Use (and Misuse) of the Responsible Drinking Message in Public Health and Alcohol Advertising: A Review
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Use (and Misuse) of the Responsible Drinking Message in Public Health and Alcohol Advertising: A Review

Adam E. Barry, PhD
Patricia Goodson, PhD

The objective is to present a comparative analysis examining the alcohol industry’s and scholarly researchers’ use of the concept “responsible drinking.” Electronic databases associated with health, education, sociology, psychology, and medicine were the date sources. Results were limited to English, peer-reviewed articles and commentaries specifically addressing “responsible drinking.” Search descriptors included responsible, responsibility, drinking, alcohol, brewer, and campaign. Eighteen articles constituted the final sample. The matrix method was utilized to organize and abstract pertinent information. Misunderstanding stemming from the inconsistency and counterintuitive nature of brewer-sponsored “responsible drinking” campaigns is further compounded by researchers’ use of the term and concept of “responsible drinking” in their scholarly reports. In articulating the definition of “responsible drinking,” researchers employ subjective notions and personal ideas, thus not differentiating the construct’s meaning from the one acquired in brewer-sponsored campaigns. Researchers are consistently inconsistent when identifying specific health measures that promote and/or contradict responsible alcohol consumption. To evade the subjective notions of researchers and restrictive impressions attached by the alcohol industry, the manner in which individuals interpret, perceive, and practice responsible drinking must be systematically explored and examined using theoretically based constructs.

Keywords: responsible drinking; drinking responsibly; alcohol; brewer sponsored; alcohol industry; advertising

PURPOSE

In this review, we systematically organize and analyze the scientific literature associated with the theme or construct of “responsible drinking.” Specifically, we discuss the message’s origins, the alcohol industry’s adoption of the theme for advertising purposes, and practical and ethical concerns associated with brewer-sponsored responsible drinking campaigns. In addition, extant empirical studies investigating “responsibility” are assessed to determine how prevention specialists conceptualize responsible drinking and delineate its characteristics.
BACKGROUND

Alcohol advertising represents an important environmental factor shaping individuals’ alcohol-related beliefs and behaviors, alongside intrapersonal and interpersonal elements. Advertising has enjoyed considerable attention from alcohol researchers and prevention experts. Grube and Wallack (1994), for instance, documented that children who are better aware of beer advertisements are more likely to hold favorable attitudes about drinking, possess greater brand and advertising slogan knowledge, and intend to drink frequently as an adult. A longitudinal study following seventh graders through ninth grade documented “nearly universal” exposure to alcohol advertising among both drinkers and nondrinkers (Ellickson, Collins, Hambarsoomians, & McCaffey, 2005, p. 241). Wyllie, Zhang, and Caswell (1998) reported an increase in current drinking frequency and expected future drinking among individuals possessing positive responses to beer advertisements. Thus, in a review of empirical studies addressing alcohol advertising’s impact, Saffer (2002) concluded that enough evidence is available to support the notion that alcohol advertising does increase overall alcohol consumption as well as alcohol misuse.

Therefore, to quell some of the controversy associated with alcohol advertising, alcohol industry marketing efforts have purposefully anchored themselves in a “responsible drinking” message in attempts to mirror public health concerns with alcohol abuse. These voluntary, brewer-sponsored campaigns portray the alcohol industry as a viable public health partner invested in addressing public concerns. However, in a refereed editorial outlining various issues associated with the alcohol industry partnering with public health officials, McCreanor, Casswell, and Hill (2000) asserted,

Alcohol producers are engaged in a campaign to capture the hearts and minds of alcohol researchers and public health people, as part of a major effort to win the war of ideas that shape alcohol policy at the national and international level. They are driven by the imperative for sales and profits, which is often in fundamental conflict with the public health goal of reducing hazardous drinking and alcohol-related harm. This essential tension cannot be argued away. (p. 179)

Furthermore, a case study assessing a partnership between an addiction agency and the Australian liquor industry indicated that collaborations such as these advance the interests of the alcohol industry more than they protect the public’s health (Munro, 2004). As a result, researchers have likened the alcohol industry’s activities in the public health sector to a lamb lying down with a lion (Hawks, 1992).

At face value, it seems counterintuitive for the industry to promote responsible drinking, as this message is at odds with the industry’s underlying profit goals. For example, in estimating the commercial value of both underage alcohol consumption and adult abusive and dependent drinking for the alcohol industry, Foster, Vaughan, Foster, and Califano (2006) asserted that of the $128.6 billion spent on alcoholic products in the United States in 2001, $36.3 billion (28.3%) was attributable to abusive and alcohol-dependent drinkers. Underage drinking accounted for $22.5 billion in 2001, representing 17.5% of the total consumer expenditures on alcohol.

Regarding the prevalence of responsible drinking campaigns, Anheuser-Busch declared expenditures of $300 million on alcohol education, awareness, and consumer responsibility campaigns between 1982 and 2000. Nevertheless, in 1999 alone the company spent $320 million on product advertisements (Center for Science in the Public Interest, 2000). Furthermore, compared to the 2,379 responsibility advertisements aired
in 2001, the alcohol industry placed a total of 208,909 advertisements promoting alcoholic beverages (Center for Alcohol Marketing and Youth, 2003). Thus, although a prodigious amount of resources has been channeled toward sponsoring responsible drinking, this sum is just a fraction of the expenditures the alcohol industry utilizes to market its products.

Yet the public seems to accept the alcohol industry’s promotion of responsible drinking as a sincere attempt to address the public health concern of alcohol abuse. For instance, in 2005, Data Development Worldwide conducted a telephone survey on Anheuser-Busch’s behalf, assessing the public’s perception of their responsible drinking campaigns. Nearly the entire sample, 870 (91%) of the 956 Americans surveyed, thought it was a “good thing” the beer industry works to address the responsible consumption of alcohol (Anheuser-Busch, 2005).

Considering such disparate views and approaches in conjunction with (a) alcohol advertising’s impact, (b) the industry’s rationale for promoting responsible drinking, (c) brewers’ underlying profit goals, and (d) the American public’s overwhelmingly positive opinion of responsible drinking campaigns, it becomes vital to address the question, “How do marketing campaigns and public health define responsible drinking?” The central purpose of this review, therefore, is to systematically answer this question through careful analyses of available data.

It is important to note that in this review, we do not address the construct of “moderate drinking” because a sizeable body of literature has already tackled this construct (Dufour, 1999; Green, Polen, Janoff, Castleton, & Perrin, 2007). The choice to exclusively focus on the construct of “responsible drinking” stems from its rather relegated status, within the public health literature, despite its dual application in alcohol advertising and scholarly inquiry. Thus, although some could argue “responsible drinking” may perhaps be subsumed under “moderate drinking,” we contend there is a need to systematically examine “responsible drinking” and how it is conceptualized before assuming the two constructs are equivalent. To the best of our knowledge, this review is the first attempt to carry out such a synthesis.

**METHOD**

Systematic literature reviews such as this one enable scholars to “form a systematic map of research” in a given area (Bennett, 2005, p. 387), establish scientific and ethical justification for specific issues, provide evidence supporting research, practice, and instruction, and demonstrate intervention effects and conditions affecting these effects (Bowman, 2007; Clarke, 2007; Forbes, 2003). Systematic reviews, therefore, have “a useful place in a research cycle that wishes to inform and be informed by practice and policy” (Andrews, 2005, p. 399).

The matrix method (Garrard, 1999) was employed as the review strategy for this study. The method consists of orderly abstracting pertinent information from individual studies, organizing it into a logical structure (i.e., a matrix), and interpreting patterns of findings emerging from the framework.

**Search and Inclusion Criteria**

The electronic databases Cambridge Scientific Abstracts, EBSCOhost (Academic Search Premiere), and ISI Web of Knowledge were utilized to identify research-based
studies and commentaries associated with responsible drinking. Examined academic fields included health (Health Sciences: A SAGE Full-Text Collection, Safety Science and Risk), education (ERIC, Education: A SAGE Full-Text Collection), sociology (Sociology: A SAGE Full-Text Collection), psychology (PsycINFO, Psychology: A SAGE Full-Text Collection), and Medicine (MEDLINE). Results were limited to English-only journal articles published before January 2007. Search descriptors included responsible, responsibility, drinking, alcohol, brewer, and campaign. Various combinations (using Boolean connectors) and search term variations were employed.

Inclusion in this review required studies to have been published in a refereed journal and to meet one of the following criteria: (a) discuss the responsible drinking prevention message’s origin and/or evolution, (b) examine ethical and/or practical dilemmas associated with brewer-sponsored responsible drinking campaigns, or (c) discuss or empirically examine how individuals develop, interpret, or practice responsible drinking prevention strategies. Articles were excluded if at least one of these three components was not addressed in the text.

**Sample**

The search process yielded 18 relevant articles. Of these 18 articles constituting the final sample, 1 discussed the origins of the responsible drinking message, 3 systematically assessed brewer-sponsored responsible drinking advertising campaigns, 3 provided commentaries detailing the ethical and/or practical dilemmas associated with responsible drinking and/or responsible drinking campaigns, and 11 used the responsible drinking concept in a program or intervention. In addition, a report from the Education Commission of the States (ECS) was also examined as it described in detail the origins of the responsible drinking message.

Articles in the final sample were published between 1981 and 2006. Pieces were drawn from assorted journals, including Journal of American College Health, Journal of Studies on Alcohol, American Journal of Health Promotion, Journal of Alcohol and Drug Education, Addiction, and Journal of College Student Development. Table 1 outlines the characteristics of all studies included in this review.

**FINDINGS**

**Origins of the Responsible Drinking Message**

Eng (1981) contended the responsible drinking philosophy originated in 1969, first proposed by churches at a symposium sponsored by North Conway Institute—a non-profit organization working with religious and secular groups to address alcoholism and alcohol abuse (Archives of the Episcopal Church, 2003). However, ECS and the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) first utilized responsible drinking as a prevention message in 1973 when they partnered to form the ECS Task Force on Responsible Decisions About Alcohol (ECS, 1977). The ECS Task Force came to the conclusion, “There are two responsible decisions a person can make about alcohol—either not to use it or to use it responsibly” (ECS, 1977, p. 12).

By the late 1970s, Williams and Vejonska (1981) reported that the majority of prevention approaches designed to reduce the incidence of alcohol-related problems sought to
### Table 1. Characteristics Researchers Associate With Responsible Drinking

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Publication Type</th>
<th>Utilize Theory</th>
<th>Central Focus</th>
<th>Salient Findings</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Atkin, Smith, and Bang</td>
<td><em>Alcohol, Drugs and Driving</em></td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Assessment of campaigns</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Determine how young viewers respond to drinking and driving messages.</td>
<td>Young individuals exposed to responsible drinking advertisements felt that sensible advice was offered and identified the spots as being somewhat influential in promoting drinking responsibly. “At best, the definition of responsible drinking is often arbitrary and capricious” (p. 382). In addition, drinking responsibly “make perfect sense to the individual who does not have or does not fully understand the disease of alcoholism” (p. 382).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chapman</td>
<td><em>Journal of College Student Development</em></td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>Commentary</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Question the use of the responsible drinking message as an objective for collegiate alcohol programs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dejong, Atkin, and Wallack</td>
<td><em>Milbank Quarterly</em></td>
<td>1992</td>
<td>Assessment of campaigns</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Critically analyze 31 “moderation” advertising sponsored by the beer industry aired on American television.</td>
<td>“Brewers have used vague slogans and other advertising strategies that fail to define ‘moderate’ drinking and have overlooked the fact that certain people should avoid alcohol consumption altogether” (p. 663).</td>
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<td>Dowling, Clark, and Corney</td>
<td><em>Youth Studies Australia</em></td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Uses drink responsibly as construct</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Compare the responsible drinking knowledge of Australian apprentices and university students.</td>
<td>Categorized knowledge relating to “responsible drinking” into three categories: (a) identification of standard drinks, (b) minimum number of drinks required to reach the legal BAC limit in relation to driving, and (c) actions that could be employed to effectively lower one’s BAC. The philosophy of responsible drinking originated in 1969, first proposed by churches at a North Conway institute symposium.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eng</td>
<td><em>Health Education</em></td>
<td>1981</td>
<td>Historical account</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Discuss the origins of the responsible drinking message.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Author(s)</td>
<td>Source</td>
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<td>Fisher, Simpson, and Kapur</td>
<td><em>Canadian Journal of Public Health</em></td>
<td>1987</td>
<td>Uses drink responsibly as construct</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Present tables to be used in the calculation of BAC, taking into consideration sex, weight, number of drinks, and time spent drinking.</td>
<td>“Generally, it would seem that having tables at hand and counting drinks is the simplest way of drinking and/or serving responsibly” (p. 301).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kishchuk et al.</td>
<td><em>American Journal of Health Promotion</em></td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Uses drink responsibly as construct</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Presented the design and evaluation of a worksite health promotion program intended to facilitate “nondependent drinkers to consume alcohol in a healthy and socially responsible manner” (p. 353).</td>
<td>Social awareness of responsible drinking includes (a) disseminating statistics concerning the social cost of alcohol and (b) supplying information on how to intervene with a friend or family member who has consumed too much alcohol.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Klein</td>
<td><em>Journal of Alcohol and Drug Education</em></td>
<td>1992</td>
<td>Uses drink responsibly as construct</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Present results from a survey examining the relationship between beliefs about drinking and alcohol use and abuse among undergraduate students.</td>
<td>“Student samples tended to agree with statements representing responsible drinking practices more than with those indicating less-than-responsible alcohol use patterns” (p. 48).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LaBrie, Pederson, Lamb, and Bove</td>
<td><em>Journal of American College Health</em></td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Uses drink responsibly as construct</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Promote responsible drinking among freshmen male college students via a nested intervention, Heads UP!</td>
<td>Heads UP! provides the campus “with an environment supportive of responsible drinking choices” (p.303). Preliminary results indicate reduction of problematic drinking and alcohol violations among 1st-year males.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Look and Rapaport</td>
<td><em>Journal of Alcohol and Drug Education</em></td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>Uses drink responsibly as construct</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Evaluation of an alcohol education discipline program for college students.</td>
<td>In a forced referral program, participants benefited by being provided a “chance to discuss their new found knowledge with roommates and friends and to try out responsible drinking in between sessions (continued)</td>
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<tr>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>McKillip, Lockhart, Eckert, and Phillips</td>
<td><em>Journal of Alcohol and Drug Education</em></td>
<td>1985</td>
<td>Uses drink responsibly as construct</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Evaluate a two-theme media campaign focused on responsible alcohol use. Themes included (a) refusing a drink is not rude and (b) friends don’t let friends drive drunk.</td>
<td>“A media campaign can be launched which will have strong effects on college students’ awareness of responsible alcohol use themes” (p. 95).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McLean, Wood, Montgomery, Davidson, and Jones</td>
<td><em>Drug and Alcohol Review</em></td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Uses drink responsibly as construct</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Reports on a trial that tested the feasibility of intervention in hotels to promote responsible drinking and in particular to decrease drink driving.</td>
<td>Directed measures at reducing intoxicated driving, but it was hypothesized that they would also promote more responsible drinking, generally.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milgram</td>
<td><em>Journal of Drug Education</em></td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>Commentary</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Comments on the reemergence of the responsible decision making regarding alcohol prevention and education strategy for the 1990s.</td>
<td>Opponents of a responsible drinking prevention message affirm the term responsible conveys that only one choice can be made, to drink. In other words, critics imply that “the responsible-decision making concept motivates drinking” (p. 360).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rubington</td>
<td><em>Deviant Behavior: An Interdisciplinary Journal</em></td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Uses drink responsibly as construct</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Assess residential assistants’ (RAs) variations in performance as prohibition agents.</td>
<td>RAs revealed that “responsible drinking means drinking that goes on behind closed doors and makes no public trouble. Drinking that is not disorderly, disruptive, or destructive is considered responsible” (p. 332).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Smith, Atkin, and Roznowski</td>
<td><em>Health Communications</em></td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Assessment of campaigns</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Expose individuals to the responsible drinking message and determine its effects.</td>
<td>Participants were found to positively evaluate both the “responsible drinking” messages’ content and the company’s overall image.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temple and Lyde</td>
<td><em>Health Educator</em></td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Uses drink responsibly as construct</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Propose an activity that can be utilized in a classroom setting to teach responsible drinking.</td>
<td>“Responsible behaviors include knowing your limit, eating foods while drinking, pacing consumption, planning ahead, and respecting others” (p. 33). Behaviors such as these “ensure that the negative results of alcohol consumption will be avoided or mitigated and enjoyment will be enhanced” (p. 33).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Towers, Kishchuk, Sylvestre, Peters, and Bourgault</td>
<td><em>American Journal of Health Promotion</em></td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Uses drink responsibly as construct</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Investigated an alcohol awareness program in blue-collar workers implemented it in an organizational setting.</td>
<td>Healthy drinking was defined as “drinking in a responsible manner that will not lead to problems for oneself and others, within specified safe drinking limits per occasion, while recognizing situations where one should not drink” (p. 57).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wolburg</td>
<td><em>Journal of Consumer Marketing</em></td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Commentary</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Question how responsible are “responsible” drinking campaigns are for preventing alcohol abuse.</td>
<td>“The beer industry has often situated responsibility message within the problem of drunk driving, which implies that drinking excessively can still be done responsibly as long as no driving is involved” (p. 176). The alcohol industry promotes this message to head off further regulations efforts, enhance its image, and gain credibility as good corporate citizens who want what is best for society” (p. 176).</td>
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</table>
help young people “exercise responsibility in making decision about drinking” (p. 3). Examples include NIAAA’s demonstration projects: Seattle’s Education Service District #121, “Here’s Looking at You,” and the Cambridge-Somerville Program for Alcoholism Rehabilitation, “Decisions About Drinking” (Williams & Vejonska, 1981). Milgram (1996) contended that as these responsible drinking prevention programs became more prevalent in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the alcohol industry began to run advertisements promoting responsible alcohol consumption. This practice continued throughout the 1980s and 1990s, and currently the nation’s three largest brewing companies—Anheuser-Busch, Coors, and Miller Brewing Company—promote full-scale marketing endeavors revolving around responsibility.

**Systematic Assessments of Brewer-Sponsored Responsible Drinking Advertisements**

Although the specific content messages (visuals, verbal messages, and appeals) of brewer-sponsored responsibility advertisements vary, many typically center on the theme of drinking and driving or the concept of a designated driver. For instance, Smith, Atkin, and Roznowski (2006) identified the following common forms of advice proffered by Anheuser-Busch responsibility advertisements:

- 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
- If you’ve been drinking, pass your keys to someone who hasn’t
- If you’ve been drinking, don’t take your show on the road
- Please designate a driver

Conversely, Coors’s “Now . . . Not Now” campaign attempts to present a clear separation between when it is acceptable to drink (“Now”) and not acceptable to drink (“Not Now”) through the use of imagery. For example, audible song lyrics proclaim Coors as the “right beer now” as images of sporting event and party settings are portrayed. As the advertisement progresses, an announcer declares “not now,” “definitely not now,” or “absolutely not now” as potentially dangerous drinking situations, such as operating a snowmobile or hunting, are presented (Dejong, Atkin, & Wallack, 1992; Smith et al., 2006).

Of the responsibility ads specifically examined in prior research, the majority are of the “talking head” variety (Atkin, Smith, & Bang, 1994; Dejong et al., 1992; Smith et al., 2006). In other words, various celebrities and sports figures deliver public service-type messages. An example of one such advertisement featured the now deceased professional golfer Payne Stewart. After driving a golf ball into the fairway, Payne Stewart tells the camera, “When I’m driving, I don’t drink. When I’m drinking, I don’t drive.” The most recent brewer-sponsored responsible drinking advertisements include Anheuser-Busch’s “Responsibility Matters” campaign, Miller Brewing Company’s “Live Responsibly” campaign, and Coors’s “21 Means 21” campaign. Currently, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) mandates a “drink responsibly” tagline be utilized by beer and wine advertisements during NCAA-sponsored events (Horovitz, Howard, & Petrecca, 2005).
Analyzing 31 brewer-sponsored ads aired on American television through 1991, Dejong et al. (1992) contended responsibility campaigns exude prodrinking themes and inconsistencies between communicated visual and verbal messages. For instance, these authors cite brewing companies utilizing ironic catch phrases such as “Think When you Drink” (Miller Brewing Company, 2006) and “Know When to Say When” (Anheuser-Busch, 2005) that ignore cognitive impairment associated with alcohol use, assume alcohol consumption will occur, and fail to articulate situations in which individuals should not drink. Atkin et al. (1994) specifically identify Anheuser-Busch’s “Know When to Say When” campaign as unclear in explaining “when” to cease drinking—in regard to either amount consumed or degree of intoxication—as well as how a person will “know” when reaching the stopping point. Because of these inconsistencies, Dejong et al. (1992) proposed replacing these slogans with more fitting mottos, such as “Think Before You Drink.”

In a study utilizing “laboratory response testing” among 326 participants (n = 174 young adults aged 19 to 22, n = 152 teenagers aged 16 to 18), Atkin et al. (1994) examined perceptions and evaluations of television advertisements on responsible drinking and intoxicated driving. Findings documented participants exposed to responsible drinking advertisements felt sensible advice was offered and identified the ads as somewhat influential in promoting responsible drinking. Similarly, Smith et al. (2006) conducted an investigation measuring teenagers’ and young adults’ responses to nine brewer-sponsored television spots dealing with responsible drinking and drunk driving. The authors asserted that because of these advertisements’ strategically ambiguous nature, individuals evaluated both the messages’ content and the company’s overall image positively.

Commentaries on the Ethical and Practical Dilemmas Associated With Responsible Drinking

Numerous researchers have cited responsible drinking campaigns’ failure to (a) establish choosing to abstain from drinking as a socially acceptable choice and (b) clarify that no alcohol consumption is completely risk free (Chapman, 1991; Milgram, 1996; Wolburg, 2005). For instance, a commentary by Chapman (1991) stated responsible drinking becomes impractical because of the compulsiveness inherent within the context of alcohol dependence and makes sense only for “the individual who does not have or does not fully understand the disease of alcoholism” (p. 382).

Because of the alcohol industry’s sales-driven nature, researchers have also raised concerns about brewers’ use of a prevention strategy (i.e., “drink responsibly”) for marketing purposes. Dejong et al. (1992) asserted, “There is little doubt . . . that this advertising . . . meets the industry’s public relations agenda” (p. 662). Atkin et al. (1994) contended that brewer-sponsored responsible drinking campaigns constitute “soft-sell” versions of traditional public service announcements displaying elements of public service persuasion strategies, advertisements, and public relations campaigns. In addition, Smith et al. (2006) stated that these campaigns might more accurately be dubbed “private service messages” (p. 1).

In addition to creating brand preference and promoting product consumption, Smith et al. (2006) cited responsible drinking campaigns as communicating a positive image and reputation and implying the alcohol company has social consciousness. “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” (Smith et al., 2006, p. 9).
Overall, researchers have affirmed that responsible drinking messages, sponsored by the alcohol industry, ignore important public health objectives and exhibit several limitations. In yet another commentary, Wolburg (2005) summarized concerns associated with brewers purposely promoting responsible drinking, stating these advertisements “hope to head off further regulation efforts, enhance their image, and gain credibility as good corporate citizens who want what is best for society” (p. 176).

**Application of the Responsible Drinking Concept in a Program or Intervention**

Among 11 articles specifically dealing with interventions addressing the responsible drinking concept, only 8 (72.7%) explicitly stated what constituted responsible drinking. Other studies, while utilizing responsible drinking as a variable or outcome, failed to describe or characterize it in any way. We chose, therefore, to present and discuss findings from these studies following the same distinction: (a) studies articulating responsible drinking characteristics and (b) studies lacking specific characteristics for the construct.

**Studies Articulating Responsible Drinking Characteristics.** Among the eight studies attempting to characterize or define responsible drinking, two situated the construct in terms of blood alcohol concentration (BAC) estimation. Fisher, Simpson, and Kapur (1987) presented tables identifying BACs resulting from five standard drinks consumed over a maximum 6-hour period as well as charts identifying the maximum number of standard drinks that can be consumed within a 6-hour time frame, resulting in a BAC less than .08% and .05%. In regard to their charts, a standard drink is classified as a 5-ounce glass of wine (12% alcohol), 1.5 ounces of distilled spirits (40% alcohol, or 80 proof), or a 12-ounce beer (5% alcohol). These authors concluded, “Generally, it would seem that having tables at hand and counting drinks is the simplest way of drinking and/or serving responsibly” (p. 301).

Dowling, Clark, and Corney (2006) did not directly characterize responsible drinking but asserted individuals “require knowledge in relation to responsible drinking practices so they can make informed decisions” (p. 42). In their study, this knowledge is classified into three categories: (a) ability to identify which drinks (e.g., “pot of regular beer,” “nip of spirits,” “small glass of wine,” “can of low-alcohol beer,” “can of premixed spirits,” “cocktail”) constitute a standard drink, (b) ability to determine how many alcoholic drinks males and females can consume within an hour while remaining under a .05% BAC, the legal driving limit for all Australian states and territories (where the study was conducted), and (c) whether drinking coffee, taking a shower, vomiting, or eating can effectively lower one’s BAC (Dowling et al., 2006). The authors empirically tested this knowledge among two samples (948 male 1st-year apprentices in the building and construction industry were compared to 192 university students).

Among the remaining six studies characterizing responsible drinking, two specifically associated responsible drinking with the popular dictum, “don’t drink and drive.” McLean, Wood, Montgomery, Davidson, and Jones (1994) presented findings from an intervention carried out in various hotel lounge areas designed to prevent intoxicated driving. The intervention consisted of providing information on the relationships among drinking, eating, and BAC to individuals working at a hotel bar as well as to patrons. Investigators also provided patrons breathalyzers to measure their respective BACs. Although the intervention sought to promote responsible drinking by providing accurate BACs and disseminating pertinent information, the ultimate
outcome was to prevent drunk driving. Participants demonstrating intent to drive and registering a BAC above the legal limit were “counseled against doing so” (McLean et al., 1994, p. 249).

In a two-theme media campaign, McKillip, Lockhart, Eckert, and Phillips (1985) attempted to promote responsible alcohol use by exposing university students to posters, advertisements, and window displays throughout campus. Two beliefs were identified as responsible drinking characteristics: (a) refusing a drink is not rude and (b) friends don’t let friends drive drunk. Program staff selected these two themes based on previous research conducted at the same university revealing that (a) “most [university students] thought that their peers expected them to drink heavily” and (b) “drinking and driving was the most frequently encountered problem of 15 [various problems] investigated” (McKillip et al., 1985, p. 89).

Among the remaining four studies characterizing responsible drinking, two characterized responsible drinking in terms of societal impacts. In a worksite health promotion effectiveness evaluation, Kishchuk and colleagues (1994) reported on a program designed to promote socially responsible attitudes toward alcohol consumption by focusing on “protecting one’s family and friends from drinking-related harm, reduction of social cost of alcohol by reinforcing individual responsibility, and responsible behavior when drinking” (p. 359). In this program, participants were instructed to watch for dangers and warning signs regarding other people’s alcohol consumption rather than focusing on their own responsible drinking. More specifically, participants were taught to (a) intervene with a friend or family member who has consumed too much alcohol, (b) prevent someone from driving after drinking, (c) invite a person to stay overnight to prevent drunk driving, and (d) offer nonalcoholic drinks during a social gathering (Kischuk et al., 1994). The authors also created a five-item social responsibility scale to measure attitudes; however, wording for the items was not provided.

In a qualitative study conducted across three freshmen-level residence halls, Rubington (1995) examined reasons why a residential assistant (RA) would or would not “write someone up” for violating alcohol-related university dormitory guidelines (i.e., no alcohol for minors; Rubington, 1995). RAs declared if dormitory residents drank responsibly, then it was easy to “look the other way.” RAs revealed that “responsible drinking means drinking that goes on behind closed doors and makes no public trouble. Drinking that is not disorderly, disruptive, or destructive, is considered responsible” (p. 332).

The final two studies were the only two characterizing responsible drinking by outlining specific and unique responsible drinking characteristics, mainly focusing on people’s behaviors or actions while drinking. Temple and Lyde (1998) outlined exercises utilizing role-play to teach responsible alcohol consumption appropriate for university students. The authors asserted that “responsible behaviors include knowing your limit, eating foods while drinking, pacing consumption, planning ahead, and respecting others” (p. 33).

To examine the relationships between beliefs about drinking and alcohol use and abuse, Klein (1992) developed survey items assessing responsible drinking practices. Again, these items described individuals' actions when drinking and included (a) “individuals giving a party should always ensure nonalcoholic drinks are readily available,” (b) “it is okay to say no to someone who offers you a drink,” (c) “as long as they don’t harm anyone else, individuals should be able to drink as much as they want,” and (d) “if offered a beer by someone else and you do not want it, then it is acceptable to ask for a nonalcoholic drink as an alternative.” Survey items addressing irresponsible
drinking included (a) “a real man should be able to hold his liquor” and (b) “it is okay to drive after you have had a few (four) drinks” (Klein, 1992).

Studies That Failed to Characterize Responsible Drinking. Although eight of the reviewed studies attempted to specify what constituted responsible drinking, three failed to denote any detail regarding beliefs and/or behaviors representing drinking responsibly, even though the construct was a central variable in the report. For instance, in a forced referral program, Look and Rapaport (1991) sought to reduce the prevalence of abusive alcohol consumption on campus by educating students on facts about alcohol and instilling the value that “abusive drinking is inappropriate and irresponsible” (p. 89). The researchers contended that participants benefited from the opportunity “to try out responsible drinking in between sessions and share their observations and results in the next group session” (p. 93). Moreover, Look and Rapaport asserted involvement in this referral intervention allowed participants to change “their pattern of consumption to a responsible level” (p. 94), all the while never defining what constituted responsible for the purposes of their study.

To reduce negative alcohol-related events on campus and prevent dangerous alcohol consumption patterns, LaBrie, Pederson, Lamb, and Bove (2006) utilized motivational interviewing to provide feedback on normative drinking and change students’ perceptions, identify inconsistencies with goals and behaviors, and promote strategies to deal with high-risk situations. LaBrie and colleagues described that during the intervention’s final step “the facilitator reinforces goals relating to responsible behavior or reductions in drinking” (p. 302), but the authors failed to provide any characterization of “responsible behavior.”

Towers, Kishchuk, Sylvestre, Peters, and Bourgault (1994) conducted a qualitative investigation based on observational and focus group data; key informant interviews also provided reactions among blue-collar workers to a worksite alcohol awareness program. For their study’s purposes, healthy (i.e., “sensible”) drinking is “drinking in a responsible manner that will not lead to problems for oneself and others, within specified safe drinking limits per occasion, while recognizing situations where one should not drink” (p. 57). Because of participant feedback, investigators changed their emphasis from problem drinking to a “discussion of the enjoyment of responsible drinking during social occasions and avoidance of alcohol in situations where it would be unhealthy or dangerous” (p. 61).

DISCUSSION

This review does not intend to negatively spotlight individual studies. Instead, the articles we reviewed here provide a heuristic example of the limitations associated with the concept of responsible drinking within the discipline of health promotion. As previously stated, the central purpose of this review is to determine how marketing campaigns and public health officials define responsible drinking.

Although brewers do not necessarily define responsible drinking, the alcohol industry’s rationale for using this message is quite clear. Brewer-sponsored responsible drinking campaigns reflect a “hybrid of commercial, public relations, and public service persuasion strategies” (Agostinelli & Grube, 2002, p. 18) possessing several practical and ethical limitations that, overall, fail to recognize important public health
concerns. Furthermore, by utilizing imprecise slogans and other advertising tactics, the alcohol industry has cleverly turned this former prevention message into a marketing tactic that appeases critics and consumers yet does not influence public health.

In articulating a definition for responsible drinking, researchers were consistently inconsistent in identifying specific characteristics of responsible alcohol consumption. In addition, the health measures provided in the reviewed studies were neither evidence based nor grounded in past research. Moreover, none of the studies that employed responsible drinking as a concept or construct in a program discussed the steps taken, either in practice or conceptually, to elicit and conceptualize the characteristics associated with responsible drinking. Scholarly reports referred to responsible drinking as a commonly known fact or assumption, not requiring definition or clarification. Although program conclusions and implications revolve around this concept, no specific behaviors, beliefs, and/or attitudes potentially connected to the concept were ever described. Therefore, misunderstanding stemming from the vagueness, inconsistency, and overall counterintuitive nature of brewer-sponsored responsible drinking campaigns is further compounded by prevention researchers’ use of the term or concept of responsible drinking in their scholarly reports.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The current scientific literature addressing responsible drinking exhibits many methodological and conceptual gaps. In addition to lacking a consensus definition among researchers and practitioners, the following questions remain unanswered: How do individuals (drinkers themselves) conceptualize (interpret and define) what it means to drink responsibly? How do people personally practice responsible drinking? Are there particular beliefs and behaviors commonly associated with responsible drinking? What are the barriers preventing one from carrying out responsible drinking practices? What are motivations to practice responsible drinking?

To answer these questions, researchers must first use exploratory methodologies to determine how various populations conceptualize and practice this behavior. Once evidence-based characteristics of responsible drinking are determined, further testing can be conducted to validate these findings. Only then will practitioners and researchers have an understanding of what it means to drink responsibly. However, if current practices continue (i.e., varying definitions of responsible drinking across studies), researchers run the risk of further emulating the restrictive ideas purposefully promoted by the alcohol industry and will not be able to determine if “responsible drinking” is actually being promoted or practiced.

References


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