# Alcohol truth: A counter marketing intervention to address adolescent alcohol consumption

## Researchers

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## Summary

Media literacy is a key skill that young people need to develop in order to be able to critically engage with media and the increasing barrage of marketing messages. Research on smoking prevention programs has suggested that higher rates of media literacy are associated with reduced rates of smoking among adolescents, and there have been a number of effective ‘counter marketing’ interventions developed and delivered, primarily in the United States (US), to increase young people’s media literacy and raise their awareness of the manipulative nature of the tobacco industry.

However, there have been few counter marketing/media literacy interventions developed to equip young people with the knowledge and skills to critically engage with alcohol advertising and marketing.

The aim of this school-based intervention was to build the skills, knowledge and understanding of young people to view and analyse alcohol-related media, advertising and other communications such that they are able to think critically about alcohol messages in a way that empowers them to re-think their choices and behaviours regarding the consumption of alcohol.

## Outcomes

### Process evaluation

Across the four intervention schools, we found both consistencies and variations in program implementation. Three out of the four schools tried to complete all components of the curriculum, including the optional debate, which resulted in a sense of rushing through some of the earlier activities. There was considerable variation in the fidelity adherence with prescribed content and activities across schools. While most teachers attempted to stay ‘on message’, all schools regularly deviated from the prescribed content.

Teachers reported that student participation was limited by the extent and nature of the activities, and felt that more handouts were needed to complement the videos, as well as more self-directed tasks and additional time for discussion. While there was some variation, most students were satisfied with the curriculum content and engaged with the materials. Student satisfaction was higher with more local content (advertisements and alcohol beverages which they could easily recall); and teachers felt the students would have been more engaged had they moved on to ‘health’ topics. Execution through an English curriculum, where the emphasis is on a critical thinking process and not a health outcome, may be more appropriate.

An important finding was the teachers consistently expressed concern about the focus on alcohol media literacy education and were sceptical of its merit from a health point of view; they expressed a strong preference for inclusion of comprehensive information regarding physical harms and harm minimisation principles. This is perhaps not surprising given that the schools delivered the program as part of the PDHPE (health) curriculum; and suggests that the material would likely be more beneficial if delivered within the English curriculum, by teachers who are more comfortable with this type of material.

### Outcome evaluation

The analysis of changes between the pre-intervention and post-intervention surveys suggests that the curriculum package had some success in increasing the students’ alcohol advertising literacy. Particularly notable changes were seen in relation to scepticism towards the alcohol industry; such as the belief that ‘a*lcohol companies try to get young people to start drinking alcohol’, ‘alcohol companies lie’,* and that they ‘*did not want to drink as it would mean they were being manipulated by alcohol companies’.* However, overall attitudes towards the alcohol industry were largely unchanged following the intervention, perhaps as a result of their already significant exposure to alcohol and alcohol marketing.

We also found significant reductions in a number of injunctive norms for drinking alcohol following the intervention, which may have been a result of the material presented in the curriculum and/or the conversations that were stimulated among young people as a result of exposure to the intervention.

While some of these changes were consistent across all four participating schools, others were significant in only one or some of the schools. This is likely due to a combination of underlying differences between the samples in the schools and inter-school differences in the implementation of the intervention.

## Recommendations

### Recommendations for future interventions

* Given that the key concern of the PDHPE teachers was the coverage of alcohol marketing at the perceived expense of detailed coverage of the health effects of alcohol consumption, it is recommended that future interventions consider trialling the program within the English curriculum (where media literacy is a core learning outcome).
* Detailed suggestions for revision of each lesson are contained in annotated curriculum; and future interventions should incorporate these revisions.
* It was clear that some of the teachers felt uncomfortable delivering the content given their lack of expertise in the area of alcohol marketing and media. Future interventions could consider the feasibility of converting the content into workshop(s) delivered by an external party – such as the Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE) – with the expert knowledge and related enthusiasm for the topic to better engage students.

### Recommendations for further research

* Future research could usefully consider the impact of different delivery formats – including program duration, location, and modality – on participants’ engagement with the material presented.
* It is likely that many secondary school students will have had substantial prior exposure to both alcohol advertising and alcohol consumption (either their own or observing that of others) and this may impact on the effectiveness of a program to increase alcohol advertising literacy. Acknowledging the limitations of self-report data and the potential difficulties in obtaining approval from an ethics committee, future research could consider collecting data on and controlling for these potential confounders.
* Also related to the exposure of adolescents to alcohol marketing and alcohol per se, and initial evidence of the effectiveness of interventions targeting younger children (Gordon et al. 2015), future research could compare the relative effectiveness of interventions targeting primary-aged versus secondary-aged students.

[view the report](https://fare.org.au/wp-content/uploads/Alcohol-truth.-A-counter-marketing-intervention-to-address-adolescent-alcohol-consumption.pdf)

[view the media release](https://fare.org.au/wp-content/uploads/ALCOHOL-MEDIA-LITERACY-PROGRAM-A-GAME-CHANGER-FOR-CANBERRA-SCHOOLS.pdf)