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Risky Messages in Alcohol Advertising, 2003–2007: Results From Content Analysis

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A B S T R A C T

Purpose: To assess the content of alcohol advertising in youth-oriented U.S. magazines, with specific attention to subject matter pertaining to risk and sexual connotations and to youth exposure to these ads.

Methods: This study consisted of a content analysis of a census of 1,261 unique alcohol advertisements (“creatives”) recurring 2,638 times (“occurrences”) in 11 U.S. magazines with disproportionately youthful readerships between 2003 and 2007. Advertisements were assessed for content relevant to injury, overconsumption, addiction, and violations of industry guidelines (termed “risk” codes), as well as for sexism and sexual activity.

Results: During the 5-year study period, more than one-quarter of occurrences contained content pertaining to risk, sexism, or sexual activity. Problematic content was concentrated in a minority of brands, mainly beer and spirits brands. Those brands with higher youth-to-adult viewership ratios were significantly more likely to have a higher percentage of occurrences with addiction content and violations of industry guidelines. Ads with violations of industry guidelines were more likely to be found in magazines with higher youth readerships.

Conclusions: The prevalence of problematic content in magazine alcohol advertisements is concentrated in advertising for beer and spirits brands, and violations of industry guidelines and addiction content appear to increase with the size of youth readerships, suggesting that individuals aged <21 years may be more likely to see such problematic content than adults.

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IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTION

This study analyzes a large census sample of alcohol advertisements in magazines with disproportionately youthful readerships over a 5-year period. It demonstrates for the first time significant relationships between problematic advertising content (related to alcohol addiction and violations of voluntary industry marketing codes) and measures of youth viewership.

Injuries are the leading cause of death among persons aged 1–44 years [1]. Alcohol consumption plays a substantial role in injury: of the approximately 79,000 deaths caused by alcohol in the United States each year, 55% are attributable to injury [2]. According to a recent meta-analysis, alcohol consumption is involved in 26.2%–62.5% of visits to trauma centers, with an aggregate weighted estimate of 32.5% [3]. Alcohol consumption also causes >4,600 deaths annually among young people aged 12–20 years [2], and is associated with the three leading causes of death among youth: motor vehicle crashes, homicide, and

suicide [4]. Numerous studies have found that exposure to alcohol advertising and marketing is an important influence in shaping young people’s expectations and behavior regarding alcohol use [5,6]. When young people perceive the models and situations in alcohol advertising as desirable, they are more likely to want to emulate them and to hold positive expectancies about what will happen when they drink, which in turn is related to likelihood of drinking [7].

The primary means by which the content of alcohol advertising is regulated is through voluntary codes of good marketing practice administered by the trade associations for the three principal branches of the alcohol industry: the Beer Institute [8], the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States [9], and the Wine Institute [10]. These codes (which we term “guidelines” for clarity) forbid portraying alcohol consumption in conjunction with

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risky activities such as driving a car or anything “requiring a high degree of alertness or physical coordination.” However, advertising is permitted to show such activities, as long as the person engaging in the behavior is not consuming alcohol in the advertisement.

Although previous efforts have been made to analyze the content of alcohol advertising [11–13], there has been no attempt to quantify or categorize the risky behaviors depicted in alcohol advertising since 2000 [12]. Further, the relationship of risky content to youth exposure has never been studied. To this end, we analyzed a census of 1,261 unique alcohol advertising creative executions appearing over a 5-year period in 11 magazines with disproportionately youthful audiences. Ethnographic content analysis (ECA) [14] was used to examine how often alcohol advertisements portrayed risky behaviors. In addition, we examined the advertisements for other examples of violations of industry guidelines, and for other salient features of the content that could be expected to influence the desirability of the advertisements in the eyes of young people.

Methods

Data collection

The 11 magazines selected for sampling reflected our focus on youth audiences. Thus, our sample consisted of nine magazines with youth (age: 12–20 years) audiences equaling or exceeding 15% (the maximum youth audience “placement standard” for alcohol companies recommended by the Institute of Medicine [15]) during at least 1 year of data collection. These magazines were *Cosmopolitan*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *ESPN The Magazine*, *In Style*, *Maxim*, *Rolling Stone*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Stuff*, and *Vibe*. An additional two magazines, *Maxim en Español* and *XXL*, were also selected for sampling. Although their youth audiences remain unmeasured, we included these magazines because we suspected higher-than-average youth audiences based on the demographics of the parent publication (in the case of *Maxim en Español*) and similarity in content to other youth-oriented publications (in the case of *XXL*). These two magazines are specifically targeted to Latino and black readerships [16], respectively. During the study period, those magazines with available audience data had an average annual audience ranging from approximately 5.70 million (*Stuff*) to 23.74 million (*Sports Illustrated*) among the population aged 12 years and older, and from 1.29 million (*Stuff*) to 5.27 million (*Sports Illustrated*) among young people aged 12–20 years [17].

Between January 1, 2003 and December 31, 2007, alcohol advertisements were collected from the print editions of these magazines. An alcohol advertisement was considered eligible if its primary focus was the promotion of an alcoholic product; thus, alcohol company ads focusing primarily on responsible drinking without mention of a product were excluded. Each unique execution, or “creative,” was analyzed once, although a creative might reappear several times (termed “occurrences”). We recorded each occurrence to track creatives that occurred multiple times, potentially in different years or in different magazines.

For each publication, we applied coterminous annual average youth and adult audience data from magazine readership surveys conducted by Mediamark Research (GfK MRI), a widely used source for audience information. A full description of the Media-

mark methodology is available in reports published by the Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth at <http://www.camy.org>.

Coding scheme

The protocol for coding ads consisted of several components. First, one coder (E.R.) coded each ad for “structural components” [11], such as the alcohol type (alcopops, beer, spirits, wine), brand, and when and where it occurred. “Alcopops” are also referred to as “low-alcohol refreshers,” “malternatives,” or “flavored malt beverages.” During the time of this analysis, many of the brands in this category had alcohol contents of between 4% and 6%, similar to most traditional malt beverages [18]. Next, we coded ads for four risk codes, two arising from previous research and two that we identified as having clear health and safety implications. The former comprised what we termed “injury content”—drawn from Austin and Hust [12], who used the term “risky activities” to identify depictions of models engaged in dangerous behaviors—and “overconsumption content”—drawn from Finn and Strickland’s study on [11] identification of depictions of “heavy or frequent consumption.” The latter two codes that we identified and added to these risk codes were “addiction content” and “violations of industry guidelines.” The coding scheme is outlined in Table 1. Note that although voluntary industry guidelines contain language related to injury, overconsumption, and addiction (although these exact terms are not always used), some researchers have found these codes require further specification to operationalize them [19]. Consequently, we defined these categories more clearly than they are defined in the industry guidelines.

In addition to these risk codes, we coded each ad for its main modes of appealing to the audience. Using Finn and Strickland’s [11] coding scheme for alcohol ads as a conceptual starting point, we applied the iterative reflexive process of ECA. This approach allowed themes to emerge from the data [14] and preserved the context of the advertisements, for instance, those that were part of a “campaign.” Using this process, a fixed coding scheme was developed (Table 1), consisting of the four a priori risk codes and two codes developed through ECA, which we termed sex-related codes. Codes were not mutually exclusive. Once the coding scheme was solidified, its reliability was tested by two coders (E.R. and D.J.) using a subset of 100 creatives, generating Cohen’s κ values [20] (Table 1). Then, the entire data set was reviewed to ensure that each ad was evaluated using this final coding scheme.

Brand data

To understand to what extent youth audiences were exposed to problematic content, we obtained the ratios of youth to adult exposure from the Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth for each brand based on Mediamark data, measured in gross rating points (GRP) generated for youth (age: 12–20 years) versus adult (age: ≥ 21 years) audiences. GRP are a per capita measure of advertising exposure based on media research surveys. A brand with a youth-to-adult ratio >1 indicates that young people aged 12–20 years were per capita more likely to see ads for this brand than were adults. GRP ratios were averaged for the 5-year study period; however, for many brands, GRP data were not available for all 5 years of the study period, and thus the average GRP ratio was determined using the year(s) available. Average GRP ratios were applied in the analysis mentioned later in the text.

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