

## **Australian media coverage of alcohol and other drug consumption during COVID-19**

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**Introduction and Aims:** Alcohol consumption was widely reported in the news media as increasing dramatically in the early stages of 'lockdown' in Australia. The news media both reflect and influence public and policy understandings of, and responses to, social issues and concerns. Given these capacities, the aim of this study is to investigate i) the characteristics of media reporting on the effects of COVID-19 on alcohol and other drug (AOD) consumption in Australia and ii) whether media reporting selectively focused on narratives of overall increased consumption, compared to decreases or stasis.

**Method / Approach:** Content and framing analysis was conducted on articles published by Australian mainstream news (online and print) and public media websites during the period March to June 2020. Articles were obtained electronically from the Factiva database. The final dataset comprised 61 articles.

**Key Findings:** Alcohol was the focus in 92% of media articles and the majority (55%) of these predominantly reported on increases in alcohol consumption. A similar tendency was observed in the 5 articles addressing other drugs. Increases in consumption were often represented as a health risk and a result of mental health difficulties stemming from social isolation, lockdowns and economic uncertainty. Increases in alcohol consumption among parents, caregivers and women were a particular focus of a substantial proportion of articles.

**Discussion and Conclusions:** The framing of increased alcohol consumption as problematic and a coping mechanism for the effects of COVID-19 reflects norms around the need for restraint and control of alcohol consumption and provision during COVID-19. This is particularly true for the above-mentioned populations. This narrative is given more dominance with the omission of research that has shown some decreases and stasis in AOD consumption in the same period.

**Implications for Practice or Policy:** By highlighting the selective focus on problematic AOD consumption in news media, this research demonstrates that AOD policy during COVID-19 must balance social norms related to AOD consumption and more comprehensive understandings of research on the area.

**Keywords:** Australia, Alcohol sales, Alcohol consumption, Media analysis, COVID-19, Framing