



Curtin University

YOUTH WATER SAFETY PROGRAM

COLLABORATION FOR EVIDENCE, RESEARCH & IMPACT IN PUBLIC HEALTH

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KEY FINDINGS & IMPLICATIONS

Background

Young people continue to be over-represented in drowning incidents in Western Australia (WA), despite careful design and implementation of youth-focused drowning prevention programs. The Royal Life Saving Society WA (RLSSWA) has been delivering youth focussed drowning prevention programs since 2004. The current Youth Water Safety program (YWSP) commenced in 2019, continuing to focus on young people aged 15-24 years. The program aims to increase knowledge and skills regarding the prevention of drowning and aquatic injury in and around water, including awareness about the risks associated with consuming alcohol and other drugs in and around water. One key program strategy is the 'Be a Mermate' campaign (the Campaign). The Campaign uses a multi-strategy approach and incorporates state-wide Broadcaster Video On Demand, advertising, social media and small print media (posters). This report presents the fourth phase (T4: 2023) of evaluation findings of YWSP, with comparisons to time points 1 (T1: 2019) and 3 (T3: 2021).

Evaluation approach

The current evaluation was conducted for the period July 2022 – June 2023 using a population level cross-sectional online survey. For reference T1 (Baseline) (November- December 2019) is used to refer to time point one, the period before the first wave of the Campaign (n=516) and T3 (March-May 2021) to time point three, the period following the Campaign (n=429). Time point 4 (T4) data were collected two years later, (February – March 2023) following the fourth wave of the media campaign (n=428). The T2 sample size (n=63) was too small for meaningful comparisons and subsequently was omitted from the report. Collection protocols required an equal proportion of males and females; an 80%/20% metropolitan/regional split; and a 40%/60% split of age categories (those aged 15 – 19 and those aged 20 – 24). The final samples were n=425 (T1), n=334 (T3) and n=327 (T4). Descriptive statistics summarised: demographic; water-based activity; factors influencing behaviour; drowning and water safety; and campaign recall. Independent t-tests analysed: alcohol consumption, sensation-seeking and peer influence. The current report summarises campaign recall and recognition and key messages, advertising diagnostics, and behavioural intent from T4 participants. Comparisons are made by time point (T1 and T3) as well as by age (15 – 19 years and 20 - 24 years) and by gender (male and female); however, only comparisons of interest are reported.

Key findings and implications

Overall the T4 results continue to suggest that the Campaign is tracking in a positive and reinforcing way when compared with both T3 and T1. This is a pleasing outcome for the Campaign and drowning prevention efforts more broadly for RLSSWA and young people in WA. The evaluation highlights areas for further examination in some cases, specifically by gender and age group, potentially by diversity for the program and the Campaign strategies, for 2024 and beyond. We present the results below using recent evidence to provide context for key findings, together with implications for future practice, research and policy endeavours.

Demographics

Data collected for age were consistent with prescribed sampling protocols. Compared with T1, more participants in T4 were older (20-24 years), born overseas, and attending university. Compared with T3, more participants in T4 were male, born overseas, identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, and less participants attended university. However, consistent with T1 and T3 findings and previous Don't Drink and Drown (DDD) evaluation reports, females and participants in the metropolitan area were over-represented in T4. Of interest, participants from the *community and personal services industry* were less represented, when comparing T1 with T4 and T3 with T4; a pleasing observation that may reflect different recruitment strategies which facilitated a more diverse participant pool. An increase in participants from the clerical and administrative sector, sales and management sectors provides a more diverse range of responses and less social bias from participants who engage with, and work in the aquatic industry; and who are more likely to have an existing relationship with RLSSWA. Consequently, T4 responses may be more consistent with or representative of the broader young adult population in WA.

In previous reports we recommended the need to broaden the socio-demographic composition of the sample and examine recruitment processes to include those from culturally diverse backgrounds and regional locations. Different recruitment strategies have afforded some diversity, however the recommendation remains with a suggestion towards greater investment in a panel recruitment strategy. The slight shifts in the demographic profile at T4 from T3 and from T1 should help inform future formative work as RLSSWA move into the next phase of the 'Be a Mermate' campaign. Investing in formative work to segment the target group by gender, age, education, country of birth, Aboriginality and occupation may be a valuable approach to design future campaign strategies.

Attitudes and behaviours relating to water safety

Water-based activity

Swimming confidence was significantly lower at T4 compared with both T3 and T1. This is an unexpected finding, and whilst we have seen the impact of COVID-19 on participation rates in swimming lessons for younger children (1), COVID-19 also represent the single biggest challenge to contemporary community sport globally (2). Compliance with social distancing policies, return-to-pool protocols, has changed the way young people engage in sporting activities including swimming (2). For the first time, at T3, participants reported relaxing in water as a top-three water-based activity; this was also achieved at T4. Pool swimming returned to the same level of participation at T4 as at T1. Flat water ocean swimming decreased in

popularity from T1 to T4. However, more than two-thirds of the T4 participants took part in ocean swimming and more than half of the participants took part in fishing. The opportunity to engage in activities that do not require social distancing such as surfing and do not attract entrance fees such as a home swimming pool may make these activities attractive to young adults (1, 3). These T4 findings continue to reflect the coastal and demographic context in which the participants live, work and play, and the continued popularity of recreational fishing in Australia (4). The recruitment using a panel may explain the finding. The need to explore perceived and actual swimming confidence and ability and include objective measures of swimming competence (5) in future evaluation and research endeavours remains a worthwhile pursuit.

Factors influencing behaviour

The Campaign focuses on factors with the potential to influence behaviours, specifically alcohol consumption (6-8), sensation-seeking (7, 9, 10) and peer influences (7, 11). Findings demonstrated a significant downward shift in alcohol consumption across T1, T3 and T4 with a change in the AUDIT-C score tracking from 4.5, 4.3 to 4.0, respectively. Across all time points, there were no significant differences in drinking risk by age, however, differences remain by gender. Young people's drinking patterns have changed markedly in Western Australia (WA) over the past 10 years (12). Emerging research suggests young people's tendency to drink less is due to increasing awareness of the health effects of alcohol, changes in parenting style, increased use of social media, changes in gender identities and the health and fitness trend (13). Future research could build on existing work around the alcogenic environment in which young people are exposed to harmful products extending this into places and spaces in which young people recreate in and around waterways (7, 14) . It will be beneficial to continue to monitor the trend over the next 3 – 5 years and continue to explore what encourages young people to drink less or abstain from alcohol.

At T4, sensation-seeking scores continued downwards compared with T3 and T1. In contrast, peer susceptibility scores were low; and have remained low across the campaign period T1 through T4. These findings are positive, significant and align with the social norms focus of the Campaign materials. At T4 there were no significant differences by gender and age for sensation-seeking and peer influence. The opposite was found at T3 with significant differences by age (younger) and gender (males) for both sensation-seeking and peer influence, while in T1 only gender was different (although not significant). The T4 findings for sensation-seeking and peer influence are consistent with recent Australian research (7, 15). whereby peer influence and sensation-seeking influenced swimming after drinking alcohol, a practice that those more likely to swim and drink felt would be admired by their peers, however this is no longer the domain of males. Recent WA research found young females were also likely to drink and swim and impress their peers, providing an interesting and previously untapped insight into the female perspective on the role of peers and sensation seeking (7). The T1 and T3 findings were consistent with an Australian study that found young males who have positive attitudes towards drinking and swimming, considered their peers to hold similar attitudes towards drinking and swimming and would perform the action (16). In T1 and T3 we highlighted that young males who scored high on sensation-seeking tended to mix with peers who drink

more frequently (9, 18) and that compared with their older peers, younger adults may have had less exposure to risk environments or to opportunities to build their skills and self-efficacy to reduce risks that may be inherent in sensation-seeking activities (17). Whilst not significant this continues to be evident at T4 with younger males pushing the boundaries of sensation seeking and the decisive influence of peers.

Evaluation findings across all time points highlight the opportunity to interrogate and target peer group norms (e.g., peer education), skills and self-efficacy (e.g., assertiveness training) (17, 18) as part of the suite of strategies delivered to younger adults. The findings also suggest the need for segmented prevention messages that account for gender, ethnic and cultural diversity and the differing peer roles that young people hold within and across their social networks given the moderating effect of social influence (7, 19). A continued investment in understanding peer and social influence within and between youth social networks is prudent, including the role of influential individuals.

Social Norms, Attitudes and Beliefs

At T4 we explored *calling out your mates' risky behaviour* and *looking out for your mates whilst in and around water* approval from partners and friends only. At T4 there has been a steady increase in approval by friends *calling out your mates' risky behaviour* when compared with T3 and T1. Across all time points *looking out for your mates whilst in and around water approval* has remained stable and high at around eight out of ten participants approving the behaviour. This is a pleasing result as this message is the key tenet of the two advertisements 'Pool' and 'River' explicitly role modelling *calling out your mates*. At T4, significantly more participants thought their partner and friends would approve of *calling out mates* compared with T1. At both T4 and T3 females felt friends were very likely to approve however, males remained neutral. The overall evaluation findings reiterate the importance of exploring strategies and messaging with both a gender and peer focus for the next phase of the program.

Calling out mates was rated beneficial and unpleasant when participating in an activity in and around water ways. However, at T4, calling out your mates was significantly less unpleasant, by almost half (23% v 44.9%) of participants compared with T3, and similarly with T1 (23% v 46.8%). This posits target audience cut through of the messages and cues to action in the *Be a Mermate* TV advertisements. Females were more likely to consider the behaviour beneficial than males. There was no significant difference by age at T4; this contrasted with T3 where younger participants considered the behaviour more harmful than the older participants. This is an interesting shift at T4 suggesting younger participants may have become more adept at negotiating their highly complex social environments and feel they can call out their mates without retribution. Careful messaging that serves to strengthen highly valued friendship bonds and social norms whilst promoting protective behaviours requires further exploration.

Looking out for your mates was rated beneficial and pleasant, however at T4, benefits were significantly lower compared with T3 and compared with T1. Whilst two-thirds of participants continue to rate the behaviour as pleasant, this has remained consistent over all three time-points. At T4 there were no shifts in age or gender which contrasts with T3 where females were significantly more likely to rate this behaviour as beneficial. Extending media messages and other program strategies to focus on the interaction between

multiple members of social groups and which seek to change not just individual, but peer group understandings regarding protective behaviours would be a valuable addition.

Knowledge

New knowledge questions were added to the T4 evaluation. Water safety knowledge was high, suggesting the campaign messages are having a reinforcing effect on those who are already water safe. Despite different question sets water safety knowledge was high at both T3 and T1. Findings at T4 for knowledge of *CPR, reminders to tell someone you are swimming alone* and *tips for safe places to swim* should be future targets for YWSP. Asking knowledge-based questions still has merit as it can target common misconceptions and ensure that individuals possess accurate knowledge about drowning risks and prevention methods. Knowledge questions can explore the specifics of behaviour and the environment e.g. swimming skills, safe places to swim, and the impact of blood alcohol concentration (BAC) levels which can inform the framing of the Campaign materials to allow young people to make informed decisions about water safety. Previous evaluation has recommended exploring the demographic of participants who scored low on the knowledge scale to allow for better segmentation of the target group and the design and delivery of tailored educational resources and skills workshops for these groups, which remains valid. The evaluation highlights the importance of well-funded, long-running health promotion programs targeting young people to prevent drowning.

Perception of Risk

Two risk perception indicators were explored at T4: seriousness of effects and peer influence. Compared with T3, perceptions of the serious consequence of drinking around waterways had been maintained and had increased significantly from T1. This aligns with Campaign media objective 2 to increase awareness of behavioural and environmental risk; and is a positive outcome for the 'Be a Mermate' media strategy. At T4, peer influence remains low and similar when compared with T3, however it is significantly higher when compared with T1. This re-invigorates the conversation around the role of peers and subjective norms (15). At T4, females rated the serious consequences significantly higher compared with males, while males rated the influence of peers more highly. These results were also observed at T3 and T1. There were no differences for either indicator between age groups at T4 or T1, unlike T3 where younger participants were less likely to consider drinking around water with serious effects, or to be influenced by their peers. Exploring the role of peer influence on perceptions of risk by demographic profiles may afford insights into the relationships between media consumption, environmental and social context and uptake of the Campaign messages translating to behaviour change. Understanding the relationship between social influence and social identity may provide further insight into how messages align with target group self-identity and represent their interests and values, continues to be worthy of further investigation.

Behaviour

Swimming alone and swimming cold or tired were the most commonly reported risk practices at T4; also seen at T3 and T1. Never swimming outside of patrolled areas increased at T4 when compared with T3, after having decreased when compared with T1. The influence of external factors such as the pandemic facilitating more regional travel to unpatrolled beaches, ability to socially distance and a smaller aquatic

workforce may explain the changes in swimming at unpatrolled beaches (3). At T4 females were significantly less likely to dive into shallow water and swim in prohibited areas when compared with males. This outcome is consistent with previous YWSP evaluation findings and the broader Australian literature (15, 20), suggesting that males are more likely to engage in risk-taking behaviour. There is a need for sustained work to reinforce the importance of environmental cues such as safety and warning signage and purchasing and wearing protective equipment. Of interest, ignoring safety advice, diving headfirst into the water, swimming in prohibited areas and not wearing a lifejacket all decreased between T1 and T4, indicating some cut-through of the Campaign messages. Some behaviours have changed between time points by age groups. At T4 the older cohort reported they were more likely to see their friends swim in prohibited areas compared with T3, while the younger cohort reported they were more likely to see their friends swim in prohibited areas which was not evident in T1. A recent review (6) suggests increased cues (media and environmental) are one way to reinforce protective behaviour, including delivery of campaign resources on-site at popular aquatic locations, particularly during public holidays and summer, and targeted placement of campaign resources on key websites such as weather and travel sites that young people utilise. These approaches will require evaluation and funding support.

Media Campaign

Recall, recognition and awareness

Almost 40% of the participants recalled advertising focused on water safety and young people, which was similar to T3. At T4 almost one in five participants were **aware** of the 'Be a Mermate' advertisement; consistent with T3. Of interest, around one in ten of participants specifically **recalled** the 'Be a Mermate' advertisement, a drop from one-third of the participants at T3. A number of reasons may account for the decrease in recall, including a change in recruitment strategies which may have increased the diversity of the sample. In addition, the images and messaging in the adverts may be experiencing fatigue whereby the novel elements of the ads featuring the 'mermate' may no longer grab young people's attention, diminishing unprompted recall. Increasingly, sophisticated alcohol advertising widely promotes drinking in and around the water, making it difficult for drowning prevention messages to compete (21, 22). However, recall drop-off is not uncommon highlighting the need for continuous monitoring, evaluation, and adaptation of communication strategies to maintain relevance and engagement with the target audience. Participants identifying the DDD campaign reduced from almost two-thirds to just one-fifth at T4. The dilution of the DDD brand is an expected finding as the brand has not been featured since 2019.

RLSSWA continues to be a well recalled brand with or without a campaign message with T4 findings similar to T3.

Main Messages and Campaign Diagnostics

At T4 most participants reported that the Campaign's main messages were well received. At T4 the message 'Alcohol and water do not mix' message was less well received compared with T3. Four years since the launch of 'Be a Mermate' advert, salience and message wear-out are timely considerations. At T4 and T3 nine out of ten participants agreed the advertisements (ads) were easy to understand and made them think about water safety. Similarly at T4 compared with T3 around half thought the ad told them something new

or indicated they would talk about the ad with their friends. At T4 fewer participants agreed the 'ads grab my attention' these results may contribute to expedited wear out (23) and may require a refresh of the intended messages and creative execution in the short- medium term to prevent diminishing recognition. Almost half of the participants had seen the ads via multiple media sites, including mainstream TV streaming services and Facebook, reinforcing the importance of a multi-channel distribution strategy. At T4 the number of participants who had seen the ads on Instagram doubled compared with T3. This finding aligns with the evidence that young people use different platforms for different messages and highlights the need to use the channels in the way that young adults already use them, including relatable role models on Instagram, support groups on Facebook, and easy to follow instruction videos via YouTube (24).

Campaign Posters

Posters were introduced at T3. Poster recognition increased at T4 compared with T3 (22.5% v 15.6%), with over half of participants from regional WA recognising the posters. This finding may be explained by the targeted poster placement at Leavers' events and other regional centres and/or sampling bias. At T4, three-quarters of participants thought the Campaign conveyed the main messages very well, which was consistent with T3. The exception was message 3 'Alcohol and water do not mix' with a drop from 75.5% to 66.2%. This is worthy of further interrogation and/or refinement for the next campaign.

Social media tiles were introduced to the evaluation at T4. Almost three-quarters of participants recognised the tiles from Instagram. Around half of participants thought the social media tiles conveyed the messages well, with 'Don't swig and swim' the most well received followed by 'Don't know? Don't dive'.

Social Media Tiles

The use of digital media tiles as a low-cost, high-reach, environmentally friendly choice to disseminate messages (24, 25) continues to be a viable option for this target group, extending the reach and impact of conventional media strategies. The choice to use social media tiles in T4 aligns with recommendations in the previous evaluation as a strategy to complement the online placement of Campaign materials. The platforms of choice will be important to gauge as the target group ages and evolves and switches platform allegiance and as new platforms are established.

Action and Intention

Most participants considered 'calling their out mates' risky behaviour', consistent with T3 findings. Most also intended 'paying more attention to their mates' behaviour' though slightly fewer than at T3. These practices align with the Campaign messaging and materials and amplify the T4 finding that fewer participants felt that looking out for your mates had benefits. In T4 as with T3 messages resonated most with females, with eight out of ten being more likely to call out their mates' risky behaviour, pay more attention to their mates' behaviour, pay more attention to their own behaviour. More than half intended to talk with their mates about the amount to alcohol they drink. in contrast to T3, females at T4 were less likely to drink **no** alcohol when compared with males. This is an interesting shift and is reinforced by a recent review that found females are the forgotten risk group in unintentional drowning (26). At T4 there were no significant differences in intended behaviours between age groups, in contrast with T3 where

younger participants were more likely to call out their mates' risky behaviour compared with the older participants. This finding may suggest that after four years, the Campaign materials continue to resonate across the target audience as a function of sustained messaging. Overall, Campaign materials positively influenced calling out risky behaviour and significant shifts in behavioural intention of female participants.

Youth Water Safety Program

'Be a Mermate' brand recognition has been sustained since T3, with almost one quarter of participants consistently recognising the slogan and recalling the logo. We anticipate this finding will continue to build. Popular summer events such as Leavers and music festivals were most likely to be where participants had seen or heard the logo, however at T4 this had slightly decreased compared with T3. Of interest the number of participants who had seen the logo via word of mouth and school presentations almost doubled at T4 compared with T3. Finally the 10% drop-off in recognition via streaming services and outdoor advertising at T4 should be investigated. Potentially this may require an exploration of wear out, whereby the initial novelty or appeal of using humour wears off, and the target audience becomes desensitised to the logo and slogan; and fatigue, as people lose interest seeing repetitive advertisements. In addition consideration can be paid toward audience shift, whereby the slogan and logo might have resonated well with the initial audience, but as the target audience ages, the slogan and logo may not effectively engage or connect with the evolving audience (23, 27). These are important considerations prior to the finalisation of the next iteration of the Campaign materials for the YWSP.

Finally, a reflection on the YWSP program:

*"The ad where you had a bunch of young men drinking by a lake, and one of the guys climbs a tree that's hanging over water and gets a little carried away, before he gets called out by the mascot (who is so f*cking cool anyway, that man has SWAG and I would buy merch)." (17 y.o, trans)*

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