

Alcohol TV Advertisements Communication to Adolescents

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Back in an era before Prohibition, the United States did not have a minimum legal drinking age. It was not until after 1933 when the Prohibition laws were repealed was a drinking age of twenty-one get established. That age was lowered to eighteen in the 1970s because the voting age was lowered. But in the 1980s too many teenagers started dying in alcohol-related car crashes so the age was brought back up to the twenty-one standard (Egendorf, 2001). Throughout the course of history underage drinking has been an issue in American society and it continues to be a problem today. From 1933 to 2013, positive images and messages of alcohol have been cultivated into mainstream society and it wasn't until recently did communication scholars realize that alcohol television ads are changing adolescents perceptions of alcohol. The purpose of this paper is to show how alcohol TV advertisements influence underage drinking and communicate positive messages of alcohol usage in adolescents.

For years families have logged countless hours in front of a TV intensely watching images flicker across the screen. TV viewing has become a major part in kids' lives. Seventy-one percent of 8-to 18 year-olds have a television in the bedroom, 54% have a DVD player, 37% have cable, and 20% have premium channels (Boyse, 2010). TV viewing is something that adolescents cannot escape from. TVs are in classrooms, doctor's offices, and TV can now be viewed online. Along with the enormous amount of shows that are constantly getting played, TV advertisements take up 17 minutes of an hour-long program. And in those 17 minutes the best messages are not communicated. Alcohol TV advertisements litter the screen of all TVs and adolescents are the target receiver of their messages. Research already done on the subject shows that alcohol advertising has significant effect on the attitudes and expectations of adolescents and helps create an environment that promotes underage drinking (Center on Alcohol Marketing and

Youth, 2005). While many factors may influence an underage person's drinking decisions, including parents, peers, and the media there is reason to believe that advertising also plays a role in adolescents decision to drink (Thompson,1999).

### **Literature Review**

Alcohol use among adolescents and young adults is a major health concern in the United States. According to a Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration report published in December of 2004, an estimated 10.9 million (29%) adolescents reported drinking alcohol in the past month, 16.6% reported problem behaviors related to alcohol use, and 6.2% met Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders for substance abuse or dependence (Grenard, Dent & Stacy, 2013). Adolescents are frequent users of alcohol and are increasingly consuming it in a risky fashion. Over one in eight of 15- to 16-year-old students reported being drunk more than 20 times in their life, and over one in six reported binge drinking three or more times in a four week period (Anderson, Bruijun, Angus & Gordon, 2008). Alcohol is the drug of choice among most adolescents in the United States. It has been engraved in their minds that alcohol isn't as bad as other drugs like marijuana or cocaine. However, there are several negative consequences associated with drinking: motor vehicle crashes, suicide, loss of control (Kusserow, 1991). It is because of these side effects that are causing people to worry about the safety and well-being of adolescents.

Because of the risks involved much attention has been given to understanding the influence of alcohol advertising on underage drinking. Many observers believe that alcohol advertisements contribute to the social acceptability of underage drinking. Large numbers of American youth are exposed to television advertisements for alcohol, particularly beer (Morgan, Alexander, Shanahan & Harris, 1990). From 2001 to 2003 young people were far more likely to

see ads promoting drinking than messages from alcohol industries warning about alcohol consumption and its consequences (Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth, 2005). Alcohol companies placed 761,347 product ads on television compared to 24,161 ads that were placed on television promoting responsible drinking from 2001 to 2003 (Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth, 2005). Across the span of those three years, adolescents the ages 12 to 20 were 96 times more likely to see an alcohol advertisement than an alcohol industry ad about underage drinking risks (Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth, 2005). Television is the main media outlet for adolescents; and alcohol companies understand and accept this fact and use it to their marketing advantage and benefit.

Alcohol use and abuse among adolescents are associated with a broad range of health consequences and high-risk behaviors. These behaviors include drinking and driving, participation in deviant peer groups, abuse of other drugs, poor school performance, and violence (Howard, Boyd & Zucker, 1995). Television communicates the acceptability and necessity of alcohol far more than other drugs (Fort, 1973). And the ads put out television contribute to this acceptability and so alcohol companies funnel money into these ads because they know that kids will respond well and contribute to the success of their product. The New York Times predicted in 2002 that America's brewers and distillers will spend more than \$350 million that year to sell young people new "designer" drinks, sweet, fruity, alcoholic beverages called 'alcopops' that are packaged and marketed like beer (Wechsler & Wuethrich, 2002). These new "designer" drinks are targeted to adolescents through advertisement on the television.

The vast amount of research already accumulated on alcohol advertisements and adolescents shows that underage drinking is a massive problem in our society and that the ads communicate messages to adolescents that does not have positive effects (Thompson, 1999).

However, media consumers cannot get away from these ads and messages. Youth love the advertisements, Chen, Grube, Bersamin, Waiters, and Keefe's journal, found that children and adolescents responded positively to animals, humor, and musical elements found in beer advertisements. All of these ideas make adolescents a huge part of the alcohol companies target audience.

Television ads are constructed in such way that each ad has a target audience that it is communicating specifically to. In 1971 cigarette companies were banned from advertising on TV because the poor affect they had on people's health. Alcohol ads are no different. The alcohol companies are creating new ads that communicate easily with adolescents because underage drinking has become a huge part of their market base. Alcohol advertisements make drinking look fun and sell the idea that drinking is socially acceptable for all ages. Cumulative exposure to alcohol advertising changes the way youth think about drinking (Snyder & Milici, 2006). Adolescents are attracted to what they see on TV and since they spend so much time in front of the TV they become to interpret what they see on TV as reality. The movies and ads that show underage drinking as fun and acceptable, makes adolescents think that drinking alcohol at such a young age is socially normal.

George Gerbner's Cultivation theory addresses the idea that television has become the main source of storytelling in today's society. He classified two different groups of those who watch television: heavy and light users of television consumption. Heavy uses are those who view television more than four or more hours a day and light users are those who watch less than four hours (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). Heavy viewers are affected by the messages they view on TV and those viewers being to interpret the world differently. Most adolescents spend a majority of their time in front of the TV and are primary targets of Gerbner's cultivation theory. It is the

consistency of the advertisements narratives and messages that cultivate ideas of social acceptability to adolescents.

Alcohol is a huge part of American society. Its ads are on the radio, billboards, magazine, and TV. Its advertisements communicate directly to anyone that sits down in front of television. Unfortunately, adolescents are the primary consumers of their ads. They communicate that alcohol doesn't do any harm and it is required to have fun at any party. These messages promote underage drinking and alcohol TV advertisements communicate negative messages to adolescents. Research has already indicated that alcohol TV advertisements influence underage drinking, rather than prevent it. Additionally, Cultivation Theory holds that media exposure has great potential for influence, but that the greater the exposure, the greater the influence. Nonetheless, evidence exists that strong messages could have a positive impact on teenager's attitudes, which leads to the following research question:

RQ: Is one strong visual message enough to begin to affect teenager's attitudes about alcohol?

### **Participants**

Alcohol television advertisements do influence underage drinking and according to cultivation theory, adolescents are receiving these negative messages and absorbing them into truth and reality. The current system of education on underage drinking so far has not been effective and cannot keep up with mainstream media. Adolescents spend so much time communicating with new and old media that creating a program that educates them on the negative effects of alcohol and underage drinking through a media source could be effective.

In the study conducted, 54 teenagers ranging from the ages of 13-18 enrolled in a West Coast high school were surveyed. The survey was sent out to 20 students and those students recruited their friends through social media sites to take the survey. The students are from an

upper middle-class population and all of them have had some form of health class in middle school. The reason for picking high school students is because they are at the prime time of exposure to these advertisements and are at a very impressionable age. They will not be forced to take the survey and if they are uncomfortable with the questions asked or they do not have to take it.

### **Procedure**

The questions asked will be analyzing the adolescent's perceptions of alcohol. The format of the questioning will be taking form in an open-ended questionnaire, meaning, they will be asked open-ended questions before and after treatment is given. The reason for taking the qualitative approach is because perceptions are getting tested and each kid has a their own perception of alcohol. Treatment consists of one video clip that will show the negative implications of underage drinking. It will be a fear induced advertisement because a fear appeal ad will be most effective. After treatment they will take a post-test to see if their perceptions of alcohol has changed. If treatment works effectively there should be a change in the perceptions they have on alcohol.

The purpose of this survey is to gain insight into an adolescents mind and try and figure out whether or not their own perceptions of alcohol are influenced by the media, and to see if one advertisement is enough to affect the current belief system of underage drinking. If this hypothesis proves to be true, then results will be that alcohol television advertisement does influence adolescent's decisions to drink and that ads showing the negative effects of underage drinking will be effective. There are a small number of questions because the lower amount of questions the more likely they are to complete the survey and answer truthfully.

### Measurements

In this survey, they were asked seven questions and watched an advertisement about negative effects of alcohol. In the pre-test they were asked three questions. They were asked how old they were, how much television they watched in the past week, and how much alcohol they consumed the last month. In the post-test questions they were asked four questions. These questions asked them, after watching the ad, do you feel like you know more about underage drinking?, after watching the ad, do you feel like you will stop or slow down your consumption of alcohol?, how has this ad changed the way you think about alcohol?, and what are your thoughts on alcohol now?. These questions were asked in order to test their perceptions and thoughts on alcohol. They were asked with the intention of their standpoint on alcohol to change after watching the advertisement. Knowing that media deeply influencing adolescents, picking an ad that appealed to their fear was important. Asking them these questions was a way to see if a media message was enough to make them challenge their own beliefs about alcohol and their very own alcohol consumption.

The video was a fear appeal ad that was titled, *Another Night Wasted, Binge Drinking TV ad*. The ad was 40-seconds long. In the ad there are two kids surrounded in their own vomit. The ad describes the drinks that they had that night and how “another night was wasted”. This advertisement goes into the graphic nature about drinking and how vomiting is a result from excessive drinking. The reason why this ad was chosen was because not only did it should kids under the age, but it showed how helpless they were and how they succumbed to the affects of too much alcohol consumption. It also appealed to adolescents fear because no kid wants to be on the ground covered in his or her own vomit in an unsanitary environment.

### Results



This survey interviewed high school students ranging from 13 to 18 years old. This survey had one 13 year old, two 14 year olds, fifteen 15 year olds, sixteen 16 years olds, eleven 17 year olds, and five 18 year olds. When asked how many times they have consumed alcohol the past month, 85% of participants said two times or less, 8% said three times, and 5% said more than five times. When asked how many times they watched TV in the past week, 46% said between 2-3 hours, 36% more than 4 hours, and 18% said less than 1 hour or none at all.

After the ad was shown the students were asked four questions to see if their attitudes about alcohol had changed in any way. The first question they were asked was, after watching the ad do you feel like you know more about underage drinking and the risks of underage drinking? 21 said that it did not, 24 said that it did and 5 answers did not answer the question either yes or no so they were put in the 'other' category. While reading through the responses to this question, a theme of innocence arose. One student said, "I think it was very exaggerated. That absolutely does not happen to many kids who drink". Another theme that arose was how gross they found the ad. A couple of students said, "no, in all honesty it just made me feel gross". Another said, "No, it just gives drinking a negative connotation."

The second question asked, after watching the ad do you feel like you will stop or slow down your consumption of alcohol? 20 students said that it would, 10 said it would not, and 12 the question did not apply because they had never consumed alcohol before, and 5 were placed in the other category because their answers were indifferent. Again a theme of innocence arose, one student said, "I would never really go that far if I was to drink more anyways". This naive and 'it won't happen to me' mentality defiantly popped up throughout the survey. However, the majority of the kids did say that after watching the ad they would slow down or stop their

consumption of alcohol. So, ultimately, the ad did have some impact on their perceptions about drinking.

When they were asked if the ad changed the way they think about alcohol, results ranged from yes to no. The ones that answered yes said that not only did it change the way they think about it also made it seem gross. One student said, “it made it look less glamorous and fun” another said “it made me realize that drinking alcohol is not as ‘cool’ or ‘fun’ as a lot of kids say it is. It looks terrible.” This ad showed the very real effects of drinking too much and kids caught onto that intended message, one student fully grasped the true intention of the ad and said, “rather than alcohol looking like something fun to do, it shows what will really happen if you get wasted”. These answers are very important because not only does it show that there is a problem in the media with depicting alcohol as something fun and glamorous, these answers also show that kids attitudes and perceptions changed with one advertisement combating the main ideology in mainstream society.

The final question asked them what their final thoughts on alcohol now are. A lot of kids said that their thoughts were still the same, but they also said drinking is more safe in moderation. One kids response was very unique in nature and defiantly reflected the teenage community of Pleasanton, “it [alcohol] is unneeded if you want to have a fun night, but growing up in a wealthy, upper-middle class, sheltered town like Pleasanton, kids are often bored on their Friday and weekend nights so they turn to alcohol for fun”, they think it is fun because that is what is seen on TV. A lot of students said that in large amounts alcohol can be dangerous, but if consumed responsibly and in small amounts it is not that bad. One student said, “it was scarier than I thought”. Since the nature of the ad was very realistic and showed the real affects of drinking, it defiantly changed some of the kid’s attitudes and perceptions about alcohol.

### **Discussion**

Based on these findings, adolescents attitudes on alcohol consumption have changed based off of one advertisement. After watching the fear ad, the majority of students said that they would slow down or stop their consumption of alcohol and that the ad was very gross and made drinking look a lot less fun. This change in perception shows that this fear ad was effective. But, there is still more that can be done to make sure that more adolescents are aware of the ‘real’ side effects of drinking. Television and alcohol television advertisements do not show the dangers of underage drinking, instead they sell the glamour and fun that kids think come along with drinking.

Adolescents love to watch television and they love to model their lives off of what they see on television. So, instead of trying to teach adolescents the harmful effects of alcohol consumption, it would be more effective to teach them this message subconsciously through the use of media and television. The more advertisements and media messages they see warning them of the dangers of alcohol use, the more likely they will adopt those ideas into their belief system and it will be cultivated into their everyday life.

### **Future Directions**

If cultivation theory is applied, another study can be done to test adolescent’s perceptions of alcohol. This study will take place over a four-month span. However, it will differ in the sense that students will be exposed not only to alcohol television advertisements, but they will also be exposed to advertisements that show the effects of underage drinking. For every TV alcohol advertisement there is, there will be two advertisements about the negative consequences of underage drinking. These ads will be scattered throughout a popular television show and they will range from informative ads to fear appeal ads. The students will be asked to sit and watch

one show every two weeks, across the span of a four-month period. The reason for this is to make sure that they are being cultivated to the mainstream ideas they are being exposed to.

The students will be the same students each time and they will range from the age of 13-18. They will be taken from the same West Coast high school. The reason for choosing the same place as the previous study is because previous data shows that underage drinking is very prevalent and apart of the culture in that underage population.

Since this pilot study showed that adolescents do positively respond to the advertisements, this next step in the research process will discover if across the span of a four-month period do multiple advertisements about the negative effects of underage drinking combat the main ideology and communicate the 'real' effects of underage drinking.

### **Conclusion**

Throughout the course of history television and the images depicted on television have been sending messages to consumers that alcohol is socially acceptable for people of all ages. Since the main group of television consumers is adolescents, they have been interpreting the steady flow of these messages, and it has allowed them to think that underage drinking is normal and socially acceptable in society. Many adolescents have been taught the side effects of underage drinking, but the current education system has not been able to combat the messages in the media.

This study proved that alcohol television advertisements do lead to underage drinking and that they also contribute to the social acceptability of underage drinking. With extensive research already done on the topic these advertisements lead to change of perceptions and makes adolescents think that underage drinking comes with very little side effects.

Also, this study looked to see if adolescents' perceptions of alcohol could be changed with one fear ad showing the negative side effects of underage drinking. This proved to be effective and true and a majority of students said that they would slow down or stop consuming alcohol after watching the advertisement. If one advertisement was effective in changing their perceptions and in showing the students the 'real' effectiveness of too much alcohol consumption then this study has proved that media can be used to combat the underage drinking epidemic.

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