

CHAPTER 7. ALCOHOL ADVERTISEMENTS. RECEPTION AMONG YOUNG EUROPEANS

Matilda Hellman

In cooperation with: Michal Bujalski, Jacek Moskalewicz, Magdalena Pietruszka-Pandey, Jakob Demant, Jordy F. Gosselt, Avalon de Bruijn, Maija Majamäki, Sara Rolando, Sara Rossetti, Franca Beccaria, Dirk Schreckenber, and Joerdis Wothge.

Summary

The chapter reports results from a qualitative study on how teenagers from six European countries negotiate messages of televised beer commercials. We have completed 48 focus group interviews with a total of 326 youngsters in the age range of 13-16 years from Finland, Italy, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands and Poland. The study establishes that norms on drinking contexts and views on drinking-related problems differ between the young audiences in different alcohol geographies. No essential difference was found with regards to level of advertisement literacy or persuasion knowledge between different countries. All youngsters interviewed were highly aware of the persuasion techniques applied by commercial producers. The expression of such knowledge seemed to be very much stimulated by the study setup of the focus group sessions. The project suggests an added value of combining research strategies on commercial alcohol messages and their young audiences. Such mixed-approach strategies may strengthen this area of research and improve its overall credibility.

Introduction

Knowledge production in the field of youth and alcohol marketing has mostly been concerned with the impact that advertisement has on initiation of alcohol use or level of consumption. Without denying the importance of such research, there are no valid arguments for the research community *not* to engage with knowledge production on how meaning is negotiated between message and its young audience. On the contrary, acknowledging that both advertising and drinking alcohol are meaning-based activities, the AMPHORA project identified a need to make qualitative inquiries into this politically topical subject.

New knowledge has been produced in three main areas. First, the cultural differences among youngsters from different alcohol cultures show how well certain stereotypical commercial messages can be adapted to different alcohol drinking norms. Second, the level and kind of persuasion knowledge may indicate the potential that young people have to distance themselves from the messages. Thirdly, the study has initiated a general theoretical and methodological discussion on how to study young recipients of alcohol commercials. This last issue is of particular importance, as the political question of restrictions on alcohol marketing “lives and breathes” through scientific knowledge production.

The qualitative youth study of AMPHORA has resulted in four scientific articles. In this chapter, the proceedings and results will be summarised, and some concrete suggestions for using the knowledge will be made.

What we did

In each country, participants were recruited from two schools: one in an urban area and the other in a rural region. We aimed to include 28 pupils from each school: 7 girls and 7 boys from a 13–14 age group (7th grade in most countries) and, similarly, 7 girls and 7 boys aged 15–16 (9th grade in most countries). The sampling resulted in eight targeted focus group interviews per country, comprising a total of 326 European youngsters in the age range of 13–16 years.

We used four televised beer commercials as stimulus texts for the group discussions. The same commercials were used in all countries, and the adverts came from other countries than the ones of the study, with as little spoken text as possible due to different languages. The group discussions were oriented around specific predetermined topics, formulated in an open-ended manner. By analysing the discourse on the clips, we learned how the group members perceived the messages, how they framed them, and what they knew about the things they saw. This method has been shown to improve comparability of qualitative data in cross-national research (see Sulkunen & Egerer, 2009)

Three main questions permeated our inquiries: Which cross-cultural differences between the interpretations of commercials could be discerned from the data sets? What tools did the youngsters have at hand when negotiating, interpreting and examining the commercial messages? How could we connect inquiries in this field to valid and updated theorization from sociology, public health and communication science?

What we found

The initial phase examined *cultural variations* in how the study participants interpreted the beer commercials. We chose commercial clips which showed different types of drinking situations (hedonistic, playful, social, “adult” etc.). The data showed a significant difference between the Italian data and the rest of the countries (Hellman et al. 2010). The Italian material was of greater volume and much more comprehensive than material from other countries, and the discussion surrounding alcohol drinking was more serious and problem-oriented. The drinking situations were also interpreted by the Italians in a different fashion from the other groups. The natural explanation for this circumstance is likely to be that Italy was the only country with a traditionally wet, Mediterranean, drinking culture represented in the study⁵. In the other countries (Finland, Germany, Poland, Netherlands and Denmark) beer is a more common drink than wine, and young drinkers in these countries more often report the intention of becoming intoxicated than in Italy (Hibell et al., 2012).

A distinctive feature of the Italian material was that images of drinking in solitude and with individualistic rationales and solutions were held to be more difficult to accept and explain. Earlier research has acknowledged a difference in audience interpretations between individualistic and collectivistic value climates, and our results seem to conform to this theoretical interpretation⁶ (see Hellman et al. 2010). Typical collectivism value traits of the drinking behaviour – in terms of living up to expectations of social togetherness and in-group-

5 We are suggesting that alcohol cultures could be conceptualized in terms of alcohol geographies, as they are not only bound by national considerations, but also regional character and according to alcohol policy traditions and landscapes.

6 For example, an association network created by German and Spanish students for a beer brand showed that the German associations belonged to more individualistic notions like success, self-esteem, independence and freedom, while the Spanish students stressed belonging, happiness and sophistication (see de Mooij, 2010: 41). Images of people enjoying beer alone - or in an ‘egocentric’ manner, as in the case of the first commercial – have been considered by advertising practitioners as non-applicable in collectivistic cultures where one enjoys beer together (De Mooij, 2010: 225).

oriented behaviour – were important explanations for drinking behaviour used by the Italian youngsters. In the Danish focus groups the adolescents were more likely to refer to commercials that were culturally more understandable (Danish ones) in their presentations of themselves. The concordance with cultural context (alcohol use, familiarity with brands, language etc.) thus seems to correlate with level of identification (Demant & Poulsen, 2012).

At a later stage of our inquiries, in a separate sub study, we explored further the possibilities of employing the distinction between individualist and collectivist cultures in cross-cultural alcohol research (Hellman & Rolando 2013). We compared the differences between the materials from Italy and Finland against the typical dissimilarities featured in comparisons between individualistic and collectivistic cultures. Although the differences presented in the individualist-collectivist dichotomy may not be unambiguous enough to be applied without some reservations, they can, indeed, be beneficial for examining how the values attached to alcohol drinking are logically bound together and reflected in drinking action in the two cultural contexts.

The collectivistic-individualistic dichotomy seemed to especially concern dimensions of agency (the self living up to expectations) and autonomy (liberty to make own decisions). We have argued that there are at least three important reasons for bringing up dimensions of agency and autonomy in this research area (Hellman & Rolando 2013). First, these dimensions have proven important in previous research on the meaning-making of alcohol use among young people. Second, values related to agency and autonomy have been suggested to be crucial framings when studying contemporary childhood and youth behaviour and culture. Third, it is precisely in the process of understanding competence in terms of agency, and expressions and choices in terms of autonomy, that the collectivist and individualist dichotomy pops out of the material analysed in this study. These circumstances convinced us that we had a good case to apply this theoretical distinction, not only for the material under study, but also in future research concerned with cross-cultural conceptualisations of social interaction.

The teenagers of this study did not express significantly different levels or types of *persuasion knowledge and advertisement literacy* (Hellman et al., accepted). The most common techniques discussed as being employed to make people drink and buy beer did not differ between the material from the different countries. In the format that the interviews were conducted – focus groups in which the interviewees were able to freely express their opinion and comment the commercials' genre and content –, the youngsters seemed prone to express sceptical stances to the genre and the messages of the beer commercials.

A lack of cross-country, gender or age variations as regards to scepticism is an important result in itself (Hellman et al., accepted). It generated the hypothesis that the knowledge of commercial persuasion codes could be less culture-bound than the participants' alcohol attitudes. An explanation for this circumstance could be that adolescents of the different European countries were likely to be used to rather similar (globalised) commercialised media image milieus.

A general critical discourse with regards to the genre of alcohol marketing dominated all data. The youth zeitgeist, or contemporary demands that makers of advertisements may claim that they are performing or living up to, does not match the stances of the young people interviewed for this study. We found nothing in our material that would contradict the claim that production of the commercials stem purely out of the producers own interests to stimulate demand for products. We found no explicitly formulated "need" or specific "usage" of the commercials expressed by the youngsters of our study (in comparison, see e.g. Willis

1996, about youngsters' uses of ads as "tokens" in social exchanges). In the view of the young European interviewees of this study, advertisement seemed mostly to cause irritation.

The participants' beliefs about their own coping and resisting abilities were high. They showed little difficulty reading the commercial subtexts and they conceptualized and described the objectives of the genre and how the messages had been produced. Overall they expressed a stance 'above' the commercial message: the viewer is in control, whereas the advertisement producer is the one who is to perform and is seldom perceived as doing so successfully. This finding contradicts the stereotype of the young victimized receivers who are injected with commercial messages that they will go out and act upon. In all group discussions, it seemed both acceptable and expected to reflect critically on the persuasion techniques applied in commercial messages on alcohol. However, in the first analysis regarding the drinking messages, we found that a larger degree of scepticism was expressed on messages whose meanings were not obvious, whereas all participants easily identified with basic emotional images, such as social togetherness and joy (Hellman et al., 2010).

The present study introduced some *new methodological and theoretical approaches* in the research field in question. The project group came to review and question the existing research paradigms in the field. In an analysis of different studies' research theoretical domicile, a suggestion was formulated on the added value of combining different research strategies in this field of knowledge production (Hellman, 2011).

There are some fundamental differences among social and psychological theories on communication of (commercial) messages. A basic division reigns between theories of communication effects and theories on meaning generation (Fiske 1990, 39). The differences are obvious between the mainstream methodological approaches to the study of the impact of alcohol marketing on youth, and the qualitative approaches of this study. Inquiries within the former research paradigm typically use different instruments to measure influences of commercial messages, whereas we chose to leave out the causal influence relationship altogether. Although these positions represent independent philosophical stances, they can be used in a complementary manner. Perceptions and influences are intuitive, knowledge-based and patterned at the same time. An integrated view of the young recipients as both – in some way – possibly affected by the messages in terms of a confirmation of a positive image of drinking, but moreover also capable of a sceptical stance or ignoring the messages altogether may be beneficial for the comprehension of the processes under study. It may also help evolve towards a more nuanced and credible picture, to be referred to by the expertise in the area.

The marketing issue has received increased attention in European alcohol policy debates in recent years. The qualitative findings of this study, as part of the AMPHORA research project, have contributed with a new European perspective on the theme of young persons as recipients of alcohol marketing messages. We have demonstrated differences and similarities between the audiences from different alcohol geographies; we have highlighted some features of how they understand commercial messages; and we have shouldered the task of contributing to methodological and theoretical developments in the area.

What does this mean?

In view of preventing alcohol consumption among young Europeans, the study has managed to produce some interesting new knowledge.

We now have strong indications that there is a generally high level of ad literacy and commercial genre scepticism among young Europeans from the six countries studied. A

general sceptical stance to the study's beer commercials and also, potentially, other commercial messages seem to be stimulated by the interview format of this study. Showing stimulus texts in group discussions could thus be used for educational and preventive programmes. They successfully stimulate the expression and generation of media literacy and raise the teenagers' self-awareness of the knowledge they possess in the area of persuasion techniques.

No demand for, enjoyment of or willingness to receive the messages of alcohol commercials were spontaneously expressed in any of the data sets. The genre of alcohol commercials seems to comprise merely discursive products that manifest their own existence in their own persuasive intentions, rather than in response to any need or enthusiasm to receive them. A qualified guess by the research team of this study is that bans on alcohol advertising would be, if not openly welcomed, at least not contravened by the young audiences interviewed for the study.

The study has shown that normative codes attached to drinking situations and levels of drinking vary among young Europeans from different alcohol geographies. The differences seemed to be most evident when it comes to dimensions of autonomy and agency, and they also showed a good fit with the dichotomy between value traits of individualistically and collectivistically -oriented cultures (adjusting behaviour to fit social expectations of a certain affirmative togetherness, or adjusting behaviour to conform with social codes that allow one to act alone or in a transgressive way).

Last but not least, the study suggests that young audiences of alcohol marketing as the study subject is viewed as beneficial within many different research paradigms, in order to give a more truthful picture of the complicated communication processes that take place. The study has suggested that combined research methods will strengthen knowledge in the alcohol public health field as a whole.

Take home messages

1. Focus group discussions of commercial clips are an efficient way to stimulate young people to formulate media critical stances and articulate ad literacy.
2. Youngsters in different European alcohol geographies negotiate and interpret alcohol drinking messages differently. The differences are especially obvious when it comes to autonomy and agency – two dimensions that seem crucial in determining the initiation of alcohol use.
3. Knowledge on youngsters as audiences of commercial messages on alcohol can and should be produced within different research traditions and using combined transdisciplinary methods.
4. The study's data sets indicate no reason or desire on the part of youngsters to be exposed to commercial messages on alcohol.

Conflict of Interest Statement

Matilda Hellman has no conflicts of interest to declare.

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