

# Study finds social media encourages teen substance use

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New research has found adolescents who are active on social media are being exposed to content that could put them at risk of developing drug and alcohol issues.

The study, led by University of Queensland Ph.D. student Brienna Rutherford from UQ's National Center for Youth Substance Use Research, examined how drug and [alcohol](#) use content was portrayed across [social media](#).

"We looked at almost 16 million posts across Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, Pinterest, TikTok and Weibo and found the majority of drug and alcohol use content was depicted positively," Ms. Rutherford said.

"This positive depiction is concerning because [adolescents](#) and [young adults](#) are the most vulnerable and heaviest users of social media globally, spending an average of eight hours a day online.

"There's evidence to show teens who are exposed to high levels of substance use are more likely to use and develop issues with alcohol, tobacco and cannabis.

"In fact, alcohol and [drug](#) use is the main contributor to disease in adolescents and young adults.

"Better restrictions are needed on [social media platforms](#) to ensure underage users are not engaging with or exposed to potentially harmful content."

The study found user-generated content depicting substance use as positive was most prevalent on social media which is likely to influence teenage viewer's behavior.

Only around 21% of posts sampled were found to be from [public health](#) and educational organizations sharing information on the harmful effects of substance use.

Ms. Rutherford says public health education agencies need to do more to

communicate the potential risks of substances.

"Social media is an incredibly powerful tool for change and, if harnessed correctly, could be a massive asset for public health messaging," she said.

"Social media is a huge opportunity for public health organizations to educate teens on the risks associated with substance use."

Currently, there are age restrictions on graphic content involving sexual themes or high-risk behaviors but substance use is relatively unregulated online.

Many platforms have taken a blanket approach to banning or restricting associated hashtags but they can be easily found by publicly available internet search engines.

Read the full paper in *Addiction*.

**More information:** Brienna N. Rutherford et al, #TurntTrending: a systematic review of substance use portrayals on social media platforms, *Addiction* (2022). [DOI: 10.1111/add.16020](https://doi.org/10.1111/add.16020)

Provided by University of Queensland

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