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ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION AND SOCIAL MEDIA USE

CONNECTIONS AND THE PRESSURE TO TREND AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN UGANDA

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Abstract

Background: Alcohol consumption contributes substantially to the global burden of disease, with a particularly high impact among young people and the low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). Social media is an evolving communication platform globally used, by particularly young people, to generate, share, and consume content, including texts, pictures, and videos. Besides its benefits, social media can be linked to addictive behaviours, and substances use such as alcohol consumption. A significant gap in the current evidence on alcohol consumption and social media connections is the limited research from LMICs such as Uganda. The main aim of this thesis is to contribute to the understanding of the connections between social media and alcohol consumption among university students in Uganda in order to advance the evidence necessary to inform relevant alcohol control interventions.

Methods: This thesis is based on two sub-studies using quantitative and qualitative methods among undergraduate students at Makerere University resulting in three papers (1–3). In Sub-study I, data on exposure to social media, including alcohol advertising, and alcohol use was collected using a questionnaire among 996 students. Multinomial logistic regression was used to assess the associations (Paper1 and 2). In sub-study II, the qualitative data was collected using semi-structured interviews with 19 students (10 men, 9 women). The content analysis approach was used to analyse the data on student perceptions and experiences on the connections between social media use and alcohol consumptions (Paper3).

Results: Almost four in ten (39%) students reported having used alcohol in the previous year, and almost all (97%) had used social media. Alcohol consumption, especially regular drinking, was associated with both moderate (OR=2.22, 95% CI:1.35–3.66) and high (OR=2.45, 95% CI: 1.43–4.20) levels of general social media use. In addition, alcohol consumption was associated with alcohol-related social media engagement (OR=6.46, 95% CI: 4.04–10.30) and alcohol-related lurking (OR=4.59, 95% CI: 2.84–7.39) (paper 1). Regarding exposure to alcohol adverts on social media (paper 2), most students (70.1%) reported low exposure. However, high exposure to social media was related to hazardous drinking (OR = 12.62, 95% CI: 4.43–35.96) and low-risk drinking (OR = 3.70, 95% CI: 1.88–7.27). These together suggest a dose-response relationship.

In paper 3, social media and alcohol consumption by university students were perceived to be connected through 'the pressure to trend to fit in' theme presented in two categories: 'drinking and posting to belong', and 'students as marketing targets and agents'. Under the first category 'drinking and posting to belong', a posting culture was believed to normalise alcohol content including hazardous drinking experiences circulated on social media. The posting culture was also perceived as a factor that created a mental health challenge that possibly contributed to alcohol drinking as a coping strategy. The 'students as marketing targets and agents' category highlights students as indirect and direct alcohol marketing audience and agents. The students revealed engagement strategies by alcohol companies that span contractual arrangements to event sponsorship tactics that appealed to student aspirations and adventure lifestyles.

Conclusion: This thesis revealed that the use of social media, including exposure to alcohol adverts on social media was related with alcohol consumption in a dose–response pattern. The qualitative analysis highlighted how a pressure to fit in within a posting and trending culture on social media that university students navigated, was perceived to perpetuate alcohol drinking as well as provoke poor mental health among students. The alcohol industry directly and indirectly engaged students on social media and through offline activities that created alcohol content for social media

By combining quantitative and qualitative methods, this thesis provides context-specific evidence from Uganda, a low- and middle-income country, offering an understanding of how social media dynamics intersect with alcohol consumption by university students. This contribution is particularly significant given the limited research from LMICs, and it highlights the need to consider social media environments and related culture in the design of interventions targeting alcohol consumption among students. The results may inform alcohol control interventions including regulations for students at Makerere university and similar settings.

Keywords: social media, alcohol, students, university, Uganda, peer pressure, trending, posting culture.

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