

Facebook Flows: Alcohol and Friendship

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Public health alcohol science has long used conventional social science methods to understand drinking cultures in order to minimize the widespread, diverse and preventable harms that arise from alcohol use. One of the key vectors in normalizing drinking practices has historically been the aggressive promotion and marketing of alcoholic beverages in a wide range of media. The emergence of the internet and social networking systems (SNS) in particular, mark a new horizon in this field, vastly expanding the penetration, range and scope of commercial activities. SNS in particular encourage and support a critical convergence of corporate and user-generated activity and environments that blur distinctions between online and offline contexts, public and private space and personal and commercial relationships, in ways that call for the development of fresh approaches to our knowledge of drinking cultures.

This paper offers some tentative efforts to make use of the theory and tools of MDA, to data from a 3 year investigation of these dynamics at the nexus of SNS, friendship and alcohol use among young people of three ethnic groups in Aotearoa New Zealand. Focusing on data from a single, 'guided tour' of one participant's Facebook page that encompasses interview, video affective record and digital navigation trace, it will explore representations of friendship and alcohol to highlight the complexities, challenges and insights available through data of this kind. One aim is to develop capability and experience within our research team around the value and necessity of using multimodal approaches to understanding drinking cultures and the threats and opportunities that the widespread use of SNS present to public health efforts to reduce alcohol-related harm.