

Study finds alcohol and tobacco appear frequently in UK reality television

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A new study in the Faculty of Public Health's *Journal of Public Health* finds that tobacco and alcohol usage are extremely common in British reality television shows.

The researchers measured depictions of alcohol and [tobacco products](#) on Celebrity Big Brother, Made in Chelsea, The Only Way is Essex, Geordie Shore, and Love Island, all airing on UK channels for a total of 112 episodes between January and August 2018. The researchers measured the number of one-minute intervals containing tobacco and/or alcohol imagery, including actual use, implied use, tobacco or alcohol related materials, and product-specific branding, and estimated viewer exposure to the imagery on screen.

Researchers here combined audience viewing figures with mid-year [population estimates](#) for 2017 to estimate overall and individual impressions—separate incidents seen—by age group for each of the coded episodes.

Alcohol [content](#) appeared in all 112 episodes and in 2212 one-minute intervals, or 42% of all intervals studied. 18% of intervals included actual alcohol consumption, while 34% featured inferred consumption, predominantly characters holding alcoholic beverages. The greatest number of intervals including any [alcohol content](#) occurred in Love Island. Alcohol branding occurred in 1% of intervals and was most prevalent in Geordie Shore (51 intervals, 69% of episodes). Forty brands were identified, the most common being Smirnoff vodka (23 intervals,

all but one of which occurred in Geordie Shore).

Tobacco content appeared in 20 episodes, in 110 or 2% of all intervals studied. Almost all (98%) of this content occurred in a single reality TV series, *Celebrity Big Brother*. This included actual tobacco use, inferred tobacco use, and tobacco paraphernalia. Tobacco branding was not present.

When all the data were combined with audience viewing figures and population estimates, the researchers estimate that the 112 episodes delivered 4.9 billion overall alcohol impressions to the UK population, including 580 million to children under the age of 16, as well as 214 million overall tobacco impressions, including 47 million to children under 16.

"Recent data shows that 44% of 11-15 year-olds in England have had an alcoholic drink, and 19% have tried smoking. Starting to smoke or drink alcohol at a young age is a strong predictor of dependence and continued use in later life," said the study's lead author, Alexander Barker. "Given that seeing alcohol or tobacco imagery in the media promotes use among young people, this study therefore identifies reality television shows as a major potential driver of alcohol and tobacco consumption in young people in the UK. Tighter scheduling rules, such as restricting the amount of content and branding shown in these programmes, could prevent children and adolescents from being exposed to the [tobacco](#) and [alcohol](#) content."

More information: Alexander B Barker et al, A content analysis of tobacco and alcohol audio-visual content in a sample of UK reality TV programmes, *Journal of Public Health* (2019). [DOI: 10.1093/pubmed/fdz043](#)

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