

SPECIAL SECTION:
COMMUNICATION ON ALCOHOL

Are “Drink Responsibly” Alcohol Campaigns Strategically Ambiguous?

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This article applies the concept of strategic ambiguity in examining viewer responses to brewer-sponsored “responsible drinking” television advertising campaigns. Strategically ambiguous messages are designed to engender diverse interpretations between varied audience segments, and these different selective perceptions should translate into relatively uniform positive corporate images. In this study, teenage and young adult respondents were shown a series of television spots from two leading alcohol companies. As predicted, there was a high degree of diversity in meanings of message content and campaign purpose derived by viewers, particularly among less sophisticated teenagers. Moreover, evaluative ratings of messages and sponsors were generally favorable and more uniform than interpretive responses. The research demonstrates how seemingly prohealth messages can serve to subtly advance both industry sales and public relations interests.

Self-regulation and marketing communication tactics are two strategies employed by national brewers and distillers in an effort to curb the rising criticism of their product and its advertising. The nation’s largest brewers, Anheuser-Busch, Miller Brewing, and Coors, are involved in consumer awareness activities to fight alcohol misuse issues of drinking and driving and underage drinking and to promote responsible consumption of beer by adults who choose to drink. Anheuser-Busch has run an advertising campaign promoting “Know When to Say When,” and Coors ran a similar advertising campaign promoting “Not Now,” and “21 Means 21.”

These industry campaigns may seem similar to public service announcements (PSAs) sponsored by governmental agencies or public interest groups (e.g., Mothers Against Drunk Driving) in that they both promote a message on be-

half of a cause. The “drink responsibly” ad campaigns developed by the brewers, however, are usually designed with two goals in mind: (a) to create a positive image (or reputation) for the firm and (b) to communicate the firm’s view on a social, business, or environmental issue (Belch & Belch, 2001). Hence, these campaigns may reflect a hybrid of conventional commercials and PSAs that can be termed *private service messages*. On one hand the campaign may create a positive image or reputation for the firm if target audiences—consumers (both current and potential), public health advocates, or legislators—equate the campaigns with being socially responsible. But at the same time, the ads may still communicate messages that promote brand preference and product consumption.

One theoretical framework presented here for examining audience responses to “drink responsibly” campaigns is derived from the strategic ambiguity approach for attaining organizational goals. This report begins with a description of the central ideas of the strategic ambiguity perspective and

how it lends itself to the study of “drink responsibly” ad campaigns followed by presentation of findings from a study measuring viewer responses to “drink responsibly” television commercials.

STRATEGIC AMBIGUITY

This perspective is characterized by the strategic and purposeful use of messages with high levels of abstraction to simultaneously accomplish multiple, and often conflicting, organizational goals. Strategically ambiguous messages are designed to engender different interpretations of the same set of symbols within and across different receivers (Eisenberg, 1984). Strategic ambiguity is a relational concept arising through a combination of source, message, and receiver variables; it takes into account the entire context of sender goals and message content, as well as individual differences among and within receivers. Strategic ambiguity is independent of perceived ambiguity; in some cases, the message may seem vague and abstract, but other executions that appear to be quite clear and literal may nevertheless elicit diverse responses among various segments of the audience. In analyzing the influence process, attention focuses on the differential interpretations drawn by receivers in processing the symbolic representations. This can be differentiated from attitudinal ambiguity, which focuses on the meaning of a receiver’s neutral response on an attitude scale, and from attitudinal ambivalence, which focuses on receivers’ simultaneous and conflicting positive and negative evaluation of an attitude object (Priester, 2002). In the strategic ambiguity perspective, a source with multiple goals creates messages that can engender differential interpretations among different audience segments and can engender multiple interpretations of sender goals within the individual.

There are two primary outcomes of strategic ambiguity: (a) diversity of message interpretations within and between audience segments, and (b) widespread consensus in bottom-line attitudinal outcomes across the overall audience. To attain diverse responses, an ambiguous message facilitates inference-making by receivers who “fill in” context and meaning according to their attitudinal predispositions and cognitive processing abilities (Bruner, 1964; Capella & Street, 1989; Kellerman & Lim, 1989; Lord, 1985; Ortony, 1978; Smith, 1995; Wyer & Carlston, 1979; Wyer & Gordon, 1984).

Previous research examining strategically ambiguous messages supports the idea of diverse message interpretation. For example, Contractor and Ehrlich (1993) investigated the impact of strategically ambiguous messages on the development of a multimillion dollar research organization at a major university and found that the organization’s development was enhanced by allowing for multiple interpretations among key constituents. Markham (1996), while studying work communication in a small graphics firm, found that management

used intentionally ambiguous messages to foster freedom, creativity, and flexibility.

In examining persuasive impact on individuals, the outcomes of interest are acceptance of advocated positions and formation of favorable corporate images and attitudes. Strategic ambiguity can facilitate selective perception of message content, preempt counterarguing, and minimize source derogation; indeed, source attributions may be amplified, particularly if the organization appears to be acting against its own best interests (Eisenberg, 1984).

Very few studies have examined ambiguity in the context of advertising or advertising-related communication. The effect of perceived ambiguity, defined traditionally in terms of unclear meaning, was investigated by Hitchon, Duckler, and Thorson (1994) in the context of consumer responses to music video commercials for a variety of product categories. Perceived incoherence decreased attitudes toward the brand and the ad. If the ads had been able to engender individually clear interpretations that varied within and across audience segments (the premise of strategic ambiguity), then attitudes toward the brands and the ads should have increased.

In addition, Ha and Hoch (1989; Hoch & Ha, 1986) examined the role of ambiguity, as defined by the distinctiveness of brands and the potential for multiple interpretations of quality. They concluded that consumers are easily convinced by ambiguous evidence in ads that can not be easily disconfirmed by them. The findings from this study are more consistent with the strategic ambiguity approach, as they allow for multiple interpretations of quality and uniform positive outcomes for the ads. Therefore, it appears that strategic ambiguity can be applied to “drink responsibly” beer campaigns as well.

PURPOSES OF “DRINK RESPONSIBLY” CAMPAIGNS

The goals of a “drink responsibly campaign” appear to be, as previously asserted, a blending of conventional commercial and public service messages. First and foremost, brewers may seek to maximize sales of the company brand by increasing both specific brand share and overall product demand (Wallack, Dorfman, Jernigan, & Themba, 1993). Like most marketers, the alcohol companies seek to create and reinforce brand name preference and loyalty by projecting distinctive brand imagery and extolling advantageous substantive attributes. In addition, the ad campaigns are designed to promote generic benefits of alcohol consumption by portraying drinking as an attractive and rewarding practice.

Second, a beer company may seek to enhance its corporate image and reputation by displaying sensitivity and concern about the well-being of its customers and by projecting the company as respectable, prosocial, and community-minded (Atkin, 2002; DeJong, Atkin, & Wallack, 1992). It also is important for advertising to help diminish drinking

inhibitions by depicting alcohol as a socially acceptable and physically harmless product, thereby attempting to dispel consumer worries about the negative psychological, social, moral, and health outcomes. In these ads the companies attempt to accomplish a selling function without undermining the corporate reputation or industry responsibility goals. Current research supports the idea that the establishment and maintenance of a positive corporate evaluation made by all corporate stakeholders hinges on corporate credibility (Fombrun, 1996; Gregory, 1991). This goal is part of an industry-wide effort to combat potential societal controls (i.e., government regulation) over the marketing of alcohol products. It should be noted that these two goals are interrelated and often mutually reinforcing. For example, an enhanced corporate image tends to strengthen brand preferences and may also deflect blame and diminish support for government regulation.

A third, and most manifest, communication goal is to actually diminish alcohol problems such as injuries, diseases, and antisocial acts (Atkin, 2004; DeJong & Atkin, 1995). Campaigns can do this by encouraging prevention of drunkenness and drunk driving, and this reflects actual concern on the part of the beer companies.

The brewers' campaigns mounted in the past few years can be analyzed using the strategic ambiguity approach that simultaneously achieves diverse effects on multiple viewing audiences by using universal appeals rather than narrowly targeted messages in commercial campaigns. Most fundamentally, they may attempt to differentially influence the mainstream general public and elites (who are most concerned about societal drinking problems) versus younger and heavier drinkers (who consume most of the product) versus problem drinkers (who drink excessively or drive drunk), while giving all audiences the impression that they are sharing the same interpretations. The campaigns have been criticized for being too ambiguous to be effective, for mollifying critics, and serving a public relations function (Abramson, 1991; Beatty, 1997; Beaver, 1997; J. A. Brown, 1991). The strategic ambiguity approach can show how the campaigns could serve all of these functions, as well as combating dangerous drinking practices and selling the product.

Strategically ambiguous messages are designed to engender different interpretations within and between audience segments but with widespread consensus in bottom-line outcomes. Therefore, it is expected that the ultimate outcome of "drink responsibly" messages will be a widely shared positive impression of the sponsoring companies and their campaigns. This is the pattern of responses that is predicted by the strategic ambiguity approach (Eisenberg, 1984). Hence, based on the preceding discussions, the following hypotheses are offered:

H1: Interpretations of message content and campaign purpose will be highly diverse, as manifested by an evenly spread distribution of answers across the full

range of multiple response categories on the items measuring ad appearance, drinking portrayals, sponsor motives, numerical guidelines, and underage policies.

H2: Interpretations of campaign purpose will be highly diverse, as evidenced by simultaneous holding of multiple perceptions across divergent dimensions of sponsor motives and underage policies.

H3: Compared to interpretations, the multiple evaluations of corporate image and attitudes toward sponsoring companies will be more uniform and positive.

DIFFERENTIAL RESPONSE BY AGE LEVEL

Age level is a key individual difference variable that is expected to mediate audience responses to "drink responsibly" campaign messages because developmental progression during adolescence has maturational implications for both sophistication of message processing and predisposition toward alcohol.

A teenage viewer who has not yet progressed to an advanced stage of development or attained several years of experience with the specific domain of alcohol products and messages will not be sufficiently prepared to process these campaign spots in a sophisticated manner. A more elaborate array of media literacy skills for analyzing media messages competently (J. A. Brown, 1998; Christ & Potter, 1998) is required to fully understand the motives and techniques of "drink responsibly" advertisers (Boush, 2001; D. A. Brown, 2001; J. A. Brown, 1991; Martin, 1997; Paxson, 2003; Potter, 2001, 2004).

This study examines the age range from middle teenage years through early twenties. During this period of development, young people are steadily advancing their information processing skills and gradually adopting more responsible alcohol predispositions (Atkin, 2004; Grube, 2004). Although these forms of progression are linear, comparisons will be drawn between the younger segment of respondents in high school (ages 15–18) versus the older segment in early adulthood (ages 19–22).

Most college-age young adults will have gained the requisite combination of maturity, experience, savvy, and skepticism to see through superficial message attributes and appeals to detect the underlying strategies of "drink responsibly" campaigns and to form more distinct and uniform interpretations of these messages (however, their sophistication may also lead to a greater likelihood of simultaneously perceiving multiple meanings and purposes in the ambiguous messages, which is a secondary indicator of diversity). In terms of alcohol predispositions, a substantial majority of this older age group can be characterized as moderately permissive; most of them regularly consume alcohol and are generally favorable toward drinking, whereas relatively small segments exhibit either restrictive antidrinking

or extreme prodrunkenness orientations (Felsted, 1986; Johnston, O'Malley, & Bachman, 1995). This also will produce less divergent interpretations of ambiguous messages.

On the other hand, teenagers still in high school are still relatively naive regarding these types of campaigns. Specifically, they may treat the messages at face value by perceiving the public service component as the dominant theme. Further, these adolescents bring more disparate sets of predispositions regarding the subject of alcohol. There is greater polarization within this age group, with substantial proportions of "conservatives" (who are predrinkers or disapproving of alcohol) versus "permissives" (who mainly drink to get drunk) and a smaller segment falling in the moderately prodrinking range of the continuum (Felsted, 1986; Johnston et al., 1995). In interpreting "drink responsibly" messages, teenagers are more likely to exhibit highly diverse responses because of these tendencies.

Based on this discussion, the following hypothesis is offered:

- H4: There will be a greater diversity in perceptual responses among the teenage audience segment than among young adults.

STRATEGIC MESSAGE CONTENT EXECUTIONS UNDER STUDY

In the Anheuser-Busch campaign, the primary slogan is "Know When to Say When." The messages also advise people to: "Drink responsibly," "Always be in control," "Be responsible," "When you're having a beer you've got to make the right call," "Don't drink and drive ... it's crazy driving any car when you've had too much to drink," "If you've been drinking, pass your car keys to someone who hasn't," "If you've been drinking, don't take your show on the road," and "Please use a designated driver." Visually, most messages portray drinkers enjoying alcohol in a party setting (although several are of the "talking head" variety). The spots never depict the harmful consequences of excessive or unsafe drinking.

The content of these messages features an array of ambiguities that enable the audience to draw differential interpretations: First, the spots do not clearly define *when* to stop drinking, either in terms of quantity consumed or degree of intoxication. Hence, light and moderate drinkers may interpret that vague stopping point conservatively, whereas heavy drinkers may interpret it quite liberally, or even regard it as a challenge to be reached or exceeded. Basically, the "Know When" spots do not explain how a drinker can recognize that moment of knowledge.

Second, the spots do not suggest the option of nondrinking for certain situations or certain types of individuals (e.g., youth, pregnant women, alcoholics). In particular, the message does not proscribe drinking by drivers; by rec-

ommending "know when" in the context of driving, it assumes that the driver will be consuming some alcohol.

Third, the spots do not clearly apply the guideline to nondriving situations. Some versions recommend "know when" in the context of driving, implying that in other situations one does not have to follow the recommendation.

The Coors "Not Now" campaign presents a set of spots featuring a basic format: brief visual depictions of a series of acceptable drinking settings (parties, campfires, and sports events) for which song lyrics labeling Coors as the "right beer now," intercut with three obviously risky situations for which the announcer progressively disclaims as "not now," "definitely not now," and "absolutely, positively not now."

Two forms of ambiguity can be seen in the Coors spots. First, there is a manifest commercial element in each message, in direct juxtaposition with the distinct warnings about unsafe drinking. Second, the ads do not clearly specify whether "not now" means zero consumption, no additional consumption, or a limited quantity of consumption. There also is further confusion because some "not now" situations include strong adjectives (e.g., "definitely," "absolutely," and "positively").

METHOD AND PROCEDURE

Stimuli and Independent Variables

This investigation measures the responses of teenagers versus young adults to an array of brewer-sponsored television spots dealing with responsible drinking and drunk driving. A total of nine ads were tested (six sponsored by Anheuser-Busch and three by Coors). The messages were packaged into three subsets of three ads each and were presented to a sample of respondents ($N = 326$) drawn from classes at several Michigan colleges and high schools ($n = 174$ young adults ages 19–22 and $n = 152$ teenagers ages 16–18); approximately one third of each age group was shown each of the three subsets of spots. Thus, more than 100 respondents saw each specimen spot, and each respondent saw three spots. In the overall sample, 44% were male and 56% were female.

Dependent Measures

The distribution of responses to each of the following items is the basis for deviation scores that will be described later. The first two sets of interpretations described following were measured immediately after exposure to each individual ad:

Perceived appearance. A pair of items assessed perceptions of the similarity of the "drink responsibly" spots to standard ads and PSAs: These items were measured along a four-step scale ranging from "very similar" to "not similar." Each item was analyzed separately to determine diversity of responses.

Perceptions of drinking portrayals. To determine how the respondents perceived the content of each beer company spot, viewers responded to the following descriptive statements on an agree–disagree scale: “This spot suggests drinking beer is fun,” “This spot encourages people to drink beer,” and “Some people in this spot look like they’ve had too much to drink.” These items were measured along a three-step scale ranging from “agree” to “neutral” to “disagree.” Each item was analyzed separately to determine diversity of responses.

Following exposure to a full set of spots, measures were taken of three types of variables encompassing interpretations of the broader campaign:

Perceived motives. Viewer perceptions of the purposes of brewer TV ad campaigns were measured with a checklist of 10 briefly defined potential motivations. Respondents were asked whether or not they thought each reason had prompted the beer company to sponsor the messages, thus their responses to these 10 items were either “yes” or “no.” They were also asked to review the list and mark which one was the most important motive. The list contained randomly ordered items representing three basic motivational dimensions: public relations (“To improve the company’s image,” “To make it appear they’re concerned,” “So the government won’t regulate alcohol,” and “To avoid getting blamed for alcohol problems”); public service (“To prevent drunk driving,” “To persuade people to avoid getting drunk,” and “Because they actually are concerned”); and commercial selling (“To make drinking look like fun,” “To make more money,” and “To sell their beer”). These items were analyzed separately.

Numerical interpretation of drinking guidelines. A pair of items sought to ascertain the meaning that the audience derived from each campaign slogan in terms of recommended quantity of consumption. Respondents were asked to write down the exact number of drinks that they believed the slogans suggested were appropriate to consume: “These messages recommend that drinkers should ‘know when to say when.’ What is your interpretation of the meaning of ‘when’—after how many cans of beer should a 150-pound adult stop drinking?” or “These messages depict several ‘not now’ situations. For these situations, how many beers do you think the Coors company wants people to drink?”

Perceived policies. To assess perceptions of the brewers’ position on underage drinking practices, respondents were asked to infer whether the companies wanted teens to think that they “should wait until they’re 21 to drink” or whether it is appropriate for teens to “drink beer in moderation” or for older teens to “get drunk on occasion.” These items were answered either as “yes” or “no.”

Finally, the questionnaire contained two sets of outcomes associated with strategic ambiguity dealing with evaluative

ratings of message substance and attitudinal ratings of the sponsoring companies.

Brewer evaluations. To assess whether viewers become more positive toward the sponsoring companies, attitudinal favorability and corporate reputation/image, as well as ratings of each company’s campaign message qualities, were measured. Corporate images were measured on a series of five-step semantic differential rating scales anchored by pairs of polar-opposite adjectives: “Caring–Uncaring,” “Responsible–Irresponsible,” “Respectable–Not Respectable,” “Trustworthy–Untrustworthy,” “Sincere–Dishonest,” and “Good–Bad.” Attitude change was assessed with a self-report item: “As a result of these messages, do you feel more favorable or less favorable toward the Anheuser-Busch (Coors) company?” To assess the campaign messages, respondents were asked to rate their “personal reaction” on a scale from 0 to 10 on these key qualities listed and briefly defined on the questionnaire: “sensible (wise, reasonable advice),” “useful (helpful and valuable information),” and “convincing (agree with ideas).”

Degree of diversity. The degree of diversity was operationalized in several ways. First, the flatness of the distribution of responses was computed with an average deviation score (AvDev) summing the absolute difference between the percentage of individuals falling in each response category versus the percentages that would be expected if there was an even spread across all categories and divided by the number of categories. An array of fairly equal percentage figures (indexed by an average deviation approaching 0%) indicates that individuals are deriving differential interpretations. For example, maximum diversity would be manifested by 25% of respondents in each of the four categories (AvDev = 0%), whereas minimal diversity would be manifested by 100% of the respondents scoring in one category (AvDev = 44%).

A more conventional measure of dispersion across multiple response categories is *kurtosis*; zero kurtosis indicates that the data are distributed normally around a single central point, positive kurtosis indicates a higher degree of clustering, whereas negative kurtosis indicates a lesser degree of clustering. A significantly negative level of kurtosis can be interpreted as representing a relatively flat distribution spread across response categories. In the analyses, kurtosis provides a compact and comparable summary statistic (*k*) and a basis for significance testing to determine whether the overall distribution differs from normality or whether the older versus younger subgroups differ to a statistically significant degree.

A different operationalization of diversity is applied to the measures of perceived motives and corporate policies, where certain answers are at least partially inconsistent with other answers: perception of company policy regarding teenage drinking as promoting abstinence versus moderation versus drunkenness and perception of the sponsor motives as both

prevention-oriented and selling-oriented. If results show that a sizable percentage of respondents derive multiple interpretations from the same sets of campaign spots, it provides another indication of diversity.

RESULTS

H1

H1 posited that interpretations of message content would be highly diverse and divergent. First, evidence is presented regarding the manifestation of evenly spread distributions of answers across response categories on perceptual categories (H1). In addition, age-related differences predicted in H4 will be reported for each dependent measure in H1 and summarized in the section on H4. The initial analyses of perceptual responses focus on the two most ambiguous spots featuring major elements that promote drinking: Anheuser-Busch's "Friends" (showing couples enjoying a noisy bar), and Coors's "Not Now" (showing drinkers at a club and a cookout, intercut with "not now" driving and jet-skiing scenes).

Perceived appearance. As seen in Table 1, there is fairly high diversity in judgments regarding the similarity of these messages to standard beer commercials. The average deviation is 8% for "Not Now" ($k = -.97, p < .05$), and 12%

for "Friends" ($k = -.62, ns$). Moreover, teenagers are almost evenly split in perceiving differing degrees of similarity of these two spots to a typical commercial designed to sell beer; the average deviation is just 3% ($k = -1.35, p < .05$). Young adults exhibit less diversity, with a 17% average deviation ($k = +.57, ns$).

Respondents tend to perceive that these spots are dissimilar to a typical PSA, but a moderate degree of diversity is still apparent for both "Not Now" (AvDev = 10%, $k = -.52, ns$) and "Friends" (AvDev = 12%, $k = -.46, ns$). The more uniformly distributed perceptions tend to be concentrated among young adults (AvDev = 18%, $k = +.33, ns$). Teenager responses are more diverse (AvDev = 11%; $k = -.81, ns$), and the kurtosis values for teenagers versus young adults differ significantly ($-.81 - .33 = -1.14, p < .05$).

Perceptions of drinking portrayals. Table 1 also shows that about two thirds of all respondents agree that the spots suggest that beer drinking is fun; there is a high average deviation of 23% for "Not Now" and 24% for "Friends," with positive kurtosis values for overall sample. This concentrated distribution is primarily due to the answers of young adults (AvDev = 34%, $k = +5.16, p < .01$), as there is considerable diversity among teenagers (AvDev = 12%, $k = -1.32, p < .05$).

On the question of whether the spot encourages drinking, the average deviation scores for the two spots are 15% and 16%, with nonsignificant kurtosis values. The responses of

TABLE 1
Viewer Responses to Two Specimen "Drink Responsibly" Spots

	Message		Age Group	
	Not Now % ^a	Friends % ^a	16-18 % ^b	19-22 % ^c
Perceived appearance				
Similarity of spot to beer commercials				
Very similar	33	49	30	53
Fairly similar	32	22	24	30
Slightly similar	21	18	26	13
Not similar	14	11	20	4
Similarity of spot to standard PSAs				
Very similar	9	11	13	6
Fairly similar	26	14	27	13
Slightly similar	45	32	40	38
Not similar	20	43	20	43
Perceptions of drinking portrayals				
Spots suggest drinking beer is fun				
Agree	68	69	52	84
Neutral	21	13	23	11
Disagree	11	18	25	5
Spots encourage beer drinking				
Agree	56	58	36	77
Neutral	25	26	37	15
Disagree	19	16	27	8
Spot characters had too much to drink				
Agree	45	24	26	51
Neutral	14	25	23	10
Disagree	39	51	51	39

^a $n = 109$. ^b $n = 102$. ^c $n = 116$.

young adults cluster in the “agree” category ($AvDev = 26\%$, $k = +2.09$, $p < .01$), whereas teenage responses result in a fairly even distribution in perception ($AvDev = 4\%$, $k = -1.36$, $p < .05$).

Perceptions of overdrinking by characters in the “Not Now” spot are polarized, with 45% agreeing and 39% disagreeing ($AvDev = 12\%$; $k = -.57$, ns); the “Friends” ad has the greatest spread on this item ($AvDev = 11\%$). Teenagers have a lower average deviation and significant kurtosis value ($+12\%$; $k = -1.14$, $p < .05$) but do not differ significantly compared to young adults ($+16\%$; $k = -.74$, ns).

Perceived motives. Table 2 presents results for the perceived purpose of the campaigns (H2), when respondents were asked whether or not the set of spots reflected each of 10 motivations. There is little diversity on the five most frequently cited motivations; more than 80% answer “Yes” rather than “No” in each of these cases. It appears that several reasons for sponsoring the campaign are quite obvious to most viewers. Nevertheless, there are four other results that are quite close to a 50–50 split with very low deviation scores: “Actual concern” “Prevent drunkenness,” and “Drinking as fun” for the Anheuser-Busch campaign, and “Forestall regulation” for the Coors campaign.

Respondents also were asked to rank which of the 10 listed reasons is the primary purpose. Combining the three subsets of items representing each basic motivational dimen-

sion, there is a fairly even three-way split in interpretation. For the Coors campaign, 39% give a top-ranking to one of the public relations motives, and 43% of those viewing the Anheuser-Busch spots rank a public relations item as most important. For the selling motives, the figures are 38% for Coors and 31% for Anheuser-Busch. Finally, 23% of the Coors viewers and 26% of the Anheuser-Busch viewers perceive that the primary purpose is public service. The average deviation figures across these three basic motives are 7% for the Coors campaign and 6% for Anheuser-Busch campaign ($k = -1.29$, $p < .05$, and -1.40 , $p < .05$, respectively).

The perceptions of the primary brewer motive are quite distinct between the two age groups. Focusing on the motivation that ranks No. 1 out of the 10 listed, 58% of young adults versus 26% of teenagers give top ranking to public relations, but for public service motives the figures are reversed, with 36% of teenagers versus 13% of young adults ranking this as most important. A relatively small difference is found on the selling dimension (29% of young adults vs. 38% of teenagers). Examining the overall pattern, there is much greater diversity of perceived motives among teenagers, with a fairly flat distribution of 26%, 36%, and 38%; the average deviation is 5% ($k = -1.41$, $p < .05$), compared to 17% for young adults ($k = +.60$, ns).

Numerical interpretation of drinking guidelines. A key question assessed how respondents interpreted the exact

TABLE 2
Percentage of Yes Interpretations of Campaign Motives and Company Policies

	Company		Age Group		
	Coors % ^a	Anheuser-Busch % ^b	16–18 % ^c	19–22 % ^d	
Selling motives					
1. Sell beer	86	93	82	94	Yes
2. Make more money	84	72	73	80	Yes
3. Show drinking as fun	71	45	49	58	Yes
Public relations motives					
1. Improve company's image	97	93	91	97	Yes
2. Appearance of concern	90	91	85	98	Yes
3. Avoid blame for problems	84	86	80	91	Yes
4. Forestall regulation	47	64	61	56	Yes
Address alcohol problems motives					
1. Prevent drunk driving	92	91	92	91	Yes
2. Actual concern	63	50	51	58	Yes
3. Prevent drunkenness	16	48	44	31	Yes
Perceived policies					
1. Shouldn't drink	37	33	45	24	Yes
2. Moderate drinking OK	54	60	49	66	Yes
3. OK to get drunk	44	39	39	42	Yes
Quantitative interpretation of drinking recommendation					
Number of “Not Now” and “Know When” beers	14	10	17	8	Six or more
	13	28	20	20	Four or five
	16	29	18	27	Three
	14	24	18	21	One or two
	25	01	13	12	Zero
	18	08	14	12	Don't know

^a $n = 109$. ^b $n = 217$. ^c $n = 102$. ^d $n = 116$.

quantity of alcohol to be consumed under the “Not Now” and “Know When” guidelines promoted by each company. The degree of diversity is remarkable in each case, as shown in Table 2. One-quarter of the sample thinks that Coors wants people to consume no drinks in a “Not Now” situation, whereas one-quarter thinks the company is recommending four or more drinks; the average deviation is 6%, and a further indication of ambiguity is the finding that almost one fifth have no idea what is meant by the recommendation. In interpreting the meaning of “Know When,” estimates are evenly spread across three levels of consumption quantity ranging from “one or two” drinks up to “four or five” drinks; overall, the average deviation is 10%. The kurtosis value for Coors is -1.34 ($p < .05$), and the Anheuser-Busch value is $-.89$ ($p < .05$). The distribution of answers is particularly dispersed for teenagers ($AvDev = 3\%$; $k = -1.13$, $p < .05$), with fairly equal proportions of responses in all six response categories. For young adults, degree of dispersion does not reach significance ($AvDev = 6\%$; $k = -.74$, ns).

Perceived policies. Table 2 also presents results for items dealing with perceived underage drinking policies of each brewer. The inferences drawn by viewers are highly divergent, with a distinct lack of unanimity in responses to the three partially contradictory statements. The deviation score averages 8% across the three policies ($AvDev = 13\%$, 4% , and 6%) for those seeing Coors campaign spots, and 13% in the case of Anheuser-Busch (17% , 10% , and 11%). Thus, the pattern of responses across the policy statements indicates that the subgroups derive diametrically opposed views of company policy after viewing the ads. This is particularly pronounced for the teenager deviation scores, which average 6%, whereas the young adult scores average 16%.

Therefore, with regard to the H1 prediction that interpretations of message content in terms of ad appearance, drinking portrayals, sponsor motives, numerical guidelines, and underage policies are highly diverse, as manifested by an evenly spread distribution of answers, ample support is provided.

H2

H2 predicted that respondents would hold multiple perceptions of sponsor motives and underage policies.

Multiple interpretations of motives and policies. H2 predicted diversity in the form of multiple interpretations among substantial proportions of the respondents, especially instances in which the response options are divergent or even contradictory. This can be examined for each campaign on the question of sponsor motivation attribution. Table 2 shows that 90% believe that the companies are creating these spots to “sell their beer,” while at the same time more than 92% believe that the spots are intended to “prevent drunk driving.”

A more clear-cut case of partially conflicting perceptions occurs among the 48% who believe that the Anheuser-Busch campaign seeks to prevent *drunkenness*; almost all of these individuals simultaneously believe that the company is also trying to sell beer. Likewise, most of the Coors viewers who think that the company seeks to prevent drunk driving (92%) also think that the spots are designed to make drinking look like fun (71%). An interesting contrast by sponsor occurs for prevention motivation: respondents interpret the two sets of ads as indicating that each company is equally motivated to “prevent drunk driving” (92% Coors vs. 91% Anheuser-Busch), but there is a significant difference of 16% Coors versus 48% Anheuser-Busch in perceived motivation to “prevent drunkenness,” $\chi^2 = 29.8$, $p < .001$). Moreover, there are divergent perceptions of the two companies on perceived motive to “show drinking as fun,” with a 71% Coors versus 45% Anheuser-Busch difference, $\chi^2 = 29.8$, $p < .001$).

Examining the pattern of responses to the set of statements about brewer policies regarding teenage drinking, many viewers also derive somewhat contradictory perceptions. An average of 40% simultaneously infer that each company is promoting both moderation and drunkenness to teenage audiences, and almost 20% draw the implication that both moderation and abstinence are being promoted in the spots. Hence, support is provided for H2 in that diversity is present in the form of multiple interpretations among substantial proportions of the respondents, especially in instances in which the response options are divergent or even contradictory.

H3

H3 posited that the evaluative ratings will be more uniform and more positive than the perceptual responses. First, the campaign message ratings are described: averaging across the Coors and Anheuser-Busch ads, the mean score on the 0 to 10 scale is 7.2 for sensible, 6.9 for convincing, and 6.7 for useful. Most of the scores were above the midpoint of the scale: 85% for sensible, 81% for convincing, and 75% for useful. The vast majority of the respondents displayed positive rather than negative evaluations the two sets of ads.

Table 3 shows that the three aspects of company image are quite positively evaluated, with moderately low levels of diversity. For Coors, a majority gave a positive evaluation on each image dimension, with large positive to negative ratios on responsible (62% to 18%), respectable (59% to 14%), and caring (51% to 15%); the average margin was 57% to 16%. The pattern is similar for Anheuser-Busch, with an average margin of 54% positive to 15% negative. Compared to the perception variables, the deviation scores are consistently higher across the three images: 19%, 17%, and 12% for Coors and 17%, 17%, and 11% for Anheuser-Busch.

On the attitudinal measure, most respondents who reported a change in favorability became more positive rather

TABLE 3
Evaluations of Sponsoring Companies

	Company		Age Group	
	Coors %	Anheuser- Busch %	16-18 %	19-22 %
Corporate image				
Respectable	62	59	52	69
Neutral	20	28	29	19
Not respectable	18	13	19	12
Responsible	59	58	49	67
Neutral	27	28	35	22
Irresponsible	14	14	16	11
Caring	51	45	40	54
Neutral	34	37	42	31
Uncaring	15	18	18	15
Company favorability				
More favorable	39	25	23	36
About the same	52	65	64	57
Less favorable	9	10	13	7

than negative. After seeing the Coors spots, 39% were more favorable and 9% were less favorable, and respondents' attitudes toward Anheuser-Busch improved by a 25% to 10% favorability margin. As predicted, the average deviation scores were relatively high, with 17% for Coors and 21% for Anheuser-Busch.

In sum, the evaluations of sponsors were generally positive and fairly uniform on each outcome measure, providing support for H3. The relatively narrower spread of responses is reflected by the higher deviation scores; across the eight percentage distribution values reported above, the average deviation was 17%. This compares to an average deviation of 11% across 20 perception measures.

H4

H4 predicted a general pattern of divergence of perceptual responses between the teenage and young adult samples. In every comparison, the average deviation for the youthful viewers is lower, indicating more diversity in interpretations: similar appearance to commercials (3% teenagers vs. 13% young adults) and to PSAs (11% vs. 18%); perceived portrayals of fun (12% vs. 34%), encouragement to drink (16% vs. 26%) and overdrinking by characters (12% vs. 16%); perceived predominant motive (5% vs. 17%); perceived company policies (6% vs. 16%); and interpretation of numerical guidelines (3% and 6%).

Therefore, substantial evidence supports the H4 prediction of a differential pattern of responses between the teenage and young adult subsamples on the interpretation of message content and campaign purpose; the difference is always in the direction of greater diversity for the more unsophisticated and polarized teenagers.

DISCUSSION

From the sponsor's perspective, strategically ambiguous "drink responsibly" campaigns are advantageous in three respects. First, "responsible use" messages provide an effective complement to conventional advertising that glamorizes consumption; the "soft sell" style offers unique and influential persuasive incentives for favoring the product or brand. Second, this type of message is more pragmatic than a hard-hitting prevention-oriented public service message; the "soft service" appeal partially combats the misuse problem without undermining most forms of product consumption. Third, the apparent good faith effort that is ambiguously symbolized in these messages serves a subtle public relations function that may disarm critics, impress opinion leaders, and engender good will with the general public.

On the surface, the Anheuser-Busch and Coors messages present appeals that discourage misuse or promote responsibility by consumers; these themes are occasionally interwoven with positive portrayals of product consumption. The focus of this investigation was the responses of teenagers and young adults to individual spots and the overall campaigns.

The first and second hypotheses informed by the strategic ambiguity approach predicted highly diverse interpretations of the message content and campaign purposes. Consistent support was obtained on four key diversity criteria. First, there was a considerable spread across answer categories in perceptions of two specimen spots and a fairly even split among the three basic perceived purposes, along with a highly disparate set of interpretations regarding company drinking policies and recommendations. Second, large proportions of respondents drew divergent multiple implications of campaign purposes and drinking policies. Third, perceptions were highly varied across a set of messages from the same campaign. These data suggest that different segments in the overall audience are deriving highly diverse interpretations of the ambiguous messages due to varied drinking predispositions and information processing skills.

In addition, the findings supported the third prediction—that evaluative ratings would be generally positive and more uniform than the interpretive responses. Evaluations of both the message content and the company image are clearly positive, and this was reflected in greater attitudinal favorability toward the sponsors. There was a much lower degree of diversity in these bottom-line responses, despite the disparate meanings associated with the message content and campaign purposes. This indicates that individuals arrived at the same basic positive outcomes through differential interpretive pathways.

The last hypothesis, which predicted that teenagers versus young adults would display relatively greater diversity in interpretations, also was supported. In almost every comparison, these younger viewers had lower deviation scores (indicating greater diversity) than did the older viewers. It appears

that their lack of sophistication and attitudinal polarization led the teenagers to draw particularly varied implications from the messages.

Thus, the evidence indicates that beer companies achieved advantageous outcomes to a large extent with these “drink responsibly” campaigns. The evaluative responses were predominantly favorable, and the interpretations tended to be mostly prodrinking; there is little indication of any attitudinal boomerang or anticonsumption sentiment.

The question of whether these campaigns benefit the public is more doubtful (DeJong et al., 1992). There is no solid evidence of message effectiveness in encouraging responsible drinking behavior; it is likely that unambiguous public service messages are more influential. However, there is some evidence to suggest that the overall effectiveness of PSAs also is limited (Andsager, Weintraub-Austin, & Pinkleton, 2001; Hatch, 2002). Regardless, the ambiguity in the “drink responsibly” advertisements enables the audience to draw primarily reinforcing implications that will not substantially reform improper drinking patterns. Furthermore, the appearance of addressing the problem may preempt more persuasive campaign efforts from government agencies and prevention organizations.

Many measures were custom-created for this study, and some variables relied on single-item measurement. Future researchers should borrow from the advertising and marketing literature traditionally well-accepted scale measures of attitudinal outcomes, such as attitude toward the ad and/or attitude toward the brand measures, as well as possibly use the newly developed measure of corporate credibility suggested by Newell and Goldsmith (2001). To enhance reliability, more elaborate scales employing multiple items to tap into relevant constructs should be developed. Additional measures of individuals’ information processing ability would enhance the precision of age-based differences in response to these messages. Of course, tracing the impact to actual drinking behavior would heighten the validity of research examining these prevention messages.

Because this topic is highly relevant to a number of stakeholders, including public policy officials, public health advocates, and the alcohol marketers and their advertising partners, a larger and more representative sample should be used in future studies. In particular, it would be advantageous to include high school students from more diverse backgrounds and to include noncollegiate young adults.

Subsequent studies might explore other modalities of moderation ads, such as print or billboard executions, and extend the scope of responsible drinking ads to include campaigns sponsored by wine or distilled spirits companies.

In conclusion, this study supports the use of the strategic ambiguity perspective in understanding the interpretation of alcohol moderation advertisements. The research demonstrates that although young viewers derived diverse interpretations of ad message content and ad purpose, they still arrived at positive evaluative outcomes. Due to the exploratory

nature of this study, the findings should be applied cautiously to the policies regarding drinking prevention messages. Additional investigations are needed to provide definitive evidence addressing the controversial issues associated with industry-sponsored moderation campaigns.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This research was supported by a grant to Charles K. Atkin from the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety, Washington, DC.

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