Mixed Alcohol Messages in Television Series: Product Placement Meets Edutainment

Cristel Russell, Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand
Dale Russell, Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand

Television programs often include mixed messages about alcohol: whereas product placements create positive associations with alcohol, entertainment-education efforts communicate the negative consequences of drinking. This research addresses the impact of these mixed alcohol messages on consumers’ drinking attitudes, beliefs and behaviors. We report research findings based on The O.C., a teen television series where mixed alcohol messages abound. A content analysis of the series and a survey of viewers provide initial evidence that EE efforts are often drowned by the abundance of pro-alcohol messages that operate under the radar.

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**Symposia Summary**

**Entertainment-Education: Dramatic Vehicles and Health Education**

Barbara Stern, Rutgers University, USA

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**Session Overview**

**Introduction**

The term “symposium” derives from the Greek word for “fellow-drinker” and was popularized by Plato’s *Symposium* (c. 5th C. B.C.E.), where it refers to a discussion among banquet guests about “love, idealism, creativity, sex, and the effects of alcohol” (Sparschott, p. 576). By 1784, (Symposia or Table Talk in the month of September 1784), it was defined more soberly as a meeting for discussion of some subject, “a collection of opinions delivered…by a number of persons on some special topic” (*Oxford English Dictionary* 2005). Nonetheless, the definition was somewhat less solemn in that the Symposia was labeled “a rhapsodical hodge-podge,” which the authors of the following proposal wish to avoid. Rather, in the spirit of conviviality, we aim at intellectual nourishment conducive to ongoing conversation accompanied by food and drink.

**Objective**

The session focuses on a specific form of modern “intellectual entertainment”—the creation and use of entertainment-education (EE) media vehicles both to promote good health practices (regular medical checkups) and to deter bad ones (dangers of alcohol or tobacco). Our objective is to gather presenters from different theoretical and methodological perspectives who examine dramatic EE vehicles such as sitcoms and soap operas, and who use theories borrowed from the humanities (rhetoric, drama criticism) and the social sciences (social psychology, cognitive psychologies) to educate consumers about the importance of healthy living and disease prevention. The discussion will be led by the author of a fotonovela—here, a comic book called “No Vale La Pena (It’s Not Worth It)—aimed at warning Hispanic immigrants about the dangers of entering the methamphetamine trade. To stimulate discussion, he will distribute copies so that the attendees can exchange opinions about a real-world EE exemplar.

In this way, the session functions as a symposium insofar as it is a meeting ground for different perspectives on EE vehicles that leads to a group discussion of EE creation, message format, target audience appeal and consumer responses. The topic of using dramas to deter unhealthy behaviors should be of special interest in consumer research, which for the most part has not fully considered the issue of reaching vulnerable audiences more likely to watch dramatized messages than to read informational brochures. Our format aims at encouraging interaction among the presenters, the discussant, and the audience that may inspire research collaborations able to advance knowledge of the way that health education messages can affect consumers’ lives for the better (Singhal et al. 2004).

The importance of delivering health messages in an entertainment format lies in their capacity to persuade difficult to reach populations such as minorities or teens to whom health education messages in written materials or advertisements have little appeal. The power of EE vehicles is recognized globally, for soap operas are not only produced in or exported to most countries, but also are the most viewed media vehicles by the majority of viewing audiences in any country (in the world). Similarly, sitcoms are globally popular, and short dramatic comic books have higher penetration among less literate and economically empowered consumers, to whom information in the guise of fiction may be more accessible. EE characters who display good, but more often bad, health practices, vivify the essential dramatic conflict between characters who are good or evil, at the heart of health messages.

**General Orientation**

The symposium will begin with Hope Schau’s presentation of Cristel and Dale Russell’s study of the effects of mixed alcohol messages in a prime time television soap opera, *O.C.*, on young viewers’ beliefs about drinking. The paper first documents the intertwining of anti-alcohol EE efforts and pro-alcohol placements and then investigates audience responses. Pechmann will present a study of the efficacy of televised EE in which a sitcom incorporates anti-smoking messages to deter high/low-risk adolescents from smoking. Finally, the symposium leader, Virginia Maduena, will lead a discussion aimed at integrating the presentations by means of a Spanish comic book “*No Vale La Pena,*” that she wrote to warn migrant agricultural workers about the dangers of entering the methamphetamine trade. She will give attendees the short comic book to generate informed conversation about the effectiveness of EE as a means of conveying positive health messages to low-literate or illiterate Hispanic immigrants. Thus, the presentations focus on the form and content of positive/negative EE dramas, with the discussion providing a real-world exemplar to stimulate discussion.

**Likely Audience**

The audience is likely to include researchers interested in the consumer behavior implications of EE, public policy and health education officials, consumer advocacy groups, and international scholars, who have the language skills needed to investigate EE across the globe. Among the research topics requiring at least one partner who is fluent in another language are the macro effects of public vs. private EE funding, government regulations and the inclusion of health education messages, and product placements that influence consumption. We anticipate broad appeal stemming from both the newness of the topic and the experiential discussion focusing on “show” rather than “tell.”

**Issues to be Considered**

The central issue is the way that EE dramas function to educate and inform consumers. The underlying theory of EE as persuasive drama is applied to different messages, program types, and audiences, in order to uncover the construction of an EE stimulus, its effectiveness in promoting good, bad, and ugly health messages to consumers. The symposium will integrate different research approaches and methods that focus on encouraging positive health behaviors and discouraging poor ones.

**Contribution to Consumer Behavior Research**

Our goal is to raise awareness of dramatic popular culture vehicles that reflect consumption problems/solutions more persuasively than advertisements or written materials. Attention to the persuasion process in not fully researched EE vehicles points to similarities/differences in form, content, and audiences. Greater understanding of the way that messages work can contribute to a more sophisticated assessment of the persuasive elements built into EE dramas, the viewer responses flowing from audience consumption habits, and the cultural context in which responses occur.
EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

“Mixed Alcohol Messages In Television Series: Product Placement Meets Edutainment”
Cristel Dale Russell, Auckland University of Technology
Hope Schau, University of Arizona

This research, funded by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, addresses the impact of alcohol messages in television programming on young viewers’ attitudes about drinking, and ultimately their alcohol consumption behaviors. In this presentation, we document the nature of alcohol messages in prime time television programs and present the results of a study assessing the impact of mixed alcohol messages on consumers. Television programs often incorporate both positive and negative alcohol messages (Blair et al, 2005). Positive alcohol messages, particularly in the form of product placements, are a common occurrence within the content of television programming. Concurrently, as entertainment-education techniques become more common to tackle especially difficult issues, targeting especially vulnerable audiences, messages that communicate the negative consequences of drinking are increasingly included in the storylines of television series (Singhal and Rogers, 2002). What impact do these mixed messages have on consumers’ drinking attitudes, beliefs and behaviors? We report research findings based on The O.C., a teen television series where mixed alcohol messages abound.

In the first phase of this research, alcohol messages in The O.C. were content analyzed on the basis of the three dimensions of the tripartite typology of product placement (Russell, 2002). The analysis revealed that negative messages about alcohol (i.e., drunk driving, addiction, death, etc.) are usually discussed in the script and tend to be highly tied to the plot of the episode. However, The O.C. also contains positive messages about alcohol (i.e., having fun, relaxing, escaping problems) but those messages are conveyed visually, and mainly through the use of low plot / background type visual depictions. Hence the messages are often mixed with education-entertainment messages stemming mainly from auditory discussions that are connected to the plot and positive messages communicated visually and more subly.

The second phase was designed to test a model of how alcohol messages are related to viewers’ attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors related to alcohol. The model incorporates the dual route models of persuasion (Pettty and Cacioppo, 1984) and the concept of television connectedness, which previous research found to be a key driver of television programs’ influence (Russell, Norman, and Heckler, 2004). Previous research has shown that subtle visual messages are effective agents of persuasion due to their subtleness, whereas audio high plot messages are processed centrally and thus more likely to be countered. Data from a cross-sectional survey of 198 viewers of The O.C. provide evidence that negative alcohol messages are processed centrally. However, because these centrally processed messages are more salient, they are also easier to discount and we find no evidence of impact on viewers’ negative beliefs about drinking. Evidence is also found that the subtle pro-alcohol messages impact highly connected viewers: the more connected the viewers, the more they believe that alcohol is linked to positive consequences not only within the television series The O.C. but in real life as well.

In conclusion, we address the public policy implications of the research. The societal impact of alcohol on youth is worrying and policymakers are working to develop new strategies to address the problem of underage drinking. These efforts include working with the alcohol and media industries to limit alcohol messaging to youths (Leavitt, 2006) as well as entertainment-education campaigns to communicate the risks associated with alcohol consump-

tion. However, this research provides initial evidence that EE efforts are often drowned by the abundance of pro-alcohol messages that operate under the radar.

“The Use of Entertainment Education to Deter Youth Smoking: Does Balance, Transformation, and a Public Service Announcement Epilogue Help or Hurt?”
Cornelia (Connie) Pechmann, University of California, Irvine
Liangyan Wang, University of California, Irvine

Entertainment Education on television is seriously underutilized in tobacco control as compared to other health domains such as AIDs, and experts opine that it is the most critical addition to tobacco control that can be made (Singhal and Rogers 2004). Entertainment Education costs very little because most costs are underwritten by television networks. Networks voluntarily embed educational content in plots or subplots and generally only seek assistance to ensure accuracy. In the United States, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Institute on Drug Abuse, National Institute of Mental Health, and Office of National Drug Control Policy promote Entertainment Education.

The aim of this research is to assess the efficacy of a various approaches to using Entertainment Education for youth smoking prevention. Many experts recommend three specific approaches to conveying an educational but entertaining message: use a balanced or two-sided (vs. one-sided) message, show character transformation, and include a public service announcement epilogue (Greenberg et al. 2004). However, other experts have expressed concern that balance may be confusing, and that an epilogue may be counterproductive (Slater 2002). No controlled study of these issues have been conducted.

We studied a real episode of the youth-targeted situation comedy Clueless called “Model Smoker.” Clueless is a popular show in reruns but the “Model Smoker” episode does not appear in the rerun schedule so there is no prior exposure and clean tests can be conducted. We created and experimentally tested eight different versions of the episode to identify the best and worst approaches to conveying the antismoking educational content. A prime objective was to study any possible adverse effects, particularly among smokers or those who coorient with the smoker.

In this episode of Clueless, the lead character Cher dates a new male student at her school, Brad, who is a smoker and had worked as a professional model in France; hence the title “Model Smoker.” Cher finds out that Brad smokes, expresses strong disapproval of his smoking, and ultimately decides she can no longer date him. However, the writers included substantial balanced content. Cher’s friends express approval of Brad’s smoking, and say his smoking is sexy and alluring. Brad quits smoking for Cher but immediately starts again. An antismoking public service announcement epilogue was included as well, in which Cher restates her disapproval of smoking.

We examined the effects of the episode on adolescents after it had been edited in different ways, by conducting a 2 x 2 x 2 randomized factorial experiment. A professional editor created eight versions. The content was edited to be wholly antismoking or balanced. Also the content was edited so that Brad did or did not succeed in quitting smoking and transforming into a nonsmoker. Finally, the original antismoking public service announcement epilogue was included or edited out. All versions were the same length (11 minutes); control or nonsmoking scenes were used as fillers. There was also a control version with no smoking whatsoever.

We tested the versions among ninth graders. Students were released from class and sent to different rooms, where each group of students was shown a randomly selected edited version. After
showing it, we measured their thoughts and feelings about the characters and smoking in general, their coorientation with or attitudinal similarity to the smoker Brad, and their intent to smoke. Two weeks previously, we had measured students’ smoking behavior and other factors that might moderate their reactions to the episode, including personality traits such as reactance.

To understand the episode’s effects we used Reference Group Theory which posits that there are three types of reference group influence: utilitarian, value-expressive and informational (Park and Lessig 1977). Utilitarian influence dictates how people should behave to comply with society’s moral and ethical rules. Value-expressive influence dictates people should behave to achieve status and standing in society. Informational influence conveys how people often do behave to function adaptively in society and provides heuristics or rules of thumb (Cialdini et al. 1990). Reference Group Theory predicts that referent effects may be moderated by coorientation or attitudinal similarity (Price et al. 1989).

We conducted our experiment among 1429 ninth graders in several public high schools in middle to lower middle class, ethnically diverse neighborhoods. We analyzed the data using ANOVA and ANCOVA. Including either past smoking behavior or coorientation with the smoker referent as a moderator, we found three two-way interactions and a three-way interaction on intent to smoke. The interactions indicate that balance is counterproductive among smokers or those cooriented with the smoker referent because these viewers misinterpret the two-sided message as prosmoking. A public service announcement epilogue is also counterproductive for these viewers, who find it preachy. The study found counterproductive.

“The Creation and Use of “No Vale La Pena” (“It Isn’t Worth It”): A Spanish Comic Book aimed at Hispanic Migrant Workers about the Dangers of the Methamphetamine Trade”

Virginia Maduena, Imagen Public Relations Agency
Barbara Stern, Rutgers University

This presentation describes the development of a Spanish-language comic book (a graphic novella) to distribute to Hispanic farm workers in central California in order to warn them against entering the lucrative but dangerous methamphetamine trade. The audience is low-literate in English, and often in Spanish as well, isolated in the central valley, and often illegally in the U.S. The valley is the center of meth production in the area, and according to Mark Pazin, the county Sheriff, is also a central distribution point for the drug. Migrant workers are likely to be lured into meth production by promises of big money, lack of danger, and low likelihood of being caught. Nonetheless, production is highly dangerous insofar as the cooking process takes place near houses and trailers, releasing toxic fumes near where the workers’ families live.

The promises attract migrant workers, who cannot be warned by means of informative booklets that tend to require higher literacy levels to be comprehended. The author, also a city Councilwoman, developed a more effective means of reaching the audience by creating a free print comic book to be distributed in Hispanic supermarkets across California, and the books were so successful that the first 15,000 were quickly snapped up. Somewhat later, Ben Duran, the President of Mercer Community College, worked with the author to create a videonovela that dramatized the story of the family tragedy and was shown in various locales such as churches, schools, and so forth.

The reason for the positive reception of both the comics and the video lies in their familiarity to the primarily Mexican audience: both fotonovelas (Spanish-language print comic books with pictures and simple text) and telenovelas (Spanish-language electronic soap operas) originated in Mexico, where they have remained popular for over a century. Men and women carry the pocket-sized books with them, and are avid fans of the soaps. Both forms are dramas, presenting outsize and recognizable good versus evil characters in family situations that notwithstanding their exaggerations typify universal emotions such as love, hate, envy, deceitfulness, indifference, rage, and so forth. Clear-cut villains and heroes act out scenarios of romance or vengeance, and consumption of goods and services plays a central role in the plot.

“No Vale La Pena” pits the central character, Jose, a farmworker who agrees to meth production against his pregnant wife, who does not want him to. She becomes sicker and sicker, finally losing the baby, and Jose’s daughter dies as a result of inhaling the fumes. These popular culture forms do not contain explicit anti-drug messages, which would disrupt the dramatic progress by introducing a narrative voice, but, rather, follow the drama conventions of characters who interact with others—that is, they show rather than tell what happens. In this way, they draw the audience directly into the plot without any interpolating voice telling audiences what to think (Stern 2007), and hence avoid the preachiness of an appended epilogue that Pechmann and Wang’s study found counterproductive.

REFERENCES