

University at Albany, State University of New York

## Scholars Archive

---

Communication

Honors College

---

5-2010

### Drug Users in Fall 2009 Television Dramas: Character Profiles

Lucy E. Place

*University at Albany, State University of New York*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarsarchive.library.albany.edu/honorscollege\\_communication](https://scholarsarchive.library.albany.edu/honorscollege_communication)



Part of the [Communication Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Place, Lucy E., "Drug Users in Fall 2009 Television Dramas: Character Profiles" (2010). *Communication*. 3. [https://scholarsarchive.library.albany.edu/honorscollege\\_communication/3](https://scholarsarchive.library.albany.edu/honorscollege_communication/3)

This Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Honors College at Scholars Archive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Communication by an authorized administrator of Scholars Archive. For more information, please contact [scholarsarchive@albany.edu](mailto:scholarsarchive@albany.edu).



# Drug Users in Fall 2009 Television Dramas

## Character Profiles

How do narrative structures inform us about our own world? This study was conducted to discover the implications of drug content depicted in primetime television through the evaluation of contemporary and stereotypical characterization trends. This study examines drug content in two medical dramas and two crime dramas: 'Grey's Anatomy', 'House', 'Law & Order SVU', and 'CSI'.

**Lucy E. Place**  
University at Albany, State University of New York

5/10/2010

## Contents

Introduction to Process.....	3
Television Viewers and Drug Users.....	4
Literature Review.....	4
Method.....	8
Data Collection.....	8
Categories of Analysis.....	9
Inter-coder Reliability.....	12
Result section.....	12
General Demographics.....	12
Real Use Compared to Television Use.....	13
Location and Drug Type.....	14
Terminology.....	14
On Screen.....	15
Outcome of Drug Use.....	16
Abuse and Dependence.....	17
Drugs and Correlation with Role Duration- Dependence and Abuse.....	18
Drug Use and Correlation with TV Programs.....	20
TV Programs and Correlation with Outcome.....	21
Limitations and Further Study.....	22
Conclusion.....	22
WORKS CITED.....	26
APPENDIX.....	27

## Introduction to Process

Drug use has been an element of American culture since the discovery of our nation; the first gift bestowed on Columbus by the Native Americans was the popular drug tobacco. Various drugs have supported historical economies as well as inspire revolution. Today, many drugs are considered illegal but are still used throughout the United States. As long as drug culture exists within our society, there will be representations of both drugs and the people who use them in art and media. The intent of this thesis is to ascertain the specific message characteristics of television dramas, specifically medical dramas and crime dramas. The initial objective of this research was to identify the correlation between real world drug use and drug use represented on television. After further research, the scope shifted to an interest in determining the specific details of drug-related scenes while creating a more layered profile of drug users on television beyond general demographics. This study examines drug content in two medical dramas and two crime dramas; these four programs were each the highest rated from the four most popular networks. These shows included 'Grey's Anatomy' (ABC), 'House' (FOX), 'Law & Order SVU' (NBC), and 'CSI' (CBS) (Gorman, 2009). The shows which were coded and analyzed are from the fall 2009 season from the beginning in September through November sweeps week (ending November 25). Each episode has been coded with attention paid to gender, age, race, drug of choice, perceived attitude amongst characters toward drug use, and the setting in which use occurs or is referred to. The first data collected concerned the popularity of primetime television. By selecting the most popular dramas from each of the four most popular networks, it could be assumed that these programs were both accessible and relevant to the average audience. Each episode was then viewed and coded using a character level coding sheet (see appendix). The results were then compiled in SPSS and analyzed to determine whether any trends existed. In total, thirty-six episodes were logged and seventy character situations were evaluated.

## Television Viewers and Drug Users

Average daily exposure to television has been on the rise since its inception. For the 2009-2010 broadcast season, Nielsen estimates that the total number of television households within the U.S., including Alaska and Hawaii, will be 114.9 million (NielsenWire, 2009). This is an increase of 400,000 homes from last year. The five broadcast networks' average live median age was 50 years old last season. This is the oldest median age for television viewers in a decade. The median age for households in the United States is 38, but the viewers tuning in to ABC, FOX, and NBC continue to be an older audience. For the 2007-08 television season, CBS was the network oldest in live viewing with a median age of 54 years old. ABC was second with a median of 50 years old, followed by NBC at 49, and Fox at 44 (Schneider, 2008). Trends in drug culture change change as fluidly as television media. An estimated 19.9 million Americans aged 12 or older were current users of an illicit drug in 2007. This estimate represents 8.0 percent of the population. Marijuana is the most widely used illicit substance in this country; in 2007, 14.4 million people were current users of marijuana. An estimated 70.9 million Americans reported being current users of a tobacco product in 2007, a prevalence rate of 28.6% of the population 12 years and older. Vicodin is one of the drugs most commonly abused by adolescents. In 2008, 15.4% of high school seniors reporting using a prescription drug for non-medical purposes in the last year (NIDA, 2009).

## Literature Review

There have been many contradictory studies about drug use, television, and the influence of images on our society. This study does not seek to determine whether images are a motivational factor in drug use but how drug use on television reflects use in our culture. The goal of this study is to discern a pattern in the situations in which drugs are used and the characterization of those who use them on

primetime television. The article "Television as Gathering Place" by Paul C. Adams argues that television has the unique quality of providing social congregation that is distinct from other media due to its place-like quality (that is, people relate to television as a specific place even though it lacks an exact location). Television acts socially and symbolically to fulfill functions that were once served by places, such as: "sensory communion, social congregation, the attribution of value to persons and objects, and the definition of an 'us' and a 'them'" (Adams, 1992). By viewing, the audience can be exposed to values and definitions they may not have otherwise, or it can augment what knowledge they already possess. Since television is without boundaries, it is possible for people to relate to what they watch as though it were reality. Television provides its own value system and functions as a center of meaning, providing a social context apart from our own. Therefore, television viewers can learn about different behaviors and social roles and the value of these roles simply by engaging in the narrative on the screen.

According to Bandura's Social Learning Theory, people learn by observing the behaviors, attitudes, and outcomes of the actions of those around them. Individuals will model the behavior they observe if there are behavioral, environmental, or cognitive factors which increase attention and retention. If the individual can then successfully repeat the behavior they have observed while possessing the motivation to do so, learning through observation has transpired. Bandura argued that due to mass media's influential role in society, it was important to account for media's influences on human thought and action. People are not "just reactive organisms shaped and shepherded by environmental events or inner forces": it is personal agency that makes people producers and products of society. People are able to give meaning, form, and continuity to their experiences through symbols. People often act in reaction to symbolical information they have acquired through personal and vicarious experiences to develop their knowledge and understand relationships. According to Bandura, "virtually all behavioral, cognitive, and affective learning from direct experiences can be achieved

vicariously by observing people's actions and its consequences for them" and if people receive this vicarious information through television, they will harbor misconceptions about different races, occupations, social and sexual roles (Bandura). Verification of personal conceptions against televised versions of social reality can foster collective, and stereotypical, illusions about societal relations and norms.

"I'm Not a Druggie", a study conducted by Miller-Day and Barnett, details the prevalent, false belief amongst both black and white teenagers that black students use more drugs. They found that the combination of the black students' strong personal identity as a nonuser of drugs and the belief that ethnicity is important motivated the black students to pursue a drug-free identity, contradicting the popular perception. In a related study by Allen and Page, it was found that male and female black students were significantly less likely to report that they "drink alcohol; get drunk; smoke cigarettes; and use smokeless tobacco, hallucinogens, and sedatives" (Miller-Day, 2004). A survey conducted by the NHSDA in 2000 observed the correlation between heavy alcohol use and illicit drug use: Among the 12.6 million heavy drinkers ages 12 and older, 30.0% were current illicit drug users. Whites were more likely than any other race-ethnicity group to report current drug use in the survey: an estimated 50.7% of whites ages 12 and older reported using alcohol in the past month compared with 33.7% of blacks (Miller-Day, 2004). During the interview process, Miller-Day and Barnett noted that white students were significantly more apt to describe themselves in terms of others and emphasized their perceived similarity to peers. Blacks students tended to emphasize their unique qualities, and had less concerns about their physical traits than white students. The researchers found that the perceived cultural norms from the point of view of the black students included a belief that blacks use drugs more than other ethnic groups. However, they also found that for black students strong identity as a nonuser and their belief that ethnicity is important worked to "motivate them to assert a positive drug-free identity as a

representative of their cultural group, to contradict the perception of what is normative and assert their “unique” identity—that is, be a nonuser” (Miller-Day, 2004).

A study conducted by Mohan J. Dutta, “Health Information Processing From Television: The Role of Health Orientation”, found that the more television people watch and especially the more variety of health oriented programs they consume, the more health oriented they are in general in their everyday lives. Among the programs included were soap operas and medical shows. Therefore, one can read a medical drama as a source for health information; however developing a health orientation based on drug messages may be confusing. It is important to consider how these messages are conveyed and the fictional characters who present them because false representations may lead to false perceptions on the part of the viewer.

The article “Prime-time TV’s Favorite Beverage- Alcohol” discusses the findings from a Cornell University study which found that the consumption of alcohol far surpasses any other beverage or food consumption. Out of 22 hours of television viewing and 276 programs, it was found that alcohol was used about twice in each program and 2.5 times an hour. Lead researcher Alan Mathios believes that because teen characters are shown drinking alcohol as much as they consume other products, teen viewers may be led to think that other people in their age group use alcohol more than soda or coffee (Lang, 1999). Similar to this study, Mathios also accounted for characterization. Generally, adult characters shown consuming alcohol possessed positive personality characteristics whereas adolescents were portrayed as having negative personality traits.

A more recent study conducted examined how adolescents are affected long-term by exposure to alcohol in films, and whether this effect was mitigated by other factors (Wills, Sargent, Gibbons,



Gerrard, & Stoolmiller, 2009). After first being exposed to alcohol use in films, an increase of personal alcohol use, positive expectancies, and peer alcohol use was found. Movie alcohol exposure was higher for adolescents with higher scores on rebelliousness and sensation seeking, easy availability of alcohol in the home, several friends who used alcohol, and more positive alcohol expectancies, as well as those with a higher baseline level of alcohol use. Alcohol expectancies, peer alcohol use, and availability of alcohol in the home promoted risk in teen use. Effects that had a tendency to protect teens from dangerous use were the adolescent's school performance, mother responsiveness, and self-control.

This study is not focused on whether or not people might not integrate the behavior they watch on television with their own; rather, this study follows drug narrative and behaviors to discover what value system dramatic television is disseminating to its viewers. Understanding the characterization of drug users on American television is central to dissecting our attitudes in relation to real use. The increasing omnipresence of television and our dependence as viewers on information presented in a fictional format is an unavoidable phenomenon. However, if this information is disproportionate to human experience, this may indicate a need for more aggressive drug and health education among students and audience members. The research goal is to describe and examine the drug-related content of four television dramas to determine how primetime dramas depict drug users.

## **Method**

### **Data Collection**

The first data collected concerned the popularity of primetime television. By selecting the most popular dramas from each of the four most popular networks, it was assumed that these programs were both accessible and relevant to the average audience. Television dramas were selected for this study because they are representations of human drama. Reality television was excluded from this sample

because I was interested in pursuing data in programs where drug use was an intentional component of the narrative. This way drugs mentioned an episode can be considered the deliberate creation of the collective mind of a team of writers and producers and will not be construed as authentic manifestations happened to be captured for an audience. Comedy was excluded because television dramas tend to have longer episodes and a larger rotating cast of characters (i.e., victims who enter the hospital or criminals questioned in the police precinct). The final selection of programs included two medical dramas and two crime dramas; these four programs were each the highest rated from the four most popular networks according to Nielsen ratings from the 2008-2009 Fall and Spring seasons. These shows included *Grey's Anatomy* (ABC), *House* (FOX), *Law & Order SVU* (NBC), and *CSI* (CBS). *Grey's Anatomy* aired a total of ten episodes during the Fall season, attracting an estimated 14.07 million viewers and ranking 8<sup>th</sup> at the conclusion of sweeps week. *House* aired a total of nine episodes, attracting around 12.66 million viewers and ranking 18<sup>th</sup>. *Law & Order SVU* also aired nine episodes, drawing around 9.03 million viewers. The program did not rank in Nielsen's top twenty-five programs during sweeps week. *CSI* aired the least episodes, showing only eight; however, the show drew an estimated 14.90 million viewers and ranked 7<sup>th</sup> place. The shows which were coded and analyzed are from the Fall 2009 season from the beginning in September through November sweeps week (ending November 25). In total, thirty-six episodes were logged and seventy character situations were evaluated. Each episode was viewed and coded using a character level coding sheet. The results were then compiled in SPSS and analyzed to determine the trends which existed. A sample size of eight of these episodes was then coded by another person to determine the inter-coder reliability.

## Categories of Analysis

Coding categories pertained to gender, age, race, drug of choice, and setting. To provide a more layered profile of characters involved in drug-scenarios, information concerning role duration; role within the program; incidence of exposure; tone, and outcome was also recorded. The coding scheme

listed these categories in a standardized coding sheet (see appendix). Scales were not used to avoid subjectivity, so the data mainly relies on statistic measurements. In the beginning, the categories were used mostly to define characters within reality; more levels were added to characterize them in contrast with other characters in similar scenarios.

It was important to determine whether characters existed for a major part of the episode or program because this would make it possible to note trends in character value. A character's role duration was determined by how central they are to the program's general plot. Therefore, major characters in a series have the highest value while minor characters in an episode have the least. A main character who would be considered major within the program would be someone who reappears each week for at least one season (i.e. Christina in 'Grey's Anatomy' or Gregory House in 'House'). A character who is minor within the program may only appear for part of a season or only appear briefly in some episodes. A major role within an episode would be defined as a character who is central to the plotline only for one episode; for example, a patient with a serious illness or major criminal who pertains to at least half of the plot in the episode. A minor character in an episode only appears briefly. These characters are can be the family members of a central character or a character who is only in one or two scenes.

Character roles and/or occupations within the program were broken up into seven categories: doctor, patient, criminal or crime suspect, victim, law enforcement agent or lawyer, student, and indeterminate. These categories were chosen to determine how drug use was reflected in the main roles familiar to these genres. This category was created in the interest of exploring authoritative and subordinate positions and how they are represented in drug-related scenarios.

Terminology used to describe the user or language that was self-defining delivered by the user was coded as negative, neutral, or positive. The overall tone of the language used in a situation was coded. Mentions of jail time, rehabilitation, or other consequences of drug use discussed were coded as

negative. Positive terminology included language that referred drugs as a reward or attributed drug use to positive health consequences (i.e. more sleep or more energy).

Information about the way drugs were used was also recorded. Coders had to label each situation as an example of neutral use, drug dependence, or drug abuse. Neutral use means the drug was not being used in excess, was not being used illegally, or the scenario did not provide enough information. Characters who displayed dependence were those who displayed any three of the following seven symptoms within one year: tolerance, withdrawal, “use that exceeds initial intention, persistent desire for the drug or failed attempts to decrease consumption, loss of time related to use, reduced activities because of consumption, and continued use despite problems”. For drug use to be considered abuse, one of the four following must manifest: “interference with major obligations, intoxication in unsafe settings, legal problems, and continued use in the face of troubles” (Earleywine, 2002). This is an important category because it eliminates questions about the severity of use. It can also provide a greater understanding about which substances are portrayed as more dangerous to an audience, in conjunction with information about real life drug use.

Finally, scenes that showed drugs or drug use by characters on the screen were coded. In a given scene, there was either no substance shown; a substance shown; or substance use shown. A substance is considered shown if it appears physically on the screen. For example, this included a cigarette in hand, a bottle of wine or drug baggies on a table. A scenario where a substance was shown and then consumed on screen by the character was coded as substance use. This was the final category to be added after I began to wonder about how perceptions about drugs are extended to the audience. Many times the history of a characters’ drug use is only discussed within the program, but I was interested to see whether certain drugs were shown while others were exempt.

## Inter-coder Reliability

After all of the episodes were watched and coded by myself, another person watched and coded a sample of eight episodes. Inter-coder reliability is necessary to determine whether a pattern exists that more than one person can recognize. If the results do not match between the two coders, then the variable is unreliable. Inter-coder reliability for these categories was assessed using Krippendorff's alpha. Coefficients of .90 or greater are nearly always acceptable, .80 or greater is acceptable in most situations, and .70 may be appropriate in exploratory studies. Considering the small sample size, two coders reached a reasonable level of inter-coder reliability. Full results of the reliability tests are as follows:

The following four variables did not reach interpretable results:

Indeterminate under the occupation category

Party and casino under the place category

Rehabilitation under the outcome category

The following results were reasonably high in reliability, but not exact::

Among occupation: patient .77; criminal .77; victim .71

Among place (or location of drug use): bar .77

Among type of drugs: crystal .64; nonspecific .67

Exposure of drug scene .57

No use on screen: .60

Substance use on screen: .67

Substance shown on screen: .76

Among outcome: murder .73, arrest .77, jobless .77, organ damage .65, no outcome .65, total .54

All other categories reached a perfect correlation between the two coders, at 1.0.

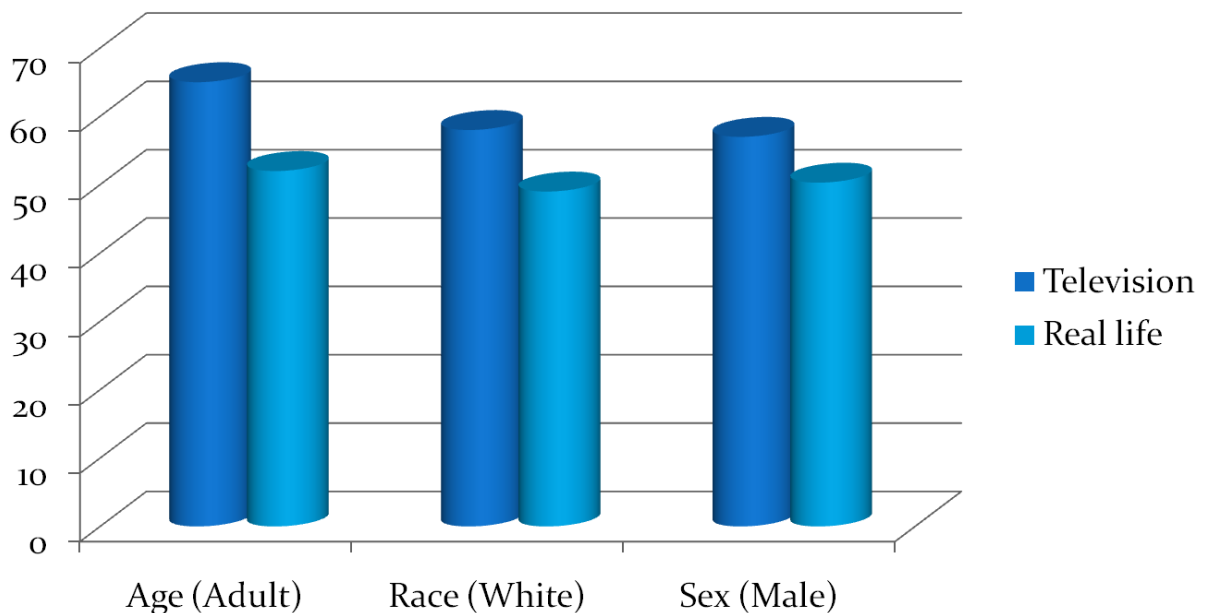
## Result section

### General Demographics

In general, white adult men represented most drug users on television. 57% of drug users were male, 58% of drug users were white, and 65% of all male users were also adults. A total of 39 characters were adult drug users, meaning that about 75% of all drug-related incidents concerned people between the ages of 18 and 65 years old. Teenagers and mixed groups were the only other age categories in which drug-related incidents occurred, representing the other 25%. 'Law & Order SVU' had the most drug scenarios during the fall season with twenty-eight character profiles, and the program represented a total of 51.9% of all characters involved with drugs. 51% of scenarios occurred in under 5 minutes, with the exception of 'House', which had a slightly higher tendency for episodes in which drug content was a pervasive theme.

### Real Use Compared to Television Use

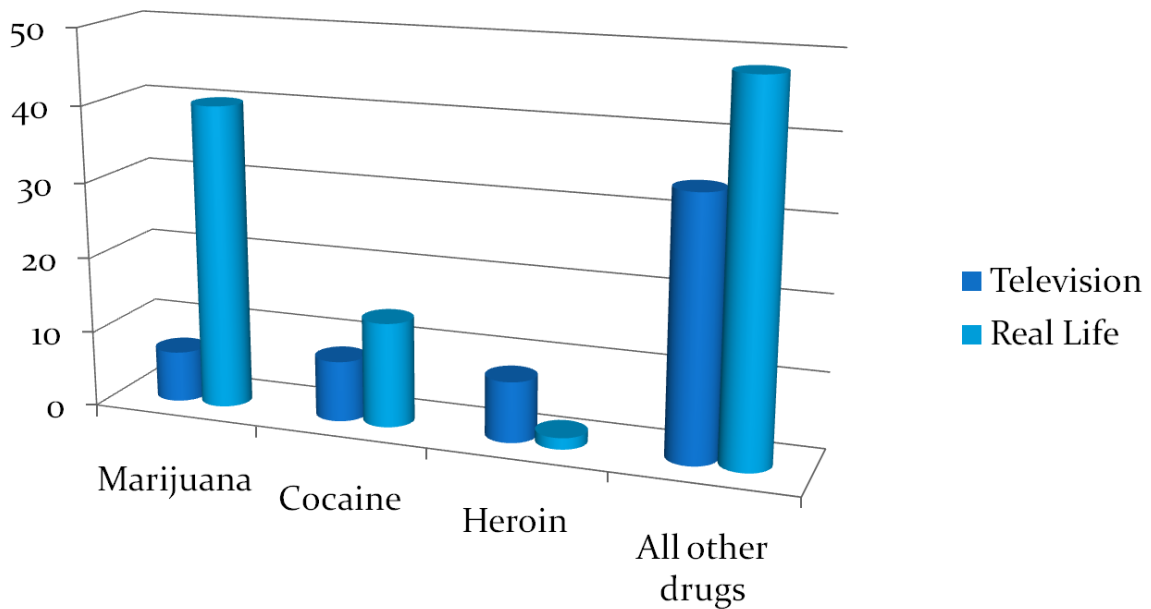
The following table demonstrates the correlation between the findings from television dramas this fall and the real life statistics.



The representation of white adult men in using drugs is fairly close to real life statistics, if not marginally over-represented.

## Location and Drug Type

Drugs were used the most at: an unspecified location (28.3%), home (20%), bar (20%). The most popular drugs on represented on television were alcohol (43.3%), unspecified (18%), cocaine (8%), heroin (8%). In total, there were twenty-six characters who displayed alcohol use, five who displayed cocaine use, and five who represented heroin users. The following graph illustrates the most popular drugs on television and the most popular drugs used today, excluding alcohol. The most popular drug, marijuana, is hugely under-represented along with cocaine and other drugs. Heroin is slightly over-represented; this is likely because it is a drug that is easily recognizable to audiences and creates tremendous shock value. This is contrary to the hypothesis, marijuana and cigarettes are replaced on television with harder drugs such as heroin and cocaine.



## Terminology

Terminology used to describe the user or language that was self-defining delivered by the user was coded as negative, neutral, or positive. The overall tone of the language used in a situation was coded. Mentions of jail time, rehabilitation, or other consequences of drug use discussed were coded as negative. Positive terminology included language that referred drugs as a reward or attributed drug use to positive health consequences (i.e. more sleep or more energy).

For example, this included a cigarette in hand, a bottle of wine or drug baggies on a table. A scenario where a substance was shown and then consumed on screen by the character was coded as substance use. This was the final category to be added after I began to wonder about how perceptions about drugs are extended to the audience. Many times the history of a characters' drug use is only discussed within the program.

For each situation, terminology used was generally negative. 'Law and Order' had the highest prevalence of negative tonality used—however, it also represents almost half of all of the characters analyzed at 46.7%. Since it is a crime drama, most mentions of drug use are likely associated with criminal activity. The program with the highest tendency to discuss or display drugs content with positive terminology was 'Grey's Anatomy'.

## **On Screen**

While analyzing the different programs, we coded for on screen use. That is, we accounted for whether the substance was shown on screen, used by a character on the screen, or not shown at all. In 30% of all analyzed episodes, the substance was used on screen. 19% showed the substance without indicating immediate use. However, 50% of all episodes did not show any substance in any form. That is, the drug-related incident was discussed by a character. In terms of on screen use, doctors (at 42%) and criminals (at 26%) have the highest rankings. Generally, drugs are talked about in these programs but

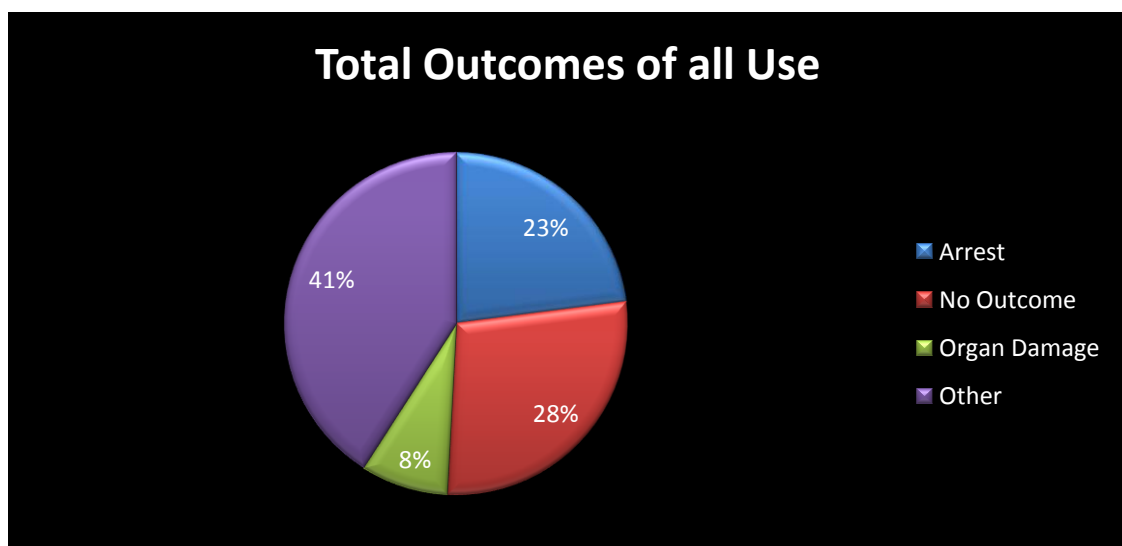


not shown. This means characters could have discussed past or intended use of drugs. Even though drugs are not being shown, messages about drugs are still being broadcast to the audience with significantly negative terminology.

## Outcome of Drug Use

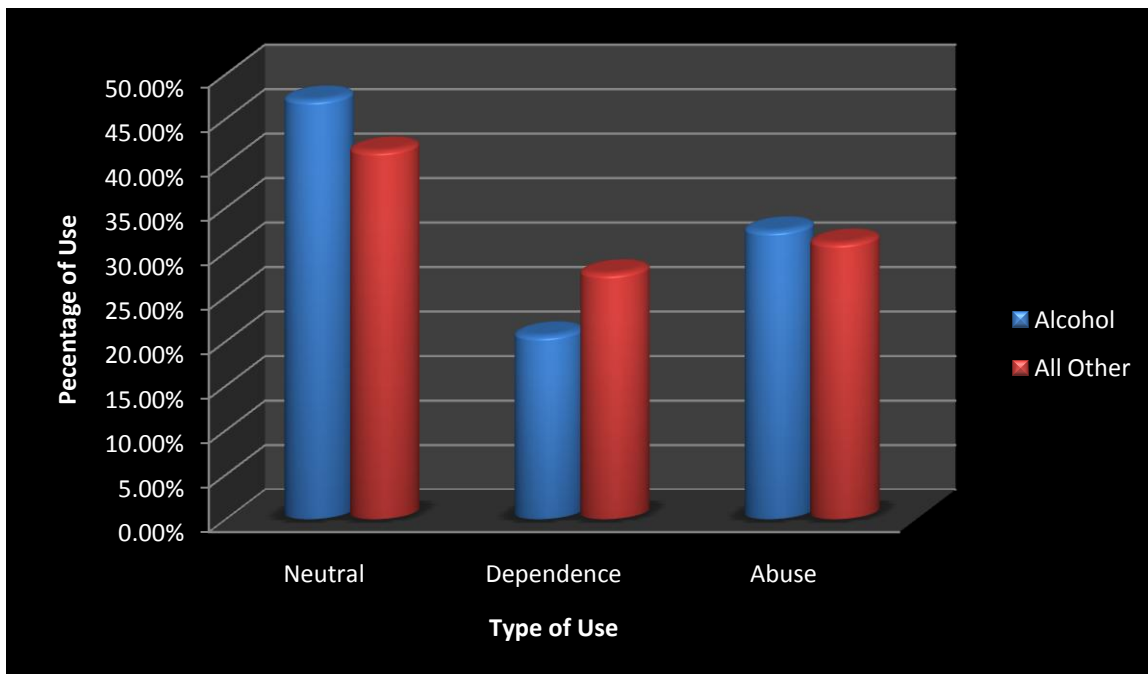
While gathering information about different drug users in order to create a more complete profile, the portrayal of specific drugs also seemed relevant. For all of the following statistics, all major drug groups represented on television were accounted for while the rest were collapsed: alcohol, unspecified drugs, and cocaine have their own categories while all others previously mentioned will now be referred to as other. In this section, alcohol, unspecified drugs, and cocaine were evaluated to discern whether their representation denoted a specific outcome.

A correlation between these categories and the most frequently used outcomes (arrest at 25%, no outcome at 21.7%, organ damage or withdrawal at 15%) were calculated. Alcohol use by a character resulted in no outcome 45.5% of the time. Of all characters arrested, 42.9% had been portrayed as using alcohol.



## Abuse and Dependence

Alcohol was the most rendered drug on television accounting for 54% of total incidents. The following graph depicts a comparison between total alcohol incidents to all other total drug incidents in terms of use (neutral, dependence, abuse). Since alcohol has the highest prevalence for all three use categories, this way we can evaluate how alcohol is represented compared to how all other drugs are represented. Although alcohol use and general drug use follow the same portrayal pattern, neutral use shown most frequently followed respectively by abuse and dependence, comparing them in relation to each other reveals an attitude possibly disseminated about drug use. Alcohol was portrayed as more neutral and with a significantly lower dependence rate than all other drugs. In terms of programs and their correlation with use, there are no conclusive results.



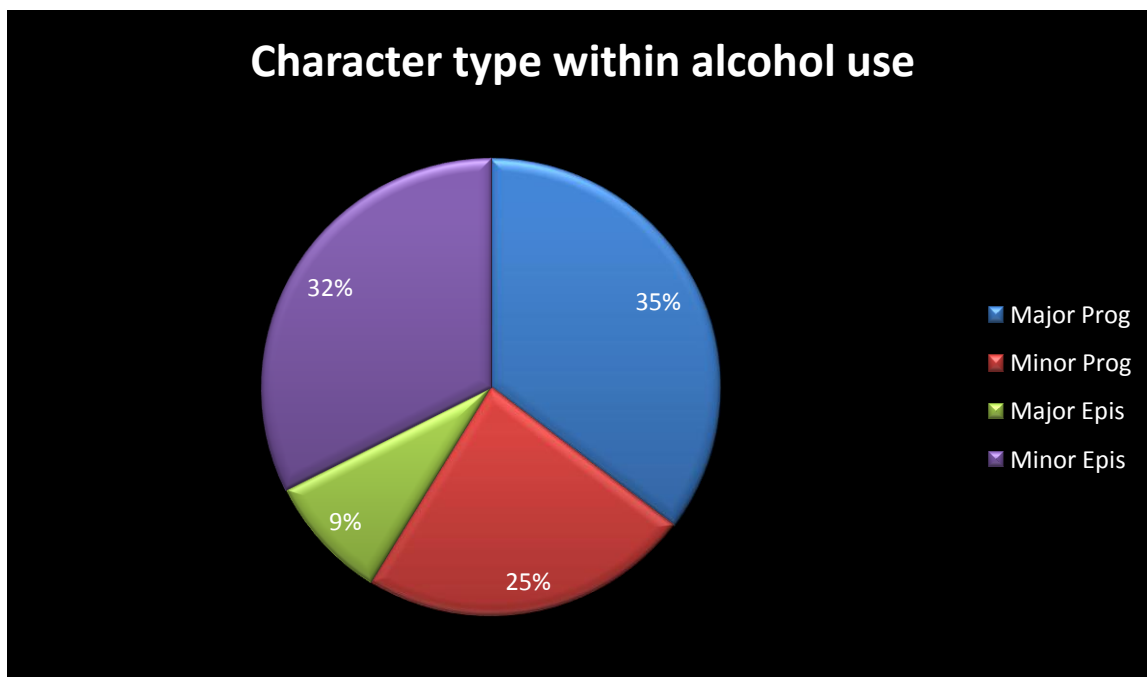
## Drugs and Correlation with Role Duration- Dependence and Abuse

Characters who displayed dependence were those who displayed any three of the following seven symptoms within one year: tolerance, withdrawal, “use that exceeds initial intention, persistent desire for the drug or failed attempts to decrease consumption, loss of time related to use, reduced activities because of consumption, and continued use despite problems”.

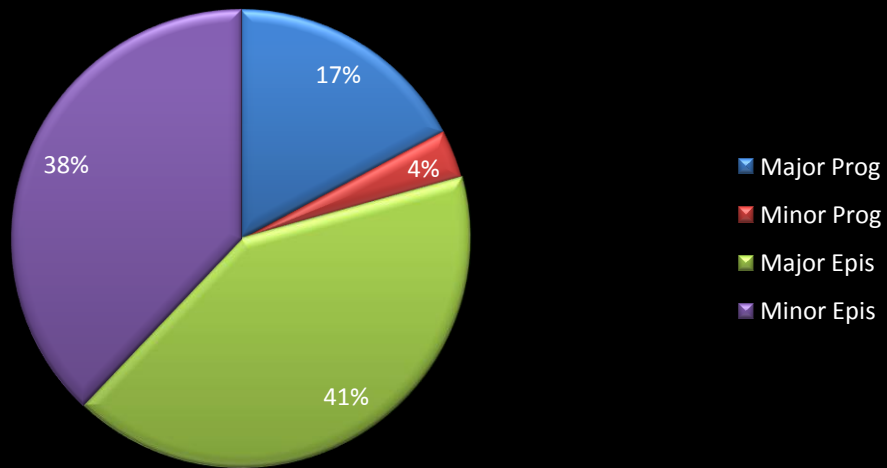
For drug use to be considered abuse, one of the four following must manifest: “interference with major obligations, intoxication in unsafe settings, legal problems, and continued use in the face of troubles”. We decided to compare this to role duration. A character’s role duration was determined by how central they are to the program’s general plot. Therefore, major characters in a series have the highest value while minor characters in an episode have the least. When comparing types of drug use with the different role durations manifested on television, our results found that 50% of major characters within an episode exhibit drug abuse, whereas all other roles displayed 47-59% neutral use. However, the characters who used drugs the most were those who were minor within the program (36.5%).

When comparing specific occupations and drug use, it was found that characters who used drugs the most were: criminals (26.7%), doctors (23.3%), and victims (20.0%). Doctors were most likely to use alcohol than any other drug at 67% and tend to display dependency at 42.9%. Despite this, the majority of characters displayed neutral use.

If a character is portrayed using drugs, they are most likely shown using alcohol despite their status as either major in a program or minor in an episode. If a character is going to be a consistent character on the program, or major within the program, they are most likely to be portrayed as an alcohol user. 50% of major characters within a program had no outcome at all for their drug-related incident. All other drugs types correlate more characters who are minor in the episode or major in the episode—this shows that a character who may be using more illicit drugs is probably only going to last one episode.



## Character type within alcohol use

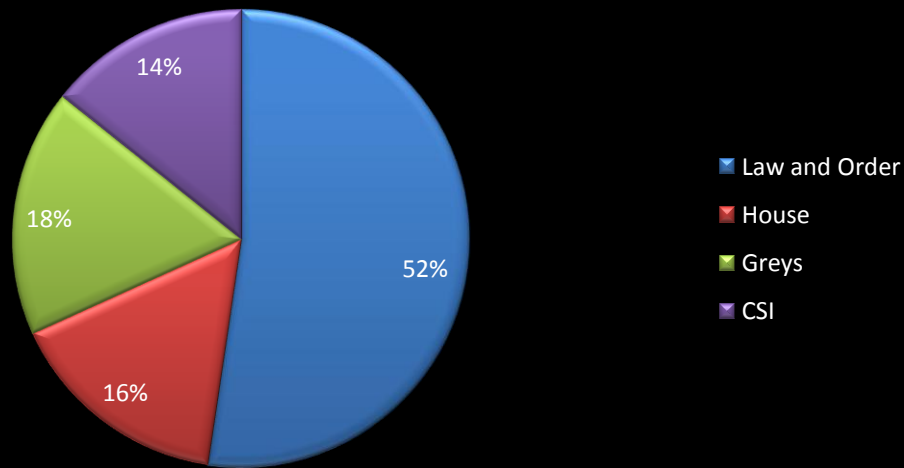


### Drug Use and Correlation with TV Programs

Crime dramas have a tendency to represent other drugs more than medical dramas by 17%.

Alcohol is less likely to be shown on a crime drama than a medical drama by 19%. This is most likely due to the nature of crime dramas, wherein the objective is often to find and prosecute dealers of illicit drugs.

## Percentage of Total Drug Use By Program



### TV Programs and Correlation with Outcome

Arrest was only displayed in 'CSI' (35.7%) and 'Law & Order' (64.3%). Within each program, the outcome organ damage was portrayed 18.2% in 'House', 9.1% in 'Grey's Anatomy', 6.5% in 'Law & Order'. This parallels the correlation found between arrests and programs—medical dramas are more likely to focus on bodily harm as a consequence of drug use whereas crime dramas are more likely to focus on the prosecution aspect, or arrests. No outcome as a consequence of drug use is much more common in medical dramas. Crime dramas are more centered on the exhibition of prosecution for drug use.

## Limitations and Further Study

A major limitation of this study is the small sample size used to extrapolate statistics. In order to make coding manageable for one person, only four shows from the top cable networks during the fall of 2009 were included. Due to the small size of the study, many of the inter-coder reliability statistics did not correlate- there was little margin for error, as one mismatched variable in a category could skew all information. For further research, this should either be expanded to an entire season or include more networks. In this study, shows such as 'Weeds' and 'Nurse Jackie' could not be accounted for. The foundation of these programs is based on drug use and selling and could offer a unique perspective presented to a different audience. 'The United States of Tara' offers much commentary about using prescription drugs to mediate psychological disorders, something barely touched on in this study. Another way to improve the findings from this study would be to only examine 'Law & Order'. Since the program made up over half of the findings, further research of this show could provide a deep insight about crime dramas and the characterization of criminals.

## Conclusion

Understanding the characterization of drug users on American television is central to dissecting our attitudes in relation to real use. The increasing omnipresence of television and our dependence as viewers on information presented in a fictional format is an unavoidable phenomenon. However, if this information is disproportionate to human experience, this may indicate a need for more aggressive drug and health education among students and audience members.

Most drug scenarios on television are very short, generally lasting under 5 minutes. Drugs were mostly used and abused by characters with non-recurring roles that mostly represented criminals and victims; regular characters often received no outcome at all for their drug use. This would suggest that

audiences are given brief profiles of drug users who have little value within the program. 'House' was the only program with a slightly higher tendency for episodes in which drug use was a pervasive theme. This was surprising given that the season premiere focused on House attending a rehabilitation program for drug dependence, an issue the show has given a lot of attention. However, following with the other programs, any character who uses illicit drugs is most likely to only last one episode. 'Law & Order SVU' had the most characters in drug-related scenarios, representing a total of twenty-eight character profiles; this program also has the lowest ratings. Alcohol was the most commonly used drug by 43.3%. White adult men represented the majority of drug users on television by 57-65%, marginally over-representing real-life statistics. The most popular drug used in real life, marijuana, is hugely under-represented along with cocaine and other drugs. Heroin is slightly over-represented; this is likely because it is a drug that is easily recognizable to audiences and creates tremendous shock value. Contrary to the hypothesis, marijuana and cigarettes are replaced on television with harder drugs such as heroin and cocaine.

If a character is portrayed using drugs, they are most likely shown using alcohol despite their status as either major in a program or minor in an episode. If a character is going to be a consistent character on the program, or major within the program, they are most likely to be portrayed as an alcohol user. 50% of major characters within a program had no outcome at all for their drug-related incident. Crime dramas had a higher tendency to display drug-related incidents, likely due to a plot structure that requires illegal activity to be punished, often specifically focusing on the prosecution aspect. This genre portrays the most arrests and uses more negative terminology to describe characters that use drugs. When comparing specific occupations and drug use, it was found that characters who used drugs the most were: criminals (26.7%) and doctors (23.3%). Contrary to the hypothesis, doctors were most likely to use alcohol than any other drug at 67% and tend to display dependency at 42.9%.



The majority of other characters displayed neutral use. Medical dramas are more likely to focus on bodily harm as a consequence of drug use; 'House' and 'Grey's Anatomy' portray the most outcomes related to organ damage. No outcome as a consequence of drug use is much more common in medical dramas. Interestingly, the program with the highest tendency to discuss or display drugs content with positive terminology was 'Grey's Anatomy'.

While television is accurately portraying the general profile characteristic of drug users in the United States, these programs are lacking other elements. Drug use is highly stigmatized, as evidenced by the prevalence for negative terminology and the predilection of criminals involved in these scenarios. Most of the characters regularly using drugs are given little value within the program and last for only a few episodes. A reason drug themes may be avoided can be reflected in the ratings for 'Law & Order SVU'—with the most character profiles, this show had the lowest ratings. Campaigns to remove smoking from television seem to have been successful; however, this substance has been replaced with heroin and cocaine. Alcohol ranks as the most used drug with its use correlating with the fewest consequences.

In light of these findings, it can be concluded that while television may be sending mixed messages about different types of drugs and drug users, viewers should be more skeptical than ever. While audiences may expect stereotypical representations of drug users on television, the only expected variable found was the high rate of criminal users. If television is providing a pseudo-social congregation from which audience members can define themselves by the values portrayed by the congregation, several things can occur. Some audience members may choose to imitate the behavior they view—with few consequences for drug use expressed on television, more people may become more motivated to use drugs. This would be especially true for alcohol, since it is the drug portrayed as having the least negative outcomes. If audience members receive health messages from soap operas and medical dramas, which use the most positive terminology to describe illicit drug use and have more character

roles filled by doctors (who are the highest drinking and most dependent profession), they may be receiving erroneous information. Since more whites are portrayed as drug users and are drug users in the United States, and because white teenagers focus so significantly over blacks on perceived similarity to peers, their use may correlate with a strong desire to fit in. Perhaps children lacking strong ethnic identity, non-user identity, strong family background, academic achievement, and self-control may all at risk. There is no one way to evaluate the ways in which an audience will react to the events that transpire on their screens, but it is possible to take note of the different characters and situations millions of people view in their homes each week. By understanding these different character profiles, we are able to actively assess the reality of our viewership. Taking a closer look at our entertainment provides a richer understand of how we may create and be affected by fiction.

## WORKS CITED

- Adams, P.C. (1992). Television as gathering place. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 82(1), 117-135.
- Bandura, A. Social cognitive theory of mass communication. In J. Bryant (Ed.), *Media effects: Advances in theory and research* (pp. 121-153). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Gorman, B. (2009, May 27). *Top adults 18-49 shows for 2008-9 season*. Retrieved from <http://tvbythenumbers.com/2009/05/27/american-idol-sunday-night-football-desperate-housewives-lead-top-adults-18-49-shows-for-2008-9-season/19505>
- Lang, S. (1999). Prime-time tv's favorite beverage- alcohol. *Human Ecology Forum*, 24.
- Miller-Day, M., & Barnett, J. (2004). I'm not a druggie. *Health Communication*, 16(2), 209-228.
- NIDA, . (2009, March 18). *Child and adolescent mental illness and drug abuse statistics*. Retrieved from [http://www.aacap.org/cs/root/resources\\_for\\_families/child\\_and\\_adolescent\\_mental\\_illness\\_statistics](http://www.aacap.org/cs/root/resources_for_families/child_and_adolescent_mental_illness_statistics)
- NielsenWire. (2009, August 28). *114.9 million u.s. television homes estimated for 2009-2010 season*. Retrieved from [http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/media\\_entertainment/1149-million-us-television-homes-estimated-for-2009-2010-season/](http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/media_entertainment/1149-million-us-television-homes-estimated-for-2009-2010-season/)
- Schneider, M. (2008, June 29). *Tv viewers' average age hits 50*. Retrieved from <http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117988273.html?categoryid=1275&cs=1>
- Wills, T., Sargent, J.D., Gibbons, F.X., Gerrard, M. , & Stoolmiller, M. (2009). Movie exposure to alcohol cues and adolescent alcohol problems: a longitudinal analysis in a national sample. *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors*, 23(1), 23-35.

## APPENDIX

### Character Description Code Sheet

Program name: 1. House, 2. Grey's Anatomy, 3. CSI, 4. Law & Order SVU

Episode name/number: \_\_\_\_\_

Role duration:

- |                         |                         |
|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. Major within program | 3. Minor within program |
| 2. Major within episode | 4. Minor within episode |

Sex:

- |         |           |                  |                |
|---------|-----------|------------------|----------------|
| 1. Male | 2. Female | 3. Indeterminate | 4. Mixed group |
|---------|-----------|------------------|----------------|

Race:

- |             |                     |                    |                |
|-------------|---------------------|--------------------|----------------|
| 1. White    | 2. African-American | 3. Native American | 4. Asian       |
| 5. Hispanic | 6. Indeterminate    | 7. Other           | 8. Mixed group |

Age:

- |                  |                |          |                 |
|------------------|----------------|----------|-----------------|
| 1. Child         | 2. Teenager    | 3. Adult | 4. Mature Adult |
| 5. Indeterminate | 6. Mixed group |          |                 |

Occupation/role:

- |                           |            |                           |           |
|---------------------------|------------|---------------------------|-----------|
| 1. Doctor                 | 2. Patient | 3. Criminal/crime suspect | 4. Victim |
| 5. Law enforcement/lawyer | 6. Student | 7. Indeterminate          |           |

Where use occurs:

- |         |         |          |              |                                  |           |
|---------|---------|----------|--------------|----------------------------------|-----------|
| 1. Home | 2. Bar  | 3. Party | 4. Car       | 5. Rehab                         | 6. Casino |
| 7. Boat | 8. Park | 9. Work  | 10. Hospital | 11. Unspecified or not mentioned |           |

What drugs are used (if indicated):

- |  |              |                 |              |                |
|--|--------------|-----------------|--------------|----------------|
| 1. Alcohol                                 | 2. Cigarette | 3. Marijuana    | 4. Vicodin   | 5. Cough syrup |
| 6. GHB/"roofies"                           | 7. Cocaine   | 8. Crystal meth | 9. Mushrooms | 10. Heroin     |
| 11. None specific, i.e. "drugs" or "pills" |              |                 |              |                |

Incidence of exposure (in minutes):

- |                  |                    |                    |
|------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| 1. Brief mention | 2. Under 5 minutes | 3. Pervasive theme |
|------------------|--------------------|--------------------|

Specific terminology used to describe the user or situation:

- |             |            |             |
|-------------|------------|-------------|
| 1. Negative | 2. Neutral | 3. Positive |
|-------------|------------|-------------|

Substance dependence or substance abuse (specify characteristics):

1. Neutral (simple use or not enough info.)
2. Dependence
3. Abuse

Substance or use on screen:

1. No substance shown
2. Substance shown on screen
3. Substance use on screen

If yes to 2. Or 3., refer back to question 6. What substance is shown or used? \_\_\_\_\_ (AY on the Research log)

Outcome (if determined); including but not limited to whether a physical effect is shown and whether a health message is verbally conveyed:

1. Murder
2. Overdose
3. Verbal reprimand
4. Arrest or suspected of crime
5. Loss of job or suspension
6. Rehabilitation
7. Physical (other): organ damage or withdrawal
8. No outcome

Total number of drug scenes:

0. Indicates there are no drugs mentioned in the episode
1. Through 4- number of scenes
2. Pervasive theme throughout the episode