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**EXPLORING AN ASSOCIATION BETWEEN ONLINE ALCOHOL  
ADVERTISEMENTS AND ALCOHOL DRINKING AMONG COLLEGE  
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**ABSTRACT**

Alcohol drinking among young people is a major global public health concern. The situation has been aggravated further by the advent of the internet and subsequent development of social media as a tool for online alcohol marketing. This exploratory study sought to find out the prevalence of alcohol advertisements on social media and its possible influence on alcohol drinking among college students in Kenya. Based on a field survey conducted in Nairobi, (N=70), this study has established that there was heavy presence of alcohol advertisements on social media scene in Kenya. Although statistically, there was huge gender disparity, the final results showed that there was significant

association between alcohol ads on social media and college student's possible alcohol drinking habits. This study concludes that there is need for the stakeholders in public health promotions to formulate policies aimed at mitigating against the challenges posed by unrestricted access to online alcohol ads by the youth in order to prevent them from being lured into early alcohol drinking by the alcoholic beverage makers.

**Key words:** alcohol abuse; influence; online ads; youth; Kenya

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## INTRODUCTION

Alcohol drinking among young people is a major global public health concern. There are concerns that exposure to alcohol advertising could be one of the influencing factors to youth alcohol consumption. Similarly, a growing body of research indicates a positive association between alcohol advertising and alcohol use among young people (Chen, Grude, Bersamin, Waiters & Keefe, 2005).

However, the advent of the Internet and subsequent development of social media as a tool for online marketing has provided new impetus to the advertisers to reach out to their prospective clients through social media platforms. Conversely, there is also growing concern that adolescents and young adults are increasingly becoming the main victims of alcohol abuse worldwide, and the situation would be exacerbated further by the heavy presence of alcohol advertisements on social media platforms.

Though McClure et al. (2016) indicated that exposure of youth to online alcohol marketing is understudied, despite its prevalence and potential accessibility and attractiveness to youth, recent studies have demonstrated that the alcoholic beverage manufacturers have taken to the social media to market their products. Alcohol marketers have increasingly moved their advertising efforts into digital and social media venues (Hoffman, Pinkleton, Austin & Reyes-Velázquez, 2014). With the proliferation of the internet and online social media use, alcohol advertisers have augmented their marketing strategies to include online promotions (Barry et al., 2015). In the same vein, Alhabash, McAlister, Quilliam, Richards and Lou (2015) assert that the alcoholic beverage manufacturers have a strong presence on social media.

In light of the foregoing, it is evidently clear that this newly found advertising techniques have also witnessed the mushrooming and penetration of alcoholic beverage manufacturing firms onto the social media platforms in an attempt to reap from this new venture. This has caused great concern amongst the key actors in public health, as it would lead to increased visibility and marketing of alcoholic products to the detriment of the wellbeing of the society generally, and to the youth in particular.

Youth have tremendous potential for exposure to online alcohol marketing given how much time they spend online (D'Amico et al., 2018). The youth are also the single largest netizens of social media users, spending the highest amount of time on the net compared with other segment of social media clients. Due to their strong presence on social media sites, coupled with a lot of time they spend on the net, youth possess enormous potential for online marketers including the alcoholic beverage makers among other corporates. This poses a serious health hazard to youth and young adults, who already bore the greatest brunt of alcohol abuse and consumption around the world.

Kenya, like elsewhere, in other parts of the world, have also had the challenges of alcohol abuse among young people. Though there is a paucity of studies linking alcohol advertisements on social media and subsequent alcohol consumption by the youth in the country, there are concerns that binge drinking by college students is a cause for worry among the actors in the public health. Therefore, this exploratory study aims to offer some insight into the prevalence of alcohol advertisements, hereafter referred to as ads, on social media, the nexus between alcohol ads on social media and alcohol drinking habits among the youth, and the resulting relationship between social media use and college students' consumption of alcohol in the country.

## BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE DEVELOPMENT

According to Ramsoomar and Morojele (2012), globally, harmful alcohol use and associated risk behaviours present a formidable threat to the health of youth aged 15 - 29 years. In addition, youth alcohol consumption is a major global public health concern (Jernigan, Noel, Landon, Thornton & Lobstein, 2016). Similarly, heavy drinking among university students has been globally recognized as a major public health burden (Yi, Ngin, Peltzer & Pengpid, 2017).

Furthermore, Cheadle and Williams (2013) argued that the prevalence of alcohol use in adolescence suggests that it is an important avenue by which teens integrate socially with peers away from adult supervision. The youth sector is an important part of the market as heavier drinking is concentrated in the late teenage years and in young adulthood (Casswell, 2004). The prevalence of heavy drinking among college students in 21 developed and developing countries was associated with living away from home, having a wealthier family background, and having well-educated parents (Dantzer, Wardle, Fuller, Pampalone, & Steptoe, 2006). Drinking alcohol has become widespread among Chinese college students, a manifestation of a nationwide epidemic for two decades already (Ji, Hu & Song, 2012).

In some countries, this hazardous alcohol drinking habits have also been reported in the under aged children. Alcohol use among adolescents and young adults, excessive alcohol consumption among college students, and underage drinking poses a considerable public health concern in the United States of America (D'Amico et al., 2018; Grenard, Dent & Stacy, 2013; Hoffman, Austin, Pinkleton & Austin, 2017). Underage drinking is a major problem in Australia and may be influenced by exposure to alcohol advertising (Jones & Magee, 2011).

At regional level, Kabiru, Beguy, Crichton and Ezeh (2010), in their study of adolescents' alcohol abuse in four sub-Saharan African countries of Burkina Faso, Ghana, Malawi and Uganda found that alcohol consumption is associated with acute and chronic adverse health outcomes, as well as negative social and behavioural outcomes, such as risky sexual behaviour. In Ethiopia, alcohol is one of commonly used substance in the country (Fekadu, Atalay & Hanlon, 2007), with the most commonly used substance among students being alcohol (Tesfaye, Derese & Hambisa, 2014). Further, Desta, Soboka, Workneh and Gashaw (2018) suggests that young people including university students are likely to be the most at risk of using substances like alcohol, khat, tobacco and other drugs.

In Uganda, the relationship between alcohol use and risky sexual behaviour is complex, and it may be influenced by a combination of social, physiological, and individual personality traits (Choudhry, Agardh, Stafström & Östergren, 2014). In another study, Stafström and Agardh (2012) suggest that alcohol consumption and monthly heavy episodic drinking (HED) among students in Uganda are associated with socioeconomic background factors, but with different patterns for young men and women. Similarly, Ramsoomar and Morojele (2012) report that, although South Africa has made significant strides in alcohol control and prevention of alcohol-related harm over the past decade, early alcohol initiation remains a concern and binge drinking is increasing, especially among females.

In Kenya, alcohol abuse is nearing a national catastrophe that could almost tear apart the social fabrics of the society. According to National Authority for the Campaign against Alcohol and Drug Abuse (Nacada) report of 2012, nationally, the use of alcohol and other intoxicating substances is a social behaviour which is embedded in communities and cultures, and is sustained by the supply side. Nacada is a national agency that is mandated to oversee the campaign against the alcohol and drug abuse in the country. Further, the Nacada report of 2011 shows that alcohol and drug abuse are major social problems in Kenya, with serious public health ramifications, and the worst part of it is that consumers are starting young. It is estimated that half of all alcohol and drug abusers in Kenya are aged between 10 to 19 years old (Craig, 2012).

Over the years, this risky alcohol drinking behaviour has also penetrated into academic institutions, affecting students across the board ranging from high schools, colleges to university students. According to Boitt (2016), despite the growing problems of global alcohol abuse, accurate information on the prevalence of alcohol abuse among university students in Kenya is still inadequate. However, the available literature indicated that the prevalence of alcohol abuse amongst the college students is rampant in the country.

Incidences of drug and alcohol abuse and related anti-social behaviour among the youth have tremendously increased in recent years despite the control mechanisms that have been put in place (Chesang, 2013). In their study among the Egerton university students, Njoro, Kenya, (Boitt, Boitt, Othieno & Obondo, 2016; Boitt, 2016) found that, there was significant association between the prevalence of alcohol abuse and the year of study, marital status, family's economic status and the living arrangements (with whom). Alcohol consumption among university student athletes is a global health issue attracting attention from different stakeholders (Rintaugu, Ngetich, & Kamande, 2012). Similarly, Changalwa, Ndurumo, Barasa and Poipoi (2012) suggest that alcohol abuse has adverse health, social and economic effects. According to these authors, alcohol also affects the brain's mental functions, adding that it is the major cause of indiscipline among college students and affects students' academic performance.

Therefore, Kenyan authorities are concerned that youth drinking of alcohol poses a great danger to the country's attainment of its economic development blue print of vision 2030, the time it is envisaged that the country will fully attain the upper middle-income economic status. This could remain a mirage unless the problem of alcohol abuse by the youth is contained, as they are the backbone towards the country's realization of this ambitious economic progress.

And now with the advent of social media and proliferation of alcohol ads on these platforms, there is growing concern that alcohol abuse among college students is likely to be accelerated further. Although the research on alcohol ads on social media is relatively at its infancy globally, locally, there was no evidence over the existence of literature in this field. Consequently, this exploratory study aims to fill this gap in order to provide some insight into the prevalence of alcohol ads on social media and its possible influence on the college student's alcohol drinking habits.

### **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The following research questions and hypothesis were formulated to guide in the study.

RQ1. What is the prevalence of the alcohol ads on social media scene in Kenya?

RQ2. What is the association between alcohol ads on social media and alcohol consumption among the youth?

H1. There is strong relationship between the college students' social media use and their alcohol drinking habits.

### **METHODOLOGY**

This study was based on a field survey, in which simple random sampling was used to select the respondents for the study from a sample population of Multimedia University of Kenya, a national public university based in Nairobi. To ensure that a representative sample was attained, the gender of the respondents and their level of study were factored in. Additionally, all the respondents should be able to access and use different social media platforms. The data collection was done by use of close ended questionnaires in May 2018, Nairobi, with an aid of a trained research assist over a period of 3 days. Once collected and coded, analysis of the data was done by the use of Statistical Packages for Social Sciences (SPSS). The first part of the questionnaire was meant to explore the prevalence of

alcohol ads on social media while the next section aimed at establishing the relationship between the youth’s exposure to alcohol ads on social media and its potential influence on alcohol use before concluding with the possible influence of social media use on alcohol consumption amongst the college students.

**Measurements of Variables**

*Prevalence of alcohol ads on social media*

The respondents were required to state the frequency of alcohol related ads appearing on the social media they were using options; always, sometimes or not at all.

*Alcohol ads on social media and alcohol use*

The respondents were asked to indicate whether or not alcohol ads on social media could have influence over the youth’s alcohol use (no, yes and I don’t know).

*Relationship between social media use and potential alcohol drinking*

The respondents were required to indicate whether there is any relationship between social media use and potential alcohol drinking among college students from the options provided (no, yes and I don’t know).

**RESULTS**

**Demographic Details**

In terms of gender, the sample (n=70) was fairly balanced with 30 males and 40 females, with mean age of 19.5 years. In total, 28.6 % of the respondents were diploma level students while 71.4% were degree students. This study showed that 97.1% the respondents used social media daily while 2.9% used it rarely. The most commonly used social media platforms were WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter accounting for 62. 9%, 18.6% and 14.3% respectively.

In terms of the uses of the social media, most of the respondents reported using the social media to chat with friends (24.3%), to have fun (17.1%) while blogging and accessing new sites each attracted 8.6% of the respondents. However, the majority of the respondents (41.4%) indicated using the social media for multiple purposes. The independent sample t-test showed that there was significant group variation in gender for uses of social media. However, the analysis of descriptive statistic showed that while 70% of the female respondents reported all of the above, 56.7% of male reported chatting with friends (See Table 1).

**Table 1: Descriptive statistics showing how different groups responded to different variables**

	Gender of respondents	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
The uses of social media	male	30	1.77	1.073	.196
	female	40	4.68	.526	.083
frequency of alcohol ads on social media	male	30	1.67	.479	.088
	female	40	2.28	.452	.071
Alcohol ads on social media influences alcohol use	male	30	1.40	.498	.091
	female	40	2.18	.385	.061
relationship bet social media use and potential alcohol use	male	30	1.2667	.44978	.08212
	female	40	2.2250	.42290	.06687

**RQ1: What is the prevalence of the alcohol ads on social media scene in Kenya?**

With regard to the prevalence of alcohol ads on social media platforms, the findings showed that 14.3 % of the respondents frequently spotted alcohol ads on social media, 70% reported noticing them occasionally while 15.7% never saw them at all. There was no group variation in gender for frequency of alcohol ads on social media. However, the analysis of descriptive statistics showed that the male respondents were most frequently exposed to online alcohol ads than their female counterparts as 33.3% and 66.7% of male reported recognizing these ads always and sometimes respectively, while female respondents indicated sometimes and not at all at 72.5% and 27.5% respectively.

**Table 2: Shows the result of independent sample t-test on the main variables of this study**

		Levene's Test		t-test for Equality of Means		
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
The uses of social media	Equal variances assumed	15.115	.000	-14.946	68	.000
	Equal variances not assumed			-13.671	39.435	.000
Frequency of alcohol ads on social media	Equal variances assumed	1.033	.313	-5.428	68	.000
	Equal variances not assumed			-5.382	60.559	.000
Alcohol ads on social media influences alcohol use	Equal variances assumed	15.630	.000	-7.346	68	.000
	Equal variances not assumed			-7.081	52.879	.000

**RQ2: What is the association between alcohol ads on social media and alcohol consumption among the youth?**

As to whether alcohol ads on social media could influence the use of alcohol among the youth, 25.7% of the respondents disagreed, 64.3% were affirmative while 10% of those polled do not know. The independent sample t-test showed that there was significant group variation in gender since p value was found to be.000 at 5 percent level of significance. In addition, the analysis of descriptive group statistics showed that there was gender disparity on this variable as 82.5% female and 60% of male reported yes and no respectively, and with a mean of 1.40 and 2.18 and wider standard deviation of 0.498 and 0.385 for male and female respectively as shown in table 1.

**H1: Social media use and potential alcohol use**

With reference to the relationship between social media use and potential for alcohol use among the college students, 31.4% of the respondents disagreed, 55.7% were affirmative while 12.9% do not know. Although the independent sample t-test showed that there is no significant group variation in gender for the relationship between the college student’s social media use and potential alcohol use, the analysis of the descriptive statistics showed that 77.5% of the female respondents agreed while 73.3% of their male counterparts disagreed. Further, as indicated in table 1, the mean rating for male on this variable was 1.3 while female was 2.2. This showed that there was wide gender disparity on this variable.

## DISCUSSION

This study sought to explore the prevalence of alcohol ads on social media scene in Kenya, the possible influence of alcohol ads on social media on alcohol use by the youth, and the relationship between social media use and potential alcohol use among the college students.

The results of this study showed that there was heavy presence of alcohol ads on social media, with the majority of the respondents spotting these ads occasionally while the others witnessed them more frequently. This high-level presence of online alcohol ads suggest that the youth were having unfettered exposure to the alcoholic beverage maker's products via social media platforms in the country. This unrestricted exposure to alcohol ads on social media poses an inherent great health hazard to the youth and young adults who could easily be influenced by these ads, and duped to engage in early alcohol drinking habit.

These results were in concurrence with other previous studies that have pointed out the existence of alcohol ads on various social media platforms. For instance, the findings by Barry et al. (2016, 490) pointed out to the unobstructed accessibility youth have to alcohol advertising and promotion via both Instagram and Twitter, and there was no restriction to viewing and interacting with the content posted on alcohol brand pages. In addition, in the study investigating the nature and content of alcohol brand websites in the UK, Gordon (2011), illustrated the sophisticated range of content accessible on alcohol brand websites. Further, Mart, Mergendoller and Simon (2010) found a great deal of alcohol-related content were contained in the five Facebook features of ads, pages, applications, events, and groups. Similarly, in a related study, Winpenny, Marteau and Nolte (2014) pointed to the evidence that social media websites such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter are heavily used by children and young adults, and that such sites are used for marketing by alcohol companies.

This study also suggested that the male respondents seemed to be more frequently exposed to online alcohol ads than their female counterparts. This could be attributed to the diverse daily social media usage patterns of the respondents, as different people engage the online media for different purposes. For instance, in this study, the analysis of the descriptive statistics showed that in their uses of social media platforms, 70% of the female respondents reported all of the above while 56.7% of the male respondents reported chatting with friends as their most common uses of social media. This suggested that the daily uses of social media among the respondents seemed to differ from one gender to another.

Although the majority of the respondents (64.3%) agreed that alcohol ads on social media has potential influence on the youths' alcohol use, this study suggest that the gender of the respondent is statistically significant with regard to this variable. While the majority of the female respondents (82.5%) were affirmative that exposure to alcohol ads on social media may have influence on alcohol consumption by the youth, their male counterparts seemed to be hesitant by indicating (60 %) disagreement on this variable. This shows that the female respondents appeared to be more concerned about the effects of the online alcohol ads than their male counterparts, who seemed to downplay the overall implication of such exposure to alcohol drinking. It is crucial to point out that as reported elsewhere in this study, the descriptive statistics showed that female respondents were less frequently exposed to online alcohol ads than their male counterparts. This implies that adverts intended for the same target audience could have varying implications.

Nevertheless, although there was gender disparity on this variable, the overall result of this study suggests that there is strong relationship between alcohol ads on social media and its possible influence on alcohol use among the youth. The results of this study partially lend support to the outcome of the study of four European countries by de Bruijn et al. (2016) whose findings demonstrate that the association between frequency of exposure to online alcohol marketing and adolescents' drinking was robust and seems consistent across national contexts.

In the same vein, the research hypothesis for this study has been confirmed, that there is a relationship between social media use and alcohol drinking among the college students. The confirmation of this hypothesis also conforms to the basic principles of advertising technique that employs persuasive tactics of arousing the interest of target audience by appealing to their emotions in order to influence their attitudes towards the product (alcohol) being advertised. After their repeated exposure to such product, this may in the end lead to change of attitude towards the product, which could ultimately result in the prospective client in making the decision to buy the product.

Although the majority of the respondents indicated that there is a close relationship between the social media use and potential alcohol drinking by college students, statistically, there was gender disparity on this variable. The analysis of descriptive statistics showed that 77% of the female respondents agreed while 73.3% of their male counterparts disagreed on the same variable. This suggests that the respondents were sharply divided as to whether there was significant relationship between the college students' social media use, and their subsequent consumption of alcohol.

However, it is worth noting that the use of social media per se in itself may not necessarily lead the youth to engage in alcohol drinking. But instead, social media could play a mediating role, given the high prevalence of the online alcohol ads, coupled with a lot of the time the youth spend on social media platforms as well as their frequent exposures to online alcohol ads, may lead the youth to engage in early trial of alcohol drinking behaviour which may result in binge drinking in the long run.

### CONCLUSION

This study has illustrated the heavy presence of alcohol ads on social media, and the likelihood of youth having unrestricted access to the alcoholic beverage products. This could have a far-reaching implication on their alcohol drinking habits. Although some of the social media sites have built in device to deter underage from accessing their ads, studies have shown that this technique is not fool proof as the tech-savvy youth were able to circumvent the restrictions put in place to have full access to the alcoholic brands. This new development could pose health hazard to the youth population, unless stringent measures are put in place to regulate the online marketing of these products. The matter is complicated further by the fact that different countries have varying legal drinking age limits. In addition, the hastily technological evolution makes it near impossible for countries to successfully regulate alcohol ads on social media. This concern was also raised by the World Health Organization (WHO) report of 2014, which indicated that most member countries were still lagging behind with requirement for the enforcement of restrictions on alcohol ads on social media. In Kenya, while the alcohol regulation act of 2010 prohibits the dissemination of promotional material that contains an alcohol-related brand via any communication media, however, it remains a challenge to extend the same restrictions to social media as technology use blurs the international boundary.

Therefore, there is need for the stakeholders and the main actors in public health promotions to device ways of handling these challenges in order to curb early recruitments of young people into alcohol drinking by the alcoholic beverage marketers on social media. In addition, the policy framework guiding the advertisements of alcohol products on social media need to be reviewed. This observation is line with the reasoning by Winpenny et al. (2014) who noted that the rise in online marketing of alcohol and the high use of social media websites by young people suggests that this is an area requiring further monitoring and regulation. Similarly, Chester, Montgomery and Dorfman (2010) have also pointed out that online alcohol marketing has already become a highly diverse and complicated field-providing new challenges to the public's health.

### RECOMMENDATIONS AND LIMITATION

Although this study has provided some insight into the prevalence of alcohol ads on social media and its possible influence on the Kenyan college students alcohol drinking, this study also has some

limitations, in that sample size was small thus the results could not be adequately generalized. Due to time constraints, the period over which the study was conducted was also equally short. Therefore, this study recommends for future research to be undertaken in this field to establish the causal relationship between the exposures to alcohol ads on social media and the college student's actual alcohol drinking habits. In addition, there is need for a follow up study to be done to unravel the reasons behind the existence of wider gender disparity with regard to the association between social media use and subsequent alcohol use among college students.

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