

ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION IN TELEVISION PROGRAMMING:
IMPLICATIONS FOR ADVERTISERS AND SOCIETAL VALUES

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This study was conducted as an exploratory attempt to understand the incidence and situational correlates of alcohol consumption in prime time television programming. Implications are significant for marketers because networks receive their revenues as a result of advertising on the programs. When firms advertise on television programs they not only endorse their product, service, or idea but are actually supporting the network and programs. In doing this the advertiser may, in effect, be condoning the kinds of values and social behaviors contained in the programs. For this reason some firms have decided not to advertise on programs which display or suggest sex, violence, and other forms of adverse social behavior.

The abuse of alcohol is rapidly becoming a major problem in our nation. Countless studies have been conducted in order to better understand the physical and social effects of alcohol and methods of rehabilitation.

Much psychological research has shown that children, teens, and adults learn partially as a result of imitation. Acts that are portrayed more frequently are more likely to be seen and learned by viewers.

Children appear to be an especially vulnerable audience because of their knack of modelling others' behavior. Although it is popularly believed that prime time television attracts adult audiences, over 30% of childrens' TV viewing is during prime time hours. It is during these times when various forms of social behavior such as sex, violence, and alcoholic consumption are transmitted across millions of television screens. The stage is therefore set for young persons as well as adults to view and mimic the behaviors contained in the programs.

The sample represented 66 hours of prime time programming (an equal amount from each of the three major networks) chosen during October and November, 1979.

Overall, 55.3% of the 30 minute program segments contained at least one drinking situation. On the average there were 1.37 drinking situations per average 30 minute segment--with CBS showing the highest and NBC having the lowest incidence. The type of programs which showed the highest proportion of total drinking situations were TV and Hollywood movies (28.7%), general drama (27.1%) and police/detective (24.8%) shows.

Given a prime time interval of 7:00 to 11:00 p.m., 26% of the drinking situations were aired in the early evening (prior to 9:00 p.m.) with the majority of drinking situations (54.7%) shown between 9:30 and 11:00 p.m.

A program was slightly more apt to find a drinking situation aired on the weekend compared to the weekday. Specifically, Tuesday and Saturday had the highest while Monday and Sunday had the lowest average number of drinking situations aired.

The most prevalent type of alcohol consumed was spirits (38.9%) followed by wine (24.8%) and beer (22.1%). The majority of the drinking took place in bars (37.2%) and in homes (28.3%) with nearly 65% of the drinking taking place during the evening (on the basis of the program context). Of those persons shown to be drinking 91.2% were white and 7.3% black and the majority (54.8%) of situations showed both men and women drinking together. During 38.3% of the drinking scenes the situation was happy while in only 8.7% of the drinking scenes was the situation sad (the remaining scenes were neutral from an emotional standpoint). In nearly 60% of the drinking situations the scenario was purely social while in 13.3% the setting was strictly professional.

As shown by the data, alcohol consumption on television is not just an infrequent or isolated event, rather, it is a behavior which occurs with regularity.

Drinking on TV is shown to be a commonplace occurrence in the lives of many of the prominent TV characters. If young people admire the character, then selected behaviors of that character (such as drinking) might be modelled. The TV characters that drink are rarely shown to suffer any negative side effects from alcohol. This is not an accurate reflection of reality. To be fair and put alcohol consumption in perspective the medium needs to deal with the many inherent problems associated with drinking.

Looking at the bottom line, this is another area of concern for the marketer. The businessperson has an obligation to look at the social effects of their decisions. The results of this study imply that the frequency of alcohol consumption on TV has the potential of communicating to viewers that this behavior is a common, socially acceptable and desirable life activity. By advertising on programs which display excessive adverse behavior in the form of drugs, alcohol, sex, or violence the advertiser is actually endorsing this social behavior and to some degree influencing viewers to model their behavior after what they have seen.

In addition to calculating the best program buy (on the basis of cost per impression) and matching consumer and audience demographics the astute marketer needs to select those programs whose content and values match the firm's moral fabric and conscience. Alcohol consumption in television programming is a controllable decision by the networks and is a decision that advertisers can influence through their opinions and time buying power.