

Impact Case Study

Professor Lisa Farrell, Professor Mike Reid & Professor Francis Farrelly - What Type of Drinker Are You? Classifying Drinker Types to Curb Harmful Habits.

Summary:

This research project explored the drinking behaviours of Victorians and media messages about alcohol. From the research, a model of key groups of drinkers was developed. This allowed VicHealth to profile drinker types for the first time and provided insight into the best way to reach drinkers with relevant messages that challenge social norms around alcohol. The research initiated and informed public discourse on harmful drinking and the findings received substantial long-lasting media exposure. The research was used in the design of Victoria's 2013-2014 'Alcohol Change Strategy' and informed a culture change advertising campaign which had a positive impact on the drinking behaviours and attitudes of Victorian drinkers. The model of Victorian drinkers is still in use by VicHealth today.

Case Study:

This research, entitled 'Drinking Related Lifestyles', has had considerable impact on the organisation for which it was conducted, VicHealth, and for the general Victorian public. This research had four key areas of impact: (1) the research team developed a lasting model that allowed Victoria's health promotion agency, VicHealth, to understand the drinking behaviours of Victorians, (2) the research initiated and informed public discourse on the topic of harmful drinking, (3) the research informed the design of Victoria's 2013-2014 Alcohol Change Strategy which included a new, culturally focused communication strategy, and (4) the research has led to positive impacts on the drinking behaviours and attitudes of Victorians. These four key areas of research impact are explored in detail below.

VicHealth CEO, Ms Jerril Rechter, stated that "this research puts Victoria's alcohol culture under the microscope to examine...people's motivations for drinking, and why alcohol is such a central part of our lives." In doing so, this research gave VicHealth a lifestyles related model for classifying drinkers, the basis to build a culturally informed communication strategy, and a framework to understand Victorian drinkers. Understanding their audience and how alcohol fits into the lifestyles of Victorians has allowed VicHealth to communicate to various drinker types in a more targeted and effective manner. Furthermore, the research report's key recommendations on how to tackle Victoria's drinking problem (i.e. refined messaging in the media, a long term strategy for change, and using innovative methods of speaking to the public about drinking) have also had a profound and lasting effect on VicHealth as an organisation. VicHealth were so impressed with the outcomes of the research that they shortlisted the research project in the 2013 Victorian Health Promotion Foundation Awards.

When released in 2013, the research received a massive amount of media attention. News articles such as 'New research reveals there are four types of drinkers', which talked about "A research study from the RMIT University... (that) investigated the role that alcohol plays in Australian culture" (Koelma, Grace, news.com.au, 7 November 2013), were very common. Professor Mike Reid (the lead investigator) also appeared on Channel 10's 'The Project' which had a wide audience reach. By late 2013 the media tally counted 308 individual items, that included

TV, print, radio and online stories, and a Drinking Related Lifestyles infographic on YouTube had received 11,069 views. An online consumer quiz was also created which enabled individuals to find out what drinker type they were, and to find out targeted information about moderating their drinking behaviour. The quiz took on a 'viral' nature. During the period of 2012-2016 it received over 229,000 individual visits. When interviewed by the media, Ms Rechter made a point of directing people to the survey website, so that people may find out where they fit on the drinking spectrum. The research and the resulting media initiated a state-wide conversation about harmful drinking and Australia's 'culture of drinking', which contributed to individuals curbing certain harmful behaviours.

The research was also crucial in broader alcohol-related health promotion initiatives. In 2013-2014 VicHealth ran an Alcohol Culture Change Project in collaboration with the Victorian Department of Health, which took "a positive approach to acknowledge the unease about how alcohol is used in Victoria, and to harness that concern to help young people shape a shared vision of a Victoria where excess alcohol isn't integral to our celebrations" (VicHealth, 2014, 'Year In Review 2013-2014', page 42). Of the research, VicHealth stated that "This VicHealth-funded research informed our Alcohol Culture Change Project with the State Government...the research found that drinking is so culturally entrenched that we regularly use it as a way of expressing our values and beliefs" (VicHealth, 2014, 'Year In Review 2013-2014', page 43).

Additionally, the Alcohol Culture Change Project, which aimed to "promote better attitudes to drinking and drunk behaviour among young Victorians aged 16–29" (VicHealth, 2016, 'Evaluation of the VicHealth Alcohol Culture Change Campaigns', Page 1) used a number of marketing and communication initiatives that were directly attributable to the Drinking Related Lifestyles research to achieve its goals. In particular, a crucial finding of the research regarding the cultural legitimacy and normalisation of drinking in Australia was significant in VicHealth adopting a cultural approach to its marketing. Previously they had focused more on psychological factors or behavioural interventions.

Finally, the research was responsible for decreasing harmful drinking behaviours via its significant contribution to the Alcohol Culture Change Project. In a VicHealth report that evaluated the effectiveness of the Alcohol Culture Change Project, VicHealth stated that "The campaign had an impact on those in the 'risky drinking' category, with attitudinal differences observed relating to the acceptability of drunkenness, pressure to drink more than they want to, and concern for Victoria's drinking culture" (VicHealth, Evaluation of the VicHealth Alcohol Culture Change Campaigns, Page 9). In addition to this VicHealth reported that "low risk drinkers who saw the campaign were more likely to be concerned about the culture of drinking in Victoria, and express concern about their own drinking behaviour" (VicHealth, Evaluation of the VicHealth Alcohol Culture Change Campaigns, Page 9).

Associated Research:

The Drinking Related Lifestyles research project was funded by VicHealth's Innovation Grants program, and was completed by a research team led by Professor Mike Reid. VicHealth were drawn to the innovative design of the research incorporating extended online communities and the development of the drinking-related lifestyle model. The research was conducted between 2010 and 2012 and the research reports were published in 2013. The research had two components. In the qualitative phase, two private online research communities of 187 people were established and monitored for approximately three months. The objective of this phase was to gain insight into drinking culture, the types of groups of drinkers, the impact of media messages related to alcohol,

and the meaning and consumption of alcohol as a cultural phenomenon. During the quantitative phase, 2,500 Victorian adult drinkers completed an online survey, providing data related to their personal values, motivations to drink, alcohol acquisition behaviours and alcohol consumption behaviours. The objective of this phase was to profile drinker types, look at similarities and differences between the drinker types, determine critical influences of over-consumption, and collect data on how people communicate about alcohol. The research resulted in a model of four key groups of drinkers (Initiator, Follower, Moderator and Protector), made an assessment of public messaging related to alcohol and drinking, and recommended positive changes to curb harmful drinking.

College Support:

Project team members were aligned with RMIT's School of Economics, Finance and Marketing, which possesses a reputation for industry collaboration and translational research. The project team were afforded research time and were supported in their research pursuits, utilising administrative assistance supplied by the university, particularly during the initiation of the project. The research project was designed around extensive community engagement and research was conducted in close collaboration with VicHealth. Regular progress presentations kept VicHealth informed, and dissemination of research findings was a joint endeavour with VicHealth. Joint media plans were developed and RMIT and VicHealth media staff expertise was leveraged to maximise exposure of findings.