



## Editorial

## Social Media and Substance Use: What Should We Be Recommending to Teens and Their Parents?



With social media increasingly integrated into the lives of today's teenagers, there are two urgent needs: for further research on online exposure to substance use and for clear recommendations to mental health practitioners, adolescents, and parents about the need to assess and monitor teens' online exposure to substance use. In this issue of the *Journal of Adolescent Health*, Nesi et al. [1] make an important contribution to this much-needed research by demonstrating an association between exposure to friends' alcohol-related postings on social networking sites and the later onset of drinking behaviors. Their finding of perception of peers' approval of alcohol as a mediator is a key step in elucidating a potential pathway between social media exposure and subsequent substance use.

### Teens and Social Media

In 2015, 92% of teens aged 13 to 17 years reported going online daily, 24% were online "almost constantly," and 71% used more than one social networking site [2]. Social media use is associated with mental health problems including depression, sleep disturbance, and eating concerns among young people (e.g., [3]). Social media perpetuates social comparison in a world where everything is curated, which is particularly problematic for teens who may be more prone to depressive cognitions in the face of such social comparison.

There is little legal protection for teens interacting online. Federal law prohibits Web sites from collecting personal information from children under age 13 years without parental permission; however, this is easily bypassed (sites like Facebook do not require verification of stated age), and no such law exists for teenagers. Teens' legal ability to share personal information online has been upheld in courts under contract law, despite recognition in many other contexts, supported by the growing body of research on adolescent brain development, that adolescents are developmentally incapable of contracting like adults. This legal landscape leaves teens vulnerable to many consequences, legal and personal, of sharing information through social media. These include cyberbullying, exposure to online predation, child pornography charges resulting from sexting, and

poorly thought postings being accessible to college admissions officers and future employers [4].

Without protection under the law for the consequences of teens' online activities, the responsibility of monitoring largely falls to parents. Parents appear to be doing some monitoring of their teens' online behavior, but frequent and consistent monitoring does not appear to be the norm. A Pew Research Center survey of parents of teens found that although 60% reported they had "ever" checked their teen's social media profiles, only 35% knew the password to one or more of their teen's social media accounts, and 39% had ever used parental controls for their teen's online activities [5]. The report did not comment on how consistently this monitoring was done (when it was done at all).

### Social Media and Substance Use

Substance use is rampant and often glorified by celebrities and others on social media. There have been reports of social media being used as a strategy for selling drugs, with hashtags facilitating the process of pairing buyers with sellers [6]. Tobacco, electronic cigarette, and alcohol industries have widely integrated social media platforms into marketing strategies that are fully accessible to teens [7]. In this way social media has opened up doors for these industries to market to youth even when direct marketing to minors is against the law or supposed to be internally regulated. The burgeoning cannabis industry is opening up even more opportunities for teens to have exposure to advertising through social media. Exposure to substance use imagery is associated with subsequent onset in use [8], which is why drinking alcohol and using drugs in movies warrants an R rating. Social media is harder to regulate.

Questions remain about the nature of the relationship between exposure to substance use on social media and subsequent use. A 2011 report by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University showed that teens who use social media were more likely to use tobacco, alcohol, and marijuana than teens who do not use social media, and risk was higher for those who had seen pictures of kids using or passed out from alcohol or drugs [9]. Another study

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found that undergraduate students with disordered online social networking use were more likely to have problematic drinking and difficulties with emotion regulation [10]. The study by Nesi et al. takes this area of inquiry a step further by demonstrating a pathway from social media use to increased drinking. Their finding that peer injunctive norms serve as a mediator between social media exposure and the initiation of drinking behaviors points toward intervention targets of peer influence and normative behaviors.

### Responsibility of Mental Health Practitioners

Mental health practitioners have a responsibility to incorporate social media education and recommendations into their practice with teens and families. Given the extent to which social media is influential in substance use and mental health functioning, we recommend that professionals take the following steps to understand and educate about social media and substance use:

- Incorporate social media use, and other online behaviors, into intake and assessment procedures.
- Encourage teens to discuss the substance use information they see on social media as part of the routine substance use assessment, and use evidence-based strategies to address negative cognitions that may arise as a result. It is currently recommended by the National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism that clinicians assess substance use with younger youth by asking whether their friends drink [11]. Exposure on social media should be considered part of this process (e.g., “What do your friends post on social media about alcohol use?”).
- Systematically ask families about social media policy in the home—how often is it being used and how is it regulated. Urge families to develop a social media policy that respects autonomy but also limits exposure and allows for parental monitoring. Encourage families to include parental access to teens’ social media passwords and accounts as part of the family policy (especially for younger teens). Have families articulate a strategy for how to handle violations of the policy, just as they would an instance of substance use.
- More research is needed on what parents actually know about their teens’ social media activities, and how parents’ reported

knowledge compares with their teens’ reports of their online activities.

More awareness among mental health practitioners of how social media influences adolescent substance use will help our field better serve adolescents in an increasingly digital age.

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