

# How the Alcohol Industry Steers Governments Away From Effective Strategies to Curb Drink Driving:

Insights from Advertising Research



Addis Ababa “Celebration” campaign image

Road traffic collisions are the leading cause of death among children and young adults 5-29 globally (1). Each year, an estimated 1.19 million people die from road crashes, with millions more enduring severe injuries leading to long-term health consequences (1). Alcohol is a significant contributor to road traffic collisions, accounting for up to 35% of all road traffic fatalities (2). While evidence-based media campaigns have successfully curbed drink-driving, those backed by the alcohol industry often undermines these efforts.

## Problem Statement

The alcohol industry engages in several strategies to appear socially responsible. This includes sponsoring drink-driving mass media campaigns, alongside other interventions that promote “responsible drinking,” including ride-sharing initiatives and designated driver programs (9, 10, 11, 12). However, the efficacy of these initiatives is questionable, and instead of promoting public health, they actually promote favorable views of the alcohol industry and its products, prompting sales and consumption (11, 12).

Alcohol use claims the lives of 2.6 million people each year (24). Alcohol use heightens the risk of a range of noncommunicable diseases and mental health conditions, and is a risk factor for injuries and deaths from road traffic crashes (25). According to the 2023 WHO report, approximately 20% of fatally injured drivers in high-income countries had blood alcohol concentration (BAC) levels above the legal limit. Research indicates that the amount of alcohol in a driver’s blood is directly correlated with their behavior and the occurrence and severity of collisions (3). It impairs drivers’ judgment and affects vision and motor functions, leading to risky behaviors like speeding and reckless driving, putting drivers, their passengers, and other people on the road at risk (3). Young adults ages 20 to 29 experience the greatest consequences from alcohol-impaired driving irrespective of BAC (3).

The alcohol industry’s interests are in conflict with the public health goals of reducing alcohol-related harm. The contradiction arises because the industry actively seeks to boost alcohol sales and consumption and normalize drinking as part of our lifestyle, while public health initiatives aim to decrease consumption and denormalize the use of alcohol (13, 14).

Despite these clear conflicts of interest, many governments and nongovernment organizations opt to collaborate with alcohol corporations in efforts to reduce drink driving (11, 13). These partnerships, often driven by resource limitations within public agencies, persist even though the conflict of interest has been documented in research. Yet, the full impact of these conflicts on policy effectiveness and public health remains largely unexplored.

**So, would governments and nongovernment organizations still partner with the industry if it were evident that these campaigns not only fail to follow best practices but also subtly promote alcohol sales?**

This brief reviews findings from a study on the extent to which alcohol industry-sponsored drink driving campaign advertisements align with best practices for public health communication. By analyzing alcohol industry-sponsored drink-driving video advertisements, aired between 2006 and 2022 in more than 14 countries, the report aims to uncover how these campaigns promote or undermine public health goals. The report seeks to provide actionable insights for policymakers by identifying the limitations of industry-sponsored campaigns and offering recommendations for developing independent, evidence-based communication strategies to reduce alcohol-impaired driving.

### Box 1: Key Messages

Evidence-based social and behavior change media campaigns, when supported by legislation and reinforced through enforcement, are proven to prevent drink-driving-related crashes and reduce traffic injuries and fatalities.

The alcohol industry often collaborates with governments globally, offering sponsorships for media campaigns that may not align with public health interests. Such collaboration derails governments from effective interventions.

This report provides evidence that such campaigns are largely ineffective and fail to align with best practices for road safety initiatives targeting drink driving.

**The authors urge the government, transportation agencies, and public health advocates to avoid partnering with the alcohol industry for drink-driving ads, as the long-term health risks outweigh any short-term financial benefits.**

## Overview of Study

A content analysis of alcohol industry-sponsored drink-driving advertisements was conducted across multiple countries to assess the extent to which the ads adhere to best practices for effective road safety communication campaigns.

The study assessed whether alcohol industry-sponsored drink-driving ads adhered to road safety best practices, applied consistent approaches across regions, and promoted alcohol consumption. Advertisements were sourced via crowdsourcing and internet searches using relevant keywords. The study analyzed the content, messaging, and execution of these ads based on established best practices.

## Box 2: Best Practices for Road Safety Drink-Driving Campaigns

As part of the Bloomberg Philanthropies Initiative for Global Road Safety, global public health organization Vital Strategies has supported governments to plan and implement more than 70 [road safety campaigns](#) across approximately 20 countries. These campaigns are grounded in research and behavior change theories. The following are best practices for road safety drink-driving campaigns drawn from research and evaluation studies conducted for these campaigns:

1. Focusing on the consequences of drink driving and generating a strong emotional response in the viewer. This may be driven by the innocence of the people harmed, their loss of future opportunities, the impact of their death or injury on their family, or the moral guilt of ruining someone's life.
2. Depicting a clear link between the drinking and the impairment in driving ability that led to the crash and the consequences.
3. Communicating clearly that impaired driving results from even a small amount of alcohol.
4. Featuring a primary ad character and situation that viewers identify as being very relevant to them. Characters should not be stigmatized for drinking nor should they appear overly drunk.
5. Depicting the crash in such a way that there is no way that the victim of the crash could be perceived as being responsible.
6. Depicting the dramatization of a realistic story in a serious tone.
7. Ending with a strong, clear and specific behavioral "call to action."
8. Supporting with messaging about enforcement activities through earned media.

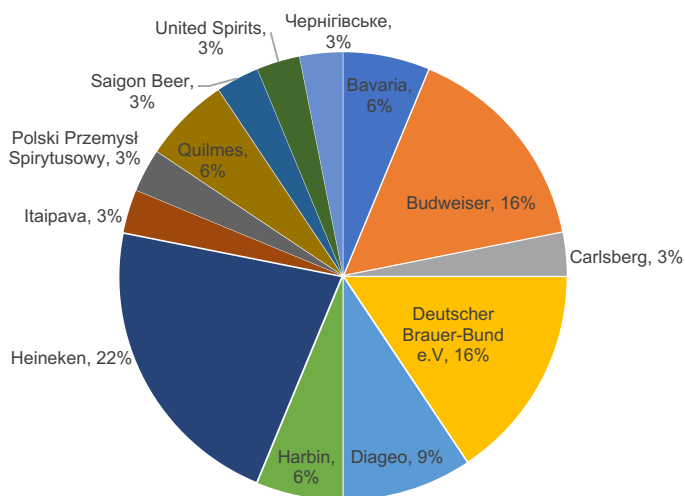
Sixteen trained researchers independently coded the ads. Each ad was coded by two different researchers, and inter-coder reliability was measured to ensure consistency between coders. Both objective and subjective elements were evaluated to understand variations in the ads.

The sample consisted of 32 advertisements sponsored by 13 alcohol industry players (12 companies and 1 trade association) aired between 2006 and 2022 in 14 countries across Asia, the Americas and Europe.

## Findings: The Real Impact of Alcohol Industry Sponsored Drink-Driving Ads

The 32 advertisements included in the study were sponsored by 13 global alcohol industry players, highlighting that industry sponsorship of drink driving ads is commonplace. Heineken sponsored the most ads followed by Budweiser and German Brewers Federation "Deutscher Brauer-Bund e.V" (Figure 1).

**Figure 1:**  
Alcohol Industry Sponsors of Drink-Driving Ads



Notably, Heineken and Budweiser are among the top-selling beer companies, with Heineken becoming the world's most valuable beer brand, valued at USD 7.6 billion in 2023, while Budweiser was valued at USD 6.7 billion (26).

### A Quarter of Ads Cobranded with Non-Alcohol Organizations

A quarter of the advertisements were produced in partnership (cobranded) with non-alcohol-related organizations, with the majority of such partnerships occurring in Asia-Pacific. Some of the organizations involved in cobranding industry-sponsored advertisements included the Traffic Management Bureau and Police Brigade in China; Legacy Media company in India; the Police Department in Poland; the Lyft transport company in the United States; and the Road Prevention Fund in Colombia.

### The Image of Alcohol in Industry-Sponsored Advertising

Alcohol consumption was portrayed in most advertisements (73.5%), either implicitly (56.3%) – for example when alcohol is bought, held, or served, or explicitly (17%) – through depiction of consumption.

This portrayal effectively serves a function of alcohol advertisement that promotes the sale of alcohol and normalizes its use, including among younger people. One of the coders noted that certain ads encouraged individuals to “get high by drinking beer,” while the message stating “people under 18 are not allowed to drink alcohol” was quickly mentioned at the end of the ad. The brand of the alcohol product was clearly shown in more than two-thirds (68%) of the advertisements.

### The Glamorization of Alcohol in Ads

Alcohol consumption was largely glamorized, by being linked with aspirational situations, such as celebrations, social inclusion and displays of social or financial status (61%).



Caption: A 2016 drink-driving advertisement from Budweiser beer in the United States

Celebrities, including actors, musicians, race car drivers and other professional athletes appeared in nearly half of the advertisements (49%). Celebrity endorsements increase positive attitudes toward brands and sales (15, 16). Formula 1 drivers were commonly featured, since alcohol companies are heavy sponsors of the race series (27). This included Felipa Massa and Nico Rosberg, a former Heineken’s “When You Drink, Never Drive” campaign ambassador who appeared in a number of the brand’s advertisements over the years (28). The actress Helen Mirren and NBA player Yao Ming were also featured, among other celebrities.



A 2013 drink-driving advertisement from Bavaria beer in Colombia

### Box 3: São Paulo campaign “Never Drink and Drive”

#### Drink Driving Consequences Were Barely Addressed

A 2019 São Paulo, Brazil campaign graphically depicted the lost future of Ana, a young woman hit by a car driven by Rodrigo, who drove home after drinking beer with friends. The ad asked viewers, “Could you live with the guilt?” The post-campaign evaluation showed that a significant majority of campaign-aware respondents (95%) agreed that the campaign helped them understand the consequences of not following drink driving rules on their lives and the lives of others. Eighty-one percent of drivers who had seen the campaign reported feeling concerned about driving after consuming alcohol, and 87% said that the campaign made them more likely to avoid driving after drinking.

São Paulo “Never Drink and Drive” campaign poster.



“Never Drink and Drive,” São Paulo, Brazil, 2019

This media campaign, which ran alongside strict enforcement measures in April-May 2019, contributed to a decline in the percentage of intoxicated drivers, from 0.6% in August 2018 to 0.23% in August 2019, as registered by the city. The evidence suggests that the most effective campaigns are paired with enhanced enforcement by police—drivers who see the ads then see a police presence and feel themselves at real risk of getting caught if they drink and drive. Earned media, such as news stories about the enhanced enforcement, support this messaging.

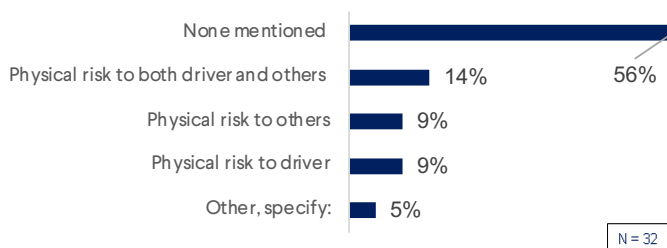
Governments that follow these best practices—developing campaign strategy based on crash and social-behavioral data analysis, conducting formative studies with drivers to refine messages and execution style, combining mass media advertising and police enforcement, and committing to strong, sustained campaigns—have seen positive results.

**Eighty-one percent of drivers who had seen the campaign reported feeling concerned about driving after consuming alcohol, and 87% said that the campaign made them more likely to avoid driving after drinking.**

Drawing a clear connection between alcohol consumption, drink driving and its consequences is critical to successful campaigns (6, 18) (Box 2. Best Practices for Road Safety Drink-Driving Campaigns). Consequences include road traffic crashes that result in death and injury of the driver and others, and enforcement-related consequences, such as arrest, loss of license, and legal fees. (6, 18). This often includes the depiction of realistic, graphic crash scenes (29). Content (verbal, visual and text) should also align to convey these consequences.

However, the majority of observed industry-sponsored advertisements did not demonstrate the consequences of drink driving (56%). Only a few advertisements verbally highlighted that drink driving poses risks to the driver (9%) and to others (9%), while some mentioned that drink driving puts both drivers and other people at risk (14%) (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2:**  
Mentions of Drink Driving Consequences



Only one advertisement aired in Poland graphically depicted a car crash as a consequence of drink driving. In some advertisements, the consequences of drink driving were not explicitly verbalized, but instead were conveyed through text, such as “1 in 3 drink-driving fatalities happen in the holiday season.”



A 2013 ad from the Polish Spirit Producer Association

### The Designated Driver Myth

Many ads provided recommendations or instructions on how to avoid drink driving (87%). The recommendations included: adopting an alternative way of getting home, such as using public transport; letting everyone know you are driving if you are a designated driver; drinking nonalcoholic drinks; and staying below the legal BAC.

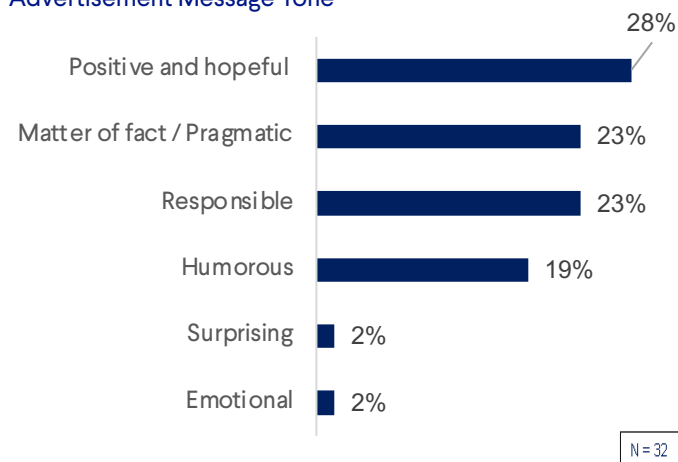
Research shows that messaging that focuses on “responsible drinking,” and having a “designated driver”, which is common in alcohol industry-sponsored drink driving ads, has been found to be ambiguous. “Responsible drinking” means different things to different people, rendering it ineffective in changing drivers’ intentions to not drink and drive (19, 20, 21, 22). This type of messaging encourages people to drink “responsibly,” not less. Furthermore, these initiatives tend to have limited efficacy. Studies show that self-identified designated drivers, especially those leaving bars, were more likely to have a higher blood alcohol concentration (BAC) than the average of all drivers on the road. Worse yet, the “designated driver” label sometimes encouraged heavier drinking among the group (11, 30, 31).

### Why Drink Driving Ads Sound Like Alcohol Commercials

In public health communication aimed at discouraging unhealthy behaviors, messages that evoke “negative emotions” such as fear are often recommended (32, 33, 34). Although “positive” emotions like humor may engage certain audiences, they are typically less effective in these health-related contexts (35). This is because they may fail to convey the serious consequences of persisting with unhealthy behaviors. None of the observed industry-sponsored advertisements used tones that would evoke negative emotions or clearly convey the consequences of drink-driving. Furthermore, some coders found the ads challenging to interpret. Some noted that the ads conveyed key messages in an entertaining manner such as through hip-hop/rap songs and were unrelated to the consequences of drink driving.

The majority of advertisements used positive and hopeful (28%) or humorous (19%) tones, similar to those used in alcohol advertisements. This was followed by “matter-of-fact” (pragmatic) (23%) and “responsible” tones, which emphasized topics like designated drivers (23%) (Figure 3).

**Figure 3:**  
Advertisement Message Tone



**The Missing Link Between Call to Action and Ad Messaging**

Most advertisements included a call to action (95%), which is a message at the end of the advertisement that is intended to elicit a specific behavioral response. The calls to action were repeated across countries. The most common call to action was “don’t drink and drive” or “when you drink never drive” or “when you drive never drink” (64%). These calls to action were often mentioned by the Deutscher Brauer-Bund federation (100%), Heineken (78%) and Budweiser (30%). This was followed by “Be a designated driver” (6%) and “Plan an alternative way to get home safely if drinking” (6%).

However, calls to action were often accompanied by brand logos and slogans, which sometimes reinforced the calls to action and sometimes had nothing to do with them (91%). Brands were incorporated into a number of these slogans, for example: “Budweiser reminds you, drink responsibly and use a designated driver,” “Do not drink and drive, HAPI (an abbreviation for HARBIN BEER pronounced like “happy”) together in the future,” and “Heineken, open your world.” Taglines or slogans often did not support or contradicted the message (31%). For example, while the strong Heineken logo prominently featured the “Open the world” tagline, the “drink aware” message was presented in a much smaller font.



A Heineken Ireland ad “When You Drive, Never Drink,” which aired in 2016

The calls to action were consistent with the content of the advertisement in approximately two-thirds of cases (69%). However, in these advertisements, alcohol was often displayed as enticing. Some coders noted the blend of public health messaging with marketing appeal. The product was prominently displayed, with many individuals not just holding the alcoholic beverage but also actively consuming it. Despite advocating against drinking and driving, the advertisements presented alcoholic beverages in a highly alluring manner. Moreover, the execution was entertaining making the call to action less memorable. In one of the ads, as recounted by one of the coders, Helen Mirren took center stage, delivering a captivating monologue to the camera. She humorously criticized those who choose to drive while intoxicated. However, ironically, she concluded her speech by taking a casual sip of beer.



A Budweiser Ad “#Give a Damn,” 2016.

The call to action did not align with the ad content in approximately one-third of cases (31%). For example, in a 2018 Heineken ad aired in Europe in the #WhenYouDriveNeverDrink campaign series featuring Nico Rosberg, the advertisement content focused on the importance of making it clear that you are the designated driver while the call to action was “when you drive, never drink.” A 2020 ad in the same series features Nico and father Keke Rosberg competing in different activities, such as fishing, to see who wins driving privileges. Only at the very end of the advertisement does the content align with the call to action “when you drive, never drink.” One of the coders mentioned “the entire ad really had nothing to do with drink driving.



A Heineken Ad “When you drive, never drink”, 2020

## Proposed Actions for Policy and Practice: Driving Meaningful Change in Drink- Driving Advertising

Media campaigns make up a large portion of public health initiatives aimed at reducing alcohol-impaired driving and alcohol-related crashes (5). When these campaigns have strong messaging, are well-executed, and are paired with other drink-driving prevention activities such as enhanced enforcement, they are successful in reducing injuries and deaths from alcohol-impaired driving (5, 6) (Box 2. Best Practices for Road Safety Drink-Driving Campaigns).

This report proposes that alcohol-industry sponsored drink-driving advertisements do not adhere to evidence-based standards to reduce drink driving and will thus be ineffective in changing drink-driving behavior, attitudes and social norms. Instead, advertisements tend to glamorize and normalize alcohol consumption, with many being executed similarly to alcohol commercials, framed around an anti-drink-driving message.

## Recommendations

### Based on the Findings of the Study, the Authors of This Report Recommend:

- Governments, transportation agencies, and public health advocates should be aware of the tactics used by the alcohol industry in sponsoring drink-driving advertisements that often serve as marketing tools for their products and alcohol use.
- Governments should avoid partnerships with the alcohol industry for sponsoring drink-driving advertisements, as the long-term health costs and consequences of increased alcohol consumption far outweigh any short-term financial benefits.
- Local and national governments should integrate communication campaigns into their comprehensive road safety strategies and plans, ensuring sustainable funding sources that do not rely on alcohol industry funding.
- Mass media campaigns aimed at preventing risky behavior, including drink driving, should adhere to best practices with evidence-based design and messages. Social behavioral research should be part of campaign development and evaluation to maximize the effectiveness of the campaign and its return on investment.

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