Instagram Posts Related to Alcohol Use on College Football Game Days after Implementation of an Alcohol Sales Policy

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InstaTags Posts Related to Alcohol Use on College Football Game Days after Implementation of an Alcohol Sales Policy

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ABSTRACT

Background: Alcohol-use frequency likely has a causal impact on chronic conditions. Many university/college athletic departments have implemented policies that allow alcohol sales at sporting events. Few studies have assessed the social context and impact of sales at college football games on fan behavior. One method for retrospectively assessing such behavior is to analyze event-specific social media posts to capture behavior displayed as photographs and text captions on event days.

Purpose: This study analyzed online data, specific to a Southeast university, posted on Instagram, after implementation of a policy to allow alcohol sales.

Methods: The posts were coded by alcohol presentation, alcohol/account type, account owner’s gender, caption, context, likes, and comments present.

Results: Key findings included: (i) an increase in alcohol images after policy implementation, although not statistically significant, (ii) alcohol posts portrayed alcohol in an overwhelmingly positive context, and (iii) alcohol content was posted more frequently by women and non-alcohol related businesses, and the primary alcohol present was beer in these posts.

Discussion: The use of Instagram for assessing the social context of alcohol use among Instagram users did allow for a better understanding of social characteristics in the context of a specific social activity (i.e., sporting event).

Translation to Health Education Practice: This research provides viable data collection methods for examining the social context of event-specific drinking (Area 1.2) and promotes discussions regarding how social media posts impact drinking behaviors among those who view the posts.

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Background

Alcohol consumption is a risk factor associated with an array of chronic diseases and conditions. Furthermore, alcohol-use frequency, along with overall volume consumed, contribute to a substantial level of global burden of chronic illnesses and conditions. Although emerging research supports a causal link between alcohol-use frequency and chronic disease, many university and college athletic departments have started implementing policies that allow the sale of alcoholic beverages at sporting events, particularly at campus football stadiums. Between 2017 and 2019, the number of Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) Division I college football programs that offered in-stadium alcohol sales nearly doubled (40 to 78). While the alcohol sales are slated to generate substantial amounts of money for the college and university campuses, they also contradict strategic campus initiatives aimed at reducing student drinking and negative consequences associated with drinking on-campus.

College students are considered an at-risk group for high levels of alcohol use, and as such, the behavior is deemed a serious public and community health problem linked to the onset of lifetime chronic conditions. In addition, sporting events held on college campuses, particularly college football games, have been associated with high-risk drinking behaviors among collegiate spectators. Specifically, Glassman and colleagues noted that alcohol consumption levels by fans on football game days were higher than consumption levels by the same fans at their last social, non-sporting event. Moreover, sports fans have been found to experience more alcohol-related problems than non-sports fans. Nelson & Wechsler, and more recently, Barry and colleagues reported that crime incidents occurring in a case study of a campus football stadium before and after the allowance of alcohol sales saw an upward trend, with liquor law violations being highest after alcohol sales at the stadium were initiated. The crime report data included alcohol violations; specifically, Barry and colleagues found that liquor law violations and alcohol

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consumed by a minor were the most frequently cited offenses within the crime report data reviewed in their case study.

Despite the recent growth of colleges and universities approving policies to allow alcohol sales at college football stadiums, to date, very few studies have assessed the impact of alcohol sales at college football games on fan behavior during the sporting event day; those that have, primarily, focused on alcohol-related offenses and arrests reported on game day. However, no studies have been found to examine fan behaviors, specifically related to alcohol use, exhibited on game day, not resulting in an arrest or alcohol-related offense. One method for retrospectively assessing such alcohol-related behavior is to collect and analyze event-specific social media posts to capture behavior displayed as photographs and text captions on college football game days, as “documentation of one’s self and life events are key motivators for use” among those who create online archives of their behavior through social media. This data collection method can be a viable and useful way for assessing event-specific behaviors, linking to Area 1.2 of the Responsibilities and Competencies for Health Education Specialists. Furthermore, research suggests that health-risk behaviors displayed online, through social media posts, are consistent with those reported offline, and it has been noted that alcohol-related content on social media platforms, such as Instagram, can provide real-time assessment of behaviors as they occur.

**Why Instagram: user-generated content on the social media platform**

Within the last decade, social media use has grown exponentially, with approximately 72% of adult Americans using at least one social media platform in 2018. One such site, Instagram, has over 500 million daily active users. Instagram is a photo-sharing, social media application that allows photographs to be shared, with text affixed to the picture, and hashtags can be used to organize and search content/pictures posted. In addition, Instagram content can be searched and organized by a specified timeframe within the social networking platform. Among those in the age range of 18–29 years, 67% use Instagram. Research has shown that Instagram users in this age group are more likely to imagine their audience to be friends and romantic partners versus a more family-oriented audience on other platforms, such as Facebook. With that, Instagram users are increasingly displaying alcohol-related posts on their accounts. Specifically, prior research indicates that young people use social networking sites to communicate about alcohol, as several studies have shown between 36% and 96% of adolescents and young adults display alcohol through social media posts, such as posting photos of a person holding an alcoholic beverage. Furthermore, research studies have suggested a positive relationship between alcohol-related posts on social networking sites and self-reported alcohol use. Therefore, this platform is ideal for examining pictures and texts posted, during a specified timeframe, in an attempt to include alcohol-related posts by young adult users.

**Alcohol posts and social activity (i.e. sporting events)**

When alcohol is consumed, within the social context of an event, like a college sporting event, social norms begin to originate from the peers present in that social context. Peer influence of alcohol use can lead to increased alcohol consumption. In addition, research has shown that if alcohol is displayed or discussed in a positive way by peers, it can result in increased alcohol consumption, while negative connotations of alcohol can actually reduce drinking behaviors. Therefore, capturing variables of the social environment, including peers present and the manner in which alcohol is portrayed, is important for better understanding the alcohol-related behaviors being displayed, particularly in regard to user-generated alcohol posts on social media. Moreover, analyzing the social content of alcohol-related posts (i.e. presence of people, type of alcohol, positive/negative social context with alcohol), while also extracting these evaluative posts via event-specific hashtags to denote a social activity (i.e. college game day), allows for examination of alcohol-related behaviors and social evaluative contexts of posts associated directly with the social activity or event.

**Purpose**

**Current investigation**

In order to evaluate fan alcohol-related behavior and social contextual variables, displayed via social media, on college game days before and after alcohol was made available in the college sporting venues, the current investigation analyzed online data, specific to a large university, with a Division I football program, located in the southeast of the U.S., posted on the popular platform, Instagram, from August 2018 through December 2018, and compared with data posted from August 2019 through December 2019. The timeframe of 2018 to 2019 was selected, because a new state policy was introduced and passed in June 2019, which allowed beer and wine sales at sporting events at institutions of higher education in the study state. The collection of Instagram data from two timeframes was critical in determining whether this recent change in state policy had an impact on the frequency alcohol displayed and social
context of Instagram posts specific to game days at the institution. The August–December months accounted for all fall sporting events at the 4-year institution, and the dates used were specific to the college football game days during each year. Therefore, a pre-post case study at this one institution was conducted, and this study reports on alcohol-related Instagram posts, specific to the study campus, during the 2018 and 2019 football seasons.

The primary purpose of the current investigation is threefold; including, determining (i) whether a change in policy allowing the sale of alcohol during sporting events had an effect on the number of alcohol-related Instagram posts associated with the college sporting events, (ii) what social content and context were present in the Instagram posts (i.e. whether overall message in alcohol posts was positive, negative, or neutral; number of people present) and (iii) the social demographics related to the Instagram posts (i.e. gender, type of alcohol, and interactions with the post). The collection of these parameters allows for a better understanding of the fan alcohol-related behavior and social context portrayed on Instagram during the specific college game days, before and after the allowance of alcohol sales during the institution’s sporting events.

**Methods**

Data for this study were collected using the social media site, Instagram. All methods were approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) (UMCIRB# 19-002625). Posts on Instagram were sampled based on the usage of four (4) specific hashtags related to the institution in the research area. These hashtags are popular hashtags used by college students and alumni of the institution, specific to college football game days, and determined by the frequency of posts using these hashtags when searched on Instagram. To protect the identity of the institution, as approved by the IRB, the institution name in the hashtag is replaced with an X for publication purposes. The hashtags were #Xfootball, #Xgameday, #Xtailgate, and #rollpirates. The search feature in Instagram allows for hashtag searches and provides a time frame for the posts under the “recent” tab. Only public posts on public accounts were accessed for the sampling frame and final sample to be analyzed qualitatively in the study. In order to collect the posts on public accounts, the researchers created a new Instagram account with zero accounts being followed, in order to keep the private accounts followed by researchers out of the sample. Posts (pictures and text in posts) from August 2018–December 2018 and August 2019–December 2019 that used the 4 hashtags were included in the study. No account names were captured and/or tracked after the picture was analyzed and the accompanying text was used for data analysis. Pictures and the text were analyzed to identify any alcohol-related content. Codes were created and affixed to each post for data analysis, in order to not use the account name in the data file. The pictures were numbered and the hashtags had a corresponding letter. Only researchers had access to pictures for conducting the data analysis. The pictures showing individuals and any identifying information were not used in the results in order to protect the identities of those in the public posts. All data files with any identifying information were stored on password protected computers that only the researchers had access to, and that data file was deleted, once the pictures and text were analyzed.

Coder training was conducted by the first author for two, independent coders. The total number of Instagram posts retrieved using the specific hashtags were recorded (n = 1591 in 2018; n = 1135 in 2019), but only images pertaining to alcohol, as described below, were analyzed (n = 125 in 2018; n = 131 in 2019). To assess coder reliability, 10% of the Instagram posts for both years (n = 25) were randomly sampled from the total alcohol-related posts and coder agreement was assessed. Coder agreement was deemed acceptable among variables with ns high enough to evaluate agreement; (i.e., posts with a negative context of alcohol could not be assessed, given the low n). Interobserver variation as measured by Cohen’s kappa statistics ranged from 0.713 to 0.921. From there, the remaining posts were coded for further analysis. Specifically, the two coders searched and retrieved the sample data separately, coded individually, and then came to consensus to analyze the content. As mentioned previously, the data were collected in two sub-samples: from August 2018–December 2018 and August 2019–December 2019. Two sub-samples were collected in order to assess the research question regarding whether there would be an increase of alcohol-related posts after the introduction of the alcohol sales policy. Each of the four selected hashtags produced a main sample of posts (n = 1591 in 2018; n = 1135 in 2019), and alcohol-related posts/pictures were pulled from the sample to be further analyzed (n = 125 in 2018; n = 131 in 2019). The posts were coded based on the alcohol presentation, type of alcohol, type of account, account owner’s gender, caption, context, likes, and comments present. The coding scheme previously published by Hendricks and colleagues was used in this current case study investigation.

**Coding procedure**

A coding scheme was created by three study researchers and recorded in a codebook for reference. Data were stored in Microsoft Excel sheets, which were used for data compilation and comparison. These data were later imported into SPSS data files for analysis. The coding
scheme dictated specific numerical codes for each variable response. A description of the variable responses is below. If a coder was unsure of how to proceed with a code, a discussion with the first author was conducted prior to a code being assigned.

Coding variables

Occurrence and people in posts
An “alcohol-related post” was determined to be any post visually displaying alcohol or mentioning alcohol use in the corresponding caption (i.e., the text affixed to the Instagram post). If the photograph posted did not explicitly depict an alcohol beverage/brand in the picture (i.e., beer can, wine, liquor or shot glass with alcohol contents, alcohol bottle and/or alcohol branding materials), it was not included for analysis, unless the text specifically mentioned drinking or alcohol. Therefore, for example, pictures of individuals holding red solo cups, without the ability to determine that they contained alcohol, were not included in the sample for further analysis (unless the caption referred to alcohol/alcohol use). Coders identified how the alcohol was displayed and/or who was holding the alcohol in the following categories: 1) the main profile user, 2) tagged individuals, 3) both the user and tagged individuals, 4) untagged individuals in the background, 5) no one, alcohol is present in the background, 6) an image of only alcohol, and 7) no alcohol in image. The coders also identified whether the caption mentioned or insinuated alcohol use. Coders also identified the type of alcohol present in the posts by the following categories: 1) beer, 2) wine, 3) liquor, 4) mixed drinks, 5) other, 6) none, and 7) multiple types of alcohol present.

Social context
The overall context toward alcohol that was displayed in the Instagram posts was recorded (positive, negative, or neutral). Positive images were based on expressions of happiness or laughing. The images were considered negative if disapproving looks were given or consequences of alcohol were displayed (e.g., someone sick or passed out), and neutral context displayed people emotionless or disengaged. In addition to the overall context of the post, the context of captions was coded as well (positive, negative, or neutral, or N/A). If positive words were used (i.e. “What a great time! Can’t wait to party tonight!”), these captions were coded as positive. If negative words were used (i.e. “Horrible hangover; Drank way too much”), a negative code was used, and if the context could not be inferred from the caption, it was neutral. An “n/a” was given if no caption was provided.

Users
The type of Instagram account from which the post originated (personal or business) was recorded. This information is found on the user Instagram profile. Further, personal accounts were coded based on the gender identified on the public account profile page. Business accounts were further coded based on whether they were an alcohol-related business or not. Alcohol-related businesses were defined as any infrastructure that serves or sells alcohol (e.g., bar, club, restaurant) and non alcohol-related businesses were any that did not sell or serve alcohol (e.g., radio station, clothing store).

Reactions to posts
Based on the studies that show individuals use social media as a way to connect, support, and often influence others, it was decided to code the number of post interactions in the form of “likes” and comments present on each Instagram post. Moreover, similar to the context of the captions described above, the overall context of the comments for each post was coded for context (positive, negative, or neutral, or N/A).

Data analysis
Using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) v25, descriptive statistics were computed to summarize sample characteristics, frequency statistics for social context of posts (positive, negative, neutral), alcohol-related information for each post, and the type of Instagram account. McNemar’s repeated measures chi-square test was used to assess differences between proportion of alcohol-related posts by year (2018 vs. 2019), to determine pre- and post-policy implementation differences, and significance testing was conducted on these differences.

Results
After the inclusion criteria were employed, 256 alcohol-related Instagram posts (yr 2018 = 125; yr 2019 = 131) were included in the final sample for further data analysis. That means that 7.9% of all posts, using the specific hashtags, were alcohol-related in 2018, while 11.5% of posts made in 2019 were deemed alcohol-related posts. Of the 256 alcohol posts, 195 (76.2%) were from personal Instagram accounts, while 61 posts (23.8%) were from business accounts. In regards to the research question of whether the policy to allow alcohol sales at the sporting events in fall of 2019 impacted the number of alcohol-related posts on Instagram, McNemar’s chi-square test of posts from 2018 compared to 2019 indicated the test was not significantly significant ($X^2 (1) = 0.141, p = .708$); therefore, the null hypothesis that the proportions of posts are equal is not rejected, indicating no significant differences of alcohol
posts, before and after the policy was established, although the proportion of alcohol posts was indeed higher (by 3.6%) after policy implementation.

In terms of how alcohol was presented in the Instagram posts, Table 1 provides the occurrence of alcohol in the images and if the alcohol in the post was being held by the Instagram user (owner of the account), a tagged/untagged individual, both the user and tagged/untagged individual, or displayed in the post with no person in the photograph. The majority of posts either displayed tagged individuals holding alcohol (26.2%) or both the user and tagged individuals holding alcohol (26.2%). Therefore, over 50% of Instagram posts, from both years, portrayed individuals displaying alcohol use/consumption on the photograph posted to the public account, which supports a social context with the user, other people shown (tagged/untagged) and the behavior.

Moreover, the analysis of the captions to assess if the text used insinuated and/or mentioned alcohol use indicated that the majority of alcohol-related posts (images) did not have an accompanying caption related to alcohol or alcohol use (77.3%). Therefore, although the photograph posted displayed alcohol use, the captions did not mention or insinuate anything about alcohol/alcohol use directly.

Table 1. How alcohol is displayed in the Instagram post.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Held by user</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>14.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Held by tagged individual</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>26.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Held by both user and tagged individuals</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>26.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Held by untagged individuals in background</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Held by no one, alcohol in background</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>14.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image of only alcohol</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>12.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No alcohol in image</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>256</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 provides data on the total number of posts that displayed each specific type of alcohol by year. Beer, by far, was the alcohol product identified in a majority of Instagram posts (82.4% in 2018, 88.5% in 2019), followed by pictures of mixed drinks (7.2% in 2018, 3.8% in 2019).

The social context toward alcohol portrayed in the alcohol image (i.e., positive, negative or neutral) was assessed and coded; the overwhelming majority of pictures posted were associated positively to alcohol (99.2%), with images associated with negative (0.4%) and neutral (0.4%) contexts accounting for less than 1% of all posts. Although not all posts contained captions associated with the alcohol or alcohol use in the picture, of those that did, a majority was coded with a positive context toward alcohol (99%). Furthermore, of the 195 posts on personal accounts, 74% were posts made by females, as identified by the user profile, and 26% by males. Additionally, of the 61 Instagram posts analyzed from business accounts, the non-alcohol related businesses posted more alcohol images (~74%) as compared with alcohol-related business (26%).

Reactions to alcohol posts, captured as “likes” and/or comments to a post, revealed that 77% of posts (197/256) had at least one comment, with frequency ranging from 1 to 177 comments, and all posts had at least one “like,” frequency ranging from 4 “likes” to 4,637 “likes.” All the alcohol posts did not receive comments, but for those that did, comments were primarily positive toward alcohol and/or alcohol use (194/256; 75.8%), with only 1.2% showing negative context toward alcohol, 1.6% neutral, and over 21% not applicable (n/a), meaning comments were not provided.

**Discussion**

The assessment of fan alcohol-related behavior, using Instagram alcohol posts linked to specific hashtags of a Division I university, before and after the allowance of alcohol sales at sporting events, indicated no statistically significant changes between the 2018 and 2019 college football seasons. Although, there was an upward trend, in terms of a slightly higher percentage (~3.6%) of alcohol posts in 2019 (after policy implementation), this difference was not found to be statistically significant. However, the use of Instagram for assessing the social context of alcohol use among Instagram users, linked directly to the study institution via the hashtags used, did allow for a better understanding of these social characteristics in the context of a specific social activity (i.e., sporting event). Therefore, this research allowed for the better assessment of how alcohol is displayed in the social media environment specific to this university community, which can potentially impact the perceived drinking norms of the media audience. This is important given the link between alcohol-use frequency and chronic conditions.1

Moreover, this data collection method provided a snapshot of alcohol-related behaviors on event-specific days. According to Moreno and Whitehill,13 social media has the potential to strongly influence decisions of young people. Moreover, there have been demonstrated links between online and offline alcohol use.28 Key findings in this study were: (i) using only the four hashtags to identify the institution in the research area, an increase in images

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Table 2. Types of alcohol posted by year.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>2018 Frequency</th>
<th>2018 Percent</th>
<th>2019 Frequency</th>
<th>2019 Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beer</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>82.4</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>88.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wine</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liquor</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed drinks</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple types of alcohol</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
related to alcohol after the introduction of the alcohol sales policy at college sporting venues was detected, although not statistically significant, (ii) alcohol-related posts, using the specific hashtags, indicated alcohol is portrayed in a positive context among users’ alcohol posts on game days, and (iii) the primary public accounts most frequently posting alcohol content were operated by women on personal accounts and non-alcohol related businesses, and the primary alcohol present is beer in these posts. While a statistically significant difference between the pre- and post-years was not detected in terms of number of alcohol posts on event-specific days, possible reasons that need further investigation include: age of the population of Instagram posters, as underage spectators would not be able to purchase alcohol at the sporting event and age is a factor for Instagram use, how cost of alcoholic beverages at the events may impact consumption during sporting events, and lastly, the alcohol types and promotions provided to spectators and if that impacted consumption, and potentially social media use, on game days. These variables, coupled with use of social media, particularly Instagram, as a means to capture behavior on event-specific days, provide opportunities for future research in this area.

Similar to results from Hendricks and colleagues, who assessed alcohol-related posts of young adults on both Instagram and Facebook, the alcohol posts of users in this study (both personal and business) were overwhelmingly positive. In addition, more tagged individuals (versus the user themselves) were more often holding alcohol in the posts, and females with public accounts were more likely to post alcohol-related pictures/captions than males. These findings give some more insight into the local condition, as it relates to this sample of Instagram posts and alcohol. The research will help create a better understanding of the social context associated with drinking, particularly with this population, and enable future discussions on research to assess how social media posts impact actual drinking behaviors among those who view the posts.

**Study limitations**

As with all research studies, the current study has several limitations to consider. First, only four hashtags were used to create the sample of posts analyzed for the online investigation. In addition, only public accounts with public posts were accessed for the study; therefore, posts from private accounts were not included. For protection purposes as IRB-required, the name of the institution and sporting events at that institution cannot be reported. Another limitation involves the coding of the alcohol posts; these posts were coded from an outsider point-of-view. Coders looked at the post and made a determination of whether alcohol was present or insinuated in the comments (based on a coding scheme used by the two coders); and, although acceptable coder reliability was determined among the independent coders, it is possible to have error in interpretation. And, although research supports an association between behavior displayed online and behavior offline, these research findings cannot be directly linked to alcohol use behavior among Instagram users of the sampled posts, as data regarding alcohol use were not collected from the users themselves.

**Translation to Health Education Practice**

Area 1.2 of the Responsibilities and Competencies of Health Education Specialists (National Commission for Health Education Credentialing, Inc., [www.nchec.org](http://www.nchec.org)) requires practitioners in the field to “obtain primary data, secondary data, and other evidence-formed sources” to effectively conduct situational assessments of populations. This study provides a data collection method, using social media platforms, for better understanding event-specific behaviors. In this case, the Instagram posts provided important information regarding how alcohol is portrayed (i.e., positive context, mostly held by tagged individuals) in the context of college football game days at a large university in the southeast. The results highlight the need for interventions aimed to decrease alcohol-related posts on social media, understanding the social context around these posts. Specifically, strategies for better understanding and increasing the awareness of how alcohol-related posts at social gatherings and events (tagging others in posts) result in viewer behavior are needed.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

**References**


