

UK anti-drinking campaign ads may be 'catastrophically misconceived'

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Some anti-drinking advertising campaigns may be “catastrophically misconceived” because they play on the entertaining ‘drinking stories’ that young people use to mark their social identity, say researchers who have just completed a three year study of the subject.

Adverts that show drunken incidents, such as being thrown out of a nightclub, being carried home or passing out in a doorway, are often seen by young people as being a typical story of a ‘fun’ night out, rather than as a cautionary tale.

Whilst these adverts, such as Diageo’s thechoiceisyours campaign, imply that being very drunk with friends carries a penalty of social disapproval, for many young people the opposite is often the case.

“Extreme inebriation is often seen as a source of personal esteem and social affirmation amongst young people,” said Professor Christine Griffin from the University of Bath, who led the research with colleagues from Royal Holloway, University of London and the University of Birmingham.

“Our detailed research interviews revealed that tales of alcohol-related mishaps and escapades were key markers of young peoples’ social identity.

“These ‘drinking stories’ also deepen bonds of friendship and cement group membership.

“Not only does being in a friendship group legitimise being very drunk - being the subject of an extreme drinking story can raise esteem within the group.”

Professor Chris Hackley in the School of Management at Royal Holloway added: “Inebriation within the friendship group is often part of a social bonding ritual that is viewed positively and linked with fun, friendship and good times, although some young people can be the target of humiliating or risky activities.

“This suggests that anti-drinking advertising campaigns that target this kind of behaviour may be catastrophically misconceived.”

The research, which was funded by the Economic & Social Research Council, involved in-depth interviews with 94 young people in three UK regions over a period of three years.

“The study suggests a radical re-thinking of national alcohol policy is required which takes into account the social character of alcohol consumption and the identity implications for young people,” said Professor Hackley.

Professor Isabelle Szmigin from Birmingham Business School, University of Birmingham, added: “Whilst many young people recognise the damage that ‘drinking too much’ can do to their health, and the associated risks of physical and sexual assault, few view these as more than short term problems.”

Source: University of Bath

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