



**Level:** Grades 7-9

**About the Author**

This lesson is based on Dr. Jean Kilbourne's article "Deadly Persuasion: 7 Myths Alcohol Advertisers Want You to Believe".

## Lesson Plan

# Alcohol Myths

### Overview

In this unit, students explore positive messages about drinking that are promoted and reinforced in ads for alcohol. A key component of this exploration includes understanding the consequences of drinking – the negative side of alcohol use that is seldom alluded to in alcohol ads. Prior to the lesson, students read an article on alcohol advertising and answer a series of questions about the gap between the truth about alcohol use and the messages advertisers want consumers to believe. In class, they discuss seven common myths about drinking and the advertising strategies used by the industry to perpetuate these myths. In groups, students research topics about alcohol use and the alcohol industry and create their own parody ads that deliver "the truth" about drinking.

### Learning Outcomes

Students will demonstrate

an understanding of:

- the negative consequences of alcohol use
- the prevalence of alcohol advertising in North American society
- the alcohol industry's motivation in promoting drinking as a positive and desirable activity

a beginning awareness of:

- the false messages about drinking that are implied in advertisements
- the ethical considerations surrounding alcohol advertising

### Preparation and Materials

- To prepare for this lesson, review the original Jean Kilbourne article: [Deadly Persuasion: 7 Myths Alcohol Advertisers Want You to Believe](#)
- Photocopy the student version of this article, [Advertising and Alcohol](#)
- Photocopy the student handouts [7 Myths Alcohol Advertisers Want You to Believe](#) and [Myth Work Sheet](#)

- Create overheads for Breaking the Myths: Parody Ads and each of the following alcohol myths:
  - Drinking is a risk-free activity
  - You can't survive without drinking
  - Problem drinking behaviours are normal
  - Alcohol is a magic potion that can transform you
  - Sports and alcohol go together

### **Procedure**

Prior to class, assign the worksheet Advertising and Alcohol. Begin this lesson by taking up students' answers to the questions at the end of the article:

1. What are some of the myths promoted by the alcohol industry?
2. In addition to commercials, what are other ways the media send us messages about drinking?
3. What are some of the negative consequences of drinking?
4. What strategies are used in alcohol ads to sell us products?
5. Who are the primary targets of alcohol ads?
6. According to alcohol companies, why do they advertise?
7. What would happen to the alcohol industry if people consumed only "moderate" amounts of alcohol?
8. According to the article, what is the primary purpose of the mass media?
9. How do ads contribute to attitudes about drinking?
10. What solutions does this article recommend?

Once answers have been reviewed, ask students to summarize the main points of this article:

- Because many people drink in moderation – or choose not to drink at all – the industry is primarily supported by a small percentage of heavy or problem drinkers
- The primary goal of alcohol advertising is to get consumers to buy and consume alcoholic beverages
- To achieve this, the alcohol industry delivers positive messages about drinking to consumers and downplays or ignores the negative consequences of alcohol use

- Many of the positive messages, or alcohol myths, promoted in ads are misleading or false
- Industry claims, that the purpose of advertising is to "encourage existing consumers to switch brands" and to "drink in moderation," don't make good business sense
- The alcohol industry needs replacement drinkers

In her article, Dr. Kilbourne discusses myths about drinking that are promoted in ads. We're now going to take a closer look at some of these myths.

(Distribute [7 Myths Alcohol Advertisers Want You to Believe](#) to students. Have them review each myth, summarizing the main ideas in point form in their notebooks. Once completed, review main ideas with students. Ask if there are any additional myths they might like to add.)

There are a number of "tried and true" strategies that advertisers use to persuade consumers to buy products, and alcohol ads are no exception. Can you identify a few of these strategies? (*Answers may include:*

- *Celebrity endorsements or testimonials*
- *Playing on dreams and insecurities*
- *Pulling the heartstrings*
- *Using glamour and sex appeal*
- *Promoting friends, fun and excitement*
- *Making it seem like everyone's doing it*
- *Making it seem hip or cool*
- *Exaggerating the merits of the product*
- *Using humour*
- *Using ideal people/models*
- *Stressing individuality*

Let's take a closer look at some of the myths and strategies alcohol advertisers use to reinforce positive feelings about drinking. (Use the overheads for Myths 1-5.)

### **Myth #1**

Here are four ads that support the idea that drinking is a risk-free activity. What messages do they deliver?

- You can drink as much as you want – in fact, drinking more, rather than less, is encouraged ("*Pour*" and "*Shake up your night*")

- Violence and drinking aren't connected – in fact, disagreements can more easily be resolved over a friendly drink (*"There is no disagreement that arm wrestling can't resolve"*)
- Drinking makes you sexy, and an intimate encounter with someone you've just met in a bar is a normal, even desirable, occurrence (*"Names optional"*)

## Myth #2

Now we're going to look at some ads that reinforce the idea that you can't survive without drinking. What are the messages here?

- Alcohol makes your life more interesting and exciting (*"Lead a more colorful life"*)
- Drinking enhances everything you do. Whether it's having fun with friends or playing sports, alcohol makes good times better (*"Real friends. Real bourbon."*)
- Alcohol is your friend (*"Real friends. Real bourbon."*)
- Alcohol will make you more exciting – you'll become the centre of attention (*Skyy vodka*)
- Alcohol is something to be worshipped, like a religion (*"Mr. Jack Daniel was no saint"*)

## Myth #3

Here are some ads that encourage people to believe that problem drinking behaviours are normal. Can you identify these messages?

- It's good to drink every day (*"The end of a perfect day"*)
- It's okay to over-drink to the point where you can't function (*"Smirnoff half day off"*)
- It's fun to drink lots of alcohol (*"... we always stop for a double"*)
- It's exciting to be obsessed with drinking (*"Accountancy was my life..."*)

## Myth #4

How about these ads, which want you to believe alcohol will transform you?

- Alcohol will make you appear to be glamorous, beautiful, rich and sophisticated (*Skyy Blue*)
- Alcohol will make you more exciting and appealing to the opposite sex (*"It makes you electric"*)

- Alcohol is all about attitude, style, being young, cool and having fun (*"Kahlua Black Russian"*)
- Alcohol separates you from ordinary, boring people (*"not your average crowd"*)

### Myth #5

The alcohol industry spends millions of dollars pairing the playing and watching of sports with alcohol. How is this pairing reinforced here?

- Alcohol is part of a healthy lifestyle (*"Lose the carbs. Not the taste."*)
- Drinking alcohol will make you more athletic (*"Lose the carbs. Not the taste."*)
- Your favourite hockey team ... brought to you by your favourite beer! (*Molson Canadian hockey logo*)
- Beer is an important part of watching sports (*"...We're so there"*)
- Alcohol provides companionship and shares your enthusiasm for sports (*"...We're so there"*)
- Sports TV/news/contests ... brought to you by your favourite beer! (*Miller Lite, ESPN*)
- Real sports fans drink beer (*Miller Lite, ESPN*)

### Class Work

Divide the class into four groups. Distribute the Myth Work Sheet to each, and have students brainstorm the myths and messages being promoted in the sample ads provided. Take up answers, keeping groups together.

So far, we've been looking at the myths that advertisers want us to believe. But there's another side to this story. What messages are we not receiving? Assign each group a myth:

- Group One: Drinking is a risk-free activity
- Group Two: Problem-drinking behaviours are normal
- Group Three: Alcohol is a magic potion that can transform you
- Group Four: Sports and alcohol go together

Your assignment is to tell the real story about your myth:

- Group One will research the health risks associated with drinking
- Group Two will research alcoholism and problem-drinking behaviours

- Group Three will study the consequences of drinking – especially as it relates to young people
- Group Four will research sports and the alcohol industry

(Students may be granted a library or computer lab period to conduct research. Some suggested Web sites to help get them started are listed on the sidebar.)

Once research is complete, each group will design a poster or parody ad that tells the real story about alcohol. For sample parody ads, show students the overhead Breaking the Myths: Parody Ads.

Each group will present its findings and its parody ad to the class.

### **Evaluation**

- Answers to the Advertising and Alcohol assignment
- Group presentations

## Deadly Persuasion: 7 Myths Alcohol Advertisers Want You to Believe

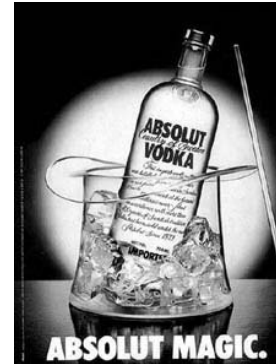
By Jean Kilbourne

This article originally appeared in the Spring/Summer 1991 edition of *Media & Values*. Reprinted, with permission, from the Center for Media Literacy. <http://www.medialit.org>.

"Absolut Magic" proclaims an ad for a popular vodka. "Paradise found," headlines another. "Fairy tales can come true" says a third.

These are the myths that the alcohol industry wants us to believe. Messages like these want to convince people that alcohol is magic. These ads tell us that alcohol can make us successful, sophisticated and even sexy. Without it, life is dull, ordinary and boring.

Everyone wants to believe in happy endings. But as most of us know, for many people alcohol is more like a horror story than a fairy tale. We are surrounded by messages that drinking is fun, sexy, desirable and harmless. It's easy to identify these messages when they appear in advertisements and commercials, but we also get less obvious messages from other media – in films, music videos, television shows, sporting events and even in songs. This is because many media companies depend on alcohol advertising for a large share of their profits. As a result, alcohol use is often glorified in the media and alcohol problems are seldom seen.



Alcohol is related to parties, good times, celebrations and fun, but it is also related to murder, suicide, car accidents, unemployment, and child abuse. Of course, you never see alcohol's negative side in ads. Advertisements are created to sell products, so it makes sense that advertisers are only going to promote positive messages about drinking. But when the product is the nation's number one drug, people should pay attention to the negative side.



Most people know that alcohol can cause problems. But did you know that 10 percent of all deaths in the United States - including half of all murders and at least one quarter of all suicides - are related to alcohol? It costs over \$100 billion each year to deal with the negative consequences of drinking.

Meanwhile, the alcohol industry spends more than \$3 billion a year on advertising and promotion to make sure that drinkers keep spending money on alcoholic beverages. Problem drinkers and young people are their primary targets.

Of course, the alcohol industry disagrees with this claim. Over and over again, alcohol industry executives state that they are not trying to create new or heavier drinkers. Instead, they say they only want people who already drink to switch to their brand and to drink it in moderation. However, many researchers who study alcohol advertising disagree. In fact, they believe the opposite: that alcohol advertising is specifically designed to recruit new, young users and to promote heavy consumption of their products.

Indeed, telling people to drink moderately doesn't make good business sense for the alcohol industry. Thus, if all drinkers did drink moderately, alcohol companies would lose nearly half the income earned from sales of beer, wine and spirits.

### Did You Know?

**Ten percent of drinkers consume over sixty percent of all the alcohol sold**

In fact, if every adult in North America drank according to the U.S. federal guidelines of what is low-risk drinking (which is no more than two drinks a day for a man and no more than one drink a

day for a woman), alcohol industry sales would be cut by 80 per cent. Although the alcohol companies claim they want people to drink "responsibly," the truth is that "responsible" drinking would destroy them.

It's unlikely that industry executives want this to happen. In fact, research has shown that advertisers deliberately target the heavy drinker and create ads designed to appeal to him or her. As with any product, the heavy user is the best customer. But, when the product is a drug, the heavy user is often an addict.

### Young Prospects

Not all problem drinkers are alcoholics and not all teenagers drink. But teens who drink are more likely than adults to binge drink, making young people a lucrative market for alcohol producers.

#### Consider This:

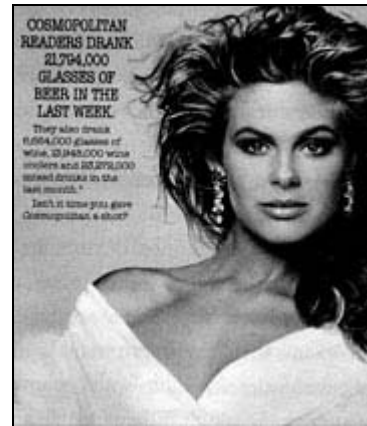
**The most widely used illegal drug in North America is beer, since it is the drug of choice for young people. Underage drinkers account for 12 per cent of all alcohol sales.**

According to the 1989 National Institute on Drug Abuse survey of high school seniors, 33 per cent of students reported that they had consumed five or more drinks on one occasion over the previous two weeks. This group is vulnerable to ad campaigns that present heavy drinking as fun and normal.

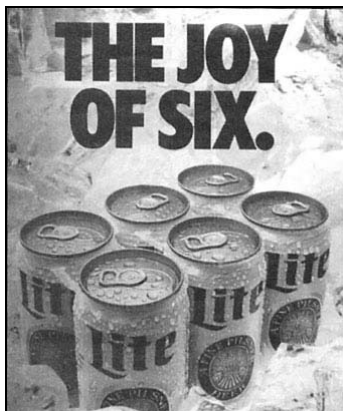
The primary purpose of the mass media is to deliver audiences to advertisers. In fact, magazines, radio stations and TV stations work hard to attract advertising dollars from all kinds of companies, including those that sell alcoholic beverages.

In the ad shown here, Cosmopolitan is trying to convince the alcohol industry to advertise alcohol in its magazine. The ad reads:

"Cosmopolitan readers drank 21,794,000 glasses of beer in the last week: Isn't it time you gave Cosmopolitan a shot?"



One of the main symptoms of the disease of alcoholism is the denial that there is a problem. In general, as a society we tend to deny the illness – and advertising encourages this denial. It may be impossible to prove beyond all doubt that alcohol advertising affects whether or not people drink, but it clearly affects attitudes about drinking. Ads for alcohol contribute to an environment of social acceptance of high-risk drinking and denial of related problems.



#### 1. **Drinking is a risk-free activity.**

Ads featuring copy like "The Joy of Six" imply that it is all right to consume large quantities of alcohol. Light beer ("great taste") has been developed and heavily promoted not for the dieter but for the heavy drinker. It is "less filling," and therefore one can drink more.

Ads like these tell the alcoholic and those around him or her that is all right, indeed splendid, to be obsessed by alcohol, to consume large amounts of it on a daily basis and to have it be a part of all one's activities. At the same time, all signs of trouble and any hint of addiction are erased.

Every instance of use seems spontaneous, unique. The daily drinking takes place on yachts at sunset, not at kitchen tables in the morning. Bottles are magically unopened even when drinks have been poured. All signs of trouble and any hint of addiction are conspicuously avoided. There is no unpleasant drunkenness, only high spirits. Certainly

alcohol-related problems such as alcohol-impaired driving, broken marriages, abused children, lost jobs, illness and premature death - are never even hinted at.

2. **You can't survive without drinking.**

"It separates the exceptional from the merely ordinary," is how a Piper champagne ad puts it. By displaying a vibrant, imbibing couple against a black and white non-drinking background crowd, the advertiser contrasts the supposedly alive and colorful world of the drinker with dull reality. The alcohol has resurrected the couple, restored them to life.

In general, such advertising is expert at making the celebration of drinking itself - not a holiday, festivity or family event - a reason for imbibing ("Pour a Party," "Holidays were made for Michelob.")

At the heart of the alcoholic's dilemma and denial is this belief, this certainty that alcohol is essential for life, that without it he or she will literally die - or at best be condemned to a gray and two-dimensional wasteland, a half-life. These ads, and many others like them, present that nightmare as true, thus affirming and even glorifying one of the symptoms of the illness.

3. **Problem drinking behaviors are normal.**

A shot of a sunset-lit bridge, captioned "At the end of the day, even a bridge seems to be heading home for Red," is actually advertising not just Scotch, but daily drinking. Often symptoms of alcohol, such as the need for a daily drink, are portrayed as not only normal, but desirable. A Smirnoff ad captioned "Hurry Sundown" features a vampirish lady immobilized in a coffin-like setting awaiting the revivifying effects of a vodka gimlet.

Slogans presenting drinking as "your own special island," and "your mountain hideaway" capitalize on the feelings of alienation and loneliness most alcoholics experience. Such ads seem to encourage solitary drinking, often one of the classic indicators of trouble with alcohol. They also distort the tragic reality that problem drinking increases - rather than alleviates - those feelings of isolation.

Alcohol lies at the center of these ads, just as it is at the center of the alcoholic's life.

"The trick for marketers is to project the right message in their advertisements to motivate those often motionless consumers to march down to the store or bar and exchange their money for a sip of liquor."

*Advertising Age*

4. **Alcohol is a magic potion that can transform you.**

Alcohol advertising often spuriously links alcohol with precisely those attributes and qualities - happiness, wealth, prestige, sophistication, success, maturity, athletic ability, virility and sexual satisfaction - that the misuse of alcohol destroys.

For example, alcohol is linked with romance and sexual fulfillment, yet it is common knowledge that drunkenness often leads to sexual dysfunction. Less well known is the fact that people with drinking problems are seven times more likely to be separated or divorced.

Such ads often target young people, women and people of color, since members of these groups often feel powerless and are eager to identify with "successful"

groups in our society. These ads sometimes connect "prestige" beverages with the aura of the rich and powerful or the goals of women's liberation.

Ads and products aimed at young people deserve special mention in these days when many preteens start drinking in junior high school. Cartoon and animal characters such as Spuds MacKenzie, Anheuser-Busch's canine mascot, are not as innocent as they



appear. In one Christmas campaign, Spuds appeared in a Santa Claus suit, promoting 12-packs of Bud Light beer. In the summer of 1990 he was cavorting with ninjas, drawing on the popularity of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles movie, a big hit with younger children.

Ads that portray drinking as a passport to adulthood, coupled with transitional products such as high-proof milkshakes and chocolate sodas, can be very successful lures for young drinkers.

5. **Sports and alcohol go together.**

Alcohol consumption actually decreases athletic performance. However, numerous ads, like a Pabst Blue Ribbon poster showing a speeding bicyclist with a bottle of beer on her basket, wrongly imply that sports and alcohol are safely complementary activities. Others feature sponsorship of a wide range of sporting events or endorsements by sports stars.

6. **If these products were truly dangerous, the media would tell us.**

Most media are reluctant to bite the hand that feeds them by spending \$2 billion annually on advertising and promotion. Media coverage of the "war on drugs" seldom mentions the two major killers, alcohol and nicotine. From the coverage, one would assume that cocaine was the United States' most dangerous drug. However, while cocaine, heroin and other illegal drugs are linked with about 20,000 deaths a year, alcohol contributes to at least 100,000 and cigarettes more than 390,000 - or more than 1,000 a day.

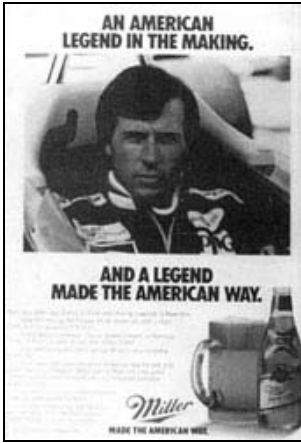
Although many media feature occasional stories about alcoholism, they usually treat it as a personal problem and focus on individual treatment solutions. Reports that probe alcohol's role in violence and other chronic problems are rare, while the role advertising plays in encouraging its use is almost never discussed.

7. **Alcoholic beverage companies promote moderation in drinking.**

The current Budweiser "moderation" campaign says, "Know when to say when," as opposed to "Know when to say no." In the guise of a moderation message, this slogan actually suggests to young people that drinking beer is one way to demonstrate their control. It also perpetuates the myth that alcoholics are simply people who "don't know when to say when," irresponsibly engaging in willful misconduct, rather than people who are suffering from a disease that afflicts at least one in 10 drinkers.

Most of these programs are designed to encourage young people not to drive drunk. Although this is a laudable goal, it is interesting to note that few of the alcohol industry programs discourage or even question drunkenness per se. The tragic result is that many young people feel it is perfectly all right to get drunk, as long as they do not get behind the wheel of a car.

In any case, we might be better off without programs designed by the alcohol industry to promote ideas about "responsible" drinking that in fact subtly promote myths and damaging attitudes. For example, one program by Miller beer defines moderate drinking as up to four drinks a day. Copy for a Budweiser program called "The Buddy System" defines drunkenness as having "too much of a good time." Doesn't this imply that being sober is having a bad time, that being drunk and having a good time go together? Even the industry's "moderation" messages imply the advantages of heavy drinking.



In addition, media dependence on revenues from alcohol advertising discourages full and open discussion of the many problems associated with drinking.

What can be done? We can investigate the extent to which the media are influenced by their dependence on alcohol advertising. We can consider the possibility of further restricting or banning all alcohol advertising, as some other countries have done. We can insist on equal time for information commercials in the broadcast media. We can raise the taxes on alcohol and use the extra revenue to fund programs to prevent and treat the illness and educate the public. And we can become more aware of the real messages in the ads and raise awareness about their implications and often tragic consequences.

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**Author:**

Jean Kilbourne, a visiting scholar at Wellesley College and member of the board of directors of the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence, lectures internationally. Her films include *Still Killing Us Softly: Advertising's Image of Women* and the new *Advertising Alcohol: Calling the Shots*.

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## Advertising and Alcohol

Adapted from "Deadly Persuasion: 7 Myths Alcohol Advertisers Want You to Believe." by Dr. Jean Kilbourne. This article originally appeared in the Spring/Summer 1991 edition of *Media & Values*. Adapted, with permission, from the Center for Media Literacy. [www.medialit.org](http://www.medialit.org).

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Everyone wants to believe in happy endings. But as most of us know, for many people alcohol is more like a horror story than a fairy tale. We are surrounded by messages that drinking is fun, sexy, desirable and harmless. It's easy to identify these messages when they appear in advertisements and commercials, but we also get less obvious messages from other media – in films, music videos, television shows, sporting events and even songs. This is because many media companies depend on alcohol advertising for a large share of their profits. As a result, alcohol use is often glorified in the media, and alcohol problems are seldom seen.

Alcohol is related to parties, good times, celebrations and fun, but it is also related to murder, suicide, car accidents, unemployment and child abuse. Of course, you never see alcohol's negative side in ads. Advertisements are created to sell products, so it makes sense that advertisers are going to promote only positive messages about drinking. But when the product is the nation's number one drug, people should pay attention to the negative side.



Most people know alcohol can cause problems. But did you know that 10 per cent of all deaths in the United States - including half of all murders and at least one quarter of all suicides - are related to alcohol? It costs more than \$100 billion each year to deal with the negative consequences of drinking.

Meanwhile, the alcohol industry spends more than \$3 billion a year on advertising and promotion to

make sure drinkers keep spending money on alcoholic beverages. Problem drinkers and young people are its primary targets.

Of course, the alcohol industry disagrees with this claim. Over and over again, alcohol industry executives state that they are not trying to create new or heavier drinkers. Instead, they say, they only want people who already drink to switch to their brand and to drink it in moderation. However, many researchers who study alcohol advertising disagree. In fact, they believe the opposite – that alcohol advertising is specifically designed to recruit new, young users and to promote heavy consumption of its products.

Indeed, telling people to drink moderately doesn't make good business sense for the alcohol industry. If all drinkers did drink moderately, alcohol companies would lose nearly half the income earned from sales of beer, wine and spirits.

### Did You Know?

**10 per cent of drinkers consume over 60 per cent of all the alcohol sold**

In fact, if every adult in North America drank according to the U.S. federal guidelines for what is low-risk drinking (which is no more than two drinks a day for a man and no more than one drink a day for a woman), alcohol industry sales would be cut by 80 per cent. Although the alcohol companies claim they want people to drink "responsibly," the truth is that "responsible" drinking would destroy them.

It's unlikely industry executives want this to happen. In fact, research has shown that advertisers deliberately target heavy drinkers and create ads designed to appeal to them. As with any product, the heavy user is the best customer. But when the product is a drug, the heavy user is often an addict.

### Young Prospects

Not all problem drinkers are alcoholics, and not all teenagers drink. But teens who do drink are more likely than adults to binge drink, making young people a lucrative market for alcohol producers.

#### Consider this:

**The most widely used illegal drug in North America is beer, since it is the drug of choice for young people. Underage drinkers account for 12 per cent of all alcohol sales.**

According to the 1989 National Institute on Drug Abuse survey of high school seniors, 33 per cent of students reported they had consumed five or more drinks on one occasion over the previous two weeks. This group is vulnerable to ad campaigns that present heavy drinking as fun and normal.

The primary purpose of the mass media is to deliver audiences to advertisers. In fact, magazines, radio stations and TV stations work hard to attract advertising dollars from all kinds of companies, including those that sell alcoholic beverages.

In the ad shown here, Cosmopolitan is trying to convince the alcohol industry to advertise alcohol in its magazine. The ad reads:

"Cosmopolitan readers drank 21,794,000 glasses of beer in the last week ... Isn't it time you gave Cosmopolitan a shot?"



One of the main symptoms of the disease of alcoholism is the denial that there is a problem. In general, as a society, we tend to deny the illness – and advertising encourages this denial. It may be impossible to prove beyond all doubt that alcohol advertising affects whether or not people drink, but it clearly affects attitudes about drinking. Ads for alcohol contribute to an environment of social acceptance of high-risk drinking and denial of related problems.

### Questions

1. What are some of the myths promoted by the alcohol industry?
2. In addition to commercials, what are some other ways that the media sends us messages about drinking?
3. What are some of the negative consequences of drinking?
4. What strategies are used in alcohol ads to sell us products?
5. Who are the primary targets of alcohol ads?
6. According to alcohol companies, why do they advertise?

7. What would happen to the alcohol industry if people consumed only "moderate" amounts of alcohol?
8. According to the article, what is the primary purpose of mass media?
9. How do ads contribute to attitudes about drinking?
10. What solutions does this article recommend?

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## 7 Myths Alcohol Advertisers Want You to Believe

### 1. Drinking is a risk-free activity.

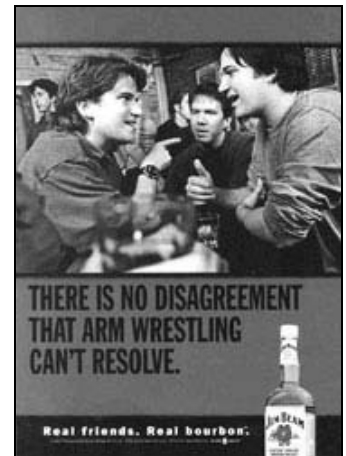


Ads that present drinking as a risk-free activity deliver messages that it is okay to drink large quantities of alcohol.

For example, when advertisements for light beers say they are "less filling," they're not really talking about losing weight – they're saying that because they're less filling, you can drink more.

Drinking in ads is portrayed as both natural and distinctive, taking place on yachts at sunset, not at kitchen tables in the morning.

All signs of trouble and any hint of addiction are avoided at all costs. There is no unpleasant drunkenness, only high spirits.



Ads like these tell alcoholics and those around them that it's all right to be obsessed by alcohol, to consume large amounts of it on a daily basis and to have it part of any activity.

### 2. You can't survive without drinking.

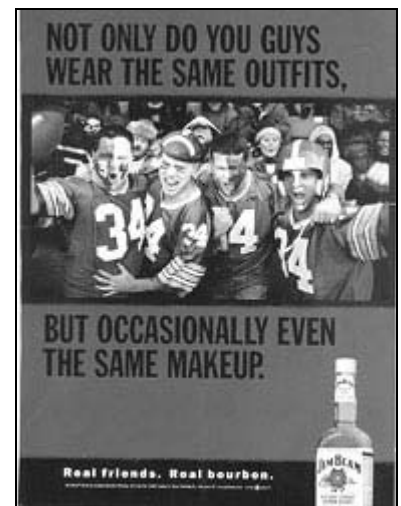


"Lead a more colorful life," is what Macallen drinkers are promised when they drink that brand of Scotch.

Messages such as this want us to believe that our real lives are dull and boring. We need alcohol in order to free ourselves and experience a richer, more interesting life.

Ads that tell us we can't survive without alcohol make the act of drinking a cause for celebration.

"Real friends. Real bourbon." For Jim Beam drinkers, alcohol is just as important as friendships and relationships.



An ad for Michelob beer says, "Pour a Party" – just open that bottle and your life will be fun.

Ads such as these are dangerous for people who are problem drinkers. Many alcoholics believe that alcohol is essential for life, that without it they will die – or at best be condemned to a gray and boring half-life. These ads, and many others like them, confirm these beliefs by telling alcoholics that they *need* alcohol to make life worthwhile and exciting.

### 3. Problem-drinking behaviors are normal.



"The end of a perfect day," is how a Royal Crown ad puts it. If you believe this ad's message, then you believe that alcohol makes everything perfect – and that drinking is something you do every day.

Many alcohol ads actually *promote* problem-drinking behaviors. In the Royal Crown ad, symptoms of alcoholism, such as the need for a daily drink, are portrayed as normal and desirable.

The messaging in "Smirnoff half day off" implies that it's acceptable to drink to the point where you miss a half day's work.



Other slogans that present drinking as "your own special island" or "your mountain hideaway" capitalize on the feelings of alienation and loneliness many alcoholics experience. Such ads encourage solitary drinking – one of the classic signs of trouble with alcohol. They also distort the tragic reality that problem drinking increases – rather than lessens – those feelings of isolation.

### 4. Alcohol is a magic potion that can transform you.



Alcohol advertising often links alcohol with the attributes and qualities that problem drinking destroys. Happiness, wealth, prestige, sophistication, success, maturity, athletic ability, virility and sex are common themes in alcohol ads.

For example, alcohol is often linked with romance, but researchers have found that people with drinking problems are seven times more likely to be separated or divorced.

Such ads often target young people, women and people of colour, since members of these groups often feel powerless and are eager to identify with "successful" groups in our society.

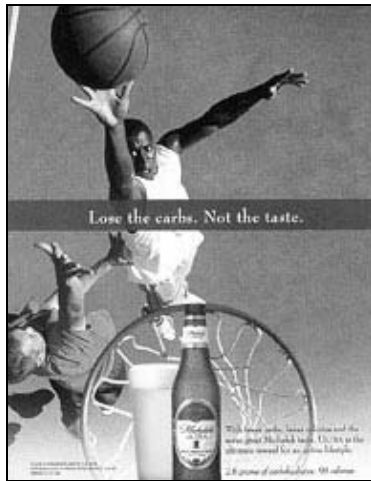
These ads sometimes connect "prestige" beverages with the aura of the rich and powerful or liberated.

Ads and products aimed at young people deserve special mention – especially when you consider the fact that many kids start drinking in junior high school. Cartoon and animal characters such as Spuds MacKenzie and Anheuser-Busch's canine mascot are not as innocent as they appear. In one Christmas campaign, Spuds appeared in a Santa Claus suit, promoting 12-packs of Bud Light beer. In the summer of 1990 he was cavorting with ninjas, drawing on the popularity of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles movie, a big hit with younger children.

Ads that portray drinking as a passport to adulthood, coupled with "bridge drinks" such as "alco-pop" malt beverages and alcohol-based jello, can be very successful lures for young drinkers.



### 5. Sports and alcohol go together.



Drinking alcohol actually decreases athletic performance. But numerous ads, such as this one for Michelob Beer, imply that sports and alcohol go together.

Other types of ads that connect sports and drinking include sponsorship of sporting events and sports television or endorsements by sports stars.

Not only do these ads make alcohol part of *playing* sports, they also feed the impression that booze is an essential part of *watching* sporting events. "It's just not football without something to pass around" says an ad for Scotch.



### 6. If these products were truly dangerous, the media would tell us.

Most media are reluctant to bite the hand that feeds them (advertisers spend \$2 billion annually on advertising and promotion). Media coverage of the "war on drugs" seldom mentions the two major killers, alcohol and nicotine. From the coverage, one would assume that cocaine was the United States' most dangerous drug. However, while cocaine, heroin and other illegal drugs are linked to about 20,000 deaths a year, alcohol contributes to at least 100,000 and cigarettes more than 390,000 deaths a year – or more than 1,000 a day.

Although many media feature occasional stories about alcoholism, they usually treat it as a personal problem and focus on individual treatment solutions. Reports that probe alcohol's role in violence and other chronic problems are rare, and the role advertising plays in encouraging alcohol use is almost never discussed.

**7. Alcoholic beverage companies promote moderation in drinking.**



Many consumer awareness campaigns downplay the very real problems associated with alcohol abuse. For example, this moderation ad from Budweiser displays a "True or False" quiz, with "The majority of college students drink 2 or fewer drinks a week" as one of the statements. The ad's tag line is "Guess what? Every one of these is true. Most importantly, college students are making responsible choices about drinking." This statement contradicts research findings concluding that binge drinking on college and university campuses has reached "epidemic" proportions.



In a second campaign, Budweiser assures parents that "kids listen," implying that the situation is under control: as long as you tell your children not to drink, they won't.



Most of these programs are designed to encourage young people not to drive drunk. They do not, however, question drinking to excess. As long as you're not the one behind the wheel of a car, it's okay to get drunk.

We might be better off without these "responsible drinking" campaigns, which are often just platforms from which the industry can promote myths and damaging attitudes. For example, one program by Miller beer defines moderate drinking as up to four drinks a day. Another Budweiser awareness ad equates not drinking to "basket weaving," implying that being sober is boring.



Adapted from the article "[Deadly Persuasion: 7 Myths Alcohol Advertisers Want You to Believe](#)" by Dr. Jean Kilbourne. This article originally appeared in the Spring/Summer 1991 edition of *Media & Values*.

Adapted, with permission, from the Center for Media Literacy, [www.medialit.org](http://www.medialit.org).

## Myth Work Sheet

For each of the following ads, identify the myth(s) and message(s) about drinking that are being promoted.



"Taste the feeling"



"A quality drink, after all those years of quantity drinking."



"It's Game Day."



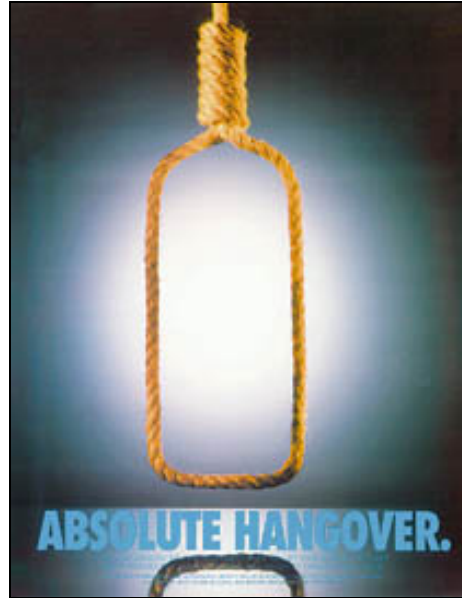
"Nectar of the guys"



"Auditor by day. Bacardi by night."

## Breaking the Myths: Parody Ads

These parody ads, created by Adbusters, shatter myths about alcohol by delivering messages about the real consequences of drinking.

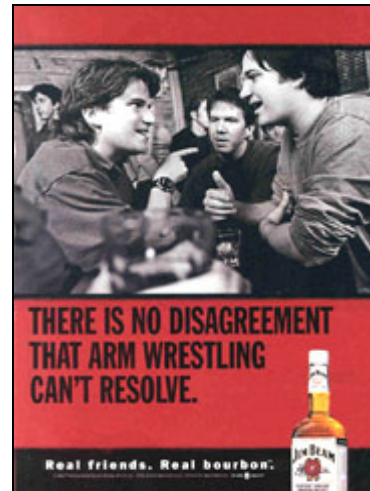


## Alcohol Myth #1

### Drinking is a risk-free activity



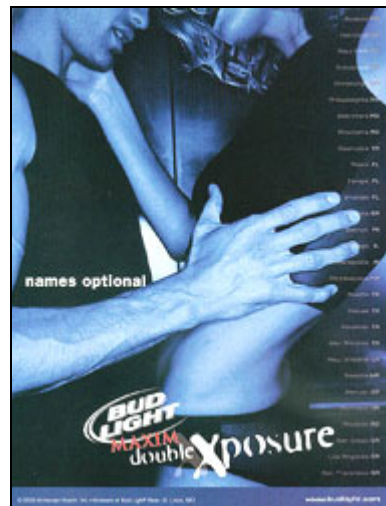
"Pour"



"There is no disagreement that arm wrestling can't resolve."



"Shake up your night"



"Names optional"

## Alcohol Myth #2

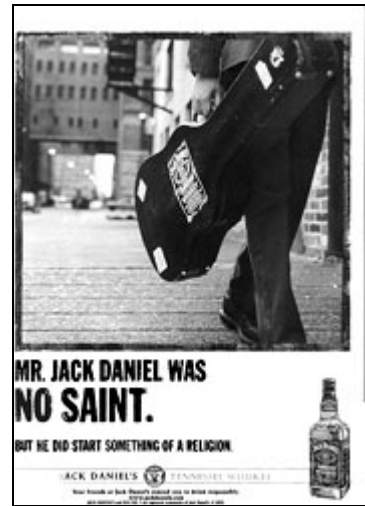
### You can't survive without drinking



"Lead a more colorful life"



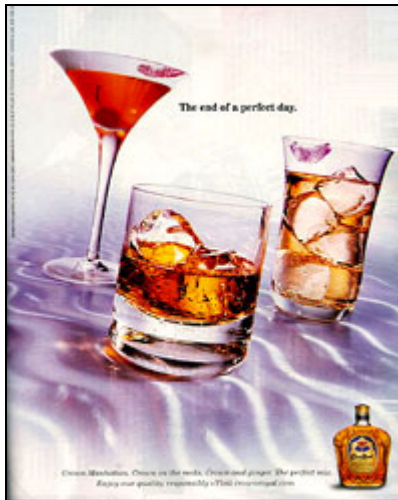
"Real friends. Real bourbon."



"Mr Jack Daniel was no saint. But he did start something of a religion."

### Alcohol Myth #3

#### Problem-drinking behaviours are normal



"The end of a perfect day."



"Smirnoff half day off."



"Ever since I introduced Maker's to my foursome, we always stop off for a double."



"Accountancy was my life until I discovered Smirnoff. The effect is shattering."

## Alcohol Myth #4

Alcohol is a magic potion that can transform you

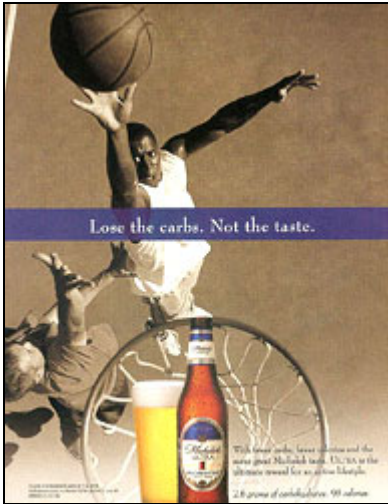


"It makes you electric."

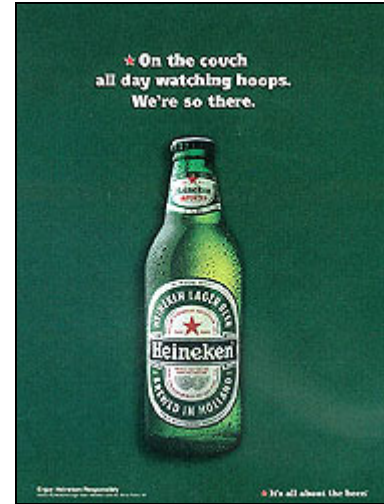


## Alcohol Myth #5

### Sports and alcohol go together



"Lose the carbs. Not the taste."



"On the couch all day watching hoops. We're so there."

