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Drink, Share, Comment; Wait, What Did I Just Do? Understanding Online Alcohol-Related Regret Experiences Among Emerging Adults.

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SOCIAL MEDIA, ALCOHOL, REGRET

Abstract

This study investigated the causes and coping strategies of regret of sharing alcohol-related content on social media. Semi-structured interviews were conducted among emerging adults who experienced regret of having shared either general alcohol references or drunken references ($n = 29$, age 19-25, $M = 21.38$, $SD = 1.60$). The most important cause of regret was a disruption of one's online self-presentation. When delving deeper into the specific causes of online alcohol-related regret and how this content can disrupt the self-presentation, two overarching themes emerged: (a) content-related regret and (b) audience-related regret. When examining the coping strategies, we found that emerging adults applied different strategies (1) to minimize their regret (e.g., delete the content) and (2) to avoid future regret (e.g., delete social media before going out). Implications for prevention are discussed.

Keywords: online regret, social media, alcohol, intoxication, emerging adults

SOCIAL MEDIA, ALCOHOL, REGRET

Drink, Share, Comment; Wait, What Did I Just Do? Understanding Online Alcohol-Related Regret Experiences Among Emerging Adults

INTRODUCTION

Drinking in college is usually engaged in to enhance socialization, bonding, and have disinhibited fun (Colby et al., 2009). Most college students consume alcohol, and references to fun drinking events are often shared on social media such as Facebook or Instagram (Beullens & Schepers, 2013; Hendriks et al., 2017). Alcohol-related content shared on social media can have many different forms: individuals can share textual updates referencing upcoming or prior drinking events (e.g., 'Completely wasted yesterday night'), textual references to alcohol in general (e.g. 'I love champagne'), pictures or video clips in which people are drinking or holding and alcoholic beverage (e.g., a picture taken at a bar or at a party), pictures or video clips in which an alcoholic beverage is the focus (e.g., a close-up of a cocktail with a reference to the nice weather), or pictures or video clips in which alcohol is shown in the background (e.g., a picture taken during a dinner with a glass of wine on the table). Other examples of alcohol-related content are pictures or video clips depicting drinking games (e.g., a picture of a group of friends playing beer pong), pictures or video clips in which someone is clearly intoxicated or drunk (e.g., a video clip of friends drunkenly singing), or textual updates (e.g., twitter status updates) shared while drunk (Beullens & Schepers, 2013; Cavazos-Rehg et al., 2015; Hendriks et al., 2017). In general, these examples can be divided in two overarching types of alcohol-related content: alcohol references and drunken references. Alcohol references are defined as textual or visual social media content which shows or refers to alcoholic beverages, and drunken references are defined as textual or visual social media content that was shared while drunk, or which depicts people in a drunken state.

Though most alcohol-related content on social media is fairly innocent (i.e., alcohol references such as a picture of friends laughing together with glasses of beer on the table in front of them; Beullens & Schepers, 2013; Hendriks et al., 2017), research has indicated that more than 15% of young individuals share photos or messages on social media while they are intoxicated (i.e., drunken references; Moreno et al., 2012). While more innocent alcohol references are often shared without thinking (Hendriks et al., 2017), sharing drunken references appears to be a deliberate choice (Hebden et al., 2015; Niland et al., 2014). Individuals share drunken references because it is fun and exciting, and because it heightens the

SOCIAL MEDIA, ALCOHOL, REGRET

expectations and pleasures of getting drunk with friends (Hebden et al., 2015; Moewaka Barnes et al., 2016).

It has been posited that sharing these drunken references is at odds with the wider cultural and policy environment dominated by the idea of risk management (Brown & Gregg, 2012). Societal norms center around moderate alcohol consumption and strict impression management, especially online (Brown & Gregg, 2012; Hebden et al., 2015). It has been argued that this is especially true for young women, who are expected to adhere to beauty and appearance standards tied to the performance of ideal femininity (Brown & Gregg, 2012). In contrast, getting drunk and sharing alcohol or drunken references online is deemed risky, and a potential source of regret as it is not in line with societal expectancies (Brown & Gregg, 2012). Regret is an aversive emotion characterized by ‘a feeling of sadness, repentance, or disappointment over one’s own actions and their factual or potential outcomes’ (Wang et al., 2011, p. 1). Although Brown and Gregg (2012) argue that there is too much emphasis on the idea that young people, and especially women, will regret getting drunk or sharing content on social media, other research has indicated that alcohol consumption can lead to regret of drinking and related behaviors (Fjær, 2015; Giguère et al., 2014). One study on Facebook-related regret found that some individuals can experience regret after sharing alcohol-related content on social media (Wang et al., 2011).

While regret is an inherently negative emotion (Wang et al., 2011; Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2007), it can also teach young individuals important life lessons (Saffrey et al., 2008; Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2007). For instance, one of the core propositions of regret regulation theory is that individuals are motivated to avoid the negative feeling of regret, and this regret avoidance influences behavioral decisions (Pieters & Zeelenberg, 2007; Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2007). One meta-analysis of anticipated regret in health behaviors found that if individuals anticipated regretting an action (e.g., drinking too much), their intention to engage in this behavior as well as their actual engagement in this behavior decreased (Brewer et al., 2016). In contrast, if individuals anticipated regretting an inaction (e.g., not using a condom), their behavioral intentions and actual behaviors increased (Brewer et al., 2016). Another meta-analysis testing anticipated regret as an additional predictor in the theory of planned behavior (TPB), found that anticipated regret was related to both behavioral intentions and actual

SOCIAL MEDIA, ALCOHOL, REGRET

behavior, over and above other TPB variables (Sandberg & Conner, 2008). This shows that regret can be a strong motivator to engage in more healthy behavior in the future.

The present study will add to the literature on alcohol-related social media use by delving deeper into the causes and impact of regret caused by online alcohol-related communication. While some research exists on either drinking-related regret (Fjær, 2015) or social media-related regret (Wang et al., 2011), to the best of our knowledge, no studies exist that focus specifically on online alcohol-related regret. This study aims to improve our understanding of the specific reasons why some alcohol-related content is regretted, by looking at what causes emerging adults to regret their online alcohol-related communication (RQ1). In addition, this study also aims to provide new insights in how they experience this regret by exploring which coping strategies emerging adults use to minimize the impact of their experienced regret (RQ2) and which lessons they learn from their regret experience to prevent future regret (RQ3). In order to obtain a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of this specific type of online regret, we will differentiate between alcohol references (e.g., a picture at a dinner party) and drunken references (e.g., a status update shared while drunk). Taken together, this study will significantly improve our understanding of emerging adults' experiences with online alcohol-related communication, which in turn can inform prevention or media literacy research.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE

This study was conducted in Belgium, a country with a tolerant alcohol culture. The legal drinking age in Belgium is 16 years and when looking at college students, nearly two out of five students (37%) consume more alcohol than the guideline¹ (Van Damme et al., 2018). Prior research on alcohol-related social media effects among Belgian emerging adults finds that the majority of this population reports to share alcohol references at least a few times per year (Geusens et al., 2019, 2020).

This study was approved by the ethical review board of the authors' institution. In order to explore emerging adults' experiences of regret of alcohol-related communication on social media, a trained female interviewer (i.e., the second author) conducted 29 in-depth interviews among emerging adults.

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¹ The guideline for safe or acceptable alcohol use is 10 standard glasses per week (VAD, 2016).

SOCIAL MEDIA, ALCOHOL, REGRET

Participants were recruited using a two-step procedure. First, a Qualtrics-link to an intake-survey was sent out via Facebook, personal contacts and several organizations (e.g., sports club, theatre company), allowing the researchers to reach potential participants outside of the personal networks of the authors. The aim of this intake-survey was to select participants who experienced regret after sharing alcohol-related content on social media. Participants were asked how frequently they shared alcohol-related content on social media, ranging on a scale from 1 (*=never*) to 6 (*=always*). In line with literature on the types of alcohol-related content that are shared on social media (e.g., Hendriks et al., 2017) one question measured having shared something on social media *while drinking alcohol*, and one question measured sharing something on social media *referencing alcohol*. Participants who indicated that they had shared either type of alcohol-related content at least once, received follow-up questions assessing feelings of regret about those posts (e.g., ‘how often did you experience regret after sharing a picture referencing alcohol?’).

Of the 78 respondents who filled out the intake survey, 92.3% ($N = 72$) indicated to have used social media while drinking, 88.5% ($N = 69$) indicated to have shared something on social media while drinking, and 34.3% ($N = 36$) indicated to have experienced regret related to online alcohol-related communication at least once. This suggests that half the individuals who have ever shared something on social media while drinking, have regretted this (51.5%). All individuals who indicated to have ever regretted alcohol-related social media content were re-contacted and asked to be interviewed. This resulted in a response-rate of 80.6 %, as 29 emerging adults aged 19-25 ($M = 21.38$, $SD = 1.60$), half of which were female ($n = 14$) agreed to be interviewed. The majority of the sample were students ($n = 22$). This sample was sufficiently large: Theoretical saturation was reached after 22 interviews, as no additional data were being found and no new codes were occurring in the data after this point (Mason, 2010; Saunders et al., 2018).

DATA COLLECTION

Participants were invited for a one-on-one in-depth interview in a quiet setting (i.e., at participants’ own home). The interviews were conducted in Dutch between February and April 2018 by the second author. Before the start of each interview, participants received detailed information on the study aims (i.e., gain insight into experiences of regret of sharing alcohol-related content on social media), the type

SOCIAL MEDIA, ALCOHOL, REGRET

of questions that will be asked and the interview procedures. Participants were assured that participation was completely voluntary, and anonymity and confidentiality was guaranteed. Active informed consent was requested before the start of each interview.

Each interview was recorded using recording software on a smartphone and later verbatim transcribed. A topic list was used to guide the interview, starting with a few opening questions about participants' general social media use in order to create a relaxed interview setting. Once the participant was at ease, specific questions were asked regarding alcohol consumption, social media and feelings of regret. More specifically, the interviewees were asked to talk about instances of alcohol-related online regret, and were probed to enhance, deepen and refine their answers (e.g., 'how did you feel after sharing this alcohol-related content?', 'what did you do with this content?'). On average, interviews lasted between 14 and 40 minutes. Of the 29 interviews, four were conducted via Skype. After the interview was over, participants were extensively debriefed on the study's purpose, how they could remain up to date, and which resources were available to them if they required professional help.

ANALYTICAL PROCEDURE

Once the interviews were transcribed and anonymized, they were coded using Nvivo coding software following guidelines for inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012). More precisely, we identified recurring themes that emerged from the transcripts. First, a first set of codes was identified regarding causes and coping strategies for regret. Some examples of initial codes are 'love declarations', 'public sharing', or 'inappropriate content'. In the following steps, overarching themes were developed by relating codes to each other. Finally, themes were further reviewed, defined and named.

RESULTS

RQ1: WHAT CAUSES EMERGING ADULTS TO REGRET THEIR ONLINE ALCOHOL-RELATED COMMUNICATION

Before delving into the causes of online alcohol-related regret, the interviews revealed that drunken references were much more often regretted than alcohol references. Participants indicated that they believed moderate alcohol consumption to be normalized in their peer group, and in the wider society as 'everyone drinks alcohol', 'drinking alcohol is natural' and 'it belongs to certain occasions'.

SOCIAL MEDIA, ALCOHOL, REGRET

Moderate alcohol consumption was considered to be a way of having fun with friends, and to be generally accepted in their environment. As a result, alcohol references were rarely regretted. In contrast, sharing drunken references was generally considered less acceptable, which caused individuals to regret sharing this type of content more often, and for more different reasons.

“Participant 20: I think there’s a difference because I think, like, yeah, alcohol consumption is relatively normal, I mean, no one is shocked or surprised when you share a picture with two glasses of wine... because no one is going to comment on that, but if you then share a picture in which you are clearly drunk, yeah, people are going to comment on that.”

(Female, 21 years old)

“Participant 19: I think there’s a difference, I mean, for me it doesn’t matter but if you look drunk in a picture, it looks worse than holding a glass because everyone drinks... Everyone or yes, almost everyone.”

(Male, 21 years old)

Overall, the most important overarching cause of regret that appears to be encapsulated in almost all specific causes of regret that we could identify, was that alcohol references and drunken references **disrupted one’s online self-presentation**. Many participants argued the importance of creating and maintaining an authentic and attractive image of themselves on social media. For instance, participant 8 (female, 21 years old) argued that having content in which you look ‘decent’ is ‘okay to publish on social media’. Some alcohol references, and especially drunken references, unsettled their online self-presentation and caused regret. According to our participants, alcohol references and especially drunken references create ‘another impression of you’, ‘not a good impression’, ‘the impression of not being a serious human’ or ‘the impression of being trashy’. When delving deeper into the specific causes of online alcohol-related regret and how this content can disrupt the self-presentation, two overarching themes emerged: content-related regret and audience-related regret. We will discuss these in more detail below.

CONTENT-RELATED REGRET

MISINTERPRETATIONS. The first major cause of regret when sharing alcohol references and especially drunken references via social media, was the content itself. One way in which the content itself could disrupt the self-presentation and cause regret, was when it was **misinterpreted**. Participants

SOCIAL MEDIA, ALCOHOL, REGRET

argued that there were two kinds of misrepresentations that could cause regret. On the one hand, others could misinterpret the amount of alcohol participants consumed. Particularly, they regretted sharing alcohol references and drunken references out of fear of having created the image of a ‘drunkard’ or a ‘person who has alcohol problems’. Especially more distant peers were feared to misinterpret the content:

“Participant 14: People can make sweeping assumptions and think, like, wow, she is so drunk and trashy.

Interviewer: And do you feel like it makes a difference who sees the content?

Participant 14: ... People you frequently hang out with will maybe know that, yeah, this is something that happens like once in a while. People you hardly ever see and who watch one of those video clips will maybe think, like, ‘she’s drunk every weekend’. I mean, like, it’s not as bad with people you see every week, they know that’s not true.”

(Female, 24 years old)

On the other hand, several participants regretted sharing alcohol and drunken references, because they feared that others would misinterpret the situation and the events that happened while drinking alcohol. For instance, several participants indicated to have shared images with strangers, or with people they shouldn’t be seen with. This could cause fear that those who saw the images would think that ‘there was a lot going on which actually didn’t happen’ and that there was a more intimate relationship between the participant and the other person in the picture. This sometimes resulted in unforeseen consequences, such as arguments among friends and partners. Participant 25 for instance revealed his experience while posting content on social media while being drunk:

“Participant 25: ... Pictures where you hang around somebody and think ‘no, people are going to piss about it’ ... or for example, I took a picture with a girl friend and then I thought ‘shit a mate has a fight with her’ and I’d rather have a good relationship with him than that girl. And then I think, ‘I shouldn’t have done this’.”

(Male, 21 years old)

INAPPROPRIATENESS. A second type of content-specific alcohol-related regret, was when the shared content was deemed **inappropriate**. Inappropriate content was discussed in many different forms, as we will outline and discuss below, but it should be noted that content-related regret due to

SOCIAL MEDIA, ALCOHOL, REGRET

inappropriateness was only discussed in relation to drunken references. When consuming large amounts of alcohol, participants stopped thinking and caring about the kind of content (i.e., textual messages or pictures) they shared online.

“Participant 24: I think that that boundary [of what is acceptable] is really lowered when you’ve been drinking. In my perception, you take more risks in that you think like ‘pff’. You dare take more risks and you think like, ‘oh I don’t care, I’ll share it’.”

(Female, 22 years old)

When looking specifically at textual drunken references, participants indicated to regret both privately (e.g., via WhatsApp) and publicly shared messages (e.g., via Twitter). Alcohol’s disinhibiting properties caused participants to share feelings and opinions they wouldn’t have shared when sober. Particularly privately sent ‘embarrassing’ **love declarations** – including platonic love declarations to good friends that came across as cheesy or misplaced – were often later regretted. While these messages were usually well-intended, they were oftentimes accidentally sent to the wrong receivers, which harmed their public image and caused regret. Participant 28 for instance revealed her regret experience after writing ‘gibberish’ love declarations via social media to the wrong people while being intoxicated:

“Participant 28: ... That you send it to the wrong person and think ‘damn, how will this person think about me when I have sent this’ ...or to somebody that I don’t know that well?. When I’ve sent ‘you are my best friend’ etcetera ... yes then I think that that person thinks ‘uh-oh, what is going on?’ ... And then I have to explain it: ‘Look, I drank too much’.”

(Female, 21 years old)

In addition, love declarations could also cause regret when sent to their love interests as this wasn’t ‘their best idea, looking back at it’. Particularly, when individuals were still in the early dating-phase of their relationship, this could be a cause of regret. Alcohol helped them to confess their feelings, hoping to develop a more intimate relationship with the receiver. Feelings of regret were heightened when love declarations backfired and the receiver rejected the person, especially if participants believed that things might have turned out differently if they had told their love interest about their feelings in person. Participant 5 for instance explained his regret after writing love declarations via private social media messages to a girl he was ‘involved with’ and wanted to start a relationship with:

SOCIAL MEDIA, ALCOHOL, REGRET

“Participant 5: The day afterwards, I felt regret because if I had said it in person, then it would have ended differently because it didn’t work out”.

(Male, 19 years old)

Alcohol’s disinhibiting properties not only caused individuals to share and regret positive feelings, but also to **argue and criticize** others. In an intoxicated state, individuals were more likely to send hurtful and mean messages via social media such as ‘why did you have to act like such a cry-baby’ or ‘you are a fat cunt’, which were later regretted. Participants named three groups of receivers of these messages: Ex-partners, nemeses, and good friends. Especially ex-partners often received these criticizing messages, in which participants outed their spite over the broken relationship and the negative characteristics of the ex-partner. In addition, alcohol made it especially easy for the participants to deliberately insult and aggrieve their ex-partners. Participants 18 and 26 for instance revealed sending drunk messages via social media to ex-boyfriends or people they were dating, which ended in a fight:

“Participant 18: I sent to my boyfriend, like, ‘yeah I’m kissing some other guy right now actually’. And my boyfriend sent me back, like, ‘yeah, you’ve already gotten over me’ and then we started arguing and, yeah, well, that ruins your entire evening actually.”

(Female, 19 years old)

“Participant 26: uhm I had a big fight and, yeah, I actually blamed him that he left me for my ... I was then a mentor for that boy and for him, he left me. I always blamed him for that and then, I sent that via messenger and that wasn’t my best idea.”

(Male, 26 years old)

Alcohol not only caused participants to fight and argue with their (ex)partners, but also to openly criticize other people’s personalities and problems. Participants for instance revealed they sent drunken messages in which they ‘lost themselves’, ‘said weird things’, ‘said something wrong’, or ‘said it like it is’. When sober, these comments would not be openly shared out of fear of the potential results, such as fights between friends, but when drunk, participants didn’t care about the results of their actions. Consequently, when these affronting comments provoked a fight, they were later regretted. Participant 6 (female, 21 years old) for instance revealed that she ‘didn’t care what she sent in a drunken state’ but when her friends became angry with her, she felt regret for what she did.

SOCIAL MEDIA, ALCOHOL, REGRET

In addition, while these drunken fights and love declarations were usually sent privately, some participants indicated to have regretted sharing *public* drunken status updates as well. Alcohol made them emotional, and in their disinhibited state, they **shared their exaggerated feelings publicly**. One female participant even indicated to have shared suicidal tendencies on her public Twitter profile, which she instantly regretted when sober as she felt these Tweets were ‘a call for attention’. But even less extreme emotional status updates were later often regretted, because participants indicated that they wouldn’t have said or shared those things had they been sober:

“**Interviewer:** And did you feel bad after saying these things?

Participant 10: Yes, awfully so. I would never do it again ... because people will think you’re a cry-baby, because who shares that on Facebook and yeah, I guess they’re right ... ”

(Female, 24 years old)

Overall, participants indicated that it is not always *what* has been said or shared that is regretted, but also *how* it is said. According to participants, alcohol ‘reduces an individual’s filter’, and as a result individuals no longer think or care about how they say things. Participants often noted that they felt a sense of relief that alcohol helped them to find the courage to send certain messages, but that they regret *how* they articulated them. Participants for instance revealed that they regretted it ‘sending it in that manner’ or feeling like ‘they should have said it differently’. When intoxicated, individuals often reacted more sharply than they would have reacted if they had been sober. This sharpness was often later regretted:

“**Participant 28:** I’ll have been drinking and things are exaggerated then, and then sometimes I’ll be like ‘oops, that may have been too harsh’, but it’s good that I said it, but maybe a little too harsh.”

(Female, 21 years old).

Furthermore, participants indicated to not only regret sharing inappropriate textual content when intoxicated, but sometimes **inappropriate visual content** as well. These pictures and video clips were often shared via more ephemeral media (e.g., Instagram stories, Snaps,...), and were regretted because of their tasteless nature. Looking back at it, participants indicated that they found this content ‘ridiculous’. Participants argued that, when sober, they would never have shared such content, but they

SOCIAL MEDIA, ALCOHOL, REGRET

didn't really care about their image when sharing those messages while drunk. Interestingly, there were vast gender differences in the kind of visual inappropriate content individuals shared. Pictures and video clips in which the participants were obviously intoxicated (e.g., drunken singing and dancing) were shared and regretted by both men and women. However, only men admitted to sharing and regretting **inappropriate sexual and obscene content**, and pictures and video clips of them publicly urinating.

“Participant 19: I stayed at a hotel, and I was pissing out of the hotel, out of the window, and yeah, I put that on Snapchat, you know ... it's not always good to share those kinds of things”

(Male, 21 years old)

While intoxicated, participants believed the content to be interesting and funny, without considering how they were portrayed in the pictures and video clips. In addition, men were encouraged by their friends to share sexual content, such as nude pictures, video clips of them kissing strangers, video clips of them telling dirty jokes, and inappropriately sexual private messages. When confronted with this content after sobering up, they were embarrassed and ashamed, because the content looked different than first believed. Especially sexual content was later realized to have been highly inappropriate, and wouldn't have been shared while sober. In general, the regret resulted from looking plastered, trashy and ridiculous:

“Participant 14: just less embarrassed and shy ... that when you're drunk, you don't care. And yeah, when you're sober you start thinking like ‘whoops, maybe my cleavage was too deep’ and ‘I should have pulled that up a little’ and when you're sober you wouldn't ... and afterwards you start thinking ‘oh boy’.”

(Female, 24 years old)

There is one special case of content-related regret that also taps into audience-related regret: the inability to remember content correctly and how friends react to this. Participants indicated that the thought of having sent inappropriate content was enough to cause regret. Some participants talked about **memory loss**, and having no recollection of what they sent the previous night. Especially ‘snaps’ were regretted, because Snapchat does not allow its users to watch content after it has been sent and deleted. When participants sobered up and noticed that they had sent snaps while being drunk, but couldn't remember the content of these messages, they experienced regret because they feared they had sent out

SOCIAL MEDIA, ALCOHOL, REGRET

inappropriate content. Participant 13 (male, 20 years old) for instance revealed that he ‘hoped that he didn’t send confronting content’ while drunk. Interestingly, some participants expressed more shame over having drunk so much as to forget their actions of the night before, than the actual drunken communication. When friends explained which messages they had received, participants’ regret often dissipated. Friends’ reactions helped to remember and reconsider the shared content, and re-label it as ‘appropriate’, thus curtailing the regret:

“Participant 9: Then you see like, ah, I sent that person four Snapchats last night and I remember maybe one of them, and then I’m ashamed just because I don’t remember what I sent and then I wonder like ‘oh no, what did I send?’, ‘was it bad?’, and if that person doesn’t answer immediately, then I think like ‘oh shit, what did I do’.”

(Female, 22 years old)

Overall, reactions from friends or other people participants had a good relationship with (e.g., (ex)girlfriends/boyfriends, ...) were one of the most critical factors in mitigating or aggravating feelings of regret. When these people approved of or ignored drunken references which were regretted, that regret lessened or even disappeared. In contrast, regret could be experienced when these people reacted negatively towards the content, by for instance sending the participant a private text or even a public message expressing their disapproval. In some cases, the friendship or relationship itself was even damaged because of the shared content, which caused the most severe form of regret. Specifically, if people did not appreciate the drunken references, they could stop communicating and break off the friendship entirely. For example, one respondent drunkenly shared about his friend’s personal problems on social media, which was not appreciated by that friend. Other participants received negative reactions after sending drunk references to ex-partners or girlfriends/boyfriends.

“Participant 26: ... I messaged my first ex and well, that went wrong entirely... I am... I have deleted her from everything...”

(Male, 21 years old)

“Participant 11: Yes I was drunk and sent something stupid to my girlfriend and it was, she didn’t think it was funny. [...] I felt pretty bad.”

(Male, 21 years old)

SOCIAL MEDIA, ALCOHOL, REGRET

AUDIENCE-RELATED REGRET

As already touched upon above when discussing friends' and other people's reactions to content, participants argued that not only the content itself can be regretted when using social media to communicate when they are drunk, but the audience they reached as well. This regret was not the result of *what* has been sent, but *to whom*. For some participants, being drunk affected 'not being able to read the names' of their contact lists, and messages were sometimes sent to the wrong receivers. Particularly, some participants indicated to regret sending out messages to **acquaintances that they wouldn't talk to when sober**. In addition, participants also indicated to drunkenly share certain content on their public social media profiles, which was then seen by **large audiences**. Participant 10 (female, 24 years old) for instance revealed that she uploaded drunk references on social media and thought 'it's okay' how many people saw it. Afterwards she realized 'a lot more people saw it' than she first expected, which caused regret. In such cases, the regret stemmed from the realization that a large amount of people had seen something that was meant to be sent privately, but was shared publicly instead:

“Participant 16: This was on Snapchat... I shared at least six 'stories' and always a 'story' instead of sending a 'snap' to other people, but really on my 'story' so everyone could see. Uh, I don't know, it seemed like a good idea at the time, but the day after [laughs] not so much.”

(Male, 21 years old)

RQ2: WHICH COPING STRATEGIES DO EMERGING ADULTS USE TO MINIMIZE THE IMPACT OF THEIR EXPERIENCED REGRET?

Once regret was experienced over what has been shared via social media while intoxicated, participants indicated to employ several strategies to minimize the impact of the experienced regret. On the one hand, participants took on an active stance to deal with their regret. Both men and women indicated to **delete the content** they regretted. Participant 16 (male, 21 years old) for instance argued that 'you can't turn back the time, you just have to delete it'. Sometimes, participants already deleted the regretted content 'while lying in bed with a hangover', while other times they waited until their head had cleared up before deleting the content. Participants especially deleted content they regretted when they thought that 'people were going to bitch about it', it was too 'awkward', 'embarrassing' or 'stupid', or when it was shared several times in a row:

SOCIAL MEDIA, ALCOHOL, REGRET

“Participant 12: Oh yeah, buh, you just look at it and if you really think you look ridiculous I’ll be like ‘Oh my God, this is scandalous’ and I’ll delete it, because not everyone has to see that”

(Male, 21 years old)

“Participant 3: When you’ve gone out and you’re really drunk and you have like 24 hours that you can see one of those pictures, and you’ll see a picture in the morning that you think like ‘oh shit’ ... then you delete it.”

(Male, 21 years old)

However, if regret was more intense, simply deleting the content was not enough. If participants regretted the impression they had potentially created among their audience, they were inclined to **‘rectify’ their self-presentation and ‘save their reputation’**. This could be done by explaining the situation to others, so as to make sure that there would be no misunderstandings about what had happened while drunk.

“Participant 23: If it is a message you sent, explain it to the person like, ‘see, this is what happened yesterday’. And if it was negative, that that wasn’t your intention and, yeah, you do kinda try to save your reputation that way, so that not everyone suddenly thinks like, ‘okay, this impression we got, that is how this person really is’.”

(Male, 25 years old)

In addition, participants indicated that they would also further explain the situation, so others wouldn’t believe they had an alcohol problem. Although our participants indicated that they would not only try to rectify their image with people they deem important, they would try harder with friends than with less important acquaintances:

“Participant 7: Yeah, well, except for that one girl, that daughter from the pub, she always looks strange at us now. But other than that, well [laughs]... I’m not going to text her like... I mean, it’s hard to rectify that if you’ve sent that... how creepy that must have come across.

Interviewer: So in some cases you just leave it as it is?

Participant 7: Yes, if it’s people you hardly ever see... but if it’s people you see regularly, then yeah, you want them to have a favorable impression of you.”

(Male, 24 years old)

Men, but not women, used their **intoxicated state as an excuse and explanation** of their inappropriate alcohol messages as well. Rather than explaining the situation to rectify their image and

SOCIAL MEDIA, ALCOHOL, REGRET

mitigate their regret, they would send a message explaining ‘they were drunk’. Some individuals would even explain that they were drunk, without actually regretting their online alcohol-related communication:

“**Participant 23:** Yeah, it’s usually like the morning after that I will say like ‘oh sorry if my messages were a bit weird, I went out for drinks yesterday’. I always say that the day after.”

(Male, 25 years old)

In some cases, explaining the situation and their intoxicated state was not enough. Especially if participants perceived receivers not to appreciate their drunken references or if the content ‘went too far’, they would **apologize** for their behavior. Preferably, they would apologize as soon as possible, as to avoid further conflict. Participants indicated that they apologized both offline and online, but online apologies were often perceived as insincere because senders ‘are hiding behind their phones’. This could even result in fights and increased regret:

“**Participant 11:** [...] I sent something to someone and... it was not appreciated, so I wanted to apologize to them, but I was so drunk that I sent ‘sorry’ like ten times or so. And on Snapchat, ‘return’ and ‘send’ are placed above each other, you know, so the whole time, I was re-sending the message instead of returning, so yeah... my messages, they made no sense, you know.”

(Male, 21 years old)

Those who experienced regret, could also choose to **do nothing** as they did ‘not pay attention to it’, ‘shrugged it off’ or ‘left it like that’. Participants would not explain the situation, nor apologize. Some respondents noted that drunken references were never mentioned afterwards. Some participants even revealed that ‘[regret] disappears by itself’. This indicated that, for some participants, doing nothing alleviated the regret and brought relief, because it normalized sending drunken messages and sharing drunken references. They would argue that ‘everyone makes mistakes and you shouldn’t be ashamed of it as it is human’ and that ‘time can’t be turned around’. In addition, some participants purposefully did not remove the content, because they argued that most people had already seen it anyway. Especially ‘stories’, with their ephemeral nature, were often left online because they would automatically disappear after 24 hours. Participant 29 (female, 19 years old) for instance revealed that she would ‘leave it on her story’ because ‘a lot of people have already seen it so it doesn’t matter anymore’. Participant 23

SOCIAL MEDIA, ALCOHOL, REGRET

(male, 25 years old) also revealed that it is ‘silly’ to delete such content as a lot of people have seen it anyway.

Finally, especially male participants would just **laugh it off**, but only if the receivers of the regretted messages were close friends or partners. Participant 23 (male, 25 years old) for instance revealed that sending such drunken references ‘can be embarrassing’ and that ‘you can feel the shame, but you can see the joke in it and friends can see it too’. Some participants would even show the regretted messages to their friends, so they could laugh at it together.

“**Participant 22:** No, I laugh at it. I laugh at myself, like, I made such a stupid decision. But, yeah, it’s not like you can change it.”

(Male, 20 years old)

RQ3: WHICH LESSONS DO EMERGING ADULTS LEARN FROM THEIR REGRET EXPERIENCE TO PREVENT FUTURE REGRET?

Some participants not only employed strategies to minimize the immediate impact of the experienced regret, but also learned a lesson urging them to change their behavior so as not to make the same mistakes. Nevertheless, it sometimes took several repeated mistakes and regret experiences before convincing oneself that ‘you shouldn’t do that anymore’. One of the strategies to avoid regret in the future, was to **consume less alcohol**, so they wouldn’t become so intoxicated that they would share regrettable content. Participant 26 (male, 21 years old) for instance revealed that he now tried to ‘pay more attention to the amount of alcohol he drinks’, after having regretted sharing drunk references in the past.

Another strategy to avoid future regret, was to **switch from sharing drunken references, to more acceptable alcohol references**. Participants for instance revealed that instead of sharing drunken references, they would share ‘content of their drinks and the atmosphere around it in a student bar’ or ‘position themselves with alcohol without coming across as trashy’.

If they did consume too much alcohol, they would not try not to use social media, as to avoid sharing regrettable drunken references. One way to avoid making the same mistakes in the future, was to **delete**

SOCIAL MEDIA, ALCOHOL, REGRET

social media apps from their phones before getting drunk. Participant 17 explains his coping strategy for not making the mistake of uploading drunken references:

“**Participant 17:** No, Facebook is one of the apps I delete before going out [laughs]

Interviewer: Ah yes, can you tell me more about that? Why do you do that?

Participant 17: just out of precaution, to make sure that I wouldn't post anything publicly which can be used against me by other people.”

(Male, 24 years old)

Others would **password protect** their social media apps, so it would be harder for them to access the apps while they are drunk. This would help them avoid sharing drunk references on social media:

“**Participant 28:** I password-protected my WhatsApp, so that if I am drunk and wanted to log onto WhatsApp, I would have to type in a word or something, which is much more difficult when you're drunk. So I was like, if I can enter the password... then it's okay for me. Then I'm clearheaded enough to send something and if not... yeah, too bad for me...”

(Female, 21 years old)

Individuals who regretted sharing their drunken references in public spaces, would be more careful to **only share the content privately** among friends or as ephemeral content (i.e., stories). Friends know the sender personally, and are less likely to think badly of the sender when confronted with the drunken references, because they have usually been around the sender while drunk. Participant 29 (female, 19 years old) for instance revealed that she ‘only sent video clips while going out to people she knows very closely’ since it wouldn't be as bad for close friends to see drunken references compared to other people. In addition, when regret was the result of memory loss, some individuals would **send the drunken references to themselves as well**, so they would know what has been sent out. However, this strategy was not frequently or consistently used.

“**Participant 9:** [...] That I'll always have to send my Snapchats to myself as well, so I can check in the morning what I sent to my friends. But I don't really always do that. But if I feel like, ‘oops, I'm really drunk, I won't remember tomorrow what I've been sending out’, then I'll send it to myself as well.”

(Female, 22 years old)

SOCIAL MEDIA, ALCOHOL, REGRET

While males had their own specific causes of regret, females have their own coping strategies. For instance, they will **use friends to avoid future regret**. Female participants always consumed alcohol with their friends, which allowed them to ask their friends to make sure they wouldn't share any drunken references they could later regret. For instance, participant 8 (female, 21 years old) mentioned that she had already asked a friend to 'take away her phone' if she was about to start a drunken fight. In addition, females were also more likely to **save their drunken references** to send it later, when they had sobered up. These girls would check the photos and videos they made on their night out, and when these were deemed acceptable when sober, they were shared online.

Finally, some individuals did not change their behavior at all. While they had experienced regret, they argued that alcohol was crucial to have fun with friends and they were not willing to change their drinking behavior. Although some of them noted that certain regrettable content should not be shared online, they said not to have taken any measures to avoid sharing this content again when getting drunk in the future. Participants for instance revealed that they 'act in the moment' and that they 'can't think twice because you don't think when you're drunk again'. This could also result in repeated mistakes, and repeated regret:

“Participant 4: In those moments, you're just having fun, and yeah, if you've been drinking you loosen up. So yeah, then, if you share it again, then yeah... it happens that you share something like that again, and afterwards you'll be like 'oh no, better take that down...'. ”

(Female, 22 years old)

DISCUSSION

The present study is situated in the field of alcohol-related social media effects. It adds to our understanding of how emerging adults engage with alcohol-related social media content by (1) exploring what can cause individuals to regret sharing alcohol-related content on social media, (2) how they minimize the immediate impact of their regret experience, and (3) which lessons they learn for the future. Alcohol-related content is frequently shared on social media, and it had already been cautiously argued that sharing alcohol references or drunken references can cause regret (Moewaka Barnes et al., 2016; Stern, 2015; Wang et al., 2011). Nevertheless, clear insight in the precise causes and consequences of this regret was lacking. To fill this gap, we interviewed 29 emerging adults to elucidate

SOCIAL MEDIA, ALCOHOL, REGRET

how sharing alcohol-related content can cause regret, and which coping strategies these individuals employed to reduce this negative experience. Based on these interviews, we can draw several conclusions with regard to how online alcohol-related regret is experienced, what these findings can mean for alcohol-related social media effects research in general, and how these findings can inspire future prevention and media literacy research.

First, it is noteworthy that it is not only content shared while drunk that is regretted: Even alcohol-related content that is shared while sober and does not depict drunkenness or objectively inappropriate content can be regretted if it is misperceived by the audience. In addition, although content analyses indicate that drunken references are the least likely alcohol-related content to be shared (Hendriks et al., 2017), our respondents indicated that this content is most often regretted. When intoxicated, the disinhibitory effects of alcohol are blamed for broadcasting transgressive textual and visual content and oversharing both positive and negative emotions, which is later regretted. These findings are in line with the proposition that individuals use their social media profiles to seek social approval from their audience and they highly value the image they convey to this audience (Griffiths & Casswell, 2010; Manago et al., 2008; Ridout et al., 2012). Thus, it seems important to not only convince emerging adults to be more mindful of their alcohol consumption, but to teach them media literacy skills as well, as even ‘innocent’ alcohol references shared while sober can cause regret.

Second, it is not just the content itself that is regretted, but platform-specific and network-related features seem to play a role in online alcohol-related regret as well. For instance, ephemeral content – such as ‘snaps’ or ‘stories’ – can cause regret when individuals cannot remember what they have sent. This is in line with Fjær’s conclusion that ‘alcohol-induced amnesia provided [individuals’] imaginations with a blank canvas on which to paint worst-case scenarios in the first person’, and a suspicion of having done something unacceptable – even if this did not actually happen – can lead to anxiety and regret (Fjær, 2015, p. 305). It seems that modern social media platforms that offer the option of using ephemeral content can amplify this amnesia-powered regret that has been demonstrated in offline drinking contexts as well. In addition, tying in with our finding that misrepresentation and audience misperceptions are an important cause of regret, the size of the audience is a specific platform-related feature causing regret as well. In particular, our respondents indicate that it is not always the

SOCIAL MEDIA, ALCOHOL, REGRET

content itself that is regretted, but the audience it has been shared with. One of the most important causes of regret found in Fjær's (2015) study on shame, guilt and embarrassment after sobering up is not wanting to be seen in a drunken, out-of-control state by others. Although regrettable actions caused by alcohol are usually witnessed by others in an offline setting, social media have created an environment with an audience larger than ever. It has become all the more important for individuals to navigate their audiences, as demonstrated by our respondents' comments on making the mistake to publish private messages in a public context, or and being more mindful of using private features as a coping strategy to avoid regret in the future. Thus, we can conclude that emerging adults do not consider all social media platforms to be equal, and drunken references are most often shared on more private and ephemeral platforms. This is in line with a recent study finding that only alcohol-related content shared on private platforms such as WhatsApp and Snapchat was associated with binge drinking behavior, whereby the authors argued that this may be because users consider these private platforms to be more suitable to share drunken references (Vranken et al., 2020). Nevertheless, content analytical research predominantly focuses on public, non-ephemeral platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter or Instagram (Beullens & Schepers, 2013; Egan & Moreno, 2011; Hendriks et al., 2018). Although these studies provide us with important insights into how alcohol is portrayed on public platforms, it appears important to take more private platforms into account as well in order to obtain the most nuanced and accurate understanding of the alcohol-related content individuals can be exposed to on social media.

Third, emerging adults distinguish between coping strategies to reduce the negative feelings related to a specific incident, and coping strategies to avoid future regret. This is in line with Stern's (2015) study on regretted online self-presentations in general. She found that individuals can and do learn from their mistakes, as more than half of those who regretted their online self-presentation learned to be more careful online. One situation-specific lesson some of our respondents learned was to reduce their alcohol intake in order to avoid future regret. Thus, from a prevention perspective it could potentially be useful to find a way to trigger regret in order to lower emerging adults' alcohol consumption. However, this suggestion should be implemented with caution and not without further research, as it has been demonstrated that regret doesn't necessarily lead to *positive* behavioral change (Dearing et al., 2005). In particular, regret can cause feeling of *guilt*, which motivates self-regulation to prevent future regret,

SOCIAL MEDIA, ALCOHOL, REGRET

but regret can also cause feelings of *shame*, which has been argued to increase problematic behavior (Dearing et al., 2005). It must thus be further analyzed when and for whom regret causes beneficial preventative action, and for whom it does not.

Fourth, friends and peers appear to play a central role in both regret experiences and coping strategies. An important underlying cause of regret appears to be friends' reactions, especially with regards to regretted textual content. Simultaneously, if friends do not react negatively towards content that could otherwise be perceived as inappropriate, regret is alleviated. This is especially the case when regret is the result of memory loss, when the regret is not triggered by the content itself, but by the possibility of having shared something inappropriate. Considering that most individuals do not react when they encounter inappropriate, offensive or otherwise excessive alcohol-related content on social media (Wolfer, 2014), encouraging individuals to speak up when they encounter these messages could be a helpful form of social surveillance to counteract the normalization of heavy drinking behavior by debunking the perception that excessive alcohol consumption is universally accepted and engaged in. This suggestion is supported by our respondents' remark that friends can not only cause regret, but also alleviate it by accepting apologies and can even help to avoid future regret by setting up collective strategies, such as taking each other's phone away when they are too drunk to make rational decisions.

Fifth, we find gender differences in the causes and coping strategies regarding online alcohol-related regret. For instance, using friends as a coping strategy is a predominantly female strategy, which is in line with other studies that found that women are not only more likely to rely on their friends to keep them safe when they are drinking, but are also more likely to look after and take care of their friends when they are intoxicated (MacLean, 2015). In contrast, male participants were more likely to laugh the regret off or even purposefully share regretted content with friends to entertain them. In addition, males are also much more likely to share – and regret having shared – sexually tinted or obscene content. This suggests that, although gender differences have diminished with regard to drinking behavior itself (de Visser & McDonnell, 2012), gender roles remain prevalent or may even be magnified in how individuals act while they are intoxicated. In addition, the fact that males are more likely to report being able to laugh it off, may indicate that society still accepts this kind of inappropriate behavior more when it is engaged in by boys or men. This is in line with other research that has concluded that the gender

SOCIAL MEDIA, ALCOHOL, REGRET

double-standard for alcohol use persists, whereby heavy drinking is considered to be more masculine, women are more harshly judged for their alcohol consumption, and individuals tend to adapt their drinking style to be in line with gender stereotypes, because they are aware that others judge them by these standards (de Visser & McDonnell, 2012).

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

One area of alcohol-related social media content that has not really been touched upon in this study, are pictures and messages that individuals did not share themselves, such as pictures taken by friends or professional photographers. It is possible that these pictures and messages trigger negative feelings as well, due to privacy violations or the perception that this content misrepresents the image they have been trying to create for themselves online. An interesting avenue of research could be to examine why and when individuals ‘untag’ themselves from online alcohol-related content, or ask others to take such content offline. Considering that our respondents consider alcohol consumption to be normal, yet regret sharing some alcohol-related content online, understanding alcohol-related untagging behavior could provide more insight into how alcohol-related content is normalized on social media. For instance, a limited number of studies on drunken references on Facebook found emerging adults to untag themselves from drunken pictures if their overall self-presentation became unattractive (Niland et al., 2014) or if ugly photos uploaded by friends made young women look unrespectable (Hutton et al., 2016).

Furthermore, our findings invite media scholars to differentiate between alcohol references and drunken references in their effect studies. While we find that both alcohol references and drunken references can cause regret, drunken references are more often regretted and for more different reasons. It can thus be concluded that these references hold different meanings for users, and can potentially engender different effects when studying the relationships between alcohol-related social media use and offline drinking behavior. For instance, Moreno et al. (2012) differentiated between alcohol references and references to intoxication or problem drinking when studying the relationship between sharing alcohol-related content on Facebook and problem drinking among college students. This study found that nearly six out of ten (58.3%) of students who shared references to intoxication or problem drinking met the criteria for at-risk problem drinking, compared to four out of ten (37.8%) of students sharing

SOCIAL MEDIA, ALCOHOL, REGRET

alcohol references and two out of ten (22.6%) of students who didn't share any alcohol-related content on Facebook. Furthermore, especially those sharing references to intoxication or problem drinking were more likely to be at risk for offline problem drinking compared to students who didn't share any alcohol-related content on Facebook.

Finally, a more quantitative approach can be taken to test whether we can predict which alcohol-related content is most likely to be regretted, who is most likely to regret such content, and which coping strategy is chosen to neutralize the situation and avoid future regret. For example, we found some gender differences in both causes of regret and coping strategies, and it would be interesting to test whether this finding can be generalized to larger groups of emerging adults in other cultural contexts as well. In addition, a quantitative approach can also test whether online alcohol-related regret experiences significantly reduce an individual's wellbeing, and whether this potential impact on wellbeing predicts how well they cope with the situation at hand, both at that moment and in the future.

LIMITATIONS

Although our findings contribute to our understanding of how emerging adults engage with alcohol-related content on social media, there are some limitations to take into account. First, memory bias can potentially threaten internal validity of our findings (Hassan, 2005). This problem can occur during interviews if participants experience difficulty remembering specific situations, such as specific regret experiences. They can find it difficult to discuss the situation in detail, and remember their exact emotional experiences. Nevertheless, although research has indicated that memory recall is rarely perfect, negative emotions such as regret are remembered more accurately than positive or neutral emotions (Thomas & Diener, 1990). A related limitation lies in social desirability (King & Bruner, 2000): This topic is sensitive and deals with very personal experiences. We noticed that some participants needed extra encouragement to discuss these instances, because they were ashamed to discuss their actions that lead to their regrets. This demonstrated that emerging adults are aware of what socially acceptable ways of engaging with alcohol and social media are.

Third, four of the interviews were conducted via Skype. Although the literature indicates that there can potentially be some comprehension issues due to slow internet connection or technical difficulties (Seitz, 2016), we anticipated these problems by rigorously testing the connection before starting the

SOCIAL MEDIA, ALCOHOL, REGRET

interview. In addition, we asked these participants to sit in a quiet space to conduct the interviews. These preemptive measures allowed us to conduct the Skype interviews without complications.

Finally, it is important to take the context of our study into account. The interviews were conducted with Flemish emerging adults between the ages of 18 and 25. Belgium has an accepting alcohol culture and the legal drinking age for 'soft' alcoholic beverages (wine and beer) is 16. Although prior research on alcohol-related social media effects has demonstrated that the drinking behavior of Belgian and American college students is similarly affected by the alcohol-related content they engage with on social media (Geusens et al., 2019), regret experiences may be different dependent on the legal context of alcohol consumption.

CONCLUSION

This study added to the literature on alcohol-related social media effects by identifying the causes and coping strategies regarding regretted alcohol-related content on social media. Regretted alcohol-related content entails both textual and visual content, privately and publicly shared content, as well as moderate alcohol references and drunken references. The most important overarching cause of regret for all of this alcohol-related content, is to have misrepresented the self on social media by sharing the wrong content with the wrong audience. On the one hand, individuals can experience what we called content-related regret, when content is regretted due to the inappropriateness of the content itself, exaggeration of emotions and the tone of messages, or memory loss in combination with ephemeral content. On the other hand, individuals can experience audience-related regret when their content reaches an unwanted audience or they encounter peer disapproval. Coping strategies to deal with this regret are twofold: Emerging adults employ both short-term coping strategies to alleviate their negative feelings, and long-term strategies to avoid future regret. Taken together, this study shed more insight into negative online experiences due to alcohol consumption, and how emerging adults define and correct these negative experiences.

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SOCIAL MEDIA, ALCOHOL, REGRET

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