

Online social norms interventions for substance use among students: a qualitative literature study
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Background
The use of (il)licit psychoactive substances remains a cause for concern when it comes to university students. Social norms feedback (SNF) shows promising results in addressing this problem. Using an e-intervention to deliver SNF has grown in popularity over the last years.

Methods
As part of the SNIPE-project a literature study was conducted. Online databases (Web Of Knowledge, Pubmed, Psychinfo, MEDLINE, EBSCOhost and Evidence based Medicine Reviews) were searched for English language studies, registered until August 2012. Only articles that discussed the combination of a) social norms messages, b) e-interventions, c) student population and d) substance use were included in the study. This resulted in a total of 26 articles. These articles were reviewed qualitatively, giving insight on the structure and content of online SNF and the study designs evaluating it.

Results
Almost all studies were North American (n = 21) and focussed on alcohol use (n = 25). Half of the studies (n = 13) were performed completely online. None of the studies reported embedding in social media into their intervention. Study designs varied for structure and complexity. The follow-up length of the majority of the studies was short (up to 6 months).

SNF is structured similarly across all articles. Students receive feedback about their own use, about their perception of the use of their peers and finally about the actual norm. Norms were usually descriptive (e.g. weekly alcohol consumption, heavy drinking episodes). Few studies gave feedback on attitude norms (i.e. injunctive norms). Four interventions based their feedback solely on social norms. The remainder used SNF alongside a variety of messages (e.g. risk status feedback, caloric intake feedback). All studies tailored SNF to some extend to respondents’ individual characteristics or responses. SNF was most frequently gender specific, yet university specific norms or age-group norms (e.g. freshmen students) were also common.

Conclusions
Whilst SNF e-interventions appear to be promising in encouraging positive substance use behaviour change in student groups, there are still questions regarding the long term effectiveness of SNF and implementing SNF for the prevention of the use of other substances than alcohol.

Key messages
- Social norms feedback e-interventions offer several promising options in preventing substance use among student groups.
- Social norms feedback e-interventions should also focus on other substances than alcohol and consider study designs with a long term follow up.