

Chapter 21

Social Media and Alcohol Use: Adverse Impact of Facebook and Twitter on College Students

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ABSTRACT

The use of Social Networking Sites (SNSs) has become an integral part of daily life, particularly for adolescents. The chapter examines the negative impact of social networking sites and how they may expose alcohol-related consumption and behavior to young adults, especially college students. In particular, the focus is on the use of two specific social networking sites, Facebook and Twitter, and their association with alcohol use. The review of existing literature reveals that the depiction of alcohol use on social networking sites has a deleterious effect on alcohol use through the creation of positive social norms toward use and abuse. Further, the chapter looks at the Theory of Differential Association to explain the use of SNS as a pivot to increased alcohol use by adolescents and young adults.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter examines the use of SNSs by young adults, specifically college students, and further describes how these platforms might shape alcohol use amongst this age group, and in turn negatively impact social and academic aspects of their lives. Based on a systematic review of most recent studies conducted in the United States and elsewhere, the thrust is on synthesizing the manner in which SNSs facilitate underage drinking. The chapter offers comprehensive conceptual, theoretical, and empirical bases of association between use of SNSs and use of alcohol in adolescence and early adulthood. The chapter focuses on Edwin Sutherland's Theory of Differential Association (TDA) to explain the manner

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in which interaction and socialization with peers in virtual communities facilitates formation of alcohol-identities and peer influence grouping. The TDA also explains why some adolescents are impacted by social media use negatively whereas others might experience socially desirable outcomes.

BACKGROUND

The alcohol culture in the United States has significantly increased in the past 25 years (Newport, 2010). Large amounts of alcohol consumption, or “binge” drinking, is connected to immediate fatalities and long-term health outcomes. While alcohol consumption varies between colleges (Lorant, Nicaise, Soto, & D’Hoore, 2013), on average four out five students drink alcohol, and about a half of college students who drink, consume four or more drinks in one sitting (Fact Sheets- Binge Drinking, 2012). The risk-taking behavior is developed through the positive outlook that is modeled from a direct or indirect encouragement of popular activities, alcohol consumption (Santor, Messervey, & Kusumakar, 2000). In addition, this deleterious culture is further amplified by print and media marketing. In one study, adolescents’ exposure to alcohol marketing increased their likeliness of drinking, and further increased consumption level for those already drinking (Bruijn, Angus, Gordon, & Hastings, 2009). With the new digital age, alcohol marketing has expended to various SNSs. This new environment allows for an additional source of exposure to alcohol, and builds the hypothesis of increased likelihood of alcohol consumption and abuse amongst young adults, especially college students.

SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES AND ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION

In recent years, the use of SNSs has become inescapable. As of May 2013, 72 percent of Americans use SNSs, a 5 percent increase from 2012; and amongst young adults ages 18-29, SNS use is 89 percent (Duggan & Brenner, 2013). There are many methods of using these platforms: entertainment, information sharing, socializing, etc. College students use SNS to extensively communicate: given that it allows them to connect and efficiently interact with their peers and instructors. These academic needs may involve sharing information related to group projects, brainstorming on common assignments, and organizing meetings with study groups. Unfortunately, they also allow creation of virtual meeting space to display shared interests relating to drinking behavior (e.g. parties, sporting events, games, etc.). Whilst there are many social networking sites used by young adults; for the focus of this study Facebook and Twitter have been analyzed.

The first platform, Facebook, was developed in 2004 for users at participating colleges and universities across the United States. Its exclusivity grew its popularity to a larger audience of users across the globe. Facebook users develop profiles to connect with friends, relatives, and other networks. Facebook functionalities range from photo-sharing, story-telling format for information sharing, and private messaging. As of recent, 86 percent of those in the 18-29-age bracket are Facebook users (Duggan & Brenner, 2013). Students in this age bracket may use Facebook to create open and private Facebook groups to share updates with their fellow peers on various academic related or social related events. Regrettably, in addition to many positive functions that Facebook’s platform can provide to college students, it can also allow students and other youth to interact and virtually connect for purposes other than academic.

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