Reviewer's report

Title: Are the stages of change relevant for the development and implementation of a web-based tailored alcohol intervention? A cross-sectional study

Version: 2 Date: 9 December 2011

Reviewer: Rachael Korcha

Reviewer's report:

Overall Summary

The authors give a logical case for considering the stages of change when developing a web-based intervention for alcohol. The article is generally well organized, thoughtful, and the objectives are well defined. Strengths include inclusion of attitude, social influence, and self-efficacy in relation to the stages of change and an item specific fit of the intervention based on participant readiness. Weaknesses include a convenience sample and a somewhat small sample size that did not allow for representation of all five stages of change but these limitations are appropriately noted.

Discretionary Revisions.

1) Though the term ‘healthily’ is technically correct, the authors may want to consider other phrasing such as, ‘healthful’, ‘in a healthier manner’, or ‘change to healthier drinking habits’.

2) The term ‘preparator’ is also technically correct but not widely used in the literature; a descriptive use of this stage may assist the reader such as ‘in preparation’ or ‘preparing to change’.

3) Table 1 seems unnecessary given that attitude, social influence, and self-efficacy are well described in the methods and factor analysis values are given which seem sufficient. Possibly this could be a supplemental table offered online for interested readers.

Minor Essential Revisions

1) 1st sentence of the background section : Change “High alcohol consumption” to “Heavy alcohol consumption”.

Sampling procedure and design

2) Please indicate where Limburg province is located within the country (north, south). Is this primarily a rural or urban area?

3) Overall N of the sample as well as failure to give consent and partial completion rates should be reported. How was the present study sample selected from the larger trial? Were respondents compensated for participation? It appears that only current drinkers were included in the study sample. This
should be noted in the methods and in the tables and figure.

Tailored message

4) A typo on Page 8, first paragraph; the sentence “was used as theoretical framework” should be changed to “was used as a theoretical framework”.

Statistical analyses

5) A typo on Page 9, first paragraph, “groups were compared as regards the psychosocial determinants….” should be changed to “groups were compared in regards to the psychosocial….”

Results

6) Table 2. Chi square comparisons are not valid for cell sizes less than n=5 so chi square values for nationality, education, and marital status should be removed. However, the low/medium educational levels could be combined and chi2 computed.

7) Figure 2. Giving an additional note describing PC, CP and AM (as is given in Table 3) would be helpful.

8) Table 3. Display N's for PC, CP, and AM.

9) Table 4. A minor typo correction for the first item under ‘layout’ is needed.

Discussion

10) An unclear sentence on page 12 “respondents may need also other information…” should be reworded for clarity.

Major Compulsory Revisions

Stages of Change measure:

There is no citation for the stages of change measure so it is assumed that this measure has not been used in prior research nor has it been evaluated with other measures of Stage of Change. The measure asks about drinking ‘no more than 2 drinks per day’ which are guidelines for women but guidelines for men indicated no more than 3 standard drinks at the time the study was conducted. Does the intervention account for the gender of the respondent?

Additionally, other levels of unsafe drinking are not properly addressed such as exceeding weekly limits of drinking. A woman reporting a plan “to drink a maximum of two drinks in a day, but started in the past six months” would be placed in the action stage of change but, if she is drinking two drinks per day on a daily basis, is she exceeding the weekly limits set by the Dutch government? Would she be in the action stage if she is drinking at unsafe levels? These are limitations of the Stages of change measure and should be addressed in the discussion.

Alcohol consumption at unsafe levels:
The authors make note of unhealthy drinking of more than 2/3 drinks but should also indicate the weekly levels of drinking that are unsafe in the background section. Also, discussion of the most prevalent Dutch drinking patterns (e.g., infrequent binge drinking) would be helpful to allow understanding of potential behaviors that would be targeted in an intervention.

The alcohol measure in the questionnaire content section needs further description of the items used to obtain volume. Additionally, inclusion of frequency, quantity, and pattern of drinking should be included in Table 2. It would be important to know what percent of the participants are drinking at unsafe levels. Of concern is that some individuals may not be drinking at unsafe levels but assigned to a stage of change when no change is needed. For example, are there persons assigned to the action stage that have never violated the safe drinking guidelines? A lifetime measure of maximum drinking would be helpful to identify these persons but if that is unavailable, discussion on the potential for stage of change misclassification is warranted. Additionally, conducting analyses excluding persons that are currently drinking within government guidelines would strengthen the paper and truly target the participants most in need of an intervention.

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests