Drinkaware
Alcohol and Soaps

SUMMARY OF ACHIEVEMENTS

- Irrefutable evidence that soaps portray alcohol unrealistically.
- Headline grabbing facts and figures for Drinkaware to feed to the press, resulting in high-reach traditional and online news coverage.
- Detailed information about soap characters' drinking habits, enabling Drinkaware to argue their case with TV producers.
- An innovative and totally bespoke coding framework based around characters and drinks.

Category: Integrated Communication Measurement/Research
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OBJECTIVE/BRIEF

Drinkaware is a UK charity that aims to change the nation's drinking habits for the better. Previous work had suggested that TV soaps – apparently true-to-life dramas watched by millions each week – might be portraying alcohol in an overly favourable light. But Drinkaware needed solid evidence of this before using it to advocate change, both in the public sphere and directly to TV producers.

So they asked us to test their hypothesis thoroughly, and also to determine how much of an effect this might be having on viewers, particularly those under 18. As well as quantifying the portrayal of alcohol in the four top soaps and assessing whether this was positive or negative, we would provide details about characters' drinking habits, the repercussions (if any) of their drinking, and the likely influence of their behaviour on audience groups. We had six weeks to complete the fieldwork and a further month to analyse the data.

STRATEGY

Many clients avoid broadcast coverage because it is expensive and time-consuming to analyse, but it formed the entire body of content for this study. We used our in-house broadcast monitoring department to capture six weeks worth of footage of the four soaps: Eastenders, Coronation Street, Emmerdale and Hollyoaks. Beyond that, however, our standard coding structures to track products and messages were entirely inappropriate, so we had to come up with a new way of analysing the footage based around characters and drinks. It was obvious we should identify all verbal and visual references to alcohol. But did a reference involve an upstanding matriarch in a drunken brawl in the street, or a young male extra quietly nursing a pint in his local? In each case, we had to qualify how alcohol was being referenced.

For each 'mention', we determined positivity by assessing its tone and the effect alcohol seemed to have on the person drinking. We also analysed the context to determine each mention's relative importance. To provide evidence for Drinkaware to lobby TV producers about their storylines, we noted the individual characters involved, and also information about where, what and how much they were drinking. To provide insight into how all this might affect viewers, we correlated our findings, particularly on the age and gender of on-screen drinkers, with demographic data on TV soap audiences.

EXECUTION/IMPLEMENTATION

Working closely with Drinkaware, we developed a coding framework encompassing all key quantitative and qualitative measures that could potentially generate useful insights – even drink measures, which would be useful to estimate alcohol units and could lead to an easy method of promoting moderation. We defined six discreet micro contexts, further specifying these as 'active' or 'passive' so we could filter out references that were less likely to influence the viewer. We identified a range of effects alcohol might have on characters, and locations where drinking might take place, but retained the flexibility to add new categories as we went along. A simple three-point tone scale was sufficient to separate neutral from positive or negative portrayals.

As units, TV episodes were too large, and it would not be cost-effective to time each reference. So we split episodes into scenes, treating each as a 'clip'. We also tracked tea as a comparative measure, as some people use tea rather than alcohol to relax after a stressful day. A single, extremely experienced analyst assessed all coverage, so the data would be both reliable and consistent.

Assessing the importance of our initial findings was a substantial undertaking. We viewed the wider context, including ongoing storylines and characters' personalities, and judged whether it was affecting the portrayal of alcohol. We considered the impact of on-screen behaviour on male and female viewers of different ages in light of the characters' own age and sex. Finally, to gauge the likely effect on the public, we correlated findings with information about the age and sex of people who, according to Kantar's longstanding and highly reputable TGI survey, 'especially choose to watch soaps'. Throughout, we had to view situations from Drinkaware's perspective, rather than that of an average person.

Our report's executive summary contained headline figures for all four soaps. But instead of the usual measured conclusions and recommendations, Drinkaware wanted punchy sound bites to feed to the press, so we provided as many of these as possible. Our detailed analysis for each soap presented datasets as simple charts, backed up with written analysis highlighting key areas of concern. After submitting the report, we remained on hand to re-examine the data in response to specific questions from the client as they prepared their advocacy materials.

CONCLUSIONS

We provided clear evidence that soaps were indeed portraying alcohol in an unrealistic way, with most scenes depicting characters drinking alcohol to aid social bonding or relieve stress. Few showed alcohol's harmful effects and most negative associations with alcohol were driven by specific storylines, such as Eastenders' Phil Mitchell descending into alcoholism.

Drinkaware issued a press release entitled "Soaps portray alcohol consumption through rose tinted glasses", and published an article on their website. As well as exposing Emmerdale as top of the "tipple tally", it contained several eye-catching statements. For example, over a third of scenes involved alcohol, and 17% showed characters actively consuming, buying, or accepting it. In all, characters consumed 836 alcoholic drinks – around 3,000 units of alcohol – and drank to excess 162 times. But only 12 scenes referenced hangovers. The story reached a wide audience, with press and online circulation figures in the region of eight million and coverage ranging from the Daily Mirror and Metro to educational trade publications. Drinkaware's chief executive, Chris Sorek, was widely quoted advising that **"with research showing people, and particularly children, make assumptions about acceptable real-life behaviour from their television viewing, it's important the negative effects of drinking too much aren't down-played"**.

Drinkaware also met with producers from each of the soaps, armed with solid and incontrovertible evidence about how they were portraying alcohol to the public. Comparative data between programmes provided useful benchmarks. For example, Hollyoaks had less of a focus on alcohol, although with 44% of females aged 15–18 watching the show, there is more of an onus on producers to promote responsible drinking. And despite Emmerdale characters drinking the most, it was Coronation Street characters who most often actively engaged with alcohol. More specific data was crucial in pointing out how to make minor adjustments to portray alcohol more responsibly and realistically.

> **Kantar Media worked closely with us to develop and refine the research analysis, and make sure they really responded to the brief. We were able to publicise the findings widely and our recommendations to broadcasters on how to better depict the risks associated with alcohol were based on solid data, making them much more powerful."** Chris Sorek, Chief Executive, Drinkaware.