



## Who is watching user-generated alcohol posts on social media?

Eilin K. Erevik<sup>a,\*</sup>, Ståle Pallesen<sup>a</sup>, Cecilie S. Andreassen<sup>b</sup>, Øystein Vedaa<sup>a,c</sup>, Torbjørn Torsheim<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Psychosocial Science, University of Bergen, Bergen, Norway

<sup>b</sup> Department of Clinical Psychology, University of Bergen, Bergen, Norway

<sup>c</sup> Department of Health Promotion, Norwegian Institute of Public Health, Bergen, Norway



### HIGHLIGHTS

- A majority of college students report exposure to alcohol content on social media.
- Alcohol posts are often interpreted as reflections of positive aspects of alcohol.
- Initiatives to countermeasure alcohol exposure on social media may be warranted.
- Alcohol disclosure on social media is strongly associated with alcohol exposure.
- Alcohol may become increasingly salient in given online networks.

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### ABSTRACT

**Aim:** To examine students' exposure to user-generated alcohol content on social media, and identify characteristics (i.e. demographics, personality traits, alcohol use, alcohol-related cognitions, and social media factors) associated with monthly or more frequent exposure.

**Method:** College/university students ( $N = 11,236$ ) in Bergen, Norway, completed a web-survey measuring exposure to alcohol on social media – both frequency and interpretations of alcohol content. The survey included questions regarding demographics, personality, alcohol-related cognitions, and general use of social media and alcohol. Binary logistic regressions were run to identify characteristics associated with monthly or more frequent exposure to alcohol-related posts on social media.

**Results:** A total of 96.7% had been exposed to alcohol-related posts, exposure to posts with a positive valence of alcohol were more frequently reported than exposure to content with a negative valence of alcohol. Reports of monthly or more frequent exposure to alcohol on social media were associated with a range of characteristics, among these younger age, being native Norwegian, lower extroversion and higher agreeableness and self-monitoring scores, higher alcohol use, stronger descriptive norms for alcohol use among online-friends, and more frequent logins to social media.

**Conclusions:** Students' potential inflated alcohol norms (originating from social media) should be addressed. The results suggest that exposure may be determined by high alcohol use and membership in demographical groups associated with high alcohol use, an increased attentiveness towards others' behavior, and excessive social media use. Future studies investigating the relationship between alcohol exposure on social media and later alcohol use should control for such factors.

### 1. Introduction

User-generated alcohol-related content, like party pictures, is salient on social media (Egan & Moreno, 2011; Moreno et al., 2014). Several scholars have argued that alcohol exposure on social media may cause more lenient alcohol-related cognitions (e.g. stronger perceived norms for alcohol use or more positive alcohol attitudes), which may further increase alcohol use (Boyle, LaBrie, Froidevaux, & Witkovic, 2016;

Fournier, Hall, Ricke, & Storey, 2013). In this realm, one can assume that the frequency of exposure is an important factor as more frequent exposure may particularly strengthen perceived norms for alcohol use. How alcohol-related content is interpreted (e.g. as a reflection of positive versus negative aspect of alcohol) is likely to affect the influence exposure has on alcohol-related cognitions as well. The relationship between alcohol exposure and alcohol use may also be explained by common factors (e.g. demographic characteristics) predicting both

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [eilin.erevik@uib.no](mailto:eilin.erevik@uib.no) (E.K. Erevik).

exposure and alcohol use (Boyle et al., 2016). Hence, identifying characteristics associated with alcohol exposure on social media could give an indication of how exposure relates to alcohol use. Very few studies have investigated frequency of exposure, the interpretation of the content, and characteristics (e.g. demographics, personality traits) associated with exposure. The university/college student population might be a particularly suitable population for research investigating alcohol exposure on social media as this population is known to be heavy users of alcohol, and have been argued to share more alcohol content on their social media sites (D'Angelo, Zhang, Eickhoff, & Moreno, 2014; O'Malley & Johnston, 2002; Slutske et al., 2004). Further, enrollment into higher education oftentimes involves formatting new friendships and social networks, which can make attentiveness and adaptability to social norms extra important in this life phase (Borsari, Murphy, & Barnett, 2007; Pittman & Richmond, 2008). Social media is one arena through which students can gather information regarding social norms. Accordingly, some scholars have argued that college/university students might be particularly susceptible for alcohol content on social media (Moreno et al., 2014).

### 1.1. How common is exposure to user-generated alcohol posts, and how is such posts interpreted?

One study found that 20% of adolescents reported to have at least one friend on social media that had posted party pictures (Huang et al., 2014), while another study reported that North American undergraduate students on average responded that their Facebook-friends posted alcohol-related content between “less than once a month” and “monthly” (Westgate, Neighbors, Heppner, Jahn, & Lindgren, 2014). Regarding the viewers' interpretation of alcohol-related posts, one study suggested that the viewers of alcohol-related posts on social media understand such posts as reflections of the sender's offline alcohol use (Moreno, Briner, Williams, Walker, & Christakis, 2009).

### 1.2. Who is watching alcohol posts on social media?

Demographical characteristics, the Five-Factor Model's personality traits and self-monitoring could predict both social media use and alcohol use in general (Correa, Hinsley, & De Zuniga, 2010; Erevik, Pallesen, Vedaa, Andreassen, & Torsheim, 2017; Kim, Seely, & Jung, 2017; Rider, 2006). Few studies have investigated whether demographic or personality characteristics could be associated with exposure to alcohol on social media, but one study indicated that women are exposed to alcohol-related posts more frequently than men (Boyle et al., 2016). Even though the research is sparse, there are reasons to expect that alcohol exposure might be predicted by demographical and personality characteristics. Individuals tend to befriend similar others in both online and offline setting (Selfhout et al., 2010; Subrahmanyam, Reich, Waechter, & Espinoza, 2008), which suggest that individuals with demographical and personality characteristics associated with high alcohol use might see more alcohol content on social media simply because their friends have a high alcohol consumption. In addition to the potential association between exposure and demographic and personality characteristics, exposure to alcohol-related social media content has been consistently linked to elevated alcohol use and lenient alcohol-related cognitions (Boyle et al., 2016). According to the prototype/willingness model, an individual's health choices are determined in part by the individual's evaluations of the typical conductor of such behavior (i.e. prototype) and how common the individual perceive the behavior to be (i.e. descriptive norms) (Gerrard, Gibbons, Houlihan, Stock, & Pomery, 2008; Ravis, Sheeran, & Armitage, 2006). Experimental studies have suggested that exposure to alcohol on social media may drive prototypic evaluations and descriptive norms of alcohol use in a more lenient direction (Fournier et al., 2013; Litt & Stock, 2011). The relationship may, however, be bidirectional, as individuals with more lenient alcohol-related cognitions may be more likely to notice

alcohol-related content on social media in order to confirm pre-conceived cognitions (Wason, 1968).

The way social media is used could also influence the amount of exposure to alcohol-related content. For instance has previous studies indicated that individuals with more online-friends reports more exposure to alcohol on social media, compared to individuals with fewer online-friends (Boyle et al., 2016; Westgate et al., 2014). Finally, exposure of alcohol-related content on social media might be associated with increased disclosure of similar posts due to friendship selection processes and social learning (Bandura, 1965; Huang, Soto, Fujimoto, & Valente, 2014).

### 1.3. Objectives

The current study aimed to investigate students' exposure to user-generated alcohol-related social media posts (i.e. frequency of exposure and interpretations of alcohol-related posts). The second aim was to identify demographic, personality, alcohol habits and cognitions, and social media factors associated with monthly or more frequent exposure to alcohol-related posts on social media.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Procedures and sample

Students registered at the four largest institutions for higher education in Bergen municipality, Norway, were invited to participate in an online survey during fall 2015. A total of 28,553 students received an e-mail invitation, whereof 11,236 (39.4%) agreed to participate. The students were given information about the study, data-storage and use, potential risk and benefits associated with participation, and their right to abstain from participation before they could chose to respond to the survey. The project was approved by the Regional Committee for Medical and Health Research Ethics, Western Norway (no. 2015/1154).

### 2.2. Measures

*Demographics* were assessed by questions about sex, place of birth, religious identification, relationship status, year of birth, and parental status. *Personality* was measured with the Mini-International Personality Item Pool (Mini-IPIP; 20 items), which is considered a reliable and valid measure of the Five-Factor Model's personality traits (Donnellan, Oswald, Baird, & Lucas, 2006). In the current study the Cronbach's alphas of the five subscales were acceptable: Extroversion (0.83), agreeableness (0.77), conscientiousness (0.69), neuroticism (0.75), and intellect/imagination (0.74). *Self-monitoring* (i.e. attentiveness and adaptability to situational norms) was assessed by the 13 items revised Self-Monitoring Scale (Lennox & Wolfe, 1984), Cronbach's alpha: 0.82 (current study).

*Alcohol use* was assessed by the Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT; 10 items) (Bohn, Babor, & Kranzler, 1995), Cronbach's alpha: 0.78 (current study). AUDIT includes items measuring alcohol consumption (e.g. frequency), the experience of harm related to alcohol use (e.g. memory loss), and symptoms of alcohol dependency (e.g. salience).

*Descriptive norms of alcohol use* were assessed by the following questions: “Think about the five students you know best. How many of them do you think drink”: a) “a couple of times a week?”, b) “10 units or more on a typical drinking occasion?”, and c) “6 units or more (on the same occasion) a couple of times a week?” (Response range: 0–5 students) (based on: Babor, Higgins-Biddle, Saunders, & Monteiro, 2001; Miller, Prichard, Hutchinson, & Wilson, 2014; Tickle, Hull, Sargent, Dalton, & Heatherton, 2006). *Descriptive norms of alcohol use among online-friends* were measured by similar questions, but for these questions, the students were asked to think about the five persons of which they see most social media content from. *Prototypes* of the typical

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