“DON’T DRINK AND DRIVE” MESSAGE MAY HAVE OPPOSITE EFFECT

FAYETTEVILLE, Ark. – Binge drinkers estimate the risk of drinking and driving as significantly lower than non-binge drinkers after they consume three or four alcoholic drinks, according to University of Arkansas marketing professors Scot Burton and Elizabeth Creyer. What is worse, the perception of risk may diminish even further when personal responsibility messages such as “Don’t Drink and Drive” are included in promotional advertising.

The researchers conducted experiments to study the effects of advertised bar promotions on binge drinking along with graduate students Jennifer Christie, Dan Fisher, John Kozup and Scott Smith. Their findings appear in the current issue of the Journal of Public Policy and Marketing.

Their original study looked at the effect of bar promotions that discounted prices – penny beer night, ladies’ night, two-for-one – on binge drinking attitudes and intentions among college students. A follow-up study looked the effect of combining the promotion with messages that encourage responsible drinking on both binge and non-binge drinkers. Binge drinking was defined as consuming five or more drinks at a single sitting in the past two weeks.
“One focus of the first study, perception of drinking behavior, produced interesting results,” explained Burton. “While binge drinkers perceived themselves as drinking the about the same amount as everyone else, non-binge drinkers saw themselves as drinking less than the norm.”

The first study showed that for all types of promotions, binge drinkers are more likely to go to the bar than non-binge drinkers. Binge drinkers also estimated that they would consume seven drinks, compared with four drinks for non-binge drinkers.

“We also found that the estimated consumption amounts for all alcohol promotion conditions exceeded or approached binge-drinking levels for both binge and non-binge drinkers,” added Christie.

For many reasons, alcohol manufacturers and some bar owners are using personal responsibility messages, such as “Don’t Drink and Drive” or “Know When to Say When.” As a follow-up study, the researchers looked at the effect of these personal responsibility messages on the perceptions and beer or wine consumption intentions of both binge and non-binge drinkers.

Burton’s results are “consistent with the worst fears of policy makers. While inclusion of the message produced positive effects on the perception of the advertiser, it had no effect at all on the attitudes or intentions of drinkers.”

In fact, personal responsibility messages may have the opposite effect. When the bar advertisement added such a message to the promotional advertising, binge drinkers perceived the bar as being more concerned about their welfare.

“Since they may be more susceptible, bar promotions can actually increase a binge drinker’s intention to go the bar and drink,” said Christie. “But the inclusion of a personal responsibility message does nothing to diminish their perception of risk or intention to drink and drive. In this case, we found a boomerang effect, where there was less perceived risk of drinking after driving when the personal responsibility message was included.”

Although University and government officials have been concerned about the effects of binge drinking on students for several years, these are the first experiments to examine the effects of promotional advertising or bars in conjunction with personal responsibility messages on student alcohol consumption attitudes and intentions. Burton thinks their findings should make official stop and think about what they are doing to prevent irresponsible drinking behaviors.
“While we know that the binge drinkers are most likely to participate in risky behaviors, I am not certain, given the results of our experiments, that those concerned with reducing the consumption of binge drinkers are effectively reaching that audience,” he explained. “They may at times be producing the opposite effects from what they intend. Perhaps people interested in consumer welfare should work to find messages that are more effective in specifically targeting binge drinkers.”