

Virtual environments get through to local drinkers

May 6 2016, by Tony Malkovic, Sciencenetwork Wa



Message received...a scene from the Alcohol360 virtual environment created to test messages about alcohol. Credit: UWA Centre for Software Practice

Online virtual environments are among the latest tools being used by WA health researchers to get through to heavy drinkers about the risks they face.

The innovative step is part of a wider trend emerging around the world

where researchers are embracing technology such as virtual reality, software solutions, smartphones and wearable devices to replace traditional research techniques.

At this week's Science on Swan conference in Perth, Curtin University's Professor Simone Pettigrew and UWA's Dr David Glance outlined their work on developing and testing health messages to get through to drinkers.

Focus groups had developed 12 messages to alert people to the dangers of drinking too much [alcohol](#), and then 2,100 people in an online survey whittled the dozen down to six.

"Once we had our six messages, we then had to decide which of those six messages was best," Prof Pettigrew said.

To do that, the researchers created three online virtual environments and a further 1,600 people were recruited to go online, enter the virtual environments and give their feedback.

The online virtual environment used to test the alcohol messages was developed by Dr David Glance and the team at the UWA Centre for Software Practice.



Message received...a scene from the Alcohol360 virtual environment created to test messages about alcohol. Credit: UWA Centre for Software Practice

Dr Glance told the conference they wanted to create an easy-to-use, online environment that users could download and visit.

From there they could roam and interact or rotate objects in a 360-degree view and see one of the messages about alcohol use.

"We had three scenarios, a living room, a doctor's surgery and a bus stop," he said.

"In the living room for example, you could click on the young boy and he would tell you what he had learnt at school, and if you clicked on the bottles on the table the alcohol message would be shown."

While participants were visiting the online world, the researchers could track where they clicked on their screens and thus analyse the results.

Prof Pettigrew said respondents who visited the virtual environment thought the alcohol messages were believable, convincing and personally relevant.

More importantly, they indicated a need to re-think or reduce their drinking.

"One respondent said: 'Very compelling survey. The 360 view made me uneasy reading that health fact over and over as I know I drink too much'," Prof Pettigrew said.

And the winning message from the people who visited the online environment?: "Alcohol increases your risk of bowel cancer."

This article first appeared on [ScienceNetwork Western Australia](#) a science news website based at Scitech.

Provided by Science Network WA

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