

Teens who perceive their friends posting drinking-related content online inaccurately report higher recent alcohol use

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Teens who perceived their friends posted alcohol-related content on social media reported drinking more than those who weren't exposed to such posts, a new study has found. In addition, adolescents overestimated the frequency of their peers' alcohol-related posts online, a

misperception that potentially shaped their drinking.

Perceptions of peers' [alcohol use](#), even if inaccurate, generate a social norm—a standard that tends to guide [human behavior](#). Adolescents are especially susceptible to peer influence. Previous research has highlighted teens' exaggerated perceptions of peers' drinking in raising the risk for their alcohol use. Social media may amplify this effect, with its unique features ("likes" and sharing) that potentially create the illusion of widespread drinking.

A discrepancy between a teen's own alcohol-related posting and their perception of peers' posting may be linked to an increased willingness to drink, but the issue is under-researched. The new study, in *Alcoholism: Clinical & Experimental Research*, examined perceptions of alcohol-related posts among adolescents and explored possible links with teens' drinking attitudes and behaviors. A better understanding of these dynamics may reveal opportunities for preventing or reducing teen drinking.

Investigators worked with 435 high-schoolers graders, mean age 17, in the northeast U.S.; 76% were White, 60% were girls. The participants completed a baseline questionnaire and follow-up surveys covering their willingness to drink, what they expected from alcohol (e.g., "have fun," "get into fights"), and their alcohol consumption.

They also reported on their posting of alcohol-related content on social media, their perceptions of friends' and peers' alcohol posts, their social media use, and real-life perceptions of their friends' and peers' drinking. The researchers used [statistical analysis](#) to look for associations between teens' online perceptions and their attitudes to drinking and alcohol use three months later, after controlling for their experience of peers' drinking in offline contexts.

Overall, the participants reported relatively low alcohol use. Sixty percent reported that their typical peers posted alcohol-related content, and 31% that their close friends did. But only 7% reported that they had posted such content, implying that even low-risk teens perceived high exposure to peers' [alcohol content](#) online.

Those who perceived that their friends (rather than their broader peer group) posted alcohol content indicated higher recent [alcohol consumption](#) than others, even after adjusting for offline perceptions. Teens' perceptions were, surprisingly, not linked to their reported willingness to drink or positive expectations about alcohol—findings that may reflect the participants' low alcohol use and/or the narrow timespan between two key survey dates.

Misperceptions of the frequency of alcohol-related social media posts may have important consequences for teens. The study adds to evidence that adolescents overestimate their peers' alcohol use and align their drinking behavior with that of friends. The influence of social norms on teen drinking may be amplified by [social media](#).

Adolescents may benefit from media literacy interventions that include [accurate information](#) on their peers' alcohol posts and drinking behavior. Further research is needed to assess [teens'](#) current perceptions and behaviors, with more nuanced consideration of online platforms, privacy, engagement, and types of content, and involving younger and more racially diverse samples.

More information: Samuel N. Meisel et al, Adolescent (mis)perceptions of peer alcohol posts on social media: Prospective associations with alcohol attitudes and use, *Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research* (2022). [DOI: 10.1111/acer.14935](https://doi.org/10.1111/acer.14935)

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