ASK YOUR TELEVISION IF DRUGS ARE RIGHT FOR YOU: MESSAGES ABOUT
DRUGS, ALCOHOL AND TOBACCO ON TELEVISION
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There have been several studies documenting the nature of illicit drug use and abuse in
television programs as well as the effect that messages about drugs, alcohol and tobacco
might have on children and teens (Austin, 2000; Borzekowski & Strasburger, 2008).
However, few content analyses have included messages about legal drugs in television
programs and commercials. Yet these messages are prevalent, especially in TV
 commercials advocating over-the-counter and prescription drugs to treat illnesses or other
reasons (e.g., to lose weight, stay awake or go to sleep). The current study represents a
content analysis of messages about or related to alcohol, cigarettes, and drugs (including
legal drugs) shown on television across four decades. Samples were taken from the
CRETV Archive at Ithaca College for 1986, 1996, 2006, and 2016, including content
from both fiction and nonfiction programs, TV commercials for medicines and alcoholic
beverages, and public service announcements. Messages were coded as negative (ANTI),
positive (PRO), or non-aligned (NEUTRAL), based on the portrayal and/or verbal
statements made during the scene or commercial. The findings show that pro-drug and
pro-drinking messages greatly outnumber anti-drug and anti-drinking messages; for
cigarettes, however – which are not advertised on television – there were more anti-
smoking messages than pro-smoking messages and do not have enough significance in
television programs to create a conclusion. Variations by program type (i.e., audience)
and year are also reported.