



Social media and college student risk behaviors: A mini-review



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Risk-behavior related social media posts are linked to negative outcomes.
- Alcohol marketing uses social media to target students, with negative outcomes.
- Social media research poses challenges; a more unified approach is warranted.
- Significant gaps exist in research on social media and health-risk behaviors.
- Prevention and intervention efforts utilizing social media are promising.

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ABSTRACT

Use of social media use is widespread and frequent among college students. Posting photos and text related to risk behaviors (e.g., problematic alcohol use, illicit drug use) on social media websites is common and has been linked to personal substance use and negative outcomes. This mini-review summarizes current findings related to associations between college students' social media use and engagement in risk behaviors. Conducting research on social media poses unique challenges for researchers; these challenges are reviewed and their impact on the state of the current literature discussed. Finally, implications for prevention and intervention efforts are discussed as well as recommendations regarding future research in the area of social media and college student risk behaviors.

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1. Introduction

Over 90% of college students use social media (Morgan, Snelson, & Elson-Bowers, 2010) and many post images or messages documenting engagement in risky behaviors. Two-thirds to more than three-quarters of social media profiles contain alcohol-related content (Egan & Moreno, 2011; Moreno et al., 2014). Posting about risky behaviors seems to be associated with increased engagement in such behaviors (Moreno, Cox, Young, & Haaland, 2015). According to Fournier, Hall, Ricke, and Storey (2013), relationships between social media and harmful alcohol use can be explained by social norms theory, which posits that individual behavior is influenced by the perceived behavior of others regardless of the accuracy of such perceptions; specifically, inflated perceptions of risk behaviors increase personal risk taking. Social media is an important source of college students' information regarding others' risk behaviors and therefore, according to social norms theory, plays an important role in individual risk behaviors (Fournier et al., 2013). That is, social norms theory would posit that since nearly all college students' use social media, their perceptions of others' behavior and therefore their own behavior, is likely influenced by the ubiquity of alcohol-related text and image postings by peers on social media websites. Other theoretical frameworks have been used to understand this relationship (e.g., social learning theory, Moreno et al., 2014), yet most researchers reference the impact of social connections on personal behavior when explaining the influence of social media on college students' behavior. Few firm conclusions can be made regarding the role of social media in risky behavior among college students due to unique measurement challenges (e.g., privacy settings) and limitations in comparing studies (e.g., disparate approaches to coding students' postings), yet social media as an avenue for prevention still appears promising.

This mini-review presents recent research documenting social media as a popular forum for college students to share their engagement in risk behaviors (e.g., alcohol use) (e.g., Fournier & Clarke, 2011) and associations between social media usage and engagement in risky behaviors. Methodological challenges are discussed further and future directions for research are suggested.

2. Methods

Studies included in the review consisted of published English language, peer-reviewed articles and book chapters focused on college student samples and examining social media as it relates to health-risk behaviors. We utilized the following databases: Academic Search Complete, Google Scholar, PsychARTICLES, PsycINFO, and Science Direct and conducted electronic searches from October 2015 to January 2016, examining articles published at any time prior to January 15, 2016. Searches were conducted with terms related to risk behaviors (i.e., "alcohol," "drinking behavior," "illicit drug use," "substance use," or "risk behavior"), college students (i.e., "college," "student," or "university"), and social media (i.e., "social media," "Facebook," "Twitter," "MySpace," "internet," or "social networking sites"). All search terms were expanded utilizing the database thesauruses when available in order to search more comprehensively for related articles. All published articles located using the above search terms and deemed to be related to the topic of focus were included based on relevance. Further, the reference lists of identified articles were reviewed to ensure no additional relevant articles had been overlooked in the database searching.

3. Alcohol-related postings on social media

3.1. Prevalence

Alcohol-related social media postings are commonplace among college students with studies reporting 60–85% of participants' Facebook profiles include alcohol-related content (Egan & Moreno, 2011; Moreno et al., 2014). The majority of Facebook posts (up to 72%) are

positive portrayals of alcohol use (e.g., approving tone; Beullens & Schepers, 2013). In contrast to the high rates of alcohol-related content found in objective analyses, college students' self-reports of alcohol-related postings tend to be much lower: 29% of Facebook users acknowledged posting pictures of themselves consuming alcohol and 56% acknowledged posting pictures of friends drinking (Glassman, 2012).

Twitter is less frequently studied, but deserves attention as one recent study identified nearly 12 million alcohol-related Tweets in a one month period, often posted by celebrities, (Cavazos-Rehg, Krauss, Sowles, & Bierut, 2015). Tweets also referred to other risk behaviors (e.g., marijuana use, risky sexual behavior; Cavazos-Rehg et al., 2015). Another social network site, *NekNominate*, highlights the increasing diversity of ways in which social media and risk behavior are intertwined; users post about excessive and dangerous alcohol use (e.g., drinking while skateboarding, mixing alcohol with motor oil) and nominate friends to exceed their use or level of risk (Zonfrillo & Osterhoudt, 2014). Within the framework of social norms theory, such postings are particularly concerning because students are likely to overestimate the frequency with which their peers engage in such dangerous behavior and as a result may be more likely to take such risks themselves.

3.2. Concerning outcomes

Alcohol displays on social media have been associated with myriad alcohol-related behaviors and negative outcomes. For example, college students who viewed a profile with alcohol content reported greater perceived peer norms of alcohol use than those who viewed a profile without alcohol-related content ($d = 0.61$), lending support to social norms theory as a framework to explain links between social media use and risky behaviors (Fournier et al., 2013). Although both groups overestimated both the frequency and quantity of alcohol use for the average student, the overestimation was greater for those exposed to the profile with alcohol content, demonstrating the overarching pattern of peer norm overestimation and the nuanced effect of social media on such overestimation. Cross-sectional (Rodriguez, Litt, Neighbors, & Lewis, *in press*) and longitudinal studies (Moreno et al., 2015) have linked alcohol-related Facebook postings and personal alcohol use. Specifically, individuals posting photos are up to 2.34 times more likely to report engaging in excessive alcohol use than individuals not posting alcohol-related photos (risk ratio = 2.34, 95%CI [1.54,3.58]; Moreno et al., 2015). Higher attention to (e.g., intentions to share) and more positive attitudes toward alcohol-related status updates on Facebook were related to higher intentions to consume alcohol ($d = 0.75$; Alhabash, McAlister, Quilliam, Richards, & Lou, 2015), a finding that lends further support to the social norms theory explanation of the connection between depictions of alcohol use on social media and individual alcohol use. Facebook displays of alcohol use prior to entering college predicted binge drinking one year into college ($d = 0.20$; D'Angelo, Kerr, & Moreno, 2014). Personal posts of alcohol use appear to be stronger predictors of personal alcohol use (Glassman, 2012), alcohol-related consequences, and alcohol-related cravings compared to friends' posts (Westgate, Neighbors, Heppner, Jahn, & Lindgren, 2014). Participants' number of Facebook friends is positively related to the number of alcohol-related pictures uploaded to Facebook (Beullens & Schepers, 2013) and to personal alcohol use ($d = 0.62$), alcohol-related problems ($d = 0.61$), and risk for AUDs ($d = 0.83$; Westgate et al., 2014), again highlighting the social nature of these relationships. The centrality of an alcohol-identity (e.g., picture alcohol display or consumption) on participants' social media has also been associated with problematic alcohol use ($f^2 = 0.21$; Ridout, Campbell, & Ellis, 2012; Rodriguez et al., *in press*).

Postings of alcohol-related content on Facebook, as measured by self-report, has been associated with multiple motives for alcohol use,

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