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Under The Influence of (Alcohol)Influencers? A Qualitative Study Examining Adolescents' Evaluations of Alcohol-Related Instagram Images from Influencers.

Sofie Vranken

Kathleen Beullens

Delphine Geyskens

Jörg Matthes

Sofie Vranken^{1,2}, MA, Corresponding author (sofie.vranken@kuleuven.be)

Kathleen Beullens¹, PhD (kathleen.beullens@kuleuven.be)

Delphine Geyskens¹, MA

Jörg Matthes³, PhD (joerg.matthes@univie.ac.at)

¹Leuven School for Mass Communication Research, KU Leuven
Parkstraat 45 (bus 3603)
B-3000 Leuven

²Research Foundation Flanders (FWO-Vlaanderen)

³Advertising and Media Psychology Research Group, University of Vienna
Währinger Straße 29
1090 Vienna

Abstract

Influencers are important socialization agents among adolescents. There are rising concerns that influencers glamorize their alcohol behaviors and promote brands on Instagram. While exposure to alcohol messages influences adolescents' alcohol use, it remains unclear how adolescents evaluate influencers' alcohol images. We conducted 10 focus group interviews with 47 adolescents ($M_{age} = 16.21$; $SD = 1.22$). Our results demonstrated that adolescents frequently encounter images of influencers who hold alcoholic beverages, provide positive reviews for brands, or promote their own beverages. Additionally, building on the Message Interpretation Process model (Austin & Meili, 1994), we examined how individuals affectively (i.e., message desirability) and cognitively (i.e., realism, similarity) evaluate these alcohol images. Our results suggest that adolescents enjoy viewing images of influencers who depicted positive alcohol-related outcomes, highlighted their luxurious lifestyles, and were transparent about their partnership with alcohol brands. Only upon explicitly encouraging them to think aloud about the realism of and similarity to these images; and through discussions with their friends, they became more skeptical and perceived influencers' images to be inauthentic. Where these critical evaluations took place, the persuasive effects seemed to diminish. Overall, our findings suggest that peer-led discussions and think-aloud procedures may be promising tools for media literacy interventions.

Keywords: Influencers; Alcohol Images; Message Evaluations; Adolescents

Under the Influence of (Alcohol)Influencers? A Qualitative Study Examining Belgian Adolescents' Evaluations of Alcohol-Related Instagram Images from Influencers.

Social network sites (SNSs), of which Instagram is the most popular platform, are highly integrated into adolescents' daily lives (Vandendriessche & De Marez, 2020). On Instagram, adolescents increasingly engage with social influencers (Naudts et al., 2021). Influencers are online celebrities who gained a large followers' base by sharing their expertise on various topics (e.g., food, lifestyle) (Khamis et al., 2017).

The popularity of influencers has sparked significantly scholarly interest. While influencers may positively affect their audience by encouraging a healthy lifestyle, they may also promote harmful behaviors (e.g., Hendriks et al., 2020; VicHealth, 2020). In this vein, influencers' Instagram profiles appear to contain many alcohol images (Hendriks et al., 2020). Influencers could recommend brands for commercial purposes (i.e., commercial images) or portray alcohol use as part of their daily lives without having the intent to sell brands (e.g., pictures at a party where someone is holding wine) (i.e., non-commercial images) (Hendriks et al., 2020). Building on the social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), exposure to alcohol images can induce an observational learning process, increasing peoples' likelihood of engaging in similar behaviors (Boyle et al., 2016; Erevik et al., 2017; LaBrie et al., 2021). This may especially be the case for exposure to alcohol content from influencers as individuals feel closely related to this socialization agent (Martínez & Olsson, 2019).

Multiple quantitative studies illustrated a link between exposure to online alcohol messages and offline alcohol-related behaviors (Boyle et al., 2016; Erevik et al., 2017; LaBrie et al., 2021; Mesman et al., 2020). Following the Message Interpretation Process Model (MIP)(Austin & Johnson, 1997; Austin & Meili, 1994), mere exposure to alcohol messages does not automatically lead to behavioral changes (Austin et al., 2006; Hoffman et al., 2014). Instead, individuals' cognitive (i.e., realism, similarity) and affective responses

(i.e., message desirability) to messages play a more substantial role in decision-making processes than mere exposure (Austin et al., 2006; Hoffman et al., 2014). The evaluation of media messages, however, depends on adolescents' own experiences and knowledge, and is not directly observable by an outsider such as a researcher (Polkinghorne, 2013). Therefore, this study uses a qualitative design to grasp how young people evaluate alcohol images from influencers, thereby taking their own personal perspectives into account. This knowledge is not only crucial to understand why and which alcohol images exert an impact on offline alcohol use behaviors but also to better prepare adolescents to deal with such online depictions.

Exposure to Alcohol Images from Influencers

In Belgium, 85% of adolescents follow influencers on Instagram and 51% of them encounter influencers' messages multiple times a day (Naudts et al., 2021). Influencers are considered to be trustworthy socialization agents as they produce unique and entertaining content on various topics of expertise (Khamis et al., 2017; Marwick, 2015; Naudts et al., 2021), share details about their daily lives, and interact directly with the audience (Marôpo et al., 2020).

Several scholars have raised their concerns about the popularity of influencers (Hendriks et al., 2020; VicHealth, 2020). Content analyses show that between 63% and 73% of influencers regularly feature alcoholic beverages in their images (Hendriks et al., 2020; VicHealth, 2020). These images highlight the appeals of alcohol use including social connectedness (Hendriks et al., 2020).

Influencers may share two types of alcohol images (Hendriks et al., 2020). On the one hand, influencers can share commercial alcohol images whereby they recommend brands based on an alliance forged with the alcohol industry (Hendriks et al., 2020). By relying on influencers, alcohol companies may more effectively target adolescents (Hendriks et al.,

2020). This segment of consumers is viable as they have lower literacy skills rendering them vulnerable to promotional content (Van Dam & Van Reijmersdal, 2019). Since guidelines condemn brands to target underage drinkers (e.g., JEP, 2019), one way of circumventing these guidelines is by collaborating with influencers who are then asked to promote the brand in one of the updates. While influencers are obliged to reveal their commercial partnership through disclosure statements (e.g., #sponsorship) (Federal Trade Commission, 2019; FeWeb, 2018), research has indicated that they regularly disregard this requirement when sharing alcohol and other promotional content (VicHealth, 2020).

On the other hand, influencers could also share non-commercial images (Hendriks et al., 2020). They could, for instance, refer to alcohol use as part of their identity without recommending brands. Examples of such images include pictures of influencers who hold a glass of wine during dinner or attend a party involving alcohol use. Indeed, Hendriks et al. (2020) showed that the majority of influencers' images displaying alcohol did not contain a brand association such as a name or logo.

The ubiquity of influencers' alcohol images is subject to concern. Drawing on social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), exposure to alcohol images might instigate a vicarious learning process, altering young people's alcohol expectations and attitudes. Studies showed a relationship between exposure to alcohol and various alcohol cognitions including inflated norms, positive attitudes and expectations, and heightened levels of alcohol use (Boyle et al., 2016; Erevik et al., 2017; Mesman et al., 2020). Since people consider influencers to be important information sources (Martínez & Olsson, 2019), they may play a crucial role in people's learning process.

Thus far, studies either focused on alcohol content (Hendriks et al., 2020; VicHealth, 2020) or its relation with offline alcohol cognitions (Boyle et al., 2016; Erevik et al., 2017; Mesman et al., 2020). These quantitative studies tend to treat media users as passive

recipients who are uniformly impacted by online alcohol content. Yet, in reality, individuals are active users who make sense of messages and evaluate them based on their own background, knowledge, and experiences (Martínez & Olsson, 2019; Polkinghorne, 2013). This implies that reception processes are crucial mechanisms for determining the relation between media and offline behaviors (Austin & Meili, 1994; Hoffman et al., 2014). To fully understand the impact of alcohol messages, we should thus direct our attention to adolescents' own perspectives and seek to understand how adolescents make sense of influencers' commercial and non-commercial alcohol images.

Examining Adolescents' Evaluations

One of the primary frameworks to understand how adolescents make sense of media messages is the MIP model (Austin & Johnson, 1997; Austin & Meili, 1994). This model posits that media users evaluate messages in cognitive and affective ways. Cognitive evaluations are comprised of realism and similarity. Realism is defined as the perception that portrayals are realistic and normative for most people, whereas similarity refers to the belief that portrayals correspond to personal experiences, and norms of relevant reference groups (e.g., peers, family) (Austin & Johnson, 1997; Austin & Meili, 1994). Thus, when influencers share aspects of their personal lives and take their audience's preferences and norms into consideration when posting messages online (Kühn & Riesmeyer, 2021; Marôpo et al., 2020), they can elicit positive evaluations in terms of realism and similarity.

Affective evaluations are approximated by the measurement of desirability, defined as one's liking and enjoyment of messages and characters (Austin & Johnson, 1997; Austin & Meili, 1994). Thus, when influencers create unique and visually appealing content (e.g., shiny colors and textures) (e.g., Barry et al., 2018; Naudts et al., 2021), positive affective evaluations are likely to occur.

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Cognitive and affective evaluations operate in tandem and elicit varying degrees of wishful identification, that is the desire to emulate the behavior. This in turn leads young people to develop positive expectancies and increases the likelihood to engage in the behaviors endorsed in media portrayals (in this case alcohol use)(Austin & Meili, 1994; Elmore et al., 2017).

So far, the MIP model has successfully been used to explain the role of media in various health-related behaviors such as alcohol use (Austin et al., 2006; Hoffman et al., 2014), tobacco use (Elmore et al., 2017; Scull et al., 2010) and sexual behaviors (Scull et al., 2018); to guide media literacy interventions for these behaviors (Kupersmidt et al., 2012; Pinkleton et al., 2008) and to develop an integrated alcohol marketing effect model (Jackson & Bartholow, 2020).

The body of literature using the MIP model mostly relied on quantitative designs including surveys and experimental research to operationalize cognitive and affective evaluations (e.g., Austin et al., 2006; Austin & Meili, 1994; Hoffman et al., 2014; Kupersmidt et al., 2012). While these studies provided interesting insights into individuals' overall evaluations of content, qualitative research would enable us to more thoroughly tap into adolescents' thinking processes and provide more in-depth information about which exact elements constitute cognitive and affective evaluations related to influencers' differential alcohol images. In fact, such insights can serve as a pillar for the MIP model and help in its further development.

So far, there is some qualitative research indicating that certain content elements determine how young people evaluate influencers' images (Balaban & Mustățea, 2019; Martínez & Olsson, 2019; Van Dam & Van Reijmersdal, 2019). For instance, it has been suggested that influencers who display a luxurious lifestyle by posting updates related to exclusive parties and exotic holiday destinations (Marwick, 2015) could evoke feelings of

envy among audience members who aspire but are unable to achieve this lifestyle (Martínez & Olsson, 2019; Marwick, 2015). Additionally, other research showed that influencers' authenticity and credibility decreases if they promote too many and expensive products as this does not align with young people's own behaviors (Martínez & Olsson, 2019; Van Dam & Van Reijmersdal, 2019). Yet, it remains unclear which exact content elements play a role in cognitive and affective evaluations related to influencers' differential alcohol images.

Thus, we pose the following research question:

RQ1: Which elements constitute adolescents' affective and cognitive evaluations of commercial and non-commercial alcohol-related Instagram images from influencers?

Additionally, prior quantitative research investigating the MIP model was only able to observe the co-occurrence of cognitive and affective evaluations and their strength in predicting behavioral outcomes (e.g., Austin et al., 2006; Hoffman et al., 2014; Scull et al., 2010). There are, however, reasons to assume that a complex dynamic between both evaluations is at play. Studies focusing on media and advertising literacy assumed that cognitive evaluations are needed to regulate affective responses (Hudders et al., 2017; Rozendaal et al., 2009; Schreurs & Vandenbosch, 2021). Scholars referred to the 'double-edged desirability paradox' to illustrate that media literacy interventions have the ability to increase skepticism and render young people less vulnerable to the persuasive impact of media messages independent of individuals' affinity for messages (Austin et al., 2007; Pinkleton et al., 2007). In line with these findings, this study adds to the MIP model by providing a more in-depth understanding of how affective and cognitive evaluations work together.

RQ2: How do affective and cognitive evaluations interrelate when assessing non-commercial and commercial-alcohol-related Instagram images from influencers?

Method

We conducted focus group interviews as the qualitative nature allows us to gain an in-depth understanding of adolescents' experiences with influencers' alcohol images. Moreover, this group format facilitates the identification of shared experiences as participants interact with each other (Polkinghorne, 2013). This is relevant as adolescents learn about alcohol (MacLean, 2016) and construct meaning of alcohol portrayals in the context of friendship groups (Atkinson et al., 2013). Additionally, group interviews encourage adolescents to more thoroughly reflect upon this topic than they would in one-to-one interviews (Heath et al., 2009). Given that people may not recall the presence of alcohol in images (Hendriks et al., 2017), group conversations may elicit recognition and probe individuals' memories.

Participants and Procedure

This study is part of the ASOC (alcohol and **social** media) project wherein we interviewed adolescents' about their online alcohol-related self-presentations and their experiences with alcohol images from influencers. This study solely used the interview data that focused on experiences with influencers' images.

We conducted interviews with 10 friendship groups with 14-to-18-year olds ($N_{total} = 47$; $M_{age} = 16.21$; $SD = 1.22$). Belgian adolescents start drinking alcohol at an average age of 14.6 years, which is approximately two years before the legal drinking age, and increase their use throughout adolescence (Rosiers et al., 2020). Moreover, this group experiences the most adverse consequences of alcohol use (World Health Organization, 2018). Participants were recruited using snowball sampling procedures. A target group of adolescents was invited for a study on alcohol-related SNS images and invited their friends to the interviews, thereby predetermining the groups themselves.

Potential participants received information on the aims and ethics (i.e., anonymity, voluntary participation). Upon providing active consent from adolescents and passive consents from their parents, participants completed an intake survey to determine the

homogeneity of the groups. First, we opted for single-sex groups (five all-boys, five all-girls groups), as gender differences in alcohol use exist; for example, male adolescents tend to consume alcohol excessively (Rosiers et al., 2020). Second, we selected five groups of underage drinkers (i.e., 14-16-year-olds), and five groups of legal drinkers (i.e., 17-18-year-olds), which enabled us to assess the accessibility of alcohol images among underage drinkers¹. Third, we selected groups of individuals with similar drinking behaviors. We questioned two items from the AUDIT scale (Saunders et al., 1993: “How often do you consume alcohol? (1) = *never* to (5) = *4 or more times a week*; “How many units do you consume during one single drinking occasion?” (1) = *1 or 2* to (5) = *10 or more units*), and multiplied both items to generate a frequency score. Individuals in each group had a similar frequency score, as differences in the normativity of alcohol use exist depending on individuals’ own drinking patterns (Vanherle et al., 2021). Once groups of four to five adolescents were formed, practical arrangements were made. This study was approved by the lead author’s Institutional Review Board under grant number G-2020-2522.

[TABLE ONE ABOUT HERE]

Data Collection

The third author conducted the group discussions in February 2021. The interviews were organized online due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. All discussions were audio and video recorded and lasted between 38 and 84 minutes. We used a topic guide to help semi-structure the interviews (cf. Appendix A on OSF²). We first zoomed in on adolescents’ experiences with following influencers. They mainly followed influencers who

¹ Belgium has a lenient alcohol policy, allowing individuals from age 16 and up to buy and consume soft alcoholic beverages (i.e., beer and wine).

² For an overview of the topic guide, see this link at the Center of Open Science: https://osf.io/6w2ez/?view_only=2e8ae90f67a745d79504648dac4d624b.

depicted entertaining and unique content, and who focused on subjects that aligned with adolescents' personal interests (e.g., lifestyle, beauty). Afterward, we questioned whether adolescents encountered images of influencers who held or consumed alcoholic beverages without disclosing a particular brand (non-commercial images). We asked them to describe these images and report on whether these images were likeable (desirability), reflected real behaviors (realism), and corresponded to their own behaviors and those of relevant reference groups (similarity). Afterward, we asked the same questions for images of influencers who promote particular brands (i.e., commercial images).

After this free recall procedure, we used photo-elicitation materials to stimulate participants' memories, thus taking into account that individuals may not be able to recall the presence of alcoholic beverages in images (Hendriks et al., 2017). We first showcased non-commercial images. We consulted lists of popular influencers in Belgium. We selected images wherein ordinary drinking settings were depicted (e.g., a dinner party, or festival) and wherein no brand association (e.g., brand logo/name) or ad disclosure statement was present. Afterward, we showcased commercial images. We consulted lists of digital agencies to guarantee that influencers had a partnership with brands and selected pictures that featured a brand association or sponsorship disclosure.

Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim, anonymized, and implemented into Nvivo12. The first author coded pieces of text on a sentence-by-sentence basis. In the first stage, the coding was deductive as the concepts of the MIP model ('realism', 'desirability', 'similarity') and our research questions ('commercial images', 'non-commercial images') provided a tentative structure for the coding frame. Additional codes ('valence', 'setting', 'commercial transparency', 'stylistic features) were developed in an inductive way. In the second phase, the codes were categorized into overarching themes (Cf. Appendix B on

OSF³). The first and third author independently coded 30% of the transcripts and met regularly to refine themes. These codes were discussed with an independent researcher. Upon completion of the data analysis, we re-contacted the participants to guarantee that our interpretations reflected their responses.

Results

Evaluations of Non-commercial Images

Participants recalled being frequently exposed to alcohol images of influencers who held or consumed alcoholic beverages. When reflecting upon the nature of these images, they highlighted two particular elements: the valence and setting of images.

With regard to the valence, participants said that influencers predominantly depict the positive and consequence-free nature of alcohol use. For instance, they stated that they had never seen “influencers post about the negative aspects of alcohol consumption” (FG5, girl, 16–17-year-olds) or “influencers hanging over a toilet [vomiting]” (FG3, girls, 17–18-year-olds).

When asked to reflect upon these images, there seemed to be an important contradiction between adolescents’ affective and cognitive evaluations. Adolescents immediately reported on the desirability of images, which is conceptualized as an affective evaluation within the MIP model. They indicated to find these positive images to be “entertaining and enjoyable”. In this vein, adolescents attached great importance to stylistic features such as “the beautiful colors” and the use of “filters”. In addition, it seemed that positive emotional appeals also enhanced the desirability of influencers’ alcohol images. For

³ For a detailed overview of the most important themes, codes, definitions and sample quotes, see this link at the Center for Open Science: https://osf.io/6w2ez/?view_only=2e8ae90f67a745d79504648dac4d624b.

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instance, participants stated that “influencers seem to be having a good time” (FG2, girls, 17-year-olds) and that “influencers are always laughing and enjoying themselves” (FG8, boys, 15-year-olds).

Interestingly, only upon explicit prompts to think aloud about whether these images represented influencers’ real behaviors (i.e., realism) and aligned with adolescents’ own behaviors and those endorsed by personally relevant reference groups (i.e., similarity), adolescents became more skeptical. All adolescents agreed that positive images create an unrealistic account of alcohol use. Incorporating negative alcohol-related outcomes into influencers’ Instagram images was regarded as more realistic and even increased evaluations of similarity. One participant mentioned that she would feel more connected if influencers occasionally displayed drunk images on Instagram, saying, “You feel closer to them if you see that they get drunk as well, then it would appear that their life is not always so perfect” (FG2, girls, 17-year-olds). However, it was noted that there were some boundaries in depicting extreme and negative behaviors. In adolescents’ opinion, it would be inappropriate for an influencer to promote a combination of dangerous behaviors (e.g., drunk driving).

Adolescents questioned the influencers’ motives to depict positive images. They acknowledged that influencers serve as role models and that they have a large audience base. They assumed that this would lead influencers to mainly select images wherein positive aspects of their identity would be highlighted. They even imagined that influencers who would regularly depict extremely drunk images would risk being “canceled” online. Noteworthy, the unmasking of influencers seemed to be a group process whereby friends built upon each other’s statements rather than refuting them, thus potentially helping each other to become more skeptical.

Participant 32: Because they need to set a good example and they can influence others.

Participant 33: Yes, they have a wide reach.

Participant 30: If they are doing something wrong and are really drunk and share these pictures or videos they just know that an article with negative comments will be written.

(FG7, girls, 17–18-year-olds)

Participant 19: Yes, you mostly see positive alcohol images.

Participant 21: They need to set an example because they are influencers, and many people follow them. If they would use their account to solely depict the bad stuff, it would not look good.

(FG5, girls, 16–17-year-olds)

A second element that participants recalled was the setting in which alcohol use was portrayed. Adolescents immediately referred to the luxurious nature of influencers' images. They vividly remembered portrayals of "exclusive parties" with "idyllic backgrounds". This luxurious nature also appeared to be prevalent in the types of beverages shown. Interviewees discussed how influencers primarily consume expensive and extravagant alcoholic beverages, which were often positioned at the center of the Instagram picture. Additionally, in these messages, influencers were described as highlighting their social status by featuring other popular influencers or traditional celebrities in their messages.

Participant 29: I think mostly in the center because they want to showcase that they are consuming expensive alcoholic beverages.

Participant 33: Yes, in the center of the picture with a chic cocktail or something in their hand [...] a beautiful cocktail and a beautiful background.

Participant 30: [...] yes, at these parties with many famous people.

(FG7, girls, 17–18-year-olds)

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Similar to the positive images, adolescents initially reported finding these luxurious images to be “likeable”, “entertaining” and “chic”, hence pointing toward positive affective evaluations. Again, only upon explicit prompts to reflect upon the realism of and similarity to alcohol images, adolescents critically assessed influencers’ motives to depict luxurious images and eventually reported to have negative cognitive evaluations. Adolescents had the impression that influencers post luxurious messages to “brag” about their wealthy lifestyle and “show off” their expensive goods. For adolescents, the lavish lifestyle represented an inauthentic performance. They noted that: “I think that, if they are not on a party and are not using Instagram, they would never buy these expensive beverages” (FG8, boys, 15-year-olds). When comparing influencers’ seemingly extravagant drinking behaviors to adolescents’ own experiences and normative expectations, a huge gap appeared to exist. Participants felt disconnected from these influencers, commenting, “This is not realistic. We will never drink expensive tequila” (FG2, girls, 17-year-olds).

Only one participant in the friendship groups was more lenient toward influencers who depicted luxurious images. He initially thought that influencers showcase their true identity in all types of alcohol-related Instagram images. As illustrated in the transcript below, one of his friends tried to debunk this belief. This led to a more nuanced view whereby the participant acknowledged that influencers consciously select different images and highlight some luxurious aspects but would not alter the actual drinking experience.

Participant 44: I do not think that someone would act differently because it is shared on Instagram [...] I think it is representative of one’s real life.

Participant 47: I think that, for many influencers, that [staging alcohol images] is exactly what they are doing.

Participant 44: Okay, well, yes they perhaps need to consider and think about what is appropriate or not. But I think that, if they go out with their friends and take pictures, for instance, it is not being staged.

(FG 10, boys, 15–16-year-olds)

The results outlined above were derived from a free recall procedure, delving into adolescents' top-of-mind awareness of alcohol-related images.

Afterward, we showcased existing alcohol messages to obtain a more in-depth understanding of their perceptions and evaluations. The photo-elicitation materials substantially differed from the luxurious images that adolescents initially recalled. Specifically, in the photo-elicitation materials, we showcased ordinary settings, such as dinner parties at restaurants, influencers' home environments, and outdoor events, such as a festival or picnics. Only upon seeing these particular images, adolescents recalled seeing similar posts quite often, hence illustrating some type of recall bias related to normative references. Noteworthy, in line with the MIP model, these were the only images that were positively evaluated in both affective and cognitive ways.

Participant 26: I think that this is realistic. It is just a glass of beer. It is not an exaggeration.

Participant 27: I just think it is the way it is. They are just there, and someone is taking a picture. They are just holding them [alcoholic beverages]

(FG6, girls, 15-year-olds)

Adolescents had the impression that alcoholic beverages were portrayed in the picture “by accident.” They explained, “Yes, she just sits there, and she happens to have a drink in her hand” (FG2, girls, 17-year-olds) and “I think it is just a coincidence” (FG6, girls, 15-year-olds). Similarly, it was mentioned that the emphasis is placed on positive individual feelings,

while alcoholic drinks become a secondary element. In these images, adolescents had the impression that influencers did not depict alcohol use as a way to show off.

Participant 10: I think they just show that they are having a good time rather than saying, “Look, this is what I am drinking.”

Participant 14: Yes, it seems like she is really enjoying herself.

(FG3, girls, 17–18-year-olds)

Evaluations of Commercial Images

Almost all participants recalled noticing particular brands and provided clear descriptions of these images. They mostly encountered images in which existing but popular brands such as Martini, Desperados, Eristoff, Baileys, Strongbow, and Flügel were promoted. Adolescents in one of the group discussions, however, stressed that they mostly saw promotions of expensive brands: “most of the time, they are not holding a brand such as Cara Pils, but rather Veuve, or Cliquot Pierre” (FG1, boys, 15–16-year-olds).

Interestingly, in half of the focus group interviews, adolescents discussed an emerging trend whereby influencers develop and invest in their own alcoholic beverages, such as wine, tequila, or gin. One participant said, “I have seen this, with Shay Mitchell, she has her own tequila brand. She promotes it often” (FG5, girls, 16–17-year-olds).

Again, we found that adolescents immediately reported on the desirability of commercial images (i.e., affective evaluations). They mainly used positive terms such as “fun,” “chic,” and “attractive” to describe commercial images. One participant argued: “I think these posts look nice. This is great promotion for the brand” (FG1, girls, 15–16-year-olds). These affective evaluations appeared to be driven by visual cues such as the “shiny colors” and “the brightness of the pictures”.

Throughout the interviews, individuals gradually became more critical and judged whether or not influencers would be authentic. These cognitive evaluations were determined

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by the setting in which alcohol use was depicted and the influencers' transparency related to the commercial intent.

The first factor was the setting in which brands were promoted. Similar to non-commercial messages, adolescents highlighted the importance of portrayals in day-to-day and more ordinary settings. For instance, they referred to pictures of influencers who promoted beer brands at festivals or wine brands during a dinner party with their family. In adolescents' opinion, this type of setting reflected typical drinking occasions and did not appear to be staged for the picture. Moreover, they stated that it resonated with their own drinking behaviors and experiences, thus increasing the similarity to these images.

The second factor relates to influencers' transparency of the commercial collaboration with alcohol brands. While influencers' content is often considered a form of native advertisement, there was a high degree of awareness related to the potential commercial nature of influencers' content. In fact, in six out of the 10 group discussions, individuals actively discussed several tactics for identifying sponsored alcohol messages were mentioned. Prominent cues such as the presence of ad disclosure statements (e.g., #Ad), explicit explanations related to paid collaboration (e.g., "paid partnership with"), the distribution of discount codes, and a high prevalence of hashtags accompanying pictures were pointed out. The ability to recognize the post's commercial nature was confirmed after the adolescents were exposed to existing commercial alcohol images.

Adolescents debated whether commercial cues could undermine the realism of and similarity to influencers' alcohol images. While adolescents generally did not mind or were not bothered by commercial images and even found these messages to be captivating, more than half of the adolescents agreed that influencers who explicitly unveil their commercial motives could undermine the realism and authenticity of their messages. They mentioned, "You follow them because you want to know their true experiences. If their messages are

sponsored, you think to yourself, ‘hello, this is not real’” (FG2, girls, 17-year-olds). In the adolescents’ opinion, these messages are biased, as influencers would have been restricted to freely express their opinions on sponsored products. They believed that influencers would be loyal to brands, even when dissatisfied with the received product: “I would not be surprised if they promote wine that they do not like just for a picture and to earn money” (FG 7, girls, 17-18-year-olds). These findings illustrate that adolescents’ awareness related the commercial intent leads them to more critically evaluate influencers’ images. These critical evaluations in turn seemed to overturn adolescents’ initial positive affective evaluations.

Participant 47: They always explicitly refer to brands in these [sponsored] posts.

Participant 44: Yes, these posts are just ‘too much’. I think you can attract more customers if you don’t involve the sponsor. They [influencers] just need to make the pictures themselves without involving the different companies (...).

Participant 45: Yes, influencers need to show their real self without being too outspoken about their collaborations.

Participant 44: Yes, if they do that [disclose commercial partnerships], I tend to dislike these pictures. I don’t find these images beautiful anymore.

(FG10, boys, 15–16-year-olds)

Participants agreed that the appropriateness of depicting commercial alcohol images would depend on the extent to which the audience comprises children and underage drinkers. They indicated that it would be unethical for influencers to target underage drinkers or younger children with this type of content. Participant stated, “It depends on the age group. If children between the ages of eight and 12 are viewing this type of content, then it should be limited. But if its youth like us, it’s not that bad. I would not mind” (FG3, girls, 17–18-year-olds) and “They are role models among young children. I often wonder ‘what do you think you are doing’” (FG9, boys, 14–15-year-olds).

Discussion

Our study draws three important conclusions related to (a) the elements that constitute affective and cognitive evaluations of influencers' alcohol images, (b) the dynamics between both types of evaluations and (c) a recall bias when reporting these evaluations.

Elements Constituting Evaluations

Our results showed that adolescents found commercial and non-commercial images to be captivating and appealing because of stylistic features (e.g., bright colors, the use of photographic enhancement filters) and the presence of emotional appeals (e.g., depiction of alcohol as contributing to friendship and positive feelings). Indeed, content analysis showed that commercial agents such as brands design their Instagram messages to appeal to youth's emotions by including colors and positive appeals (Barry et al., 2018).

Despite positive affective evaluations, adolescents were able to judge when influencers were inauthentic (i.e., cognitive evaluations). This created a sense of disconnection, undermining the realism of and similarity to their alcohol images. Three elements determined these evaluations.

The first element driving cognitive evaluations was the valence of messages. Extending previous research (Hendriks et al., 2020), adolescents described being predominantly exposed to positive alcohol images. Given their awareness of negative alcohol-related outcomes, they preferred a balanced view of alcohol images. Indeed, scholars already indicated that followers appreciate influencers who portray their 'true self' by sharing negative experiences as it creates the perception that role models are regular people like themselves (Newman & Smith, 2016).

The second element constituting cognitive evaluations is the setting in which alcohol use was portrayed. Adolescents were most skeptical toward images in which influencers focused on their wealthy lifestyle, while they were most lenient toward ordinary images

depicting day-to-day drinking settings (e.g., a picnic, a festival). These findings corroborate research suggesting influencers who display their lavish lifestyle damage their narrative of being ordinary and authentic role models (Marwick, 2015). Moreover, such luxurious images may evoke feelings of jealousy among followers who wish to obtain a similar lifestyle but are unable to do so (Chae, 2018).

The third element determining cognitive evaluations was the influencers' transparency related to the commercial intent. Commercial cues created the perception that influencers would provide biased reviews in favor of the brand with whom they collaborated. While influencers adhere to ethical standards by disclosing their partnership, doing so may paradoxically result in negative evaluations. Indeed, Hendriks et al. (2020) already showed that influencers who included disclosure statements received fewer likes and comments on their alcohol images.

Based on our findings, we propose to further refine the MIP model and to test some additional hypotheses in quantitative research (cf. figure 1). While prior research (Austin et al., 2006; Hoffman et al., 2014) and frameworks building on this model (Jackson & Bartholow, 2020) investigated how one's overall exposure to alcohol images relates to general cognitive and affective evaluations, we illustrate that alcohol images cannot be treated as a homogenous construct. Instead, it is important to include more nuanced measures of exposure by distinguishing between content elements (e.g., stylistic features, valence, setting, commercial cues) as this influences the ways wherein people affectively and cognitively evaluate messages, and potentially also the impact on alcohol-related outcomes.

[FIGURE ONE ABOUT HERE]

The Interplay between Evaluations

A second conclusion relates to the dynamics between affective and cognitive evaluations. Adolescents initially responded in positive affective ways based on stylistic

features and emotional appeals of alcohol images. This coincides with the elaboration likelihood model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), which posits that individuals who do not have the mental resources to process messages base their judgment on general impressions.

Noteworthy, the receptiveness to alcohol images diminished as soon as adolescents critically reflected upon influencers' motivations to depict certain types of alcohol images. This implies that cognitive evaluations overrule affective ones. Indeed, media and advertising literacy literature assumed that individuals who have insights into the working of appealing portrayals are empowered to regulate their affective evaluations (Hudders et al., 2017; Schreurs & Vandenbosch, 2021). Similarly, scholars refer to the concept of the 'double-edged desirability paradox' to illustrate that interventions increase people's knowledge of the efforts made by commercial agents to create attractive portrayals. This knowledge in turn eliminates the impact of emotionally dominated processing (Austin et al., 2007; Pinkleton et al., 2007).

Cognitive evaluations in our study were activated upon explicit prompts to think aloud about influencers' images. This may be attributable to the fact that people experience difficulties to retrieve previously stored knowledge spontaneously (e.g., Lang, 2000) and therefore need explicit cues to do so. As follows, think-aloud procedures may be a useful tool for future media literacy interventions aimed at making adolescents more savvy to resist influencers' appealing alcohol images. In addition to explicit prompts, the discussions with peers about influencers' images also enabled them to critically evaluate influencers' alcohol images. Adolescents guided each other in reflecting upon the realism of and similarity to influencers' images. The potential success of peer-led discussions lies in the fact that information stemming from peers is less threatening and more credible due to perceptions of high similarity between the source and the audience (Caron et al., 2004; Simoni et al., 2011). Hence, peer-led discussions may be another useful tool for media literacy interventions.

A Recall Bias

Our study illustrated that a recall bias in adolescents' reports of alcohol images exists. Adolescents only recalled encountering luxurious images, which only enabled them to report on their evaluations related to these images. Yet, on SNSs, more ordinary drinking images are also prevalent (e.g., Hendriks et al., 2017). Only upon showcasing ordinary images during the photo-elicitation procedure, adolescents were able to report upon their evaluations. Notably, these were the only images that were deemed to be realistic, similar, and desirable, which according to the MIP model (Austin & Johnson, 1997; Hoffman et al., 2014) would make these particular most influential for subsequent alcohol use behaviors.

These findings align with prior research, which indicated that people do not always notice the presence of alcoholic beverages when sharing alcohol images online (Hendriks et al., 2017). This recall bias may lead to a gap between the actual sharing of alcohol images online and self-reports of this behavior (Geusens & Beullens, 2021). As follows, future research should implement photo-elicitation materials to probe adolescents' memories and to gain a more in-depth understanding of evaluations related to different types of images they may encounter online. Moreover, it would be interesting for future studies to delve deeper into this recall bias by examining how adolescents process alcohol images and how this may lead to a distortion in their memory.

Limitations

Some limitations should be addressed. First, we conducted online interviews due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. A close-up of participants' heads provided by a webcam hinders the interviewer from observing nonverbal cues (e.g., body language). Such cues determine when further questioning is needed (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2017). Second, we used photo-elicitation materials of alcohol images in Instagram Feed posts, thereby neglecting images in Stories. Unlike feed posts, stories remain only briefly visible and

contain images that focuses on what is happening in the moment rather than messages that are strategically selected (Arriagada & Ibáñez, 2020). Hence, future research should assess whether this context leads to different evaluations. Third, participants determined the groups themselves. It is likely that a self-selection bias whereby individuals who were interested in the study's topic agreed to participate. Fourth, a social desirability bias may have occurred because of the sensitive nature of this topic (i.e., evaluations of alcohol images). This may be particularly the case in boys' group discussions due to the presence of a female interviewer. Fifth, we focused our attention on evaluations of images that encourage the consumption of alcohol use. We thus neglected messages of influencers who promote responsible drinking patterns or the consumption of non-alcoholic alternatives. Health organizations can use the power of influencers to boost their health campaigns and, subsequently, motivate adolescents to decrease their alcohol consumption. In line with our study, these messages should incorporate elements that drive positive affective (e.g., stylistic features, positive emotional appeals) and cognitive evaluations (e.g., highlighting the fit with the non-alcoholic product rather than a focus on the partnership with the alcohol prevention organizations). Given that alcohol is highly integrated into young people's lives (Rosiers et al., 2020), it is possible that people may not be receptive to these images. Future quantitative research is thus needed to test the effectiveness of such messages.

Conclusion

Exposure to alcohol on Instagram has long-lasting impacts on adolescents' drinking behaviors. The findings of our study confirm the persuasive potential of such depictions: Adolescents are frequently confronted with influencers' alcohol images and tend to enjoy such depictions. These affective evaluations are driven by stylistic features and emotional appeals. When adolescents activate their critical thinking skills, the persuasive power of appealing alcohol images diminished. Upon thinking aloud about and engaging in group

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discussions with friends, adolescents were able to critically evaluate influencers' images.

Adolescents reacted with negative evaluations when influencers highlighted the positive sides of alcohol use, showcased a wealthy lifestyle related to alcohol, and had commercial partnerships with alcohol brands. Thus, think-aloud procedures and peer-led discussions may be important tools to activate adolescents' critical cognitive evaluations.

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Tables and Figures

Table 1

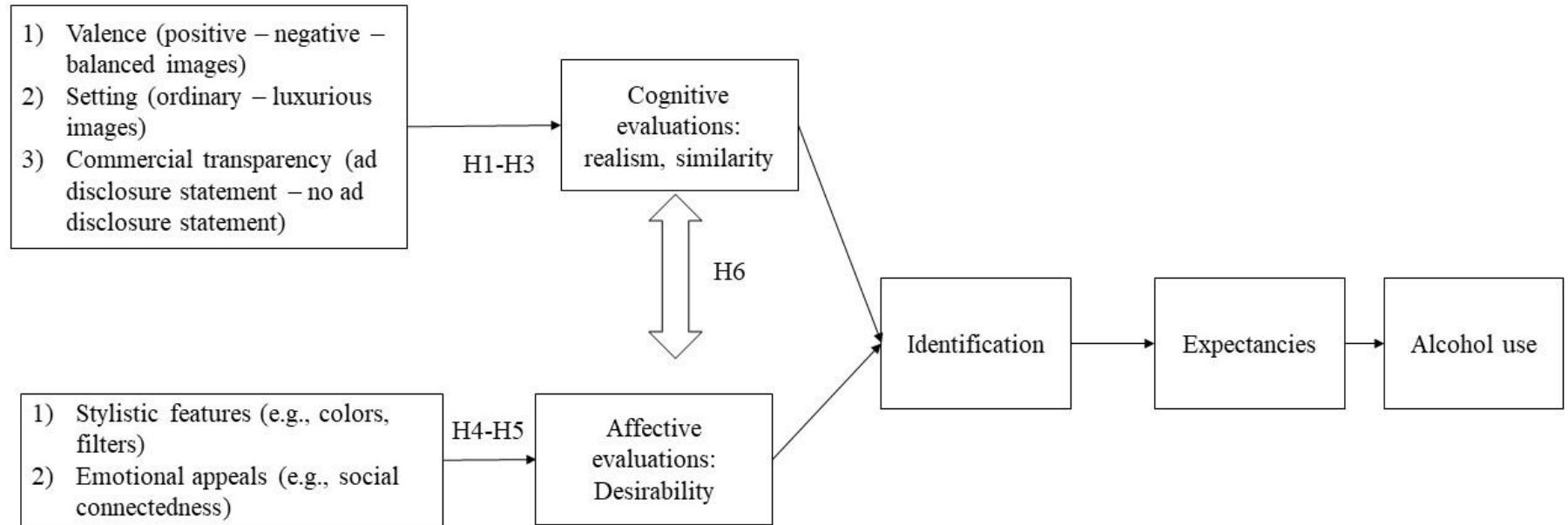
Descriptive information of focus groups.

Group	Number of participants	Gender	Age	Average age of alcohol initiation	Average frequency of alcohol use	Average number of beverages during a drinking occasion	Average frequency of binge drinking ^a	Average Instagram usage
FG1	4	boys	15-16	14	2-4 times a month	3-4 units	2-3 times a month	Once a day – multiple times a day
FG2	5	girls	All 17	14	2-3 times a week	3-6 units	2-3 times a month	Once a day – multiple times a day
FG3	4	girls	17-18	14	2-4 times a month	1-4 units	3-11 days a year	Once a day – multiple times a day
FG4	5	boys	17-18	15	2-4 times a month	5-9 units	2-3 times a month	Once a day – multiple times a day
FG5	5	girls	16-17	14	2-4 times a month	1-4 units	3-11 days a year	Once a day – multiple times a day
FG6	5	girls	All 15	13	Less than once a month	1-4 units	1-2 days a year	Once a day – multiple times a day
FG7	5	girls	17-18	15	2-4 times a month	3-6 units	1 day a month	Multiple times a day
FG8	5	boys	All 15	14	Less than once a month	2-3 units	3-11 days a year	Once a day – multiple times a day
FG9	5	boys	14-15	13	Never – less than once a month	0-3 units	3-11 days a year	Multiple times a week – once a day
FG10	4	boys	15-16	14	2-4 times a month	3-6 units	1 day a month	Multiple times a day

^a binge drinking is defined as the consumption of four alcoholic drinks for girls and five for boys within two hours

Figure 1

Future Hypotheses and Extensions to the MIP model



Proposed hypotheses for future quantitative research:

H1: Balanced alcohol images containing both positive and negative alcohol-related outcomes increase realism and similarity compared to images containing only positive or negative outcomes.

H2: Ordinary alcohol images increase realism and similarity compared to luxurious images.

H3: Alcohol images featuring ad disclosure statements decrease realism and similarity compared to images without such disclosures.

H6: Alcohol images containing many stylistic features increase desirability compared to images without such features.

H7: Alcohol images that contain many emotional appeals increase desirability compared to images without such appeals.

H8: Critical cognitive evaluations diminish the impact of affective evaluations.