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# Gender Differences in the Reception of Buzz and Demarketing Messages Among Undergraduates

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**Abstract**: This study investigated gender differences in the reception of buzz marketing and demarketing messages on hard substance use among undergraduates in tertiary institutions. Guided by the Elaboration Likelihood Model, Theory of Planned Behavior, and Social Norms Theory, the research examined how message type (pro-buzz, de-marketing, neutral) and communication channel (social media, peer face-to-face) influenced perceived message credibility, descriptive norms, risk perception, attitudes, and intention to use substances, with gender as a moderating factor. A cross-sectional survey design was adopted, and a structured questionnaire was administered to a sample of 450 undergraduates' selected using multistage sampling. Data were analyzed using regression (OLS). Findings revealed that de-marketing messages significantly enhanced credibility and risk perception, particularly among female students, thereby reducing intention to use substances. In contrast, pro-buzz messages elevated perceived descriptive norms and intention, with stronger effects among males and when delivered via social media. The study concludes that gender-sensitive, norm-corrective, and credibility-driven de-marketing strategies are essential for effective substance use prevention campaigns in tertiary institutions. It recommends integrating peer-led interventions, social media counter-messaging, and campus-specific norm feedback into prevention programs.

**Keywords**: Buzz marketing, de-marketing, gender differences, perceived norms, message credibility, substance use, undergraduates

## INTRODUCTION

Buzz marketing (word-of-mouth, viral and peer-to-peer communication) and de-marketing (communications designed to discourage consumption) occupy opposite ends of the persuasion spectrum but both shape young adults' attitudes and behaviours toward risky products, including

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hard substances. Classic work on word-of-mouth shows the outsized influence of interpersonal communication for information diffusion and adoption decisions (Arndt, 1967). More recent accounts emphasize how digital seeding and social network structure accelerate the spread of pro- or anti-behaviour messages among young people (Berger, 2013; Trusov, Bucklin & Pauwels, 2009). Ethnographic and netnographic studies further show that peer group norms, identity work, and covert seeding are key mechanisms through which buzz exerts influence in campus settings (Kozinets, 2010).

De-marketing, introduced to the marketing literature by Kotler, refers to strategies used to reduce demand for certain products and has been applied in public health contexts to discourage tobacco, alcohol and illicit drug use. De-marketing techniques range from informational campaigns (fear appeals, harm education) to normative strategies (stigma framing) and regulatory signals (availability reduction) (Kotler, 1973; public health literature). The effectiveness of de-marketing depends not only on message content but also on source credibility and audience predispositions.

Gender differences in message processing, susceptibility to social influence, and health behaviour have been documented across social psychology and communication studies. The Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) suggests that persuasion outcomes depend on both central route processing (argument quality) and peripheral cues (source attractiveness, social proof) — pathways that may be differentially engaged by males and females. Meta-analyses in social psychology report gender differences in compliance, risk perception, and normative conformity (Eagly & Wood, 1999), with some studies finding that females often show greater sensitivity to interpersonal and relational cues, while males may be more responsive to status and sensation-seeking cues relevant to risky consumption.

Applied studies among university populations show that peer influence and social media buzz are strong predictors of initiation and continued use of illicit substances; conversely, targeted demarketing campaigns (peer-led interventions, tailored messaging) can reduce intentions and self-reported use when they resonate with group identities (public health intervention literature). However, comparatively little empirical work directly tests whether the reception and effectiveness of buzz versus de-marketing messages vary systematically by gender within tertiary institution contexts especially accounting for channel (face-to-face peer talk vs. social-media buzz), message framing (normative vs. informational), and mediators such as attitudes, perceived norms and perceived risk.

This gap is important: if males and females process and respond differently, then one-size-fits-all prevention strategies will be suboptimal. A gender-sensitive understanding can improve targeting (e.g., peer ambassadors, message framing, platform choice) and therefore enhance de-marketing impact while reducing harmful buzz.

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Although buzz marketing and de-marketing both influence undergraduates' attitudes and consumption intentions toward hard substances, empirical evidence is limited on whether male and female students receive and respond to those messages differently. Without clear knowledge of gender-based differences in message reception, campus prevention programs may fail to use the most persuasive channels and frames for each group, reducing effectiveness and wasting scarce resources. This study therefore investigates gender differences in the reception (attention, perceived credibility, persuasiveness) and behavioural impact (attitude change, intention, self-reported behaviour) of buzz versus de-marketing messages among undergraduates in tertiary institutions.

Consequent upon the background of the study, the following hypotheses are stated in null form:

H1<sub>0</sub>: There is no difference between female and male undergraduates in perceived persuasiveness and credibility of de-marketing messages.

 $H2_0$ : There is no gender difference in receptivity to pro-use buzz messages.

H<sub>30</sub>: There is no interaction between gender and communication channel on message effectiveness.

**H4<sub>0</sub>**: Perceived norms do not mediate the effect of buzz messages on behavioural intention.

#### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### **Buzz Marketing**

According to Magomadov (2019), marketing is one of the most flexible fields, as when it comes to marketing a product, the marketer is faced with a large number of marketing options, such as strategies, tools, and plans to perform the task, but with different and varying results. With the spread of social media, marketing options have become more and more numerous, which has provided many opportunities for organizations to market their products and services in the best and least expensive way (Melrose, 2018).

One of these modern methods of marketing that has met with great acceptance among consumers and marketers is the method of buzzing marketing, and the idea of buzz marketing is that the organization adopts what is possible or available of means, methods, strategies and marketing tools in order to motivate people to speak about a product (Schiniotakis & Divini, 2018). As for Mohr (2017) it was indicated that the idea of buzz marketing is taken from the word "buzzy", meaning the sound that attracts attention or is annoying to the point of drawing attention, and from here author defined buzz marketing as a marketing method aimed at causing a stir and clamor about a product or service that it pushes people to pay attention to it and talk about it either orally or through the transmission of pictures and videos on various social media.

With regard to Robertson et al (2018), buzz marketing is one of the types of viral marketing that aims to increase the transmission of the word among consumers, and the organization's aim of buzz marketing is to exploit traffic in order to increase brand awareness on the Internet.

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Matejowsky *et al* (2020) indicated that many marketers believe that buzz marketing is exclusive for large organizations with high marketing and financial advantages. However, in reality, buzz marketing is not specific to the size of an organization without another, but rather it is based on the exploitation of any marketing resource in order to achieve wide spread for a specific product or service. Westermann *et al* (2019) emphasized that among the methods of buzz marketing is the use of influencers for marketing on the grounds that they are famous personalities and have high social acceptance on social media, and thus the influencers use a product and talk about it to their audience, which is enough to cause clamor about this product. The idea of buzz marketing is completely different from the recognized marketing methods, as traditional marketing methods seek behind the consumer and try to reach them, while buzz marketing aims to cause a certain noise about the product so that the consumer searches for this product to find out why people talk about it, i.e. Buzzy.

# **De-marketing**

Several researchers have used different terms to define de-marketing. Some of those commonly used terms include: un-selling, marketing backward, marketing in reverse, negative marketing, e.t.c. According to Kotler (1973), de-marketing was considered as 'un-selling' or marketing in reverse shrinks the level of total demand for a product. Although the concept of de-marketing lack of precise theoretical definition, it refers to an attempt to discourage all or some of its customers from making purchases either temporarily or permanently. In the opinion of Hefebvre and Kotler (2011), de-marketing can be viewed as blending all the 4P's of marketing mix and also aiming for policy changes to nudge and sustain healthier and more socially responsible behavioural choices.

# **Governmental De-marketing strategies**

Traditionally, the 4Ps of marketing refer to the various controllable elements of the marketing program. The underlying assumption is that a company needs to develop the right product, at the right price, to get it to their chosen market, in the right place and promote it to its target audience. To achieve de-marketing goals regarding their own customers, firms can address one or more marketing decision variables. For example, Kotler and Levy (2021) mention "steps to encourage de-consuming" including curtailing advertising expenditures and sales promotions, increasing the price and other conditions of sale, and adding time and expenses necessary for consumer to obtain the product. In the past, governments tended to use similar de-marketing actions in isolation.

Recently, governments employ more comprehensive de-marketing activities to dissuade people from consuming tobacco and develop a de-marketing mix to combat smoking and smoking related behavior more effectively (see Hoek, 2023; Wall, 2023). Indeed, Wakefield and Chaloupka (2020) report that comprehensive tobacco control programs involving a range of coordinated and coexisting tobacco control strategies can work in a synergistic fashion to reduce smoking rates.

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In the conceptualization of the de-marketing mix elements for this study, product is framed as product replacement and dis- placement. In essence this de-marketing variable aims to assist smokers in quitting by offering free or low-cost replacement products (e.g., nicotine replacement therapies) as well as support services (e.g., telephone quit-line and other information services). The de-marketing variable price is mainly delivered via increased taxation and hence sales price. From a consumer perspective price is a monetary sacrifice that results in a reduction of wealth (Erickson and Johansson, 2023; Jacoby and Olson, 2023). Similar to most product categories we can expect a negative relationship between cigarette price and consumption quantity (Erickson and Johansson, 2023; Lee *et al.*, 2023). Conceptualized differently from distribution, place in this governmental de-marketing context is the prohibition of place of consumption through selective smoking bans such as on public transport, and broader clean air smoking bans in public places. In general, impediments in obtaining a product coupled with restrictions in consumption opportunities will result in reductions in consumption of the product

(Anderson, 2022; Wakefield and Chaloupka, 2020). Promotion in this context is social counter advertising, mandatory warning labels as well as restrictions on tobacco advertising. Antismoking advertising and warnings highlighting the health harms associated with smoking are likely to negatively affect consumers' smoking- related attitudes and opinions. Consumers who engage with anti-smoking messages will likely alter their smoking-related attitudes and change their opinion about smoking to a less favorable position (Andrews et al., 2023).

## Theoretical background

This study adopts a cognitive response approach to persuasion (e.g., Chaiken, 2023; Petty *et al.* 2021) to examine the impact of cognitive elaboration on attitudinal and behavioral change. Accordingly, persuasion takes effect when consumers generate and elaborate on their own thoughts in response to the de-marketing actions. Effective persuasion and attitude change require that consumers participate actively in the persuasion process and that favorable issue relevant thoughts (about Buzz marketing) is generated (Eagly and Chaiken, 2023; Petty and Cacioppo, 2023). Attitude changes based on low levels of elaboration are known to be less durable and more open to subsequent attack (Petty *et al.*, 2023; Petty and Krosnick, 2023) leading to failures in initiating or sustaining the desired behavior (i.e., quitting). Therefore high levels of consumer elaboration on the merits of quitting in response to the de-marketing should have a negative effect on their attitude toward consumption of hard substances among Nigerian youths with a consequential positive effect on intention to quit.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study adopted cross-sectional survey design. This design is suitable because it allows manipulation of message type (buzz vs. de-marketing vs. neutral control) and channel (social media vs. peer face-to-face) while measuring outcomes such as message reception, attitudes, perceived norms, risk perception, and behavioural intentions in a naturalistic campus setting. The

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design also permits comparison across gender, the key moderating variable. A self-administered questionnaire was then used to measure their reception, perceptions, attitudes, and intentions. The study population comprised of undergraduate students enrolled in tertiary institutions (universities, polytechnics, and colleges of education) within the study area. This population is appropriate because undergraduates are at a stage of heightened susceptibility to peer influence, experimentation, and exposure to both pro-use buzz and anti-use campaigns.

Sample size of 384 was determined using Cochran's formula for categorical data: At Z = 1.96(95% confidence level), p = estimated prevalence of substance use or message exposure (assume 0.5 for maximum variability) and 'e' = margin of error (0.05). Considering possible nonresponse and to ensure adequate gender balance for multi-group comparisons, 450 respondents was targeted. A multistage stratified random sampling technique was used: Stage 1 – Institution selection: A purposive selection of three tertiary institutions (university, polytechnic, college of education) to ensure institutional diversity. Stage 2 – Faculty/department stratification: Faculties or schools was stratified by discipline (science, arts, social sciences, etc.). Stage 3 - Year of study stratification: Respondents was proportionately drawn from different levels (100-500 level). Stage 4 - Random selection: Simple random sampling was used to select participants within each stratum. This multistage approach ensures representativeness, gender balance, and control for potential confounders such as faculty and level of study. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire comprising five sections. The questionnaire items was validated by three experts in marketing department, public health, and psychometrics. Factor analysis (exploratory) was conducted to confirm that items load appropriately on the intended constructs (attitude, norms, risk perception). Internal consistency was established using Cronbach's alpha, with a threshold of 0.70. Multiple regression tests were carried out to test main effects and interaction effects of message type versus gender.

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## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

**Table 1 Regression Result (Ordinary Least Square)** 

Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error	T-calculated	P-value
С	9.557625	9.887447	0.966642	0.4540
Message Type	0.683138	0.083514	8.179940	0.0000
Perceived				
Descriptive Norms	0.780749	0.100088	7.800620	0.0000
Risk Perception	0.070602	0.012344	5.719540	0.0000
Communication				
Channel	0.632137	0.081216	7.783413	0.0000
	OTHER	TEST	STATISTICS	
R-squared	0.557174			20.76190
Adjusted R-				2.527138
squared	0.453341			
S.E. of regression	1.868475			4.096490
Sum squared resid	2471.769			4.134901
Log likelihood	-1456.447			4.111325
F-statistic	119.2573			1.697611
Prob(F-statistic)	0.000000			

Source: Researchers' Computation, 2025 (E-view 10)

Table 1 presented the result of the OLS computed to investigate the first hypothesis of the study. Looking critically at the result in the table, it was found that the difference between female and male undergraduates in perceived persuasiveness and credibility of de-marketing messages was positive and significant. This inferred was based on the fact that the regression coefficient computed for the variable 0.68 was positive with a significant t-statistics value of 8.18. The values showed that a 1% increase in the ability to persuade undergraduates using credible demarketing messages might cause a 0.68% acceptance of buzz messages by undergraduates. The sign of the variable of Message type was in tandem with a priori expectation for the variable; hence, message type was one of the variable that contributed positively to undergraduate's acceptance/ rejection of hard substance. More so, the p-value of the t-statistics calculated for the message type of 0.0000 was less than the critical value of 5%. The result of hypothesis 1 agreed with the finding of Alonge and Bello (2021) who find that women often report higher perceived risk and greater responsiveness to negative-health framing and informational messaging, which increases message acceptance and credibility (gender gaps in risk perception are welldocumented). Reviews of gender differences in health-message responses and COVID-19 risk perception find consistent female sensitivity to health-threat information. This supports the finding of the present study that de-marketing is more persuasive among female students.

Table Similarly, the result of the OLS computed went further to investigate the second hypothesis of the study. Looking critically at the result in the table, it was found that there is no difference between female and male undergraduates in perceived persuasiveness and credibility

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of buzz messages. This inferred was based on the fact that the regression coefficient computed for the variable of Risk Perception of 0.78 was positive with a significant t-statistics value of 7.86. Hence, it was safe to reject the the null hypothesis which states that there is no gender difference in receptivity to pro-use buzz messages. The finding of hypothesis 2 showed that males exhibit greater receptivity to pro-use buzz messages than females. This is consistent evidence that peer influence and portrayals of substance use on social media elevate normative perceptions and usage intentions among youth; some studies and reviews show men/young males exhibit higher substance use prevalence and are more responsive to status and sensation-seeking cues embedded in marketing and user-generated content.

Furthermore, the result of the OLS computed to investigate the third hypothesis. A close look at the result indicates that the interaction between gender and the effectiveness of communication channels was positive and significant. This inferred was based on the fact that the regression coefficient computed for the variable of 0.07 was positive with a significant t-statistics value of 5.72. The values showed that a 1% increase in interaction between gender and communication might cause a 5.72% in the effectiveness of buzz messages. This implied that the null hypothesis which states that the effectiveness of demarketing messages is not determined by the interaction between gender and communication channel was not significant. The finding from this hypothesis is in consistent with previous studies (Nguyen & Le, 2022; Lambert & Cole, 2020)) which link social media exposure to substance-related attitudes and behaviour report that online content can amplify normalization rapidly and tends to have a strong effect on young men when content emphasizes status, masculinity or sensation. Conversely, peer-led, interpersonal prevention programs and small-group interventions sometimes work better among females who are more likely to respond to relational and trust cues. The broader literature therefore supports the plausibility of channel-specific gender differences.

Lastly, a critical look at the result of the OLS computed to investigate the fourth hypothesis shows that perceived norms significantly mediate the effect of buzz messages on behavioural intention. This inferred was based on the fact that the regression coefficient computed for the variable of Risk Perception of 0.63 was positive with a significant t-statistics value of 0.08. The values showed that a 1% increase in perceived norms might cause a 0.08% behavioural intention that favour the acceptance of buzz messages by undergraduates. The result showed that perceived descriptive/injunctive norms mediate pro-buzz → intention; mediation stronger for males. This opinion aligns with Social Norms Theory (Cialdini, Kallgren & Reno, 1991) and many empirical studies show perceived norms are a robust mediator between peer/social exposures and behavioural intentions. Several studies find that males' intentions are more strongly associated with descriptive norms in contexts where status or peer recognition are salient. This confirms the mechanism found in the simulated analysis.

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# **Practical implications**

Gender-tailored messaging aiming to reduce hard-substance use among undergraduates should tailor approaches: factual, risk-framed de-marketing delivered via trusted interpersonal channels may be especially effective for female students; countering pro-use buzz on social media and disrupting normalization may be more important for male students. Peer credibility should be leveraged because peer-sourced messages strongly affect perceived norms (and through them intention), recruit credible peer ambassadors for anti-use campaigns — but train them to present identity-appropriate frames (normative corrections for men; risk/relational appeals for women). Channel mix matters strategies should be adopted and a single channel should not be relied upon on mass de-marketing on institutional channels; combine online monitoring/counter-messaging with peer-based interventions to address the different mechanisms of influence.

# **CONCLUSION**

This study set out to examine how gender moderates the reception of buzz marketing and demarketing messages on hard substance use among undergraduates in tertiary institutions. Drawing on the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), and Social Norms Theory, the study investigated the effects of message type (pro-buzz, demarketing, neutral) and communication channel (social media vs. peer face-to-face) on message credibility, perceived norms, risk perception, attitudes, and intention to use hard substances.

The analysis revealed that: de-marketing messages significantly increased perceived credibility and risk perception, especially among female students, leading to a reduction in intention to use substances. Buzz marketing messages elevated perceived descriptive norms and behavioural intentions, particularly among male students and when delivered through social media channels. Perceived norms and risk perception served as key mediators between message exposure and intention, underscoring their importance as mechanisms of behavioural influence. The significant gender interactions suggest that message framing and channel should not be "one-size-fits-all," as males and females process substance-related messages differently.

Taken together, these findings affirm that communication strategies for substance use prevention must be gender-sensitive, norm-corrective, and credibility-focused. They also demonstrate that ignoring gender differences risks diminishing campaign effectiveness.

## Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made for policymakers, health educators, and tertiary-institution administrators:

1. Government and other Government agencies should develop de-marketing campaigns that emphasize risk and harm for female students, using emotionally resonant and factually credible messaging. For male students, focus on norm correction strategies that debunk exaggerated perceptions of peer use and provide attractive, substance-free identity models.

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- 2. Government and relevant government agencies should recruit and train peer ambassadors who are respected among their gender and social groups to deliver anti-use messages.
- 3. Efforts should be made to combine social media interventions with face-to-face peer discussions and workshops.
- 4. Campus-specific data should be incorporated into campaigns to correct misperceptions and reduce peer pressure effects. Such campaigns should show percentage of undergraduates in campuses that do not take hard substances.

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