

Article

'Everyone's a bit buzzed, why not share that': exploring alcohol-related user-generated content among young people in Victoria, Australia

Alessandro Crocetti¹, Jennifer Browne¹, Kathryn Backholer¹, Nichole Lister¹, Sharon Atkinson-Briggs¹, Rebecca Bennett¹, Oliver Cook², Troy Walker¹, Florentine Martino¹, Peter Miller³, Matthew Dunn^{2,*}

¹School of Health and Social Development, Faculty of Health, Global Centre for Preventive Health and Nutrition, Institute for Health Transformation, Deakin University, 1 Gheringhap Street, Geelong, VIC 3220, Australia

²School of Health and Social Development, Faculty of Health, Institute for Health Transformation, Deakin University, 221 Burwood Highway, Burwood, VIC 3125, Australia

³School of Psychology, Deakin University, 1 Gheringhap Street, Geelong, VIC 3220, Australia

*Corresponding author. School of Health and Social Development, Faculty of Health, Institute for Health Transformation, Deakin University, 221 Burwood Highway, Burwood, VIC 3125, Australia. E-mail: m.dunn@deakin.edu.au

Abstract

Social media platforms are increasingly saturated with alcohol-related user-generated content (UGC), which can shape young people's attitudes and behaviours towards drinking. While all young people are potentially influenced by this content, certain groups, such as Aboriginal young people; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or other sexual and gender minorities (LGBTQ+) young people; and those living in regional areas, experience disproportionate alcohol-related harms and may have unique experiences with alcohol-related UGC. However, research examining these diverse perspectives remains limited. This qualitative study explored perspectives of Aboriginal, LGBTQ+, and regional young people (aged 16–20) regarding alcohol-related social media practices through semi-structured interviews ($n=24$). Reflexive thematic analysis was applied, with four overarching themes constructed from the data: (i) participants described alcohol posting as performative practice tied to sociability, identity, and peer influence; (ii) social media posts and digital amplification were seen to embed binge drinking culture within youth identity; (iii) Aboriginal, LGBTQ+, and regional participants reported distinct responses to alcohol UGC, with experiences shaped by stereotyping, safety concerns, and permissive environments; (iv) influencer-generated content was viewed as highly pervasive and many participants expressed scepticism at its authenticity. Policy action is needed to protect young people from the harms associated with online alcohol promotion and must recognize the intersectional experiences of young people from Aboriginal, LGBTQ+ and regional communities.

Keywords: social media; alcohol-related content; young people; intersectionality; qualitative research

Contribution to Health Promotion

- Participants perceived that alcohol-related user-generated content (UGC) is deeply embedded in youth social and cultural identity, with unique impacts across Aboriginal, LGBTQ+, and regional communities.
- Alcohol-related influencer content was viewed largely negatively, with participants expressing scepticism about its transparency and concern about its impact.
- Prevention efforts should be attentive to intersectional experiences in relation to alcohol-related UGC, attitudes, and behaviours.

INTRODUCTION

Alcohol harms among young people

Despite a reported decline in young people's alcohol consumption in Australia (AIHW 2024a), alcohol remains a key public health challenge. Initiation, experimentation and escalation of drinking typically occurs during adolescence, and is associated with increased risk of alcohol-related harm (Chung *et al.* 2018, Enstad *et al.* 2019, Yuen *et al.* 2020). Social media has rapidly emerged as a platform where young people are increasingly exposed to alcohol related-content (Carah and Brodmerkel 2021, Hayden *et al.* 2023).

Social media platforms can strengthen social connection and foster inclusive communities, particularly for marginalized groups (McAlister *et al.* 2024). However, they may also promote and normalize harmful products and behaviours, with alcohol-related content frequently embedded within everyday social contexts (Moreno and Whitehill 2014, Boyle *et al.* 2016, Wesche *et al.* 2019, Carr *et al.* 2021). One common source of such content is alcohol-related user generated content (UGC), which includes text, images, or videos created and shared by individual social media users rather than official alcohol brands. The content can be peer-generated (e.g. friends posting party photos), self-generated (e.g. an individual sharing a photo of themselves with a drink), or influencer-generated (e.g. an influencer posting a photo with alcohol in their hand). Alcohol-related UGC exposure, whether originating from peers or influencers, has been associated with earlier initiation of drinking, increased alcohol consumption and shifts to more tolerant alcohol-related attitudes (Lobstein *et al.* 2017, Curtis *et al.* 2018, Mayrhofer *et al.* 2020, Noel *et al.* 2020, Sargent and Babor 2020, Geusens and Beullens 2021, Meisel *et al.* 2022, Nagata *et al.* 2023). According to social norms theory, such content can influence both descriptive norms (perceptions that alcohol consumption is widespread among peer groups) and injunctive norms (beliefs that drinking is socially approved and celebrated) (Hendriks *et al.* 2020). This normalization of alcohol is reflected in the positive and celebratory portrayals of drinking commonly shared on social media (Russell *et al.* 2021, Guégan *et al.* 2024).

The relational dynamics of peer- and influencer-generated content contribute to a complex digital alcohol landscape. Emerging empirical evidence suggests peer-generated alcohol content exerts a stronger normative influence on young people's drinking cognitions and behaviours than influencer content (Hou *et al.* 2023, Corcoran *et al.* 2024). This reflects the greater perceived relevance of content generated within established social networks, where relational proximity can amplify normative pressures (Strowger *et al.* 2022). Nevertheless, the impact of influencer-generated alcohol content cannot be ignored. Recent systematic reviews have documented the pervasive presence of influencer-generated alcohol content and its influence on alcohol-related attitudes (Strowger *et al.* 2022, Robards *et al.* 2023, Strowger *et al.* 2024), suggesting such content blurs the line between entertainment with brand promotion (Brooks *et al.* 2022). Of particular concern is the documented pattern of undisclosed commercial relationships between influencers and alcohol brands (Hendriks *et al.* 2020, Guégan *et al.* 2024). These covert affiliations potentially circumvent traditional advertising regulations (when in place) while leveraging the parasocial relationships influencers cultivate with their audiences (Carah and Brodmerkel 2021, Hawker and Carah 2021). Consequently, to understand how young people navigate,

interpret, and respond to alcohol-related UGC further investigation of how they experience both peer and influencer generated content is required (Corcoran *et al.* 2024).

Intersecting alcohol-related harms across diverse communities

Despite the growing body of research on the links between alcohol-related social media content and alcohol attitudes and behaviours, key gaps remain, particularly in relation to its impact on young people most affected by alcohol-related harm (AIHW 2018, 2024b, Hill *et al.* 2021a, 2021b). Notably, this includes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, young people living in regional areas (non-metropolitan), and those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or other sexual and gender minorities (LGBTQ+).

Australia has high level of risky drinking, with 31% of people aged 14 and over consuming alcohol at rates that exceed national health guidelines in 2022–23 (AIHW 2023). This level of consumption is accompanied by significant alcohol-related harm, including preventable hospitalizations and deaths (AIHW 2023). Young people from LGBTQ+ and regional communities are often exposed to environments where heavy drinking is normalized. In regional areas, alcohol use is influenced by established social norms and the widespread availability of alcohol, including at community events (Dixon and Chartier 2016, Friesen *et al.* 2022). In 2022–23, Australians aged over 14 years living in outer regional areas were 1.4 times more likely than those in major cities to consume alcohol at risky levels (AIHW 2024c). Lesbian, gay or bisexual Australians were 1.2 times more likely than heterosexual people to consume alcohol in risky quantities (AIHW 2025). A 2020 survey also found that 28% of LGBTQ+ participants reported consuming more than two standard drinks per day on average, compared with 16% reported among the general adult population (Hill *et al.* 2021a, 2021b). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people also disproportionately experience alcohol-related harm. Alcohol use disorder is a leading cause of morbidity and mortality for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples aged 10–24, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people accounted for one-third of all alcohol and other drug treatment service episodes during 2015–16 (AIHW 2018).

The historical, social, economic, cultural, and structural factors driving alcohol use and alcohol-related harm within communities experiencing marginalization are complex and multifaceted. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples the ongoing impacts of colonization and dispossession, including intergenerational trauma, systemic discrimination and social exclusion are key structural drivers underpinning the disparities in alcohol-related harm (Freeman *et al.* 2019, Clifford *et al.* 2021, Holland *et al.* 2023). Similarly, alcohol use among LGBTQ+ people may stem from experiences of discrimination, as well as the role alcohol can play in identity expression and social connection (Emslie *et al.* 2017, Compton and Jones 2021). Intersectionality in the context of alcohol related harms elucidates how overlapping social identities and structural factors including gender, sexual orientation, race, and geographic location contribute to health inequalities by creating distinct patterns of marginalization where individuals experience differential exposure to alcohol-related harms

through both digital and physical environments (Bright *et al.* 2024). Despite multiple social and environmental drivers of alcohol consumption among young people experiencing marginalization, the ways in which alcohol-related UGC both influences and is influenced by these factors remains unclear.

Given social media's role in shaping norms and behaviours, understanding how young people from Aboriginal, regional and LGBTQ+ communities engage with alcohol-related UGC is essential to inform targeted, culturally safe public health interventions. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the perspectives of young people from these three communities about alcohol-related UGC. Specifically, we sought to answer the following research questions (i) how do young people from regional, Aboriginal and LGBTQ+ communities experience alcohol-related UGC? (ii) How do their social and structural contexts shape how they interpret and respond to this content?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study design and setting

We used a qualitative descriptive design, employing semi-structured interviews to explore young people's perspectives related to alcohol-related UGC on social media in the Australian state of Victoria. Qualitative description is well-suited to health research that seeks a rich, comprehensive account of participants' perspectives, while minimizing inference (Sandelowski 2000). Victoria is the second most populous and the most urbanized state in Australia, with a population of close to 7 million (ABS 2024). Approximately 23% of Victorians live in inner and outer regional areas (Victorian Government 2023a), 1% identify as Aboriginal (ABS 2021), and 5.7% identify as LGBTQ+ (Victorian Government 2023b).

Researcher positionality

This study examines how UGC is experienced by young people at the complex intersections of social and cultural factors, including age, gender, sexuality, Aboriginality, and place-based identity. Thus, reflecting on our positionality, as a research team, becomes especially important when conducting research with diverse communities. This project was conceived, designed and conducted by a team comprising social science and public health researchers, including male, female, Aboriginal and queer/gay researchers and researchers from regional areas. Interviews were undertaken by a young (<30 years) male early career researcher who had grown up in regional Victoria (A.C.). To help mitigate power imbalances, uphold gender and cultural safety and foster trust, all interviews with participants identifying as female were conducted alongside a female co-interviewer (R.B.); all interviews with LGBTQ+ participants were undertaken with a gender queer identifying co-interviewer (O.C.); and interviews with Aboriginal participants were conducted with an Aboriginal co-interviewer (S.A.-B.).

Participant selection and recruitment

We aimed to recruit 30 young people, aged 16–20 years, living in Victoria: 10 who identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander; 10 who identified as living in a regional area, and 10 who identified as LGBTQ+. Participants could identify with one, two, or all of these groups. We drew on the principle of information power to guide recruitment (Malterud *et al.*

2015). Given the study's focused aim, the specificity of the sample, and our theory-grounded analysis, we anticipated that this sample size would yield sufficiently rich and relevant insights to address the research questions. While our recruitment target was 30 participants (10 across each priority group), the adequacy of the sample was assessed by the richness and relevance of the data, rather than on meeting fixed quotas. The age range, 16–20 years, was selected to capture perspectives during a developmental window spanning the average age of alcohol initiation (16.2 years) and consolidation of drinking patterns in early adulthood (AIHW 2020). To be eligible, participants had to own a smartphone or have regular access to a smartphone or mobile device enabling use of social media apps.

Participants were recruited using a combination of convenience and snowball sampling. Convenience sampling involved recruitment through a social media advertising campaign linked to an expression of interest form, via Qualtrics, that screened potential participants against the inclusion criteria. Snowball sampling involved inviting interviewees to refer friends within their networks who met the inclusion criteria and might be interested in participating. All participants were recruited through social media advertising and snowball sampling. The study was also promoted via relevant VicHealth (government health promotion agency) partner organizations and other organizations that serve each priority population group, such as youth support organizations, LGBTQ+ support organizations and Aboriginal health organizations, and through the networks of the research team. Email invitations were sent to 41 organizations, with follow-up emails sent within 2 weeks if a response was not received. No participants were recruited through this method.

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted between September and November 2024. A flexible interview topic guide, aligned with the research questions, guided the discussion. Participants were asked questions about their perceptions about alcohol-related UGC shared by young people on social media, including the characteristics of these posts, the context in which they encounter them and how they engage with them. They were also asked to reflect on the how such social media content influenced their attitudes, perceptions and behaviours related to alcohol. Questions were divided between A.C. and the co-interviewer (R.B., O.C., or S.A.-B.) to ensure balance, with both researchers contributing to follow-up questions to support an organic flow of conversation. Interviewers checked in with each other before and after each interview to reflect on dynamics and emerging insights. Most (22/24) interviews were conducted via Zoom and two by telephone. Telephone interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by A.C., while Zoom interviews were documented using the Zoom recording and transcription functions and then cross-checked for accuracy. Transcripts were returned to participants to provide an opportunity to make edits; however, no changes to transcripts were requested.

Data analysis

Data were analysed using the reflexive thematic analysis method outlined by Braun and Clarke (2019, 2021). Coding was an inductive process, reflexively guided by theories of social learning and social norms, with attention to how intersecting

identities and structural contexts shaped participants' experiences and meaning-making (Bandura and Walters 1977, Berkowitz 2004). A.C. undertook preliminary coding using Microsoft Word (2016) based on the research questions. As coding progressed, Microsoft Excel (2016) was used to record codes, with iterations highlighted across each successive column. Initial codes were discussed with senior author (M.D.). Codes generated from interviews with Aboriginal participants were discussed with an Aboriginal member of the research team (T.W.), while those from LGBTQ+ participants were reviewed with a gender queer team member (O.C.). Themes were constructed, refined and subsequently named, by grouping similar codes together and interpreting their latent meanings through discussion with the research team until consensus was reached.

Ethics

This study was approved by Deakin University Human Research Ethics Committee (2024-037). While some participants were below the legal drinking age, the study did not encourage or facilitate alcohol use; rather, it explored experiences of social media UGC. Ethical approval was granted with specific consideration of the ethical issues pertaining to participants aged under 18 years, including informed consent, confidentiality, and assurance no adverse consequences would arise from disclosure of underage drinking. Participants were remunerated with a \$40 gift card in recognition for their time.

RESULTS

Of the 561 individuals who expressed interest in the study, 70 were eligible and 24 young people participated in an interview. The main reason for non-participation was non-response to the follow-up invitation sent to eligible participants. Interview duration ranged from 19 to 55 min. Participant characteristics are shown in Table 1. Participants ranged in age from 16 to 20 years (mean = 17.8 years). Ten participants identified as LGBTQ+ and six identified as Aboriginal. All Aboriginal participants lived in regional areas, while a further eight non-Aboriginal participants resided in regional areas. To avoid double counting, Aboriginal participants were reported separately and not included among regional participants in Table 1.

Four themes were constructed from the data, reflecting how young people experience and respond to alcohol-related UGC (Table 2). Following a brief overview of participants' social media use, these themes are described in detail below, each supported by illustrative participant quotes. The results section concludes with recommendations on ways to mitigate the impacts of alcohol-related social media content drawn from participants.

Participants' social media use

Most participants reported being frequent social media users, explaining that they are on 'pretty much everything and anything like TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat' (P16, She/Her, Regional, Age 19). One participant noted on the intensity of their use that 'it's pretty bad, probably on like seven-eight hours a day' (P20, She/Her, Aboriginal and regional, Age 19). Several participants emphasized the highly addictive nature of TikTok 'because it's very easy to get stuck on it ... since it's really easy to zombie scroll' (P3, any pronouns, LGBTQ+, Age 17). For many participants, Facebook was considered 'an

Table 1. Participant characteristics.

Characteristic	<i>n</i>	%
Age (years)		
16–17	10	42
18–20	14	58
Mean	17.8	–
Gender identity		
Female	18	78
Male	3	13
Non-binary	2	8
Population group		
Aboriginal	6	25
LGBTQ+	10	42
Regional (non-Aboriginal)	8	33

old person platform' (P1, She/Her, Regional, Age 17), while 'Instagram is the biggest one, then probably Snapchat' (P6, any pronouns, LGBTQ+, Age 17) for young users.

Theme 1: posting to belong: alcohol, identity, and social pressure

Participants across all groups described posting alcohol content as a normalized performative act that signals belonging, sociability and identity. Documenting a night out on social media was considered a normal practice and a marker of inclusion in peer groups after a few drinks because 'everyone's a bit buzzed, so why not share that' (P1, She/Her, Regional, Age 17). As one participant explained 'every second post that [they] see' (P15, She/Her, Regional, Age 18) is an alcohol-related post from friends. Others reflected on the ubiquity of alcohol-related content on social media, with one noting 'every time there's a gathering in every single photo there's always a drink, they'll always make their way into every photo' (P17, She/Her, Regional, Age 17). Similarly, one Aboriginal participant described the performative nature of including alcohol in a photo 'as an accessory in a photo or video ... like something that you have to have' (P20, She/Her, Aboriginal and regional, Age 19). Peer alcohol-content not only normalized social drinking at parties, but also seemed to trigger exposure to alcohol marketing. As one participant explained, a single alcohol-related post by a peer prompted targeted advertising: 'you look at your friend's post ... a party vibe, and then the next thing you get ... an ad for a tequila brand but it's just how the algorithm works' (P3, any pronouns, LGBTQ+, Age 17).

Participants across all groups described distinct patterns of alcohol-related content across different platforms. Content was 'mostly on Instagram and Snapchat' (P3, any pronouns, LGBTQ+, Age 17), while younger participants explained that peers will 'post most of it on TikTok ... and they will snap (i.e. send via Snapchat) you photos and stuff while they're at the party'. (P5, She/Her, Regional, Age 16). This sentiment was shared by one Aboriginal teenager who expressed that 'a lot of my friends post alcohol [content] on TikTok' (P22, She/Her, Aboriginal and regional, Age 16). While, Instagram content was described as more curated, featuring 'aesthetic picture[s] ... you see girls posting their cocktails at bars' (P9, She/Her, LGBTQ+, Age 19).

Table 2. Themes and their descriptions.

Theme	Theme description summary
Theme 1: posting to belong: alcohol, identity and social pressure	This theme was constructed around the ways posting about alcohol functioned as a performative practice tied to sociability, belonging, and identity. Social media was understood as central to shaping youth drinking cultures by reinforcing peer pressure. The theme also reflects social pressures to drink linked to peer visibility online such as the Fear of Missing Out (FoMo)
Theme 2: social media and binge drinking culture	This theme was constructed to capture how binge drinking was positioned as a marker of social status, with its visibility intensified through digital amplification. Platform-specific risks, particularly algorithmic amplification on TikTok, were identified as mechanism that extended and reinforced these behaviours. Humour memes, and funny stories were also recognized as important cultural devices through which alcohol use was normalized and embedded within online engagement practices.
Theme 3: alcohol content is not experienced equally	This theme was constructed to highlight how experiences of alcohol-related content differed across participant groups. For regional participants, permissive environments increased online visibility of alcohol as part of everyday sociability. Aboriginal participants discussed racialized stereotyping and hypocritical peer responses to alcohol-related content, reflecting broader experiences of discrimination and exclusion. LGBTQ+ participants described alcohol as central to queer events and drag culture, while also negotiating its role in relation to safety, visibility, and identity expression.
Theme 4: seeing through the #Spon ^a	This theme was constructed to illustrate participants' active attempts in distinguishing between paid promotional and authentic content. While exposure with influencer alcohol posts was ubiquitous it was shaped by scepticism about its authenticity.

^a#Spon is a shorthand hashtag for 'sponsored', indicating that a post is a paid promotion or part of an alcohol brand partnership.

Across all three participant groups, alcohol-related social media's relationship to identity, sociability and belonging intensified social pressures to drink. Many participants expressed experiencing that 'FoMo (i.e. Fear of Missing Out)' (P19, She/Her, Aboriginal and regional, Age 16) or 'anxiety over missing out' (P7, She/Her, LGBTQ+, Age 20) when viewing alcohol-related posts from events they were not attending. This led to feelings of exclusion, as one participant explained: 'sometimes you can really tell that they're trying to shove it in your face that they're drinking' (P2, He/Him, LGBTQ+, Age 19). Another participant shared similar sentiments: 'if you're just at home and everyone's having a really big night, you're missing out' (P17, She/Her, Regional, Age 17). The influence of peers' alcohol-related content on social media was particularly emphasized with participant explaining that the 'more you see it the more you want to do it' (P14, She/Her, Regional, Age 19) or that 'your interest peaks' (P20, She/Her, Aboriginal and regional, Age 19). Digital representations were seen to amplify peer norms, as one regional participant explained:

If they're seeing a bunch of their friends doing something, and they're all happy doing it and having a great time, then it's likely that they're going to want to do it too. Even if they hear the bad stuff about it, their friends are going on social media and going, 'Oh, no, it's great and super fun.' Then they're gonna trust them, because they're their friends. (P5, She/Her, Regional, Age 16)

Theme 2: social media and binge drinking culture

Participants described how binge drinking is framed and rewarded on social media as aspirational and cool behaviour. The 'big binge drinking culture' (P10, She/Her, LGBTQ+, Age 19) in Australia was seen as reinforced and normalized online, where posting alcohol content removed context and made risky behaviour appear socially desirable: 'posting on social media makes it seem so normalized that it removes all the context ... It makes it feel like it's fine' (P15, She/Her,

Regional, Age 18). For some, this visibility was explicitly tied to status claims: 'to let people know, they're at a party ... we're underage and we're having fun' (P22, She/Her, Aboriginal and regional, Age 16). This is particularly the case for younger adolescents where there is 'clout attached to drinking' (P7, She/Her, LGBTQ+, Age 20). Participants highlighted how different platforms mediated these dynamics in distinct ways. TikTok algorithms were described as exposing even very young users to glorified depictions of heavy drinking: 'on my For You page (i.e. TikTok's personalized content feed), I end up seeing 13–14-year-olds glorifying alcohol, like flexing that they have it' (P4, She/Her, LGBTQ+, Age 16). Therefore, concerns were especially pronounced for these younger audiences on TikTok, with participants noting that 'the stuff you see ... should not be on here for young kids to see'. (P5, She/Her, Regional, Age 16). Others expressed concern with Snapchat and its particularly risky drinking content: 'Snapchat is the biggest platform that I see drunk people' (P16, She/Her, Regional, Age 19). One rural participant summarized:

I think that snapchat is awful when you're drunk. When you're younger It feels like Snapchat is dangerous because it feels like it's going to go away. Everyone posts really dumb stuff on their stories, and I'd have hundreds of stories on Saturday nights with people getting really, really drunk and just doing dumb stuff and they think that it seems so private but don't understand the ramifications of what will happen like that It's still public they're posting on a public platform people will still see it. (P15, She/Her, Regional, Age 18)

Participants described humour as a defining feature of alcohol-related content on social media, often conveyed through memes, skits and comedic posts that functioned as a means of promoting drinking culture. Participants reported sharing 'funny post[s], like those stupid beer posts' (P7, She/Her, LGBTQ+, Age 20) or engaging with alcohol content 'if

it's something funny' (P9, She/Her, LGBTQ+, Age 19). Similarly, another participant explained they would engage with 'posts from content creators or comedians or skits that involve alcohol; if it's funny, I'll send it to a friend' (P11, He/Him, LGBTQ+, Age 19). Humour was frequently used to portray intoxication and its aftermath as entertaining or socially rewarding, framing excessive consumption as something to laugh about rather than avoid: 'one of my friends posting drunk antics with a friend ... and I'll be like, "Oh, haha, that's pretty funny"' (P6, any pronouns, LGBTQ+, Age 17). The connection between humour and binge drinking also extended offline, where retelling funny drinking stories become a social ritual. One regional participant explained that '[peers] almost make you want to have more bad experiences so, you have stories to tell ... , "Oh, this is a funny story"' (P17, She/Her, Regional, Age 17). This indicates that humour not only increases engagement and sharing but also encourages the valorization of excessive consumption as a source of collective amusement and social bonding. These accounts illustrate a problematic issue that social media appear to glorify Australia's binge drinking culture through platform-specific practices that obscure risks and extend alcohol's visibility to younger audiences.

Theme 3: alcohol content is not experienced equally

Social media alcohol cultures were experienced and responded to differently across participant subgroups, with regional participants reporting more permissive environments and greater alcohol exposure and alcohol-related UGC compared with metropolitan peers. Rules around underage drinking were described as 'a lot less strict' (P21, She/Her, Aboriginal and regional, Age 16) 'in regional areas', with establishments and parents 'less likely to enforce rules on youth alcohol consumption' (P18, He/Him, Regional, Age 19). This permissiveness translated into more alcohol-fuelled events to capture and share on social media, including 'drinking with the boys' 'at country football clubs' (P15, She/Her, regional, Age 18) and 'bush doofs (Bush doof is an Australian term used to describe an outdoor electronic dance music event held primarily in rural and regional parts of Australia, known as the 'the bush'.)' (P20, She/Her, Aboriginal and regional, Age 19), enabling earlier and heavier drinking than in urban areas. According to regional participants, social media and alcohol-related UGC reinforces the already entrenched youth drinking culture, which one participant described as 'extremely, extremely normalized' (P16, She/Her, Regional, Age 19), further embedding alcohol into youth identity.

Despite also living in regional areas, Aboriginal participants experienced alcohol culture on social media differently. Almost all Aboriginal respondents reported being stereotyped as 'alcoholics' by their peers because of their Aboriginal cultural identity. At times, these racist stereotypes extended to comments made by peers on their social media posts. This differential, and often hypocritical, treatment of Aboriginal young people by their peers when 'you're having, a good time' (P21, She/Her, Aboriginal and regional, Age 16) was explained by one Aboriginal teenager:

People more so view us as having control issues with alcohol and then we're viewed differently even though that we're in the same social settings and having the same amount of alcohol. (P20, She/Her, Aboriginal and regional, Age 19)

As a result of this racialized stereotyping, Aboriginal participants described being more cautious about what they posted. For instance, one young woman reflected that 'things can get skyrocket compared to the reality' and that you really need to 'settle yourself' (P22, She/Her, Aboriginal and Rural, Age 16). These accounts suggest, that unlike their non-Aboriginal peers who often alcohol posting as a mean of belonging, Aboriginal participants weighed the risks of reinforcing stereotypes, which constrains rather than affirm their sense of belonging.

LGBTQ+ respondents described a range of views on the relationships between alcohol, queer social events, and online visibility. Many participants highlighted others had the view that LGBTQ+ events and drinking were closely linked: 'you want to have fun and be up dancing' (P6, any pronouns, LGBTQ+, Age 17), with drag culture described as 'synonymous with party culture ... and then party culture is all about excessive drinking'. (P9, She/Her, LGBTQ+, Age 19). Conversely, some others reported that the alcohol-related content that someone is exposed to is 'not a gender or a sexuality thing, it just depends on the flavour of person you are' (P3, any pronouns, LGBTQ+, Age 17). Another observed that alcohol-related posting was not necessarily more common among queer peers; instead, heterosexual couples were more likely to post alcohol content: 'Most of the people I see posting about alcohol are, like, heterosexual couples, for example, that have gone on a date or something like that. But I don't think any of my queer friends would be posting that' (P7, She/Her, LGBTQ+, Age 20).

At the same time, LGBTQ+ participants also shared ways alcohol was negotiated in relation to safety and visibility. Some reduced their drinking in non-queer spaces—'they'll definitely drink less, just so they can be safe', this is especially the case when one is 'outwardly, queer presenting or feminine' (P4, She/Her LGBTQ+, Age 16) and thus reduced their alcohol-related posting. One queer participant explained that seeing her queer friends post about drinking immediately prompted concern: 'You just hope they're safe' (P13, She/Her, LGBTQ+, Age 18). Taken together, these accounts highlight that alcohol in LGBTQ+ contexts is bound up with cultural expression and community celebration, yet also negotiated in relation to safety, identity expression, and decisions about online visibility.

Theme 4: seeing through the #Spon

While young people recognize and attempt to navigate influencer-generated alcohol content, the blurring of authentic and paid posts ensures that marketing still permeates their social media feeds. Many participants described the frequency of seeing influencer driven alcohol-related content and noticing disclosed influencer partnerships. One participant explained that they see it 'all the time and it's probably disclosed as much as it is not' (P15, She/Her, Regional, Age 18). This participant went on to explain that influencer alcohol-related content 'advertise [drinking] as more like a normal, everyday thing' (P15, She/Her, Regional, Age 18). Another participant described how influencers often present alcohol as glamorous and sophisticated 'They just show the good sides of it, and they never show the bad sides' (P16, She/Her, Regional, Age 19). This respondent went on to emphasize that influencers are 'promoting drinking' when alcohol is a product that 'really destroys friendships and community' (P16, She/Her, Regional,

Age 19). An Aboriginal participant contrasted alcohol-related content shared by peers with that posted by influencers:

Influencers on social media show like the more fun side of it but on friends' stories, it shows, like, the effects of it, like vomiting and, like, yeah, everything like that. (P21, She/Her, Aboriginal and regional, Age 16)

Many participants reported they do not like to engage (like, comment and share) with influencer or other public accounts and 'don't really express any interest' (P20, She/Her, Aboriginal and regional, Age 19). This sentiment was encapsulated by one rural participant: 'I hate when people see what you've liked ... usually with public accounts if I follow them, I tend not to like the posts, I'll look at it and scroll past' (P1, She/Her, Regional, Age 17). Many other respondents said they avoid interacting specifically with influencer-generated alcohol posts as they judge them more critically for promoting such products, as one participant expressed:

An influencer account, I'd probably judge that a bit more harshly than I would if it was some random person ... I think, like they have a platform, and especially if they were marketing towards young people. I would think that that would be kind of irresponsible, perhaps bad ... I'd probably try and avoid interacting with that kind of post, because it's just not really what I want to see. (P10, She/Her, LGBTQ+, Age 19)

Young people's recommendations

In addition to the above themes, respondents across the three groups recognized the need to mitigate the potential impact of alcohol-related content on social media and provided a range of recommendations for governments and social media companies. While participants often referred to alcohol social media advertising more broadly, their concerns encompassed both traditional promotional content and influencer-generated content including 'paid partnerships' (P15, She/Her, Regional, Age 18) with alcohol brands. Several called for restrictions or outright bans on alcohol promotion, including through influencers. Many participants suggested that health warnings should be embedded into content that promotes alcohol including influencer-generated alcohol content, like gambling warnings, as this respondent suggests—'having posts educating people about the reality of alcohol' (P8, She/Her, Regional, Age 19) and 'more posts about drinking responsibly. I don't see enough of those' (P9, She/Her, LGBTQ+, Age 19), as a measure to 'try and educate people through social media about the negative impacts of alcohol' (P19, She/Her, Aboriginal and regional, Age 16). One participant reflected on how regulations seemed less strict for alcohol advertising than for gambling advertising:

I definitely think it should be better regulated. I get gambling ads all the time, but I know at least like, there will be gamble safely at the end of it, there's still a spiel about, like, gamble responsibly and alcohol ads just do not have that whatsoever. (P6, any pronouns, LGBTQ+, Age 17)

Many participants expressed the view that 'in an ideal world, we'd ban drinking ads' (P11, He/Him, LGBTQ+, Age 19) or at least 'restrict it' (P21, Aboriginal and regional, Age 16), with

participants recognizing the dangers of alcohol advertising for young people, saying 'I think on social media, it should be eliminated ... that information and content being accessible for younger people, I think it could be, really dangerous' (P5, She/Her, Regional, Age 16). Other participants recognized the 'tension of more regulation versus freedom' (P7, She/Her, LGBTQ+, Age 20), expressing the view that improving public health campaigns alongside social media regulation is needed. To this end, many participants expressed the need for more education programmes in schools including on 'media literacy and just, how to be cautious and careful [on the internet]' (P6, any pronouns, LGBTQ+, Age 17). As one participant explained, to reduce harms associated with alcohol-related content, policy and action was required across multiple settings, including within social media companies themselves:

Social media companies need to be actually willing to engage with government policies or take on policies of their own...government influence cannot just come from telling a social media company what to do, but providing better public health campaigns around that. (P11, He/Him, LGBTQ+, Age 19)

DISCUSSION

To our knowledge, this is the first study exploring the perspectives of Aboriginal, LGBTQ+, and regionally based young people about alcohol-related UGC and how intersectional experiences shape how young people navigate and respond to this content. Our findings reveal a complex interplay between social media, drinking culture and social and cultural identity, as well as the pervasiveness of alcohol-related UGC across social media platforms. Four overarching findings were drawn from the data including some recommendations by participants. Alcohol-related posting was considered a ubiquitous, performative practice among young people, and connected to sociability, identity, peer influence and binge-drinking culture. Online alcohol culture was not experienced equally by Aboriginal, LGBTQ+, and regional young people, with experiences of racism, safety concerns, and permissive regional environments shaping intersectional responses to alcohol UGC. Influencer-generated alcohol content was viewed as highly pervasive, with participants calling for increased regulation of online alcohol promotion coupled with broader social media literacy education.

Our most notable finding was that young people's experiences and interpretations of alcohol-related UGC differed substantially across the three groups, reflecting their unique socio-cultural contexts and challenges. Regional participants described distinctly different patterns of exposure and engagement compared with what they perceived among their urban young peers, with greater emphasis on alcohol-related content at local events and being less strict at enforcing underage drinking laws. This aligns with wider research on youth alcohol culture in regional areas, which highlights established social norms and the perceived ease of access to alcohol, (Warren *et al.* 2015, Friesen *et al.* 2022) and extends this understanding of how digital spaces reinforce and amplify drinking culture in regional areas.

The varied perspectives of LGBTQ+ participants regarding alcohol-related content reveal complex intersections between identity, safety, and digital representation. While some participants rejected associations between alcohol exposure and gender and sexuality, many others had the view that alcohol-

related UGC was intertwined with queer social spaces and identity affirmation. Participant narratives suggested a complex negotiation between alcohol's role in queer cultural spaces and safety considerations in mainstream environments. This reflects wider, long-documented concerns about queer safety and exclusion in public spaces and mainstream social environments (Fileborn 2014, Doan 2015). Queer young people's engagement with alcohol content often centred around specific venues and events that hold cultural significance within LGBTQ+ communities, as well as historically being considered safer spaces (Charlton 2025). This content was perceived as both a celebration of identity and a potential driver of consumption behaviours. This safety/celebration tension reflects broader research on substance use in LGBTQ+ communities, where alcohol simultaneously functions as a facilitator of community connection and a response to minority stress (Talley *et al.* 2016, Demant *et al.* 2018).

Aboriginal participants' encounters with alcohol-related racial prejudice on social media illustrate a clear expression of digital colonialism, a dynamic in which digital platforms become contemporary sites for the reproduction of colonial power, surveillance, policing and control (Carlson and Frazer 2020, Sullivan and McLean 2023). Through the surveillance and shaming of Aboriginal young peoples for perceived behaviours that are otherwise normalized among non-Indigenous peers, social media functions as a mechanism for the continued policing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This reflects broader systems of colonial violence that cast Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples within deficit-based narratives, particularly in relation to alcohol (Stoneham *et al.* 2014). Similar dynamics were observed among young Māori drinkers in Aotearoa New Zealand, where colonial histories and ongoing racialized visibility mean they cannot participate in social media self-presentation such as posting drinking photos, in the same way as their pākehā (white) peers (Goodwin *et al.* 2016). Together, these experiences underscore the need to consider how platforms may exacerbate social and health inequities through the unequal visibility and framing of alcohol-related content.

Our findings provide strong empirical support of the Alcohol Self-Presentation Model (Steers *et al.* 2022) by illustrating how alcohol-related UGC among young people is shaped by context-specific yet widely normalized behaviours. Participants described the practice of sharing alcohol consumption online as both routine and socially expected; this served to reinforce drinking as a normative and even desirable behaviour. These digital displays operate as status-signalling mechanisms, where aestheticized posts (visually stylized to project desirability and social appeal) and shared rituals of consumption generate 'clout' and social validation. However, our findings also suggest that the curated nature of young people's alcohol posts contributes to social exclusion for those not participating. This was especially evident in accounts of FoMo (Fear of Missing Out), with participants reporting feelings of anxiety and pressure when not present at alcohol-related events. The manifestation of social pressure known as FoMo has been associated with experiencing more negative alcohol-related harm and higher quantities of alcoholic drinks consumed among young people (Riordan *et al.* 2015).

Participants in this study expressed scepticism and had a negative outlook towards influencer-generated content. However, whilst some participants appeared aware of certain influencer marketing tactics, it is likely that other forms of

alcohol promotion via influencers went unnoticed, as reported in previous research suggesting that young people are unaware recipients of digital alcohol messaging via influencers (Zarouali *et al.* 2020, Hendriks *et al.* 2023). Furthermore, the reported reluctance to engage with disclosed influencer content through likes, comments or shares aligns with previous research (Hendriks *et al.* 2020). This resistance appears multifaceted stemming from concerns about privacy, judgements about influencer responsibility, and critical evaluations of content relevance. However, despite this critical stance, participants reported ubiquitous exposure to alcohol-related UGC across multiple platforms, with the perception that the algorithm ensures continued visibility. Participants' reflections that after viewing peer drinking content, alcohol marketing or branded posts would subsequently appear in their feeds emphasizes the sense that algorithms curate and sustain these connections at times of potentially heightened social engagement. This dynamic is likely compounded with alcohol brands increasingly investing into social media marketing, including paid partnerships with influencers (Shepherd 2023). Evidence shows that exposure to alcohol-related social media marketing increases alcohol consumption among young people and contributes to heightened social pressure to drink (Lobstein *et al.* 2017, Finan *et al.* 2020, Alhabash *et al.* 2022).

Participants shared several recommendations to mitigate the impact of alcohol-related UGC. Their suggestions included transparent alcohol content disclosures and social media alcohol marketing restrictions, including influencer-generated content. For influencer-generated content there are two regulatory measures that could be pursued: the first is better disclosure of commercial partnerships between influencers and brands (Carah and Brodmerkel 2021). In Australia this is already required under consumer and competition law but is not monitored and is poorly enforced (ACCC 2023, Hayden *et al.* 2023). Secondly, although regulating all alcohol-related UGC is challenging, in the case of influencer marketing where a commercial transaction has taken place for the promotion of alcohol, this content could be captured within regulatory frameworks that ban the online alcohol marketing (Hayden *et al.* 2023). In line with participant perspectives, a potentially viable intervention is the integration of health warning disclosures or prompts on alcohol-related UGC, which could be algorithmically triggered by alcohol-related hashtags or visual cues. Evidence shows that health warnings on alcohol advertising can heighten risk perception and reduce both behavioural intentions and perceived brand appeal (Diouf *et al.* 2023, Critchlow *et al.* 2024). However, significant challenges remain regarding feasibility, enforcement, and the fact that alcohol marketing on social media continues to be permitted within existing regulatory frameworks. To advance the research and policy agenda on digital alcohol promotion including UGC, systematic monitoring is essential (Carah and Brodmerkel 2021). Such monitoring requires greater platform transparency, particularly surrounding researcher access to algorithmic models that shape how alcohol-related content is recommended, promoted, and engaged with across diverse user groups (Carah and Brodmerkel 2021, Russell *et al.* 2023).

Limitations

This study has several limitations. The research was deeply rooted in the Australian social and cultural context and findings may not translate to different cultural or regulatory

environments and experiences internationally. Our findings are based on the perspectives of 24 participants who may not represent the diversity of regional, LGBTQ+ and Aboriginal communities, cultures and experiences. Regional communities vary significantly in terms of geography, socio-economic conditions, cultural norms, and access to services, all of which shape young people's experiences with alcohol and social media in different ways. The LGBTQ+ community is similarly diverse, encompassing a wide spectrum of sexualities, gender identities, and expressions. Likewise, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are not homogenous; they comprise many distinct nations, languages, and cultural practices. While this study included participants who identified as Aboriginal, it does not claim to represent the experiences of all Aboriginal young people in Victoria or nationally. Only two interviews were conducted by telephone, which presented additional challenges for co-interviewing, as turn-taking could not be managed through body language cues. In these cases, verbal coordination and reflexive awareness were particularly important to ensure balance between interviewers and participant comfort. Additionally, although we did not reach the target of 10 Aboriginal participants, 6 were interviewed. In line with the principle of information power, their accounts were sufficiently rich and relevant to allow meaningful analysis. All Aboriginal participants were from regional areas, while all queer participants were based in metropolitan areas. This sample composition means we were unable to examine how regionality may intersect with these identities, which remains an important direction for future research. This also underscores the need for more research privileging both Aboriginal voices on alcohol-related UGC, social media and its specific impact, particularly when it comes to the ongoing impacts of colonization through online racism. More broadly, future research should further explore the intersectional experiences of Aboriginal, LGBTQ+, and rural/regional communities in relation to alcohol-related attitudes, behaviours, and exposure to alcohol-related UGC to enable a more nuanced understanding of how online alcohol culture intersects with specific geographic, social and cultural contexts. Such research is crucial for developing targeted policies and interventions that address the unique challenges faced by each community in navigating social media. This research did not include participants from remote or very remote Aboriginal communities, which are, in some cases, designated as dry communities. Despite alcohol restrictions, these communities still have access to social media and may be exposed to alcohol-related content and advertising, warranting further investigation.

CONCLUSION

This study provides valuable insights into the complex relationship between alcohol-related UGC and its perceived impacts on Aboriginal, LGBTQ+, and regional young people in Victoria. Our findings reveal that alcohol-related UGC practices are perceived to differ across platforms and are seen to reinforce drinking behaviours while creating pressures through social comparison and fear of missing out. However, the alcohol-related UGC experiences of these three communities are likewise distinctly shaped by their sociocultural contexts. Despite being critical of influencer content, participants remain immersed in algorithmic environments that consistently promote alcohol consumption reinforcing the need for stronger regulatory frameworks.

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Author contributions

Alessandro Crocetti (Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Writing—original draft, Writing—review & editing), Jennifer Browne (Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Writing—review & editing), Kathryn Backholer (Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Writing—review & editing), Nichole Lister (Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing—review & editing), Sharon Atkinson-Briggs (Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing—review & editing), Rebecca Bennett (Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing—review & editing), Oliver Cook (Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing—review & editing), Troy Walker (Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing—review & editing), Florentine Martino (Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Writing—review & editing), Peter Miller (Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Writing—review & editing), and Matthew Dunn (Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Writing—original draft, Writing—review & editing). All authors meet the ICMJE criteria for authorship. All authors approve the final manuscript.

Conflict of interest

None declared.

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Data availability

Data is not available due to institutional ethical restraints.

Generative AI statement

Generative AI ('GenAI') was not used in the preparation or finalization of this manuscript.

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