

Social media influencers as vectors of alcohol marketing: A mixed-methods assessment of content and youth exposure

Summary

Alcohol consumption among adolescents and young adults in Switzerland has declined over the past two decades, mirroring broader trends across Western countries. Amid this positive development, alcohol producers have increasingly shifted their marketing efforts toward digital environments, particularly social media. A growing body of international research shows that social media influencers (SMIs) now play a significant role in promoting alcohol through subtle, often undisclosed content that young people struggle to recognise as advertising. While these practices are well documented elsewhere, evidence for Switzerland is almost completely lacking.

The aim of this project is to provide a comprehensive overview of alcohol-related content posted by SMIs most followed by young people in French- and German-speaking Switzerland. Three core research questions guide the study: (1) How frequently do popular SMIs post alcohol-related content? (2) To what extent do they disclose commercial partnerships or sponsorships? (3) How is exposure to such content associated with young people's own drinking behaviours?

The project builds on two consecutive and interconnected fieldworks. Fieldwork 1, an online questionnaire, will identify the SMIs most followed by 16- to 25-year-olds and measure participants' social media habits, exposure to alcohol-related posts, and drinking behaviours. Recruitment will take place via Instagram and TikTok advertisements targeting young users in both linguistic regions. The sample of 400 participants (balanced by gender and region) provides a pragmatic compromise between statistical power and feasibility, given project constraints. Descriptive statistics and inferential analyses will examine associations between exposure to alcohol cues and self-reported alcohol use.

Fieldwork 2, a structured content analysis, will focus on posts published by the most-followed SMIs identified in the survey. Over an initial two-week monitoring period, the project will determine which influencers most frequently share alcohol-related content. The subsequent six-week data collection phase will target the top five Swiss-based and top five non-Swiss-based SMIs with the highest frequency of alcohol-related contents in each linguistic region. Data will be collected from Instagram and TikTok, including posts, stories, reels, videos, hashtags, images, and engagement metrics. Contents, including ephemeral posts, will be captured through daily downloads. This data will be coded using a comprehensive codebook developed from prior international studies and include drink type, drinking context, post tone, presence of branding, SMI characteristics, and sponsorship disclosure. Two trained coders will ensure intercoder reliability through a structured training process and reliability checks.

The project is expected to provide a detailed overview of how frequently alcohol appears in the posts of the most popular SMIs, and how context, tone, and lifestyle representation are used to frame drinking. It will also generate the first empirical assessment of the extent to which SMIs based or active in Switzerland disclose sponsorship, thereby identifying potential gaps or ambiguities in current enforcement mechanisms. Lastly, by combining questionnaire and content analysis data, the project will explore how drinking behaviour of participants is associated with the characteristics and posts of their favourite SMIs.

The project's scientific significance lies in addressing a major evidence gap concerning digital alcohol marketing in Switzerland. The findings will inform public health authorities, prevention professionals, and policymakers by identifying both good and problematic SMIs practices and by highlighting inconsistencies between existing regulations and real-world marketing tactics. Outcomes will support evidence-based youth protection policies, including potential improvements in advertising disclosure and monitoring.