



## Emergence and predictors of alcohol reference displays on Facebook during the first year of college



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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate the emergence of displayed alcohol references on Facebook for first-year students from two universities. Graduated high school seniors who were planning to attend one of the two targeted study universities were recruited. Participants' Facebook profiles were evaluated for displayed alcohol references at baseline and every four weeks throughout the first year of college. Profiles were categorized as Non-Displayers, Alcohol Displayers or Intoxication/Problem Drinking Displayers. Analyses included logistic regression, univariate and multivariate Cox proportional hazard analysis and multi-state Markov modeling. A total of 338 participants were recruited, 56.1% were female, 74.8% were Caucasian, and 58.8% were from University A. At baseline, 68 Facebook profiles (20.1%) included displayed alcohol references. During the first year of college, 135 (39.9%) profiles newly displayed alcohol. In multivariate Cox proportional hazard analysis, university (University B versus A, HR = 0.47, 95% CI: 0.28–0.77,  $p = 0.003$ ), number of Facebook friends (HR = 1.19, 95% CI: 1.09–1.28,  $p < 0.001$  for every 100 more friends), and average monthly status updates (HR = 1.03, 95% CI: 1.002–1.05,  $p = 0.033$ ) were identified as independent predictors for new alcohol display. Findings contribute to understanding the patterns and predictors for displayed alcohol references on Facebook.

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### 1. Introduction

Adolescents' transition from high school to college is often accompanied by escalation of alcohol behaviors. For some first-year students, experimentation with alcohol use begins with arrival at college and exposure to both new social settings and increased independence. Among students who did not drink heavily in high school, approximately 20% initiate this behavior in college (Wechsler et al., 2002). For other students, arrival at college may prompt a transition from experimentation to frequent alcohol use (Johnson, O'Malley, Bachman, & Schulenberg, 2007). Though alcohol use is common, high-risk drinking remains a major cause of morbidity and mortality in the college population (Association, 2009).

While alcohol use is readily visible in the corporal collegiate setting, it is also displayed in virtual collegiate contexts. Alcohol use and abuse is often displayed on college students' Facebook pro-

files; up to 83% of college students' profiles include displayed references to alcohol (Egan & Moreno, 2011; Moreno, Parks, Zimmerman, Brito, & Christakis, 2009). These displayed alcohol references on Facebook are likely to have broad reach, as the vast majority of college students maintain a Facebook profile, most report daily use and college students have large social networks within the website (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008; Lewis, Kaufman, & Christakis, 2008; Sachdev et al., 2012).

#### 1.1. Influence on alcohol behavior

Previous work, rooted in social learning theory, has established strong links between what adolescents see in daily life and how they act (Bandura, 1986). While there are many influences involved in a first-year college student's decision to initiate alcohol use, two salient ones that may be encountered on a daily basis are peers and media. Observation of peers is a major source of influence on adolescent health attitudes, intentions and behaviors (Keefe, 1994; Wood, Read, Mitchell, & Brand, 2004). Previous work has illustrated that both close peers and the larger social network influence alcohol behaviors (Mundt, 2011). Equally strong are links between adolescent health behaviors and exposure to media

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content (Dalton et al., 2009, 2003; Gidwani, Sobol, DeJong, Perrin, & Gortmaker, 2002; Titus-Ernstoff, Dalton, Adachi-Mejia, Longacre, & Beach, 2008). Studies have shown that exposure to substance use in traditional media such as television or movies is associated with initiation of these behaviors, leading some to describe television as a “superpeer” (Dalton et al., 2009; Gidwani et al., 2002; Klein et al., 1993; Robinson, Chen, & Killen, 1998; Strasburger, Wilson, & Jordan, 2008).

### 1.2. Social media combines peer and media influences

Social media sites such as Facebook allow adolescents to display information about their identities, communicate with peers and build an online social network. As social media combines peer and media effects, it thereby represents a powerful potential motivator of behavior. Adolescents are uniquely positioned to be vulnerable to the influence of what they see on social media: they are at once early adopters of technologies, nearly ubiquitous users and highly susceptible to peer influences (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Lenhart & Madden, 2007; Lenhart, Madden, & Hitlin, 2005; Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010). A previous study found that younger teens viewed displayed references to alcohol on social networking site profiles by their peers as both influential and believable as representations of offline behaviors (Moreno, Briner, Williams, Walker, & Christakis, 2009). Further, adolescents who view alcohol content on Facebook profiles are more likely to perceive that alcohol use is a normative behavior, and are more likely to report interest in initiating alcohol use (Litt & Stock, 2011). Thus, social media likely has influence over those who view and interact with it, particularly regarding substance use.

### 1.3. First year college students: seeking a new peer group

Incoming college students may be particularly influenced by peers' Facebook content as they learn to navigate social norms and expectations in their new college setting. An early task when entering college is establishing new friends. In this process it is likely that adolescents use Facebook to evaluate a new acquaintance's profile to learn more about a potential new friend (Chou & Edge, 2012). If displayed alcohol references are present on a new peer's Facebook profile, this may contribute to perceptions of social norms of students regarding alcohol behaviors. Social learning theory suggests that exposure to alcohol use in media may influence behavior through promoting positive attitudes and intentions towards the displayed behavior. (Bandura, 1977; Bandura, 2001; Glanz, Rimer, & Lewis, 2002) If an adolescent is exposed to displayed alcohol content prior to or upon arriving at college there are potential implications for that adolescents' attitudes, intentions and behaviors regarding alcohol.

### 1.4. Purpose

While it is well understood that the first year of college often leads to changes in alcohol behaviors in the offline world, little is understood regarding how these exposures or experiences change online displays on Facebook. A current gap in the literature involves understanding the emergence of alcohol references on Facebook among early college students. Previous work has evaluated displayed alcohol content on Facebook profiles; however, these evaluations have been limited by being observational only and by collecting cross sectional data at one time point (Egan & Moreno, 2011; Moreno, Parks et al., 2009). Thus, the purpose of this study was to investigate the emergence of displayed alcohol references on Facebook for two universities over the first year of college. Specifically, we investigated baseline prevalence and predictors of displayed alcohol references on Facebook, and the

emergence of displayed alcohol content over time. We sought to understand predictors in the emergence of displayed alcohol content, including the role of university context and time of year. This information may contribute to a deeper understanding regarding which students choose to display alcohol content on Facebook and what these displays may mean both to those who display and those who view such content.

## 2. Materials and methods

### 2.1. Setting

This study was conducted between May 2011 and July 2012 and received approval from the two relevant university Institutional Review Boards.

### 2.2. Subjects

Graduated high school seniors who were planning to attend one of the two targeted study universities were recruited the summer prior to beginning college. Participants were eligible if they were between the ages of 17 and 19 years and enrolled as first-year full-time students for fall 2011 at one of these two universities. A subset of approximately 600 potential participants were randomly selected from the full registrar's lists of incoming first-year students from both universities for recruitment towards our goal of recruiting 320 participants.

### 2.3. Recruitment

Students were recruited through several steps, beginning with a pre-announcement postcard. Over a 4 week recruitment period potentially eligible students were recruited through up to 4 rounds of emails, phone calls and Facebook messages. Students were excluded if they were outside the age range for this study. Students were also excluded if they had already arrived on campus for summer early-enrollment programs, as baseline measures were intended to measure pre-college experiences.

### 2.4. Consent process and Facebook friending

During the consent process potential participants were informed that this was a longitudinal study involving a baseline phone interview as well as evaluation of Facebook profiles, and that friending our research team profile was a requirement of the study. Participants were informed that content would be viewed, but that no one on the research team would post any information to the participant's profile. Participants were asked to maintain open security settings with our research team during the study. Students who provided consent to enroll in the study were sent a Facebook friend request from one of our research assistant Facebook profiles designated for use in this study.

### 2.5. Codebook and variables

An existing codebook was used to evaluate displayed alcohol references. This codebook has been described in previous publications and studies (Egan & Moreno, 2011; Moreno, Egan, & Brockman, 2011). This research codebook was initially designed to evaluate displayed alcohol references on Facebook that represented alcohol behaviors. For the purposes of this study, the definition of displayed alcohol content was expanded applying the theory of planned behavior as a conceptual framework (Ajzen, 1985; Ajzen, 1991). This theory supports the importance of attitudes and intentions predicting behaviors.

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