

AlcoholNZ article

Title

Young adults, alcohol and social networking

At a glance

- This article was published in print form in HPA's June 2014 *AlcoholNZ* magazine (available on alcohol.org.nz/alcoholnz).
- Dr Patricia Niland is the author of this article. It examines how young adults use social networking sites to create, share and reflect on their drinking occasions.
- This article also outlines findings from New Zealand research that explored the ways that young adults use social technologies in their drinking practices.
- It demonstrated that social networking sites are crucial to young adults' drinking cultures and the ways they represent their identities in their social worlds.
- The research report and other related publications can be found on Massey University's drinkingcultures.info website.

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Young adults, alcohol and social networking

Young adults are identified globally as excessive drinkers and this has led to widespread concerns about the implications of their drinking practices on their health (Babor et al., 2010; Rehm et al., 2009).

Yet young adults make sense of their drinking as an enjoyable sociable activity for friends to share (eg, Martinic & Measham, 2008; Niland, Lyons, Goodwin, & Hutton, 2013; Guise & Gill, 2007). Further, they view alcohol health promotion messages that promote individual responsibility for alcohol harms as largely irrelevant to them (de Visser, Wheeler, Abraham, & Smith, 2013; Fry, 2011; Hutton, 2012). To understand young adults' drinking practices, it is important to explore the meanings of their drinking from their own perspectives (Brown & Gregg, 2012; Jayne, Valentine, & Holloway, 2010). This article examines how young adults use social networking sites (SNS) to create, share and reflect upon their drinking occasions.

Research exploring young people's own meanings of their drinking finds they highly value drinking as social fun times together (Lyons & Willott, 2008; Niland et al., 2013; Szmigin, Bengry-Howell, Griffin, Hackley, & Mistral, 2011). Their drinking is closely related to friendship, intimacy and bonding through humorous and adventurous nights out together (MacNeela & Bredin, 2011; Tutenges, 2012; Workman, 2001) and in experiences of caring for drunk friends and being looked after when drunk (de Visser et al., 2013; Niland et al., 2013; Vander Ven, 2011).

Young adults are also among the most active users of SNSs such as Facebook and MySpace (Duggan & Brenner, 2013) and their personal relationships are increasingly managed through these online contexts (Tapscott, 2009).

Young people use SNSs to interact with their face-to-face friends (eg, Boyd, 2006; Niland, Lyons, Goodwin, & Hutton, in press; Reich, Subrahmanyam, & Espinoza, 2012) and they represent their identities within SNSs in relation to their friends (Larsen, 2007), as "this is who we understand 'me' to be" (Mallan & Giardina, 2009, para. 22).



The value placed on drinking as a social activity among young people, alongside the significance of SNSs in their everyday lives, has led researchers to consider the role of SNS use on drinking practices for this group.

Qualitative (interview and focus group) research exploring young adults' meanings of SNS alcohol content has shown they routinely use SNSs to organise drinking events, post photos and comments while out drinking, and share the fun and humour of drinking nights through photos afterwards (Brown & Gregg, 2012; Hebden, 2012; Lyons et al., 2014; Niland, Lyons, Goodwin, & Hutton, 2014; Tonks, 2012). A study in Australia, for instance, found that young adult women use Facebook status updates (brief written text on SNS pages) to share the anticipation of drinking events and a night's thrills and drama are routinely documented at the time through Facebook status updates, comments and photos, all shared by friends as 'insider jokes' the next day (Brown & Gregg, 2012).

Findings from a New Zealand study

In New Zealand, a recent research project, funded through the Marsden Fund, explored the ways in which young adults (18 to 25 years) use social technologies in their drinking practices (Lyons et al., 2014). This study included 141 participants within 34 friendship focus group discussions (12 Pākehā, 12 Māori and 10 Pasifika groups) and 23 young adults went online to show and talk about their Facebook activities in individual interviews that were screen and video recorded. This research demonstrated that SNSs are crucial to young adults' drinking cultures and the ways they represent their identities in their social worlds. Most of the young adults routinely consumed alcohol together to become intoxicated and SNSs were fully integrated into their drinking practices. They shared humorous and adventurous stories created through Facebook photos, tagging (adding a friend's profile name to a photo or status update), commenting, and 'liking' (clicking a 'like' button next to a photo or post to indicate positive feedback), all of which perpetuate shared drinking fun (Lyons et al., 2014; Niland et al., 2014).

This engagement with drinking and SNSs was, however, nuanced across ethnicity, gender and social class. The study reports, for instance, that Pākehā participants shared their drinking practices online with less self-surveillance or reflection than Pasifika and Māori participants, who were more likely to voice concerns about their families and communities viewing their online drinking displays. Females spoke of society's expectations for them to display 'feminine' (moderate and controlled) drinking behaviour and to represent this in SNS drinking photos. Although males tended to distance themselves from SNS photo activity, viewing it as 'feminine' behaviour, to be tagged in these photos was an important social recognition for them. Participants from lower socio-economic groups voiced concerns about others judging their online drinking content, while middle socio-economic groups had concerns for their occupational reputations, and upper socio-economic groups expressed less concern about online drinking displays.

This research project also found that to be visible in SNS pages was crucial for many young adults, and they invested significant amounts of time and effort to update and maintain their Facebook pages. Their photo displays of drinking events were particularly attended to.

The research found that firstly photos were used to identify, connect to, and reinforce friendship group relationships.

Secondly, drinking photos involved effort to fit into drunk ('ugly' and 'crazy') friendship group drinking displays while maintaining an overall attractive (more good looking photos) online self-identity. This involved ongoing photo work to judge appearances, tag acceptable good photos and un-tag unattractive or 'too drunk' photos.

Thirdly, talk about happy drinking photos also prompted recounting of drinking episodes (unseen in photos) involving personal upsets and injuries. These photos were meaningful to friends as 'insider stories', reinforcing friendship group belonging and excluding wider audiences. This friendship bonding through shared adversity in drinking may set up powerful resistances to messages that focus on individual negative emotional and physical consequences.

This research and its findings have recently been published in a research report which can be directly accessed via the research project website – visit <http://drinkingcultures.info/index.html>.

Implications

Insights gained from research on young adults' drinking and social networking demonstrate that SNSs are embedded in young adults' everyday drinking cultures. To align their initiatives to be more realistic and relevant to young adults' social worlds, it is now timely for health promoters to engage with young adults' use of SNSs within their drinking practices.

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