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Would You 'Like' A Drink? Youth Drinking Cultures, Social Networking and Alcohol Marketing

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Preventing alcohol abuse, especially among young people, has long been a focus of public-health campaigns.

But despite the well-publicised social and medical consequences of drinking too much it's clear that for many, heavy drinking has become a normal part of life.

And now, public-health professionals have a new force to contend with in their battle against the bottle: social-networking sites (SNS).

Writing in a recent issue of *Critical Public Heath*, researchers from New Zealand consider the extensive, and not entirely positive, impact SNS may have on their efforts to encourage more responsible youth drinking (McCreanor et al., 2013).

The authors argue that although SNS users benefit from creating and sharing content, the sites are "quintessentially commercial platforms" which provide entirely new vehicles for alcohol marketing. The very characteristics that make SNS popular – blurring boundaries between public and private spaces, acting as extensions of face-to-face relationships and being regularly viewed and updated – also contribute to their commercial potential by bringing alcohol producers and consumers closer together.

The researchers note that site owners also have extensive access to valuable information about users' preferences, habits and interests, providing a bonanza for alcohol-marketing dataminers.

Evidence suggests that alcohol producers and sellers are already embracing SNS as an effective marketing tool.

Diageo, which has expanded its SNS marketing in recent years, has entered into a deal with Facebook, with over one billion users; other UK brands also employ a range of strategies including games, competitions and "branded conversation stimulus" in Tweets and wall posts. Well-known brands and alcohol-related events generate vast numbers of "friends", and alcohol-related apps

thrive. The effect of all of this, the authors write, is to "normalise alcohol within both banal and special occasions in the everyday lives of SNS users".

And then there is user-generated content.

Millions of wall posts, profiles and photos revolving around alcohol play a big role in normalising drinking within young adults' lives and cultural words. But the biggest challenge posed by SNS is that "they are effectively beyond the domain of public authority, essentially unregulated and possibly uncontrollable". The authors call for more research into the impact of SNS on youth drinking patterns, as even this initial survey gives a strong indication of how they may come to play a major role in maintaining pro-alcohol environments.

On the positive side, the Critical Public Health study also points out that SNS can be used to encourage young drinkers to change their practices in a more positive way. Unfortunately for public-health practitioners however, photos of people drinking responsibly aren't nearly so much fun to put up on Facebook.

More information: McCreanor, T. et al. *Youth drinking cultures, social networking and alcohol marketing: implications for public health, Critical Public Health,* 23(1), 110-120.

Source: Medical Xpress