

**Monroe, J. (1994, December 12). Alcohol and Ads: What Effect Do They Have? Current Health, pp. 24-26.**

## **OVERVIEW**

Some of TV's most creative advertising promotes alcohol. The problem is that these colorful, imaginative, and eye-catching ads often attract the attention of minors.

The alcohol industry spends \$2 billion annually in advertising and promoting their products. The majority of these ads run during televised sporting events viewed by both teens and adults. Some advertisers hire famous personalities that are recognizable to young people to promote their products.

By age 18, the average American teen will have seen 100,000 televised beer commercials. Many experts insist that these ads encourage underage drinking, establish an early loyalty to a brand, and contribute to the current rise in teen alcoholism. Medical complications from alcoholism (which may take decades to develop in adults) can cause a teenage drinker to develop an addiction within months because teens are still developing physically, mentally, and emotionally. Some teens also participate in binge drinking (having five or more drinks in a short period of time) which can be fatal. Each year, underage drinkers consume about 1.1 billion cans of beer and more than one third of all wine coolers sold.

Alcohol producers maintain that their ads are geared toward adult viewers and deny that the ads encourage teen drinking or create teen alcoholics. They say that the ads are designed to encourage drinkers to switch brands or continue to drink their present brand. Dr. Jean Kilbourne, former advisor to the U.S. Surgeon General, disagrees. Kilbourne believes that Americans are drinking at earlier ages as a direct result of advertising aimed at teens. Alcohol ads do not specify an age for their target audience. They encourage all viewers to use their product, whether they are adults, teens, non-drinkers, light drinkers, or heavy drinkers.

Dwayne James, who helped conduct a 1992 study for the National Safety Council on teen alcohol use, also wonders about the audiences the alcohol producers are trying to reach. "Although the alcohol industry declares that it's not targeting teen drinkers...(they) have a very good knack for putting

ads on during times when teens are watching TV shows." An example is Indiana's Sweet 16, the high school basketball playoff, which is televised each year to thousands of excited teens and adults. One of the major advertisers is a large alcohol producer that runs numerous ads during the event.

The message of alcohol ads is also called into question. "(The ads) show how much fun it is to drink and how popular it makes you. The ads say 'Fit in. Have fun. Drink,'" says James. The ads try to create an image by linking alcohol with something people want. Seeing groups of people being successful in social settings or looking attractive and fit may tempt viewers to buy a brand of beer or wine cooler so that they can be like the image. Also, since the ads are so common, people tend to accept the idea that alcohol use is a part of everyday life.

The advertisers provide a one-sided look at their products. They do not show the dark side of drinking. They do not show the way drinking impairs judgment or how it affects your system. They do not show the specific problems with teen drinking, such as slipping grades, troubles with family and friends, trouble with the law, and auto accidents, to name a few. It has been found that before leaving high school, one third of all students have a serious problem in school, at home, or with the law because of alcohol use. According to the American Council for Drug Education, alcohol-related problems account for 500,000 college dropouts a year.

Some breweries currently sponsor ads featuring well-known personalities warning "know when to say when." Other American alcohol manufacturers have launched alcohol-awareness campaigns of their own. However, the threat to teens remains as long as the ads continue to be prevalent during prime time programming and as long as their message neglects to address the dark side of drinking.

## **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION**

1. What do you think of the messages of beer ads?
2. Do you find yourself paying closer attention to ads that feature celebrities or athletes?
3. What do you think of the "know when to say when" campaign? What types of programs or promotions do you think would help deter teenage drinkers?

## **IMPLICATIONS**

1. Alcohol companies often run their ads during prime time programming or sporting events. The sheer volume of ads coupled with their imagery of people drinking and having fun sends a dangerous message to teens.
2. Anti-smoking campaigns have been effective in raising awareness about the dangers of smoking and generating public support for smoking legislation. Campaigns to illustrate the dangers of teenage drinking—both physical and emotional—should also be launched.

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