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Friends' Alcohol-Related Social Networking Site Activity Predicts Escalations in Adolescent Drinking: Mediation by Peer Norms

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A B S T R A C T

Purpose: Adolescents' increased use of social networking sites (SNS) coincides with a developmental period of heightened risk for alcohol use initiation. However, little is known regarding associations between adolescents' SNS use and drinking initiation nor the mechanisms of this association. This study examined longitudinal associations among adolescents' exposure to friends' alcohol-related SNS postings, alcohol-favorable peer injunctive norms, and initiation of drinking behaviors.

Methods: Participants were 658 high-school students who reported on posting of alcohol-related SNS content by self and friends, alcohol-related injunctive norms, and other developmental risk factors for alcohol use at two time points, 1 year apart. Participants also reported on initiation of three drinking behaviors: consuming a full drink, becoming drunk, and heavy episodic drinking (three or more drinks per occasion). Probit regression analyses were used to predict initiation of drinking behaviors from exposure to alcohol-related SNS content. Path analyses examined mediation of this association by peer injunctive norms.

Results: Exposure to friends' alcohol-related SNS content predicted adolescents' initiation of drinking and heavy episodic drinking 1 year later, controlling for demographic and known developmental risk factors for alcohol use (i.e., parental monitoring and peer orientation). In addition, alcohol-favorable peer injunctive norms statistically mediated the relationship between alcohol-related SNS exposure and each drinking milestone.

Conclusions: Results suggest that social media plays a unique role in contributing to peer influence processes surrounding alcohol use and highlight the need for future investigative and preventive efforts to account for adolescents' changing social environments.

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IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTION

These results demonstrate that adolescents' exposure to friends' alcohol-related posts on social networking sites longitudinally predicts initiation of drinking behaviors. This exposure may lead adolescents to develop alcohol-favorable peer injunctive norms. Further research should examine how and for whom peer influence via social media occurs.

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Adolescent's use of social networking sites (SNS) has increased drastically within the last decade, with 89% of adolescents using at least one SNS in 2015 [1]. Such sites allow adolescents to create public profiles and connect with networks of "friends" through text, photos, and videos. Adolescents' interactions via SNS may provide an important context for the development of risk behaviors [2], particularly as adolescents share and view peer-generated content about alcohol use [3].

Adolescence is the highest risk period for initiation of drinking [4] and early-onset alcohol use prospectively predicts neurological, social, cognitive, and mental health impairments, as well as the increased risk for problematic substance use [5,6]. Despite coinciding increases in risky alcohol-related behaviors and use of SNS where youth may share alcohol-related content, little is known regarding associations between adolescents' SNS use and initiation of alcohol use.

SNS have become an essential aspect of adolescents' social lives, with traditional peer interactions often occurring within such environments [1]. Using SNS, adolescents can engage with their peers in a variety of alcohol-related activities. Prior research indicates that individuals may use SNS to post photos or text that explicitly reference their own drinking behaviors, as well as to display more implicit references to alcohol, such as those contained in song lyrics, Web sites, and music videos [7–9]. On SNS, adolescents may view peers' postings related to alcohol [10] and the feedback that such postings receive from others. Research suggests that these portrayals of alcohol use are largely positive in nature [7,8]. There are many theoretical reasons to suspect that these alcohol-related aspects of SNS use may have implications for adolescents' drinking behaviors.

Behavioral theories such as social cognitive theory [11] and the theory of planned behavior [12] emphasize the ways in which individuals' behaviors are shaped via observation of others and the development of subjective norms. Such theories have informed models of both media and peer influences on risk behavior. For example, adolescents may adopt behaviors that are modeled via mass media, depending on their beliefs and expectations regarding those behaviors [11]. Indeed, portrayals of alcohol use via media channels have been shown to influence adolescents' likelihood of consuming alcohol, particularly when adolescents perceive those portrayals to be desirable, realistic, and similar to them [13]. Furthermore, peer substance use has been shown to be among the strongest correlates of adolescents' drinking initiation and escalation [4], with peer alcohol use longitudinally predicting early-onset drinking behaviors [14] and progression to heavy drinking [15]. Social media provides both the vast quantities of digitally mediated information characteristic of mass media and the personalized, reciprocal engagement characteristic of traditional peer interactions. It may thus represent a synthesis of peer and media influences on adolescents' behavior.

These theories suggest that peer and media influences contribute to adolescents' perceived social norms around drinking, which impact their own drinking behaviors. Descriptive norms, or beliefs about the extent to which one's peers are drinking alcohol, and injunctive norms, or beliefs about peers' approval or disapproval of drinking alcohol, have both been shown to influence drinking behaviors [16]. On SNS, experimental evidence suggests that youth who view Facebook profiles portraying alcohol use report greater descriptive norms of alcohol use and willingness to drink [17]. The unique context of social media may also influence adolescents' injunctive norms around peers' alcohol use. Some adolescents may engage in selective self-presentation on these platforms, sharing experiences with alcohol and engaging with alcohol-related messages as a means of portraying an "intoxigenic social identity," which supports drinking as normative among youth [9] and emphasizes positive, rather than negative, aspects of alcohol use [7]. These adolescents will likely be viewed as approving of alcohol use, perhaps contributing to misperceptions of peers' beliefs about alcohol [18]. Furthermore, as adolescents' SNS often represent

large networks of peers, accessible any time, anywhere, [1] an incredible volume of alcohol-related social information may be accessible, and the posts of just a few alcohol-using peers can have wide influence. Thus, adolescents exposed to alcohol-related SNS activity may be uniquely positioned to develop biased perceptions of injunctive norms around alcohol and may be at risk for early initiation of alcohol use and progression to problematic drinking behaviors.

Despite theoretical reasons to suggest that exposure to alcohol-related SNS use may be associated with adolescents' alcohol use, little empirical work has examined these associations longitudinally, with existing work primarily cross-sectional and/or limited to college student samples. The lack of research is problematic as adolescence is a critical period for the development of alcohol use beliefs [19] and self-schemas involving future-oriented self-cognitions related to alcohol [20]. Initial descriptive work suggests that adolescents' exposure to alcohol-related postings on SNS is frequent. According to a 2012 national survey, 45% of adolescents reported seeing pictures posted of peers drinking, passed out, or using drugs [10].

Only a few studies have examined associations between exposure to alcohol-related SNS activity and alcohol use and norms in teenagers, and these largely support a positive association. Cross-sectional findings indicate that adolescents reporting more frequent exposure to SNS alcohol content, including other teens getting drunk or passed out, report more alcohol-favorable injunctive norms and greater likelihood of having used alcohol [10,21]. A longitudinal study of 10th graders found that those with more close friends who posted pictures of "partying or drinking alcohol" on SNS were at increased risk of drinking alcohol 6 months later [22], but a study from the same authors using stochastic actor-oriented models found no direct association between exposure to friends' postings and subsequent alcohol use [23]. Finally, one study of seventh and eighth grade students demonstrated that media exposure to alcohol or drugs, including SNS content, was both predictive of greater alcohol use 1 year later and predicted by prior year alcohol use [24].

Building on this literature, the present study offers a unique opportunity to examine adolescents' exposure to alcohol-related SNS content and development of favorable injunctive norms using longitudinal data from a sample of secondary school students. In addition, by following a sample of initially alcohol abstinent adolescents, this study allows for the prospective prediction of initiation of alcohol use behaviors. Thus, the primary goal of this study was to conduct a prospective longitudinal investigation of the effects of exposure to friends' alcohol-related SNS postings on adolescent initiation of drinking milestones, controlling for known developmental risk factors for alcohol use (e.g., parental monitoring and peer orientation). In addition, the study sought to examine whether injunctive norms mediate the longitudinal association between exposure to friends' alcohol-related SNS content and initiation of drinking milestones.

Methods

Participants

Participants were taken from an ongoing prospective study on alcohol initiation and progression among adolescents [25,26]. Participants were 59.0% female and 21.3% nonwhite (4.6% black, 3.2% Asian, 1.5% American Indian, 5.5% mixed race, and 6.6% other) and 10.6% Hispanic; 36.1% of students received free or

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