

DECONSTRUCTING AN ALCOHOL ADVERTISEMENT

STEP 1: MAKE OBSERVATIONS

» Think of five adjectives that describe the ad.

» Where did you find the ad? Was it in a magazine? if so, what type? Was it on TV? if so, during what type of program? How much do you think the ad cost? If you can, find out approximately how much the ad cost to make and run.

» Does the medium in which you found the ad have any connections to the alcoholic product being sold? For example, does the same company own both the product and the magazine in which an ad for that product ran?

» Evaluate the advertisement's aesthetics:

■ What type of alcoholic product is being advertised—beer, wine, liquor? How does it look? Is the product given any human qualities? (*i.e. a wine bottle made to look like a woman's body, a beer can that talks, etc.*)

■ Where is the alcoholic product placed? Is it a prominent feature of the ad, or does it blend into the scene?

■ What is the product's brand name? Where does that brand name appear in the ad? For example, Budweiser might be written across a woman's t-shirt. How many times do you see and/or hear the brand name of the product?

■ Does the product have a slogan and have you seen/heard it before? Where is that located in the ad? How many times do you hear and/or see it?

■ Are there people in the ad? What gender(s) or race(s) are represented? What is the sexuality of the people in the ad? How is their sexuality portrayed? What do the people look like—are they young, old, sexy, plain? What are they doing? What role does the alcoholic product play in what they are doing? What does their expression suggest they are feeling?

■ What does the ad actually say? What is the tone—funny, sarcastic, serious, etc.? Is what the ad says in-line with or different from the scenario depicted in the ad? If different, why do you think this is?

■ How is the camera used? Consider the angles: where does the camera appear to be in relation to the subject—near, far, above, below? If you're deconstructing a video ad does the camera seem to move a lot—from right to left, top to bottom? What effect does the way the camera has been used have on the ad?

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STEP 1: MAKE OBSERVATIONS (CONT.)

- Take note of the lighting—does it appear to be natural or artificial? Are certain parts of the ad highlighted while others are not? If so, why do you think this is? Are there shadows? If so, how big are they? What effect does the lighting have on the ad?
- What colors are used? Are they bright? Black and white? In sharp contrast to each other? Why effect does the coloring have on the ad?
- If the ad has text or copy, how does it look? What type(s) of font is (are) used? How big is the text? What color is the text? What does the text actually say? Who, if anyone, appears to be saying it? What does the large text say? The small text?
- Does the ad contain any graphics like animation? If so, describe them. What effect do the graphics have on the ad?
- If you're looking at a video ad, what does it sound like? Is anyone speaking in the ad? Who speaks? Who is silent? What exactly is said? How does the speaker sound? Does the ad have music? What genre of music is used? Do you recognize the song? Why do you think they've chosen this music? Do you like it? What, if any, feelings does the music invoke? What effect does the sound(s) have on the ad?

STEP 2: DETERMINE THE PURPOSE OF THE AD

- » *Remember that the purpose of an ad is always to sell a product!*
- » What is the alcoholic product is being sold?
- » Do you find the product appealing? Why or why not?
- » Who is the target audience for this product? The legal drinking age in most U.S. states is 21 and 19 in most Canadian provinces. Does this mean that the ad only targets adults? Might some aspect of the ad appeal to children and teens? Why? Do you think the ad targets a particular gender, race or class? How so? Remember to keep in mind where you found the ad.
- » Consider the type of alcoholic product being sold. Given your general knowledge of alcohol ads, is this type of product usually marketed to a particular audience? For instance, beer ads usually target young men, wine is often marketed to the middle class. How does the ad you're examining fit or not fit with other alcohol ads for similar products? Why might advertisers choose this target audience for their product?
- » What feelings or emotions does the ad attach to the product? For example, partying and fun may be attached to a brand of beer. Is the ad successful at making those attachments? Why or why not?

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STEP 3: DETERMINE THE ASSUMPTIONS THE AD MAKES & THE MESSAGES IT SENDS

» What kinds of assumptions does the ad make about drinking? For instance, the ad might assume that drinking is fun for everyone. Are these assumptions always true? Who might they not be true for?

» What messages does the ad send about drinking? Do you see any contradictions in what these messages suggest and the reality of drinking? What are some of these contradictions? For instance, an ad may suggest drinking will lead to great sex, while in reality drinking is often associated with sexual dysfunction.

» What assumptions does the ad make and what messages does the ad send about what we want and desire? Do we really want what the ad says we want? Do you? Does the ad suggest that if we buy this product we will get something we want? What? Is it true?

» What assumptions does the ad make and what messages does the ad send about gender and sexuality? (*i.e. Couples are always heterosexual. Men are interested in sex, while women are interested in marriage.*) Are these assumptions/messages realistic? Why or why not? Does the ad reinforce or challenge stereotypes about gender identity?

STEP 4: CONSIDER THE POSSIBLE CONSEQUENCES OF THESE MESSAGES

» What are some messages about drinking and alcohol that are left out of the ad? Are they left out on purpose? Why?

» Drinking alcohol can have very serious negative consequences. Think of some of these consequences. For example in *Deadly Persuasion: The Advertising of Alcohol & Tobacco* Jean Kilbourne notes that “on an average day 4 college students die in alcohol related accidents, an additional 1,370 students suffer injuries related to drinking, and about 192 college women are raped by their dates or sexually assaulted after drinking.” Does this ad address any of the negative consequences of drinking? Note that some ads address these issues by making light of them. Does the ad you’re looking at do this? For example an ad may make light of someone waking up the next morning and not remembering what they’ve done the night before. Given that we know people often practice unsafe sex when drunk, getting so drunk you cannot remember anything can be quite dangerous. Why would an ad make light of something like this? What might be the effect of this tactic?

» The messages conveyed in ads only make sense in a cultural context in which we can understand them. For instance, an ad depicting a noose around the neck of a groom-to-be doesn’t make much sense unless we understand the assumption “men want sex, NOT a committed relationship.” With that in mind, do the messages in this ad counter or undermine social change?

» Is this ad socially responsible? How or how not? What does it mean for an ad or a company to be socially responsible?

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STEP 4: CONSIDER THE POSSIBLE CONSEQUENCES OF THESE MESSAGES (CONT.)

» Might the presence of this ad have any consequences for the medium in which you found it? For example if you found this ad in a magazine do you think that magazine would run a story about alcoholism? If it ran during a television program do you think that program would run a story dealing with how sexual violence is linked to alcohol? What might the consequences of this be for the audience?

» In the closing comments of the video *Killing Us Softly 3* Jean Kilbourne states that change will depend upon “an aware, active, educated public that thinks for itself primarily as citizens rather than primarily as consumers.” What does it mean to think of oneself primarily as a citizen rather than primarily a consumer? Can one be both a citizen and a consumer? How? Reflect on the ad with the above statement in mind.

» In *Deadly Persuasion: The Advertising of Alcohol & Tobacco* Jean Kilbourne calls counter-advertising “advertising that gives us honest information... [and] de-glamorizes the product.” Find some counter-ads for alcohol and compare these to the ad you’ve been deconstructing. Create your own counter-ad. You can find some ideas to help you get started at www.adbusters.org.

More information about alcohol advertising:

The Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth www.camy.org

Deadly Persuasion: The Advertising of Alcohol & Tobacco www.mediaed.org/videos/MediaAndHealth/DeadlyPersuasion

Jean Kilbourne’s website www.jeankilbourne.com