Please Drink Responsibly! the Effectiveness of Responsibility Messages in Alcohol Product Advertising

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There is no general consensus on the effectiveness of responsibility messages in alcohol advertisements. The aim of the current research is to address the shortcomings in the literature and to investigate the effectiveness of brief warning messages as it relates to presentation modality. In study 1, we content analyzed brief responsibility messages within the product ads for companies promoting alcohol in 2007 on national network and cable television, N=596. Our study 2 experimentally addresses the questions of optimizing placement and format of responsibility messages by manipulating industry-manufactured spots.

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Among important factors influencing national alcohol consumption is alcohol advertising. Longitudinal studies have shown that exposure to alcohol advertising leads to drinking initiation, and to an increase in drinking rates (Snyder et al., 2006). Alcohol advertising on television keeps growing, especially alcohol advertising toward American youth (Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth (CAMY) 2007), while alcohol responsibility advertising remains low.

CAMY defines responsibility advertising as alcohol industry-sponsored ads (corporate PSAs) in which responsibility (drinking responsibly, avoiding drunk driving, and addressing underage drinking) is the primary focus of the message. Content analysis using Nielsen data found that corporate PSAs make up less than three percent of the nearly 1.5 million alcohol televised advertising from 2001 to 2005 (CAMY 2007).

CAMY report (2007) dismisses brief warning messages within product ads as “ineffective” and cites Fox et al.’s (1998) study as the evidence. Such dismissal is puzzling and unfortunate because: a) Fox’s study actually concluded that responsibility messages had warning value, albeit a limited one (p. 57), and b) the investigated warnings were all print-based and thusly differed from video messages that last several seconds. The aim of the current study is to address the shortcomings in the literature and to investigate the effectiveness of brief warning messages as it relates to presentation modality.

There is no general consensus on the effectiveness of responsibility messages in alcohol advertisements. Snyder and Blood (1992) as well as Ringold (2002) found support for a boomerang effect under which the exposure to alcohol warnings actually created more favorable attitudes toward alcohol among viewers; however, MacKinnon and Lapin (1998) were not able to find a similar effect in two replication experiments. Just as Fox et al. (1998), these studies investigated print ads. Studies investigating TV ads specifically focused on the effectiveness of corporate PSAs. These studies concluded that responsibility messages sponsored by alcohol companies are ambiguous, and are never dissociated from the actual alcohol consumption and product promotion (Agostinelli and Grube, 2002; CAMY, 2007; Dejong et al., 1992).

The Wine Institute and the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States self-regulate their advertising practices using self-initiated marketing and advertising guidelines. Interestingly, the guidelines do not address either corporate PSA or on responsibility messages within the product ads (ICAP, 2001).

In study 1, we content analyzed brief responsibility messages within the product ads (N=596) of companies promoting alcohol in 2007 on national network and cable television. We found that the most common channel for the responsibility message was through text on the screen (93% of the total advertisements); a small percentage used a voice over only (5%); and 16% used both text and voice messages. Responsibility messages lasted 3 seconds on average for 15 and 30 second spots, and appeared closer to the end of a spot. In addition, 58% of text messages were combined with other textual information in a way that was very difficult to read.

Such numbers are in conflict with existing evidence that: a) messages using both video and textual information are more likely to be remembered compared to one channel alone (Krugman et al., 1994), b) when video and text are shown simultaneously, individuals pay more attention to video (Kallenbach et al., 2007), c) verbal information leads to greater learning relative to textual information (Mcneil, 2005), and d) primacy effect elicits higher recall and elaboration relative to recency placement (Brunel and Nelson 2003; Haugtvedt and Wegener 1994). In other words, if there was a formula on how to strategically place a warning message within an ad it would have to be a complete opposite of what was found. This is ironic, because effective placement and modality of responsibility messages may actually be more important and beneficial to manufacturers and not consumers. Arguably, consumers’ attention during and recall after the message presentation may lead to positive evaluations of a product manufacturer as socially responsible. It is relevant to mention that the portrayal of responsibility by alcohol companies was found to be directly correlated to increases in market share, which is a major goal for the industry (Dejong et al., 1992).

The arguments presented above indicate that research on modality of responsibility messages in advertising is long overdue. How long should the warnings last in order to be noticed? How should the warning messages be presented? Our second study employs a 4 x 2 between-subjects factorial design, investigating the effect of responsibility message presentation mode (no message, text only, voice only, text + voice) and advertising length (15-second ads and 30-second ads) on the dependent variables of effectiveness: attention and recall, short-term drinking intention, attitudes toward manufacturer. Current drinking behaviors and tendency to enjoy advertising will
be tested as moderators. We use industry-manufactured ads as our stimuli. Following our review, we first propose the following hypotheses and research questions regarding message presentation.

H1: Combined text and voice message presentation mode will be more effective than text or voice only.
H2: Voice only message presentation will be more effective than text only message presentation.
RQ1: Is text only presentation mode more effective than no presentation mode?

Because it is not clear whether responsibility messages in 15-second ads will differ in effectiveness from those in 30-second ads, we ask the following:

RQ2: Is there a difference in message effectiveness between 30-second ads and 15-second ads?

Responsibility messages last for approximately three seconds for both length formats, and make up 10 percent and 20 percent of the total length respectively for 30 and 15-second ads. It is possible that higher percentage of the total length will be more effective.

It is important to note that in the current experiment, message effectiveness will be measured in more than one way (i.e. message recall as well as drinking intentions). Hence it is possible that even coherently and effectively presented message might actually not have any impact on individual’s responsible drinking behavior. Quite the contrary, exposure to alcohol advertising may overweight the warning message and lead to higher degrees of drinking intentions.

Since there is a potential for responsibility message effectiveness to have a positive effect on manufacturer’s perceived social responsibility and good will, we ask:

RQ3: Is there a relationship between message effectiveness and perceived corporate responsibility?

The follow-up experiments will use similar 4 x 2 designs to specifically investigate the effectiveness of primacy and recency placement strategies.

Key References

Short-Term and Long-Term Affective Responses: A Comparison between Emotions and Sentiments
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Affective responses have been presented in academic literature as important elements in the study of consumer behavior as they influence the evaluation, memory and judgment processes (Gardner, 1985). Some studies have sought to demonstrate that affective