

Identity, influence, and intervention: The roles of social media in alcohol use

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Alcohol-related content is common on social media and may both reflect and influence offline drinking behavior. Posting alcohol-related content has been linked to alcohol outcomes, including higher rates of alcohol consumption, cravings, alcohol-related problems, and clinical alcohol use disorders. Exposure to alcohol-related content on social media has likewise been associated with adverse alcohol outcomes. In this paper, we review research on the relationship between social media and alcohol use, and explore the ways that online identity and social influence can account for this relationship. Finally, we call for further research on the use of social media as a platform for prevention and intervention efforts.

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Picture this: you're browsing through your Facebook feed one morning when you notice a friend's status update about their wild Friday night. It's the latest in a long line of posts they've been sharing recently about their drinking and partying. You feel a twinge of uneasiness — should you feel concerned about your friend? But, it's only Facebook, right?

Such alcohol-related content appears surprisingly frequently in social media [1,2]. Given the seriousness of problematic alcohol use as a public health concern [3], should such content be taken seriously as an indicator or influence on actual health behaviors? In this paper, we review recent work on social media and alcohol use with an emphasis on determining how and why the two are related.

What is social media and how does it relate to alcohol?

Social media loosely includes online and mobile platforms where people voluntarily come together to generate, share, and consume content, including text, pictures, and video. Popular social media platforms include Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Tumblr, Vine, Instagram, and Snapchat, among others. Historically, such platforms also included mySpace, AOL Instant Messenger (AIM), and Bebo. Social media use is pervasive. According to the Pew Research Center, 71% of the US population reports active use of a Facebook account, and although use is more prevalent among teenagers, a majority of older adults also use it. Twitter use is slightly less common, with only 23% of online adults reporting active use.

Surprisingly, alcohol-related content is quite common on social media, including Facebook [1,2] and MySpace [4–6]. Content analysis of Facebook pictures and messages suggests that alcohol-related content on social media typically conveys positive attitudes toward alcohol [7]. Such content may even become more prevalent during college: in one study of freshmen, the percentage of students posting alcohol-related content on Facebook increased from an initial 20% to 39.9% of participants by the end of their first year [8]. Male college undergraduates were particularly likely to post alcohol-related content, with 85.3% of college men displaying alcohol in their profiles [9].

Social media and alcohol outcomes

Whether social media is related to alcohol outcomes involves at least two separate questions: first, Does social media use *in general* indicate higher risk of adverse alcohol outcomes? and second, Does *alcohol-related content* on social media reflect off-line behavior or influence alcohol outcomes off-line? In answering these questions, it's important to address causal direction (e.g., does off-line behavior drive social media use, or does social media use drive behavior?), as well as the role of potential third-party variables, such as personality or drinking motives.

There is mixed evidence on whether social media use on its own is associated with drinking. In one survey, general social media use was *not* related to differences in alcohol consumption, but social media use specifically related to alcohol marketing *was* linked to increased alcohol consumption and problem drinking [10]. A longitudinal study of adolescents likewise found no association between general social network use and drinking [11•]. By

contrast, other studies have found links between general social media and alcohol use. Among teenage adolescents, drinking has sometimes been associated with increased computer use and social media use [12]. In a slightly older population, college undergraduates who have more Facebook friends [13*,14] also report more hazardous drinking, as do young adults who have more online peer ties and denser social media networks [15]. This is particularly true for men, which may reflect their greater tendency to use alcohol as a form of social bonding and develop networks of friends who drink [15]. How social media is used and who uses it may matter in determining whether increased use is associated with adverse alcohol outcomes.

Explicit alcohol-related content on social media, on the other hand, may be more problematic. People who post more alcohol-related content on Facebook also consume more alcohol [13*,14,16,17]. Female university students who post alcohol-related photos of themselves on Facebook report higher rates of alcohol consumption [18], and an analysis of Twitter posts in the United Kingdom found that alcohol-related posts mirrored real-time local and national patterns of alcohol consumption.

In addition to consumption, college undergraduates who report frequently posting about alcohol on Facebook also experience more alcohol-related problems, such as missing work, not being able to study, or getting into fights [13*,14]. Frequent or widespread alcohol-related content on Facebook also predicts risk of meeting clinical criteria for alcohol use disorders and alcoholism in correlational studies [13*,14,19], as well as cravings for alcohol [13*]. Underlying alcohol use disorders may even drive increased sharing of alcohol-related content on social media. In a single longitudinal study, college freshmen who met criteria for dependent alcohol use prior to starting college subsequently posted more content explicitly featuring intoxication and problematic alcohol use during their freshman year [20]. In summary, alcohol-related content on social media has been linked to a number of outcomes, including alcohol consumption, alcohol-related problems, cravings, and clinical measures of risk for alcoholism.

Why is social media use linked to alcohol outcomes?

Both social media use in general and alcohol-related content in particular may be associated with adverse alcohol outcomes for the same underlying reasons: first, people's self-representations on social media accurately reflect off-line behaviors, and second, people's behavior is influenced by the content that they view online, especially if it comes from trusted sources [21].

Identity

Drinking identity is an important predictor of alcohol use, particularly for college students [22], and may include the online construction of both individual and group

identities. Social media profiles reflect online identities that are largely accurate and reflective of actual personality and behavioral traits [23]. When neutral coders observed online Facebook profiles, their perceptions of the profile owner's personality were highly correlated with actual personality traits, as rated by the profile owners and their friends in real life [23]. As reviewed above, alcohol-related content on social media profiles is directly correlated with actual alcohol behaviors, including consumption, alcohol-related problems, and criteria for clinical alcohol use disorder [13*,14,17]. This is due in part to people's efforts to actively construct online identities on social media [24] which may accurately mirror their off-line identities [23]. Such identities may even provide a historical track record of actual behavior [25]. By contrast, impression management, or trying to 'appear cool' by posting alcohol-related content that does not reflect one's actual behavior, appears to play a relatively minor role in social media. Indeed, in focus groups, adolescents reported that they typically interpreted alcohol-related content displays as reflecting actual use rather than mere posturing [26].

In addition to self-presentation, individual and group identity may also play a role in determining who to include in one's social media networks and how the members of those networks interact. In a longitudinal study of adolescents, Huang *et al.* [27**] found that over time heavy drinkers sought out friends on Facebook who also used alcohol. Such selection effects, in which a person who uses alcohol seeks out like-minded individuals, may partially account for the consistent finding that larger and denser social media networks are linked to heavier alcohol use [2,13*,14,15].

Online networks of like-minded individuals may even develop cultures that foster online portrayal of actual alcohol use. A study of Australian and New Zealand adolescents in a heavy youth drinking culture found that Facebook use was very prevalent before, during, and after using alcohol. Sharing positive upbeat photos of socializing and drinking while avoiding photos that depicted negative events or over-intoxication was an important element of managing their online identity and relationships [28]. Such communal sharing of drinking stories and positive photographic portrayals of drinking may contribute to pro-alcohol group cultures that not only reflect their members' activities, but actively encourage drinking [29*].

Influence

In addition to actively contributing content to their social networks, people on social media spend considerable time viewing the content generated by others. As such, people's attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors are probably influenced by the content that they see on social media [21]. However, how and when alcohol-related content posted by others results in changes in drinking behavior is

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