

Article

# Depictions of Alcohol in Australian TV ‘Bachelor In Paradise’: A Content Analysis

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## Abstract

**Aims:** To quantify the depictions of alcohol in the popular Australian reality TV show—*Bachelor in Paradise* (season 1: 2018).

**Methods:** All 16 episodes were coded in 1-min intervals for the presence of alcoholic beverage related content and non-alcoholic beverage content, and the categories of actual use, implied use and other references.

**Results:** Alcohol was highly prevalent in all episodes. Alcohol content occurred frequently, with 70.7% of intervals having any alcohol content. Actual alcohol use occurred in 31.9% of 1-min intervals, implied alcohol use occurred in 63.4% of intervals and other alcohol references occurred in 14.0% of intervals. Alcohol content was present in the first or second 1-min interval of all 16 episodes. Alcohol content was more than twice as prevalent as non-alcoholic content (34.0%).

**Conclusions:** The high volume of alcohol content depicted in the show is of concern, due to the important influence it may have on the audience. Vulnerable viewers, especially minors and young adults, are being exposed to ubiquitous alcohol references. This may influence their perceptions of normal alcohol use, their attitudes toward alcohol and their own consumption of alcohol. A stronger regulatory regime is required in Australia to protect young people more effectively from depictions in television programs.

## INTRODUCTION

The harmful effects of alcohol use are substantial, resulting in around 5.3% of deaths worldwide (World Health Organization, 2018). Alcohol consumption is socially normalised within Australia, with an average consumption of 10.6 l of pure alcohol per capita for ages 15 years and over compared to 6.4 l of pure alcohol per capita globally in 2016 (World Health Organization, 2018). In 2016, 77% of Australians (14 years and over) consumed alcohol (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2017) compared to 43% of people (15 years and over) globally (World Health Organization, 2018). A substantial proportion of Australians, including young Australians, drink at levels that put them at risk of short- or long-term harm. Overall, 26% of Australians aged 14 years and over (~5 million)

consumed five or more standard drinks on a single occasion at least monthly (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2017). Those in the 18–24 year age group were most likely to drink at risky levels with 15.3% drinking more than 11 standard drinks on a single occasion drinking episode, at least monthly (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2017).

### The influence of alcohol content in popular media

Much research has been conducted into alcohol marketing and its impact on drinking and attitudes (Anderson *et al.*, 2009; Fielder *et al.*, 2009; O’Brien *et al.*, 2015; Jernigan *et al.*, 2017; Morgenstern *et al.*, 2017). Systematic reviews have concluded that higher exposure to alcohol marketing among young people is associated

with increased alcohol uptake (Anderson *et al.*, 2009; Jernigan *et al.*, 2017), increased consumption (Anderson *et al.*, 2009) and increased binge/hazardous drinking levels (Jernigan *et al.*, 2017). Given this evidence, the World Health Organization (WHO) recently recommended 'best buy' policy options to reduce harmful alcohol consumption levels including '...enacting and enforcing bans or comprehensive restrictions on exposure to alcohol advertising across multiple types of media...' (World Health Organization, 2018, p. xiii).

However, the influence of alcohol consumption in popular media occurs not just through formal advertising, but in the content of popular media, such as movies and television programs. Australia has a system of self-regulation for advertising standards (Education and Health Standing Committee, 2011). The Alcohol Beverages Advertising Code (ABAC) is part of this system. The ABAC is a complaint review system funded by alcohol industry groups (The Brewers Association of Australia, Spirits and Cocktails Australia and Australian Grape & Wine; The ABAC Scheme Limited, 2020b). It is administered by a management committee comprising one Australian Government representative alongside four representatives from the alcohol and advertising industries (The ABAC Scheme Limited, 2020a). This system has been the subject of a number of reviews and has many limitations (Education and Health Standing Committee, 2011; Australian National Preventive Health Agency, 2014; Pierce *et al.*, 2019). Standards for alcohol marketing in Australia are set out in the ABAC Responsible Marketing Code, which is reported to apply 'to all marketing communications in Australia generated by or within the reasonable control of a marketer'. This includes but is not limited to: brand advertising; competitions; digital communications; alcohol beverage product names and packaging; advertorials; alcohol brand extensions to non-alcohol beverage products; point of sale materials; retailer advertising and marketing collateral (The ABAC Scheme Limited, 2019, p. 1). The code includes a standard of 'responsibility toward minors', where any marketing communication must not 'have strong or evident appeal to minors'. It also includes a standard of 'responsible and moderate portrayal of alcohol beverages', whereby marketing communication must not show or encourage excessive or rapid consumption (The ABAC Scheme Limited, 2019). While this self-regulatory code covers the 'traditional' forms of paid advertising it does not cover content within television programs, including reality television or movies. There has been a small body of research investigating the influence of alcohol content in TV/movies (Hanewinkel *et al.*, 2012; Lyons *et al.*, 2013; Gabrielli *et al.*, 2016; Eisenberg *et al.*, 2017; Wilson *et al.*, 2018; Barker *et al.*, 2018b). For example, a study of adolescents in six European countries concluded that strong evidence existed for an association between exposure to high alcohol content in popular movies and binge drinking (Hanewinkel *et al.*, 2012). Furthermore, it has been suggested that teenagers and young adults may perceive successful media figures as 'super-peers' (Elmore *et al.*, 2017) and desire to emulate their behaviour, (including their alcohol intake) and also achieve the perceived successes of these figures (Jackson *et al.*, 2018). The observed habits of others, whether peers, family or successful media figures, is an influence on the uptake of drinking alongside a young person's assumptions of how normative alcohol consumption is (Anderson *et al.*, 2009).

A category of popular media entertainment that has received little research attention with respect to its depiction of alcohol is reality TV. Yet, the depiction of reality TV participants' apparently 'real' behaviour creates the potential for these shows to be particularly influential. Indeed, Kim *et al.* (2019) examined the combination of sexual and alcohol content in reality and fictional TV, with

findings indicating more frequent harmful alcohol use and intoxicated sexual behaviour by viewers (18–25 year age group) following higher exposures to combined alcohol and sexual scenes and when viewers perceived show content to actually be real (Kim *et al.*, 2019). However, to date few studies have examined alcohol content in reality TV programs. Exceptions include a study by Lowe *et al.* (2018), who coded alcohol content in a British reality TV series named 'Geordie Shore', a series which chronicles the casts' lives, relationships and events while living in the same house from the city of Newcastle Upon Tyne in the UK. This review indicated that the show was popular with young viewers and also observed excessive alcohol content and branding. Another study, by Barker *et al.* (2019), separately coded and calculated impressions of alcohol and tobacco content in five reality TV series produced and aired in the UK in early 2018. Alcohol content was found to be present in all reality TV episodes, in comparison to a 54% prevalence in other prime time UK-TV (Barker 2019). This study suggested that the popularity of reality shows with young people is a potential driver of alcohol consumption through increased exposure. In the present study, we look to extend this limited field of research by investigating the depiction of alcohol in an Australian reality TV program, Bachelor in Paradise and also move beyond previous studies as outlined below.

### Ratings, reality TV and Bachelor in Paradise

Bachelor in Paradise is a spin-off from the Australian versions of the reality shows 'The Bachelor' and 'The Bachelorette', with contestants drawn from these two shows (Chandra, 2018), and from overseas equivalents. The setting is Mango Bay Resort in Fiji, where participants attempt to find the love of their life-/long-term partner (Chandra, 2018) amidst the drama of conflicting relationships. Evidence from studies of alcohol advertising has shown that alcohol advertising themes that contain sexual innuendo (Felder *et al.*, 2009) or a 'party theme' (Morgenstern *et al.*, 2017) have a particularly strong influence on youth and young adult alcohol use. Alcohol content in a reality TV program heavy in these themes, such as Bachelor in Paradise, similarly might be expected to influence the alcohol consumption of younger viewers.

The first episode of Bachelor in Paradise aired 25 March 2018 on Channel 10 free to air television (FTA-TV). OzTAM (Australia's official source of television audience measurement covering Australia's five mainland metropolitan markets Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide and Perth) statistics estimated a total viewing audience, including 28-day catch-up TV of 847,000 people for the first episode (which consisted of 16% of the total free to air TV market share) and a total viewing audience of 848,000 people for the season finale on 30 April 2018 (13.5% of the total free to air TV market share) (OzTAM personal communications—total individuals, 18 February 2020). Average total viewing audience across all episodes for the five cities for broadcast television was 735,000 and by age groupings was: 0–5 years 21,000 (2.9%); 6–17 years 47,000 (6.6%); 18–24 years 81,000 (11.0%); 25–34 years 161,000 (21.9%); 35–49 years 230,000 (31.2%); 50–64 years 137,000 (18.6%); and 65 years and over 58,000 (7.8%) (OzTAM personal communications, 18 February 2020). Online only ratings indicate that Bachelor in Paradise consistently performed in the top five television show ratings (i.e. estimated audience size) for all networks and was often the top-rated show for Channel 10 (OzTAM, 2020).

The potentially influential themes of Bachelor in Paradise, together with large audience sizes, vulnerable viewers (particularly

**Box 1.** Glossary of alcoholic and non-alcoholic overall category, categories and sub-categories.

Overall category	Categories	Sub-categories
<b>ALCOHOL:</b>		
Any alcohol content	<b>Actual alcohol use</b> (i.e. depicted consuming alcoholic beverages)	Cocktail Wine Sparkling white wine Beer spirits other male or female
	<b>Implied alcohol use</b> (without actual consumption)	<b>Verbal</b> for example, ‘where’s the bar’ <b>Visual</b> for example, holding alcoholic drink <b>Both</b> visual and verbal together
	<b>Other alcohol reference</b> (without actual consumption or implied consumption)	<b>Paraphernalia</b> for example, cocktail glasses on the bar without implied use <b>Other</b> for example, vineyard discussion
<b>NON-ALCOHOLIC:</b>		
Any non-alcoholic content	<b>Actual non-alcoholic use</b>	Tumbler Water bottle Can/bottle Cup/mug Other
	<b>Implied non-alcoholic use</b> (without actual use)	<b>Verbal</b> for example, ‘let us get a coffee’ <b>Visual</b> for example, holding a water bottle
	<b>Other non-alcoholic reference</b> (without implied or actual use)	<b>Paraphernalia</b> for example, a teapot <b>Other</b>

younger viewers who may be at the age of making decisions about alcohol uptake and/or consumption levels) and lack of research into reality TV content and its effects, has created a gap warranting investigation. This study aims to fill part of this gap in research by determining the extent to which alcohol is portrayed in the Australian Bachelor in Paradise (season 1: 2018), including an examination of overall alcohol content, actual and implied alcohol use and other alcohol references.

## METHODS

### Procedure

*Bachelor in Paradise* (season 1: 2018) consisted of 16 episodes. Episodes are comprised of short scenes interrupted with flashes of island animals and scenery interspersed with brief interviews of participants. Each episode was accessed via the 10play network online (<https://10play.com.au/>) between March and July 2019. Episodes were coded into 1-min intervals, consistent with methodology previously used for examination of general television shows (Lyons *et al.*, 2013, 2014) and reality TV (Lowe *et al.*, 2018; Barker *et al.*, 2018a). The coding technique was primarily based on an alcohol content study of the UK reality television show ‘Geordie Shore’ by Lowe *et al.* (2018), with additional coding ideas from Lyons *et al.* (2014), Barker *et al.* (2018a), (Barker *et al.*, 2018b) and Wilson *et al.* (2018) and refined after supplementary private correspondence with the Lowe *et al.* (2018) research team. Coding intervals included titles and recaps. Part-intervals at the episode end were coded as a full 1-min interval consistent with Lowe *et al.* (2018). Advertisement breaks were excluded because footage was viewed over the internet, with original FTA-TV advertisements unavailable. Part-intervals before

and after advertisements were added together to form a 1-min interval. We extended upon the research by Lowe *et al.* (2018) by also investigating the time from the start of each episode to the first alcohol depiction, and the depiction of non-alcoholic drinks, providing further context.

The 1-min intervals were coded using the following categories and sub-categories:

- **Time from episode onset to first alcohol reference** (by minute intervals).
- **Alcoholic beverage categories**—any alcohol content (overall alcohol content), actual alcohol use, implied alcohol use and other alcohol references. Refer to Box 1 for alcoholic beverage sub-categories.
- **Non-alcoholic beverage categories**—any non-alcoholic content (overall non-alcoholic content), actual non-alcoholic use, implied non-alcoholic use and other non-alcoholic references. Refer to Box 1 for non-alcoholic sub-categories.
- **Unidentifiable**—the number of events where a drink was unable to be identified as either alcoholic or non-alcoholic. If placed in the unidentifiable category it was then not coded in any other category.

Alcoholic and non-alcoholic categories were coded firstly for ‘yes’ or ‘no’ for content in that 1-min interval, then for the number of ‘events’ (i.e. occasions) within each sub-category, and then the total number of ‘events’ for that category in each 1-min interval. Where an instance of beverage content appears in two categories it was only counted in the higher classified category (higher in significance) for example if a person is holding a drink (implied use) but then begins to actually drink it (actual use) it was coded only once, as actual use.

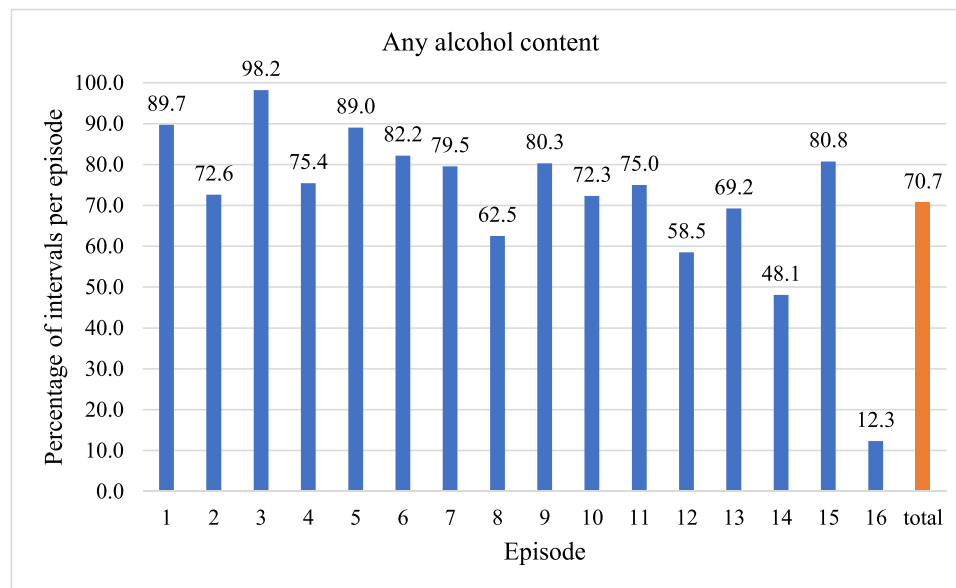


Fig. 1. Percentage of intervals per episode (and of total intervals) containing any alcohol content.

### Data analysis

Data were entered and analysed to generate frequencies using Microsoft Excel (Version 15.33). At completion, a random subsample (10%) of 1-min intervals was coded by an independent researcher and the percentage agreement was calculated at mean percentage agreement: 93%; range: 75–100% (Feng, 2013).

To assess viewing demographics, the study authors purchased viewing data for *Bachelor in Paradise* across specific age groupings from OzTAM.

## RESULTS

The total run time of the 16 episodes of *Bachelor in Paradise* was 979 min and 44 s, which coded into 986 1-min intervals (including part intervals at the end of episodes). Episodes ranged in length from 44 min 25 s (episode 7) to 73 min and 59 s (episode 2).

### Alcohol content

The first appearance of alcohol was in the first 1-min interval in 14 episodes and in the second 1-min interval in the remaining two episodes. Across the 16 episodes, alcohol content (any alcohol content) was present in 697 intervals (70.7%) and ranged from 8 intervals (12.3%) for episode 16 to 55 intervals (98.2%) for episode 3, refer to Fig. 1. The total number of any alcohol content was 2480 ‘events’. The number of unidentifiable drinks was 260 (7.6% of all events coded).

Observed consumption of alcohol (actual alcohol use) was present in 315 1-min intervals (31.9%) across the 16 episodes. Actual alcohol use ranged from 3.1% of episode 16 to 51.8% of episode 3. A total of 455 actual alcohol use events (number of events) were present in the 315 intervals, with 158 spirits (34.7%), 143 cocktails (31.4%) and 97 sparkling white wine (21.3%) making up the largest portions, refer Fig. 2. More actual alcohol use events were observed involving men (256 times—56.3%), than women (199 times—43.7%).

Implied alcohol use occurred in 625 intervals (63.4% of total intervals) across the 16 episodes. Implied alcohol use per episode

ranged from 9.2% for episode 16 to 89.3% for episode 3. This alcohol category contained the largest number of events (apart from the totals category—any alcohol content) with the total number of implied alcohol use events 1827. Within the sub-categories, the number of events in implied alcohol use was: verbal 31 events (1.7%); visual 1780 events (97.4%) and both-visual and verbal together 16 events (0.9%).

Other alcohol references were present in 138 intervals (14.0% of the total 1-min intervals). Other alcohol references ranged from being present in one interval (1.5%) in episode 10 to being present in 18 intervals (32.1%) in episode 3. There were a total number of 198 other alcohol reference events, with the sub-categories of paraphernalia having 191 events (96.5%) and other seven events (3.5%).

### Non-alcoholic content

Any non-alcoholic drinks were present in 335 intervals (34.0%) of the total 1-min intervals. Any non-alcoholic drinks ranged from 7.7% of intervals in episode 15 to 59.1% in episode 7.

Actual non-alcoholic use was present in 42 (4.3%) 1-min intervals across the 16 episodes. Actual non-alcoholic use ranged from zero in episodes 4 and 16 to 11.4% of episode 7. A total number of 45 actual non-alcoholic use events were present across all episodes, with bottled water the most used non-alcoholic drink, occurring in 35 events (77.8%), followed by cups/mugs occurring in 8 events (17.8%) and tumblers occurring in 2 events (4.4%). The other sub-categories of unknown and can/bottle contained no events.

Implied non-alcoholic use occurred in 248 intervals (25.2%) across all 16 episodes. Implied non-alcoholic use per episode ranged from 1.9% of episode 15 to 40.9% of episode 7. This category contained the largest number of non-alcoholic events with 396 the total number of events across all episodes. Within the sub-categories, the number of events was: verbal 3 events (0.8%); visual 393 events (99.2%) and both, zero events.

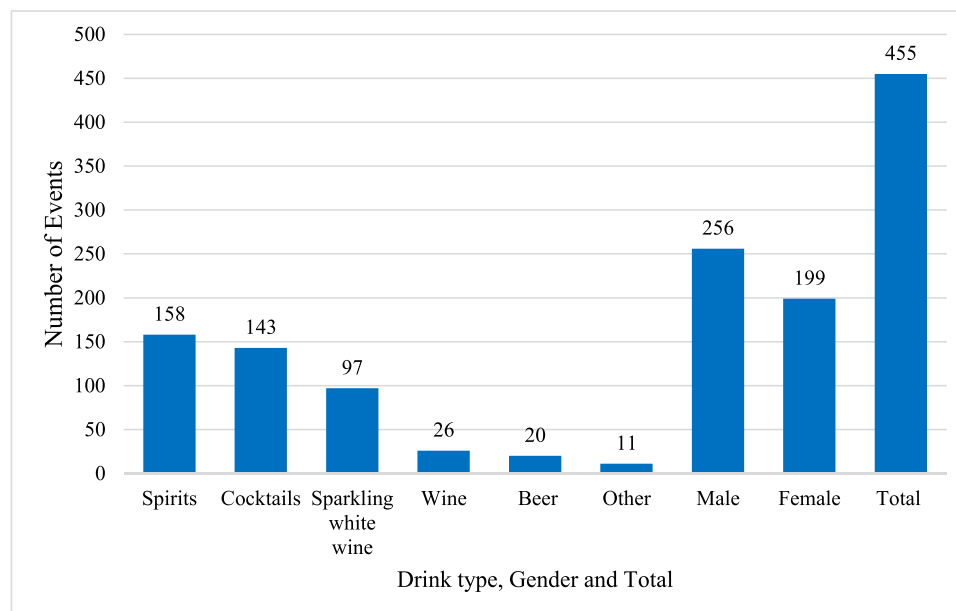


Fig. 2. Number of actual alcohol use events by alcohol type, gender and total number ( $n = 455$ ).

Other non-alcoholic references were present in 145 intervals (14.7%) of the total 1-min intervals. Other non-alcoholic references ranged from zero intervals in episode 16 to 15 intervals (34.1%) in episode 7. There were a total number of 229 other non-alcoholic reference events, with the sub-categories of paraphernalia having 229 events (100%) and other zero events.

#### A comparison of alcoholic versus non-alcoholic content across coding categories

Overall any alcoholic content was present in 70.7% of all intervals and any non-alcoholic content was present in 34.0% of all intervals. Overall alcoholic and non-alcoholic content, broken down into actual use, implied use and other is presented in Fig. 3. In all categories except for other reference, alcohol content is more than double non-alcoholic content. In the actual use category alcohol is used in 31.9% of intervals, more than seven times as much as non-alcoholic actual use (4.3% of intervals).

## DISCUSSION

This study was designed to quantify the amount of alcohol depicted in the Australian reality television show *Bachelor in Paradise* (series 1: 2018). We found that alcohol content was portrayed prolifically and was highly prevalent across the series. Alcohol appeared in the first 1 or 2-min of all episodes, and appeared in 70.7% of all intervals, with one episode having alcohol content in 98.2% of its 1-min intervals (episode 3). By comparison, Lyons *et al.* (2013) who concentrated on overall TV content, found 12% alcohol content (any alcohol content), Barker *et al.* (2019) who studied five UK reality TV series found alcohol content (any alcohol content) in a range of 28–63% of intervals across each series (mean 42%), and Lowe *et al.* (2018) who studied a British reality TV show, found 78% alcohol content (any alcohol content). Taken together, this demonstrates the extremely high alcohol content found in the reality TV shows examined, compared to general TV content. While studies

investigating the impact of the depiction of alcohol on reality TV are limited, it is likely that this may serve to promote alcohol via presence and high level of consumption within programs. It also bypasses Australia's self-regulations on alcohol advertising (The ABAC Scheme Limited, 2019). An 'ethics of care' (Hill, 2005, p. 108) needs to be established to protect underage viewers and vulnerable adults from the high frequencies of alcohol content displayed. The results of this study support calls for a regulatory regime by government that protects young people more effectively from exposure to alcohol advertising (Reeve, 2018; Noel, 2019; Pierce *et al.*, 2019). This should capture both traditional forms of advertising and also non-traditional forms such as depictions in television programs and movies.

Actual alcohol use was present in almost one third, 31.9% of intervals overall, and implied alcohol use was very frequent in this show and present in 63.4% of intervals overall, so the vast majority of appearances of alcohol in the show demonstrated contestants either consuming alcohol or with an alcoholic drink. Alcohol consumption by males was present somewhat more frequently than female drinking. Spirits were the most popular drink consumed, closely followed by cocktails and sparkling white wine. Despite being set in the heat of the tropics, where there is a need for drinking extra fluids, water was not the main fluid of choice portrayed (34.0% any non-alcoholic content), and was not even represented equally with alcohol (70.7% of intervals had any alcoholic content), as there was more than twice as much alcoholic content compared with non-alcoholic content.

Viewer demographics show vulnerable age groups, 47,000 viewers 6–17 years and 81,000 viewers 18–24 years, viewing these many alcohol images and observing the comparatively small amounts of non-alcoholic drinks consumed. The normalisation of alcohol through excessive exposure and the glamorisation of alcohol through drink types (and the poolside party like setting in 'paradise') are features that may send an influential message to viewers. The impact of such imagery on these age groups is recommended for further research.



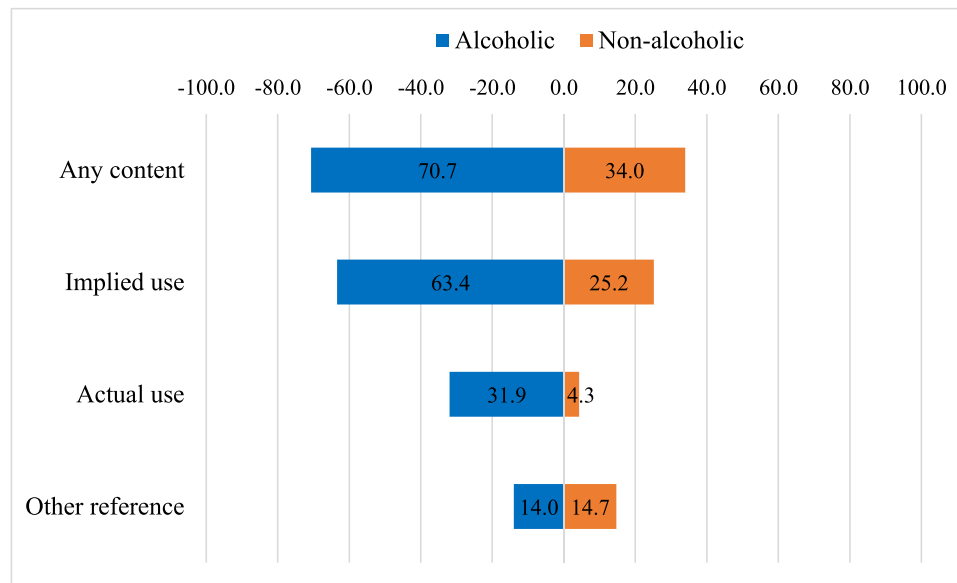


Fig. 3. Percentage of total intervals, comparing alcoholic versus non-alcoholic content by coding categories. Categories are not mutually exclusive.

It is promising to note that Australian figures show that uptake of alcohol for 12–17-year olds decreased between 2013 and 2016 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2017). This is encouraging, however, single occasion risky drinking levels are high amongst adolescents (WHO, 2018) and even higher amongst young adults. The 18–24-year old age group is the most at risk age group for risky single occasion drinking (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2017). The current alcohol guidelines set by Australian Government via the National Health and Medical Research Council state that ‘for children and young people under 18 years of age, not drinking alcohol is the safest option’ (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2009, p. 4) and for healthy adults (men and women) ‘...drinking no more than two standard drinks on any day reduces the lifetime risk of harm from alcohol-related disease or injury’. It is likely that this recommendation will be reduced to 10 standard drinks a week (down from 14), based on the current draft guidelines out for consultation (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2019). While there is no underage drinking depicted in this show, adult drinking is strongly suggestive of exceeding the adult guidelines. Depiction of ubiquitous alcohol consumption through reality TV (and other media: viz: Chambers *et al.*, 2018) may serve to normalise excessive consumption for minors and young adult viewers, undermining the messages of health bodies such as the National Health and Medical Research Council. The influence and cumulative effect of the many images of alcohol through reality TV and other forms of media are likely to be significant underlying influences on their perceptions of normal and acceptable drinking behaviours.

Because evidence shows that many adolescents are currently abstaining from alcohol there is a need to continue to promote this as a healthy and normal thing to do, including into adulthood. Considering world statistics where more than half the world are abstainers, 57% (WHO, 2018), these abstaining adolescents are actually in a majority worldwide. However in Australia 77% of Australians 14 years and over consumed alcohol in 2016 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2017) and around 5 million consumed five or more standard drinks on a single occasion at least monthly (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2017) (2016 figures). There remains much work to be done to reduce alcohol consumption

and its associated harms and to encourage consumption of water (and other non-alcoholic beverages) as a healthier alternative.

## LIMITATIONS

This study was an audit of actual imagery in a television show, so there is limited bias in the study design, however, a few limitations exist in the scope of the study. Although drunken behaviour has been assessed in other research (Lowe *et al.*, 2018) and suggested through a social media commentary site (Stephens, 2018) due to the scope of this study it was unable to be included. Due to restrictions with viewing figures, viewer impressions could not be calculated as assessed in Barker *et al.* (2019). A further limitation is the lack of online and international viewing figures (other than the ratings as presented in the introduction). Furthermore, social media commentary about the episodes was not assessed in this study and may be worthy of future research. We were also unable to view or assess the original advertisements or the reaction of viewers to the alcohol content of this show. It is recommended that future research investigate alcohol content of the advertisements in the free to air show, social media commentaries and in particular, the impact of alcohol content on the viewing audience.

## CONCLUSION

Bachelor in Paradise has very high depictions of alcohol usage. These depictions reinforce the normalisation of excessive alcohol consumption and may influence susceptible adolescent and young adult viewing audiences. Some influences are overt, others are more subtle, and alcohol use in programming is not captured by Australian policy. Whilst reality TV is only one avenue for normalising alcohol, arguably it is a significant one as it depicts ‘real’ people and situations, and it draws large audience sizes with many in age groups who are vulnerable to the influence of alcohol. The reduction of the depiction of alcohol in these programs is recommended.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

None declared.

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