcement in social norms marketing.

The findings also suggest that college students respond best to messages that blend subtle deterrent elements with strong positive framing. The poster's emphasis on peer norms—that most WSU students already make safe transportation choices—combined with a gentle reminder of potential consequences, helped encourage alignment with responsible behaviors. Future campaign development targeting student safety should continue to incorporate iterative feedback from the target audience to optimize clarity, relatability, and motivational impact.

Revised Message

The final revised poster incorporated several key changes based on the feedback gathered. The rideshare app logo was enlarged and repositioned for greater prominence. The call-to-action text was bolded and brightened for improved visibility, making it immediately noticeable even from a distance. The blue lighting behind the car was intensified to enhance the depiction of law enforcement presence, subtly reinforcing the fear-based component of the message.

Overall, the final version of the poster more effectively emphasizes that safe transportation choices are the social norm among WSU students, while also providing clear, accessible alternatives to driving under the influence. The balance between empowerment and subtle fear appeal was refined to ensure that the message was persuasive without being overwhelming.

Conclusion

The two-stage message development and testing process demonstrated the value of iterative audience-centered design. Gathering feedback from the target audience at multiple stages allowed for meaningful improvements that strengthened the clarity, engagement, and overall persuasiveness of the poster.
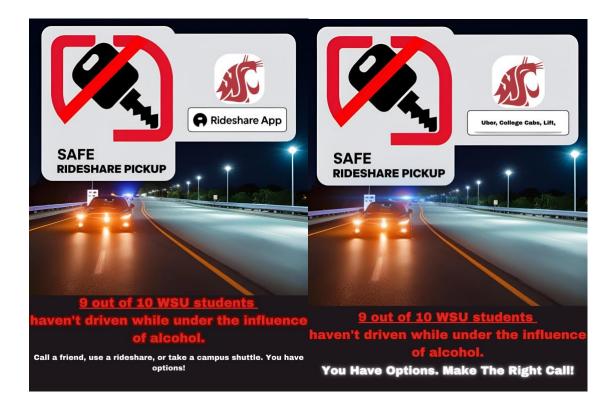
Applying Social Norms Theory in combination with carefully calibrated emotional appeals proved to be an effective strategy for promoting positive behavior change among WSU students. The project highlighted the importance of developing messages that are immediately understandable, emotionally resonant, and clearly actionable. Moving forward, these principles will continue to guide the creation of communication campaigns aimed at improving student health and safety outcomes.

References

National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. (2021). *College drinking*. https://www.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/brochures-and-fact-sheets/college-drinking

Perkins, H. W., & Berkowitz, A. D. (1986). Perceiving the community norms of alcohol use among students: Some research implications for campus alcohol education programming. *International Journal of the Addictions, 21*(9-10), 961-976. https://doi.org/10.3109/10826088609077249

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