

Interpretations of Individualistic and Collectivistic Drinking Messages in Beer Commercials by Teenagers from Five European Countries

INTERPRÉTATIONS DES MESSAGES INDIVIDUALISTES ET COLLECTIVISTES DANS LES PUBLICITÉS DE BIÈRE PAR LES ADOLESCENTS DE CINQ PAYS EUROPÉENS

Hellman M.^{1,*}

Gosselt J. F.²

Pietruszka. M.³

Rolando S.⁴

Rossetti S.⁵

Wothge J.⁶

Abstract: The study is a qualitative investigation into European teenagers' meaning-making of beer commercials with individualistic and collectivistic drinking messages. The subjects were teenagers (aged 13–16) from Finland, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Poland. Eight (8) focus group interviews were conducted in each country, with a total of 267 participants. Beer commercials acted as stimuli for the group discussions. The adolescents' speech in these discussions was analysed for the perceived positive outcomes of drinking alcohol and for perceptions of competence attached to drinking. The speech of the participants is juxtaposed to a semiotic reading of the commercials and differences between the groups are explained by cultural differences.

Key words: Drinking cultures; Teenagers; Beer commercials; RAGI; Collectivistic and individualistic cultures

¹ Nordic Centre for Welfare and Social Issues (NVC), Finland.

* Correspondence to Matilda Hellman, Nordic Centre for Welfare and Social Issues (NVC), Annankatu 29 A 23, FIN-00100 Helsinki. E-mail: matilda.hellman@nordicwelfare.org

² University of Twente, the Netherlands.

³ State Agency for Prevention of Alcohol Related Problems (PARPA), Poland.

⁴ Eclectica, Italy.

⁵ Asl of Milan, Italy.

⁶ ZEUS (Centre for Applied Psychology, Social and Environment), Germany.

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Resumé: L'étude est une enquête qualitative sur la signification perçue par les adolescents européens vis-à-vis des publicités de bière avec des messages individualistes et collectivistes. Les sujets d'étude étaient des adolescents (âgés de 13-16) de la Finlande, de l'Allemagne, de l'Italie, des Pays-Bas et de la Pologne. Huit (8) groupes d'entretien ont été menés dans chaque pays, avec un total de 267 participants. Les publicités de bière ont été utilisées comme des stimuli pour activer les discussions de groupe. Les discours des adolescents dans ces discussions ont été analysés pour les résultats positifs perçus de la consommation d'alcool et la perception des compétences associées à l'alcoolisme. Les discours des participants sont juxtaposés à une lecture sémiotique des publicités et les différences entre les groupes sont expliquées par les différences culturelles.

Mots-clés: cultures de vin; adolescents; publicités de bière; RAGI; culture collectiviste et individualiste

Glossary: RAGI=The Reception Analytical Group Interview technique, semiotics= study of the meaning of signs, symbolic interactionism=all communication is symbolic and based upon interaction and meaning.

BACKGROUND

The values that teenagers ascribe alcohol use have impact on how they relate to persuasive messages on alcohol drinking. This conception lies in the focal point of the inquiries of the present study. We have performed a qualitative investigation into European teenagers' interpretations of messages of drinking in beer commercials. We interviewed 267 (=N) 13–16-year-olds from Finland, Italy, Germany, the Netherlands and Poland in focus group discussions with televised beer commercials as stimulus texts. We hypothesize a correlation between drinking culture extraction and interpretations of individualistic and collectivistic messages on drinking alcohol.

A main variation between drinking cultures in Europe pertains to the extent of emphasis that is given to intoxication. In Italy drinking to intoxication is neither as usual nor as accepted as in Finland, Germany, the Netherlands and Poland. A majority of Italians report that they only drink in association to meals, while corresponding amounts of meal-drinkers in the other countries lie on around five to ten per cent (data from Poland is missing) (Anderson and Baumberg, 2006: 89).

Variations in European drinking patterns among teenagers are also manifest particularly in a north-south divergence. On the basis of an analysis of a data set by the European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD), Bjarnason (2010) has showed that drinking patterns among teenagers have undergone a divergence trend during the period 1999-2007. The drinking frequencies and the quantity of consumed alcohol follow a distinctly different pattern in northern European countries (low frequency, larger quantities per occasion) compared to southern European countries (high frequency, smaller quantities per occasion) (Bjarnason, 2010; Hibell, 2007; Järvinen & Room, 2007). Beer is the most commonly reported type of beverage (49%) used in the last 30 days among 15-year-old Europeans (Hibell et al, 2007: 68). It occupies a particularly large share of the adolescents' consumption in Poland.

The second cultural variation with relevance for this study is a well-known challenge for cross-cultural marketing, namely the one between collectivistic and individualistic cultures. Individualistic cultures are, roughly speaking, associated with emphasis on independence, achievement, freedom, high levels of competition, and pleasure, whereas collectivistic are oriented towards interdependence, harmony, family security, social hierarchies, cooperation and low levels of competition (Han & Shavitt, 1994: 328; Triandis, 1989; de Mooij, 2010). Individualistic cultural patterns are found in most Northern and Western regions of Europe, whereas cultures in southern Europe contain more collectivistic patterns. Italy belongs to the latter

group, while Poland can be viewed as somewhere in between the two⁷. Finland, Germany and the Netherlands represent individualistic cultures.

The experience of alcoholic beverages and of drinking behaviour has been proven markedly different between individualistic and collective culture and the cultures have also shown to produce different types of alcohol ad connotations. For example, an association network created by German and Spanish students for the beer brand Corona Extra showed different clusters: the German associations pertained 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). The connotations reflect different patterns of thought concerning drink adhering to identity and social belonging. Such framings of perceptions of drinking are classic themes in the sociological and anthropological literature on the cultural meaning of alcohol (e.g. Barrows & Room, 1991; Heath, 2000; Wilson, 2005; Douglas, 2003; Beccaria, 2010).

The participants' speech on alcohol drinking constitutes our material. The speech is analysed in relation to images and narratives of two televised beer commercials; one being more individualistic and the other more collectivistic in its core drinking message. We will compare how well the teenagers' understandings correlate with the commercial messages and explore whether these differences show cultural variations.

AN INTERACTIONIST MEANING-BASED MODEL

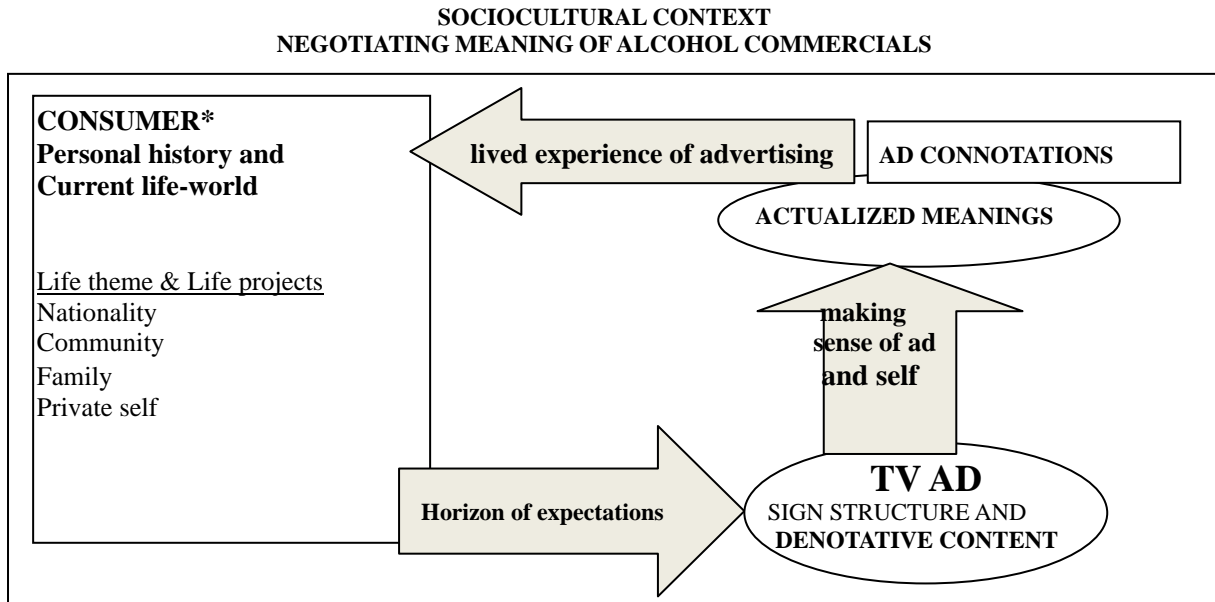
Overviews of previous research on alcohol marketing and youngsters (Aitken et al, 1988; Smith et al, 2009; Anderson et al, 2009) show that it has largely been concerned with experimental studies attempting to link advertising exposure and behavioural outcomes, like testing the match between amount of exposure, extent of appeal and corresponding amounts of drinking (e.g. Wyllie et al, 1998; Collins et al, 2007).

The present study's point of departure lies in theories on inter-cultural variations pertaining to discourse (Clyne, 1994; Scollon & Wong Scollon, 2001). The communication process is viewed in the light of symbolic interactionism and consumer semiotics. To clarify, we have found a model by Parker (1998) most useful⁸. Our version of the model can be viewed in figure 1. What this interactionist model portrays is the importance of the life themes and life projects in the meanings negotiated in the readings of alcohol commercials. The lens that the consumer uses in his negotiation of the commercials is formed by his relationship to alcohol, and this will vary according to cultural extraction. What is called life projects in the figure can be viewed as frames of reference in the teenagers' lives. We view the life theme of drinking alcohol as negotiated within and influenced by a wealth of circumstances in the young person's life. Of special interest here are, naturally, the differences that can be claimed to be resulting from different national and cultural frameworks of meaning attached to drinking. These will overlap with the prevailing culturally anchored perceptions of the individual on the one hand and the collectivity on the other (Hofstede, 1984: 148).

⁷ In comparison with the USA Poland has been described as collectivistic, see Cialdini et al. 1999. The more individualistic pattern of drinking to intoxication is more common in Poland than e.g. in the Mediterranean region.

⁸ The model is borrowed by Mick and Buhl (1992). In order to explain the role of alcohol advertising in the lives of college students, Parker employed it for a meaning-based model of the advertising experience.

Figure 1: An adapted version of Mick and Buhls (1992) meaning-based model of advertising experiences



***THE CONSUMER:**

A pervasive *Life Theme* can e.g. be the teenagers relationship to alcohol.

National life projects involve meanings associated with nationalities and internationality.

Community life projects involve meanings associated with residential areas, peer groups and careers.

Family life projects involve meanings associated with family members, including parents and siblings.

The Private Self life project involves meanings associated with being an individuated human being, including personal activities and interests.

Visual advertisement is here viewed as a convention-based symbolic system, which must be cognitively processed, rather than absorbed peripherally or automatically (Scott, 1994: 252). Consumers act toward things on the basis of the meaning that the things have for them: *'meanings are handled in, modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters'* (Blumer, 1986: 2). An integral part of our social system, advertising conveys to consumers the culturally constituted meanings of products: *'Consumers... have them [the meanings] reinforced by the act of reading ads, that is, by interpreting the product definitions that are implicit in ostensible advertising content'* (Domzal et al, 1992: 62). The function of advertising is to serve us a repertoire of what the product can mean for us and to reinforce that message. The meanings are negotiated and generated by the receivers according to contextual circumstances, actions and situations.

Perceptions of the relationship between the individual and the group and their internal role divisions have been proven to be significantly different in different cultural value systems (see e.g. Hofstede, 1984). This is why semiotics, or the study of signs, has emerged as a major area of investigation in consumer and marketing research and proved especially pertinent in light of international and global markets (Uniker-Sebeok, 1987; Mick et al, 2004). The advertiser must ask which set of signifiers will produce the desired consumer interpretations. The standardization of meaning, or the homogenization of meaning strived for by advertising has been noted to work best when the target market (the receiver of the message) responds to the message by creating meanings that are similar to the ones produced by the producer (Camargo, 1987: 465). The inability to understand 'what is meant by what is said' has by Thomas (1983: 22) been described in terms of a 'cross-cultural pragmatic failure'. We will look for such failures by studying how the meaning interpreted by receivers matched the connotations sought by the creators of the advertisement.

Beer commercials have been shown to convey a set of specific myths about the social and ritual use of beer (Wallack et al., 1990; Postman et al., 1987). From a semiotic reading of 61 beer commercials from seven different countries, Domzal and Kernan (1992) have, for example, discerned meaning prototypes of beer and pointed out some specific ways in which the ads entreat beer drinkers to reward themselves (privately) or to have fun with friends (socially). The primary aim guiding the thematic selection of the beer commercials for this study was that the clips should portray drinking competence and instrumental values of alcohol in different ways.

Beer commercials were selected as stimulus texts also because the advertising of beer is permitted in all the participating countries and because beer is a popular drink among young persons in all six countries. In order to minimize the risk of some youngsters being more familiar with a brand or message than others, we chose commercials which had not been broadcasted in any of the participating countries.

Commercials that contained as little speech as possible were preferred, as the participants had different mother tongues. Our analysis examines speech generated by two commercials shown in the focus groups⁹. In both of these commercials, specific albeit different meaning was attached to beer drinking. The core meanings of the commercials were interpreted by a semiotic reading.

In order to discern the differences in meaning-making between the different data sets, the meanings articulated by the participants are juxtaposed to the semiotic reading of the commercials. The variations illuminate the participants' evolving culturally framed life values and experiences (Lieblich et al, 1998) pertaining to alcohol use.

RESEARCH SETTING AND SAMPLE

In each country, participants were recruited from two schools: one in an urban area and the other in a rural region. We aimed for a total sample of 28 pupils from each school: 7 girls and 7 boys from a 13–14 age group and, similarly, 7 girls and 7 boys aged 15–16. The pupils were randomly sampled from each of the two school levels, since we sought to spread the samples as widely as possible over the groups. There were thus four (4) focus group discussions in each school, or a total of eight (8) per country. The number of participants from different regions is displayed in table 1.

The age band and geographical sampling were not primarily theoretically informed for this specific study. The focus groups also served as a pretest for data collection of a future longitudinal survey study conducted within the same research project (de Bruijn et.al., accepted). These needs have marked the sampling procedure.

Table 1: Number of participants from different countries; regions and gender

	FIN	GER	ITA	NL	POL
	Orivesi	Hanstedt	Ciriè	Losser	Zamosc
Rural and	Girls: 14	Girls: 13	Girls: 14	Girls: 15	Girls: 12
urban regions	Boys: 7*	Boys: 14	Boys: 14	Boys: 14	Boys: 11
	Helsinki	Hamburg	Milano	Amsterdam	Warsaw
	Girls: 14	Girls: 14	Girls: 14	Girls: 15	Girls: 14
	Boys: 14	Boys: 13	Boys: 14	Boys: 15	Boys: 12
TOTAL= 267	49	54	56	59	49

*One of the boy group discussions in Orivesi was not possible to transcribe.

PROCESS AND METHODS

The Reception Analytical Group Interview (RAGI) consists of focus group interviews with stimulus texts. The aim is to gain as much naturally occurring speech as possible and to systematize analyses for cross-country comparisons. The group discussions are oriented around specific predetermined topics formulated in an open-ended manner. By analysing the speech around the clips, the researcher will learn how the group members perceive the messages, how they frame them and what they know about the things they see. The researcher identifies and codes the participants' speech modalities.

In view of our theoretical model in figure 1 the RAGI tool box is particularly helpful for our inquiries. It facilitates many dimensions for investigations: (i) exegetical meaning represented by verbal interpretations of symbols by the informants (our data sets); (ii) operational meaning represented by actual symbol use by the advertiser (and informants) as observed by the researcher (the semiotic reading), and, additionally, (iii) positional meaning by interpretations of the relationships between symbols and their meanings and uses (the analysis of the reasoning around the ads in relation to the semiotic reading) (see Mick, 1986: 207 for these dimensions in consumer research and semiotics).

In each country, the material was gathered by 1–2 researchers. They interviewed the adolescents in sessions that lasted approximately 45 minutes depending on how talkative the groups were. Finland had the shortest session which lasted with 25 minutes, while one of the Polish session lasted as long as around 90 minutes. Four commercials were shown, and after each commercial, the participants were invited to have free group discussions about the following topics: 1) What is happening in the commercial? 2) What has happened just before the clip? 3) What will happen after the clip? 4) How is drinking portrayed? 5) Location and situation of the clip.

The researcher introduced the topics both verbally and on a sheet of paper placed in front of each group member. We wanted the group to work together to assure that the topics were all addressed during the discussions. However, with participants of this age it proved almost impossible not to interfere at all, or at least a bit. The interview sessions were audio and/or video recorded. Group members remained anonymous throughout the interview process, identified by number plates only.

The discussions were transcribed and the material grouped similarly in all countries. The Finnish team suggested ways of grouping the data based on the Finnish material. All country partners came back with feedback on how well these worked with their own material. After two such feedback rounds a handbook for coding was developed and distributed. The partners then submitted the translated coded materials to the project coordinator for comparison. Comparisons were commented on and finally approved by the partners, who were most acquainted with their own material.

This paper does not attempt a full analysis of the data. Instead, we shall focus on the speech on drinking generated by two of the commercials, examining speech that concerns a) drinking competences related to amounts of alcohol consumed and b) outcomes of drinking, mostly those expressed as positive. The perceptions expressed by the adolescents were juxtaposed to the significations of drinking that we interpreted as those aimed at by the advertisers. A brief account of the semiotic reading is presented in the next section.

Ethical considerations. The research had ethical considerations related to the participants' age, nature of the material, stimulus texts and the way in which the material was collected. Informed consent was adapted. All participants were able to leave the study at any time. The data was rendered anonymous and kept in a safe way. The reporting does not leave out information that could unveil the identity of the participants. All of the ethical aspects above are included in the systems that the partner institutions have in place to ensure that questions of ethics are considered in every stage of the research. The partnering countries emphasize ethical considerations somewhat differently in the individual procedures for permissions to conduct interviews in schools.

⁹ All in all four beer commercials were used as stimulus texts during the group discussions.

THE COMMERCIALS: A SEMIOTIC READING

Since advertisements, in their core meaning, consist of both open and hidden messages, it is not possible to obtain a description of them by deduction from the content elements on the surface level (see Nöth, 1987). Hence, in order to grasp the more subliminal messages we performed a semiotic reading of the two commercials. We produced interpretations of how the meanings worked in the context of their structures. Short summaries of these analyses are given in figures 2 and 3.

Figure 2: Semiotic reading of Hahn beer commercial

Hahn beer commercial: man and woman drinking in a gondola

Country of brand origin: Australia

What is shown: An objectified picture of a woman walking on a bridge, followed by her and a man entering a gondola for a ride. He holds her hand as she walks down the stairs to the boat. While the boat slides through the setting of Venice, the camera glances over parts of the woman's body from different angles. She takes a sip of a glass of champagne. Suddenly the man hauls a large fish from the water on a fishing line. The fish strikes the woman. She is surprised/hysterical, but the man acts as if nothing has happened. He opens a bottle of beer and starts to drink. The woman is portrayed as angry and disappointed while he remains content sitting with the fish in his hand. He says 'What?' as in 'What is wrong?'. The last image shows a Hahn beer bottle with Venice in the background.

Semiotic reading: The setting is perfect for romance, the woman is sexy and attractive, but the man prefers to fish. He represents the 'boy male' engaged in 'harmless', childish and fun leisure activities (fishing and drinking beer), while the woman represents (boring) adult and romantic expectations. They thus embody stereotypical male and female roles. He wants to and is allowed to live his inner child, whereas the woman looks forward to spending time together with romantic expectations. She expresses disappointment, a rather complicated emotional state. He is the uncomplicated one (=more rational, and less emotional), not interested in spending time with her on (her) adult premises. (Consequently he will be interested in her only when it suits him. He is more in control than she is.)

Core message on drinking: Beer drinking is connected to male playfulness and relaxation without social ambitions. It is just fun and relaxing – in opposition to drinking wine which is connected to certain (female) ambitions on life and self.

Figure 3: Semiotic reading of Budweiser Ale commercial

Budweiser Ale: Civilised adult drinking

Country of brand origin: United States of America

What is shown: A man fetches two beers from a bar desk. In the background is a table with four people. The man turns to walk to this table, carrying the beers. Two men and a woman sit around the table, and we hear a voice saying 'There are moments in life worth saving, friends worth saving – and now a new beer worth saving'. The man lays the beers on the table and joins the group. They lift their glasses, look cheerfully at each other and drink. A filling scene shows beer being poured into a glass from a bottle. When the glass is full, there is a close-up on the foaming beer. The focus then returns to the company of four, two Caucasian males, one man of colour and one woman. The girl is portrayed smiling, agreeing on something. Once again there is a close-up of a glass and a beer bottle on the table. And once again the image switches to the company of four, raising their glasses. They are friendly and adult, clearly cherishing the company but also acting in a fairly restrained manner, not given to excessive behaviour. The last frame returns to the image of a glass and a bottle.

Semiotic reading: The togetherness of the group is genuine, sincere and mature, like the beer they drink. These people have sustainable and good values/morals. They would not disappoint their friends (and would not choose a bad beer). Their behaviour is adult and reasonable.

Core message on drinking: Beer drinking is connected to relaxation as well as important and sincere socialising among friends.

In the first commercial (Hahn Beer, described in figure 2) the role by the male can be described in Postman et al's (1987) terms as that of the 'ageing child' or 'the adorable jerk' (Ibid: 22), a frequent character in beer commercials, whenever male playfulness is portrayed. The same type of individualistic male character occurs in popular TV shows and Hollywood films (see Wexman Wright, 1993). What the advertiser arguably wishes to achieve is that drinking beer by Hahn should be simple and joyful. Hahn drinkers want a break from responsibilities and from adult expectations on how to behave in certain situations.

Regarding the second commercial (Budweiser Ale, described in figure 3) Postman et al. (1987) have identified a strikingly similar draft of social (often male) bonding in a content analysis of 40 American beer commercials: reward yourself with a beer after a hard day's labour (Postman et al, 1987: 25). The plausible message of the ad is the opposite of the Hahn commercial: people who drink the Budweiser Ale live up to adult expectations on drinking responsibly and value important things in life, such as genuine friendship.

The Hahn commercial represents an individualistic view on situation solution whereas the Budweiser commercial opts for a collectivistic sentiment. In the following we will discuss the views on the drinking in the commercials as expressed by the adolescents from the five countries of this study.

INTERPRETATIONS OF DRINKING

On several occasions, the adolescents saw a link between the amounts consumed and the drinking competence – ability or skills connected to drinking. The characters in the commercials were perceived as able to drink as much or as little as the situation demanded. In discussions on all four commercials, most comments were made about the second advertisement (Budweiser Ale), which featured a group of friends sitting in a bar, enjoying their beer and each other's company.

The gondola ride: Small-scale or excessive drinking?

Finnish, Dutch and German pupils established that the characters of the commercial were engaged in small-scale or 'permitted' drinking: '*Just, you know, in Venice on the boat by the ditches, just a sip of beer, you know*' (D_M_95)¹⁰, '*He's just taken one sip*' (GER_M_95), '*They didn't indulge in huge amounts of alcohol, it was just taken within perfectly permitted limits.*' (FIN_M_93).

The drinking is described as relaxed, not a main theme of the scenario:

GER_M_93: *There wasn't a lot of alcohol consumption in the spot, it's more about the enjoyment.*

D_M_94: *[--], he had just one.*

Finnish pupils argued that this did not really qualify as 'real' drinking. The characters should in fact have had some more to drink:

FIN_F_93: *That wasn't even drinking, it was just for enjoyment or something like that.*

FIN_M_93: *It's just that they could've taken more [to drink]*

The drinking of the commercial was positioned as reasonable (or 'permitted'), but at the same time it did not constitute 'real' drinking, which is associated with consuming larger amounts. The German participants concluded that while there was not that much drinking, it was 'not too little' (GER_M_95). The pupils were clearly aware of a cultural transgression of drinking too much, but this did not stop the Finnish and German pupils partly identifying with such drinking by expressing personal experience of similar situations. Most

10 D=Dutch; FIN=Finnish; GER=German; ITA=Italian; POL=Polish. F=Female; M=Male; 93=year of birth 1993; 95=year of birth 1995.

of the German and Finnish references to drinking the right amount of alcohol in the first commercial related to the small amounts consumed.

The Italian and some of the Dutch discussions about the amount of drinking in the first commercial were somewhat different. The perceived irrational behaviour of the male character was framed by debates about intoxication: *'He was drunk'* (ITA_F_93); *'He might've been drunk even before'* (ITA_F_93). *'I think he's drunk'* (D_M_95). *'Yeah, boozed'* (D_M_96). Interviewer: *'Why do you think this?'* *'Because he's acting strange'* (D_M_96), and: *'He's going to get drunk'* (D_M_95).

The Italian group discussions contained substantially more speech regarding the negative effects of excessive drinking in view of the male character's behavior. Too much drink will make you do crazy things:

ITA_F_95: *You need to dose the quantity of alcohol. Otherwise, you do strange things...*

ITA_F_95: *Crazy things*

Both the Dutch and the Polish materials contained a strain of discussion on alcohol giving the drinker power, strength and energy. Drinking enabled the man in the commercial to catch the fish. Also, according to some of the pupils, the commercial portrayed that alcohol was good for the body.

D_F_95: *It seems like drinking gives you energy.*

D_F_95: *And drinking gives him power.*

D_F_95: *It's about the drinking. It gives him power. That's why he can catch such a big fish.*

D_F_95: *He catches such a large fish and therefore he thinks that the drink gives him power.*

D_F_95: *It's like you get power.*

D_F_94: *He gets power from the drinking.*

D_M_95: *It's like drinking is good for your body, that you get a quick response, and that you can catch that fish.*

POL_M_94: *Alcohol makes you stronger*

POL_M_94: *Alcohol boosts your strength*

To conclude, the Italian youngsters explained irrational behaviour by excessive alcohol intake even if only moderate amounts were consumed in the commercial. The unexpected situation portrayed in the commercial seemed to invite explanatory comments. To the Dutch and Polish pupils, alcohol gave the male lead extra powers. His irrational behaviour was attributed to intoxication in the Italian material.

Group of friends drinking: where will it lead?

In talking about the second commercial, the pupils reasoned around whether the drinking would stay within reasonable limits or turn to something else, most often referred to as more drinking and partying. This applied to the Finnish, German, Dutch and Polish material: some participants thought that the group would stay in the bar and drink some more beer, whereas others felt that the group would go to another place to continue drinking.

The Finnish discussions about how the evening would end focused solely on the amounts of alcohol to be consumed. There were two possible storylines: the characters would either stay in the bar for a while without drinking too much before going home or they would go on drinking, start partying and go to other places to drink some more.

FIN_M_93: */--/ but from this [clip] you can't say whether this'll be reasonable use or real sort of intoxication. You can't tell just by looking at the ad.*

FIN_M_93: *For now it looked like the drinking would stay within reasonable limits, but it's a sort of situation that could develop into unreasonable spheres. [bolding by res.]*

The setting is open for different scenarios, but the discursive force of the Finnish youngsters' speech drifts more often towards the second alternative: the group would continue drinking.

FIN_F_93: *[The drinking is] just like, not going over the top yet [bolding by res.]*

This is especially interesting, as the message of the commercial identified by the semiotic reading was decidedly not of getting irresponsibly drunk. Instead, the commercial emphasized the value of mature friendship and the right way of enjoying the right brand of beer.

Neither did the following views expressed by German girls accord with the commercial's message of rational adult drinking:

GER_F_95: *Maybe one of them will pass out, or won't be able to drink more, because they have a nice and good conversation, and then they drink yet another beer and another beer and another beer*

GER_F_95: *They drink a lot, I would guess, people who drink alcohol together especially if they are in a bigger group; then it might become larger amounts [of alcohol]*

GER_F_95: *It's very nice and comfy when they sit together and drink, and then they don't pay attention to how much they drink, when they sit together*

A party scenario outcome is described by some German boys:

GER_M_95: *they will go out partying*

GER_M_95: *they will get drunk or they will go to a party. No matter what, they will get drunk though*

GER_F_93: *They probably liked it a lot and then they want to do it again and again. I mean, drinking beer.*

This was also speculated on by a group of Dutch boys:

D_M_96: *Then they are drunk and they go home*

D_M_96: *By car*

D_M_96: *Yes, and then they will run over and kill someone and they will go to prison their whole life. Really!*

Some Polish girls discussed different options:

POL_F_94: *They had too much alcohol*

POL_F_94: *They could have [had] just one beer and then gone home.*

POL_F_94: *..they could have one more and another and they could get drunk and drive.*

A group of Dutch girls responded to the interviewer's question 'What will happen after the commercial?':

D_F_95&

D_F_94 *Drunk, drunk!*

D_F_94: *And then they will go home to throw up and so on.*

To the pupils, the scenario of the characters getting drunk and partying is not only a powerful alternative but a very likely outcome. However, the Italian discussions took a different direction. The likelihood of such an outcome was only mentioned twice, and in these cases it was not cited as a positive outcome of the evening. In the words of some Italian boys: 'Very unlikely [that they get drunk], almost impossible. Maybe one will...' (ITA_M_95); 'A small beer and that's it, a quick one' (ITA_M_95).

Additionally, the Italian material has substantially more commenting on what is unhealthy and harmful about drinking alcohol. This can be interpreted as reflecting more strict frames and boundaries for accepted drinking. The youngsters distanced themselves from irrational drinking behaviour:

ITA_F_95: *You hear about these things in the news, also in the press: they drink, get drunk, take drugs, and then have accidents.*

ITA_F_95: *I mean, it should be this way [like in the Budweiser commercial]*

The discussion continues to address irresponsible behaviour, clearly different from what is considered adequate drinking, such as having a beer during meals.

ITA_F_95: *I guess that having a beer is fine. What counts is not going over the top. As long as you only have a beer during meals, that's fine...*

ITA_F_95: *Those who go to discos... when they drink or, like, take drugs, they think they're clever.*

ITA_F_95: *They don't even think of the consequences. These ones [in the commercial], what will they do next? They'll leave, maybe go for a walk, nothing more... Those ones [irresponsible persons in real life], will drive, at night, no one around and, then, quite certainly, there will be trouble.*

ITA_F_95: *Then, not feeling well...*

The characters in the commercial are not such irresponsible people. This ties in with the commercial's message of a group of good friends who know how to behave. In the Italian data, intoxication is not really an option, as it is generally connected to horrible things that can happen. Intoxication lurks as a threat round the corner:

ITA_F_95: *You always have to act sensibly... to have a beer is not forbidden, but you can't act thoughtlessly, as beer is alcohol all the same.*

ITA_M_93: *if you drink too much, you put your life at risk*

DRINKING AND SOCIALIZATION

Sociability was the most commonly expressed positive outcome of drinking. The impression that the adolescents had of the situation in the bar was that socialization goes hand in hand with drinking and is also one of its outcomes.

FIN_F_93: *You and your friends, the music is playing in the background and you come to think about nice things.*

FIN_F_93 *As soon as you get a beer the joy will start*

In the Dutch and the German data, sociability emerged as a positive outcome of drinking and even dependent on drinking: 'Yes, like, beer makes everything sociable or so' (D_M_95); 'Yes!' (D_M_95, two girls at the same time); 'If you drink that or so, everything will become more sociable' (D_M_95). The fun of the moment is connected with the drinking:

D_M_95: *They're having a nice time because of the beer.*

D_M_95: *Sociably with the beer.*

D_M_95: *It's always sociable with spirits.*

D_M_95: *Sociable, that it is good for you, so sociable.*

GER_F_95: *drinking together is more fun*

GER_F_95: *with friends and so on, well, then you do it*

GER_F_95: *[drinking] with friends, then it's funny*

GER_F_95: *drinking alone is no fun*

The association of drinking beer and being with friends was also very common among the Italians:

IT_M_93: *it's beer that gets people together*

IT_M_93: *it's as if alcohol, in general, helped you to socialize*

IT_F_95: *it shows that... it shows that you can do these things with your friends, you don't necessarily have to go on and do something else, you can stay in a pub, have a beer, and you're happy nonetheless*

Even though some of the groups felt that the characters of the commercial would go on drinking and get intoxicated, interpreting the outcome differently from the advertiser, all of the groups identified the feeling of social interaction with the intended positive image. The adolescents recognized that sociability was connected to drinking beer in the second commercial. The German pupils felt that the situation was relaxed and the characters relished the setting:

GER_F_93: *They are in a bar, drink beer*

GER_F_93: *they have fun*

GER_F_93: *good friends*

GER_F_93: *just to have a drink, just to spend some time with friends, just going out, a nice dinner.*

Overall, the core message of relaxed, enjoyable and social drinking is perceived and understood by all groups. It is fun with alcohol and there are socialising benefits from alcohol. In the German and Finnish data, the social aspects are also connected to larger amounts of drinking and intoxication. This is similarly true, to some extent at least, in the Polish and Dutch data, but does not apply to the Italian pupils, who, on their part, do not connect large amounts of alcohol consumption particularly with socialization.

CORRELATION WITH ADVERTISERS' CORE MESSAGE

None of the groups discussed very much the core message of the first commercial of beer drinking being associated with uncomplicated, relaxed and fun views on life. Again, the Italian youngsters diverge, paying some special attention to this element. In many of the Italian groups, the participants criticized the male character's behaviour:

ITA_M_95: *You finish the bottle and then what? It lasted two minutes... while you could've had a woman for ten years. There is a difference, isn't there? Come on, it's different!*

The group goes on to discuss the pointlessness of preferring a beer that lasts two minutes to having a woman for life. Italian boys in the 13–14 age group question the male character's playfulness, his individualistic behaviour and its consequences. If only he had been different, the situation would have been perfect:

ITA_M_95: *--Harmless. Perfect. Except for the fact that he missed his chance with the girl. A Dutch boy strives to understand:*

D_M_95: *It's like he's an alcoholic or something. It shows that he drinks alcohol and that he prefers the beer more than such a beautiful blond girl.*

The division of gender roles is interpreted and expressed by some German girls in the following manner:

GER_F_93: *She goes away and he drinks the beer*
(giggling)

GER_F_93: *She doesn't want to have anything to do with him anymore. He prefers drinking beer.*

GER_F_93: *And being happy nonetheless.*

The German pupils do not condemn or criticize the male character's selfish behaviour. When it comes to the message on gender differences mediated by the advertiser, an Italian girl voices her thoughts:

ITA_F_93: *girls know that they must stop drinking at a certain stage as they're well aware that if they drink too much they'll get into trouble /-.../, while men don't think about this, they live the present moment and don't care about the consequences, about the future*

The girl's comments agree with the advertiser's point as identified by the semiotic reading. Her thoughts demonstrate a high level of literacy of the advertiser's message about the subtle meaning of gender roles.

There is least agreement with the advertiser's message in the Finnish pupils' tendency to read into the second commercial that the group members will get intoxicated and go on partying. Some of the pupils even suggest that the characters have agreed on a wager about who will drink the most:

FIN_F_95: *They have of course made a bet*

FIN_F_95: *Yes, who will drink the most*

Even though there is no such thing as interpreting 'wrongly', this interpretation deviates gloriously from the American advertiser's aim of portraying sincere and rational characters. Contrast this with the following statement from Italy:

ITA_M_93: *not lots of different kinds of alcohol, just a beer with friends*

The Italians also have the ability to see the connection between the brand and 'sincere friendship':

ITA_M_93: /.../ *It's more about the pleasure of meeting friends than about beer. It also says that this kind of beer helps you to keep friends...*

And the idea of responsible relaxed adults meeting up after a hard day of work or after a long separation is expressed very 'accurately': 'These friends might have met after a long while and might have decided to go and get a beer and spend some time together' (ITA_F_95).

OVERVIEW OF RESULTS

The success of advertising depends on how well the target group responds to the message in terms of generating meanings that are similar to the connotations of the commercial. The results of this study indicate that some meanings on beer drinking in the commercials do this fairly well, whereas others do not. It appears that the discrepancies are attributable to cultural differences.

Table 2: Correlation with core messages of Hahn and Budweiser commercials. To the right, views on intoxication expressed in the different data

	Correlation with Hahn commercial's drinking message – individualistic	Correlation with Budweiser commercial's drinking message – collectivistic	View on intoxication
FIN	High correlation with message on feeling and situation, and characters' way of drinking.	High correlation with feeling and situation. Low correlation with function and way of drinking, and the characters of the persons in the commercial	Closeness to intoxication, viewed as real drinking, although identified as unreasonable. Likely outcome of any drinking.
GER	High correlation with message on feeling and situation, and characters' way of drinking.	High correlation with feeling and situation. Low correlation with function and way of drinking, and the characters of the persons in the commercial	Closeness to intoxication, viewed as something that the drinking will inevitably lead up to.
ITA	High correlation with message on feeling and situation. Low correlation with message on individualistic behaviour (perceived as irrational).	High correlation with feeling and situation, and also with the message of responsibility.	Intoxication is unreasonable and deviant drinking behaviour that leads to trouble and harm.
NL	High correlation with message on feeling and situation, and characters' way of drinking.	High correlation with feeling and situation. Low correlation with function and way of drinking, and the characters of the persons in the commercial	Closeness to intoxication, likely outcome of drinking in a group.
POL	High correlation with message on feeling and situation. Both high and low correlations on characters' way of drinking.	High correlation with feeling and situation. Low correlation with function and way of drinking, and the characters of the persons in the commercial	Closeness to intoxication, likely outcome of any drinking.

The Finnish, German and Dutch pupils partly distanced themselves from the small-scale adult drinking in commercial 1 and did not react specifically to the non-adult and non-rational acting by the male character. That Italians did not comment on the small-scale drinking in the first commercial may be viewed in the light of the dominant collectivistic view on drinking in Italy: one is not supposed to go over the top. The individualistic behaviour of the male character was perceived as irrational and explained by an intoxicated

state. The antics of this 'adorable jerk' did not reverberate among the Italian pupils. The Italians also showed a great awareness of the negative consequences of excessive drinking and drunkenness.

The second commercial produced ideas of sociability in all groups. It proved easy to relate to the social aspects of drinking. However, the advertiser's message on the responsible adults did not meet the pitch of the Finnish, German, Dutch and Polish adolescents, some (albeit not all) of whom saw the story ending with the group continuing drinking and partying. The German and Finnish pupils in particular had a strong tendency to finish the story in this fashion. Some Finnish pupils even suggested that the commercial was about a drinking bet and that the characters would get drunk 'for sure'.

The adult and responsible elements in the commercial's stories on drinking found more favour with the Italian pupils. Intoxication seems to be a more familiar and ordinary state for the Finnish, German, Dutch and partly the Polish pupils. The basic messages of the romance of the couple and the togetherness of the group in the bar were something that all groups of pupils responded to. The correlations regarding individualistic and collectivistic drinking messages in the commercials are displayed in table 2.

DISCUSSION

From our material we have explored the informants' ideas about drinking embedded in their interpretations of the commercials. The advertisers of beer transfer symbolic meaning of this specific consumer good by attaching the beer drinking to certain images. We have investigated the ways in which youngsters construe meaning about drinking in such commercial messages and we have highlighted some differences in the interpretations. We claim that these differences correlate with basic characteristics of drinking cultures, which can, roughly speaking, be seen as separating the Italian style from the rest. More sophisticated and detailed differences would perhaps have been possible to discerned from an even larger data set that would solely have focused on cultural aspects in the discussions.

On the basis of the study we can conclude that the pupils were stimulated by the images, which they utilized and negotiated partly to 'see what they wanted' or what they are culturally 'programmed' to see. They were more likely to interpret and emphasize drinking in the commercials in accordance with how drinking is viewed in their own culture. They were less likely to underline messages that they didn't seem to be able to relate to. This appears to hold true even when the opposite message is as clearly pronounced as in the case of the second commercial (the 'sincere' friendship, the moderate drinking).

More sophisticated brand-profiling messages do not seem to have the same degree of penetration as do the messages which correlate with the basic ideas about e.g. social dimensions of drinking. It could mean that those alcohol commercials that share the target audience's views on drinking, are especially conducive to the flow of the message. If the correlation is high the flow should be high, and conversely, if correlation is low, the flow should work less well.

Even though the statement above represents a somewhat simplistic view of the impact-process of marketing, we are still able to draw some suggestive conclusions about the types of drinking messages that seem to be easier to agree upon in the different cultures. A larger degree of scepticism was expressed on messages whose meanings were not obvious, whereas basic emotional images such as social togetherness and joy were easy to identify with for all participants. In the second commercial, socialising and its importance were underscored by all the participating groups. In case of high correlation the participants would be more likely to draw conclusions regarding the format of the message and its aims: '*it is supposed to show that it's fun to drink together in company, it's fun and sociable*' GER_M_93. '*It's seen like a way to get together, to have a beer is harmless and you don't get drunk... it's just a way to spend some time together*' (ITA_F_93). This would suggest that an understanding of a subtle dimension of the messages would correlate with an acknowledgement of the persuasive intent.

The speech of the Italian pupils showed a higher correlation to the second commercial's core message of 'responsible' drinking. They were also generally more critical to what they saw in the commercials. The Italian group discussions often demonstrated a high ability to make quite sophisticated judgements on the messages. The ability to recognize certain messages in the commercials seems to tally with an ability to

distance yourself from the messages and to criticize them. Abilities to reason around products are surely in many ways connected to analytical maturity. Another reason may be that the commercials contain messages on drinking that correlate with a way of drinking that appears as familiar and 'natural' to the viewer.

The fact that Finnish, German and Dutch pupils wanted to steer alcohol consumption in the second commercial toward intoxication might imply that a culture of intoxicated drinking appears to stand in the way of discerning a message about restrictive drinking. This further supports the notion that the meaning is in the eye of the beholder.

Images of people enjoying beer alone - or in an 'egocentric' manner, as in the case of the first commercial - have by advertising practitioners been considered non-applicable in collectivistic cultures where one enjoys beer together (De Mooij, 2010: 225). The Italian participants' responses to the gondola ride showed that they perceived social relations more important than the individual character's whereabouts. Nevertheless, we can only speculate on the different functions that commercials that convey somewhat transgressive behaviour play in young peoples' lives: such messages may be of particular relevance as they may e.g. channel and reverberate emotions of youth revolt and therefore be of even more relevance for the youngsters. This further problematizes the notion of either sociopragmatic failure or success (Thomas 1983).

Some emotions, such as happiness and love, have been proven to be basic and universal to such an extent that connecting these emotions to a brand has been described as a safe card for companies that want to market globally (Ibid: 110). The act of socialising, sitting together and being happy in the company of friends can be considered such a universal feeling among European youngsters interviewed in this study. Among the young people, drinking is above all a social act with social functions (see e.g. Järvinen and Room, 2007). Therefore, we suggest that the doubts expressed about studying the effectiveness of advertising and other mass media efforts in changing behaviour related to alcohol may be a consequence of the lack of a methodologically satisfactory way of relating the cognising individual to his/her cognized social environment. As symbols require agreement in meaning for the social construction of reality, there is a need to focus on both the production and consumption of symbols, but also, in the next phase, to examine the rhetoric of symbols and who controls their meaning over time.

Children sieve commercial messages and see what is supported by their own views on the world, their needs and values. The beer commercials feed these thoughts and ideas related to drinking, although the unnecessary of feeding such positive images to the underage is plain.

To conclude, alcohol and commercial messages on alcohol emerge as natural elements of adolescents' meaning-making of the world. Images of drinking in the commercials stimulate youth images of drinking, emphasising certain aspects on the expense of other ones. The meaning-making vary according to the culturally anchored world views of the teenagers of this study.

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