



## LESSON PLAN

**Level:** Grades 4 to 8  
**About the Author:** MediaSmarts

# Kids, Alcohol and Advertising: Interpreting Media Messages

## Overview

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In this lesson, students investigate the importance of branding and messaging, especially as they relate to parity products such as beer and alcohol. Students explore the "3Ps" of brand messaging – personality, position and promise – by seeing how they apply to top selling brands of beer in the United States. Students study how consumers interpret and decide whether or not to act on media messages by applying the Media Message Interpretation Process Model to an advertisement for rum. And for homework, they conduct a "3P" analysis of three ads for alcohol.

## Learning Outcomes

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Students will demonstrate:

- how alcohol companies use branding and messaging to attract consumers
- the factors – including media messages – that may influence an individual's behaviour choices

an understanding of:

- the differences between merit-based advertising and image advertising
- how consumers interpret media messages

## Preparation and Materials

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- Photocopy the overheads *Mr. Clean, How We Interpret Media Messages* (PDF) and *Beer Study*
- Photocopy the *Ad Analysis* student assignment
- [The Target is You!: Alcohol Advertising Quiz](#) is a companion activity for the lesson series *Kids, Alcohol and Advertising*. It can be a fun and interactive way to introduce the topic, or after, to re-enforce learning (optional resource).

## Procedure

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### Class Discussion

As we saw in our last lesson, branding is an important part of advertising. This is especially true for products for which there is little difference in taste or product performance. Products such as these are called "parity" products.



- Can you list a few types of parity products? (Hint: one example is milk. Can you taste the difference between different brands of 2% milk?)

Other parity products include cigarettes, colas, gasoline, sugar, flour, bottled water, vodka, and blank CDs.

Another good example of a parity product is beer. Really, there's not much difference in taste between many brands of the same type of beer, so beer companies develop extensive advertising campaigns to attract customers to their products. In fact, the top beer brands in both Canada and the U.S. are those that spend the most money on advertising and promotion. And it's not only adults who are paying attention to the ads. According to researchers, junior and senior high school students know about, prefer and drink the most heavily advertised brands of beer.

A U.S. company called Stealing Share helps companies develop more effective brands by researching the advertising campaigns for similar products. Its website features a study that was conducted on American top-selling brands of beer. In this study, Stealing Share looked at how advertisements for each of these brands created a distinct "personality" for the product, a "position" in the marketplace and a "promise" to consumers – we'll call these the "3Ps." Here are a few of the beers that they looked at (Put the Beer Study chart onto the overhead projector):

- Do you notice any similarities in the "personalities" that have been created around these beers? (*Three of the four beers feature "cool" or "hip" as part of the personality profile.*)
- What kind of people do you think beers that promote themselves as "cool" are trying to reach? What makes you think this?
- What about the market position? Have these companies managed to develop distinct positions for their brands, or do they all say the same thing? What is your impression about each beer when you hear its slogan?
- Now let's look at the promise of each beer. What type of people do you think each of these "promises" might attract? Is there any truth to these promises?

As this chart shows, coming up with a logo or brand is only the first step in promoting a product.

- What else do advertisers have to do?

Advertisers need to give their product or brand maximum exposure – not just in commercials or ads, but also – in the case of alcoholic beverages – through positive portrayals in TV dramas and sitcoms, in music videos, on talk shows, in store promotions and at sporting events.

And, as we can see from the "3Ps," advertisers also need to create "messaging" in order to make their product stand out. For some products, the message is clear and direct. For example, what would you say about this ad for Mr. Clean? (Put the *Mr. Clean* overhead onto the projector.)

- What is the brand for this product? (A big, strong cleaning guy in a spotless white T-shirt.)
- What does the choice of this character as a brand imply about the product? (*That this is a hard-working cleaner that will get rid of dirt and grime.*)
- What message reinforces the image of "hard-working cleaner?" (The slogan: "cleans your whole house and everything that's in it")



This is an example of messaging that is very straightforward: "Buy this cleaner because it will make your house spotless."

Most ads for beer and alcohol aren't straightforward at all. Instead of selling products, they sell images, fantasies and life styles. "Drink this," many alcohol ads seem to say, "and you can be glamorous, or sexy, or rebellious, or athletic, or popular, or cool."

Alcohol ads also promote the idea that "everyone's doing it" – this is called normalization.

We know that advertisers spend billions of dollars trying to make us want to use their products. The big question is: does it work? It's safe to assume that companies wouldn't waste all this money if they didn't think advertising worked, but this is a central question when trying to figure out how much influence alcohol advertising has on kids and teens.

Researchers have discovered that when it comes to kids and alcohol advertising:

- kids who identify with media messages and who want to be like people in ads have more positive feelings about drinking than kids who don't
- older kids are more likely to have positive feelings about drinking than younger kids
- kids who are frequently exposed to ads for alcohol have more positive feelings about drinking than kids who don't see many ads
- kids who generally like alcohol ads have more positive feelings about drinking than kids who don't like or notice them

Experts say the key to advertising is not in the message, but how the consumer interprets it. That's why companies spend so much money to make sure their product's "promise" is clearly understood by their target audience.

(Put How We Interpret Media Messages onto the overhead projector, showing only the first point, as well as the diagram on top.)

This diagram, created by Dr. Erica Austin and her team of researchers at Washington State University, explains how young people interpret messages in alcohol ads, and the factors that may influence them to drink. According to Dr. Austin:

1. When we get messages from the media – such as this advertisement for rum – we receive it two ways: logically and emotionally. Our logical side asks, "Is this message realistic?" and "Is this message correct?" Our emotional side asks, "Do I like what this message is telling me?"
  - Let's take a look at this ad from a logical point of view. First, what do you think is the message about drinking in this ad? What is it promising consumers?
  - Second, do you think this message is realistic? Is this how most people act when they have a drink?
  - Now take a look at the people in this ad. How would you describe them? Do normal people look like this?
  - These are logical questions. Now, let's look at this message from an emotional perspective: do you like what this message is telling you? Why or why not? (Uncover the second point.)



2. Over time, as we are exposed to the same message again and again, we either internalize or reject it by asking ourselves, "Do I want to be like this?" We make this decision based on logical thinking, as well as on emotional feelings. This can sometimes be a tough decision, because our emotions can be stronger than our sensible, logical side.
  - Sometimes you hear people say "I should have known better" when they act rashly. Has this ever happened to you?
  - Let's take a look at this rum ad again. Even though you know this is not how real people look or behave when they drink, do you want to be like this? (Alcohol advertisers are betting that you will, and that this will make you buy into the idea that every time you have a drink, it's one big party!) (Uncover point 3 and the rest of the diagram.)
3. Whether or not we let ourselves be influenced by a media message depends on our thoughts, our feelings and our expectations about the behaviour being promoted. We ask ourselves, "What will happen if I imitate what the people in this ad are doing?" If you have internalized and accepted the message in the advertisement, you will most likely consider positive consequences. (In the case of this ad, you will tell yourself, "If I drink this rum, I'm going to be popular and party and have a good time.") If you have rejected the ad's message, then you are more likely to consider the negative consequences ("I might get into trouble with my parents or the law because I'm underage" or "I might get sick from drinking too much").

Depending on how you interpret the message, you will make a decision about drinking. However, we don't make these decisions all by ourselves.

- Can you think of any outside influences that may affect whether or not you buy into what alcohol marketers want you to believe? (This might include: friends, parents, teachers or even life experience – perhaps you know someone who's had a bad experience with alcohol.)

### Homework

- Ask students to complete the *Ad Analysis* sheet. (Younger students will need help in completing this assignment.)
- When students have completed their work, discuss and compare their answers.



## Mr. Clean

The advertisement features the Mr. Clean character on the left, with his arms crossed. To his right is the slogan: "Mr. Clean cleans your whole house and everything that's in it." Below the slogan, a collection of Mr. Clean products is displayed, including a mop, a spray bottle, a box of eraser, and several large bottles of different colors (orange, yellow, blue, green, red). The background is a blue and white gradient with a red circular element on the left.

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home products

Mr. Clean cleans your whole house and everything that's in it.

Mr. Clean Clean Mop

Mr. Clean Clean Mop

NEW Mr. Clean Eraser

Mr. Clean

Mr. Clean

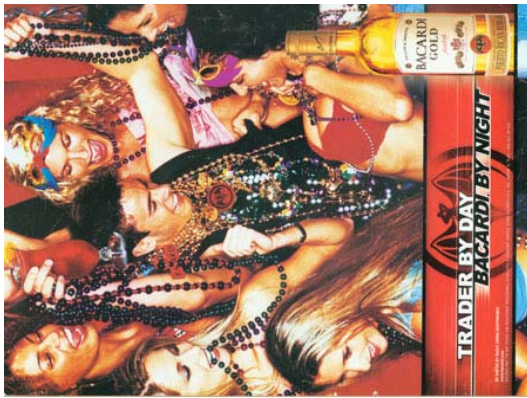
Mr. Clean

Mr. Clean

Mr. Clean



## How We Interpret Media Messages



# 1 + 2 + 3 =

When we get messages from the media, we receive them two ways: logically and emotionally. Our logical side asks "is this message realistic?" and "is this message correct?"

Our emotional side asks "do I like what this message is telling me?"

Over time, as we are exposed to the same message again and again, we internalize or reject the message by asking "Do I want to be like this?"

We make this decision based on our logical thinking, as well as our emotional feelings.

Researchers have found that our emotional feelings may override our more sensible, logical side.

# Behaviour Choices

Whether or not we let ourselves be influenced by a media message depends on our thoughts, our feelings and our expectations about the behaviour being promoted. In other words, we consider "what will happen if I imitate what the people in this ad are doing?"


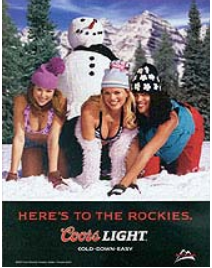
OR



If you have decided to accept a message, it's likely that you will consider positive consequences. If you are leaning towards rejecting a message, you are more likely to consider the negative consequences.



## Beer Study

Brand	Personality	Position	Promise
 <p><b>Budweiser</b></p>	Confident, hip	King of Beers	"Be part of the crowd that 'gets' it"
	Cool, hip, young	The Beer of Friends	"Our drinkers experience life"
 <p><b>Coors Light</b></p>	Cool, hip (sophomoric)	Cold, from the Rockies	"Makes you cooler (we're not snobs)"
 <p><b>Coors</b></p>	Real, confident, legendary	The Original	"Drink Coors and be an original"




Source: Stealing Share, "Growing Market Share by Brand Development in the Beer Industry"

[http://www.stealingshare.com/library/ataglance/beer\\_study.html](http://www.stealingshare.com/library/ataglance/beer_study.html)



## Ad Analysis

Judging by the advertisements for each of the following brands, record what you think the personality of each brand might be, how it could be positioned in the marketplace (the slogan) and the promise it makes to consumers (what message does it deliver about the product?).

Brand	Personality	Position	Promise
			
			
			

**Bonus Question:** Who do you think is the target audience for each ad? Which do you think would most appeal to teens? Why?