

The portrayal of alcohol and alcohol consumption in television news and drama programmes

A research report for Alcohol Concern



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The portrayal of alcohol and alcohol consumption in television news and drama programmes

Summary

1. This is a report on a systematic analysis of the portrayal of alcohol and alcohol-consumption on British prime-time television over a five-day week in August 2003. All programme content broadcast on the five terrestrial television channels during the 5-day sample-week of Monday 11th to Friday 15th August was monitored, and a systematic content analysis was carried out on all programmes in the categories Drama, Soaps and News. 'Prime-time' was interpreted as 5.30pm – 10.30pm, although programmes overlapping with the 10.30pm cut-off point were included in full.
2. Monitoring of all prime-time programmes broadcast on the five terrestrial television channels during the five-day sample period showed that no programme during this period was *specifically about* alcohol or any aspects associated with alcohol or alcohol consumption.
3. A total of 89 programmes in the categories Soaps (28), Drama (14) and News (47) were content analysed. The total duration of programmes was 49.3 hours: 13.6 hours of Soaps, 13.4 hours of Drama, and 22.3 hours of News.
4. Overall, 85.4% of the programmes analysed contained some reference to alcohol or alcohol-consumption: all of the Drama programmes, 92.9% of Soaps, and 76.6% of News programmes contained visual or verbal references to alcohol. References to alcohol and drinking were very predominantly of a background nature, and only in 7.1% of Drama, 21.4% of Soaps and 21.3% of News programmes did the portrayal of alcohol form an important part of the narrative or news-story.

5. Alcohol was the most prominent drink depicted: the total number of visual and verbal references to alcohol (381) was more than double the total number of references to non-alcoholic drinks (170)
6. The hourly rate of visual references to alcohol was very considerably higher at 10.6 in Soaps than in Drama (4.3) or News (1.9). The hourly rate of (alcohol) drinking scenes in Soaps was, at 7 drinking scenes per hour, more than twice that of Drama (3.1 drinking scenes per hour), with News programmes containing just over one (1.3) drinking scenes per hour of programming.
7. The overall hourly rate of alcohol drinking scenes was 3.4, compared with only 1.9 scenes per hour showing the consumption of non-alcoholic drinks, but the consumption of non-alcoholic drinks was relatively more prominent in Soaps (4.6 non-alcoholic drinking scenes per hour) than in either Drama (1.0) or News (0.9).
8. These results show that drinking (alcohol or non-alcoholic drinks) is a central narrative device in Soaps, most of which also feature fixed drinking and eating venues as central spaces for narrative development. Drinking is interestingly much more prominently used in Soaps than in the comparable fictional programme category, Drama.
9. In contrast to the frequent and prominent reference to alcohol and drinking, there was little portrayal of either smoking or illegal drugs. The hourly rates of smoking/tobacco references were 0.9 in Soaps, 1.3 in Drama, and 0.4 in News programmes (an overall rate of 0.8 for all programmes). The hourly rates of references to illegal drugs were 0.4 in Soaps, 1.0 in Drama, and 0.4 in News programmes (an overall rate of 0.6 for all programmes).
10. Beer was the type of alcohol most frequently shown/consumed (2.5 references per hour overall), followed by spirits (1.6 references) and then wine (1.3). Wine and spirits received comparatively little exposure in News programmes, where beer was the alcohol of prominence (1.2 references per hour). In contrast, references to beer, wine and spirits were much more evenly distributed in Drama programmes, while in the Soaps, references to beer (5.6 per hour) were considerably more frequent than references to spirits (3.4 per hour) or to wine (2.9 per hour).

11. A comparison of this study's findings with results of similar studies of Soaps broadcast in 1983 and 1994/5 showed a considerable increase over the twenty-year period from 1983 to 2003 in the hourly rate of visual references to alcohol, from 5.8 to 9.3 to 10.6, and in the rate of alcohol drinking scenes, from 3.9 to 6.4 to 7.0 alcohol drinking scenes per hour of programming. The rate of visual reference to non-alcoholic drinks (3.7 in 1994/5 and 6.5 in 2003) and the rate of non-alcoholic drinks consumption (2.9 in 1994/5 and 4.6 in 2003) also increased. By contrast, the hourly rate of verbal references to alcohol or drinking went down from 8 and 9.6 in 1983 and 1994/5 to only 4.3 per hour in 2003, as did the hourly rate of verbal reference to non-alcoholic drinks.
12. The most noticeable aspect of alcohol consumption and alcohol images on television was the way that they featured prominently in terms of frequency of occurrence, yet were rarely in the foreground narratively or thematically. In this respect, alcohol and alcohol consumption are 'naturalised' by the programmes, as a normal, frequent, and common aspect of social interaction.
13. When alcohol-portrayal departed from the most common mode of 'part of the background', it was most often with reference – verbal or visual – to its role in a **celebratory context (and/or as a marker of a special personal or social event/achievement) or as accompaniment to or facilitator of romance or sexual relationships.**
14. A rather different, but also much less frequent, use of alcohol/drinking in prime time television programmes was **to signify a personal crisis or as a part of personal crisis-management**, e.g. (a) **to 'steady one's nerves'**; (b) **for courage**; (c) as an **outlet for or signifier of pent-up frustration or rage**; or (d) to **'drown one's sorrows'**.
15. Alcohol-consumption as associated with 'having a good time' and leading to 'merry' behaviour, tipsiness, and even drunkenness, was shown on several occasions in both Drama and Soaps. By contrast, there was little portrayal of alcohol and/or drinking as a problem. There was no explicit portrayal of alcohol addiction/alcoholism, and in the few instances where characters were shown to have a potential drink-problem, the tendency was to treat this in a lighthearted manner. One Soaps story-line touched on under-age drinking as a problem,

another Soaps episode hinted obliquely and very briefly that a character may be abstaining from alcohol because of a past drinking problem.

16. The study noted the ambivalence of alcohol portrayal in News programmes. On the one hand, News programmes – when they contain reference to alcohol at all – deploy stereotypical images of alcohol and drinking as part of celebrations and good-natured fun and joviality, as an integral part of the British way of life, and a pandering to the more folksy and populist end of the news reporting repertoire. On the other hand, News programmes are the obvious home for ‘problem’ stories highlighting social problems caused by or associated with alcohol consumption. In this sample of programmes, the latter was represented by extensive coverage of the problems caused by the excessive drinking and drunken behaviour of British holiday-makers in a Greek holiday resort, and the problem of drink-driving in the hot summer months.
17. The study’s analysis of the amount of alcohol and non-alcoholic drinks advertising showed alcohol advertising to be considerably less frequent than advertising for non-alcoholic drinks. The rate of alcohol advertisements was just under one advert in every three hours of prime-time, compared with just under one non-alcoholic drinks advert in every hour of prime-time programming. There was some indication – although this needs to be tested on a more comprehensive sample – that alcohol advertisements were carefully positioned in relation to particular types of programme, and in relation to particular programme content. Although not examined in a systematic way in this research, the study noted that alcohol/drinks images are often used in advertising for products other than alcoholic drinks – it is suggested that future research could usefully examine the extent to which advertising in general is an important source of alcohol images.
18. The study showed that television offers a very selective – and, in Soaps and Drama, remarkably uniform – image of alcohol consumption as a routine, pleasant and unproblematic component of social interaction, a marker of celebrations, achievements, romance and sexual relations, and an integral component of ‘having a good time’. Conversely, television Soaps and Drama offer little portrayal of the wide range of potentially serious personal and social

consequences of alcohol consumption generally, and excessive drinking more particularly.

19. While a negative or problematising portrayal of alcohol consumption does occur – particularly in News programmes – it is infrequent by comparison with the dominant emphasis on positive, convivial, funny images stressing the pleasant, socially facilitating, and unproblematic aspects of drinking.
20. It is in this respect then that television's portrayal of alcohol and drinking must be criticised: for the 'naturalisation' of alcohol consumption that is an adjunct of its sheer relative prominence in Soaps and Drama, and for the highly imbalanced and selective emphasis on the positive aspects of alcohol consumption at the expense of images/messages which highlight, explore, or represent the potential personal and social dangers, cost, and consequences of drinking.

The portrayal of alcohol and alcohol consumption in television news and drama programmes

A research report

Research on Alcohol and the Mass Media

Concern about the role played by the mass media in relation to alcohol consumption, drinking practices and public beliefs about alcohol and drinking has traditionally focused on alcohol advertising and public communication campaigns. Research in both of these areas has been characterised by a relatively narrow media ‘effects’ framework, focusing on influences on consumption and on alcohol-related beliefs, attitudes and behaviours. Some diversification in the range and type of media analysed has, however, taken place since the early 1980s, and this has been accompanied by a development and broadening of both the approaches and theoretical frameworks deployed for understanding the ‘media and alcohol’. Concern and research in this field broadly comprise three principal domains:

(1) The portrayal of alcohol and drinking in television drama and entertainment

Studies of television entertainment and drama portrayals of alcohol and drinking have broadly taken their point of departure in a social learning framework, arguing that the images and representations of drinking in media entertainment may be a more significant contributor to public beliefs and perceptions than alcohol advertising.

In Britain, a number of studies published between 1984 and 1997 have provided systematic evidence on the extent and nature of images of alcohol and drinking in popular television (Hansen, 1984, 1986, 1988a, 1988b, 1988c, 1995; Smith et al, 1988; Pendleton et al, 1991; Furnham et al, 1997). Using very similar designs, these studies have significantly facilitated some degree of tracking over time of changes in the extent and nature of alcohol portrayal.

The studies have shown, *inter alia*: that images of alcohol and drinking are prominent in popular television serials; that alcohol is the most prominent drink shown on television; that drinking is predominantly associated with pleasant social interaction; that drinking is portrayed as a normal part of the lives, stories, and interaction of

television characters. Perhaps the most significant finding is the demonstration that popular television serials ‘naturalise’ alcohol and drinking as normal, expected and unproblematic. Thematic foregrounding of alcohol consumption or portrayals of the potential problems associated with drinking at both individual and social levels are very infrequent. The dominant images and messages thus run counter to the messages which health educators and others are seeking to put across about the dangers of excessive drinking and the association with health problems, violence, crime, and accidents.

(2) Persuasive communication: advertising and public communication campaigns

Alcohol advertising has long been a prominent focus in North American research. A large number of studies drawing on a diverse range of approaches – content analyses, survey studies, experimental research and econometric studies – have sought to examine whether alcohol advertising: (a) encourages non-drinkers to begin drinking; (b) contributes to heavier consumption of alcohol; and (c) encourages dangerous or irresponsible consumption of alcohol. While there have been a number of econometric studies of alcohol advertising in the British context, there has been surprisingly little published research on the images and messages communicated about alcohol and drinking through advertising. This is particularly surprising given that alcohol advertising in Britain is governed by both statutory (television) and voluntary (print advertising) codes.

By contrast, the roles and effectiveness of mass media campaigns in the context of information and health education initiatives are relatively well researched areas. We now have a very significant body of research evidence, from the UK and elsewhere, on: ‘what works’ in mass media campaigns; on ‘realistic’ expectations of campaign effectiveness; and on the limitations of such campaigns, particularly as a sole means of influencing public beliefs, attitudes and lifestyles.

(3) News media coverage of alcohol-related issues, problems and policies

The most neglected area of research on alcohol and the mass media in Britain is that of the news media. There has been little research on how alcohol policies and problems are covered and defined by the news media. The news media are potentially a powerful contributor to public understanding and definitions of alcohol and alcohol-related problems and issues. Thus, public concern may often be fuelled and guided by

whether and how the news media report on alcohol-related issues or policies, and this in turn plays into the dynamics of how such issues are addressed through formal political and legislative forums. Changes over time in the 'climate of opinion' regarding socially acceptable uses of alcohol, the regulation of alcohol promotion and consumption, and the allocation of societal resources to the tackling of alcohol abuse and problems are likely to be influenced in large measure by news coverage.

The present study

While a significant body of British research on media and alcohol has accumulated, particularly in the last two decades, there are still large gaps in research in this area; furthermore, it appears that British research efforts in the field of media and alcohol have been waning in the most recent six-year period. The research presented here seeks to address some of these gaps by providing up-to-date analysis of the extent of alcohol and other substance portrayal in television drama and news

Research design, aims and methods

This is a report on a systematic analysis of the portrayal of alcohol and alcohol-consumption on British prime-time television over a five-day week in August 2003.

The research was designed to sample and monitor prime time programmes broadcast on the five terrestrial television channels during the 5-day sample-week of Monday 11th to Friday 15th August. 'Prime-time' was interpreted as 5.30pm – 10.30pm, although programmes overlapping with the 10.30pm cut-off point were included in full.

The five-day sampling week was chosen principally for reasons of expediency and convenience. It is recognised that a longer sampling period would have produced a more robust sample. However, for the purposes of the focus of this particular study, there is nothing to indicate that the sampling period chosen was in any way atypical, and there is indeed precedence in the television research literature for the approach adopted here (Gerbner et al, 1982).

The study monitored all programming broadcast during prime-time to identify any programme specifically about alcohol, alcohol-consumption or drinking-related

practices, but the main focus of the research was a systematic analysis of drinking and alcohol-related portrayal/references in two types of programme: **News** (including regional news) and **Drama series/serials**. For purposes of analysis and comparison with previous research, the category **Drama series/serials** was further divided into the two subcategories of **Soaps** and **Drama**. Classification of programmes into programme types followed the broadcasters' own classification scheme, in this case as listed on the Channel Five TV-Guide website of programme listings for all television channels (<http://www.five.tv>).

Using the method of systematic content analysis, the principal aim of the study was to show the number of visual and verbal references per hour of programming and by programme type to:

- Alcohol and alcohol consumption
- Non-alcoholic drinks and their consumption
- Tobacco and smoking
- The use/abuse of illegal drugs

This was complemented with a more qualitative account of the images/messages communicated, directly and indirectly, about the use, abuse, contexts, effects, purposes and consequences associated with alcohol and drinking, including the extent to which alcohol is constructed as either a social or an individual problem, or both.

A particular objective was to enable – through the systematic coding and analysis of the portrayal of alcohol and other substance use – comparison with previous research on alcohol representations on British television, to establish for example increases or decreases in the prominence of such images over time.

While the study was not designed to include a detailed analysis of alcohol advertising, a final objective of the research was to establish baseline statistics about the hourly rates of **alcohol advertisements** and **non-alcoholic drinks advertisements** broadcast during prime-time.

For purposes of comparison with previous studies of alcohol on British television, the definitions and coding frame used is that developed by Hansen (1984) in one of the first British studies to examine the portrayal of alcohol and drinking on British prime time television; this coding frame has since been used in subsequent British studies by

Hansen (1988c), Smith et al (1988), Pendleton et al (1991) and Furnham et al (1995), thus providing the basis for a comparison of changes over time in the portrayal and relative prominence of alcohol and drinking representations on British television.

Core to the analysis is the distinction between visual reference, verbal reference, and drinking/consumption. Also central to the analysis is the definition of a scene. Each of the three dimensions (visual reference, verbal reference, drinking) was coded/counted once for every scene in which they appeared. The scene was defined by its temporal and spatial dimensions: if the story line or narrative jumped to a different (narrative) time, then this was considered the start of a new scene; likewise, if the camera jumped to a different location within the universe of the programme narrative, then this was considered the start of a new scene. The scene definition works well in relation to soaps and drama, but is less appropriate in relation to news programmes. For news programmes, the individual news-item was treated as a 'scene'. A 'Drinking' scene was defined as any scene (using the scene definition just given) showing the actual or implied (i.e. a character or person is depicted/shown with a glass, bottle or other container of alcohol within arm's reach, and it is implied that the character/person has been consuming and/or is about to consume) consumption of alcohol by one or more characters/people.

Results:

Type and duration of programmes

Monitoring of all prime-time programmes broadcast on the five terrestrial television channels during the five-day sample period showed that no programme during this period was *specifically about* alcohol or any aspects associated with alcohol or alcohol consumption; there were thus no documentaries or current affairs programmes about alcohol and drinking, nor were there any feature films or other fictional programme content specifically focused on alcohol, alcoholism or drink-related issues.

The total number of programmes satisfying the specific programme sampling criteria – as Soaps, Drama or News programmes - was 89¹. The distribution of programmes

across programme types and channels is shown in Table 1 below, and a full listing of individual programme titles by channel is given in Appendix 1:

Table 1: Programme type by channel

	BBC1	BBC2	ITV1	Channel Four	Five	All channels
Soap	9		8	3	8	28
Drama	3	3	4	2	2	14
News	20		15	4	8	47
All programmes	32	3	27	9	18	89

The 89 programmes selected for analysis came to a total of just over 49 hours of television. As shown in Table 2 below, the average duration of Soaps and News was approximately half an hour while Drama programmes averaged approximately an hour in length. Drama and Soaps each totalled approximately thirteen and a half hours of programming, while news programmes during the sample period came to a total of just over 22 hours.

Table 2: Duration by programme type

Programme type	N	Mean duration (minutes)	Total minutes	Total hours
Soap	28	29.11	815	13.6
Drama	14	57.50	805	13.4
News	47	28.40	1335	22.3
Total	89	33.20	2955	49.3

References to alcohol and non-alcoholic drinks

The programmes were analysed in terms of whether they contained any reference at all, visual or verbal, to alcohol, and if so, how prominent or important overall was the reference to alcohol or drinking to the narrative or to the news-item?

Overall, 85.4% of the programmes analysed contained some reference to alcohol or alcohol-consumption, showing the sheer prominence of alcohol in this selection of programmes. Put differently, 14.6% of the programmes analysed contained no references, visual or verbal, to alcohol or alcohol consumption. This overall figure, however, masks some considerable differences between programme types. Thus, while just under a quarter (23.4%) of news programmes had no mention of alcohol, only 7.1% of Soaps contained no references to alcohol and all of the Drama programmes had either visual or verbal references to alcohol. While alcohol portrayal is clearly considerably less likely in News programmes than in Soaps or Drama, the reference to alcohol in over three quarters of News programmes confirms the importance of extending an analysis of television portrayal of alcohol beyond the traditional focus on Soaps and Drama.

Table 3: Alcohol reference/focus by programme type

Alcohol as theme * Programme type Crosstabulation

			Programme type			Total
			Soap	Drama	News	
Alcohol as theme	no reference to alcohol	Count	2		11	13
		% within Programme type	7.1%		23.4%	14.6%
	important focus of narrative or news item	Count	6	1	10	17
		% within Programme type	21.4%	7.1%	21.3%	19.1%
	secondary theme	Count	6	5	4	15
		% within Programme type	21.4%	35.7%	8.5%	16.9%
	background-incidental	Count	14	8	22	44
		% within Programme type	50.0%	57.1%	46.8%	49.4%
Total		Count	28	14	47	89
		% within Programme type	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Although reference to alcohol figures prominently in all three types of programme, it is also clear from table 3 that such reference is predominantly of a background nature or incidental to the narrative or story of the programme. This was particularly the case in the Drama category of programmes, where reference to alcohol/drinking was secondary or incidental to the story in 92.9% of programmes, and only one programme (7.1%) had alcohol/drinking as an important narrative focus. Equally interesting is the finding that alcohol/drinking was an important focus in very similar percentages of Soap and News programmes: 21.4% of the Soaps and 21.3% of the News programmes had a story-line or focus where alcohol/drinking was in the foreground and important to the narrative/story.

Table 4: Alcohol and non-alcohol references and drink scenes by programme type

		Soap	Drama	News	All programmes
		13.6 hours	13.4 hours	22.3 hours	49.3 hours
Alcohol visual scenes	n	144	57	43	244
	R/H	10.6	4.3	1.9	4.9
Alcohol verbal scenes	n	58	46	33	137
	R/H	4.3	3.4	1.5	2.8
Alcohol drinking scenes	n	95	42	30	167
	R/H	7	3.1	1.3	3.4
Alcohol total references	n	202	103	76	381
	R/H	14.9	7.7	3.4	7.7
Non-alcoholic drink visual references	n	88	19	39	146
	R/H	6.5	1.4	1.7	3.0
Non-alcoholic drink verbal references	n	22	1	1	24
	R/H	1.6	0.1	0.04	0.5
Non-alcoholic drink drinking scenes	n	62	13	19	94
	R/H	4.6	1.0	0.9	1.9
Non-alcoholic drink total references	n	110	20	40	170
	R/H	8.1	1.5	1.8	3.4

In the sample of programmes analysed, alcohol was not only the most prominent drink depicted, and considerably more prominent than non-alcoholic drinks, but also very much more prominent than tobacco/smoking and references to illegal drugs.

Table 4 shows that the total number of visual and verbal references to alcohol (381 references) was more than double the total number of references to non-alcoholic drinks (tea, coffee, milk, juice, fizzy sweet drinks, water, etc.). Alcohol drinking scenes (167 scenes) were likewise much more frequent than depictions of the consumption of non-alcoholic drinks (94 scenes).

In order to compare the relative prominence of alcohol and other substances across the three programme types, it was necessary to create an index, which would take into consideration the very different total durations of the three types of programme in the sample. This index was the Rate per Hour (R/H) of references – arrived at by dividing the total number of references in each category by the total programme hours for each programme type.

Using the Rate per Hour (R/H) index, the considerable differences between programme types become clear: Soaps feature visual/verbal references to alcohol much more prominently than Drama and News programmes. The hourly rate of visual references to alcohol was very considerably higher at 10.6 in Soaps than in Drama (4.3) or News (1.9). The hourly rate of (alcohol) drinking scenes in Soaps was, at 7 drinking scenes per hour, more than twice that of Drama (3.1 drinking scenes per hour), with News programmes containing just over one (1.3) drinking scenes per hour of programming.

While references to non-alcoholic drinks and their consumption are clearly, as seen in Table 4, much less prominent overall than references to alcohol and alcohol consumption, there is nevertheless considerable depiction of non-alcoholic drinks in Soaps. The hourly rate of visual references to non-alcoholic drinks is 6.5 in the Soaps (compared with 10.6 visual references to alcohol), and the rate of non-alcoholic drink consumption is 4.6 (compared with 7 alcohol drinking scenes per hour) in the Soaps. Evident in these figures, for both alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks, is the central role that characters ‘having a drink’ or ‘having a cuppa’ together plays in many Soaps for facilitating, providing a framework for, social interaction and conversation – essentially, drinking and eating venues (pubs, restaurants, bars, cafés/cafeteria) are central locations in many Soaps, and they provide a ‘space’ for characters to come together and for the many different parallel narrative strands, characteristic of Soaps, to cross over or be brought together. It is the sheer frequency with which social interaction is accompanied by drinking that stands out as a defining feature of Soaps,

especially when compared to the other, comparable, category of fictional programming: Drama.

References to smoking and illegal drugs

As indicated earlier, alcohol is by far the most prominent substance portrayed in any of the three types of programme. The contrast is particularly striking when compared, not to non-alcoholic drinks, but to references to tobacco/smoking or to illegal drugs. While alcohol or drinking is frequently referred to verbally, smoking is virtually never talked about or verbally referred to in any of the three types of programme.

As shown in Table 5 (over), there were only 4 verbal references to tobacco/smoking in the 89 programmes analysed, and none at all in the Soaps. In contrast, illegal drugs, when referred to at all, tend to be 'talked about' rather than shown visually. Thus, illegal drugs were only shown visually 4 times in all programmes, but referred to verbally 5 times in the Soaps, 11 times in the Drama programmes, and 8 times in the News programmes. Visual references to tobacco/cigarettes/smoking appeared 12 times in the Soaps (just under once in every hour of programming), 15 times in the Drama programmes (just slightly more than once in every hour of programming), and 8 times in the News programmes (0.4 times per hour, or less than once in every two hours of programming).

Table 5: References to smoking/tobacco and illegal drugs by type of programme

		Soap	Drama	News	All programmes
		13.6 hours	13.4 hours	22.3 hours	49.3 hours
Tobacco/Smoking visual references	n	12	15	8	35
	R/H	0.9	1.1	0.4	0.7
Tobacco/smoking verbal references	n	0	3	1	4
	R/H	0	0.2	0.04	0.1
Tobacco/smoking total references	n	12	18	9	39
	R/H	0.9	1.3	0.4	0.8
Illegal drugs visual references	n	1	2	1	4
	R/H	0.07	0.1	0.04	0.1
Illegal drugs verbal references	n	5	11	8	24
	R/H	0.4	0.8	0.4	0.5
Illegal drugs total references	n	6	13	9	28
	R/H	0.4	1.0	0.4	0.6

It is clear then, that while there is indeed some – if relatively little compared with alcohol - depiction of smoking/tobacco in the Soaps and Drama programmes, smoking does not attract much attention by the News media. Likewise, it would seem that Soaps and Drama programmes ‘steer clear’ – particularly compared to their alcohol portrayal – of smoking and illegal drugs, despite their otherwise general leaning toward a social-realist mode of storytelling, discourse, and thematic focus.

Types of alcohol shown

Beer (2.5 references per hour of programming, but more than twice this in Soaps) continues (see previous studies, e.g. Hansen, 1984; Furnham et al, 1997) to be the most prominent type of alcohol on British television, although wine, approximately half as frequent as beer (1.3 references per hour), and spirits (1.6 references per hour) are also relatively frequent (see Table 6). Wine and spirits receive comparatively little exposure in News programmes, where beer is the alcohol of prominence (1.2 references per hour). In contrast, references to beer, wine and spirits are much more evenly distributed in Drama programmes, while in the Soaps, references to beer (5.6 per hour) are considerably more frequent than references to spirits (3.4 per hour) and more particularly to wine (2.9 per hour) (Table 6).

Table 6: Beer, wine and spirits references by type of programme

		Soap	Drama	News	All programmes
		13.6 hours	13.4 hours	22.3 hours	49.3 hours
Beer	n	76	23	26	125
	R/H	5.6	1.7	1.2	2.5
Wine	n	40	16	7	63
	R/H	2.9	1.2	0.3	1.3
Spirits	n	46	20	12	78
	R/H	3.4	1.5	0.5	1.6

Changes over time in the rate of alcohol portrayal

One objective of this study was to compare the rates of alcohol portrayal in the present sample of programmes with those found in previous studies of British television in order to see whether any discernible trends, up or down, in the prominence of alcohol images over the last two decades could be determined.

The key reference studies are those by Hansen, 1984 and 1986, Smith et al, 1988, Hansen, 1988c, Pendleton et al, 1991, and Furnham et al, 1997. Furnham et al (1997) attempted a comparison between their own findings and those of Hansen, 1984, Smith et al, 1988, and Pendleton et al, 1991, and they concluded, very tentatively: that “the portrayal of alcohol is still rising” (Furnham et al, 1997, p.527); that beer is “still portrayed far more frequently than either wine or spirits” (ibid), and that “the portrayal of beer has doubled in the period 1986-95” (ibid). One of the problems faced by Furnham and his colleagues in their comparison with previous studies is the differences in types of programmes investigated.

In table 7 below, the comparison is made only where it has been possible to focus solely on the same type of programme, namely Soaps. Table 7 then compares the rates of alcohol and other portrayals in Soaps across three studies: Hansen, 1984², Furnham et al, 1997, and the present study.

Table 7: Alcohol portrayal in Soaps, 1983-2003.

	Present study: 2003	Furnham et al (1997) (programmes from 1994-95)	Hansen (1984) (programmes from 1983)
	R/H	R/H	R/H
Alcohol visual scenes	10.6	9.3	5.8
Alcohol verbal scenes	4.3	9.6	8.0
Alcohol drinking scenes	7	6.4	3.9
Alcohol total references	14.9	19	13.8
Non-alcoholic drink visual references	6.5	3.7	
Non-alcoholic drink verbal references	1.6	6.7	
Non-alcoholic drink drinking scenes	4.6	2.9	
Non-alcoholic drink total references	8.1	10.5	

Table 7 shows a considerable increase, over the twenty-year period from 1983 to 2003, in the hourly rate of visual references to alcohol (from 5.8 to 9.3 to 10.6) and in the rate of alcohol drinking scenes (from 3.9 to 6.4 to 7.0), but a considerable drop in the hourly rate of verbal references, from 8 in 1983, increasing to 9.6 in Furnham et al's study from the mid-1990s, and then dropping down to 4.3 in 2003. Furnham et al (1997, p.522) found that "alcohol was referred to either visually or verbally in 86.7% of the programmes" – in the present study 92.9% of the Soaps contained visual or verbal reference to alcohol, indicating that not only has the hourly rate of alcohol portrayal increased, but so too has the percentage of programmes, within this type of programme, which contains references to alcohol.

Although it is not possible to map the portrayal of non-alcoholic drinks right back to 1983, the comparison between Furnham et al's (1997) study and the present study, shows an interesting increase in the hourly rate of non-alcoholic drink consumption from 2.9 to 4.5. Visual references to non-alcoholic drinks have also increased noticeably from just 3.7 in 1997 to 6.5 in 2003. By contrast, the amount of verbal reference to non-alcoholic drinks has decreased sharply between the two recent studies.

The nature of alcohol portrayal

While this study was not designed to examine in detail the types of character (gender, age, ethnicity, social class) portrayed drinking or the social or individual functions of alcohol consumption within the narrative universe of drama and news programmes, the general context of drinking was noted in relation to all drinking scenes, for the purpose of ascertaining the extent to which alcohol consumption is portrayed as either pleasant, desirable and problem-free, or, conversely, as potentially or actually problematic.

The most noticeable aspect of alcohol consumption and alcohol images on television is perhaps the way that they feature prominently in terms of frequency of occurrence, yet are rarely in the foreground narratively or thematically. In this respect, alcohol and alcohol consumption are 'naturalised' by the programmes, as a normal, frequent, and common aspect of social interaction. When alcohol-portrayal departs from the most

common mode of 'part of the background', it is most often with reference – verbal or visual – to its role in:

- **a celebratory context and/or as a marker of a special personal or social event/achievement:** e.g. *EastEnders*-character celebrating her exam results in the Vic – the programme's central pub; another *EastEnders*-character celebrating her job-promotion with a toast with family/friends; a surprise birthday party with champagne in *Emmerdale*; people drinking beer and champagne at a 'leaving do'/party in *Hollyoaks*; Indian wedding party/dinner, beer, wine and spirits visible, and being consumed by guests at many tables, in *EastEnders*; BBC1 and ITV1 news items on students receiving A-level results and celebrating with champagne; ITV1 news clips of footballers celebrating win in pub; *Channel Four News* item on Italian lottery winner celebrating with bottle of champagne; *Channel Five News* item on new record-holder celebrating with a pint of beer; extended BBC Regional News item on celebrations of cricket anniversary at a famous cricket-club inn; a hockey team celebrating their win with cans of beer in *Malcolm in the Middle*.
- **as accompaniment to or facilitator of romance or sexual relationships:** e.g. man and woman have restaurant meal with wine, potential development of a romantic relationship is implied, in *Neighbours*; pub-landlord engineers bringing (estranged) couple back together over a bottle of champagne and they subsequently proceed to dine and drink more champagne, getting drunk and talking intimately, until they are the only customers left in the pub and the landlord eventually has to ask them to leave; in *EastEnders*, a woman is using alcohol to sexually seduce a man, as part of a scheme to alienate him from another woman; later she returns to the man again with a bottle of champagne "to celebrate the start of something really special" (*EastEnders*, 15 August 2003); in *Eustace Brothers*, drinking, drunkenness and partying in a nightclub facilitates sexual intimacy between man and woman, who meet here for the first time – the woman, who is taking the initiative, is drunk and spills her drink on the man ... "Hey, let me get you another drink – I'm insisting" – the man, one of the eponymous brothers, is shown to have a serious hangover the following day, and his sexual conquest and hangover are

jokingly commented on by his brothers, including: “you were pissed”; in *Emmerdale*, a man and a woman are seen drinking red-wine at home as prelude to sexual intimacy (13 August 2003); in *EastEnders* (12 August 2003), a divorced man is courting a woman, inviting her out for an expensive restaurant meal and “Waiter, a bottle of your finest champagne”; in *The Bill*, a man and a woman are shown drinking champagne at home as a prelude to sexual intimacy (13 August 2003).

A rather different, but also much less frequent, use of alcohol/drinking is **to signify a personal crisis or as a part of personal crisis-management**, e.g.:

- **to ‘steady one’s nerves’**: Three A-level students are shown drinking pints of beer (two young men) and cola (a young woman) by the riverside in the garden of a pub, “calming the nerves - anxious about tomorrow’s A-level results” *BBC News At Ten O’Clock*, 13 August 2003.
- **for courage**: “I’ll need a drink first .. for Dutch courage” (before seeing separated husband about divorce papers) (*EastEnders*, 15 August 2003)
- as an **outlet for or signifier of pent-up frustration or rage**: Asian brothers are depicted in two separate episodes of *EastEnders* drinking several pints of beer or double-whiskies, frustrated and angry, “same [pints of beer] again!” – “are you sure?” – “definitely!” (14 August 2003); “What do you want?” – “double whisky, please” (15 August 2003); meanwhile, their father, arriving home after family bust-up at wedding, frantically (spills some) pours himself a large whisky (15 August 2003), and later, when son arrives home, he (the son) likewise pours himself a large whisky “I need a drink – do you [the father] want one?”
- to **‘drown one’s sorrows’**: in *Family Affairs*, a woman is drinking as a reaction to a failed love-affair; a similar case of solitary ‘crisis drinking’ (and inebriation) is portrayed in an episode of *EastEnders*.

Alcohol-consumption as associated with ‘having a good time’ and leading to ‘merry’ behaviour, tipsiness, and even drunkenness, is shown on several occasions in both Drama and Soaps: e.g. a group of women are shown drinking Gin & Tonics in the Vic (*EastEnders*), progressively getting louder and more merry; a couple in *Neighbours* get progressively drunk as they spend the whole evening drinking; a woman in

EastEnders is seen to be mildly intoxicated, saying “Ah, I’m gabbling – I think the champagne’s gone to my head” – to which her male friend replies: “Well, that’s what champagne’s for”. In *The Bill*, a police-man and a police-woman are shown drinking competitively in a bar, the police-woman intent on proving that she can drink any male colleague under the table any time; in *Eustace Brothers*, drunkenness and associated lack of inhibitions lead to sexual intimacy. In *Teachers* drunkenness is repeatedly treated in a comic and lighthearted manner.

While there is very little portrayal of alcohol and/or drinking as a problem, this type of portrayal is not entirely absent. Thus, *Family Affairs* touches on under-age drinking: two teenagers drinking cans of beer in the street are told off for doing so by an older man, to whom their response is “you can’t tell me what to do”; a teenager takes spirits, without parental consent, from home for an illegal house party, and teenagers are seen drinking beer, wine and spirits at an illegal house party. In another episode, a mother forces her son out of the local pub and reprimands him for underage drinking. Also in *Family Affairs*, a man is eventually told by bar-staff to leave the pub after drink-fuelled abusive behaviour and attempting to engage a woman in a competition to see who can drink the most fastest. Twice, people are being warned or reprimanded for drinking too much too early in the day, and reference is made to a woman who was drinking for consolation after a failed love-affair and ended up in hospital with alcohol-poisoning. In *Neighbours*, a character declining the offer of wine with a meal is met with a joking response “What are you, alcoholic or something?” – “no, I just don’t drink anymore ... for health reasons”; it is clear from the silence and subdued atmosphere following this exchange, however, that deeper problems lie beneath the brief ‘reason’ given for not drinking. In *EastEnders*, an elderly man is shown drinking four cans of beer in the morning, while watching women’s wrestling on television at a time when he was supposed to be tidying up the house. From a different location, the comment (by a different character) “now that I’ve got him on the straight and narrow” is followed, with comic effect, by a scene-cut back to the elderly man swigging beer in front of the television, showing that he is very much not on the alleged “straight and narrow”.

The prominent use of alcohol and drinking shots to show or signify ‘celebration’ was described above in relation to both Drama/Soaps and News programmes. The ‘ambivalent’ place of alcohol in News is perhaps particularly interesting.

On the one hand, News programmes – when they contain reference to alcohol at all – deploy stereotypical images of alcohol and drinking as part of celebrations and good-natured fun and joviality; this kind of imagery is particularly noticeable in Regional News programmes where it constitutes an important part of the efforts towards a more populist discourse than that characterising flagship national news programmes on the BBC and ITV channels.

An example of this was a Regional BBC news item on a pony riding event where the organiser's description of this as an event where "everybody comes, bring plenty of drink, have a good time" was complemented by shots of a horse-rider drinking lager at a beer-tent and the reporter punningly admonishing "and just a note on safety: if your horse heads for the bar, just stay with it".

The populist tendency is, however, not confined to Regional news programmes: a lengthy BBC1 *Six O'Clock News* item on Monday 11 August reported on findings from a study carried out by Stirling University showing that moderate drinkers earn on average £2000 more than teetotallers, and exploring the association between drinking with one's boss/colleagues and promotion/networking/career advancement. The item – in the style characteristic of much reporting on research – opted for vox-pop interviews in a bar, rather than interviews with the researchers who had carried out the study. The tone of reporting was generally one of fun, established through good use of puns ("a tippie after work may not be a bar to...") and vox-pop interviews in a bar, although mixed with a warning against the dangers of excessive drinking.

On the other hand, News programmes are the obvious programme genre for 'problem' stories highlighting social problems caused by or associated with alcohol consumption; thus, extensive coverage was given during the sample week by both the BBC and ITV1 news programmes to the fatal stabbing of a British holiday-maker in the Greek island town/resort of Faliraki. These news items emphasised the serious problems caused by British drunkenness – underlined by footage of excessive drinking by mainly young British holiday-makers ("and every night the bars and clubs are packed with people drinking to excess", BBC *News at Ten O'Clock*, 12 August 2003). It was the top BBC1 news story on Friday 15 August: "Holiday Drunkenness [sic]" was the title used, and the introductory line was "Why the Greeks want to call time on the great British pub-crawl".

While the news-item never left any doubt about the seriousness of the problem, and the urgent need for something to be done about this social problem, it is worth noting the simultaneous pandering to populism injected with both the deliberate choice of the metaphor “call time” and the elevation of the pub-crawl as an inalienable component of the British national identity through the phrase “the great British pub-crawl”. The BBC Regional news programme, in a news item broadcast in the early evening regional news and repeated – in a shorter form – in the regional news later in the evening, gave extensive coverage to the problems of drink driving in the summer, warning against the dangerous combination of hot weather, dehydration and alcohol consumption at barbecues and summer parties.

Television Alcohol advertising

Alcohol advertising appears on the three commercial channels: ITV1, Channel Four and Channel Five. While alcohol advertising was not a key research focus of this study, the study did seek to establish a baseline indication of the amount of alcohol advertising. There is considerable advertising overlap between these channels. Two channels, ITV1 and Channel Four, were analysed for the present study. While the target prime-time period examined in the study was 5.30-10.30 pm, the rule that programmes overlapping with the 10.30pm cut-off would be included in full, meant that the target period was extended in many cases. Taking this into consideration, the advertising analysis was carried out on the slightly longer ‘prime-time’ period definition of 5.30-11.30pm. All occurrences of advertising for alcoholic or non-alcoholic drinks were counted, and the hourly rate of alcohol/non-alcoholic drinks advertisements was calculated. The results appear in table 8 over.

During the sample week, alcohol advertisements were twice as prominent on Channel Four as on ITV1. Channel Four also gave more prominence to the advertising of non-alcoholic drinks (the brands advertised on the two channels included: Lipton tea, Nescafe, Lilt, Diet Coke, Coca Cola, Lucozade Sport, Robinsons fruit drink, Ribena fruit drink, Appletiser, Vittel mineral water, Buxton mineral water). Alcohol advertisements were for the following brands: Fosters Lager, Carling Lager, Budweiser Beer, Stella Artois, WKD Alcopop, Vodka Reef drink, and Bulmers

Strongbow Cider. The overall hourly rate of alcohol advertising on the two channels was 0.3, which is a third of the rate of non-alcoholic drinks advertising: 0.9.

Table 8: Alcohol and Non-alcoholic drinks advertising by Channel

Advertising 5.30-11.30pm, 11-15 August 2003		ITV1	Channel Four	Both channels
		30 hours	30 hours	60 hours
Alcohol	n	6	13	19
	R/H	0.2	0.4	0.3
Non-alcoholic drinks	n	21	30	51
	R/H	0.7	1.0	0.9

While the overall sample of alcohol advertisements is too small for making strong generalizations about positioning of alcohol advertising and its relationship with particular types of programme, two ‘trends’ were noteworthy in this particular analysis: a) Over half (7) of the five-day total of 13 alcohol advertisements on Channel Four appeared on Friday evening, where the programme schedule of Channel Four is dominated by Situation Comedy, Comedy, and Drama programmes; and b) the Channel Four drama programme *Teachers*, itself characterized by conspicuous alcohol consumption, had an above-average concentration of drinks advertisements: three alcohol advertisements (in a 65-minute programme period) and three non-alcoholic drinks advertisements. The indication here, which should ideally be explored further on a considerably larger sample of programming, is – perhaps rather unsurprisingly – that alcohol advertising is carefully positioned in relation not just to particular types of programme, but also in relation to particular (alcohol-related) programme content.

Although not examined in a systematic way in this research, the study noted that alcohol/drinks images are often used in advertising for products other than alcoholic

drinks – it is suggested that future research could usefully examine the extent to which advertising in general is an important source of alcohol images.

Discussion and conclusion

This study confirms the general findings of previous studies of the portrayal of alcohol and alcohol consumption on television, that alcohol is the most prominent drink on television and considerably more prominent than non-alcoholic drinks, and that Soaps are the main source of alcohol/drinking portrayal on television, although images of alcohol and drinking also feature prominently in television Drama programmes. Comparison with previous research on alcohol portrayal in Soaps, shows that the hourly rate of drinking scenes and of visual references to alcohol have been increasing over the twenty-year period from 1983 to 2003.

In contrast to much of the previous research, this study extended the analysis to prime-time News programmes in order to establish the extent to which alcohol and alcohol-related problems are considered newsworthy and form part of the ‘problems’ repertoire characteristic of News. The study showed alcohol references in News to be relatively frequent, but perhaps more significantly, the study demonstrated the ambivalent place of alcohol in the News repertoire: on the one hand, considerable coverage is given to the role of alcohol and excessive drinking in relation to social problems; on the other hand, alcohol and drinking images are an important component of News stories about celebrations, achievements, the marking of important events – stories which tend to pander to the more populist end of the News repertoire, and which often celebrate – implicitly or explicitly – drinking (alcohol) as a key ingredient of ‘Britishness’ or the British way of life.

There is no firm basis in the research literature for drawing a direct causal link between the actual basic rates of visual/verbal references to alcohol, or the hourly rate of drinking scenes, and public perceptions, beliefs and behaviour. Nor is there any basis in the alcohol research literature for attempting simplistic extrapolations from the observed increase in the hourly rates of alcohol images over the last twenty years, to their wider social impact. Similarly, it would be futile to attempt to draw any direct comparisons between the rate of alcohol consumption in television programmes and the rates of alcohol consumption in real life (‘futile’ because this would be tantamount

to assuming that television is a simple 'window on the world' rather than a symbolic medium and a highly selective story-teller). What is possible, however, is, on the basis of the results of this study, to point to the imbalances – the relative prominences and absences – in the overall messages communicated by television about alcohol and drinking, and to ask the question: does television in its portrayal of alcohol and drinking provide a sufficiently balanced and diverse range of images and messages? The results of this study show that the answer to this question must be an emphatic 'no'. Television offers a very selective – and, in Soaps and Drama, remarkably uniform – image of alcohol consumption as a routine, pleasant and unproblematic component of social interaction, a marker of celebrations, achievements, romance and sexual relations, and an integral component of 'having a good time'. Conversely, television Soaps and Drama offer little portrayal of the wide range of potentially serious personal and social consequences of alcohol consumption generally, and excessive drinking more particularly. Where excessive drinking or drunkenness is shown in Soaps and Drama, this is often portrayed in a humorous light, and the consequences shown merely as 'a bit of a headache' the following day. While a negative or problematising portrayal of alcohol consumption, then, does occur – particularly in News programmes – it is infrequent by comparison with the dominant emphasis on positive, convivial, funny images stressing the pleasant, socially facilitating, and unproblematic aspects of drinking. It is in this respect then that television's portrayal of alcohol and drinking must be criticised: for the 'naturalisation' of alcohol consumption that is an adjunct of its sheer relative prominence in Soaps and Drama, and for the highly imbalanced and selective emphasis on the positive aspects of alcohol consumption at the expense of images/messages which highlight, explore, or represent the potential personal and social dangers, cost, and consequences of drinking.

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Appendix 1: Programme titles

Channel	Type	Programme Title
BBC1	Soap	<i>Neighbours</i> <i>EastEnders</i>
	Drama	<i>Spooks</i> <i>Holby City</i> <i>The Eustace Bros</i>
	News	<i>BBC News at 6.00pm</i> <i>Regional News and Weather</i> <i>BBC News at Ten O'Clock</i> <i>Regional News and Weather</i>
BBC2	Drama	<i>The New Adventures of Superman</i> <i>Malcolm In The Middle</i>
ITV1	Soap	<i>Emmerdale</i> <i>Coronation Street</i>
	Drama	<i>The Bill</i> <i>A Touch of Frost</i> <i>Bad Girls</i>
	News	<i>Regional News</i> <i>ITV Evening News</i> <i>ITV News at Ten</i>
Channel Four	Soap	<i>Hollyoaks</i>
	Drama	<i>ER</i> <i>Teachers</i>
	News	<i>Channel 4 News</i>
Five	Soap	<i>Home and Away</i> <i>Family Affairs</i>
	Drama	<i>CSI: Miami</i> <i>CSI: Crime Scene Investigation</i>
	News	<i>five News (5.00pm)</i> <i>five News (7.00pm)</i>

Endnotes

- 1 Due to mechanical problems in the programme recording process, the *Channel Four* and *Channel Five* recordings for the first sampling date, Monday 11th August, were missed. Recording problems on Thursday 14th August for *ITVI* and on Friday 15th August for *Channel Five* were resolved by substituting with programmes from the same day of the following week, i.e. Thursday 21st August for *ITVI* and Friday 22nd August for *Channel Five*.

- 2 Although Hansen's (1984) study was an analysis of all prime time television programming, the study does offer (contrary to the claim made by Furnham et al (1997)) statistics showing the rate of alcohol references by programme type, including the rate of alcohol references specifically in Soaps.