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ALCOHOL USE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: A VISUAL SELF-NARRATIVE LONGITUDINAL STUDY ABOUT VARIOUS DRINKING HABITS DURING COVID-19

During the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, people faced life-threatening uncertainties with socio-psychological implications that will likely outlast the actual pandemic (Brooks et al., 2020). At the root of these issues, Horigian, Schmidt and Feaster (2021), suggest, is loneliness which can cause an increase in anxiety and depression as well as coping behaviors such as drinking and drug use. Several studies have specifically honed in on increased alcohol use as a maladaptive form of coping induced by pandemic-related stress and isolation (Sun et al., 2020). Despite this, alcohol has also been found to increase people's willingness to socialize and reduce stress (Sayette, 2017; Schry & White, 2013). While the majority of alcohol-focused research during the pandemic has been statistically based focusing on alcohol consumption as maladaptive, we feel that these studies do not get to the root of implications for usage. In the context of COVID-19, where normal face-to-face socialization has been altered and alcohol consumption increased, we employ visual self-narrative ("author"), a method that uses photographic recording and participant-driven photo-elicitation interviews (Collier, 1957) of lived experiences, to better understand the varying roles alcohol has played in people's lives. Photographs have been found to 1. offer deeper understanding through collection of perishable data into social phenomena than other methods (Pauwels, 2010), and 2. allow inquiry into and gather emotional responses from sensitive topics with vulnerable populations ("author"; Ginicola et al., 2012; Zelizer & Allan, 2011). Delgado and Wester (2020) suggest that when interpreting photographs people feel less threatened and are more likely to speak directly and honestly. Furthermore, Pauwels (2010) suggests photographs offer unique data that is less explored and challenges other forms of scholarship.

Data including 15 photographs of alcohol or alluding to alcohol from captions were taken from a larger research project that included 57 participants who photographically documented their lives for one week at two different times: May 2020, during the time when many states instilled stay-at-home orders and exactly one year later in May 2021 during a time when there was much controversy over vaccinations and treatment. As such, this study qualifies as a panel longitudinal study. Findings suggest that alcohol was used for various reasons including easing difficult and overwhelming feelings and developing a

sense of community and connection. In particular, alcohol allowed participants to be in the present moment with family and friends and temporarily forget about the threat of the virus. Alternatively, when viewing photographs of alcohol, participants experienced difficult emotions such as guilt, and a desire to change behaviors. Interestingly, there was a dramatic decrease in visual self-narrative images and photo-elicitation responses focusing on alcohol in the follow-up study, perhaps because of external circumstances: many states had loosened their stay-at-home restrictions by May 2021 and people could finally meet in person. Without photographic visual narrative data our understanding of increased alcohol usage during the COVID-19 pandemic may otherwise be limited by statistical studies.

BIO:

Dr. Allison Kwesell (Ph.D., International Christian University) is an Assistant Professor of Communication at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University. Her research interests include implications of perceived and self-stigma on vulnerable populations, visual narration as a tool to cope with post-trauma situations, effects of media photographs, and socio-psychological aspects of sustainable recovery. Alli worked as a photojournalist for over a decade covering several public health and disaster situations including polio vaccination activities in India, civil conflict in Nepal, earthquake disaster in Haiti, human security in Azerbaijan, nuclear disaster in Japan, and gun violence in Portland, Oregon. She is interested in learning more about how photographs can affect change and increase self-efficacy and resilience during trying times. Alli works alongside her two four-legged colleagues (photographed in profile) Rory and Lily.