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## Alcohol in the Movies: Characteristics of Drinkers and Nondrinkers in Films From 1940 to 1989

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### ABSTRACT

We examined depictions of alcohol use in 100 popular films spanning 5 decades. Drinkers were depicted as more attractive, more romantically/sexually active, more aggressive, and having a higher socioeconomic status than nondrinkers. No systematic changes were found across decades that might reflect the growing knowledge base regarding the adverse effects of alcohol use. We compared the depiction of alcohol use in movies to real-world demographics and found that alcohol use in movies is somewhat glamorized.

Movies are often viewed as both a reflection of social attitudes and a shaper of them. Denizen (1991) aptly expressed this by stating that movies “mirror and create, while they produce images, representations, and stories that simultaneously derive from, yet challenge, the social worlds they attempt to map and interpret” (p. 7). If movies do indeed influence the attitudes and behaviors of the people who watch them, it becomes important to understand what attitudes and behaviors are being depicted in movies.

One ongoing concern is that popular movies reinforce or propagate behaviors that are undesirable and harmful. For example, the movie industry has often been criticized as being a purveyor of unhealthy lifestyles (Terre, Drabman, & Speer, 1991). The concern, of course, is that by having attractive, cosmopolitan characters engage in health-risking behaviors such as sexual promiscuity, poor eating habits, or smoking, movies are glamorizing such behaviors. It is feared that ultimately such depictions influence moviegoers’ own behavior, especially that of impressionable children and teens (Bandura, 1977).

People emulate the behavior of vicarious role models observed on television and in movies in the same manner that they emulate any other role model (e.g., Bandura, 1986; Berry & Mitchell-Kernan, 1982; Freuh & McGhee, 1975). However, people do not indiscriminately model the behavior of any television or movie character. They are most likely to model those who they perceive are similar to them (Nicholas, McCarter, & Heckel, 1971), are likable (Bandura, 1977), and are depicted as popular and heroic (Harris, 1986). Children especially are likely to imitate only those behaviors that they perceive to be rewarding to the model (Bandura, 1986).

The depiction in films of a variety of undesirable attitudes and behaviors has been investigated, including gender stereotyping (Bazzini, McIntosh, Smith, Cook, & Harris, 1997) and smoking (Hazan, Lipton, & Glantz, 1994). One harmful behavior depicted in film that has not been extensively investigated is alcohol consumption (Terre et al., 1991).

Attitudes toward alcohol are clearly influenced by observing the drinking behavior of role models (Caudill & Marlatt, 1975; Garlington & DeRicco, 1977), including role models observed in film (Room, 1988) and on television (Rychtarik, Fairbank, Allen, Foy, & Drabman, 1983). It can be argued that the raw number of occurrences of alcohol use depicted in films is not the best predictor of whether such depictions will influence film viewers to imitate the behavior they see. An important question to ask is who is drinking in films. Are those depicted drinking alcohol in films the stars and heroes of the film or the more unwholesome characters? If drinking is associated with positive characters, people will be motivated to emulate their behaviors. However, if drinking is more closely tied to negative characters, it is unlikely that people will want to copy those behaviors (Austin & Meili, 1994).

In an attempt to elucidate Hollywood’s messages about alcohol, we reviewed 100 popular films released between 1940 and 1989, rated the characters on a variety of attributes, and compared the ratings of drinkers and nondrinkers. This investigation was aimed at answering two questions. First, what are the messages about alcohol that popular movies send? Specifically, are the characters who

drink in movies depicted more or less positively than nondrinking characters?  
Second, are the messages that are conveyed about people who drink consistent with reality?

## **METHOD**

### ***Selection of Target Films***

We selected the period 1940-1989 for our investigation. We reasoned that the 1940s was the earliest decade for which films would be readily available on videocassette. In order to facilitate ease in making comparisons across decades, we rated only complete decades. This precluded rating films from the 1990s. We obtained lists of the top-grossing movies from each year for the period 1940 to 1989, counting only a film's revenues at first release. We included the top 20 films from each year in the pool from which we drew our sample. Twenty films out of the possible pool of 400 from each decade were randomly selected, for a total of 100 films.[1] The resulting sample of films included the following genres: comedy, 24%; drama, 24%; action/adventure, 14%; musical, 13%; suspense, 6%; children/family, 5%; western, 4%; science fiction/fantasy, 3%; other, 7%. Although there was a trend toward fewer musicals and westerns and more science fiction/fantasy over time, these genres represented only a small percentage of the films viewed. Otherwise, percentages of genres remained relatively consistent across decades.

### ***Rating Procedure***

Each rater was provided with written training materials spelling out the criteria for making character ratings. In addition, each rater was given verbal instructions on how to carry out ratings. The raters knew that the purpose of the study was to examine if alcohol use was portrayed favorably or unfavorably, but had no consistent expectations for the pattern of results and had no hypotheses for changes across time.

A total of 11 different raters participated, and at least 3 people rated each film. Films were viewed by an average of 3.38 raters. Raters were instructed to rate all characters who appeared in enough scenes to afford the rater a clear gauge of the characteristics of interest. Reliability of raters' selection of which characters to rate was more than adequate ( $\alpha = .92$ ).

Characters were rated on the following dimensions:

1. *Alcohol use.* If at any point in the film a character drank alcohol, raters placed a check on the appropriate line of the rating form. Raters were also instructed to classify a character as drinking alcohol if some comment or action in the movie made it clear that a character drank alcohol. So, for example, if two characters are eating dinner at a restaurant, and there is a half-empty wine bottle on the table and both characters have wine glasses in front of them, the characters were judged to be alcohol drinkers. In the few cases where there was not total

agreement among raters on whether a character had used alcohol or not, a character was rated as drinking alcohol if at least 50% of the raters judged the character as such.

2. *Attractiveness*. Ratings of physical attractiveness were based on an 11 - point scale ranging from 0 (*extremely unattractive*) to 10 (*extremely attractive*). Raters were instructed to make this rating the first time the character was shown onscreen in a reasonably clear, full-faced shot. These ratings were not to be changed once an initial judgment was made, because such alterations could reflect raters' incorporations of the beauty and goodness bias (e.g., lowering a rating of attractiveness at the end of a film when a character is revealed as evil).

3. *Aggressiveness*. Aggressiveness was defined as physical or verbal abuse of other people and was rated on a scale ranging from 0 (*not at all aggressive*) to 10 (*extremely aggressive*).

4. *Friendliness*. Raters assessed each character's friendliness on a scale ranging from 0 (*extremely unfriendly*) to 10 (*extremely friendly*).

5. "Goodness." Raters assessed the character's moral virtue on a scale ranging from 0 (*extremely immoral*) to 10 (*extremely moral, saintly*).

6. *Intelligence*. The character's intelligence was assessed on a scale ranging from 0 (*extremely unintelligent*) to 10 (*extremely intelligent*).

7. *Outcome*. At film's end, each character's outcome was rated on a scale of 0 (*extremely negative*; e.g., death) to 10 (*extremely positive*; e.g., struck it rich and lived "happily ever after").

8. *Romantic activity*. A character's real or implied romantic or sexual involvement was rated on a scale ranging from 0 (*totally inactive*) to 10 (*extremely active*). Due to changing norms and laws, recent films portray sexuality more explicitly. In an attempt to balance this inequity, raters attempted to estimate how much romantic/sexual activity a character was portrayed to be involved in, rather than consider only the amount of time the characters actually engaged in romantic or sexual activity. Only consensual romantic activity was considered in the ratings. Forced sexual activity was taken into account in ratings of aggressiveness.

9. *Socioeconomic status (SES)*. SES was rated on a scale ranging from 0 (*extremely poor, lower class*) to 10 (*extremely rich, upper class*).

With the exception of physical attractiveness ratings, raters could execute ratings at any time during the course of the film and could change their ratings to accommodate new information that unfolded as the movie progressed. Whenever two or more raters viewed a film together, no discussion of the characters or plot of the film was allowed until all ratings were complete. This eliminated opportunities for raters to influence each other's ratings.

## RESULTS

### *Rater Reliability*

Reliability was assessed by randomly selecting 15 films from our sample, which seemed a more than sufficient sample from which to generalize. We entered the ratings of three raters who had viewed all of these films as variables. Treating the movie characters who were rated as “subjects,” we then calculated reliability coefficients for all nine character dimensions. A total of 117 character ratings were used in the reliability analysis. Reliabilities across raters were well above acceptable levels across all dimensions rated, ranging from a low of .74 (for intelligence) to a high of .94 (for outcome). Reliability for alcohol use was .81.[2]

### *Frequency of Drinking*

Overall, 35% of the rated characters drank at least once during the films. Generally, the number of characters who consumed alcohol decreased across decades, from 33% in the 1940s to a high of 40% in the 1950s, then steadily declining to 32% (1960s), 28% (1970s), and 24% (1980s; Table 1).

Table 1

#### *Characters Who Drank Alcohol, by Decade*

Decade	Characters who drank alcohol
1940s	33%
1950s	40%
1960s	32%
1970s	28%
1980s	24%

*Note.* Mean across decades: 35%.

### *Overall Ratings*

Of the character variables examined, four were found to be significantly related to drinking when the data from all decades were combined and analyzed in a one-way MANOVA. Drinkers were depicted as having a higher SES ( $M = 6.01$ ) than nondrinkers ( $M = 5.69$ ),  $F(1, 829) = 5.96$ ,  $p < .05$ ; as being more attractive ( $M = 6.13$ ) than nondrinkers ( $M = 5.69$ ),  $F(1, 829) = 12.11$ ,  $p < .001$ ; as engaging in more romantic/sexual activity ( $M = 2.11$ ) than nondrinkers ( $M = 0.99$ ),  $F(1, 829) = 57.34$ ,  $p < .001$ ; and as more aggressive ( $M = 2.38$ ) than nondrinkers ( $M = 1.92$ ),  $F(1, 829) = 6.01$ ,  $p < .02$ . There were no significant differences overall between drinkers and nondrinkers in terms of friendliness, goodness, intelligence, and outcome at film's end (Table 2).

Table 2

*Overall Mean Ratings and F Values for Nondrinkers and Drinkers*

Characteristic	Nondrinkers <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	Drinkers <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	<i>F</i> value
Aggression	1.92 (2.55)	2.38 (2.68)	6.01*
Attractiveness	5.69 (1.75)	6.13 (1.66)	12.11**
Friendliness	5.41 (1.86)	5.63 (1.79)	2.99
Goodness	5.83 (2.19)	0.75 (2.04)	<1
Intelligence	5.65 (1.27)	5.70 (1.33)	<1
Outcome at film's end	5.04 (2.81)	5.37 (3.09)	2.53
Romantic activity	0.99 (1.78)	2.11 (2.42)	57.34**
Socioeconomic status	5.69 (1.78)	6.01 (1.89)	5.96*

*Note.* All ratings based on a scale of 1 to 10.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .001$  (two-tailed).

*Ratings by decade.* A 2 x 5 (Drinking x Decade) MANOVA revealed no significant trends across time in the depiction of drinkers versus nondrinkers on any of the rated characteristics (all  $ps > .05$ ).

*Ratings by gender.* We conducted a 2 x 2 (Drinkers vs. Nondrinkers x Males vs. Females) MANOVA to determine if depictions of alcohol use differed by gender. There were no significant interactions between gender and drinking for any of the personal characteristics (all  $ps > .10$ ).

## DISCUSSION

Based on the ratings of 832 characters appearing in 100 popular films, we found that drinkers tend to be portrayed as having a higher SES and as being more attractive, more romantically/sexually active, and more aggressive than nondrinkers. How can these results be interpreted in terms of a media message about alcohol? The combination of characteristics that distinguish drinkers from nondrinkers suggests that alcohol is associated with a romantic/heroic persona. The drinker is more wealthy, better looking, and more sexually active than the nondrinker. The drinker is also more aggressive without being less "good" than the nondrinker, suggesting an individual who does not initiate violence but who does not shy away from a fight. In the world of Hollywood movies, aggression is not always a negative characteristic. An individual who is violent to a "right end" is often portrayed as a noble individual who is given little choice but to aggress because of the situation he or she is in. The characteristics of drinkers found in this investigation are reminiscent of James Bond, the British spy whose line is "shaken, not stirred," referring to how he likes his martinis. Overall it can be concluded

that, to the extent that drinkers are depicted differently than nondrinkers, drinkers are depicted more positively than nondrinkers.

Is this depiction of drinkers an accurate reflection of trends in the United States? We should point out that we did not make a distinction between light drinkers and heavy drinkers in our ratings. Anyone shown in the film either with a drink or actually drinking was rated as a drinker, whether this occurred once or several times throughout the film. The decision to rate whether or not a character drank alcohol in the film, and not how much, was made because the authors determined that the amount of alcohol a character consumed could not be rated reliably. Rarely do films clearly depict the amount of alcohol a character is drinking. It was therefore impractical to try to measure how many drinks a character consumed, let alone the size of those drinks, the alcoholic content (e.g., straight vodka vs. a White Russian), and so on. However, the majority of alcohol-related problems in society are caused by light to moderate drinkers rather than by heavy drinkers (Goldberg, 1993), so it can be argued that much information can be gleaned by simply comparing drinkers to nondrinkers.

According to a report issued by the U.S. Bureau of the Census (1996), 4.8% of the people earning less than \$10,000 annually have two or more drinks on any given day. This percentage increases as income increases, resulting in people with an annual income of \$50,000 or more having the highest percentage at 6.7%. On the basis of such statistics, it appears that film portrayals of alcohol drinkers having a higher SES than nondrinkers is reflective of the true state of affairs. By stating that movies appear to be mirroring reality with their message that drinkers are affluent, we are speaking generally because such an assertion is not valid for the specific subpopulation of alcoholics and problem drinkers. Alcoholism is more prevalent among those of lower SES than those of higher SES (Fields, 1992).

Our finding that drinkers in the movies tend to be more attractive than nondrinkers is probably not an accurate reflection of reality. There are no data available on attractiveness and alcohol consumption, but a relationship would seem to be unlikely.

The message in film that drinkers are more romantically/sexually active than nondrinkers does have merit. According to Fields (1992), alcohol has been described as an aphrodisiac because low levels of consumption can reduce inhibitions and stimulate sexual arousal. Even beyond such physiological correlates, alcohol is commonly viewed as a social prescription for romance (e.g., "candlelight and wine," "Can I buy you a drink?").

The final attribute found to be characteristic of drinkers in the movies is aggressiveness. Again we see a parallel with reality. Based on a 1975 report by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (as cited in Fields, 1992), drinking even small amounts of alcohol can increase the likelihood of aggressive behavior. The higher the alcohol consumption, the stronger and longer lasting is the potential for aggression. Thus, the message that drinking is associated with aggression is not fictitious.

Generally speaking, the characteristics associated with drinkers in films seem to be reasonably close to the characteristics of drinkers in society. It should be pointed out, however, that the depiction of drinking may be somewhat skewed by what is not associated with drinking. Movies fail to depict some of the negative consequences which accompany drinking. For example, no relationship was found between drinking and character's outcome at film's end. Because films are intended to be dramatic and eventful, many highly negative outcomes are depicted, such as death, loss of loved ones, and life imprisonment. Many extremely positive outcomes are also depicted, such as becoming wealthy unexpectedly or finding true love. It can be argued that the depiction of equal fortune in the lives of drinkers and nondrinkers may not accurately reflect reality. As mentioned earlier, drinking is related to aggressive behavior, which may increase the likelihood that a person will become the victim of violence or will be incarcerated.

Drinking alcohol can also be related to health problems. Studies indicate that people who abuse alcohol are at substantially greater risk than nondrinkers of suffering ill health and premature death (Fields, 1992). Of course, this observation is tempered by the fact that this study did not make distinctions between light and heavy drinkers. The health problems associated with drinking alcohol are primarily restricted to individuals who are moderate to heavy drinkers.

The depiction of drinking in popular movies does involve some glamorization, most notably in depicting drinkers as more attractive than nondrinkers. Unquestionably, to the extent that movies slant the depiction of alcohol use, that slant is toward a more positive depiction than reality would suggest, rather than a more negative depiction. In general, however, we might conclude that the depiction of alcohol use in movies is fairly representative of its use in society.

## NOTES

1. Two movies that were selected were rejected because the main characters were animated and meaningful attractiveness ratings could not be made.

2. Specific interrater reliability estimates were as follows:  $a = .86$  for attractiveness,  $a = .90$  for aggressiveness,  $a = .76$  for friendliness,  $a = .79$  for goodness,  $a = .74$  for intelligence,  $a = .94$  for outcome,  $a = .84$  for romantic activity,  $a = .89$  for SES,  $a = .81$  for alcohol use.

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