



## Original article

## Underage College Students' Alcohol Displays on Facebook and Real-Time Alcohol Behaviors



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## A B S T R A C T

**Purpose:** College is often a time of alcohol use initiation and displayed Facebook alcohol references. The purpose of this longitudinal study was to determine associations between initial references to alcohol on social media and college students' self-reported recent drinking, binge drinking, and excessive drinking.

**Methods:** First-year students from two U.S. public universities were randomly selected from registrar lists for recruitment. Data collection included 2 years of monthly Facebook evaluation. When an initial displayed Facebook alcohol reference was identified, these "New Alcohol Displayers" were contacted for phone interviews. Phone interviews used the validated timeline followback method to evaluate recent alcohol use, binge episodes, and excessive drinking. Analyses included calculation of positive predictive value and Poisson regression.

**Results:** A total of 338 participants were enrolled; 56.1% participants were female, 74.8% were Caucasian, and 58.8% were from the Midwestern University. A total of 167 (49.4%) participants became new alcohol displayers during the first 2 years of college. Among new alcohol displayers, 78.5% reported past 28-day alcohol use. Among new alcohol displayers who reported recent alcohol use, 84.9% reported at least one binge episode. Posting an initial Facebook alcohol reference as a profile picture or cover photo was positively associated with excessive drinking (risk ratio = 2.34; 95% confidence interval, 1.54–3.58).

**Conclusions:** Findings suggest positive associations between references to alcohol on social media and self-reported recent alcohol use. Location of initial reference as a profile picture or cover photo was associated with problematic drinking and may suggest that a student would benefit from clinical investigation or resources.

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IMPLICATIONS AND  
CONTRIBUTION

We evaluated college students' Facebook profiles monthly for 2 years to identify initial displayed alcohol references. Alcohol references displayed in prominent Facebook locations such as profile pictures were associated with self-reported recent problematic drinking; these publicly available photographs could identify students who may benefit from clinical screening or resources.

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

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The transition from high school to college is a high-risk time for alcohol use initiation and escalation. Alcohol is the most commonly used substance by college students [1], and approximately 20% of adolescents initiate heavy drinking in college [2]. For other students, college is associated with a shift from experimentation to frequent or excessive alcohol use [3]. These

trends are concerning because underage drinking contributes to the following leading causes of death among adolescents aged 12–20 years: unintentional injury, homicide, and suicide [4]. Furthermore, problem alcohol use is associated with morbidities such as injury and unwanted sexual encounters [5,6].

Early identification of college students at risk for alcohol-related harm can lead to early intervention. Although excellent screening instruments and validated interventions for problem alcohol use exist [7], many college students do not seek preventive care and are rarely screened for alcohol problems [8]. One innovative and complementary approach toward identifying college students at risk for problem alcohol use and related harms may be using social media such as Facebook. More than 90% of college students use Facebook; students frequently display references to alcohol use and problem drinking on their profiles [9–13]. Most displayed content on Facebook is date and time stamped; thus, this site offers opportunities for viewers to identify newly displayed alcohol references that may be proximal to alcohol behaviors in “real-time.”

Past work has illustrated that displayed alcohol references on Facebook were positively associated with self-reported alcohol use in cross-sectional samples [14,15]. However, whether posted content on Facebook is reflective of real-time offline alcohol behaviors is unknown. Most college students do not display alcohol references on Facebook before arrival at college [9]; thus, a college student's initial displayed Facebook alcohol reference may represent recent initiation of alcohol use. It may also represent ongoing alcohol use but the new integration of alcohol into the student's online identity. Alternatively, it may represent intention to engage in future use or an attempt to brag or fit in to a new environment in which alcohol may be a social norm [16].

Furthermore, the location of alcohol displays on the Facebook profile affects their visibility, impacting viewer access to this information. Displayed alcohol references may be present in a variety of Facebook locations, including “Likes,” photographs, or status updates. For example, the Facebook profile picture or cover photo may be considered closely tied to a profile owner's online identity and is typically viewable and accessible regardless of security settings. In contrast, a displayed alcohol reference among Facebook “Likes” may be one of hundreds of other Likes and thus easily overlooked or hidden from view by privacy settings.

In this work, we sought to understand how Facebook might be used to identify underage college students engaged in problem drinking. If the timing or content of an initial displayed alcohol reference is associated with recent alcohol behaviors, then opportunities may exist for adults or peers within the Facebook network to approach the student and potentially help facilitate timely and targeted alcohol screening or education. Thus, the purpose of this study was to evaluate underage students' initial displayed alcohol reference on Facebook across their first 2 years of college and evaluate the relationship between location of that display and self-reported alcohol use including recent drinking, binge drinking, and excessive drinking.

## Methods

This longitudinal mixed-methods study included evaluation of references to alcohol displayed on Facebook using content analysis and self-reported alcohol behaviors using participant interviews throughout the early matriculation of college.

## Setting

This study included two large state universities, one in the Midwest and one in the Northwest. Data for this study were collected between May 15, 2011 and June 18, 2013. This study received approval from the two relevant institutional review boards.

## Participants and recruitment

Graduated high school seniors who were planning to attend one of the two participating universities were recruited the summer before their first year of college. Potential participants were randomly selected from the registrar's lists of incoming first-year students from both universities for recruitment. Participants were eligible if they were between the ages of 17 and 19 years and enrolled as a first-year student for Fall 2011 at one of these two universities.

Students were recruited through several steps, beginning with a preannouncement postcard. Over a 3–4 week recruitment period, potentially eligible students were contacted with a maximum of four rounds of e-mails, phone calls, or Facebook messages. Students were excluded if they had already arrived on campus for summer early-enrollment programs, were an age other than 18 or 19 years, were non-English-speaking, or did not have a Facebook profile.

## Consent process and Facebook friending

During the consent process, potential participants were informed that this was a longitudinal study involving intermittent phone interviews about substance use and social media and Facebook friending a research team profile. When two Facebook profiles are “friended,” this allows profile content to be mutually accessible. Participants were informed that their Facebook profile content would be viewed, but that no content would be posted on the participant's profile by the research team. Participants were asked to maintain open security settings with the research team's Facebook profile for the duration of the study.

## Interview

**Interview procedure.** This study included two types of interviews: baseline and prompted. Baseline phone interviews were conducted with all participants at the time of enrollment to obtain demographic data and baseline alcohol experience information. For each 28-day Facebook coding period, if initial displayed references to alcohol were identified by a coder, then the participant was contacted to complete a prompted phone interview within the 28 days after the date the reference was evaluated on Facebook. This 28-day window allowed self-report data to be captured using the 28-day timeline followback (TLFB) technique described below. Interviews were conducted by trained staff at a time convenient for the participant and lasted 30–50 minutes. Interview data were recorded using a FileMaker (FileMaker, Santa Clara, CA) database.

**Interview data.** Both baseline and prompted interviews assessed lifetime and past 28-day alcohol use. Lifetime alcohol use was assessed with the question: “Have you ever had a drink of alcohol in your lifetime?” Current alcohol use was assessed with the

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