STASH, Vol. 21(4) – Adolescents' perceptions of substance use social media content and prevention messages

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Substance use is a public health concern among adolescents in the United States. By the time they graduate high school, over 61% of students have already tried alcohol, and over 38% have used nicotine and cannabis. Adolescents are exposed to substances online through advertisements and social media content. This is important to address because exposure to pro-substance use content is associated with a greater likelihood of heavy episodic drinking and other substance use. This week, STASH reviews a study by Rhana Hashemi and Erin Vogel that examined adolescents' exposure to and perceptions of substance use-related social media content and prevention messages.

What was the research question?

How do adolescents perceive substance use-related content on social media, and how does that correspond to their perceptions of prevention messages?

What did the researchers do?

The researchers recruited 30 adolescents (aged 14–18) living in California through a Facebook and Instagram advertising campaign. Participants were interviewed about their exposure to and perceptions of substance use-related social media content and prevention messages (e.g., *Are the messages you're getting about drugs and alcohol on social media different from the messages adults have told you about drugs and alcohol?*). The researchers then used thematic analysis to identify key themes.

What did they find?

Participants were mainly exposed to substance use-related content on social media, through pictures and videos posted by their peers (e.g., recreational drinking at a party). They primarily encountered formal prevention messages in school through drug education programs and online as public service announcements. Participants perceived discrepancies between posts from their

peers and prevention messages (see Figure). For example, while prevention messages taught them to not use drugs, peer posts on social media seemed to promote substance use. Additionally, while some prevention messages highlighted health risks, these risks were not reflected in their peers' posts. This led some participants to perceive that prevention messages exaggerated risks, and that these warnings did not need to be taken seriously. Participants also questioned the effectiveness of prevention messages, which mostly focused on abstinence instead of safer use strategies. They believed that their peers were using substances recreationally and were unlikely to stop or be influenced by abstinence campaigns.

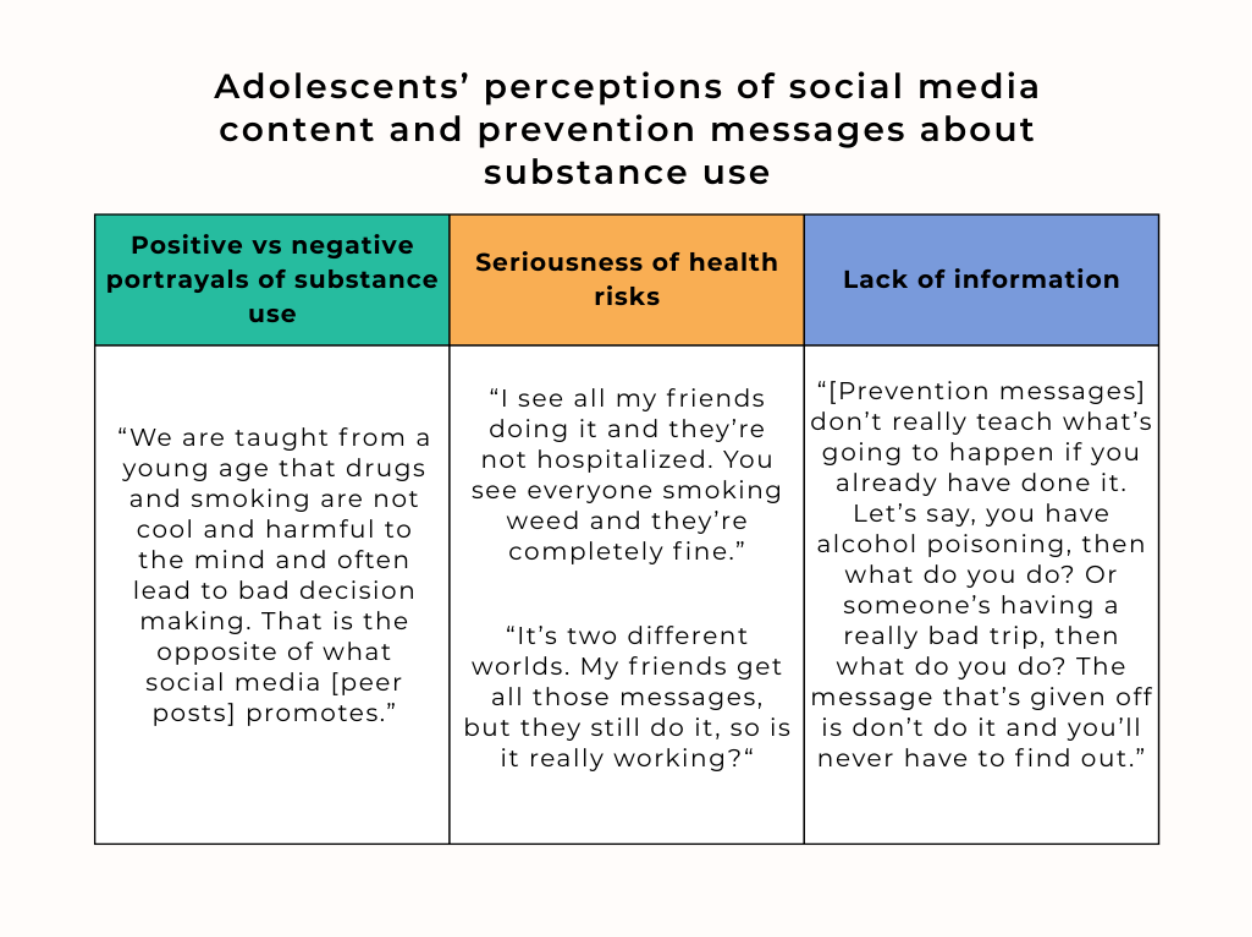

Figure. Key themes about social media content and prevention messages on substance use, including quotes from participants. Click image to enlarge.

Why do these findings matter?

Adolescents are educated about the risks of substance use in school and online, but they often see positive portrayals of substance use through their peers' social media accounts. Prevention messages also often promote abstinence and contradict what they are seeing from their peers online. Prevention campaigns could be more effective by using a harm reduction approach and highlighting

safer use strategies, as youth are more likely to accept these types of messages. It is especially important to improve the content of prevention messages in today's digital age since many adolescents are susceptible to what they see online.

Every study has limitations. What are the limitations in this study?
The results may be subject to recall bias since they were based on participants' memories of messages. All participants were living in California and reported minimal substance use, so the results may not be generalizable to adolescents from other geographic areas and may not be reflective of actual substance use.

For more information:
If you are worried that you or someone you know is experiencing addiction, the SAMHSA National Helpline is a free treatment and information service available 24/7. SAMHSA also provides fact sheets and brochures about substance use prevention specifically for youth and college students. For more details about addiction, visit our Addiction Resources page.

— Annette Siu

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