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MEDIA RELEASE

Young people embrace personalised SMSs to curb risky or binge drinking

There's a strong acceptance and uptake among young people for personalised mobile phone messages to address harmful, binge, or risky single-occasion drinking, new Burnet Institute research, the first of its type, has found.

The study, *Participatory development of MIDY (Mobile Intervention for Drinking in Young People)* published in *BMC Public Health*, investigated the feasibility of interventions delivered via mobile phone for young people during drinking events.

The study participants trialled the intervention on a night out while drinking and filled in hourly mobile-based questionnaires tracking their drinks consumed, spending, location and mood, and invited them to relate their plans, priorities, and any adverse events.

In response, participants received tailored feedback relating to their drinking via SMS after each questionnaire. Lead researcher Cassandra Wright said colleagues were initially sceptical when she told them about the study design.

"When I said that we wanted to get people to fill out surveys every hour while they were at a party or at the pub, people literally laughed at me, saying that no-one would ever do it," Ms Wright said. "But we had a really high response rate – about 90 percent of the surveys were completed – and people reported back that they found the intervention not to be too much of an imposition.

"It turned out really well because mobile phones are permanently attached to young people's hands, and they're not afraid to use them. The intervention aside, this is really exciting because it allows us to collect alcohol-related data in a way that we've never been able to before. It's real-time, it reduces issues with reporting related to memory-loss, and it's convenient."

Ms Wright said participants reported that they had never previously even tried to keep track of their drinking or spending during a night out, and that for some it was a real eye-opener.

"Young people don't really talk openly about wanting to drink less, but they do want to reduce the harms associated with it, and we've got other research that shows that drinking even a little bit less can dramatically reduce the risk of harm," she said.

"There is a lot of evidence that shows that individualising messages about health makes them more effective, but this is the only study that's been able to collect alcohol related data and use it to deliver back messages tailored specifically to the context of where the participants are and what they're doing."

The success of the study has prompted VicHealth and Gandel Philanthropy to support an expanded phase two involving 270 participants and more comprehensive testing and evaluation.



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VicHealth CEO Jerril Rechter said VicHealth was pleased to support the expanded phase of this research which targets young people's risky drinking.

"VicHealth is keen to support research and interventions that aim to address harmful drinking attitudes and behaviour, with reducing harm from alcohol one of our priority areas of work," Ms Rechter said.

BACKGROUND NOTES:

In Australia, alcohol consumption is a significant public health issue; Risky Single Occasion Drinking (RSOD), also known as binge drinking, is widespread and concerning. More than one in seven deaths and one in five hospitalisations among young people are attributed to alcohol consumption, largely related to RSOD rather than long-term heavy consumption. RSOD is associated with harms including physical and sexual violence, suicide, risky sexual behaviour as well as both short- and long-term brain impairment and cognitive deficits. RSOD is common in Australia and persists beyond adolescence, with more than 66 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds and 64 percent of 25–29-year-old Australians reporting such drinking within the past year.

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