DO WE ACT UPON WHAT WE SEE? IMMEDIATE EFFECTS OF ALCOHOL CUES ON MOVIES ON ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION OF YOUNG PEOPLE

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Population surveys have linked movie alcohol portrayals with alcohol consumption in youth. There is also experimental evidence that alcohol portrayals in movies immediately influence viewers’ drinking of alcohol while watching movies. One process that might account for these immediate effects is imitation, as empirical studies have shown that individuals consume more alcohol and with a higher pace when they are with someone who consumes alcohol. This might also apply to seeing actors drinking on screen. Here we present data from two experimental studies on movie alcohol portrayals conducted with Dutch students. In the first study, a two (sex) by two (movie: alcohol or no alcohol portrayals) between-subject design was used. A total of 122 same-sex dyads (ages 18-29 years) watched the 60-minute movie clip, “What Happens in Vegas”, in a semi-naturalistic home setting. Their alcohol consumption while watching was examined. Results showed that assignment to movie alcohol portrayals increased alcohol consumption during the movie for men but not for women (β = -0.650, p = .010). While controlling for weekly consumption, the effects remained significant. Identification and weekly alcohol consumption did not moderate the relation between condition and alcohol consumption. The second study examined, in a subsample of the first study, whether participants imitated actors’ drinking on-screen. Only participants who consumed alcohol in the alcohol condition were included (79 students; 61 males, mean age = 20.8). We assessed at what time during the movie actors and participants took a sip to match the sipping of the actors and participants. Participants were more likely to sip in accordance with the actors’ sipping than without such a cue (OR = 1.50, p < 0.001, 95% CI = 1.28-1.75). Further, men were more likely to imitate actors’ sipping than females (HR = 1.97, p = 0.001, 95% CI = 1.36-3.09) and participants tended to respond to actors’ sipping at the beginning of the movie rather than at the end (HR = 0.80, p = 0.037, 95% CI = 0.63-0.98). Exposure to actors sipping alcohol in a movie appears to have an immediate impact on the drinking behavior of young adult viewers, via the mechanism of imitation. Further research should determine if exposure to movie alcohol use affects drinking among underage drinkers and attitudes toward use among non-drinkers.