

The alcohol industry doesn't want you to drink responsibly

 salon.com/2014/11/28/the_alcohol_industry_doesnt_want_you_to_drink_responsibly_partner/

Stuart Silverstein

Friday, Nov 28, 2014 7:00 PM UTC

This piece originally appeared on [FairWarning](#).

The “drink responsibly” or “enjoy in moderation” messages tucked into liquor and beer ads don’t impress Jennifer Romo.



“Nobody actually takes that seriously,” said Romo, a 21-year-old political science major at UCLA. She added: “‘Drink responsibly,’ what does that even mean?”

A [recent study](#), alcohol industry critics and even [a risqué parody](#) on the animated sitcom South Park echo Romo’s skepticism.

In their study, researchers at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore found that 87 percent of magazine ads for liquor, beer and so-called alcopop beverages contained a responsibility message. Yet among the 1,795 ads reviewed, taken from U.S. magazines published 2008 through 2010, not one had a responsibility message that gave specifics, said Katherine Clegg Smith, the study’s lead author.

That, Smith said, defies the cardinal rule that health warnings must be specific to change people’s behavior. “If you want to warn people against something, you need to be clear about what you’re warning them against and why,” she said.

What’s more, the researchers found that the ads, often aimed at young people like Romo, never suggested avoiding drinking in certain situations. And consumers who looked closely enough to spot the responsibility messages – which Smith said were “inevitably in very small type” — often encountered language that reinforced corporate marketing themes. “If they’re giving any message, it’s about the product, rather than about responsible drinking,” Smith said.

As an example, the researchers pointed to an ad for Hennessy cognac that featured the slogan, “Flaunt Your Taste.” At the bottom, it added, “Please Flaunt Responsibly.”

Critics say the responsibility theme is drowned out in broadcast and online advertising, too. “When you look at the sophistication and the power of digital advertising generally, and what the alcohol companies do in creating these kinds of entire immersive, fun environments, they know from the get-go they are overriding any responsibility message,” said Jeffrey Chester, a consumer rights advocate who is executive director of the nonprofit Center for Digital Democracy.
