

Breasts and Booze – So what's the big deal?

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"Flesh has made a dramatic comeback in Canadian beer advertising," opens an article by Globe and Mail writer Keith McArthur. "Brewers seek to seduce impressionable young men through an abundance of bikinis, cleavage and girl-on-girl action," states McArthur, published on July 13, 2004.

Within the pages of NOW Magazine's August 12-18 issue, hides a perfect example of this - a sexually explicit alcohol advertisement entitled "Sex on the Beach", later criticized in the September 30 – October 6 Letters to the Editor section. But what's the big deal? Why the concern? Alcohol manufacturers, like many other industries, have been using under-dressed, attractive models to push products for years. Where is the harm in that?

To begin, one has to believe that alcohol advertising actually does sell booze. This is a fairly easy concept to agree with – why else would the alcohol industry spend over \$160 million on advertising per annum in Canada alone (AC Neilson, 2004)?

Secondly, one has to be convinced that alcohol advertising actually impacts the level and patterns of consumption. Research clearly shows this link. "Advertising has been found to promote and reinforce perceptions of drinking as positive, glamorous and relatively risk-free," claims a distinguished group of international WHO researchers (Babor et al., 2003). This poses a problem as "exposure to repeated high levels of alcohol promotion inculcates pro-drinking attitudes and increases the likelihood of heavier drinking" (Babor et al., 2003). These same researchers go on to outline "the cumulative influence of alcohol advertising in shaping young people's perceptions of alcohol and drinking norms. Alcohol advertising predisposes minors to drinking well before the legal age of purchase" (Babor et al., 2003).

Thirdly, one has to admit that patterns of heavy drinking may be influenced through advertising and in turn, actually cause serious health and safety problems. Again, research demonstrates this link. "Alcohol advertising is linked to patterns of heavy drinking, drinking in dangerous situations, and deaths from alcohol-related motor vehicle crashes," states Canadian Policy Analyst Diane McKenzie (2000). This line of reasoning can have critical effects on the public as an increase in advertising can lead to an increase in consumption which can ultimately lead to an increase in alcohol-related harm (Hlaing et al., 2004). Dr. Saffer (1997) of the Harvard School of Public Health presents the situation succinctly: "If a ban were placed on all radio and TV alcohol advertising, 2,000 to 3,000 lives would be saved each year (in the U.S. alone)."

Finally, irresponsible advertising contravenes the Liquor Advertising Guidelines (2003) set out by the Alcohol and Gaming Commission of Ontario (AGCO). These guidelines, produced in an attempt to assist advertisers to govern themselves, frown upon associating alcohol with dangerous sports; associating alcohol with boats or moving vehicles; depicting over-consumption; and of course, implying that alcohol and sex go together.

Alcohol commercials use sure-fire techniques such as humour, hot models, popular music, and party scenes to connect with young viewers. Rarely, if ever, do these commercials portray the negative effects of alcohol. "(Students) are bombarded by confusing and often misleading messages designed to build brand loyalty," claims Susan Hiltz, executive director of the

Prevention Coalition of Southeast Michigan in a recent article by Detroit News writer Mike Martindale (Nov. 9, 2004). Hiltz continues by clarifying that "beer doesn't make you sexy. It's more likely to slur your speech, make it difficult to walk and, in some cases, make you violent or sick."

Alcohol advertising is a big deal. It's not just about beer and breasts. It's about creating a climate for excess that leads to serious health and safety problems.

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