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## Original Research

## Use of social networking sites and alcohol consumption among adolescents

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## ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** Research indicates that screen time (e.g. TV viewing) is associated with alcohol consumption in adolescents; however, very little is known about the link between the use of social networking sites (SNSs) and alcohol intake in this age group. The purpose of this study was to examine the association between the use of SNSs and alcohol consumption among Canadian middle and high school students, and to test whether this link varies by sex and drinking frequency or intensity.

**Study design:** School-based cross-sectional study.

**Methods:** Self-reported data on time spent on SNSs, alcohol consumption and sociodemographic characteristics were obtained from 10,072 participants within the 2013 cycle of the Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey, a province-wide survey of students in grades 7–12 (11–20 years old).

**Results:** Adolescent females who reported daily use of SNSs ( $\leq 2$  hours/day or  $> 2$  hours/day) were more likely than those who use them infrequently or do not use them at all to report both occasional and regular alcohol consumption in the past 12 months, while adolescent males who reported daily use of SNSs were more likely than those who use SNSs infrequently or do not use them at all to report regular alcohol use in the past 12 months. The use of SNSs was also associated with report of binge drinking (defined as drinking five or more drinks on one occasion) in the past 4 weeks in both males and females.

**Conclusions:** Results provide evidence that the use of SNSs is associated with alcohol consumption among adolescents. Differences between males and females in the reported associations warrant further investigations.

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## Introduction

Alcohol use is a major public health problem worldwide that can cause adverse health and social consequences related to its intoxicating, toxic and dependence-producing properties.<sup>1</sup> Intoxication with alcohol can lead young people to engage in dangerous behaviours such as drunk driving, drug use, and risky sexual behaviour.<sup>2</sup> These behaviours increase the risk of unintentional injuries, which are the leading cause of death among youth.<sup>3,4</sup> In 2012, about 3.3 million deaths, or 5.9% of all global deaths, were attributable to alcohol consumption.<sup>1</sup> Alcohol intake can also affect behaviour and decision making,<sup>5,6</sup> or induce loss of coordination, memory, and lead to liver damage. Heavy binge drinking by adolescents has been indicated to increase long-term risk for cardiometabolic risks, including heart disease, high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, and other metabolic disorders.<sup>7</sup> Prevention of excessive alcohol consumption among adolescents remains a challenge for public health. Various risk factors have been identified to be associated with alcohol consumption in teenagers<sup>8</sup> and the media has been indicated to play a key role in adolescents' alcohol consumption.<sup>9,10</sup>

There is much research literature indicating that exposure to alcohol advertising results in more positive beliefs about drinking and alcohol initiation and is predictive of underage drinking.<sup>9,11–16</sup> Approximately \$5 billion a year is spent on alcohol advertising and promotion,<sup>17</sup> and alcohol advertisements are often created in a way to attract children and adolescents.<sup>11,12</sup> While the association between traditional forms of media and alcohol use is well established, the relationship between the use of social networking sites (SNSs) and alcohol consumption is largely unknown. SNSs such as Facebook, Twitter, and MySpace have grown exponentially over the past decade and are omnipresent in daily life of many children;<sup>18</sup> their use has been indicated to be the most popular Internet activity among adolescents.<sup>19</sup> This web presence has offered new opportunities for advertising alcohol products.<sup>20,21</sup> Previous studies have provided evidence of displayed alcohol references on social media, including information and images,<sup>21–23</sup> which may possibly lead to offline alcohol consumption.<sup>24</sup> However, studies that empirically examined the link between the use of SNSs and alcohol use behaviour at the population level of adolescents are scarce. To the best of our knowledge, only a survey of 2038 teens aged 12–17 years conducted by the Columbia University's National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA) reported that teens who visit SNSs daily are more likely to drink alcohol than those who do not.<sup>25</sup>

Sex differences in alcohol consumption are well established among adults, with studies indicating that men are more likely than women to consume alcohol;<sup>26,27</sup> however, research consistently reports no gender differences among adolescents.<sup>28,29</sup> On the trajectory from adolescence to adulthood, differences between males and females have been shown to become more apparent around age of 18 years.<sup>30</sup> However, females are well known to be greater users of SNSs compared to their male counterparts.<sup>31,32</sup> While the use of SNSs has been demonstrated to be a risk factor for alcohol consumption among adolescents, it has not been established whether the influence of SNSs on alcohol consumption varies

by sex. Gaining such knowledge can have important implications for more tailored intervention efforts.

The objective of this study was to examine the association between the use of SNSs and alcohol consumption among Canadian middle and high school students, and to test whether this link varies by sex. We hypothesized that the use of SNSs would be associated with alcohol use in adolescents, and that the use of SNSs would be more strongly related to alcohol consumption in females than males because of their greater exposure to SNSs.

## Methods

### Participants

Data for this study were derived from the 2013 cycle of the Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey (OSDUHS), a province-wide survey of students in grades 7–12 (11–20 years old).<sup>4</sup> Conducted every 2 years since 1977, the OSDUHS is the longest ongoing school study of adolescents in Canada. The survey employs a two-stage cluster design (school, class) to monitor substance use, gambling, mental health, physical health, and delinquent behaviour. The total sample in 2013 was 10,272 students from 42 school boards, 198 schools, and 671 classrooms. The survey had a student participation or response rate of 63%, which is above average for a survey of students that requires active parental consent.<sup>33</sup> Absenteeism (11%) and unreturned forms or lack of parental consent (26%) were the main reasons for non-participation among students. A complete description of the survey methodology has been reported elsewhere.<sup>4</sup>

### Measures

#### Outcome measures

Alcohol use was measured with the following question: 'In the last 12 months, how often did you drink alcohol (liquor, wine, beer, coolers)?' Response options included 10 categories ranging from never used to used almost every day. Categories were recoded to create a three-category measure—none, occasional, and regular—for analysis purposes. Students who had never drunk, did not drink in the last 12 months, or only had a sip were classified as non-drinkers. Drinking once per month or less often, or on special occasions was classified as occasional drinking. Drinking twice per month or more often was classified as regular drinking.

Binge drinking was also measured through a question asking how often students had five or more drinks of alcohol on the same occasion during the past 4 weeks. Response options were 'yes' and 'no'.

#### Independent variable

Students were asked how many hours a day they usually spend on social media websites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, MySpace, either posting or browsing. Response options referred to daily use (less than 1 hour a day, about 1 hour a day, 2 hours a day, 3–4 hours a day, 5–6 hours a day, 7 or more hours a day); use, but not daily; use the Internet, but never visit SNSs; and do not use the Internet. A three-category measure was constructed wherein the three latter response

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