



Original article

Evaluating College Students' Displayed Alcohol References on Facebook and Twitter



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A B S T R A C T

Purpose: Current trends suggest that adolescents and young adults typically maintain a social media “portfolio” of several sites including Facebook and Twitter, but little is known regarding how an individual chooses to display risk behaviors across these different sites. The purpose of this study was to investigate college students' displayed alcohol references on both Facebook and Twitter.

Methods: Among a larger sample of college students from two universities, we identified participants who maintained both Facebook and Twitter profiles. Data collection included evaluation of 5 months of participants' Facebook and Twitter posts for alcohol references, number of social connections (i.e., friends or followers), and number of posts. Phone interviews assessed participants' frequency of Facebook and Twitter use and self-reported alcohol use. Analyses included Fisher's exact test, Wilcoxon matched pair sign test, Friedman rank-sum tests, and logistic regression.

Results: Of 112 eligible participants, 94 completed the study. Participants were more likely to display alcohol references on Facebook compared with those on Twitter (76% vs. 34%, $p = .02$). Participants reported more social connections on Facebook versus Twitter (average 801.2 friends vs. 189.4 followers, $p < .001$) and were more likely to report daily use of Facebook versus Twitter (94.6% vs. 50%, $p < .001$). Current alcohol use was predictive of both Facebook and Twitter displayed alcohol references, but mediators differed in each model.

Conclusions: College students were more likely to display alcohol references on Facebook compared with those on Twitter. Understanding these patterns and predictors may inform prevention and intervention efforts directed at particular social media sites.

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IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTION

College students who maintained both Facebook and Twitter profiles were recruited; profiles were evaluated for displayed alcohol references over 5 months. Alcohol references were more common on Facebook compared with those on Twitter. Findings may assist investigators in making data-driven decisions about future intervention platforms.

Conflicts of Interest: No authors have conflicts of interest to report.

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Alcohol is the most commonly used substance by college students [1,2]. Underage drinking is a major contributor to all three leading causes of death for this age group: unintentional injury, homicide, and suicide [3]. Almost half of U.S. high school graduates transition to college after high school [4,5], and rates of problem drinking are higher among college students compared

with those among noncollege-attending peers [6]. Thus, college students represent a key population for alcohol prevention and intervention efforts.

One novel approach to alcohol prevention efforts may be via social media. Previous studies have investigated college students' displayed alcohol references on Facebook and found prevalence to be between 37% and 85% [7–10]. Furthermore, displayed alcohol references have positive associations with self-reported alcohol behaviors [11,12]. Although previous studies have focused on evaluation of alcohol references on a single social media site [7,13,14], the recent Pew Internet and American Life Project report illustrates that today's youth typically maintain more than one social media profile [15]. Among the most popular sites in this social media "portfolio" are Facebook and Twitter [15,16]. Both sites allow users to connect to others by friending or following profiles, which allows users to build social capital through creating social networks [17–19]. Facebook users typically connect to people known in offline life and use privacy settings to limit the audience for their displayed content to their friends [20]. In contrast, on Twitter, content is typically shared publicly, and it is normative for users to follow individuals they have never met, such as celebrities and politicians [21]. A previous study found that users understood that Facebook and Twitter presented them with different audiences for their displayed content, supporting youth's attention to differences in social media site culture and affordances [22].

Health-related content displayed on social media is important from a clinical and public health standpoint. The positive association between displayed Facebook alcohol references and self-reported behavior suggests that this site could be used to identify at-risk students who may benefit from clinical evaluation [12,23]. Furthermore, there is potential for evaluating large-scale epidemiologic trends in health behaviors or illnesses using publicly available data on Twitter [24,25]. To move the field forward, a better understanding of how users display content and interact differently with particular sites is needed so that epidemiologic data can be appropriately interpreted, and intervention efforts can be targeted to the most appropriate social media venue.

Given that most of the college students now maintain more than one social media profile, a gap exists in understanding how individual students choose to display health-risk behaviors across different social media sites. The purpose of this study was to determine the prevalence of displayed alcohol references on two social media sites, Facebook and Twitter, among a cohort of college students from two universities. To understand the context of displayed alcohol references on each site, we also compared the number of social connections via friending and following, and frequency of use of these two sites. Finally, we investigated associations between self-reported current alcohol use and displayed alcohol references on each site.

Methods

This study evaluated displayed alcohol references on Facebook and Twitter using content analysis and self-reported alcohol behaviors and frequency of Facebook and Twitter use via participant interviews. Study sites included two large state universities, one in the Midwest and one in the Northwest. Data for this study were collected between May 13, 2013, and June 7, 2014. This study received approval from the two relevant institutional review boards.

Participants

Incoming first-year students at the two participating universities were recruited in 2011 for a longitudinal study of social media and substance use. Potential participants were randomly selected from the registrar's lists of incoming first-year students from both universities for recruitment. Interviewers assessed participant's eligibility with inclusion criteria between the ages of 17 and 19 years, enrolled as a first-year student at one of these two universities, primary language of English, and maintained a Facebook profile.

Recruitment and social media connection

Students were recruited through several steps, including e-mails, phone calls, and Facebook messages. During the consent process, potential participants were informed that this was a longitudinal study involving phone interviews and Facebook friending a research team profile. Participants were informed that their Facebook profile content would be viewed but that no content would be posted on the participant's profile. Participants were asked to maintain open security settings with the research team's Facebook profile for the duration of the study, although the study team did not monitor participant privacy settings.

Yearly phone interviews with all participants assessed whether they were regular users of several social media sites. The 2013 interview took place between May and August; participants were provided an incentive of \$40 for completing their yearly interview. From these interviews, we identified a subset of 112 eligible participants (33% of full study sample) who maintained a Twitter profile. We contacted these participants, explained the study, and obtained consent. We then requested to follow participants on Twitter using our study Twitter page, applying the same conditions as with friending on Facebook.

Social media coding

Measures. We used our standard content analysis process to evaluate displayed alcohol references, described in previous publications [7,13,26]. Profiles with one or more references to alcohol attitudes, intentions, or behaviors were considered "alcohol displayers." Example references included personal photographs in which the profile owner was drinking from a labeled beer bottle, text references describing intention to consume alcohol at a party, or Facebook "Likes" including alcohol brands. Only photographs that contained the profile owner with a clearly labeled alcoholic beverage were included; thus, ambiguous containers were not considered alcohol references. Profiles without any alcohol references were considered "nondisplayers."

Social media connections were evaluated on both Facebook and Twitter. On Facebook, evaluations were conducted monthly as part of the ongoing study; thus, the number of friends for each of the 5 months coded was averaged across the 5 months. On Twitter, the number of followers and following were recorded at the time of evaluation for this study. Posting frequency was evaluated by calculating the number of profile owner generated status updates on Facebook and profile owner's tweets on Twitter for 1 month across both sites.

Coder training to identify displayed alcohol references. Facebook coder training began with a trainee reviewing an established

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