

## Commentary on Ng Fat *et al.*: On-line interaction and behavior IRL—social media and alcohol use among young people

*Social media and on-line interaction can be as significant as the offline environment in shaping youth health behaviour; possibly explaining the association between social media and alcohol use by youth. Social media also presents opportunities for new prevention and intervention strategies.*

Ng Fat *et al.* showed that heavier social media use was associated with greater alcohol consumption among 10–15- and 16–19-year-olds in the United Kingdom [1]. Longitudinally, the authors found that, when compared to non-users, those youths and young adults with some social media use at baseline were more likely to drink alcohol or binge drink over time. While the findings are in line with previous research, which has consistently established a relationship between youth social media use and increased alcohol consumption [2,3], the study by Ng Fat *et al.* extends prior literature by offering valuable evidence on how age changes the relationship between social media use and drinking—an issue of which little is still known [2]. According to the authors, a change in alcohol use frequency was observed particularly in the younger age group, as those 10–15-year-olds who had increased their social media usage were also more likely to have increased their drinking frequency. This is a notable finding that slightly differs from past research findings, which have indicated a relationship between social media and heavier alcohol use among older adolescents and young adults [4]. These current findings call for a deeper exploration of where the risk and protective factors of social media use lie when it comes to alcohol use by youth. Social media are inherently social, and people are inevitably influenced by the interactions therein [5]. Ng Fat *et al.* propose that the association between heavier social media use and higher likelihood of more frequent drinking by youth could be due to cultural norms of drinking which are transferred through the on-line context [1,6]. Prior research work on norms concerning addictive behaviours [7–9] provide support to this notion, suggesting that observed norms are a powerful transferer of health behaviours. The challenge of social media is that they are likely to distort the user's perception of reality due to user activity, contacts and various algorithms [10]. Perceptions of alcohol norms or the impression of how much others are drinking are often over-estimated [2,11]. This poses a risk to young people who are particularly susceptible to social norms and can lead to many unwanted and harmful

behaviour patterns, such as increased drinking. Ng Fat *et al.* did not investigate the effect of social norms as such, although they discussed youths' sociability both on- and off-line as a potential factor influencing greater alcohol use. However, their results highlight where the gaps exist in understanding how social media and on-line relationships could impact the behaviour of developing youths. Emerging research in the field suggests that social media and virtual interaction in general can be as powerful as the off-line environment in terms of shaping youth behaviour [12].

Ng Fat *et al.* defined social media use as belonging to social media sites, including Facebook, Myspace and Bebo. However, social media are much more diverse and manifold, warranting wider and more nuanced consideration. Research indicates that social media platforms differ greatly when it comes to interface and content [13]. Social media such as Facebook and Instagram are more user-orientated and on these types of platforms, users typically have a visible identity. Interaction in these services is based on people's mutual relationships and content is mainly shared among a certain set of other users (i.e. friends, followers) [13]. It is possible that, on platforms such as these, social interaction is more meaningful and social influence and behavioural diffusion occur more easily. Social media such as YouTube and Twitter are more content-orientated where networks are established around users' shared interests. Other users or audiences are more far-reaching and often anonymous [14]. Young individuals are likely to turn towards more interactional social media platforms where communication is mutual [15,16]. This could also partly explain the clearer pattern between social media use and higher likelihood of more frequent drinking among the 10–15 age group.

It is noteworthy that Ng Fat *et al.* conclude that no direct evidence was found indicating that the rise of social media platforms could be contributing to the increase in non-drinking among youth [17]. While social media use has been associated with adverse health behaviours, the opportunities to employ different on-line platforms for prevention and intervention strategies are abundant. However, future longitudinal research is needed, as social media are rapidly expanding and evolving. New forms of social media may present unforeseeable risks for youth alcohol use and other off-line risk behaviours, but also opportunities for prevention.

**Declaration of interests**

None.

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