

Research explores relationship between social media and drinking

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A psychologist at the University of Houston is exploring the ways in which social media influences alcohol consumption among college students. Mai-Ly Nguyen Steers, a postdoctoral fellow and lecturer, will

use grant from the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism to study how social media, and Facebook in particular, shapes students' drinking habits. The findings will then be used to develop and implement a personalized intervention designed to use social media to reduce drinking among students who are heavy drinkers.

"Heavier drinkers tend to overestimate how much others are drinking, and they tend to think that they are drinking less than what's normal. In reality, they're actually drinking more," said Nguyen Steers.

According to Nguyen Steers, people self-select "friends" on social media who have similar interests and views. If a heavy drinker is posting about drinking on social media, it's likely that their friends and followers are sharing similar posts, thus influencing what they believe to be "normal" amounts of drinking.

"We are swayed by what we see and post on social media in more ways than we realize," she said.

To draw a comparison, Nguyen Steers points to the recent presidential election. Hillary Clinton supporters are likely to have friends who are like-minded and posted pro-Hillary-related content, she said. When the election results came in, they might have been shocked at the results.

"In the months leading up to the election, your social media newsfeed led you to believe that it was virtually impossible for Donald Trump to win the election," she said. "Similarly, young people are particularly influenced by social [media](#), so I think it's important for [heavy drinking college students](#) to recognize that posting and seeing their friends' alcohol-related posts can strongly influence how much they drink."

Heavy drinking among college students remains a critical public health concern. About one in four college students report academic

consequences from drinking including missing class, falling behind in class, doing poorly on exams or papers, and receiving lower grades overall. About 1,800 college students die every year of alcohol-related causes, according to the NIAAA.

The first two years of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) Pathway to Independence Award will be devoted to creating standardized self-report measures to gauge how often students post about drinking and alcohol-related topics.

Nguyen Steers will work with Clayton Neighbors, UH psychology professor and director of the Social Influences and Health Behavior Lab, and Megan Moreno of the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She will collaborate with Robert Wickham of Palo Alto University.

The goal of the intervention - described as a "[social-media](#) specific personalized normative feedback intervention" - is to serve as an "eye-opener" for heavy drinkers by drawing attention to misperceptions related to these alcohol-related posts, Nguyen Steers said.

"When heavy drinkers are confronted with what's actually normal, they're usually surprised when they realize they're [drinking](#) way above the norm," said Nguyen Steers.

The grant is for \$251,010 over the first two years at UH with additional funding in the remaining three years.

A 2014 study by Nguyen Steers found a link between Facebook use and depressive symptoms due to social comparison.

Provided by University of Houston

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