

Project Details	
Project Code	MRC22PHSEx Lawrence
Title	Absence makes the will grow stronger? Boosting abstinence campaigns to reduce alcohol and meat consumption to improve public health
Research Theme	Population Health Sciences
Summary	How does temporary abstinence from unhealthy consumption (e.g. during Dry January or Veganuary) lead to behaviour change? We will examine how changes in individuals' attitudes, self-control, and identity are associated with short- and long-term reductions in consumption, along with secondary effects on household finances. The factors predictive of behaviour change will then be targeted in an intervention study to 'boost' the effects of abstinence campaigns.
Description	<p>Tackling our biggest health challenges requires action at multiple levels, including changing individual consumption. Our project aims to improve population health by maximising the effects of temporary abstinence campaigns such as Veganuary and Dry January. These tackle two behaviours (the consumption of animal products and alcohol) that contribute to ~19% and ~6% of premature deaths globally. Alcohol-related deaths in the UK have risen sharply (by 21%) during the covid pandemic. Consuming animal products also damages planetary health and contributes to zoonotic disease and antimicrobial resistance. Sustained behaviour change is difficult but month-long abstinence campaigns like Dry January and Veganuary lead to long-term reductions in consumption with substantial health benefits, and are increasingly popular, with between 1 and 4 million people participating. We will examine how these campaigns work by focusing on how known cognitive and social drivers of behaviour (such as reward processes, inhibitory control, attitudes, norms and identity) change during motivated abstinence. We will combine lab and online studies employing diverse validated methods to determine which factors are associated with success following a period of abstinence. We aim to then 'boost' these factors by adding targeted interventions to future campaigns to maximise their impact, providing training in translational research. The potentially large-scale effects of abstinence campaigns will also impact on household consumption patterns. It is important to assess these as these may enhance (e.g. if spending more on fresh food or exercise) or mitigate (e.g. spending more on soft-drinks or sweets) the effects of the campaign. Using methods from health economics, we will examine how changes in consumption patterns affect household finances and the likely knock-on effects on health services. This project will examine how behaviour, attitudes, identity and finances change from pre- to post- abstinence campaigns (at 1 and 6 months), in those undertaking vs. not undertaking abstinence. Proposed PhD timeline: (Year 1): Conduct a systematic review of temporary abstinence campaigns. Prepare and pilot-test methods for abstinence studies (phase 2). (Year/phase 2; lab and online studies): Compare both alcohol and meat intake in people undertaking Veganuary and Dry January (and matched controls not undertaking them) to understand the mechanisms underlying the effectiveness of abstinence campaigns on changing attitudes and behaviours after 1 and 6 months (relative to baseline). We predict that larger reductions in positive evaluations of the abstained</p>

	<p>substance and changes in self-efficacy and identity will be associated with greater abstinence. This will be seen using conscious and more subconscious measures, such as eye-tracking, instrumental responding and implicit association tests. We will also obtain information on wider household consumption patterns to assess secondary impacts on demand for other products, and potential implications for health service use. (Year 3): Strengthen the effects of abstinence campaigns by adding interventions targeting the key mechanisms identified in year 2. For example, if reduced valuation is important we will ask participants to conduct cognitive training known to result in devaluation of alcohol and meat (e.g. using a smartphone app NL has developed that combines response inhibition and evaluative conditioning). If changes in self-identity or social norms are more influential, we will develop interventions to increase these (JS expertise). The student will develop and pilot-test interventions before adding them to Veganuary/Dry January in 2025 to assess efficacy relative to an 'abstinence as usual' group. Participants for studies can be recruited and tested exclusively online if necessary. We have considerable experience running studies of this kind in the lab and online.</p>
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