

NEWS RELEASE

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For immediate release

PERSONAL FRIENDSHIP NETWORKS KEY TO COMBATING BINGE DRINKING

New research commissioned by the Advertising Association has identified personal friendship networks as the key to tackling the spread of binge drinking in the UK.

The results of the research establish that social influence operating through personal friendship networks alone explains the large rise in binge drinking among young people seen recently in the UK. The pilot study carried out ground breaking research to examine whether the rise in binge drinking is a “fashion” phenomenon, which has spread by observing and copying what other people do. Many previous studies have related movements in alcohol consumption to factors such as disposable income, price and advertising. None of these have taken into account the possible effect of copying the behaviour of others ie. of fashion, as an important causal factor.

In this new research a standard market research survey was carried out in order to discover both the number of binge drinkers in the 18-24 year old population, where the problem is most acute, and their friendship patterns in terms of drinking behaviour. The research shows that there are decisive differences in the drinking behaviour of friends of binge drinkers compared to the drinking behaviour of friends of non-binge drinkers.

By far the most dramatic difference is seen in the behaviour of friends **85 per cent of binge drinkers think that most or all of their friends binge drink, compared to just 41 per cent for non-binge drinkers.** Conversely, **only 3 per cent of binge drinkers have no or hardly any friends that binge drink, compared to 22 per cent of non-binge drinkers.**

The importance of the personal networks also extends to work colleagues. **65 per cent of binge drinkers think that most or all of their work colleagues binge drink, compared to just 34 per cent for non-binge drinkers.** Whilst not as big a difference as with networks of friends this is still statistically a highly significant difference.

The innovative methodology of the study is based on research carried out for a conference on social networks sponsored by the US Office for Naval Research, and published in the leading statistical physics journal Physica A.

Commenting on the research, Advertising Association Chief Executive Baroness Buscombe said,

“This research shows conclusively that the people around us are the key influences in terms of our relationship with alcohol, not alcohol advertising. Not only do the findings of this study confirm this to be the case but they also demonstrate that a new approach to tackle binge drinking is required.

“Alcohol misuse is clearly a hugely important social issue that must be taken seriously. This new and compelling research highlighting the importance of personal friendship networks shows that tackling alcohol misuse is about encouraging behavioral change so people develop a healthy relationship with alcohol. Using the advertising industry as a positive and powerful tool to tackle serious societal problems would be a constructive way forward.”

Paul Ormerod, Volterra, co-author of the research programme said:

“Two key American studies have recently shown that social networks are the key to understanding both the growth of obesity and the decline in smoking. We find exactly the same thing with binge drinking. Policies which do not take the personal social network effect into account have a high probability of failure”

For further information, contact:

Jonathan Collett, AA
Tel: 0207 340 1107

or Tim Farrow, AA
Tel: 0207 340 1100

Notes to editors

1. The Advertising Association is a federation of 30 trade bodies and organisations representing the advertising and promotional marketing industries including advertisers, agencies, media and support services in the UK. Further information about the Advertising Association, its membership and remit is available on our website at <http://www.adassoc.org.uk/>
2. The Advertising Association commissioned the market research consultancy FDS International and the economics consultancy Volterra to examine the influences on problem drinking. The aim of the paper is to examine the extent to which the sudden emergence of the binge drinking problem in the UK can be explained as a social network phenomenon (not to be confused with social networking sites)

3. The pilot study research process:

A standard market research survey was carried out in order to discover both the number of binge drinkers in the 18-24 year old population, where the problem is most acute, and their friendship patterns in terms of drinking behaviour. There are decisive differences in the drinking behaviour of friends of binge drinkers compared to the drinking behaviour of non-binge drinkers. FDS and Volterra Consulting examined different types of potential networks, random, scale-free

and small world with both additional and re-wired links. Extensive searches were conducted for the best combination(s) of relevant parameters in each of the three types of networks considered. A small world network was the optimal choice of network, and was able to generate a close approximation to the observed patterns of behaviour.

The quantitative research conducted for the pilot study consisted of interviews with 504 18-24 year-olds in the UK using an online survey based on MyVoice Panel. Of the respondents, 258 (51%) were male and 246 (49%) were female. The interviews were carried out between 20th February and 28th February 2008.

For the purposes of the pilot study, the sample group was selected to reflect a demographic which is believed to represent a particular problem in terms of alcohol consumption. The survey asked about the number of drinks consumed. In order to translate the survey responses based on the number of 'drinks' into data related to units of consumption, it was based on an average 'drink' representing two alcohol units.

The research offers strong evidence that this factor is important - indeed it is sufficient - to describe current behaviour and the recent rapid and dramatic rise in binge drinking.

4. **A key motivation for the pilot study** was an important article on the spread of obesity in America, published in 2007 in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, one of the world's leading medical journals. This analysis was conducted using data on 12,000 people who were monitored from 1971 to 2003. The study found that social influences on behaviour in this area were very powerful. For example, the chance of any individual being obese increased by 57 per cent if he or she had a friend who became obese. The paper in the *New England Journal* proved that 'fashion', the influence of other people on an individual's behaviour, is a crucial factor in the spread of obesity in the US.
5. **The definition of binge drinking** for the purposes of the pilot study is as follows - For men, getting drunk on 4 or more drinks OR having 10 or more drinks (but not necessarily getting drunk) at least once a week and for women, getting drunk on 3 or more drinks OR having 10 or more drinks (but not necessarily getting drunk) at least once a week.
6. The market research consultancy **FDS International** was founded 33 years ago with a vision of building a company that would be known for the excellence of its work, and would grow through the loyalty of satisfied customers. Today, FDS and acefieldwork, combine together as one of the largest independent market research agencies in the UK. **Volterra** is an economics consultancy that specialises in the application of innovative and cutting-edge techniques to business problems. The team comprises mathematicians, statisticians, economists and physicists, who bring a unique multi- disciplinary approach to analysis.