

New study warns of damaging effects of 'alcohol posts' on social media

May 25 2023



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Many young people regularly post photos of themselves with a glass of beer or wine in their hand. But such "alcohol posts" could lead to more youngsters drinking alcohol. In a new study, communications scientist

Hanneke Hendriks asked students for their ideas on potential solutions.

According to Hendriks, many [young people](#) publish posts in which alcohol plays a role. "They say that alcohol is depicted unintentionally and they do not see it as a problem. Only 17% of the respondents found such posts problematic. But when we then told them that such posts could lead to greater alcohol consumption among their peers, they often changed their minds."

For their study published in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, Hendriks and her fellow researchers interviewed close to 300 young people aged between 16 and 28, including school pupils and students of various educational levels. "The young people were found to be in particular need of warnings about alcohol posts on social media. They often scroll and post on auto-pilot, and they would like to be pulled away from this," says Hendriks.

Alcohol posts

Around 60% of young people post photos featuring alcohol now and then. These photos often conjure positive associations with drinking. They are frequently taken at parties or dinner parties and depict a group of young people standing or sitting together with glasses of alcohol in their hands or on the table. On Instagram, some posts also feature close-ups of cocktails, for instance.

In Hendrik's previous research, it appeared that young people who viewed such photos were more inclined to drink more. A clear causal link was shown: if young people saw an "alcohol post" on a Friday, they were more likely to drink on Saturday—and also to drink more than they would have otherwise.

Interventions

In this follow-up study, the researchers interviewed these young people. Through questionnaires and focus groups, the youngsters indicated which interventions most appealed to them. Hendriks says, "They did not think that awareness-raising campaigns would work very well. But they did advocate for automatic warnings. Machine learning could recognize and issue warnings about alcohol featured in posts, for instance: 'This post features content about alcohol,' or 'Are you sure that you'd like to publish a post featuring alcohol?' In this way, they would think more carefully about their social media behavior."

In addition to warnings on [social media](#) itself, young people would also like to be reminded about how their posts might come across to future employers. "Then they would be less tempted to post photos of themselves drinking, in fear of gaining a bad reputation."

An automatic warning seems promising, but it also has snags, according to Hendriks. "Then Facebook and Instagram would have to implement such warnings. You could develop a browser plug-in for this, but young people would have to install it themselves. The question is whether they would do that. Another option is to give [training sessions](#) at schools, similar to the ones already being held on media literacy; [alcohol](#) posts could be included in these. Ultimately, we hope that young people become more aware of the possible consequences of their posting behavior."

More information: Hanneke Hendriks et al, Dealing with Alcohol-Related Posts on Social Media: Using a Mixed-Method Approach to Understand Young Peoples' Problem Awareness and Evaluations of Intervention Ideas, *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* (2023). [DOI: 10.3390/ijerph20105820](https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20105820)

Provided by Radboud University

Citation: New study warns of damaging effects of 'alcohol posts' on social media (2023, May 25)
retrieved 28 April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-05-effects-alcohol-social-media.html>

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