

Beyond the Likes: Youth, Alcohol, and the Power of User-Generated Content

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Aim: Young people today spend a significant amount of time on social media, making it a central part of their daily lives. A growing concern is the widespread presence of user-generated alcohol-related content, which may influence young people's attitudes and behaviours around drinking. Understanding how alcohol-related content is shared and perceived is an important area of research, as it can provide insights into potential risks and guide effective prevention strategies. The symposium will report on the findings from two separate but complementary projects that examined user-generated alcohol-related content using a range of methodological approaches and novel methods, focusing on young people, including those from groups who are disproportionately impacted by alcohol related harm.

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PRESENTATION 1: Alcohol Promotion via User-Generated Content on Instagram and TikTok: A Content Analysis

Presenting Authors: *Assoc Prof Matthew Dunn*

Background: Young Australians are prolific users of social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. Alcohol-related user-generated content (UGC) – created by influencers and peers – appears to play a central role in shaping young people’s alcohol-related attitudes and behaviours. However, the nature and extent to which UGC facilitates the promotion of alcohol remains under-examined.

Method: This content analysis examined 1,739 public user-generated Instagram and TikTok posts, focusing on major alcohol tags and hashtags over a 7-year period. Posts were systematically coded for account type, sentiment, product placement, and indicators of marketing (e.g., sponsorship or undisclosed marketing).

Results: Of the posts analysed, 38% originated from influencers accounts. Five percent were identified as sponsored content, while 9% showed characteristics of undisclosed marketing. Half featured alcohol as the main focus, with 63% including branded products. Most posts (77%) expressed pro-brand sentiment, 52% showed positive drinking experiences, and 20% portrayed camaraderie. Only 2% contained anti-brand sentiment or depicted negative consequences of alcohol consumption.

Discussions and Conclusions: UGC predominantly carried a celebratory tone, reinforcing a pro-alcohol narrative that influences young users’ attitudes toward drinking. The disparity between disclosed and suspected undisclosed promotional content highlights transparency and regulatory issues.

Implications for Practice or Policy: These findings underscore the limitations of industry self-regulation in managing alcohol marketing online. Stronger regulatory frameworks, independent monitoring, and content transparency tools are urgently needed to mitigate young people’s exposure to covert alcohol promotion.

PRESENTATION 2: “Cocktails and Fireworks:” When are Alcohol-related Instagram posts more likely to be written?

Presenting Author: *Jack Delmenico*

Introduction: Alcohol use and associated harms peak during festive seasons and large public gathering events, like New Years Eve. One factor that may influence alcohol use by normalising use and harms around festive seasons is the alcohol related content (ARC) and advertising on social media, particularly from influencers and celebrities. We aimed to track the top Australian influencers on Instagram to identify when alcohol-related and branded alcohol posts were written.

Method: We identified every post written ($n=688,325$) from the top 1,034 Australian Influencers. Large Language model Llama2 was used to determine if posts contained alcohol references. The posts were then hand coded to ensure accuracy and to identify branded posts. A total of 20,803 alcohol-related posts were identified. Descriptives and ANOVAs were then run to test for differences in posts for days of the week and months of the year.

Results: There was a significant difference in the number of posts written per day ($F=8.778$ $p>.001$), with more ARC posted on weekends (Friday to Sunday) and during the summer months ($F= 3.42$, $p>.001$) (November to December). Specifically, 3.5%-3.7% of all posts are alcohol-related on weekend days compared to 2.6%-2.7% during the mid-week. These trends are the opposite for non-ARC posts as they're posted mid-week and in the middle of the year. The most common posting days were over the new year.

Discussions and Conclusions: ARC was posted more on weekends and during summer months, which follows the trend of when people partake in alcohol use. The opposite trend for non-alcohol related posts demonstrates that exposure to ARC occurs when viewers are more likely to drink alcohol.

Implications for Practice or Policy: These findings support the need for further policy development around ARC on social media and implementing safety messages during periods of increased drinking behaviours.

PRESENTATION 3: “Everyone’s a bit buzzed, so why not share that”: Exploring the alcohol-related user-generated content practices among Aboriginal, Rural and LGBTQIA+ young people in Victoria, Australia

Presenting Author: *Dr Alessandro Crocetti*

Background: Social media platforms are increasingly saturated with alcohol-related user-generated content (UGC), which can shape young people’s attitudes and behaviours toward drinking. While all young people are potentially influenced by this content, certain groups—such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth, LGBTQIA+ youth, and those living in rural and regional areas—experience disproportionate alcohol-related harms and may have unique experiences with alcohol-related UGC. However, research examining these diverse perspectives remains limited.

Method: This qualitative study explored perspectives of Aboriginal, LGBTQIA+, and rural/regional young people (aged 16-20) regarding alcohol-related social media practices through semi-structured interviews (n=24). Reflexive thematic analysis identified patterns across participant narratives with attention to cohort-specific experiences.

Results: Platform-specific alcohol-related UGC practices normalise alcohol consumption, impact mental health, and increase pressure to drink. Rural/regional youth reported heavier drinking with exposure to glorified binge drinking content; LGBTQIA+ participants engaged with alcohol content intertwined with identity; and Aboriginal participants faced alcohol-based racial prejudices via UGC rooted in historical stereotypes.

Discussions and Conclusions: Findings demonstrate complex interplay between location, identity, and alcohol-related social media practices. Digital platforms reproduce existing inequalities while creating unique vulnerabilities for marginalised youth. Participants demonstrated media literacy as they navigated peer dynamics, influencer content, and broader commercial influences embedded within digital environments.

Implications for Practice or Policy: Participants advocated for health warning labels on alcohol-related content akin to gambling advertisements and comprehensive education programs rather than restrictive social media measures. Policy development should incorporate youth perspectives, particularly from marginalised communities, to create culturally responsive approaches.

PRESENTATION 4: Do the influencers really influence? Establishing an objective measure better determine whether there is a link between following influencers who post about alcohol and alcohol use.

Presenting Authors: *Dr. Benjamin Riordan*

Introduction: Previous research has identified that there is a link between following influencers who post about alcohol and alcohol use. However, these studies exclusively rely on participants' self-reporting how often the top influencers they follow post about alcohol, which is extremely inaccurate. We aim to establish an objective measure to better estimate alcohol-related posts from influencers and test whether objective measures correlate with alcohol use.

Method: Participants (n=128) reported their weekly alcohol use and up to five of the top influencers they followed. We then extracted every public Instagram post from the listed influencers and used a Large Language Model (LLM) to analyse the text of each post for whether it mentioned alcohol or not. We hand-annotated a subset of posts to estimate accuracy of the model, calculated number of alcohol posts for each influencer, and then estimated the link between average number of alcohol posts from influencers participants followed and alcohol use.

Results: 281,227 total posts were collected from 410 unique influencers. The LLM was accurate at detecting whether alcohol was mentioned (96%), and most influencers referenced alcohol at least once (90%). We found a positive link between alcohol use and the mean number of alcohol-related influencer posts ($r=.29$). In a multiple regression model, objective estimates predicted participants' alcohol use when controlling for age and gender.

Discussions and Conclusions: We highlight that objective measures are feasible and are likely more accurate than participant estimates. Additionally, we highlight that even when using objective measures, that there is a link between following influencers who post more about alcohol and alcohol use.

Implications for Practice or Policy: Influencers are commonly followed by young people and are often used to market alcohol and other unhealthy commodities. Policy should aim to reduce exposure to alcohol-related content to young people from influencers.