

# The role movies play in alcohol consumption by youths

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A small number of scholars have systematically evaluated the imagery surrounding alcohol use in movies to see what messages young people may encounter. Their research indicates that images of drinking in movies are extremely common.

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**A**lcohol use and misuse among young people continue to be a major public health concern, despite decades of initiatives aimed at educating young people about the hazards of alcohol. Yet where do young people learn about alcohol use? How do they form attitudes about the effects and risks of drinking? Increasing evidence suggests that young people learn not only from real people (e.g. peers and parents) in their everyday lives but also from characters whose lives they witness through the media. In fact, the mass media have been recognised as significant sources of information about substance use that can influence young people's beliefs and expectations (Bahk, 2001; Sargent *et al*, 2002).

Movies, in particular, deserve attention because of their broad youth appeal. Attending the movies remains one of the most popular pastimes for teenagers. For example, although 12- to 17-year-olds comprise only 11% of the US population, they accounted for 19% of total cinema admissions in 2004, according to the Motion Picture Association of America (2004). On average, the majority of teenagers watch films in cinemas at least monthly and on video weekly (Roberts *et al*, 1999). DVDs, the internet, pay per view, movie networks and television broadcasts further heighten their access to movies, and make it easier to view a film now than ever before. Accordingly, it comes as little surprise that about two-thirds of young people (those aged 9–17) say that it is 'important' to see the latest movies (cited by Roberts *et al*, 1999). What do they learn about alcohol consumption from these popular storytellers?

## The imagery

A small number of scholars have systematically evaluated the imagery surrounding alcohol use in movies to see what messages young people may encounter. Their research indicates that images of drinking in movies are extremely common. For example, Everett *et al* (1998) documented that four out of five films among the top money-makers from 1985–95 showed at least one major character drinking alcohol. However, adults are not the only characters in films to drink alcohol. Indeed, in their analysis of the most popular movie rentals from 1996 to 1997, Roberts *et al* (1999) found that 22% of characters who appeared to be under the age of 18 were shown drinking alcohol. More recently, Stern (2005) found that

two-fifths of the teenage characters in the most successful teen-centred films from 1999–2001 were shown drinking. Moreover, of all characters shown drinking alcohol, more than half were depicted as drunk, and almost a tenth were shown driving while drunk.

## Behaviour modelling

Such depictions of teenagers, in particular, may play a role in real teenagers' actual alcohol usage and attitudes, by shaping shared understandings of common or appropriate teenage behaviours. Moreover, real teenagers may view teenage characters in the media as appealing models and consequently adopt similar behaviours and attitudes in their own lives.

One framework for understanding this process of media effects is social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986). This proposes that people learn by observing others either directly in real life or vicariously, such as through watching television or a movie. The media can thus affect viewers' beliefs, attitudes and behaviours by providing models from whom viewers can learn. Viewers are most likely to pay attention to those media models they see as similar to themselves. Consequently, a media model who is the same age as a teenage viewer is particularly likely to be influential (Hoffner & Cantor, 1991).

Models whom viewers consider to be attractive or desirable, such as those who are good-looking, financially well-off and powerful, are also more likely to be influential. This phenomenon is particularly troubling in the light of evidence that drinkers in films are depicted as being of higher socio-economic status and as being more attractive, romantic, sexual and aggressive than other characters (Everett *et al*, 1998; McIntosh *et al*, 1999). Stern (2005) did not find distinctions between drinking and non-drinking teenage characters in her study; however, since nearly all the main characters in the teenage films examined rated above average in terms of their physical appearance and virtuosity, drinking characters would be just as likely to draw the attention of teenage viewers as non-drinking characters, according to social cognitive theory.

By watching what happens when similar and attractive media models perform activities on screen, young viewers can develop expectations about the consequences that certain behaviours and attitudes – such as those relating to alcohol consumption – will have for themselves. Incentives and disincentives teach

viewers about social norms and values by indicating what rewards (e.g. happiness, love, acceptance) and punishments (e.g. health problems, loss of control, social isolation) one can expect when one acts in accordance with media models. Viewers need not actually engage in any action to acquire knowledge about normative values and rules of conduct (Bandura, 1986). For example, research has shown that young people have well developed beliefs and expectations about alcohol use well before they ever experiment with it (Goldman *et al.*, 1987).

Unfortunately, the negative consequences of alcohol consumption are rarely portrayed in films. Indeed, only one-tenth of the films analysed by Roberts *et al.* (1999) contained an anti-alcohol message. Stern (2005) investigated both short-term and long-term consequences of drinking behaviours by teenage characters in teenage films. Only one-third of the characters in the study were shown to suffer any negative short-term consequences (e.g. getting sick) and only one-quarter endured negative consequences in the long term (e.g. failing academically). Showing characters who openly regret their substance use is another way in which films can demonstrate negative consequences, but only a tenth of all characters shown drinking in the films Stern analysed exhibited any regret about their alcohol consumption. Moreover, although showing a teenage character declining an invitation to drink can go a long way to suggest to teenage viewers that an offer is not an obligation, in Stern's study only one character in the entire sample of films refused an offer of a drink.

The idea that media depictions of alcohol consumption affect young viewers is not simply theoretical. In fact, Bahk (2001) showed that the greater the role attractiveness and perceived realism of drinking characters in films, the more favourable were viewers' attitudes towards drinking and the more disposed they were to drink alcohol. Similarly, Rychtarik *et al.* (1983) found that viewing drinking scenes in television programmes increased the likelihood that youths would select an alcoholic beverage as more appropriate than water for serving to adults. Kotch *et al.* (1986) found that viewing depictions of negative consequences in television programmes decreased young people's expectations that alcohol had good effects.

More research is clearly warranted, given the findings of these studies, as well as the mounting evidence

that depictions of other types of substance use, particularly smoking, affect viewers' beliefs and behaviours.

## Conclusion

Altogether, research indicates that movies commonly provide images of alcohol use by both adults and teenagers. Such imagery is of concern, especially given the dearth of depictions demonstrating the negative consequences that often follow alcohol consumption. Equally notable is the apparent message in many films, especially those targeting young people, that drinking is normal, appropriate and fun. Such patterns may help explain why many teenagers view drinking as an acceptable youth behaviour. This possibility, as well as the growing amount of research demonstrating media effects, signals that we should concern ourselves with movie messages about drinking as one important part of our effort to reduce unsafe drinking practices among young people.

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### International Divisions in Glasgow

All six International Divisions of the College will be holding academic sessions at the College annual meeting in Glasgow:

African Division: The interface of traditional healers and psychiatry in Africa, 11 July, 9.00–10.15 a.m.

European Division: Psychiatric education in Europe, 10 July, 9.00–10.15 a.m.

Middle East Division: The role of the family in management of psychiatric disorders in the Middle East, 12 July, 2.00–3.30 p.m.

Pan-American Division: Complementary and alternative medicine in the Americas: good, bad or indifferent, 11 July, 10.45–12.00 a.m.

South Asian Division: The mental health component of primary care, 12 July, 4.00–5.30 p.m.

West Pacific Division: Improving the capacity of primary care health workers to identify mental health problems, 12 July, 10.45–12.00 a.m.