

'Drink responsibly' messages in alcohol ads promote products, not public health

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Alcohol industry magazine ads reminding consumers to "drink responsibly" or "enjoy in moderation" fail to convey basic public health information, according to a new study from the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

A report on the research, published in the September issue of *Drug and Alcohol Dependence*, analyzed all [alcohol ads](#) that appeared in U.S. magazines from 2008 to 2010 to determine whether messages about responsibility define [responsible drinking](#) or provide clear warnings about the risks associated with [alcohol consumption](#).

According to the study, most of the ads analyzed (87 percent) incorporated a responsibility message, but none actually defined responsible drinking or promoted abstinence at particular times or in certain situations. When responsibility messages were accompanied by a product tagline or slogan, the messages were displayed in smaller font than the company's tagline or slogan 95 percent of the time.

Analysis of the responsibility messages found that 88 percent served to reinforce promotion of the advertised product, and many directly contradicted scenes depicted in the ads. For example, a vodka ad displayed a photograph of an open pour of alcohol with a tagline that implied the drinker had been partying all night. In small lettering, the same ad advised the audience to enjoy the product responsibly.

"While responsibility messages were present in almost nine out of ten

ads, none of them provided any information about what it means to drink responsibly," says study leader Katherine Clegg Smith, PhD, an associate professor in the Department of Health, Behavior and Society at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. "Instead, we found that the vast majority of responsibility messages were used to convey promotional information, such as appealing product qualities or how the product should be consumed."

Federal regulations do not require "responsibility" statements in alcohol advertising, and while the alcohol industry's voluntary codes for marketing and promotion emphasize responsibility, they provide no definition for "responsible drinking."

"The contradiction between appearing to promote responsible drinking and the actual use of 'drink responsibly' messages to reinforce product promotion suggests that these messages can be deceptive and misleading," said David Jernigan, PhD, director of the Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

A better option for promoting responsible drinking in advertising would be to replace or supplement unregulated messages with prominently placed, tested warning messages that directly address behaviors presented in the ad and that do not reinforce marketing messages, Smith says.

"We know from experience with tobacco that warning messages on product containers and in advertising can affect consumption of potentially dangerous products," she says. "We should apply that knowledge to alcohol ads and provide real warnings about the negative effects of excessive [alcohol](#) use."

More information: "Defining strategies for promoting product

through 'drink responsibly' messages in magazine ads for beer, spirits and alcopops" *Drug and Alcohol Dependence*, 2014.

Provided by Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health

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