



Short Communication

Facebook dethroned: Revealing the more likely social media destinations for college students' depictions of underage drinking



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Instagram was the most likely destination for posts glamorizing college drinking.
- Snapchat was the most likely destination for posts showing negative consequences.
- Facebook was judged to be the least likely destination for both post types.
- College drinking prevention researchers should shift focus to Instagram and Snapchat.

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ABSTRACT

Studies examining representations of college drinking on social media have almost exclusively focused on Facebook. However, recent research suggests college students may be more influenced by peers' alcohol-related posts on Instagram and Snapchat, two image-based platforms popular among this demographic. One potential explanation for this differential influence is that qualitative distinctions in the types of alcohol-related content posted by students on these three platforms may exist. Informed by undergraduate focus groups, this study examined the hypothesis that, of the three platforms, students tend to use Instagram most often for photos glamorizing drinking and Snapchat for incriminating photos of alcohol misuse and negative consequences. Undergraduate research assistants aided investigators in developing hypothetical vignettes and photographic examples of posts both glamorizing and depicting negative consequences associated with college drinking. In an online survey, vignette and photo stimuli were followed by counterbalanced paired comparisons that presented each possible pair of social media platforms. Undergraduates ($N = 196$) selected the platform from each pair on which they would be more likely to see each post. Generalized Bradley-Terry models examined the probabilities of platform selections. As predicted, Instagram was seen as the most probable destination (and Facebook least probable) for photos depicting alcohol use as attractive and glamorous. Conversely, Snapchat was selected as the most probable destination (and Facebook least probable) for items depicting negative consequences associated with heavy drinking. Results suggest researchers aiming to mitigate the potential influences associated with college students' glamorous and consequential alcohol-related photos posted social media posts should shift their focus from Facebook to Instagram and Snapchat.

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1. Introduction

Perceptions of peer drinking norms are among the strongest predictors of alcohol use among undergraduate students (Borsari & Carey, 2003; Neighbors, Lee, Lewis, Fossos, & Larimer, 2007) and recent research suggests new students arriving on campus may be especially likely to turn to *social media sites* (SMS) in order to learn the norms for acceptable behavior at their university (Kitsantas, Dabbagh,

Chirinos, & Fake, 2016)—including norms related to alcohol use (Moreno, Briner, Williams, Walker, & Christakis, 2009; Moreno et al., 2014). Alcohol use and risky drinking are often glorified and glamorized by college students on SMS (Niland, Lyons, Goodwin, & Hutton, 2014; Hebden, Lyons, Goodwin, & McCreanor, 2015; Ridout, Campbell, & Ellis, 2011) and exposure to alcohol-related content posted by peers may inflate perceptions of drinking norms (Fournier, Hall, Ricke, & Storey, 2013) and, subsequently, influence underage college students' own future alcohol consumption (Boyle, LaBrie, Froidevaux, & Witkovic, 2016).

Studies to date have focused mainly on college drinking as represented on Facebook, the leading SMS platform. However, market

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research data suggests Facebook use by college students has decreased substantially in recent years (Neal, 2014; Matthews, 2014; Hoelzel, 2015), while students' use of Instagram and Snapchat, newer image-based SMS platforms, has skyrocketed and is projected to rapidly grow over the next 3 years (Stampler, 2015; Bercovici, 2013; Hoelzel, 2015; Lenhart, 2015). In fact, according to the latest usership statistics Instagram and Snapchat have eclipsed all other non-Facebook SMS platforms (including Twitter) in terms of young-adult users and, along with Facebook, now represent the three most widely used SMS platforms among young adults nationwide (Koh, 2016; Cavazos-Rehg, Krauss, Sowles, & Bierut, 2016; Hoelzel, 2015; Lenhart, 2015). In the only published study comparing college students' exposure to alcohol-related content across multiple SMS platforms undergraduates reported more frequent exposure on both Instagram and Snapchat, relative to Facebook. Moreover, exposure to alcohol content on Instagram and Snapchat was more strongly related to students' current and future alcohol use than was exposure on Facebook (Boyle et al., 2016). Thus, while Instagram and Snapchat appear to play a critically important role in the alcohol use trajectories of first-year students and may be more important than Facebook, there is a dearth of research examining the nature of this influence.

One potential explanation for the differential influence of these three SMS is that there may be qualitative differences in the alcohol-related content posted by students on these platforms. That is, while we know large numbers of college students post alcohol-related content on SMS (e.g., Moreno et al., 2014; Rodriguez, Litt, Neighbors, & Lewis, 2016; Boyle et al., 2016), it is unlikely that all content is equal in prevalence and influence. For example, researchers have suggested that two distinct types of alcohol-related posts, those glamorizing college drinking, and those depicting the negative consequences associated with alcohol misuse, may be more prevalent among college students and potentially influential than other types of alcohol-related content (e.g., Ridout et al., 2011; Niland et al., 2014; Moewaka Barnes et al., 2016). What has not been considered to date is how the specific features of SMS platforms may make particular platforms more or less likely destinations for glamorizing and consequential alcohol-related posts.

Anecdotal evidence from student focus groups at our University suggests Instagram's photo enhancement filters, moderate level of privacy, and focus on aesthetic beauty may make it a preferred destination for photos glamorizing college drinking. In contrast, Snapchat's greater privacy and unique disappearing-post feature may make it the preferred destination for student's incriminating and embarrassing images depicting alcohol-related consequences. If verified empirically, these platform-specific differences in the types of alcohol-related content posted by undergraduates may carry important implications for social media-based college drinking prevention efforts. Specifically, efforts could shift to the specific SMS most likely to attract prevalent & influential alcohol-related-content and interventions could be informed by specific platform features. Thus, in an effort to help direct future prevention efforts, the current study examined which SMS platforms were viewed by undergraduate students as the most likely destinations for SMS posts that (a) glamorize alcohol use and (b) portray negative consequences associated with heavy drinking.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were 209 undergraduate students at a private, mid-sized university on the west coast of the United States who received course credit from the psychology department subject pool for completing an online survey about college life. All measures and procedures were approved by the university's Institutional Review Board. Although neither familiarity nor active use of SMS platforms were requisites for participation, 98% of participants reported having an active Facebook account, 94% reported having an active Instagram account and 95%

reported having an active Snapchat account. The current study focuses on the 196 students that reported active use of all 3 SMS platforms. The majority of these participants reporting checking SMS once or more per day; 79% for Facebook, 85% for Instagram, and 87% for Snapchat. Participants were predominantly freshmen or sophomores ($N = 181, 92.3\%$), the mean age was 19.02 years ($SD = 0.42$), and 72% were female, 53% were Caucasian, 8% were Asian, 12% were African American, 25% were Hispanic, and 2% were multi-racial or other.

After signing up for the study participants received a link to the online survey, which was approximately 30 min long. The current study focuses on the initial module of the larger survey, which was presented to participants as a "Social Media Quiz". This quiz presented a series of 6 vignettes describing situations leading up to SMS posts by college students and 6 sample photos that might be posted on SMS by college students. After viewing each stimulus, participants selected the SMS on which they would be most likely to see the post described or depicted. Options were presented using a paired comparison approach which required participants to select the more likely platform for each post from three sets of platform pairs (e.g., Facebook vs. Instagram, Facebook vs.

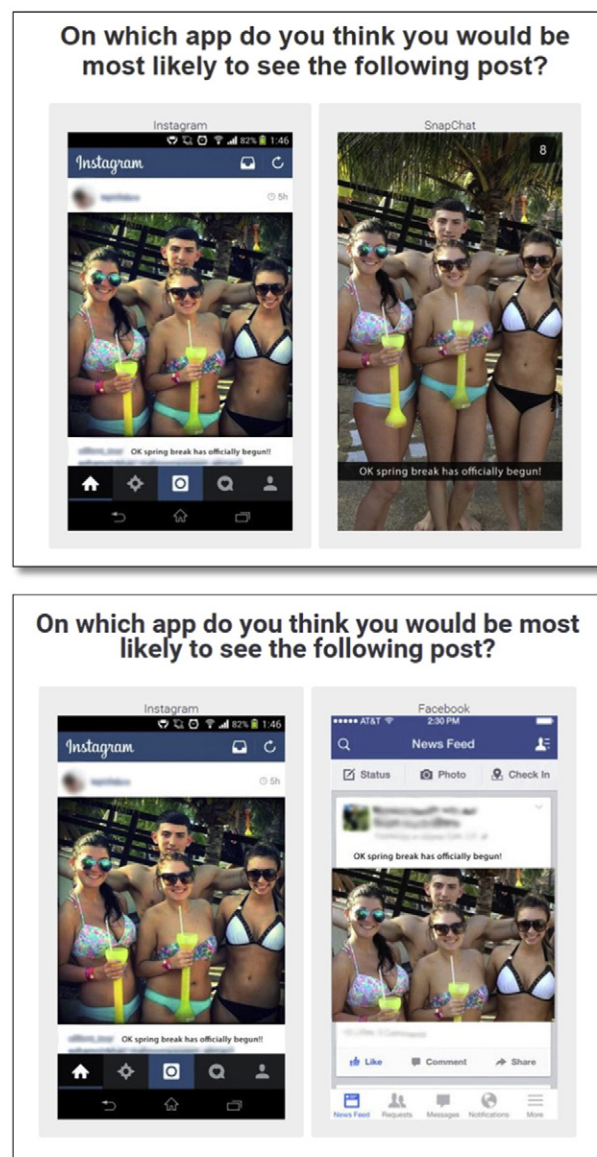


Fig. 1. Example of hypothetical alcohol-related social media photos edited to be consistent with the dimensions, appearance, and features of mobile newsfeed/story photos posted by peers on Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat.

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