

# The DRAM, Vol. 8(5) - Virtual expectations: The effect of manipulated Facebook profiles on drinking norms and cognitions in adolescents

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With over 900 million active users worldwide (Facebook.com, 2012), Facebook is the dominant social networking site in the world. With the growing influence of Facebook, it is important to understand how content on social networking sites affects adolescents' growth and behavior. This week's *DRAM* reviews a study exploring the effects of exposure to Facebook profiles containing alcohol cues on adolescents' thoughts and beliefs regarding alcohol use (Litt & Stock, 2011).

## Methods

- Researchers recruited 189 adolescents between the ages of 13 and 15 from private schools, sports teams, and church youth groups.
- Participants believed they had 40 minutes to view the Facebook profiles of four high school students and rate the users on several personality traits.
- Researchers randomized participants into two experimental groups:
  - Alcohol condition: 3 of the 4 viewed fabricated profiles had textual references to alcohol (e.g., "You were so drunk last night!").
  - Non-alcohol condition: 3 of the 4 viewed fabricated profiles had no mention of alcohol and had textual references to non-drinking activities (e.g., "I had fun at the movie last night").
- After the 40 minutes, participants filled out a questionnaire assessing five outcomes:
  - Willingness to use alcohol ;
  - Affective attitudes about drinking (i.e., the benefits the participant believes drinking would have);
  - Perceived vulnerability (i.e., how vulnerable the participant believes he or she is to the negative aspects of

drinking);

- User prototypes (i.e., how similar the participant believes he or she is to an older adolescent who drinks).
- Perceived norms (i.e., how often and how much the participant believes older adolescents drink).

## Results

- Researchers found that the type of profile participants viewed had a significant effect on all outcome measures. Participants in the alcohol condition reported greater willingness to drink, greater similarity to drinkers, higher favorability and fewer negative consequences of drinking, and higher estimates of older adolescent drinking,  $F_s(1, 189) = 4.22 - 7.89, p < .05$ .
- Researchers also found that participants' perceptions and beliefs about alcohol partially mediated the relationship between condition and willingness to drink (see Figure). In other words, participants who viewed alcohol-related user profiles had more favorable views toward alcohol and found its use more normative, which in turn increased their reported willingness to drink.

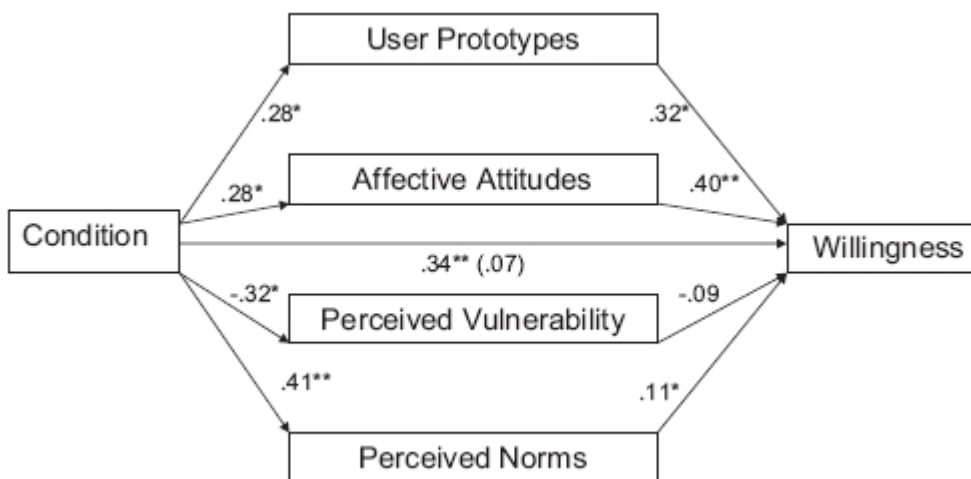


Figure. Schematic of the multiple mediation model (from Litt & Stockman, 2011; reproduced with permission). Click image to enlarge.

## Limitations

- Facebook profiles only showed textual references to alcohol; future studies might include photographs etc.
- The study assumes middle school-aged children would be Facebook

friends with high school-aged students two years older than themselves.

- While other adolescents previously checked the profiles for authenticity, there was no measure of whether participants accepted the profiles as genuine.

## **Conclusions**

This study shows that experimentally manipulated Facebook profiles can increase young adolescents' willingness to drink, as well as create a more favorable view of alcohol and drinking behavior. Interestingly, only a short-term exposure to these influences in strangers' profiles elicited this effect. Future studies might explore whether long-term exposure to peers' drinking behaviors has a similar, or even greater effect. Studies like this might eventually result in stricter or more comprehensive parental controls over social networking sites like Facebook.

-Daniel Tao

*What do you think? Please use the comment link below to provide feedback on this article.*

## **References**

Facebook.com (2012). *Key Facts - Facebook Pressroom*. Retrieved from <http://newsroom.fb.com/content/default.aspx?NewsAreaId=22>

Litt, D.M., Stock, M.L. (2011). Adolescent alcohol-related risk cognitions: The roles of social norms and social networking sites. *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors*, 25(4): 708-713. DOI: 10.1037/a0024226.