The impact of Instagram content on perceived harm due to alcohol and marijuana use among adolescents

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BACKGROUND

- Perceived harm, or the perception of negative consequences (or lack thereof) linked with substance use, is an important correlate of adolescent use.
- Monitoring the Future has found that perceived harm often influences adolescent substance use.
- As alcohol and marijuana are the most widely used substances among youth, identifying factors associated with perceived harm can inform prevention programming.
- Social media provides opportunities to interact with both peers and influential figures (e.g., celebrities, musicians, athletes) that may display glamorized alcohol and marijuana use.
- As such, we examined whether frequency of exposure to alcohol and marijuana content on Instagram by peers and influential figures was associated with perceived harm.

METHODS

- Sample: 120 adolescents (M_age = 15.02, 60.8% Female, 85.0% White, 82.5% Latinx/Hispanic) who completed Waves 1 and 2 of a longitudinal study examining factors impacting e-cigarette initiation.
- Procedure: All assessments were conducted at a university laboratory. Participants enrolled in Wave 1 had to be in 9th or 10th grade and report experiencing at least 1 risk factor for substance use initiation (e.g., peer use).
- Social Media Measure: Participants endorsed the frequency of observing content posted by peers/influential figures on Instagram related to alcohol/marijuana (4 items total; 0 = Never to 4 = Always).
- Perceived Harm: Participants rated how harmful they perceive binge drinking and marijuana use to be (0 = No harm to 3 = A lot of harm).

DATA ANALYSIS

- Multiple regression models were estimated using SPSS 22.0. Covariates included sex, age, race, ethnicity, lifetime substance use and number of times checking Instagram.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Perceived Harm of Binge Drinking</th>
<th>Perceived Harm of Marijuana Use</th>
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<tr>
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<td>B -0.14 0.16 0.37 0.20</td>
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<tr>
<td>Exposure to Influential Figure Content</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Multiple regression models. Unstandardized beta coefficients and standard errors are presented. * p < 0.05.

RESULTS

- Mean exposure to alcohol content was 1.08 (SD=1.14) for peers, and 1.16 (SD=1.12) for influential figures. Mean exposure to marijuana content was 1.29 (SD=1.26) for peers, and 1.05 (SD=1.20) for influential figures.
- Participants rated binge drinking as more harmful (M=2.28, SD=0.77) than marijuana use (M=1.60; SD=0.98).
- Exposure to alcohol posts by both peers and influential figures did not predict perceived harm of binge drinking (Table 1).
- Frequency of checking Instagram negatively predicted perceived harm of marijuana use (Table 1).
- Exposure to marijuana posts by influential figures, not peers, negatively predicted perceived harm of marijuana use. Specifically, as exposure to marijuana content by influential figures increased, adolescent perceived harm of marijuana use decreased (Table 1).

DISCUSSION

- While peers strongly impact teen risk behaviors, exposure to content posted by influential figures may have a greater impact on adolescents’ perception of harm, especially with regard to marijuana use. This may be due to the glamorization of marijuana use and absence of negative consequences displayed on social media.
- Additionally, adolescents that check Instagram more frequently may be more likely to view content that displays risk behaviors.
- Interventions that target Instagram, or other social media content may have utility for addressing perceived harm of marijuana use among adolescents.
- Using influential figures to promote positive health-related behaviors and provide educational content about the deleterious impact of marijuana use may be one way to change perceptions of harm, and ultimately reduce use.
- Future work should examine these associations among samples with higher levels of use, as they may be more likely to seek out alcohol and marijuana related content.

TAKE AWAY

- Social media provides adolescents with opportunities to observe and engage with glorified alcohol and marijuana content. This project provides preliminary support for the influence that content by influential figures, not peers, can have on perceived harm of marijuana use. Future work on social media should consider the role that influential figures have on substance use behaviors.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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