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## Does Nighttime Television Influence Attitudes Toward Drinking?

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DOES NIGHTTIME TELEVISION INFLUENCE ATTITUDES TOWARD  
DRINKING?

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of The School of Journalism and Mass Communications  
San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Science

by

Mike McHone

August 2010

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DOES NIGHTTIME TELEVISION INFLUENCE ATTITUDES TOWARD  
DRINKING?

by

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## ABSTRACT

### DOES NIGHTTIME TELEVISION INFLUENCE ATTITUDES TOWARD DRINKING?

By Mike McHone

Alcoholism is a problem in the United States. Television portrays individuals drinking alcohol. Is television influencing attitudes toward drinking? An experiment was performed with students from San José State University in the School of Journalism and Mass Communications to discover if television would indeed influence them to drink.

Two groups, both Mass Communication classes, participated in an initial survey, and then the test group class viewed a dramatized program in which the main character was depicted drinking glamorously. Both classes then took the same survey again. Results were analyzed via a t-test. Although there was a change in attitude regarding two of the questions directly attributable to the program, the majority of the answers did not reflect any significant changes in attitude. The results of "*I feel that TV police detectives serve as positive role models*" ( $t(40) = -2.004, p = .046$ ) showed a change as there was not as much support for TV police detectives in the initial survey. Regarding "*Which television character is most likely to drink alcohol*" ( $t(40) = 2.451, p = .009$ ), the results were in favor of a businessman or businesswoman. Ironically the initial survey showed that the students thought that a police detective is most likely to drink.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

#### Significance of the Issue

Does the manner in which scripted television characters consume alcohol give college-age people between the ages of 18 and 25 permission to abuse alcohol? Albert Bandura (1971) theorized that individuals' behaviors are based on what they learn from what they observe. Thus, if an individual observes television programming, it is possible that behaviors can be learned from viewing television.

If television does have an impact on individuals' behaviors, is it possible that a single television program episode can influence individuals' behaviors? An episode of *Happy Days* that was broadcast on September 27, 1977 showed Fonzi, arguably the show's most popular character, obtaining a library card. Within the next few days, requests for library cards throughout the U.S. increased by 500% (EMA-Online.org).

Grube (1993) found that alcohol advertising will increase the chances that adolescents will develop glamorous attitudes toward alcohol consumption, and increase the likelihood that they will drink. Possible reasons found were that drinking alcohol in advertising was made attractive and that there were no serious consequences for this type of behavior.

According to the Harvard Medical School (Harvard Health Publications, 2008), alcohol addiction or abuse affects 18.2 million people in the United States. A further analysis revealed that one in every 13 adults and teens over age 12 is affected. The study

also suggested that other negative effects on society, including violent crime, accidents, and suicide, can be attributed to alcohol abuse. Wright (2004) of the Wake Forest University Baptist Medical Center found that the number of people with a drinking problem rose from 7.41% to 8.46% over the 10-year period between 1992 and 2002. Wright also found that the majority of individuals with drinking problems are adults between the ages of 18 and 29. A report released by the U.S. Surgeon General (United States Dept. of Health & Human Services, 2007) asked Americans to take actions toward stopping the more than 11 million under-age drinkers from consuming alcohol and to discourage other young people from starting to drink.

A study by the Center for Disease Control & Prevention (2004) indicated that alcohol abuse was the third leading preventable cause of death in the United States.

Even when alcohol abuse does not result in death, there are significant financial burdens brought on by alcohol abuse. In 2001, the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (Gordis, 2001) released a report detailing the costs of alcoholism on the U.S. economy. The statistics revealed a 1998 economic cost of \$185 billion attributed to alcohol abuse. More than 70% of the estimated economic costs of alcohol abuse were attributed to production losses of \$134.2 billion. Losses included alcohol-related illnesses (\$87.6 billion), premature death (\$36.5 billion), and crime (\$10 billion). Additional costs included health care expenses (\$26.3 billion), property and automobile related accidents (\$15.7 billion), and criminal justice costs for crime-related issues (\$6.3 billion). The Mayo Clinic (CNN, 2006) reported that nearly 50% of all fatal traffic accidents are caused by alcohol.

Parsons (2003) found that alcoholism is the source of more family problems than any other single cause. Parsons contends that one out of every four families suffers problems related to alcohol abuse.

The purpose of this study was to determine if nighttime television influenced college-age people between 18 and 25 to abuse alcohol.

### **Significance and Value of the Study**

Although there has been some research on television characters' portrayals of alcohol consumption, there appears to be a lack of comprehensive work on how these portrayals have influenced society in general. This study was designed to determine if nighttime television programming can influence intake and abuse. Questions asked by the researcher include: How often does nighttime television portray characters drinking? What types of messages are being conveyed by characters consuming alcohol? Is it possible that young people under the age of 25, based on what they view on television, can become influenced by fictional characters who drink?

Previous television viewing experience and applicable studies have indicated that the great majority of nighttime television character portrayals of alcoholics focused on individual characters and their behaviors. This study will try to determine if a television drama episode influences society to drink. At the very least, can a single broadcast program reinforce the idea that alcohol or deviant behaviors are acceptable?

### **Summary of the Experiment**

Permission was granted to conduct an experiment involving two lower-division Mass Communications and Society classes at San José State University. One of the

classes functioned as the test group, while the second class was the control group. Two surveys were presented to both classes which examined students' drinking attitudes. The test group then viewed an episode of *Saving Grace* featuring a character named Detective Grace Hanadarko who engaged in alcohol scenarios, portraying potentially abusive alcoholic behaviors. The same surveys were again presented to both classes with the hypothesis that the test group would be more tolerant of the lead character's alcoholic behavior. It was expected that the control group's responses to the second survey should have reflected the same results as the first questionnaire.

If the results of the second questionnaire for the test group showed that students were more willing to drink, is it possible that nighttime television programming is glamorizing the images of alcohol, thus leading viewers to believe that there are no adverse consequences of drinking? Is it possible that nighttime television is sending the wrong messages to young people under the age of 25?

The experiment was conducted to support the following research questions:

1. What are the effects of television characters' alcohol intake portrayals on viewers who approve of excessive drinking activities?

A literature review reveals that college students and individuals over the age of 25 engage in binge drinking. Hanadarko, the main character of *Saving Grace* engages in heavy drinking and deviant behaviors.

2. Do glamorized television character portrayals influence the drinking attitudes of viewers?

One of the issues that was addressed by the questionnaires focused on deviant behaviors. Is it possible that students who viewed *Saving Grace* will approve of the main character's lifestyle?

The character of Hanadarko breaks the rules of stereotypical female characters. She is a police detective, and she also lives a lifestyle that female viewers (and perhaps male viewers) might find appealing. Although past television broadcast programs such as *The Bionic Woman*, *Police Woman*, *Nancy Drew*, and *Charlie's Angels* feature female leads, authoritative characters, none of these characters are portrayed living deviant lifestyles.

3. Do television portrayals of law enforcement officials that drink influence the viewers' attitudes toward drinking?

Grace Hanadarko carries a gun. Is it possible that students who viewed this portrayal of what might be perceived as an exciting character, will approve of police officials' drinking activities?

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

The present body of academic literature reveals there is enough scientific evidence to support the theory that there is a drinking problem in American society. Is it possible that nighttime television is influencing attitudes toward drinking alcohol?

This literature review on alcoholism effects begins with a section on Social Learning Theory. The second section discusses research on television alcohol advertising. The third section discusses how alcoholism is portrayed in films, and its possible influencing effects. The last section focuses on television portrayals of alcoholism and its possible effects.

Before looking at television and film influences, it is important to consider how people acquire their learning abilities.

#### **Social Learning Theory**

Social Learning Theory was developed by Albert Bandura (1971), and assumes individuals' behaviors are based on what they learn, from an observational point of view.

There are four main aspects to Bandura's theory: Attentional Processes (applying what is observed); Retention Processes (remembering what is observed); Reproduction Processes (reproducing what is observed); and Motivation Processes (reason to adapt what is observed). All four aspects are related to environmental (social) and psychological (cognitive) learning.

It is important to understand the role that television and other mass media play in helping shape behavior. Bandura and Walters (1963) claimed that mass media is an

influence in shaping social behavior. Because of the large amounts of time that children spend watching television, the portrayal of role models play a significant role in shaping the behavior of children and adolescents.

Arenas, Briones, and Tambernero (2007) utilized social learning theory to determine why some people engage in self-defeating behavior when facing difficult tasks, while other individuals are more self-resourceful and look at difficult tasks as a challenge toward mastering the tasks. Results included people who anticipated a lonely future and who displayed the largest levels of anxiety. However, people who were told that they would have a fulfilling future displayed more positive emotions. In general, people with low levels of positive emotions displayed more self-defeating behavior as opposed to people with higher levels of positive emotions.

A more recent study by Glascock (2008) examined three types of aggression portrayed during prime-time television. Glascock cited social learning/social cognitive theory to explain how television adds to individuals' aggressive tendencies. The three types of aggression that were examined were verbal aggression, indirect aggression, and physical aggression. Portrayals of physical aggression were more prevalent among Caucasians and male characters, while indirect aggression was represented by female characters, and verbal aggression was equally distributed between male and female characters.

By understanding Social Learning Theory, it may be possible to understand the relation of television's influence on society.

A study of how television might be sending positive messages about alcohol centered on the popular, long-running comedy *Cheers*. Hundley (1995) was concerned about the lack of health risks being portrayed by television, so she chose to utilize Social Learning Theory to support her theory. Hundley concluded that television is a constant learning tool for life, and a popular show like *Cheers* reaches large segments of society. Due to the comic nature of the program, and its failure to portray any negative consequence of drinking beer, viewers of *Cheers* equated alcohol with social drinking and relaxation.

Information provided by *Pediatrics* (2001) supports compelling evidence of alcohol consumption and behaviors. While approximately 9.5 million Americans between 12 and 20 years old reported having one drink during the past month, half of them reported being binge drinkers. In addition, more than one third of high school seniors saw no negative consequences in consuming four to five drinks daily.

### **Television Advertising**

Waiters, Treno, and Grube's study (2001) indicated that adolescents responded favorably to the lifestyles and images portrayed by beer commercials. *Education Daily* (2004) reported that one of the reasons that adolescents drink is that they want to imitate sports and media personalities, in addition to the excitement of just getting drunk.

It is important to understand any possible connections of adolescents' behaviors toward alcohol, and possible overexposure to television advertising. A 2001 report by The Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth [CAMU] (2002) at Georgetown University indicated that television advertising reached 89% of the youth, which they defined as 12

years and up, and almost 25% of the total alcohol ads were more effective on youth than on adults. The report by CAMU was adamant in its stance on overexposure to adolescents: “By placing advertising on programs where the composition of youth audience is higher than the average audience, the youth audience is in effect “overexposed” to the advertising and is more likely to have seen it than adults” (CAMU, 2002, p. 2 ).

Because most of the overexposure was shown during sports programming and dramas such as the *X-Files* and *Dark Angel*, one might observe a correlation with the Waiter, et al. study that indicated one of the reasons that adolescents drink alcohol is to imitate media or sports celebrities.

Grube (1993) also discovered that adolescents said they would drink after observing alcohol ads on television, and that they felt there were no consequences for their behaviors.

If young people felt there were no consequences for their drinking behaviors, would a character such as Grace Hanadarko who suffers no negative consequences because of her alcohol consumption, reinforce the alcohol behaviors of young people?

The motion picture industry is not free from criticism of its influence of drinking alcoholic beverages. Although most of the literature reviews focus more on stats, as opposed to inaccurate portrayals, connections can still be made to alcohol use of people under the age of 25.

### **Alcohol Portrayals in Feature Films**

Everett, Schnuth, and Tribble (1998) assessed the use of alcohol in the top ten grossing movies from 1985 to 1995. The study was performed to assess if alcohol usage in feature films changed during an 11-year period, and to study the messages presented by alcohol in the reviewed films. However this study was not concerned about reality connections.

Questions asked in the Everett *et al.* study included: “Did the characteristics of lead characters change over the study period?” and “Were these leading film characters associated with increased references to alcohol?”

The study ultimately concluded that 96% of the films studied contained at least one alcohol event while only 38% of the films discouraged the use of alcohol. Overall, the risks of alcohol consumption were not portrayed by the characters in the studied films. Further results included male characters were the dominant alcohol consumer, comprising 74% of total drinking dramatizations. Other characteristics of these males included middle or high socioeconomic status (98%) and white (93%).

Christenson, Henricksen, and Roberts (2000) conducted a study to determine the accuracy of public perceptions about extensive substance use in popular movies among youth. The major concern was that because teenagers are major viewers of movies, those popular movies or depictions would encourage alcohol drinking or drug use among the young.

The study analyzed 200 popular movie rentals in 1997 and 1998. The criteria included substances used, by whom, under what circumstances, how often, and the dire

consequences. This study also contained fact-related evidence of the behaviors of adolescents. Alcohol was used in 76% of G- or PG- movies, and in mostly all PG-13 (97%), 33 scenes findings included 29 movies or 15%, included under age individuals participating in some form of substance interest. A significant finding in this study was that there were no clear motives for young characters' substance use. A few scenes conveyed the idea that young people use substances to reduce stress or improve their mood or self-image. Only one scene portrayed underage alcohol use as a result of peer pressure. Also of significance was that of the films that contained alcohol use, 20% contained positive statements about drinking alcohol, as opposed to the 9% that were negative.

A similar review of alcohol depiction in movies was performed in a 1999 study by McIntosh, Smith, Bazinni, and Mills. The study consisted of a review of 100 films made between 1940 to 1989. However, McIntosh was also interested in the messages sent by drinking characters, to understand if they were consistent with real life experiences. This same question was also examined by the Christenson investigation. However, unlike that study which focused its results and effects on adolescents, McIntosh was also interested on the effects on society in general.

According to the McIntosh *et al.* study (1999), one behavior depicted in movies not yet fully investigated, as of 1991, was alcohol. However, the study pointed out that film and television characters are influential in shaping the alcohol behaviors of viewers, in that some of the viewers regard the film and television characters as role models.

Conclusions found in the McIntosh study included that 35% of the characters drank at least once during the movies. Drinkers in the films were found to have a higher societal status, being more physically attractive and more promiscuous as opposed to nondrinkers. If there was any doubt that the messages sent by movies that included alcohol don't reflect reality, McIntosh relates the traits of drinkers found in this investigation to those of James Bond. The data concerning wealthy drinkers supports the similar data found in the Everett study.

The results of these studies suggest that alcohol events are prevalent in American films. Although the Everett study did not make a connection to reality for adolescents as the Christenson and McIntosh findings had, it did illustrate the messages that are exposed to adolescents, which all three studies explained. As Everett pointed out, children are at risk when identifying with media role models if they lack positive relationships with both friends and parents. Signorielli (1993) confirmed this adolescent risk by explaining that many young people drink alcohol and beer is the favorite beverage within large segments of American youth. She also indicated that, among young males, about half of the high school seniors and almost 20% of the ninth graders had been designated as problem drinkers.

Wedding (2000) attacked the issue of alcohol use in film from a different perspective. He was concerned about the behaviors of characters in film, and about the influence that film has. However, his main concern was why society was so acceptable of inebriation. To tackle these issues Wedding first turned his attention to the Western film genre. As Wedding pointed out, "Saloons, bar fights, whiskey bottles, drunken

gunfighters, and town drunks are all the staple features of the genre, and it is a genre that has contributed significantly to the prevailing image of masculinity” (p. 3). Wedding also indicated that cinematic representations of alcohol use and abuse serve as models with profoundly significant societal consequences since films reflect and shape individual and societal behavior.

Wedding also examined past studies and discovered that there were more positive messages associated with drinking alcohol in films than there were negative. Examples of these positive messages during alcohol portrayals include celebration, courage, and emotional comfort. His studies found that positive messages about alcohol outnumbered negative ones by a 10 to 1 margin. However, what was of real concern to Wedding was that the risks of alcohol were seldom portrayed in the films, and that lead characters could be seen as role models to adolescents.

Wedding used social theory thinking to illustrate how media messages can influence behaviors of young people to drink alcohol. He found that movie portrayals or songs about alcohol can potentially make an impact on young peoples’ behavior.

Wedding also went into other areas of study that the teams of Everett, and McIntosh did not cover. He chose to examine G-rated or children’s films made between 1937 and 1997 that contained scenes that included alcohol use. Wedding found that 50% of the studied films portrayed alcohol use in story plots without clear messages about any potential risks of alcohol consumption. He was concerned about this discovery insofar as that he felt that children may be at risk to the effects of role modeling, because binge drinking is a serious health problem among American youth.

Another new area of study for Wedding was the work of Norman Denzin and his book, *Hollywood, Shot by Shot*. Denzin examined whether the number of films portraying alcohol qualified them as an independent genre. Wedding's research discovered alcohol-using characters such as a drinking robot in *Forbidden Planet*, a drunk extraterrestrial in *E.T.*, an inebriated Santa Claus in *Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street*, as well as characters in popular movies such as *The Verdict* and *The Deer Hunter*.

A majority of previous studies of the effect of television characters' portrayals of alcohol consumption have been performed on adolescents and not on society in general. Reasons for the studies included alcohol messages in film, public perceptions of alcohol in movies, alcoholic messages conveyed by characters in film, and social acceptance of inebriation.

What appears to be increasingly clear is that most research done on how alcohol is portrayed in the media has been focused on the effects or influences upon adolescents. Although the next section on prime-time television reviews previous academic studies that relate to adults and adolescents, there are few academic studies in the current literature regarding the depictions of the long-term consequences of alcoholism, not only from a health perspective but also on the behaviors of individuals around the alcoholic. One study reported that of the 75,766 alcohol-attributed deaths, 46% of them were from chronic conditions such as cirrhosis of the liver, while 54% resulted from acute conditions such as physical injuries (Center for Disease Control & Prevention, 2004).

To offer further support for this study of whether television influences college-age young adults to drink alcohol, it is important to understand how society acquires its beliefs and attitudes about alcohol issues.

### **Alcohol Portrayals in Broadcast Television**

Regarding previous studies that centered on alcohol in television programs, Mathios, Avery, Bisogni, and Shanahan (1998) found that alcohol was in 14% of male scenes and 20% of female scenes. Long, O'Connor, Gerber and Concerto (2002) provided data on actual character alcohol consumption. This study found that prior to 1995 alcohol and other substance abuses were overrepresented. Will, Porter, Geller, and DePasquale (2005) found that alcohol was a prevalent substance on television, appearing in 75% of primetime programs. Lastly, a study by Montero (2002) found that glamorized alcoholic portrayals can have influential, negative effects on young people.

Russell and Russell (2008) found that television dramas are a very influential avenue where viewers not only gain knowledge, but also learn about social behaviors that include drinking activities.

Singhal, Cody, Rogers, and Sabido (2004) explored how televised portrayals shape society's public consciousness. The explanation was that society's realities depend enormously on what they see, hear, and read, rather than on their own experiences.

A study performed by the CDC (Beck, Pollard, Johnson, 2003) demonstrated that 57% of viewers receive their health-related information from daytime and nighttime dramas. One possible explanation for this type of education is due to product placements within the programming itself. Positive images of alcohol are often observed in

television programs in the forms of these product placements. Alcohol is one of the most popular products placed in television programs and theatrical-released movies (Russell and Russell, 2008).

To further understand television's possible influence on college-age adults' drinking activities, it is important to realize how viewers in general connect with television characters.

"Connectedness" (Russell and Puto, 1999) refers to the intensity of the relationships that viewers form with television programs, and television characters.

Russell and Russell (2008) also indicated that even greater connectedness by viewers associates them more so to the program, and concluded that connectedness is a significant factor in that viewers relate more to characters' situations as opposed to an actual drinking scene. O'Guinn and Shrum (1997) defined connectedness as being an actual predictor of television influence, as opposed to the overall consumption of television.

Mathios *et al.* (1998) explored the frequency of alcohol messages embedded in prime-time television. The study concluded that alcohol use occurred by all characters, including adolescents, as well as attractive or leading characters. It was also revealed that alcohol beverages were the most common food of choice represented on television. Additionally, when adolescent characters are involved with alcohol incidents, they are more likely to be portrayed "partying" when compared to adults. The study also revealed that adolescent alcohol use is portrayed more with negative characters (low-income) than positive (high-income). When researchers observed role-model-adult characters consuming alcohol, the research revealed that those characters on average had positive

personalities. In addition, Signorielli (1993) observed that television drinking portrayals relate minimally to real-life drinking experiences and that 80% of the programs portrayed scenes of drinking alcoholic beverages, most of which were hard liquor.

Signorielli's content analysis study included 224 hours of programming across 276 programs on the four major networks.

A different approach to portrayals of alcoholic characters on television was subsequently performed by Long *et al.* (2002). They suggested that alcohol and other substance abuses were overrepresented in television characters prior to 1995. The objective of this study was to examine the use of alcohol, illicit drug, and tobacco users among characters on prime-time TV during 1995 and 1996 compared to the actual use rate in the United States. They wanted to determine if the ratio of adolescent drinkers, young to old, white to minority, or users of addictive substance on prime-time TV were similar to the equivalent U.S. ratios. Comparing results for prime-time TV characters versus the U.S. population (respectively), 11% of the prime-time characters drank alcohol versus 51% of the general U.S. population. Further, no consistent pattern was evident in their analyses that assessed whether addictive substance users on prime-time TV were more frequently represented as men, young, or minority compared to the similar U.S. ratio. These results indicate that contrary to prevailing beliefs, alcohol, illicit drug, and tobacco users are uncommon on prime-time TV and are less prevalent than in the U.S. population.

Wallack, Grube, Madden, and Breed (1990) conducted a study involving three weeks of observing prime-time fictional television programs. Of the 195 programs

observed, 64% of the programs contained the placement of alcohol, with more than 50% of the programs depicting individuals drinking alcohol. Additional data revealed 8.1 drinking acts per hour. Other significant data from the study revealed that movies produced for television had the highest rate of drinking acts per hour (10.0) followed by situation comedies (9.2) and then theatrical-release movies (7.4) and dramas (7.4). Nighttime dramas, produced for television, had the most drinking acts with 13.3 per hour. The data also revealed that main characters were more likely to drink than supporting or secondary characters. Drinking characters also tended to be affluent, mostly white, upper-class professionals. A time-trend analysis showed a regular increase in alcohol on television from 1976 to 1984, reaching a high of 10.2 acts in 1984 per program. After 1984, the trend appeared to reverse.

Byrd-Bredbenner, Finckenor, and Grasso (2003) conducted another study which centered on young children, 2- to 11-years old. The results were that viewers saw one health-related-content-containing scene approximately every four minutes. Food and alcoholic beverages were frequently shown and consumed. What was of significance was that most of the alcohol consumption was not central to the scene.

Another study by Robinson, Chen, and Killen (1998) focused on a group of 1,533 ninth grade students in San José, California. This cohort study evaluated students' hours of television, music video and videotape viewing as well as their use of computers and video games. At the beginning and toward the end of this 18-month study, students were asked about their alcohol drinking behaviors. Conclusions were that students who did not drink, before the television viewing, were at risk to start drinking after television viewing.

Another conclusion was alcohol portrayed in positive manners in television, such as successful or influential characters may increase the onset of drinking.

Montero (2002) looked at the work done by recovery organizations. Although many patients had successfully become clean and sober, Montero was still concerned about the influence that television had on young people. As Montero pointed out:

Such portrayals often glamorize alcohol use, and younger viewers seem to associate positive values with alcohol. For such an impressionable audience, this glamorization and level of influence can have negative consequences. They begin to think that drinking is "cool" and therefore feel the pressure to drink. We know from research done by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) that a person who begins drinking at a young age has a greater chance of developing a clinically defined alcohol disorder. (p. 5.)

Montero went on to describe how the television industry and entertainment industry as a whole had become cognizant of the fact that its portrayals of alcohol abuse were having negative effects on young people. Consequently, the industry began to examine its responsibility to society, and ultimately enacted story lines that began to deal with alcoholism. Thus, the television and entertainment industries hoped to help reconnect society to more true-to-life perceptions. However, there is some supporting evidence that indicates that nighttime television still does not accurately portray real-life alcoholics and the chaos that they carry with them in their lives.

Grube (1993) somewhat reinforced this idea when he indicated that although contributing factors such as parents, peers, and environmental factors can influence the drinking beliefs and behaviors of young people, these same beliefs and behaviors may also be learned by exposure to alcohol on television content programming and by alcohol advertising.

In the review of content in nighttime television, areas of concern included the frequency of alcohol activities, character use of alcohol, and the effects of alcohol in nighttime broadcast television upon adolescents. As Signorielli (1993) observed, television drinking activities bore little resemblance to reality; and Wallack et al. (1990) provided evidence that television portrays mostly white and affluent people as drinkers. This could be deceiving, encouraging people to think only certain types of people can be affected by alcoholism. Montero (2002) then described how television, despite being cognizant of the negative effects on society, still does not accurately portray alcoholism.

Although there have been compelling illustrations of alcohol portrayals on television and film, along with the possible effects and influences that these portrayals may contain, there is no academic research offering any conclusive evidence that television accurately portrays the alcoholic and the effects that the alcoholic has on those in his or her family.

In preparation for the experiment described in the next section an experiment that had been conducted by Pamela Vasquez at San José State University (SJSU) in 1997 was reviewed. Vasquez was interested in the impact of television portrayals of gay marriage on audience beliefs. She measured students' beliefs before and after viewing an ABC program that featured gay and lesbian couples planning their weddings. Although the results did not reflect ultimate support for her hypothesis, the demographic commonalities between the experimental and control group findings did indicate that issues between different demographics were impacted by the television program.

## Chapter 3

### Method

#### Subjects

To discover whether nighttime television is influencing society to drink, an experiment was conducted with San José State University students during the spring semester of 2009.

Two sections consisting of a total of 71 students, both from the undergraduate level Mass Communications and Society class from the School of Journalism and Mass Communications, participated in this experiment. The test group was given the first survey one week, and then was asked to watch TNT's program *Saving Grace*, a drama in which the character, a female detective, engages in alcohol, and immoral behaviors. The class viewed the program later the same week, but in order to accommodate their schedule, the same survey could not be repeated until two weeks later. The control group was given the same survey two times, as well, but did not view the program.

The surveys asked questions regarding the students' own drinking attitudes, in addition to questions related to *Saving Grace*. The survey questions were designed with a Likert scale format. Questions included "*I feel that people who are heavy drinkers are fun*"; "*I feel it is all right for college students to drink large amounts of alcohol*"; "*I feel that television police detectives serve as positive role models*"; and "*I feel that women who play law enforcement officials on television are glamorous.*"

The episode used for study purposes shows the main character, Grace Hanadarko, a female detective, engaging in heavy drinking at a bar, in addition to regular drinking at

home or at her friend's home. In addition, Hanadarko is shown jumping out of the shower and flashing her breasts to her elderly neighbor through the window. The character also is portrayed having a sexual affair with her married co-worker. Later, Hanadarko is confronted by the co-worker's wife about the affair, and she chooses to lie about the affair.

The character of Hanadarko is written to make her life seem exciting and interesting to watch. Could this type of deviant portrayal influence an individual to drink? Is it possible that just one episode could influence a person to emulate Hanadarko's behavior and drink?

As reported earlier in this study, a single episode of *Happy Days* showed Fonzi, obtaining a library card. Within the next few days, requests for library cards throughout the U.S. increased by 500% (EMA-Online.org).

For this study, the test group during the first survey numbered 47 students, and the control group numbered 24. Since both classes could not commit to the experiment until later in the semester, the second survey was not submitted until the second-to-last week of the semester. This became problematic, as only 25 students showed up for the test group, and only 15 students showed up for the control group.

### **Procedure**

The students were verbally informed that their participation in the experiment was voluntary, and that they could remove themselves from the experiment at any time. Those agreeing to participate in the experiment were then asked to sign an agreement to

participate in the research. Following introductions and explanations, surveys were then distributed to the students.

The students were given verbal instructions to follow the directions on each page of the 34-question survey.

The first two pages of the survey consisted of Likert scale responses that reflected *strongly agree, somewhat agree, undecided, somewhat disagree, and strongly disagree*, reflecting a Likert scale. The responses were ranked on a one-to-five scale, with strongly agree reflecting a one, and strongly disagree reflecting a five. There were also questions on gender and age. The last two questions included listing how many weekly hours of television, students watched and having the students rank from the types of television programs they watch. The last two pages consisted of 15 questions relating to *Saving Grace* and television characters in general and more about the students' attitudes toward drinking alcohol.

The surveys were collected at the end of the session. Students were thanked for their participation and contributions, and they were also given a phone number by which they could reach the researcher to ask him questions about the research.

## Chapter 4

### Results

This experiment tested the hypothesis that viewing one television episode could influence college-age students' attitudes toward alcohol consumptions. The results of the experiment indicate that after viewing a single episode of *Saving Grace*, there were no significant changes. Most surprising was that the majority of the main changes in attitude were not even directly related to the episode. Specifically, there were only two significant changes in attitude.

#### T-Test Analysis

The test group was made up of 25 students, with 5 males and 20 females. The students' ages ranged from 18 to 25, with an average age of 21. The control group was a group of 15 students, with 7 males and 10 females. The students' ages for this group ranged from 18 to 27, with an average age of 22.

There were two questions directly related to the viewing of the program that had significant difference: "*I feel that TV police detectives serve as positive role models*" ( $t(40) = -2.004, p = .046$ ); "*Which television character is most likely to drink alcohol*" ( $t(40) = 2.451, p = .009$ ). The irony of the positive role model question is that the episode screened for students showed Grace Hanadarko engaging in a sexual affair with a married man, lying to her best friend, and also drinking alcohol excessively. In the initial survey the positive role model question did not gain as much support. Regarding the character most likely to drink alcohol, a business man or business woman was the top selection.

The other questions from the survey that reflected significant differences were based on issues that dealt with other types of television characters in occupations different from Hanadarko. The hypothetical characters that showed significant differences were a teacher and business individual. “*In your opinion which television character type is most admired?*” ( $t(40) = 2.351, p = .021$ ), and ( $t(40) = -2.768, p = .005$ ). Another question directed toward the perception of teachers: “*Which character is television most likely to empower?*” ( $t(40) = 3.563, p = .006$ ).

Lastly, a question directed toward the perception of doctors, “*Which character is television most likely to show acting immorally?*” ( $t(40) = -2.253, p = .022$ ).

To gain a better understanding of the lack of support for the combined class differences, this study also looked closely at the results of four questions directly related to *Saving Grace*. The questions included, “*I feel that heavy drinking is all right for an individual as long as the drinking does not affect their career*”; “*I feel that TV characters who drink are more appealing than those that don’t*”; “*I feel that there should be more TV programs with characters drinking*”; “*I do think the government should be allowed to restrict TV programs with heavy drinking*”. None of the four listed questions showed any significant differences or support in the post-test survey. The question, “*I feel that there should be more TV programs with characters drinking*,” came the closest at ( $t(40) = -1.584, p = .124$ ).

Even when the test and control classes are separated and the same four questions are examined, the results of both post surveys for each class do not show any significant change.

### **Data on Students' Drinking Attitudes**

Examining data on students' attitudes toward drinking in general revealed why there was a lack of support for the experiment. The following combined data of both classes, reflected results from the post survey.

The results of the statements "*I feel it is all right for college students to drink large amounts of alcohol*" revealed that 62.5% of the students strongly or somewhat disagreed with the question, while only 22.5% strongly or somewhat agreed. "*I feel that heavy drinking at a party should be acceptable*" revealed that 60% strongly or somewhat disagreed, while only 15% strongly or somewhat agreed. "*I feel that people under 21 should be allowed to drink*" revealed that 45% strongly or somewhat disagreed, while only 37.5% strongly or somewhat agreed. "*I feel that people who are heavy drinkers are fun*" revealed 70% strongly or somewhat disagreed, while only 12.5% strongly or somewhat agreed. "*I feel that heavy drinking is all right for an individual as long as the drinking does not affect their career*" revealed 69.5% strongly or somewhat disagreed, while only 12.5% strongly or somewhat agreed.

The lack of support for the hypothesis shows that if the college students do engage in heavy drinking those attitudes might be attributed to prior experiences. The following table provides possible explanations as to why there was a lack of support for the hypothesis.

Table 1

*Results to Questions Regarding Students' Drinking Attitudes*

Statement	Agreed	Disagreed	Undecided
1. I feel it is all right for college students to drink large amounts of alcohol.	22.5%	62.5%	15%
2. I feel that heavy drinking at a party should be acceptable.	15%	60%	25%
3. I feel that people under 21 should be allowed to drink.	32.5%	45%	22.5%
4. I feel that people that are heavy drinkers are fun.	12.5%	72.5%	17.5%
5. I feel that heavy drinking is all right for an individual as long as the drinking does not affect their career.	12.5%	2.5%	15%

## Chapter 5

### Discussion

#### Summary

The purpose of this study was to discover if television was influencing college-age students between the ages of 18 and 25 years to drink alcohol. It was hypothesized that one dramatized episode, portraying an exciting, drinking police detective, would influence viewers to drink alcohol.

The hypothesis gained little support, as there were only two questions from the survey that were directly related to *Saving Grace* that reflected any significant difference. The two questions that were supported by the data from the survey results reflected police detective characters in general as positive role models, in addition to police detectives being portrayed as drinking too much.

In the episode viewed for this study, what is perceived as a positive role model, the main character of *Saving Grace*, Detective Hanadarko, engages in questionable behaviors including a sexual affair with a married man and ultimately lying to the man's wife when confronted. It is possible that the students' reactions to the actual question could have reflected previous positive portrayals of other police detectives, or law enforcement in general.

It should be noted that 57.5% of the students self-reported watching only 10 hours of television per week, and although Bandura's Social Learning Theory stated that individuals' behaviors are learned, and the fact that the *Happy Days* research showed

support for a one episode impact, the results of this experiment provided minimal support for the hypothesis.

### **Conclusions**

Gerbner, Gross, & Melody (1973) were convinced through their cultivation analysis work that television images can be influential for individuals when they are able to relate their own personal experiences to the images. This study was based on research over a longer viewing period. The results of the single viewing of *Saving Grace* in this study do not support the conclusions of the Gerbner research. It is possible that viewing multiple episodes or even a full season would produce results that agree with that study.

The second survey after viewing the single episode of *Saving Grace* was given two weeks later in order to accommodate the schedule of the test group. Thus it was possible that the effects of the episode were negative or minimal at best because of the delay.

Although this experiment was not successful in providing ultimate support for the hypothesis, it is this researcher's hope that this study will provide inspiration for future studies regarding television characters' portrayals of alcohol consumption on selected age groups or society in general.

### **Strengths and Weaknesses of the Research**

This research was able to apply the Social Learning Theory to viewing television and its effects upon viewers regarding the consumption of alcohol in college-age students between the ages of 18 and 25. The literature review revealed a significant body of research which illustrates the risks of alcoholism in general and its potential

risks. Combined with the research performed on alcohol advertising in television, and the television and film dramatization sections, there is compelling data that could inspire future researchers.

The actual results of the experiment outweigh the minimal conclusions that can be made on the basis of this research. Part of the problem was the small sample size of students who participated in the second survey. Initially, 71 students (study and control group) took the survey, but only 40 repeated the survey. The reason for the decline in the sample size is unknown. Perhaps the scheduling of the experiment so late in the semester was the problem, as students focused on final exams. It is also possible that the two-week gap between viewing the episode and administering the repeat survey of the test group had an impact. The subject matter itself may have been problematic. Even though anonymity was promised, it is possible, due to the potentially controversial subject of alcohol use, that some students were reluctant to providing honest responses.

Although the single-episode impact of *Happy Days* revealed that one episode can have a significant impact on viewers, perhaps that was an isolated example, and in order to influence individuals' attitudes toward drinking, television viewers would have to watch a program consistently over a longer period of time.

### **Significance of the Research**

Although there has been a great deal of research done on both the effects of television and alcoholism itself, there have been few studies performed on the effects of a single viewing of a television program on people's behavior. Furthermore, there have been few studies performed to ascertain if a single viewing of a television program can

influence people to drink alcohol. It is hoped that this study will encourage more specific, in-depth research in the future.

### **Future Research**

In order to draw a conclusion that television programs can influence individuals' behavior, future experiments should ask participants to view more than just one episode of a given program.

Future researchers might also consider studying younger individuals, perhaps high school students. College-age students might already be engaging in drinking activities, perhaps to the point of abusive drinking. High school students are younger, so it is possible that television might be a greater influence on a younger demographic.

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## APPENDIX A

**Agreement to Participate in Research:****Responsible Investigator:** \_\_\_\_\_**Participant's Name:** \_\_\_\_\_**Title: Does Nighttime Television Influence Society to Drink?**

1. You have been asked to participate in a research study to discover if television can influence society to drink alcohol.
2. You are being asked to participate in a survey that will examine your attitude drinking behavior or lack of drinking. Later, there will be a second survey to re-examine your thoughts on alcohol. The results of the second survey will be compared with the results of the first survey.
3. Although the results of this survey will be published, there will be no information that could identify any of the participants.
4. There will no foreseeable risks to anyone who participates in this research. If anybody feels there is any risk, anytime to their well being, they can withdraw from the research study at anytime.
5. There will no foreseeable benefits or compensation to anyone who participates in this research.
6. Questions about this research can be addressed to Mike McHone, who can be emailed at [sgtcarlino@aol.com](mailto:sgtcarlino@aol.com). Questions about a research subjects' rights can be presented to Pamela Stacks, Ph.D., Associate Vice President, Graduate Studies and Research, at 408-924-2427.
7. No service of any kind, to which you are entitled, will be lost or jeopardized if you choose not participate in this research.
8. Your consent is being given voluntarily. You may refuse to participate in this study, or any part of it. If you decide to participate in the research, you are free to withdraw at any time without any negative effect on your relations to San Jose State University, along with Mike McHone or any other institution.
9. You will receive a copy of this consent for your records, signed and dated by Mike McHone. The signature of the subject on this document indicates agreement to participate, and the subject acknowledges that he or she have been informed of their rights.

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Participant's signature

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Date

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Mike McHone

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Date