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Is exposure to online content depicting risky behavior related to viewers' own risky behavior offline?☆

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ABSTRACT

There are public and governmental concerns that social media may encourage risky behavior in the offline environment. Using international survey data from 412 young adults aged between 18 and 25 years of age ($M = 21.20$ years, $SD = 2.31$ years), this study demonstrates that there is a relationship between exposure to online content depicting risky behavior and users' own offline risky behavior. This relationship was found for six behaviors: drug use, excessive alcohol use, disordered eating, self-harm, violence to others, and dangerous pranks. A borderline effect was found for two further behaviors: unprotected sex and sex with a stranger. The relationship between content depicting disordered eating and offline behavior was only significant for females; suggesting that female users may be more vulnerable to effects of viewing content depicting disordered eating habits, and/or use social media content to find material related to their existing behavior. No other gender moderation effects were found. The findings provide preliminary evidence that social media use may influence offline risky behavior in young adults.

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1. Introduction

Previous research has linked social media use to online behavior that is perceived to be 'risky' or to put the individual 'at risk'. These risks include, for example, revealing too much personal information (O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011), exchanging sexual content with strangers (Baumgartner, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2010), and sharing content which could negatively impact upon the user's career (Pujazon-Zazik & Park, 2010). There are however also concerns that social media use may exert its influence beyond the online world and influence offline behavior for example, unprotected sex and sex with strangers (Young & Jordan, 2013), excessive alcohol consumption (Moreno, Briner, Williams, Walker, & Christakis, 2009), self-harm (Dunlop, More, & Romer, 2011; Luxton, June, & Fairall, 2012), and eating disorders (Borzekowski, Schenk, Wilson, & Peebles, 2010). Despite existing concerns there

is limited research demonstrating a link between social media use and offline risky behavior; and existing research has been limited to using intention/willingness as a measure of future behavior. Young and Jordan (2013) identified the need for research to measure behavior itself. This study addresses this gap in the literature by using a measure of behavior and investigating whether there is a relationship between the type of content viewed on social media and congruent offline risky behavior. For example, we examine whether users exposed to content encouraging excessive drinking tend to drink to excess. The study investigates all current social media platforms (excluding gaming and virtual worlds/role play platforms) and a wide range of risky behaviors (excessive alcohol consumption, illegal drug use, disordered eating, self-harm, violence, unprotected sex, sex with strangers, engaging in dangerous pranks, and bullying or directing hatred towards specific individuals/groups).

Existing theories such as social learning theory (Akers, Krohn, Lanza-Kaduce, & Radosevich, 1979; Bandura, 1977, pp. 1–46) can help explain why a relationship between social media use and risky behavior may exist. Social learning theory emphasises the importance of exposure to and internalisation of behavior through observational learning (what individuals see and may imitate) and instrumental learning (how behaviors are reinforced through

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rewards or punishment from others). If individuals are exposed to risky behavior and pro-risky behavior reactions from others, they are more likely to engage in that behavior due to social learning. Although reinforcers of behavior can be non-social (e.g., direct effects of the behavior such as the effect of drugs on the user), social learning theory posits that the principle behavioral effects are a result of social reinforcers (Akers et al., 1979). Social media provides a platform through which users may be exposed to risky behavior, and also other peoples' reactions and attitudes towards risky behavior. Facilitative peer influence can also occur when information from peers makes it easier for the individual to engage in risky behavior for example through providing information on obtaining necessary items (such as drugs/alcohol) or procedural instructions on how to carry out the behavior (Cox & Cox, 1998). This also fits with other behavioral theories such as the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991) as peer influence can feed into normative beliefs about the behavior and attitudes towards the behavior, whilst facilitative (or informational) peer influence could affect perceived behavioral control (i.e., the individuals perceptions about their ability to conduct the behavior).

This study involves an international sample of young adults from 18 to 25 years of age. Media speculation and public concern suggests that younger users may be more prone to negative influences of the internet and social media (O'Regan, 2014; Topping, 2014). From adolescence onwards, peer group replaces family members as the most important source for social learning (Koon-Magnin, Bowers, Langhinrichsen-Rohling, & Arata, 2016), with adolescence representing a period that can influence future adult behavior (Brook, Whiteman, Czeisler, Shapiro, & Cohen, 1997). The current study therefore includes peer behavior as an additional predictor of risky behavior to identify whether exposure to social media content depicting risky behavior predicts users' own risky behavior above-and-beyond social learning from peers. Risk taking propensity (Meertens & Lion, 2008) is also controlled for in this study. Previous research shows a consistent relationship between gender and risky behavior, with males engaging in risky behavior at a higher rate than females (Browne & Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2005; Koon-Magnin et al., 2016). There are also gender differences in the type of activities that users engage in online (e.g., females more likely to use social media to communicate with pre-existing friends whereas males are more likely to use it for information seeking, making new contacts and entertainment: Branley, 2015; Pujazon-Zazik & Park, 2010). This suggests that there may be gender differences in the type of risky opportunities that arise from users' social media use. Therefore, in the current study, gender is included as a potential moderator of the relationship between exposure to online content depicting risky behavior and users' own behavior.

In summary, this research addresses the following two questions:

1. Does exposure to social media content depicting risky behavior predict users' own engagement in that behavior in the offline environment?
2. Is the relationship between exposure to social media content depicting risky behavior and users' own risky behavior stronger for males?

It is acknowledged that demonstrating a link between exposure to online content and behavior does not provide evidence for a causal link. However as there is very little empirical research in this area, this research represents a first step towards investigating whether a relationship does exist; therefore laying the foundations on which future research can build to identify the *nature* of that relationship.

2. Method

2.1. Sample and survey methodology

An online survey was used to collect data from a diverse sample of 1228 international social media users. Of the original sample, 126 participants were excluded due to not proceeding past the initial demographics page of the survey. From this sample we selected young adults aged between 18 and 25 years ($N = 412$, $M = 21.20$ years, $SD = 2.31$ years). Females accounted for 71.1% ($n = 293$) of the sample, and males accounted for 28.9% ($n = 119$). The majority of participants were from the UK and Ireland (47.6%) and the USA (24.8%). Full demographics are provided in [Appendix A](#).

To be eligible to participate, users were required to be fluent English speakers and to have accessed social media at least once in the last 3-month period. Social media was defined as 'social networking websites and digital applications that enable people, identified by user profiles, to share information. This information can be in the form of 'status updates', messages, news, data, images, audio, maps, comments, video content and so on' and it included the following: Social Networking Sites (e.g., Facebook, Myspace, Google+); Blogging and Microblogging platforms (e.g., Twitter, Tumblr, WordPress); Photo and video-sharing platforms (e.g., Instagram, Pinterest, YouTube); and Location-based platforms (e.g., Foursquare, Facebook Places). These platform sub-types are based upon those identified by [Kaplan and Haenlein \(2010\)](#). Participants were instructed not to include the use of online games and virtual worlds such as Second Life and World of Warcraft because they involve more extreme elements of anonymity, fantasy and role play not traditionally associated with social media where there is generally an expectation that user profiles are at least somewhat representative of the users' 'real' (offline) identity ([Back et al., 2010](#); [Hardey, 2011](#)). The focus of the current research is to investigate the effect of mainstream, non-gaming/non-fantasy online environments. Participants reported using a wide range of social media applications ([Appendix B](#)). Over 93.2% of the participants actively used Facebook. The patterns shown are largely representative of the popularity of the individual social media sites ([Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010](#)).

The survey was designed by the authors and reviewed by an expert within the field of social media research. The survey was also piloted on a small sample of participants via opportunistic sampling and feedback was obtained regarding the clarity of the survey items and any difficulties encountered by the participants. The survey was revised following this feedback and all necessary amendments were made and piloted prior to recruitment. To help maintain participants interest and to encourage completion of the entire survey, interesting and/or humorous facts were displayed throughout the survey (a technique detailed in [Branley, Covey, & Hardey, 2014](#)).

To reach a wide audience of users, the survey was administered online and recruitment took place through a wide range of online platforms ([Appendix C](#)). Snowball sampling was also used to help roll out the survey by encouraging participants to share the link to the survey through their social media channels. Snowball sampling is particularly effective when used via social media as these platforms enable users to easily and conveniently share the study with everyone in their social circle.

The survey was completed anonymously, with participants reassured that they would not be identifiable in their answers or in any subsequent reporting of the research. This is one of the most common methods of measuring risky behavior. Reassuring participants of anonymity and confidentiality should help to limit the effect of social desirability bias on participants responses ([Davis, Thake, & Vilhena, 2010](#)). Although social desirability is not likely

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