5. Alcohol in the media

Why does entertainment media matter?
A survey of 3719 television viewer conducted by the United States Centers for Disease Control found that 57% of viewers acquire health-related knowledge from watching daytime and/or prime-time dramas.1 Other studies have shown that people who have higher exposure to mass media (e.g., watch more television or read more magazines) are more likely to have incorrect beliefs about health and nutrition, and more likely to have unhealthy behaviours.2,3

A study conducted in the UK found that one of the main reasons why British viewers (aged 13 to 62) regularly watch soap operas is that they believe they are ‘realistic’ and that more than 40% of the people surveyed claimed that soap operas help resolve problems in the own lives.4

Advocacy groups have criticised television producers and media outlets for their portrayal of alcohol in entertainment television. For example, the Australian Drug Foundation for many years gave an annual ‘Boozie Award’ for irresponsible promotion of alcohol. In 2002 and 2003 this was awarded to the soap opera Secret Life of Us (in which 25% of scenes portrayed alcohol consumption); in 2004 it was awarded to children’s show The Chilli Factor (for its broadcast of the Jim Beam Tag Surfing Competition); and in 2005 to The Footy Show (following the episode in which Sam Newman drank a bottle of Jim Beam).

What do television shows and movies reveal to people about drinking?
There have been a large number of studies which have shown that alcohol use is common in television programs and movies. For example, a study of the 200 most popular movie rentals for 1996 and 1997 found that 92% contained images of drinking, and in more than one-third alcohol was associated with wealth or luxury.5

This is not a recent phenomenon, but has been a common issue with movies since they were first developed as an entertainment vehicle. For example, a content analysis of 100 films from 1940-1999 found that drinkers were depicted more positively than nondrinkers; and that drinkers were shown as wealthier, more attractive, more romantic and having more sexual involvements.6

It is also not just limited to ‘adult’ or ‘R-rated’ movies, with another study finding that 47% of animated feature films show alcohol or drinking.7

Alcohol use in soap operas in the UK
Researchers analysed 108 episodes of six soap operas aired in Britain between May and June 2007 [four were made in the UK (Hollyoaks, Emmerdale, Coronation Street, and East Enders) and two in Australia (Neighbours and Home and Away)]

- Only 10 of the 108 episodes contained no depictions of people drinking; all of these were in the Australian shows (7 episodes of Neighbours and three of Home and Away)
- There were an average of just under eight alcohol depictions per episode [almost 10 per episode of the British soaps]
- In almost all cases, drinking alcohol resulted in no direct consequences (less than 2% resulted in negative behavior by the character)
- Female characters were more likely to be shown drinking as a means of coping; male characters were more likely to be portrayed as social drinkers

Alcohol imagery on New Zealand television
In 2004 New Zealand researchers recorded seven consecutive days of programs (including movies) shown from 6.00 to 9.30 pm on the three main television stations, as well as a music video channel aimed at 15–29 year olds (a total of 98 hours of television). They found that:

- Of the 120 programs, 75 (63%) had at least one scene containing alcohol; almost one in five had 10 or more scenes containing alcohol.
- Alcohol depiction were highest in reality television (70% of programs), drama/action (86% of programs), and comedy (65%). Approximately half of the music programs and sports programs contained alcohol references.
- The majority of alcohol imagery was judged to be ‘neutral’ (that is, it didn't promote or discourage drinking. Approximately 13% of scenes showed the positive effects of alcohol; and only 8% were critical of alcohol use.

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Do these portrayals of alcohol influence people’s attitudes or behaviours?

There is increasing evidence that these positive portrayals of drinking do influence young people’s attitudes to drinking alcohol, and even their drinking behaviours. For example:

- Male high school students who are heavy television viewers drink more than those who watch less television.¹⁰
- Young people who watch a lot of television and more likely than those who watch less television to agree that “people who drink are happy” and “you have to drink to have fun at a sporting event”.¹¹
- A study which surveyed young people over an 18-month period found that for every additional hour of television viewing at baseline (i.e., at the first survey time) was associated with a 9% increased risk for initiating drinking during the following 18 months.¹²

However, it is important to note that these effects almost certainly result from a combination of exposure to alcohol in movies/programs and exposure to alcohol advertising [refer to Module 2].

Nature and impact of alcohol messages in a youth-oriented television series¹³

Researchers conducted a content analysis of seasons 1 to 3 of The OC (76 episodes). They found that:

- There was an average of four minutes of visual depictions of alcohol and five verbal references to alcohol per 42-minute episode
- Of the 76 episodes, 90% depicted at least one positive outcome of drinking, whereas 60% depicted at least one negative outcome. Importantly, 34% of the episodes with alcohol depicted positive outcomes only, whereas only 3% depicted negative outcomes only.
- The most common message about alcohol in the episodes was feeling relaxed (76%), followed by having fun (36%). Other positive messages included having an easier time expressing feelings (25%), feeling happy (20%), feeling good (18%), and having an easier time talking to people (15%).
- The most common negative messages were related to someone doing something they might regret (30%) and feeling sad (29%). Other negative messages included doing something embarrassing (20%), getting a hangover (17%), or getting in trouble with the police (14.5%).
- Contrary to what would be expected given the regular portrayal of heavy drinking, negative health outcomes were rarely depicted.
- Over half of the episodes depicted underage drinking; and, generally, this was associated with independent, good-looking people having a good time without any negative consequence.

The researchers then conducted an audience study – in which they surveyed 207 university students who reported watching The OC. They found that:

- People recalled specific alcohol episodes on The OC, and that most of those recalled were negative.
- The more ‘connected’ viewers were to The OC (that is, the more they identified with the characters of the program) the more they perceived that alcohol was presented in The OC as having positive outcomes (like feeling happy or having fun)
- The more ‘connected’ viewers were to The OC, the more they believed that alcohol is linked to positive consequences in real life.

Class Activity 1 Portrayal of alcohol in the media

1. As a class (or in small groups) discuss the findings from these studies.
2. Why do you think that there is such a high level of portrayals of alcohol and drinking in movies and television?
3. Why do you think these portrayals influence people’s attitudes and behaviours?
4. Why do you think that these messages have different effects on people who identify more with the programs and the characters?
Class Activity 2 Alcohol in an Australian television program

Teacher note
In order to complete this activity, you will need to have a copy of a relevant television program for students to view. Programs that are likely to be of interest to students (and have a high level of alcohol portrayals) include: Gossip Girl (pilot episode is available on DVD); Big Brother (or most other reality programs); Beverly Hills 90210 (modern version); Desperate Housewives; Two and a Half Men. Depending on the level and interests of your class, another option would be to select an appropriate episode of The Simpsons (available via YouTube).

If there is not time in class to watch the television program – or if you would prefer students to work independently – this task can be changed to having them watch a television program (or a movie) at home and complete the task for homework.

Alcohol in an Australian television program
1. Watch the television program and record all references to alcohol. Things to note:
   • Who is drinking? (e.g., male or female, adult or teenager, main character or minor character)
   • Where are they drinking? (e.g., at home, in a pub or club, at a party)
   • Why are they drinking? (e.g., to celebrate, to have fun, to reduce stress)
   • What are the consequences of the drinking? (include positive and negative consequences)
2. As a class (or in small groups) discuss your observations.
   • Did you all note the same scenes?
   • Did you code them in the same way?
   • Why do you think these portrayals of alcohol are in this program?
   • What effects (if any) do you think they would have on viewers?

Alcohol in other types of media
Alcohol has also been found to be present in a range of other entertainment media – including magazines, radio, music and the Internet.

For example, studies from the 1990s found that:
• Alcohol was mentioned in 17% of popular song lyrics in 1996-1997. It was most common in rap music (47% of songs) and least common in heavy metal songs (4%) and ‘alternative’ songs (10%).
• The role of alcohol differs across different types of music. For example, in country music alcohol is primarily shown as consumed by men in bars and related to relationship issues (such as breaking up). In rap music, alcohol portrayals generally convey rebellion, identity, sensuality and power.
• Young people who are heavy watchers of music videos are more likely to initiate drinking at an earlier age.

Assessment Task: Report on alcohol in the entertainment media
As outlined in this module, representations of alcohol and portrayals of drinking are prevalent in the entertainment media. In this activity, you will analyse the portrayal of alcohol in a specific medium and prepare a report.

1. Choose one of the options below:
   Alcohol in music lyrics: Select a particular type of music, or a particular time period (for example, you might focus on the current Top 40, or the five highest-selling songs in each of the last 10 years, or all of the songs by a particular artist). Print out a copy of the lyrics of these songs (you will be able to find them on the Internet) and mark all references to alcohol and/or drinking.
   Alcohol in magazines: Select a particular magazine or a group of magazines for a particular time period (for example, you might look at all issues of Cosmopolitan or Cleo for the last year, or the current issues of the 10 most popular magazines). Look through these magazines and note all pictures of and references to alcohol and/or drinking (if you do not have access to these magazines at home or at school you should be able to borrow them from your local library).
2. Prepare a report on the representation of alcohol in your chosen media sample. Your report should include information on:

- The amount of alcohol portrayals
- The nature of the references to alcohol (including the role of alcohol, the reasons for drinking, the consequences of drinking) and whether, overall, they appear to encourage or discourage drinking
- The possible effects of these portrayals on the target audience (and other audiences who may see them)

Teacher Notes

If you are covering this topic as part of a larger theme on alcohol (or on media) you could have the students compare their findings and discuss the differences between the different media samples (e.g., did the findings differ across different magazines, different types of music etc).

This activity could also be undertaken using Internet portrayals of alcohol (e.g., alcohol references/portrayals on YouTube, or alcohol ‘pages’ on Facebook). However, this would be a more complex task and would depend on the level of the students (and the school’s, and parents’, views on students accessing this material).

REFERENCES