

A stylized, handwritten-style logo consisting of the letters 'MJU' in a cursive font, positioned above a horizontal line.

## ***Beer Commercials: A Contradiction in Communication***

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*This study in communication and rhetorical criticism examined twenty recently released beer commercials. Applying Kenneth Burke's Pentad to each commercial revealed that these beer commercials do not support, but rather contradict, the overt message at the end of each advertisement instructing consumers to be responsible in their drinking habits. Most (fourteen) of the commercials depicted beer as the agency, while for a few, beer served as the act and/or the purpose. A deeper analysis of these findings showed that each commercial communicated one of three main underlying messages: beer is the center of life, life without beer is boring, and beer is the solution to problems. These messages ultimately contradict the commercials' overt instruction to drink responsibly, as the consumer receives the underlying message that beer holds the power in the consumer-product relationship. Overall, beer companies are not following their own self-created guidelines that require them to encourage responsible consumption.*

### **Introduction**

Alcohol consumption is generally not associated with the notion of responsibility. In fact, alcohol has long been connected to problems of irresponsibility and the loss of control. For instance, one of the most recent studies reported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention revealed that about one third of all vehicle crash fatalities involve alcohol-impaired driving.<sup>1</sup> News stories frequently highlight incidents of drunk driving. In the late nineteenth century, a variety of temperance movements across the United States pushed for the restriction of alcohol sales, as alcohol consumption was believed to be connected to many vices and irresponsible behaviors. In 1920, as a result of these movements, alcohol was prohibited entirely by the Eighteenth Amendment. These instances, among others, illustrate alcohol's long history of being associated with problems and irresponsibility. The message that appears at the end of many beer commercials to "drink responsibly" should come as no surprise, then, if beer companies are looking to improve their images. However, from the perspective of a company's sales and profit, the fact that these companies are encouraging responsible consumption seems strange, as responsibility in drinking behaviors would seem to decrease sales. Thus, the question arises regarding the message actually being communicated from the alcohol industry

to the audience viewing those advertisements.

This question is an important one, especially as advertising is so prevalent in the capitalist culture of America. Although many people like to think that they are not affected by advertisements, research seems to suggest otherwise. Advertising has been shown to be effective in influencing people's decisions about what products they choose to purchase<sup>2</sup> and how they feel about certain brands.<sup>3</sup> Because Americans are so frequently exposed to advertisements, with some estimations suggesting up to 5,000 a day, an understanding of how advertising affects people is not only interesting but is also important.<sup>4</sup> More specifically, due to the popularity and prevalence of beer advertisements, they should be carefully analyzed to discover the messages being presented to viewers.

Beer advertisements do affect viewers and consumers in numerous ways. Awareness of product brand is correlated with more frequent decisions to purchase those products, and exposure to company or brand-name advertisements tends to improve attitudes toward that brand.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, viewing alcohol advertisements corresponds to increased subsequent alcohol consumption.<sup>6</sup> Thus, advertising affects both attitudes and purchasing habits.

The style of advertising also seems to be influential, as the likeability of the advertisement has been shown to affect how people interpret it and perceive it. Beer advertisements that induce positive affective responses tend to be more likeable, causing the viewer to be more receptive to the advertisement.<sup>7</sup> Alcohol advertising has been shown to be especially effective among youth—being exposed to more advertisements increases the likelihood that alcohol consumption will occur and also increases the amount of alcohol that a youth consumes.<sup>8</sup> Thus, alcohol advertising is connected to increased alcohol consumption, even in underage individuals.

Because advertising has been shown to be so effective, determining what messages are actually being conveyed to viewers is an important area of study. Beer commercials, in particular, tend to communicate certain messages—both overt and latent—to viewers. This analysis attempts to answer an important question about the compatibility of those messages: does the content of beer commercials actually encourage responsible drinking habits in the consumer, as these commercials overtly instruct?

In answering this question, this analysis adds to a large body of alcohol-related literature already in existence. A number of researchers have studied the effects of beer advertising on product purchasing, and several scholars have examined common themes found in advertisements. However, there is limited research attempting to analyze the underlying messages or narratives in beer commercials. By adding to the information already discovered by other researchers, an analysis of the messages being communicated in beer commercials brings a deeper understanding of what beer companies' advertisements are actually doing. This analysis uniquely studies the relationship between these commercials' overt and underlying messages. Overall, the content analysis illustrates that the latent messages in beer commercials undermine the overt message encouraging consumers to drink responsibly.

## Literature Review

### *Common Themes in Beer Commercials*

Several other scholars have looked into what themes are frequently portrayed in beer commercials and other forms of beer advertising. One common theme is that of gender. Beer advertisements routinely promote gender stereotypes, depicting the sexes in traditional gender roles.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps the most prominent message communicated by commercials is that beer is manly.<sup>10</sup> Beer commercials also often promote negative stereotypes about women—something female advertisement viewers tend to notice more often than male viewers.<sup>11</sup> Women are frequently depicted as being extremely sexualized and they are often fantasized about by men.<sup>12</sup> Thus, commercials for beer often play off the themes of gender and stereotypical gender roles.

In addition to portraying and promoting gender stereotypes, beer is often shown affecting one's social life. Consuming beer often improves social life, enabling individuals to fit into society.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, not only can one improve his (or her) social life by drinking beer, one's social life is sometimes improved in commercials by the sharing of beer, which enables a person to make friends.<sup>14</sup> On the one hand, by combining the themes of gender roles and social life, consuming beer is often portrayed as a way to facilitate interaction between men and women.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, the absence of beer is marked by the absence of happiness and the lack of friends.<sup>16</sup> Thus, beer not only improves one's social life, but it is a necessary component for having a social life at all.

A third major theme that has historically been found in beer advertisements is that of reward and leisure. Beer is frequently portrayed as a reward for hard work.<sup>17</sup> The characters depicted in commercials are often shown resting after working hard. However, over time, a shift has occurred in this theme. More recent advertisements focus on entire lifestyles of leisure—beer is a way to relax all the time, not only after working hard.<sup>18</sup>

In addition to these thematic studies of commercials, comparative analyses have also been conducted, which reveal several different themes found in U.S. and foreign beer advertisements. In these studies, the American values presented in American commercials are contrasted with the values appealed to in other countries' commercials. For example, British advertisements tend to focus on the cultural values of tradition/history and eccentricity, whereas American commercials appeal to independence and modernity.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, the majority of American advertisements use sexual or emotional appeals, whereas British advertising relies almost exclusively on humor alone.<sup>20</sup>

American advertisements differ from British advertisements. Ukrainian and American advertisements also have been compared. Lantolf and Bobrova (2012) found that both Ukrainian and American beer commercials involve the dominant metaphor of "happiness is drinking beer."<sup>21</sup> Both cul-

tures link beer drinking with social life, which is connected to happiness, but the portrayal of happiness differs for each country.<sup>22</sup> In American commercials, drinking is the cause and central aspect of socializing; thus, beer leads to happiness.<sup>23</sup> In Ukrainian commercials, beer drinking takes place with close friends, so beer is simply correlated with happiness.

### *Responsible Drinking Campaigns*

Not only have scholars analyzed individual alcohol advertisements, several scholars have also analyzed the public service advertisements produced by the alcohol industry as a whole and by particular brewers in the 1980s and 1990s. According to the Beer Institute, an organization created to represent the beer industry especially in legal and political matters, beer companies are “committed to a policy and practice of responsible advertising and marketing.”<sup>24</sup> Beer companies supposedly consider and portray beer as a “legal beverage meant to be consumed responsibly.”<sup>25</sup> Because of this, several companies launched campaigns to encourage responsible consumption of their product. These public service announcements, or moderation campaigns, featured slogans such as “know when to say when,”<sup>26</sup> however, these campaigns did not clearly define “responsible,” so their effectiveness was difficult for researchers to analyze.<sup>27</sup> In part because of this vagueness in definition, several researchers have argued that campaigns urging responsible drinking are actually just another way to increase sales.<sup>28</sup> In fact, in their so-called partnership with public health efforts, the alcohol industry has been accused of merely promoting “industry-favourable alcohol ideology.”<sup>29</sup>

These campaigns have, therefore, been labeled as, at best, ineffective, and at worst, detrimental or harmful. The messages of “moderation” in the campaigns are ultimately undermined and dominated by the messages found in the alcohol industry’s other commercials.<sup>30</sup> The public service advertisements never offer the suggestion that drinking should be avoided by certain people and in certain situations, as a typical urging of responsibility might suggest.<sup>31</sup> Thus, these “moderation campaigns” seem to be a half-hearted effort on the part of the alcohol industry.

In assessing the body of scholarly literature that exists concerning beer advertisements, several gaps become apparent. Whereas other researchers have looked at some common themes in beer advertisements or have analyzed beer companies’ moderation efforts in regard to entire “moderation campaigns,” research on how individual commercials contradict the responsible consumption instruction is lacking. At first glance, the narratives in the commercials do not seem to contradict the message of responsibility—they do not show people acting irresponsibly or drinking too much—but upon closer inspection, they do offer incompatible messages to the viewer. This analysis extends the findings about common themes in beer commercials by focusing on a set of individual television advertisements and explaining how the messages actually undermine the encouragement found at the end of each commercial to “drink responsibly.”

## Context

### *Commercials Analyzed*

A specific set of televised beer commercials was the focus of this analysis. The commercials were located through a series of YouTube searches and through the beer companies' own websites, which often included videos of the companies' most recently released television advertisements. Due to the large number of commercials in existence, some parameters were used in order to narrow the set of commercials to a reasonable size. The set was limited to the most recent commercials; only those of the top beer companies in America that aired on television from 2011-2012 were evaluated. Currently, the top-selling beers in America are Bud Light, Budweiser, Coors Light, and Miller Lite, so the analysis focused on commercials about those beers.<sup>32</sup> Recent commercials for Corona Extra were also analyzed due to their widespread viewership and because Corona Extra is the top-selling imported beer in the United States.<sup>33</sup> Corona Extra has different commercials for each country where it is sold, so the advertisements shown in the United States are exclusively American commercials, as is the case for the other beers. Finally, the study focused on commercials that involved human interaction.

Table 1 summarizes each of the twenty commercials included in the analysis. In general, the commercials had several common properties; almost all of them involved some appeal to humor, and each of them involved human interaction with other humans and with beer. Furthermore, at the end of every commercial, a message encouraging responsible consumption was displayed.

Table 1. Commercials Analyzed

Year	Product	Name	Length	Shortened Description	Message displayed at end:
2012	Bud Light	Rescue Dog	1:00	Rescue dog "Wego" brings Bud Light to anyone saying "Here we go" at a party, including rolling a keg of beer in for a large group.	Enjoy responsibly.
2012	Bud Light	Shazam LMFAO	:30	LMFAO band starts a dance party at Halftime Bar during the Super Bowl when presented with Bud Light before discovering that they showed up at the wrong halftime.	Enjoy responsibly.

Table 1 Continued

2012	Bud Light Platinum	At the Office	:30	People dressed-up and drinking Bud Light Platinum in party-like scene (at end of commercial, revealed as Budweiser office). Narrator describes the things "They say": A man's work is never done, you can't mix business with pleasure, and good things come to those who wait, then concludes: "It's a good thing they don't work here."	Enjoy responsibly.
2012	Budweiser	Prohibition	1:00	Townpeople celebrate the end of Prohibition with the return of Budweiser beer and the reopening of the bar.	Enjoy responsibly.
2012	Budweiser	Eternal Optimism	1:00	Great American achievements and eras are celebrated throughout time with Budweiser beers.	Enjoy responsibly.
2011	Budweiser	Epic Toast	:30	Multiple short segments of toasts/speeches being made are cut together to make one "Epic toast" in which everyone (in different situations) is holding Buds.	Enjoy responsibly.
2012	Coors Light	Snow Cave	:30	Man rappelling into cavern chips out Coors Light from wall of ice in Arctic land and brings it to a tailgating man from the inside of a travel cooler.	Great beer. Great responsibility.
2012	Coors Light	Ascent	:30	Mountain climbers in snowy Arctic deliver bottles of Coors Light from the inner Arctic of a restaurant's refrigerator to a waitress.	Great beer. Great responsibility

Table 1 Continued

2012	Coors Light	The Bodyguard	:30	Ice Cube and his bodyguard "Tiny" have "face-off" about who's the coldest with Coors Light bottle and aluminum pint. Aluminum pint gives Tiny a "facewash" in snow; Tiny chooses the aluminum pint to drink, much to Ice Cube's dismay.	Great beer. Great responsibility.
2012	Coors Light	Pint Party	:15	Dance party on beach in summer taking place behind an aluminum pint of Coors Light. Man leaves the party to get a drink of Coors Light, then returns.	Great beer. Great responsibility.
2011	Corona Extra	Commuters	:30	Woman escapes from business meeting to join her friends in enjoying Corona Extras, transporting themselves from a busy city to a beach.	Relax responsibly.
2011	Corona Extra	Flight	:30	Two passengers on a airplane full of people escape the packed flight by drinking Corona Extra and transporting themselves to a beach.	Relax responsibly.
2012	Corona Extra	Spotlight	:30	Three people at concert improve the venue by drinking Corona Extra and transporting themselves from a full bar/stage scene to a beach.	Relax responsibly.
2011	Corona Extra	Snow-Sand	:30	Snowboarder relaxes after a day on the ski slopes by enjoying a Corona Extra and transporting herself and a male friend to the beach.	Relax responsibly
2012	Miller Lite	Roadie	:30	Three guys get backstage at rock concert with the help of the "bouncer" at the door. When the band gets called to go on stage, the guys are left in the room with a bunch of Miller Lite.	Great beer. Great responsibility
2012	Miller Lite	Girlfriend	:30	Guy faces a potential fight in a bar after hitting on a man's girlfriend, but his friend "rescues" him by offering the man some Miller Lite.	Great beer. Great responsibility

Table 1 Continued

2012	Miller Lite	Miller Time	:30	"Miller Time" is described as those times when real friends come together. Men are shown in a variety of situations--camping, playing golf, at a bar, etc.--but always with beers.	Great beer. Great responsibility.
2012	Miller Lite	Brothers	:30	Guys shown having fun/crazy experiences together, then each scene is revisited, showing them all holding/drinking Miller Lite. Narrator discusses true "brothers" who are chosen. Adding Miller Lite to these scenes makes brother-time into "Miller time."	Great beer. Great responsibility.
2012	Miller Lite	Corner Men	:30	Guy eats last hot wing during a bar/restaurant "Demon Wings" challenge after drinking Miller Lite. He celebrates with friends. Narrator explains "Miller Time" battles involve friends.	Great beer. Great responsibility.
2012	Miller Lite	Punch Top Cans (Set)	:30	Variety of ways to puncture (or "punch") the tops of Miller Lite's "Punch Top Cans." People use whatever they have on hand in the situation they are in.	Great beer. Great responsibility.

*Responsible Drinking Message*

In viewing these and other beer advertisements, one might be initially surprised to see the companies encouraging responsible drinking. As two scholars recently observed when critiquing the “responsible drinking” campaigns, “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.”<sup>34</sup> Most alcohol is consumed by heavy drinkers in what would be considered a risky manner,<sup>35</sup> so if consumers took this advice and drank “responsibly,” they would likely consume less beer, which would cause a decrease in profit for the beer industry. In college, especially, heavy (and irresponsible) drinking is prevalent; in 2002, the U.S. Department of Justice reported that 72% of 18-20 year olds reported heavy drinking in the month prior to the study.<sup>36</sup>

Several scholars argue that the purpose for including the message of responsible drinking in commercials for beer is not actually to encourage consumers to drink responsibly. Similar to the assertions made against the moderation campaigns, critics maintain that the message placed at the ends of com-



mercials is simply another marketing scheme. The messages encouraging people to drink responsibly have become a “marketing tactic that appeases critics and consumers, yet does not influence public health.”<sup>37</sup> Beer companies use this message to boost their images as being concerned about public health and safety, but there is little evidence to show that the encouragement for consumers to be responsible in their drinking habits actually has any effect on alcohol consumption. This analysis attempts to answer the puzzling question as to why this has been the case. An analysis of the narratives presented in the commercials reveals the blatant contradictions presented to viewers; they are not actually being encouraged to drink responsibly, despite the overt message being relayed. Rather, the commercials offer numerous, often unstated reasons to be irresponsible in one’s drinking habits.

### **Methodology**

In order to identify common themes and narratives offered by a variety of individual beer commercials, it was necessary to use a single method of analysis that could be applied to each commercial while revealing commonalities among the advertisements. In order to effectively compare the commercials to each other, a specific set of points to compare needed to be established. For this reason, Kenneth Burke’s Pentad was applied to each commercial. Through the use of the Pentad, the true motives and messages of the commercials are made apparent. Rather than getting caught up in the story being presented, the Pentad separates the different parts of the narrative and thereby allows analysis of each aspect individually in a systematic fashion. The Pentad also enables the critic to see how the various components at play in the on-screen drama work together, overlap, and dominate one another.

The overall approach taken to analyze the commercials began with Internet searches for the commercials. After locating a variety of commercials, a Pentadic analysis was conducted for each advertisement. According to Burke’s methods, the Pentad was applied internally to each commercial to determine the following elements at play:

1. Agent—the person/thing doing something
2. Act—the conscious/purposive action being done
3. Agency—how the action was accomplished
4. Scene—where/when the action took place
5. Purpose—the intent/reason for the action<sup>38</sup>

After viewing each commercial and identifying its Pentadic elements, the findings were compared and analyzed in order to identify common patterns. A Pentadic analysis revealed that beer is typically portrayed as the agency, although occasionally it is set up as the act. Furthermore, each commercial communicates one of three underlying messages: beer is the center of life, life without beer is boring, and beer is the solution to problems. Each message undermines the commercials’ instruction to drink responsibly.

## Analysis

### *Individual Commercials*

Applying the Pentad to each commercial uncovered some interesting aspects of the advertisements. Sometimes the elements were difficult to identify, but other times they were more readily apparent. Following the classification of each commercial, the analysis revealed several patterns in what role the beer played in the commercials—it was most often presented as the agency, but it could occasionally be found as part of the act. Finally, those patterns in the beer's role illuminated three main messages that were communicated through the commercials: beer is the center of life, life without beer is boring, and beer is the solution to problems.

### *Pentadic Roles*

After viewing each commercial several times, the five elements of the Pentad were identified for each advertisement. Table 2 shows the results of the Pentadic analysis for each commercial. Some of the elements of the Pentad were apparent and stated outright, whereas others were merely implied. For example, in Miller Lite's "Girlfriend" commercial, the agent is clearly labeled as "The Fixer," and his act is obvious—he finds a solution to the problem "The Hound" creates in making advances toward another man's girlfriend. He offers Miller Lite to the angry boyfriend. The five Pentadic elements—agent, act, agency, scene, and purpose—are all obvious in this commercial.

In a similar way, the Coors Light "Snow Cave" commercial is easily analyzed for its outward Pentadic elements. In this advertisement, the agent (the snow cave explorer) is discovered to be "chipping away" at the ice with his ice pick (agency) to retrieve the Coors Light (act). When he emerges from the cooler in the middle of a group of tailgaters, the purpose becomes clear—he needed to deliver an incredibly cold beer. Once again, the elements of the Pentad are fairly straightforward and obvious.

However, in other commercials, some aspects of the Pentad are harder to identify, as they are only implied by the commercial; for these, the audience is expected to fill in the blanks. For example, the "At the Office" commercial for Bud Light Platinum requires close attention by the viewer in order to understand it. The agent is not identified until the end of the commercial, when the narrator states, "It's a good thing they don't work here." "Here" is never described nor explained, and the man shown working at the beginning of the commercial is never explicitly labeled as a Budweiser employee; this fact is only understood if the viewer connects the dots and reads into the commercial's implications. Thus, the agent and the scene are not outwardly apparent—they exist only if the viewer is able to draw certain inferences in order to conclude that the agent is a Budweiser employee and the scene is the Bud Light Platinum office. The act is also ambiguous—it is unclear from the commercial's set-up whether the people in the room are working or partying. The narrator's statement suggests that they are at work, but their actions appear to

be more aligned with party-like behaviors.

Similarly, in Miller Lite's "Corner Men" advertisement, the act is unclear and needs to be inferred from other events shown. The man is shown sweating, drinking Miller Lite, being encouraged by friends, and, finally, eating a wing at a bar/restaurant. One needs to infer from these depictions that the wing is extremely spicy and that there initially were more of them. Similarly, when he is tossed the t-shirt at the end, the viewer is expected to make the connection that he was trying to accomplish a hot wings "challenge," and drinking Miller Lite enabled him to complete the task. Thus, the viewer once again connects the dots in an effort to discover the more obscure aspects of the Pentad—specifically, the act (accomplishing a hot wings challenge) and the purpose (to earn a t-shirt)—as well as to be receptive to the underlying message that Miller Lite, as the agency, helped him accomplish the challenge.

### *Patterns Among Commercials*

After identifying the elements of the Pentad for each individual commercial, those findings were compared and evaluated in order to detect any patterns. The results of the comparison were very telling about what messages beer commercials truly communicate to consumers. In these commercials, the beer played several different roles; the most common, however, was beer as agency.

#### *Beer as Agency*

In looking at Table 2, one observes that for many of the commercials, beer fills the role of agency in the narratives presented. In fact, fourteen of the twenty commercials set up beer as the agency, or the means by which the act was accomplished. This discovery leads to several conclusions about what claims are being made by the narratives. Depicting beer as the thing that gives the agent the means to do something seems to place beer under the agent's control—the agent uses the beer to perform some act. This seems to be the case for most (fourteen) of the twenty commercials. For instance, in all of the Corona commercials, beer (Corona Extra) is what the agents (the businesswoman, the flight passengers, the snowboarder, and the concert attendees) use to mentally escape to a beach. The agents use the beer in order to get away. Similarly, in the "Shazam LMFAO" commercial for Bud Light, the agent (LMFAO) begins to act (play music) once the bartender brings out the agency (some Bud Lights). Furthermore, in "Prohibition," the beer allows the townspeople to celebrate the end of the prohibition era—the passing out of Budweiser was the factor that enabled the act to take place. Once people had beer, they were able to celebrate. In each of these fourteen commercials, beer seems to be the means to the act. On the surface, then, these commercials communicate the message that the consumer controls the beer. Table 2 summarizes how the beer supports the agents' actions for the rest of the fourteen commercials.

Table 2. Pentadic Analysis

Product	Commercial	Agent	Act
Bud Light Platinum	At the Office	Bud employee	Working/ Partying
Budweiser	Prohibition	Townpeople	Celebrating/ Drinking
Budweiser	Eternal Optimism	American people	Celebrating/ Drinking
Budweiser	Epic Toast	American people	Offering toasts
Bud Light	Shazam LMFAO	LMFAO	Performing-start bar party
Coors Light	The Bodyguard	Ice Cube	Loses showdown -gets snowed out
Coors Light	Pint Party	Party guest (man)	Enjoying summer party
Corona Extra	Commuters	Businesswoman	Transports to beach
Corona Extra	Flight	Passengers	Transports to beach
Corona Extra	Spotlight	Concert-goers	Transports to beach
Corona Extra	Snow-Sand	Snowboarder	Celebrates last run snowboarding
Miller Lite	Girlfriend	"The Fixer"	Prevents fight
Miller Lite	Corner Men	Restaurant visitor (man)	Finishing "Demon wings" (hot wings)
Miller Lite	Miller Time	Friends (Men)	Having fun together

<b>Agency</b>	<b>Scene</b>	<b>Purpose</b>
Beer (Bud Light Platinum)	Budweiser development Office	Working (job)
Beer (Buds)	End of prohibition	Celebrating return of Budweiser
Beer (Buds)	Various achievement celebrations	Celebrate great American accomplishments
Beer (Buds)	Various achievement celebrations	Celebrate great times
Beer (Buds) + Music	Halftime Bar	Bar had Buds
Beer (Coors Light Aluminum Pint)	Beachside bar	Find out who's colder
Beer (Coors Light Aluminum Pint)	Beach party	Get refreshed during hot summer
Beer (Corona)	City	Relax
Beer (Corona)	Airplane	Relax
Beer (Corona)	Everest concert	Relax in a better concert venue
Beer (Corona)	Mountainside	Relax
Beer (Miller Lite)	Bar	Help friend
Beer (Miller Lite)	Restaurant/Bar	Earn T-Shirt
Beer (Miller Lite)	Friendly meetings	Be a good friend

Table 2 Continued

Product	Commercial	Agent	Act
Coors Light	Snow Cave	Ice climbers/pickers	Get Coors Light
Bud Light	Rescue Dog	Dog (We Go)	Fetches Bud Light
Coors Light	Ascent	Mountain climbers	Get Coors Light
Miller Lite	Punch Top Cans (Set)	Men (beer drinkers)	Opening Millers
Miller Lite	Brothers	Best friends (men)	Having crazy experiences (with Millers)
Miller Lite	Roadie	4 guys	Get backstage

*Beer as Powerful Agency*

One can also see another important message being communicated through these advertisements. The relationship between the agency and the agent is unique in that it seems to be a two-way relationship. Initially, the beer appears to be used by humans; therefore, the human is depicted as being in control—the agent dominates the agency. When examined more closely, however, the beer (as agency) seems to be what actually holds the power. Because the beer is the agency, it serves as the enabler and therefore is ultimately what holds the power to allow the agent to accomplish the act. Humans only obtain that power when they drink the beer. This suggests that beer is necessary and beneficial in order to achieve certain goals. Thus, one comes away from the commercials with the message that in order to be successful in a variety of tasks, one needs to drink beer. The agent (the viewer) needs to use the agency (the beer) in order to accomplish an act. The consumer is told he/she is in control, but in reality, the beer holds the real power in the drama.

Agency	Scene	Purpose
Chipping out of ice	Tailgating at game	Deliver coldest taste
Trained by owner	Party & gatherings	Keep people happy (is a "trick")
Retrieve from frozen tundra	Bar	Deliver coldest taste
With anything available	All over - various situations	Smoother pour
Hanging out	Various	Have good times
Talking/Acting	Concert	Acquire Miller Lites

“Corner Men,” a commercial for Miller Lite, is a good illustration of this twisted power relationship. In this commercial, the agent, in his effort to finish the hot wings, takes a drink of Miller Lite. This gives him the determination, energy, and ability to finish the plate of wings. Thus, the man uses a drink of Miller Lite to empower himself, but the underlying message is that he needed the beer in order to finish the wings; without Miller Lite, he would not have succeeded in his quest. Thus, the man as agent uses the beer to assist him, which makes him seem in control, but the beer is actually a necessity for him in his quest—the beer gave him the power. Although people use beer, beer ultimately holds the power for the people.

#### *Beer as Act*

In the twenty commercials analyzed, beer is most commonly set up as the agency, but in several commercials, beer plays a different role. Beer is presented in conjunction with the act being performed. The agent obtains the beer via some other agency, so getting or opening a beer is considered the act.

In two of the Coors Light commercials (for instance, “Ascent” and “Snow Cave”), this is done by traveling deep into the arctic interior of the coolers to retrieve an ice-cold beer; the agents obtain the beer through their arctic adventures. In Budweiser’s “Rescue Dog” commercial, a dog named Wego (who is set up as the agent) fetches Bud Lights (as the act) for a variety of people whenever he is called (the agency). Finally, beer is the act in the set of Miller Lite’s “Punch Top Can” advertisements. The agents punch open a can of beer using various tools and instruments as the agency. By setting up opening or obtaining a beer as the act, these commercials outwardly convey the message that, once again, beer is under human control. The agent is doing the act; therefore, the agent is in control and seems to dominate the other Pentadic elements.

#### *Beer as Act and Purpose*

In several of these commercials, however, beer is also depicted as the purpose for the act. For example, in the Coors Light “Ascent” commercial, the agents’ act is retrieving the beer. Thus, the people are doing the act, so the people dominate the beer, but beer is also portrayed as the purpose—the reason for the treacherous journey is because someone wanted an ice-cold beer. By setting up the beer as both the act and the purpose, a powerful message is conveyed: beer is what *is* done as well as *why* it is done; it is the action and it is the reason for the action. This circular chain of events illustrates the commercial’s messages about the deeper importance of beer. By presenting the beer as the act and as the purpose, the commercials communicate the message that people (especially men) live for beer, and beer is the reason for living. Indeed, in analyzing the set of commercials, this is one of the three underlying messages uncovered by this analysis.

#### *Implied Messages*

While examining each commercial to identify the elements of the Pentad, it becomes clear that these advertisements revolve around “implied narratives” in which the entire story is not fully explained or developed. Rather, certain aspects of the tale in each commercial go unstated (similar to an enthymeme) and are left for the audience to fill in. Each commercial seems to subscribe to one of three general themes, which are not explicitly stated; rather, they must be “read into” by the viewer. Each message explains why beer is so important for human agents’ ability to act. The bidirectional nature of the human-beer relationship suggests that beer is incredibly powerful—it either is the act and the reason for the act, or it enables humans to act and is required for action. When analyzing these commercials to see what gives the beer its power, each commercial offers the viewer one of three general implied messages:

1. Beer is the center of life.
2. Life without beer is boring.
3. Beer is the solution to problems.



*Beer is the Center of Life*

The first of these unstated implications is that beer is the center of life. The commercials that set up beer as the Pentadic act and purpose—"Ascent," "Snow Cave," and "Rescue Dog," along with the set of Miller Lite commercials about the Punch Top Can—suggest that the agents in the commercials act to get beer for the purpose of getting beer. Thus, beer is a reward in and of itself and serves as the motivation for acting. This circularity suggests that beer is central to everything the agents do. This message of beer's centrality is especially apparent in the "Rescue Dog" commercial, in which someone apparently trained the dog, Wego, to fetch beer. Wego's training and much of his life revolves around beer and retrieving beer for humans. Thus, in analyzing the narrative presented in this commercial, one sees that even dog-training and pet ownership are focused on beer; beer is the center of life.

A few of the other commercials also seem to offer this message. Budweiser's "Epic Toast" depicts a variety of people offering toasts in a wide range of events; the toasts would not be possible without Budweiser. Thus, the commercial suggests that any time there is cause for commemoration, whether a wedding, a business deal, or a bachelor party, beer should be part of the celebration. In fact, during one of the toasts, a man asks if everyone has a Bud in hand, implying that he cannot make his speech and the celebration cannot continue without everyone having a beer. Beer is shown as being central to celebrations, which are presented as major parts of daily life.

Another Budweiser commercial, "Eternal Optimism," suggests the same central nature of beer to life. The Pentadic analysis suggests that all great American achievements, big or small, are celebrated by drinking Budweiser. Bud, therefore, is once again at the center of every celebration and is the method by which the celebration takes place.

Finally, Miller Lite's "Miller Time" commercial suggests that beer is central to friendship, and, therefore, to life. The commercial shows the men holding Miller Lite in a variety of apparently fun situations. The men gather as good friends, and in every case beer is not only involved but is also apparently a high priority. Most of the activities in which they are involved seem secondary or at least equal in importance to drinking beer. For example, at one point three friends are shown attempting to set up a camping tent; however, two of the men are holding Miller Lites, so they only have one hand available to help with the task at hand. They are not fully invested in assembling the tent, then; rather, keeping their beers as close as possible is more important to them. The implication is that beer is central to any situation where good friends are involved; therefore, one's social life revolves around beer, not, in this case, camping.

### *Life without Beer is Boring*

The second implication offered by a number of these commercials is that life without beer is boring or dull. This message is apparent in several of the commercials that set up beer as the agency. In these commercials, a contrast is drawn between life without beer and life with beer. The first commercial, Budweiser's "Prohibition" advertisement, clearly sends this message, although the overt message revolves around Budweiser's greatness. The commercial shows daily life during Prohibition in dull colors, without music. The characters move slowly, apparently without much motivation. However, once Prohibition ends and Budweiser enters the scene, the townspeople are much more lively and animated, color is added to the pictures, and music begins to play. The contrast between the dullness without beer and the excitement with beer communicates that life without beer is boring, although the commercial does not explicitly state this.

The second commercial that depicts how boring life without beer can be is Bud Light's "Shazam LMFAO" advertisement. In this commercial, the band enters an unlively bar scene; once the bartender offers the band members Bud Lights, however, they start performing, and the entire bar seems to erupt into a party-like atmosphere. Thus, beer (the agency) caused the bar to come alive, whereas without the Bud Light, the scene was boring and dull.

Budweiser's "At the Office" advertisement also shows the contrast between life (in this case, the work life) without Bud Light Platinum and life with Bud Light Platinum. Before the viewer discovers that the man shown is a Budweiser employee, he is depicted as being at work, looking miserable, and representing the typical "bored at work" character. However, because he is an employee of Budweiser, his workplace is apparently more party-like. Thus, Bud Light Platinum makes life at work far more fun than any other ordinary jobs. This suggestion is once again not explicitly stated but is implied by the contrast between the images shown.

Finally, Corona Extra's "Flight" commercial shows that the typical airplane ride is dull and boring, but with Corona, it becomes far more exciting and enjoyable. Corona turns a dull experience into a vacation; therefore, beer can turn "boring" into "exciting."

### *Beer is the Solution to Problems*

The third message often communicated through beer commercials is that beer is the solution to problems. Five of the commercials examined offered this implication. Miller Lite's "Girlfriend" commercial implies this message most clearly. The Fixer gets his friend out of trouble with the angry boyfriend by offering a bottle of Miller Lite as a sort of peace offering. Miller Lite, then, is a way to alleviate anger and tension. Similarly, several of Corona Extra's commercials also convey this message. "Commuters" and "Snow-

Sand" suggest that Corona is the solution when one needs a "break" or needs to relax. After a long day at work or on the ski slope, Corona Extra is how a person can relax. In "Spotlight," Corona is the means by which people can better enjoy a concert—the agents (the concert attendees) drink Corona,

which transports them to a beach, a far better venue for the concert, as there are fewer people there and the scenery is much prettier. Finally, Miller Lite's "Corner Men" portray beer as the means by which the wing-eater is able to conquer the challenge (or problem) of eating the final wing. He simply needed a drink of beer in order to succeed—beer was the solution to his problem.

In examining the patterns among the Pentadic elements of these commercials, the implied aspects of the narratives, namely, that beer is the solution for problems, beer makes life more exciting, and beer is the center of many aspects of life, are uncovered. These three properties of beer are what apparently give beer the power in its bidirectional relationship with human agents. Although humans ultimately need to choose to drink the beer, if they do, they are told that they can reap these benefits. Beer holds the power; so, according to the commercials, if people drink beer, they gain power.

#### *Contradiction of "Drink Responsibly"*

In communicating this message of what can be gained by drinking beer, beer commercials contradict their own instruction to consumers to engage in responsible drinking. Every commercial examined ends with a message advocating responsibility. This message would seem to suggest that there are times when drinking beer is not appropriate and should be stopped or perhaps not started at all. However, the underlying messages offered by the commercials suggest that beer is necessary in order for humans to live and "act." Because the latent messages about why beer is so important are portrayed through the narratives in these commercials, the message of "drink responsibly" gets lost.

These messages of responsibility are arguably a kind of manipulation on the part of the beer companies. The role the beer plays can also impact the message imparted to viewers; beer companies attempt to alter this message and their reputation by assigning the beer to the role of agency. In doing so, beer is initially shown as being under human control. Thus, the commercials suggest that humans are in control of the situation, playing into the American value of individualism.<sup>39</sup> The companies creating the commercial are apparently attempting to counter the frequently drawn connection between drinking beer and losing control of oneself. In order to avoid association with losing control, beer commercials focus on the beer as being under human control, although the underlying message that beer holds the power is also present. Getting drunk and losing control is generally seen in a negative light, so the suggestion that beer consumption is always controlled by human agents takes the blame for lost control off the beer.

Similarly, casting the beer as part of the act also places blame for any resulting irresponsible behavior on the human agents, who must ultimately choose to do the act. The beer is, once again, shown as being under human control. By adding the statement to "drink responsibly" to the equation, beer companies are essentially covering their backs—the beer is under human control as the agency or as the act, and the beer companies are encouraging drink-

ers not to get out of control.

However, the underlying messages being communicated in the commercials stand in sharp contradiction to the encouragement to drink responsibly. The commercials' narratives suggest that beer holds the power as the enabler for human action. Additionally, drinking beer brings excitement to a boring life, is a solution to a variety of problems, and, ultimately, is the center of most aspects of life. Therefore, although beer commercials *seem* to encourage responsibility on the part of the consumer, they actually suggest that beer, because it is central to life, is important, powerful, and necessary, and should not be avoided. Thus, limited consumption is not a good idea, according to the narratives in the commercials.

### **Implications**

These findings offer several implications, in addition to offering insights on the messages beer commercials communicate to viewers. Because the underlying messages contradict overt encouragement to drink responsibly, beer companies are not actually following the guidelines for advertising, although they may claim to be doing so. This discovery holds some possible legal implications. Because beer companies follow certain self-imposed guidelines that require them to portray and encourage responsible drinking practices,<sup>40</sup> they overtly encourage responsibility and suggest that beer is under human control. Beneath the outward assertions, however, lay the true messages being communicated—that beer is powerful, and that people need beer to accomplish their goals and acts. Therefore, as the research accumulates regarding the effectiveness and consequences of advertising, beer companies will be required to answer when questioned about how they are promoting responsible drinking. Although they might claim to be encouraging consumers to be responsible, this analysis suggests otherwise and illustrates how their commercials contradict their message of responsible consumption.

Future research that might stem from these findings could venture into the areas of Internet-specific commercials and advertisements. Are online interviews and episodes as contradictory as television commercials towards the message of responsibility? Do they convey the same messages as those in television commercials regarding the power of beer? Another area that holds great potential for revealing findings lies in analyzing the Beer Institute's guidelines and seeing how beer companies are following or not following them. Are other guidelines besides the requirement of encouraging responsibility being similarly ignored or dodged, so to speak?

### **Conclusions**

By conducting a Pentadic analysis of a variety of recent American beer commercials, several findings were revealed. First, beer is most often depicted as the agency or means by which the agent accomplishes an act. However, sometimes, beer is portrayed in conjunction with the action itself,

when the agent is trying to obtain a beer. In these situations, the beer also serves as the purpose. Thus, a person tries to acquire beer for the purpose of acquiring beer. In looking more closely at these findings, several underlying messages become apparent. Beer is outwardly shown as being under human control, because humans do the act or use the agency. However, when examined more closely, beer is also shown to be what holds the power in the relationship between beer and humans. Thus, people seem to be depicted as on top with the most control, but beer actually owns the power to which the people want access. This concept is conveyed through three main unstated messages—beer is the center of life, life without beer is boring, and beer solves problems. By communicating these powers of beer, beer is shown to be necessary for people who want an exciting life. This ultimately contradicts the encouragement to drink responsibly, which would normally suggest that there are times when drinking beer is not responsible. Ultimately, then, because advertising has been found to have an impact on people's consumption of alcohol, this analysis brings cause for concern. Because people are affected by advertisements and these advertisements do not encourage responsible drinking, viewers receive the message to drink irresponsibly, which could result in some potential dangers facing beer consumers.

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