

Study: Social media encourages teen substance use by portraying drug and alcohol use positively

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A new study out of Australia found that teenagers who use social media are exposed to a large amount of advertising that portrays the use of alcohol and drugs in a positive manner, encouraging teen substance use.

The study, headed by University of Queensland's Brienna Rutherford, a Ph.D. student, examined thousands of social media posts across several platforms and found that overwhelmingly, ads served to teenage users depict alcohol and drugs in a positive light.

The study was carried out by examining over 16 million social media posts on Twitter, YouTube, Pinterest, TikTok, Weibo and Instagram, to see how substances were being portrayed.

"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," said Riutherford. "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.”

Of the posts examined, the ones that showed alcohol and drug use positively were mostly user-generated content, and only 21 percent of the posts were from public health organizations warning about the harms of substance abuse.

“Better restrictions are needed on social media platforms to ensure underage users are not engaging with or exposed to potentially harmful content,” said Rutherford. “Social media is an incredibly powerful tool for change and, if harnessed correctly, could be a massive asset for public health messaging. Social media is a huge opportunity for public health organizations to educate teens on the risks associated with substance use.”