



**Disapproving But Invisible: College Student and Adult Views, Reasons, and Responses to On-Line Posts about Alcohol**

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**Abstract**

Most research about alcohol on social media focuses on visible posts college students share, but not how others, including adults, view this information and what they do in response. An online survey of 572 students and 190 faculty/staff at a northeastern Pennsylvania university asked respondents to rate, explain, and react to two hypothetical Facebook posts about alcohol. One post was a bland statement of intoxication, while the other depicted the person as underage and mentioned vomiting. Findings reveal age similarities in the general views, reasons, and reactions to both posts. While more critical of the higher offense post, both students and adults felt that each post was generally inappropriate and their reasoning is similar. For the low offense post, respondents felt that it was socially unpopular and reflected poorly on the person; and, in the more offensive post, the illegal behavior was noted. However findings also reveal that both students and adults largely report that they would ignore or hide the post; therefore, the poster is not likely to see or be aware of the viewer's disapproval. Theoretical and policy implications are discussed.

**Keywords:** Facebook, alcohol, college students, adults



## **Introduction and Literature Review**

Social media, a mainstay of young adult life, is increasingly becoming a part of more mature adults' lives as well. According to a recent PEW research study, 88% of young adults and 79% of the entire adult population use Facebook, which remains the most popular social media platform (PEW Research Center, 2016). Social media affords people of all ages the opportunity to keep in contact with friends and family, to feel involved with others' lives, and to obtain entertainment (Leung, 2013; Nadkarni & Hoffman, 2012; Yang & Brown, 2013). However age differences in social media use also exist as young adults, like college students, are more likely than more mature adults to use social network sites to practice selfexpression, to learn social norms, and to test different identities (Brandtzæg, Lüders, & Skjetne, 2010; Ehrenreich, Underwood, & Ackerman, 2014; Shoenberger & Tandoc, 2014; Yang & Brown, 2013). Researchers have also found that young adults using social network sites, like Facebook, work to consciously craft online images of themselves that will foster their social capital and connections (Birnbaum, 2013; Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lamp, 2011; Reich, 2010; West & Trester, 2013). They do this by exploring the content they see peers post online, consider that content for their own identity, and if they choose to incorporate it, post evidence of that behavior, and then use online feedback for reflection and possible alteration (Brown, 2000; Moreno & Whitehill, 2014). Mature adults, on the other hand, primarily see social media as a source of entertainment and a means to keep in contact with friends and family, especially children, and may be less concerned about using Facebook for identity formation (Leung, 2013).

Presentation of alcohol consumption is another area where young adults and more mature adults may differ in their uses of social media. Many college students believe that college is a place to party and to drink alcohol (Lo, 2000; Marciszewski, 2006); and, students tend to think that visible participation in these behaviors online is necessary to be socially accepted (Ehrenreich, Underwood, & Ackerman, 2014; Shinew & Parry, 2005). In a study of 200 Facebook profiles, Peluchette and Karl (2007) found that 42% of posts had comments about alcohol, 53% had photos about alcohol use, and 50% involved pictures of partying. Posts about alcohol portray drinking as a positive experience, a means of having fun, and a way to bond with peers (Cavazos-Rehg, Krauss, Sowles, & Bierut, 2015; Glassman, 2012; Hebden, Lyons, Goodwin, & McCreanor, 2015; Moreno, et al., 2010). Researchers have also found that young adults who



view online posts about alcohol are more likely to consume alcohol (Boyle, LaBrie, Froidevaux, Witkovic, 2016; Carey, Borsari, Carey, & Maisto, 2006; Moreno, et al., 2010; Perkins, Haines, & Rice, 2008). More mature adults are less likely to feel such pressure.

However, in many ways the depictions of alcohol consumption online are inaccurate portrayals of reality. Students either exaggerate the amount that they drink, the social aspect of the drinking, or the effect of the alcohol on them (Dietz, 2008; Griffiths & Casswell, 2010; Litt & Stock 2011). The negative consequences of alcohol consumption, such as blackouts or hangovers, are also not as commonly depicted online; and, when they are shown, they are frequently reconstructed as positive in the form of humorous drinking stories (Hebden, et al., 2015; Moreno, et al., 2010). Even when students recognized the danger of potentially negative consequences, they felt this risk was low or too far in the future to be of immediate concern (Hebden, et al., 2015; Miller, Parsons, & Lifer, 2010). Therefore young adults may post excessive or dangerous drinking behavior in order to receive a positive reaction from others, which in turn further encourages this behavior.

Even though college students may present their drinking experiences positively, there is little research on what others, peers or adults, actually think of these posts, especially drunken ones. Wolfer (2016), in a study of college students' self-identified most offensive Facebook posts, found that posts involving alcohol or drugs (they were combined) rated 16<sup>th</sup> out of the 17 unique themes students identified as offensive. The relatively low ranking suggests that either college students did not find alcohol posts offensive or that they considered other posts more offensive. However, this does not mean that college students view all posts about alcohol similarly. An earlier study by Wolfer (2014) found that students felt that if a discloser was under the age to legally drink, even a general online comment about being drunk was inappropriate, as were posts mentioning vomiting. Students argued that this type of information was too personal or was unnecessary to share online because family and potential employers might see it. Therefore, while alcohol posts may not be the "most offensive" topic to college students, there may be some parameters which make a post more or less appropriate, but this is largely unexamined. A more recent study by Beullens & Schepers (2013) found that even though respondents averaged 476 Facebook friends, the typical alcohol post received an average of only three comments, of which almost three quarters were positive, about 10% were neutral,



and another 15% were negative. Furthermore, the typical post received about three likes and no dislikes (Beullens & Schepers, 2013).

More mature adults may be less accepting of online alcohol posts. They may drink to excess less, be less likely to share drinking experiences online, and they may also be more concerned about the negative consequences of intoxication. They may also be part of professional social networks for these young people. As professional networks especially, negative reactions to posts are important because researchers have found that when others view a post negatively, the poster's social capital may decline because these people view the poster negatively as well (Bazarova, 2012; Goodmom, Smith, Ivancevich, & Lundberg, 2014; Steeves & Regan, 2014). Therefore more mature adults' reaction when they see such posts may differ from young adults.

Since online interaction differs from face-to-face interaction in many ways (Davis, 2012; Ho & McLeod, 2008), some new theories have emerged to explain how online interaction affects behavior. One theory is the Facebook Influence Model (FIM) which, based on concept mapping, has identified four ways in which Facebook is influential to adolescent and young adult behavior (Moreno, Kota, Schoohs & Whitehill, 2013; Moreno & Whitehill, 2014). These areas are: connection, identification, comparison, and immersive experience. Connection is the ease in which information is accessible and able to be disseminated across a wide variety of people and groups (Moreno et al., 2013; Moreno, D'Angelo, & Whitehill, 2016; Moreno & Whitehill, 2014). Identification refers to how individuals create and reflect upon their individual and social identity through their presentation of their interests and how they decide whether to copy others on Facebook. The third component, comparison, is where young adults compare their standing to their peers based on post feedback. Last, immersive experience refers to the positive and negative experiences that can alter the user's mood and decisions (Moreno, D'Angelo, & Whitehill, 2016). The FIM argues that through the connection with peers, adolescents and young adults receive online feedback, such as "likes" or comments that allows them to compare experiences and reflect upon these reactions for their own identity and behavior formation.

However, the FIM does not explicitly account for an adult presence online. While peers are definitely an important socializing influence at this life stage, studies suggest that adults are also important influences (Hardy, Carlo, & Roesch, 2010; Lara, Alvarez-Dardet,



HidalgoGarcia, 2016). Peers may give positive reactions – and whether they do or not is not really studied – but adults may not, as they may be more concerned about the dangerous personal, professional, and social consequences of these posts. Adults may respond negatively to online posts about alcohol, especially drunkenness, via public negative comments which can directly socialize a specific individual and indirectly socialize their peers viewing the comment. Given the importance of negative online reactions for people’s perceptions of a discloser, young adults need to know when others are not viewing their behavior favourably (Bazarova, 2012; Goodmom et al., 2014; Steeves & Regan, 2014). However, few studies link perceptions of appropriateness with reasons or reactions, especially involving disclosures of alcohol, and especially among adult Facebook users.

To address these gaps, this research asks the following research questions:

1. Do mature and young adult differ regarding what types of drunken posts they view as appropriate for Facebook?
2. Do the reasons behind these views differ by age?
3. Among those who are unsure of a post’s appropriateness or who view it negatively, what do they do in response to seeing such posts?

## **Methods**

An online survey via Survey Monkey was administered to a population of undergraduate students (n=3,713), faculty (n=306), and staff (n=610) at a small liberal arts college in northeastern Pennsylvania regarding their Facebook experiences. The part of the survey relevant here asked respondents about their Facebook usage, some brief demographic variables, and for them to react to two hypothetical drunken posts, one mildly and the other more seriously inappropriate. Pretests reveal that the appropriateness of the hypothetical posts were statistically different at the  $p < .05$  level. IRB approval was obtained and the respondents were offered a chance to win a Kindle Fire for participation. Surveys and respondents were tracked separately by unique identifiers which enabled the researcher to know who responded to the study, without linking respondents to individual surveys.

Both hypothetical posts were designed based on the findings of the previous, especially qualitative, studies. Part of this research is to see if those previous findings hold in a larger,



more quantitative approach. The low offense (LO) post was largely based on Wolfer's (2014) study which found that college students generally did not mind posts about alcohol as long as the post did not go into detail about drunken behavior or mentioned that the individual was under the legal drinking age of 21. Therefore this post was not necessarily out of line with the expectations for alcohol consumption and the process for sharing that information to give others the impression of fitting in with college life (Birmbaum, 2013; Egan & Moreno, 2011; Rodriguez, Litt, Neighbors, & Lewis, 2016; Wolfer, 2014). The "low offense" (LO) post, was:

I can't believe how drunk we got last night! What were we thinking?

The second post built on the previous post in three ways to be more obviously inappropriate. First, again influenced by Wolfer's (2014) qualitative findings, this post made it clear that the person doing the post was not 21, so the behavior was illegal. Second based on Wolfer (2014) and Hebden and colleagues' (2015) findings about references to vomiting and excessive drunkenness, it implied that the poster vomited, thereby possibly providing "too much information" (Roche, et al., 2015). This "high offense" (HO) post is:

Great party! I got so drunk I am not even sure how I got home. Time to clean the puke off of my clothes! More to come tonight – gotta get in drinking shape for when I turn 21.

The posts were randomly presented along with other posts not relevant here so respondents didn't directly compare one post to its pair. Respondents were first asked to rate the level of appropriateness of each post on a seven point scale (1=extremely inappropriate, 7=completely appropriate). Next, the respondent was asked the reason for the post's rating. As stated, there were other, non-alcohol related, posts in the study that are not the focus here; but, the main reasons for inappropriateness were the same for the different scenarios, therefore some reasons are more relevant here than others. The listed reasons are: there is nothing wrong with the post, the topic is socially unpopular, the topic is mean, the post is offensive to my beliefs, the language used was inappropriate, the view expressed is misinformed, and the behavior is illegal.



There was also an “other” write-in option. About 40% (n=216) of students and 55.6% (n=144) of adults wrote reasons for the LO post; and, one third of the students (34.5%, n=181) and 51.7% (n=134) of the adults wrote in reasons for the HO post. To code these, the author, using open coding tactics, read through all responses and color coded like statements into themes. Next the author made a code sheet illustrating what types of statements corresponded to each theme. Comments were coded a “1” if it related to a theme and a “0” if it did not. Additional themes identified include: the behavior isn’t appropriate for social media, who cares, it could harm the individual’s future job / educational opportunities, it portrayed the person negatively, the behavior is dangerous to the person and / or others, the topic itself is one that makes the respondent uncomfortable, it glorified poor behavior, and it provided too much personal information. A summary of the themes and some examples of the comments coded as such appear in Table 1.

Table 1: Reason for Inappropriateness Themes, Reaction Themes and Select Examples

<b>Inappropriate Reason Theme</b>	<b>Examples</b>
Nothing is wrong	It doesn't bother me
Behavior is dangerous	I am concerned This is dangerous
Behavior or post is not appropriate for social media	Shouldn't be posted / publicized on Facebook for everyone
Glorifies poor behavior	Bragging / glorifies poor judgment Tries to be cool
Negative judgment of the person	He is stupid / idiotic / immature
Potentially harmful to one's future	Employers will not like this Unprofessional when applying for jobs
Too much information	
Topic itself	I do not like any posts that involve alcohol
Who cares?	Who cares? Not interested
<b>Response Theme</b>	
Nothing	Nothing / Ignore
Invisible: Hide the post	Hide the post Block the post
Invisible: Delete as a friend	Delete the person from my Facebook friends
Visible: Public comment to individual	Comment on Facebook
Visible: Private comment to individual	Text / call / private message
Visible: Help home but no mention of how contact	Make sure he had a way home. Ask if he needed help
Visible: Involve third party	Report the post Contact the police



Depends on relationship	If I didn't know the person well, I would delete him as a friend
	If I knew him / her well I would talk / text / private message
Depends on frequency	If it was all the time, I would delete the person as a friend If it was occasional / rare, I would ignore
I don't have Facebook / My friends wouldn't do	I don't have Facebook I wouldn't be Facebook friends with someone like this

Sometimes one comment received two or more codes. For example, one respondent wrote “Facebook is not a place to be posting these kinds of things. Way too much personal information others don't need to see” which received a code of “1” for “not for social media” and a code for “1” for “provided too much personal information.” A second independent evaluator coded the same data using the coding themes developed. Inter-rater reliability was established via a Cohen's kappa threshold of .8 since the themes were categorical in nature (McHugh, 2012; Viera & Garrett, 2005). For items which initially had a Cohen's kappa of less than .8, the raters discussed the individual areas of discrepancy for each respondent until agreement in coding was reached.

Last, respondents were asked how they would react if they saw the post in their feed. As this was an open ended question, the same thematic analytical procedure and inter-rater reliability coder tests were conducted. The responses fell into the following themes, which loosely follow a continuum of least to more direct visibility to the poster: do nothing, invisible reaction by hiding the post or blocking it, invisible reaction by deleting the person as a Facebook friend, visible private reaction by sending a text or private message, visible public reaction by commenting on Facebook, react by offering to “help” but how or when is unclear, visible reaction to a third party, decide based on the personal relationship, or decide based on the frequency of similar posts. Overwhelmingly respondents only provided one response to this question, therefore multiple codes do not exist. For the two “decide” codes, the responses were fairly consistent. For decisions based on personal relationship, respondents mostly said that if they didn't know the person they would ignore the post and if they did they know the person,



they would contact them privately. For decisions based on frequency, respondents consistently said they would ignore or delete the post if this was a rare occurrence but delete the person as a Facebook friend if it was frequent. Furthermore, hiding a comment was seen as less extreme than deleting as a Facebook friend because it didn't end the online friendship. Likewise, a private comment leads to less public visibility, and therefore is less serious than a public comment, which in turn is less serious than directly involving a third party. Examples of responses for these reactions also appear in Table 1.

### **Sample**

The student response rate was 14.1% (n=572) and the faculty / staff response rate was 20.8% (n=190), which is lower than the one-third percent response rate common to online surveys (Nulty, 2008). Like the university from which the data was collected, the majority of both the student and the adult sample is female (66.7% of students, 72.9% of adults) and white (81.9% of students, 93.7% of adults). The majority of the student sample is freshmen (35.3%), followed most commonly by seniors (22.5%), sophomores (22%), and juniors (19.5%). The majority of the adult sample is between 45-54 years old (28.9%), followed by 55-64 years old (24.2%). Three quarters of the adult sample has at least a four year college degree (75.8%).

More than three quarters of the student respondents (78.7%) and all but one of the adult respondents had a Facebook account at the time of the study. The higher percent of adults having Facebook than students may result from adults who did not have Facebook deciding not to participate in the study. For respondents with an active Facebook account, similar proportions of students and adults report being on Facebook multiple times a day (54.4% of students and 53.2% of adults).

### **Results**

#### **General View of Post Appropriateness**

The majority of both the students (24.2%, Table 2) and adults (22.9%) felt that the LO post was “a little inappropriate” and none of the respondents, regardless of age, felt that the LO post was “completely appropriate”. According to an independent samples t-test, there were no age differences in appropriateness ratings for the LO post.

Table 2: Perceived level of appropriateness by age

	LO post		HO post	
	Students	Adults	Students	Adults
<b>Level of appropriateness</b>				
Completely inappropriate	13.9% (70)	15% (36)	49.2% (255)	51.4% (131)
Somewhat inappropriate	20.6% (104)	16.7% (40)	25.1% (130)	24.3% (130)
A little inappropriate	24.2% (122)	22.9% (55)	13.7% (71)	26% (10.2)
Not sure	19.2% (97)	18.8% (45)	4.1% (21)	6.7% (17)
A little appropriate	11.9% (60)	13.3% (32)	3.7% (19)	2.7% (7)
Somewhat appropriate	10.3% (52)	13.3% (32)	4.2% (22)	4.7% (12)
Very appropriate	----	----	----	----

None of the respondents felt that the HO post was “completely appropriate” either; and respondents rated it as more inappropriate than the LO post. Half of both the students (49.2%) and the adults (51.4%) felt that this post was “completely inappropriate”, the strongest rating of inappropriateness, followed by another quarter of each (25.1% of students 24.3% of adults) who felt that it was “somewhat inappropriate.” As with the LO post, there was no statistically significant age difference in the view of the appropriateness of the HO post.

### Reasons for View of Inappropriateness

Very few respondents, regardless of age, felt that the LO post was generally OK and that there was nothing wrong with it. Among students, the three most cited reasons for finding the LO post inappropriate was that the topic was socially unpopular (29%), “who cares” (10.2%), and that the post reflected poorly on the individual (9.6%, Table 3). For the adults, the top reason

was also that it was socially unpopular (15.8%), but this was followed by it reflects poorly on the individual (12%) and was offensive to the respondent's beliefs (11.6%).

Table 3: Reasons for inappropriateness by age

	LO post		HO post	
	Student	Adult	Student	Adult
<b>Why Inappropriate</b>				
It's not inappropriate: the post is OK	7.3% (38)	9.3% (24)	7.3% (38)	5.8% (15)
Socially unpopular	29% (151)	15.8%*** (41)	23.4% (122)	9.3% *** (24)
It's mean	1% (5)	0	1.5% (8)	1.5% (4)
It's offensive to my beliefs	5.4% (28)	11.6%*** (30)	8.4% (44)	17% *** (44)
The language used	8.2% (43)	3.1%*** (8)	18% (94)	12.7% (33)
It is mis-informed	3.8% (20)	1.2% ** (3)	8.4% (44)	10.4% (27)
It is illegal	8.4% (44)	1.5% *** (4)	59.3% (309)	47.1% *** (122)
It is not for social media	6.5% (34)	5.4% (14)	3.3% (17)	1.5% (4)
Who cares?	10.2% (53)	6.9% (18)	5.8% (30)	2.3% ** (6)
May harm future opportunities	3.1% (16)	5.8% (15)	3.8% (20)	6.6% (17)
Reflects poorly on the individual posting – people made a negative judgment about the person	9.6% (50)	12% (31)	15.5% (81)	5.8% *** (15)

The behavior is dangerous to person or others	0	1.5% *** (4)	2.5% (13)	5.0% (13)
The nature of the topic itself is distressful	2.3% (12)	1.5% (4)	2.1% (11)	1.5% (4)
It glorifies poor behavior	1.3% (7)	1.5% (4)	3.6% (19)	5% (13)
It is too much personal information	5.9% (31)	8.9% (23)	4.6% (24)	0.8% *** (2)

\*\* p<.05    \*\*\* p<.01

Chi square tests for independence reveal that students (29%) were more likely than adults (15.8%) to feel that the LO post was “socially unacceptable” ( $X^2(1, 780) = 16.13, p=.000$ ), that it had offensive language (8.2% compared to 3.1%,  $X^2(1, 780) = 7.55, p=.006$ ), was misinformed (3.2% compared to 1.2%,  $X^2(1, 780) = 4.34, p=.037$ ), and was illegal (8.4% compared to 1.5%,  $X^2(1, 780) = 14.27, p=.000$ ). It is interesting that students were more likely than adults to assume that the individual was under the legal drinking age, when there was no indication of the person’s age in the actual post. Perhaps students felt that underage people should not be sharing this information and did not approve of the topic, so this misperception affected their rating of the language.

On the other hand, adults were more likely than students to feel that the LO post was offensive to their beliefs (11.6% of adults compared to 5.4% of students,  $X^2(1, 780) = 9.69, p=.002$ ) and that it was potentially dangerous to the individual (1.5% compared to no students, ( $X^2(1, 780) = 8.09, p=.004$ ). Only the adults noted the danger in being drunk, but the percent was remarkably small.

For the HO post, the most common reason for inappropriateness for both students (59.3%) and adults (47.1%) was that the post was illegal; however, chi square tests of independence suggest that students were more likely to cite this reason ( $X^2(1, 780) = 10.42, p=.001$ ). For students, the second most common reason was that the nature of the post was socially unpopular (23.4%), which they were also statistically more likely than adults (9.3%) to state ( $X^2(1, 780) = 22.77,$



p=.000). For the adults, the second most common reason they felt that this post was inappropriate was that it was offensive to their beliefs (17%) and adults were twice as likely to respond this way than students (8.4%,  $X^2(1, 780) = 12.62, p=.000$ ). Last, for both students (18%) and adults (17%), the language of the post was the third most common explanation given, but there were no statistically significant differences in this view. Interestingly, reflecting poorly on the individual, while not in the top three reasons for either group, was noted by students (15.5%) more so than adults (5.8%,  $X^2(1, 780) = 15.26, p=.000$ ).

### **Reactions to Inappropriate Posts**

For ease of writing, the respondents who were “unsure” or who felt that the post was at least “a little inappropriate” are referred to as respondents who did not have a favorable view of the post. Among these respondents, chi-square tests for independence indicate that there is a statistically significant age difference in how respondents would react to the LO post ( $X^2(5,563)=36.002, p=.000$ ). While the most common response among both students (83.2%) and adults (64.1%) was that they would do nothing, students were more likely to respond this way than adults (Table 4). Likewise, while the second most common response for both groups was that they would hide or block the post, adults (20%) were more likely to claim they would do this than were students (12.5%). As both responses are invisible to the discloser, when combined, we see individuals who post bland comments about drunkenness may almost never learn of the disapproval of others.

Table 4: Reaction to post for among those who viewed it as inappropriate by age

	LO post ***		HO post ***	
	Student	Adult	Student	Adult
<b>Reaction to Post</b>				
Nothing	83.2% (327)	64.1% (109)	54.7% (260)	25.2% (57)
Invisible – hide or block the post/ person	12.5% (49)	20% (34)	34.1% (162)	38.9% (88)
Visible – privately contact (not through Facebook)	1.5% (6)	5.4% (9)	2.3% (11)	5.8% (13)
Visible – publically contact (such as a FB comment)	2.0% (8)	7.1% (12)	4.6% (22)	13.7% (31)
Visible - Involve a third party	0.5% (2)	0	2.7% (13)	2.7% (13)
Depends on frequency or relationship	0.3% (1)	3.5% (6)	1.5% (7)	13.7% (31)

\*\* p<.05    \*\*\* p<.01

For the HO post, chi-square tests of independence reveal that among those who have an unfavorable view of the post, their reactions would also vary by age ( $X^2(5,701)=94.85, p=.000$ ). Half of students (54.7%) would still do nothing if they saw this post; but, only a quarter of adults (25.2%) would react similarly. Furthermore, while only about one in twenty students (4.6%) would publically comment on this post, almost one in ten (13.7%) of adults would. Even with these differences, students and adults report they would be equally likely to react invisibly (38.9% of adults and 34.1% of students). Therefore, once again, even with a post that people found more seriously inappropriate, the majority of people who make similar posts may still not be visibly negatively sanctioned, although there is a slightly higher chance of a visible response.



## Discussion

Researchers argue that colleges continue to have a culture of alcohol consumption where students use drinking as a means to gain peer acceptance and form group identity (CavazosRehg, et al., 2015; Glassman, 2012; Hebden, et al., 2015; Perkins, Haines, & Rice, 2008). Depictions of alcohol on social media foster this image because they portray excessive use of alcohol positively while downplaying or making comical the possible negative consequences of overindulgence (Hebden, et al., 2015; Moreno, et al., 2010). However little research exists about how college students actually feel about alcoholic posts, especially drunken ones, what might make a post more or less acceptable, and what they do when they see a post they view negatively. The Facebook Influence Model argues that online responses to posts help socialize young adults to drinking norms (Brown, 2000; Moreno & Whitehill, 2014); however, there is little systematic examination about what these online reactions really are.

Furthermore, college students have a wide array of online “friends”, including adults, who may be less tolerant of the posts that they see among their younger Facebook “friends”. Given the socializing role adults still possess for young adults and their potential to be professional networks, understanding adult views and reactions to these posts are important, yet this discussion is also absent in the existing literature (Hardy, Carlo, & Roesch, 2010; Lara, Alvarez-Dardet, Hidalgo-Garcia, 2016). This online survey of 572 students and 190 faculty / staff at a relatively small northeastern university begins to address this gap by examining the views, reasons, and reactions to two hypothetical posts about alcohol. One post was a casual comment about being drunk (low offense, LO) and the second post, designed to be more offensive (HO), contained evidence that the individual was underage and dangerously over-indulging.

The findings of this study suggest that young and more mature adults have similar views regarding online drunken posts, and that neither group views these posts particularly positively. Both groups generally felt that each post was inappropriate, and both viewed the HO post more negatively than the LO one. Therefore while researchers have found that people frequently share their drinking experiences online (Cavazos-Rehg, Krauss, Sowles, & Bierut, 2015;



Glassman, 2012; Hebden, et al., 2015; Peluchette & Karl, 2007), these findings suggest that this sharing is not viewed positively by others, including peers.

These findings contradict those of Wolfer (2016) for which alcohol consumption was rated towards the bottom of offensive posts seen on Facebook. There may be a couple of explanations for this disagreement. First, because the adults and students responding to this survey are at a small, private liberal arts university, their views of alcohol consumption may be atypical of other college students or this university may be different than that of a larger university. Second, Wolfer (2014, 2016) posed the question as “What are the top three most offensive posts you have seen on Facebook”. There may be a difference between “most offensive” and “inappropriate”. Given the perceived expectation and frequency of alcohol consumption on college campuses, students may not find the posts of their peers as the “most offensive” even if they still feel that the posts are “inappropriate”.

The findings also suggest that college students and adults generally share similar reasons for their disapproval. For the LO post the most common reason for inappropriateness by both students and adults was that the behavior was “socially unpopular,” even though the content of the post was generally mild. This finding is somewhat unexpected. As noted in the methods section, this research is part of a larger study that also addressed posts about controversial social issues and the response “socially unpopular” was more suited to those scenarios. There are a number of possible reasons this answer choice was selected here. First, it may be that drinking to excess really is not viewed as routine or entertaining by this sample and, therefore, does come with disapproval. Contrary to the findings of some researchers (Ridout & Campbell, 2014; Shinew & Parry, 2005), for this sample, participation in such behaviors may work against acquiring social capital and, therefore, to them would be socially unpopular. This interpretation is indirectly supported by findings where for both students and adults the theme “reflects poorly on the individual” was in their top three reasons of inappropriateness for the LO post, even though it was more highly ranked for adults than students. Consequently the risks for negative judgment of even a mild comment of intoxication by others may be more immediate than students think (Hebden, et al., 2015; Miller, Parsons, & Lifer, 2010).



Second, this unexpected finding may point to the importance of how behaviors are linguistically expressed online and how researchers frame studies of online interaction. Like some other research regarding the view of inappropriate posts (Bazarova, 2012; Roche et al., 2015), the two posts here are hypothetical in order to address specific aspects of drunken expression. Therefore, the response of “socially unpopular” may refer to the language of the post. Respondents may have taken issue with how the post expressed the behavior rather than the behavior itself. Furthermore, “socially unpopular” itself may have multiple meanings depending on the person.

For the HO post, in support of Wolfer’s (2014) study, the illegal nature of the post was identified as the top reason for inappropriateness by both students and adults, although students were more likely to note this. The language used was also in the top three reasons for inappropriateness among both groups. If “language” means the nature of the drunken depiction (for example, the “vomiting”), then these findings support Wolfer’s (2014) research. However, as with the comment about being “socially unpopular”, the term “language” here may also have multiple meanings. As mentioned previously, respondents may have taken issue with how the behavior was expressed rather than the behavior itself.

Interestingly, reflecting poorly on the individual did not make the top three reasons for inappropriateness for either group here, but it may be because for this post, the obviously illegal nature of the activity overshadowed the other reasons. The possible health and safety risks were also not highly rated for the HO post, either by students or adults. This is not surprising among students who expect their peers to drink heavily and routine, even if they do not approve of sharing this information online; but, for adults, the explanation is unclear and merits further examination (Cavazos-Rehg, et al., 2015; Egan & Moreno, 2011; Glassman, 2012; Hebden et al., 2015; Marciszewski, 2006).

Therefore, students and adults are fairly consistent in their general disapproval for even a minor declaration of drunkenness online; but, this raises the question as to why these findings appear to be so inconsistent with those identified in other research. One explanation may lie in the research methodology. Most of the existing research focuses on the nature of the posts and the comments people visibly make (Peluchette & Karl, 2007; Rodriguez, et al., 2016).



However, these findings suggest what is not said is equally important. Regardless of how inappropriate the post was or the age of the respondent, when someone sees a drunken post of which they disapprove, they either do nothing or react in a way that is not visible to the discloser. This implies that primarily positive reactions are visibly shared online, which provides a biased view of acceptance.

This lack of visible negative response has a number of implications. First, the Facebook Influence Model (Moreno, et al., 2013, Moreno, et al., 2016) argues that online reactions to posts serve to shape young adult behavior, and the implication is that these reactions would be both positive and negative. However, this research suggests that mainly positive reactions are visible online, therefore the information young adults are using for identity and norm formation may be biased (Hebden, et al., 2015; Moreno, et al., 2010; Moreno & Whitehill, 2014). Young adults who see primarily positive comments may get the impression that this behavior is endorsed, which could contribute to the misperception of the popularity of alcohol consumption on college campuses, thereby inadvertently reinforcing a culture of consumption (Reich, 2010). However, on the other hand, since young adults actively work to craft their online identities (Birnbaum, 2013; Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lamp, 2011; Reich, 2010; West & Trester, 2013), FIM might also argue that posters would notice the lack of reaction to certain posts and realize that these posts were not well received by viewers, thus discouraging similar future behavior. However, the details of this process has not been studied with regards to alcohol socialization. At the time of this writing, the author was unable to find studies that actually examined the content of posted negative comments, what specific types of negative information – direct (through comments) or indirect (the absence thereof) – young adults notice in response to their posts, and whether they weigh these messages the same. For example, even if there is an absence of response, if the visible responses are positive, these positive responses may be more influential because they are immediate and in the desired direction of affirmation, thus anything invisible may thus be ignored in favour of information that gives the poster positive feedback.

Second, research by Goodmon and colleagues (2014) and Steeves and Regan (2014), both find that a negative view of a post translates to a negative view of the individual doing the posting. When one has possibly hundreds of Facebook “friends”, a possible silent majority may make



negative judgments about the individual sharing these experiences unbeknownst to that person. Therefore, college students who post about their drinking exploits may alienate more people than they impress. (Bazarova, 2012; Goodmon, et al., 2014; Steeves & Regan, 2014). Last, visible negative comments may decrease this behavior. Considering that, at least with the HO post, a noticeable minority of adults were more likely to respond actively than were students – almost three times more likely - perhaps a future direction for research might be to examine if visible negative responses, both peer and adult, alter young adult drinking behavior.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

Even with these important findings, this study is not without its limitations. First, as noted in the methods section, the response rate for both students and adults was lower than that for other online surveys (Nulty, 2008), even though this sample is generally representative of the study population from which it was drawn. Because the findings here are contrary to those of many other studies, replication by asking people how they would respond is important. Furthermore, this study was done at a rather small liberal arts university in northeastern Pennsylvania.

Examining people's perceptions, reasons, and reactions to different types of drunken posts at larger schools and in other regions may be useful. Third, this study only involved two types of posts – one that was a rather bland expression of drunkenness and one that involved multiple issues such as underage drinking, vomiting, and possibly blacking out. Constructing scenarios about these behaviors separately, constructing scenarios along a finer continuum of acceptability or inappropriateness, and paying particular attention to the language used in the scenarios and wording of responses may help researchers better understand where people of different ages draw the line for appropriate and inappropriate drunken behavior online. Last, like Roche and colleagues (2015) and Bazarova's (2014) studies, this study used researcher driven scenarios, the language of which may have also influenced the findings. Qualitative studies where students and adults express what is inappropriate, why, and how they process such feedback when they receive it, as well as trying to find natural examples of similar feeds and study the reactions to them, will help obtain a fuller understanding of this phenomena.

Future research examining how posters process information and what specific kind of information they process is useful for understanding the effects of drinking behavior online,



the theories explaining the process of how others use this information to create their own social identity, and what can be done to combat the imbalance between the perception of online drinking behavior and the actual behavior. Without understanding this process more clearly, the misperception that posting on Facebook about excessive alcohol use and underage drinking are socially desirable are likely to persist.

### **Acknowledgements**

The author would like to acknowledge the contribution of Kelsey Andrews for serving as the second coder to establish inter-rater reliability for the reason and response themes.



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