Ethics Assessment: Reducing Alcohol Consumption Through Apps

1) Briefly summarise the rationale and aims of the study (approx. 100 words)

The study aims to look at the effectiveness of the intervention in reducing alcohol consumption over four weeks against a control condition in wherein there is no intervention. It will look at the effectiveness of an application that will be downloaded onto participants' phones for four weeks.

The rationale behind the study is that by using this tool, everyday life can be improved. Mobile phone applications allow for interventions in a variety of problems such as alcoholism and substance abuse, without having barriers such as cost, availability, and transport. They also allow for those who do cannot get a formal diagnosis to access more services and facilities.

2) Now consider the research scenario against the BPS Code of Human Research Ethics. Aim to identify 3-4 ethical issues (700 words approx.)

a. What ethical issues have you identified and why are they a problem? Refer to the BPS code. b. How would you propose to address them and is this appropriate? Why/why not? c. Any other ways you would improve the study.

One of the ethical issues identified in this research is due to the vulnerability of sample group. Those who volunteered to take part are alcoholics and therefore consume large amounts of alcohol each week. The researcher should have considered all of the research from the view-point of the participant and should aim to avoid all potential risks including psychological well-being, the invasion of privacy and any mental health risks (BPS Code of Human Research Ethics 2014 Pg. 11). With this study there are risks as the sample group may not actually be motivated to cut drinking and instead are simply taking part in the research for the voucher at the end, or they may lie in their entries on the mobile application. This means that they could potentially cause risk to themselves during the research as they are not aiming to stop drinking - so will perhaps drink more and harm themselves. This also links to the ethical issue of protection from harm, the researcher should consider all the risks in the research and protect the participants from harm (BPS Code of Human Research Ethics 2014 Pg. 11). To address these problems a full in-depth risk analysis should take place before conducting any research to identify any hazards or potential issues that could come into play. The researcher could also complete a pilot study after doing a risk analysis to further ensure there will be no harm towards participants and allow the researcher to identify any issues they have originally missed.

The proposed research scenario does not state if a participant is allowed to withdraw from the research. According to the BPS Code of Human Research Ethics participants may chose not to be involved in research, or if they agree to participate, they may subsequently request their data be destroyed (BPS Code of Human Research Ethics 2014 Pg. 9) However, as the research is

predominately using an app to measure and collect its data, we can be unsure how much of this data will be completely withdrawn and destroyed. Along with this we can also be unsure about how much of the participants data is kept confidential. Researchers's should respect confidentiality and ensure that any data or information collected is anonymised and cannot be traced back to the participant but, as the research is using a mobile application, it can be difficult to regulate where the data goes and how confidential it is kept (BPS Code of Human Research Ethics 2014 Pg. 9). To address these problems the researcher should ensure that if a participant wishes to withdraw from the research then their data is disposed of and cannot be accessed again. The researcher should fully research into the application's interfacing and privacy conditions. If there are problems in the privacy and confidentiality of data, then participants should be made aware of this in a briefing before the study.

There is a lack of debrief in the research. Although the research mentions the 'Alcohol Timeline Followback' it does not seem as though this is a proper debriefing, as it just measures the alcohol consumption. The research should include a debrief at the end of all research as participants need to know what will be happening with their data and what the data and information collected will be used for. The debrief could also include an evaluation on both their physical and mental health to ensure that all harmful after-effects are eliminated (BPS Code of Human Research Ethics 2014 Pg. 26).

To improve the study further I would consider not giving the £25 voucher at the end of the study as it could mean that participants only take part for the voucher and therefore the results will not be reliable or valid as people could be giving fake answers and amounts just to get the voucher. I would also consider changing the sampling method, instead of putting up posters and social media adverts that could attract anyone, I would look at sampling from alcohol support groups as then those people have a chance of cutting down alcohol consumption by using this app, and they will also have motivation to do so - otherwise they wouldn't be in the group. To make the sample more varied, you could randomly sample participants from many different support groups in a city. This would then hopefully give a wider spread of ages, race, gender, psychographics, and demographics.

3) Given all of the information above, what would your recommendation be and why? There are three options