

7-1-1999

# Understanding the "Social Gifts" of Drinking Rituals: An Alternative Framework for PSA Developers

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# Understanding the "Social Gifts" of Drinking Rituals: An Alternative Framework for PSA Developers

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*Binge drinking behavior has been described as the most significant health hazard on college campuses today. Using definitions of ritual behavior drawn from the literature, the authors conducted focus groups, depth interviews, and participant observations to explore the ritualized nature of alcohol beverage consumption among college students at two large universities. The themes that emerged provide an understanding of the rituals associated with college student drinking. With the drinking-as-ritual interpretation as a theoretical framework, the authors discuss how developers of public service announcements (PSAs) could capture and contextualize drinking rituals and*

*thus make PSAs more relevant to the target audience. They provide examples of PSAs that could be tested.*

BOSTON (AP, September 30, 1997)- Three days after falling into an alcohol-induced coma, a Massachusetts Institute of Technology freshman died and the investigation was turned over to homicide detectives. Maura McLaughlin, spokesperson for Beth Israel Deaconness Medical Center said today that Scott Krueger, an 18-year-old fraternity pledge, died Monday night.

Binge drinking behavior-or the consumption of five or more drinks in a row on at least one occasion within a typical two-week period-has been described as the most significant health hazard on college campuses today (Wechsler et al. 1994). The high incidence of traffic fatalities is the most visible alcohol-related problem addressed; however, consumption of alcohol among students has also been associated with unplanned and unsafe sexual activity, physical and sexual assault, unintentional injuries, other criminal violations, interpersonal problems, physical or cognitive impairment, and poor academic performance (Hanson and Engs 1992; Presley, Meilman and Lyster 1993; Wechsler and Isaac 1992).

Messages aimed at curtailing drinking are among the most common public service announcements (PSAs) produced, but generally are created for "an undifferentiated general audience rather than those who are at greatest risk [and] young people in their teens and twenties are an especially difficult audience to reach" (DeJong and Atkin 1995). Moreover, even with the moderate success of some of the campaigns, both the number of binge-drinking incidents and the amount of alcohol consumed during such incidents continue to rise (Wechsler and Isaac 1992).

We address the problems in communicating antidrinking messages to college students and the need for greater insight to that group's behavior as a basis for developing more effective PSAs. The uneven success of PSAs in the past does not necessarily mean that such messages should be abandoned, but rather that a search for alternative message strategies may be in order. We argue that *one theoretical framework* that could prove useful for PSA developers and salient to PSA viewers is the conceptualization of college drinking as ritual behavior. We do not imply that such a theoretical framework is

limited to college drinking; instead, we offer an example of how the ritual framework can be applied to change behavior. As we show, the concept of drinking-as-ritual is an efficacious one, and using it as a starting point should enable researchers to create more resonant PSAs, as the alcohol industry certainly has done in its commercials encouraging use of the product. If important ritual aspects of behavior are incorporated correctly, PSAs may be more meaningful to the audience and hence more effective than previous efforts.

We (1) identify the scope of the problems associated with alcohol use on campus. (2) briefly review the use of alcohol-related PSAs by both manufacturers and nonprofit organizations, (3) provide an overview of the literature pertaining to ritualistic consumption, (4) report findings from a qualitative study that supports our interpretation of drinking behavior as ritualistic, and (5) make specific recommendations as to how a ritual framework can be used to develop and test PSAs designed to moderate college drinking behavior.

### *The Scope of the Problem*

Clearly, drinking and driving is a problem for society as a whole. For instance, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (1994) reports that more than 50% of the fatal highway crashes involving two or more cars, and more than 60% of all fatal single-car crashes are alcohol-related. However, college students are disproportionately responsible for alcohol-related traffic fatalities (Stearn 1987) and disproportionately at risk, as the leading cause of death for people 15 to 24 years of age is alcohol-related traffic accidents (National Committee for Injury Prevention and Control 1989). One of the largest studies of college drinking behavior, based on a random sample of 17,592 college students, found that almost half (44%) were binge drinkers, and 19% of them hinged as frequently as three times or more within a two-week period (Wechsler et al. 1994). Thirty-three percent of college students drink primarily to get drunk (Wechsler and Issac 1992).

Consumption of alcohol by college students has been described as an inevitable rite of passage (CASA Commission on Substance

Abuse at Colleges and Universities 1994). However, consumption varies widely among different groups and by locality, suggesting that heavy consumption is not necessarily inevitable or unalterable. Data from students who responded to a major survey (Presley, Meilman, and Lyerla 1993) showed that white men drink much more than any other group, followed by Hispanic men, white women, black men, and black women. Freshmen are more likely to drink more and to drink more often than seniors; on-campus students (especially those in fraternities and sororities) drink more than those living off campus. Finally, students in the Northeast and North Central sections of the country have dramatically higher drinking rates than students in other areas. Those patterns suggest that college drinking should not simply be regarded as a "given," and that different efforts may be needed to reach different groups.

### *Effects of Responsible Drinking Ads From the Alcohol Industry*

The alcohol industry has initiated several campaigns promoting responsible drinking, including Miller's "Think When You Drink" and "Drink Safely" campaigns, Coor's "Now, Not Now" ads, and Anheuser Busch's "Know When to Say When" campaign—a \$15 million effort but only a small part of its \$450 million advertising budget (Rose 1991). Critics believe such ads have led to an increased awareness of alcohol issues but have done little to change behavior (Jacobs 1989). Motivated by the fear of regulations that could severely restrict the marketing of alcoholic beverages, the industry's efforts have been regarded by some critics as failing to play a constructive role in reducing drinking and driving (DeJong, Atkin, and Wallack 1992).

DeJong, Atkin, and Wallack note other criticisms of moderation ads. Specifically, they argue that although the ads ostensibly promote responsible drinking, they actually increase the legitimacy of beer consumption in a variety of social situations by using some of the same images found in the brand advertising—playful teasing between a young man and woman at the beach, male bonding around a campfire, and bars crowded with sexually attractive women. The ads are criticized also for their tendency to blame problems with alcohol on the individual rather than the industry.

Campaigns for designating a driver, a practice many college students have adopted, arose as a potential solution to the drinking and driving dilemma (DeJong and Wallack 1992). Proponents of driver designation find it an easy, commonsense approach that appeals to people's sense of altruism and fairness and earns the respect of friends. However, many designated drivers do not abstain but merely consume less alcohol than other members of the group. Hence, some critics have argued that using a designated driver might actually encourage heavier consumption by the driver's companions (Seal 1990 cited by DeJong and Wallack). Wagenaar (1992) further notes that designating a driver can make a difference only if two or more people are traveling together, and 58% of all vehicles involved in fatal crashes have only one occupant.

### *Nonprofit Organization PSAs*

Although the overall effectiveness of PSAs is often difficult to measure, particularly because of wide variances in media exposure, PSAs are valued as an important communication tool. PSAs sponsored by nonprofit organizations are a significant source of antidrinking messages. Atkin, Garramone, and Anderson (1986) note that such PSAs have used a variety of tactics including encouraging drivers to drink less ("know your limit"), encouraging drivers to avoid driving ("designate a driver" and "take a cab"), or communicating the importance of interpersonal relationships ("friends don't let friends drink and drive").

The use of fear appeals is perhaps the most common tactic for PSAs, with threats of physical harm including injury and death used more frequently than social threats (Reid and King 1986). However, findings for the effectiveness of fear appeals are contradictory some researchers have reported greater attitude change with minimal amounts of fear (Janis and Feshbach 1953), others have found no relationship between fear and persuasion (Frandsen 1963; Millman 1968), and still others have noted greater attitude change with a strong fear appeal (Burnett and Oliver 1979). Although fear may be a motivator for some people, Denzin (1984) concluded that fear resides in the individual, not in the message content.

One problem associated with the use of fear appeals aimed at college students is that the target audience underestimates or minimizes the risk associated with drinking. The Institute for Health Policy (1993) reported that 18 to 25 year-olds are the least likely of any age group to believe that heavy alcohol use is risky. Further, students who consume larger quantities of alcohol perceive consumption to be significantly less risky than those who consume smaller quantities (Patterson, Hunnicutt, and Stutts 1992).

In summary, moderation messages created by both the industry and nonprofit organizations have received mixed reviews and have achieved only moderate success in modifying drinking behavior.

### *Ritualistic Consumer Behavior*

The idea that consumption can be described as ritual behavior has been articulated by many researchers. In his seminal piece on ritualistic consumption, Rook (1985) offers the following definition:

The term ritual refers to a type of expressive, symbolic activity constructed of multiple behaviors that occur in a fixed, episodic sequence, and that tend to be repeated over time. Ritual behavior is dramatically scripted and acted out and is performed with formality, seriousness, and inner intensity.

As a dramatic enactment, ritual behavior involves four tangible components: (1) ritual artifacts, (2) a ritual script, (3) ritual performance roles, and (4) a ritual audience (Rook 1985). Ritual artifacts can take the form of sacred objects used in religious ceremonies, gifts, and even food and drink. Ritual scripts identify the artifacts, enumerate the rules of their usage, specify who will use them, and delineate the behavioral sequence. Ritual performance roles carefully detail what is expected of persons who perform ritualistic behaviors. For example, an investigation of Thanksgiving dinner identified several performance patterns, including following prescribed rules of food preparation, fasting or eating very little prior to the meal, consuming abundant amounts of food at the meal, and enacting togetherness through storytelling and viewing photographs (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991).

Finally, the ritual audience defines who observes the performance. Some rituals, such as the Super Bowl, draw large audiences whereas other rituals involve only performers. Although solitary rituals of prayer or personal grooming are performed without an audience *per se*, they often are performed with significant others in mind (Rook 1985).

Our assumption that the drinking experience can be framed as ritual behavior is supported when one considers Rook's four structural elements of ritual in the drinking context. Drinking requires an artifact (the alcohol itself), a script (rules about who can and cannot drink legally, when and where the drinking will occur, agreements about transportation to and from the places where drinking occurs), a performance role (how to drink, how many drinks to consume, how to behave while drinking), and an audience (peers, bartenders, campus personnel). Moreover, of the 10 different forms of ritual that Rook identifies, two-small group rituals and rites of passage-seem relevant to the context of college drinking behavior.

Rook's explication of the structural elements of ritual behavior is not incompatible with Driver's (1991) more functionally based model. Driver outlines the three "social gifts" of rituals in society, arguing that ritual behavior (1) provides order in society, (2) allows for the experience of community, and (3) provides a chance for the individual to be transformed in some significant way. Because the functional approach is linked directly to the needs that ritual behavior may satisfy, we believe it provides an opportunity for in-depth analysis of college drinking as ritual behavior.

### *Links between Ritual Behavior and Advertising*

McCracken (1986) holds that for consumers, the meaning of ritual artifacts or consumer goods is not fixed but is constantly changing. It is in transit first between the "culturally constituted world" (the world of everyday experience) and the consumer good itself, and second from the good to the individual consumer. McCracken positions advertising as one of the mechanisms that accomplishes the transition of meaning from the culturally constituted world to the consumer good through the ability of advertising to assign symbolic properties to

products. After meaning has been transferred from the world to the good via advertising (as well as the fashion system and other mechanisms), the transition of meaning from good to consumer is accomplished through another set of mechanisms, including ritual (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1983; Turner 1969). Because ritual provides an opportunity to "affirm, evoke, assign or revise the conventional symbols and meaning of the cultural order," it is a "powerful and versatile tool for the manipulation of cultural meaning" (McCracken 1986, p. 78).

Otnes and Scott (1996) agree that advertising and ritual provide meaning to consumer goods, but they question the simplicity of the process McCracken describes and instead propose a two-dimensional relationship between advertising and ritual. Specifically, they argue that advertising can attempt to effect changes in rituals, to encourage the transference of ritual artifacts from one occasion to another (hence the development of Easter and Halloween trees), and to legitimize "ritual constellations" or required artifacts through their portrayal in advertising. Moreover, rituals can affect advertising because the ritualized use of language, such as that found in "spells," may be employed in advertising messages to create and reinforce both specific brand images and consumers' experiences with products.

We believe that in addition to ritual change, ritual transference, and the portrayal of ritual constellations, advertising can influence rituals in another way that is, through its attempt at ritual *control*. Specifically, ads can employ ritual symbolism in their attempt to "rein in" ritualized behaviors that could have potentially detrimental effects on consumers. Driver (1991), Hirschman (1992), and others have written about the "dark side" of ritualized consumption in such contexts as addiction. As Driver observes, "Ritual occasions are always fraught with the possibility that aggressions usually held in check by social pressures may come free" (p. 154).

Unlike many of the examples offered by Otnes and Scott (1996), antidrinking PSAs obviously do not promote the use of the main artifact employed in college drinking rituals-namely, alcohol. However, such PSAs can seek to decrease usage of that product by making relevant connections to the order, community, and

transformational experiences that drinking offers college students. After detailing our method, we illustrate how those "social gifts" emerged in our qualitative study of drinking rituals, and how understanding them can contribute to the creation and testing of antidrinking PSAs.

## **Method**

### *Design*

We used a qualitative research design to explore the meanings and ritualized consumption behaviors of college students. To obtain a more holistic perspective of college drinking behavior than is typically achieved through surveys alone, we used multiple data collection methods: interviews with key informants, participant observations, focus groups, and depth interviews with participants.

### *Participants*

Participants for the study were chosen from two large southeastern universities (with 46,000 and 25,000 students). Both campuses are public and are in midsize cities with populations of 150,000 and 600,000, respectively. The racial composition of the participants mirrored the ratio of ethnic groups on each campus. Participants (for both the focus groups and the depth interviews) were selected from introductory and upper-level telecommunication, marketing, and journalism classes and were given extra credit.

To ground the researchers in the phenomenon of interest, one campus policeman, four bartenders, and one dormitory resident assistant at the smaller university acted as key informants. They were chosen for their unique knowledge, experience, or, in the case of the bartenders, continued contact with participants (Lindlof 1995). For example, the policeman provided information about the patterns of behavior that require police intervention (i.e., underage drinking, intoxication, and criminal behavior under the influence of alcohol). The dormitory assistant commented on the types of alcohol-related rule infractions encountered, and the bartenders provided information on

the level of intoxication among students and the frequency of their drinking.

In addition, graduate assistants trained in qualitative methods conducted systematic observations in several bars near the larger campus over a period of three weeks. Participant observations are useful for gathering data within normal social situations to see how individuals behave (Becker 1970). The knowledge from key informants and observations served two functions: (1) because the observations were conducted before the focus groups, they provided a context for and grounding in the drinking experience, and (2) they provided triangulation of data.

Twenty-five female and 30 male college students between 21 and 25 years of age at the larger of the two universities participated in one of eight focus group sessions, with groups ranging in size from eight to 11. Although perhaps not the group most at risk, students over the age of 21 were recruited for the research because they would feel more free than younger ones to discuss illegal behaviors. Focus groups were one component of the larger study and were used to orient researchers to the field, develop question guides, and generate preliminary ideas based on informants' insights (Morgan 1988). Students selected to participate were those identified as binge drinkers (those consuming five or more drinks at a time within a typical two-week period), from drinking information gathered during preliminary screenings. None of the participants knew one another.

Informants on both campuses were selected for the depth interviews by the typical-case sampling method, which identifies cases or individuals representing the essence or the "composite ideal" of the phenomenon under study (Lindlof 1995). Ten male and 10 female college students from each campus who fit the criterion of being binge drinkers were selected, for a total of 20 interviewees.

### *Procedure and Data Analysis*

Focus groups consisted of men only or women only, and both men and women to account for role- and gender-based perspectives. The sessions continued until no new information was obtained (Taylor

1994). A low level of moderator involvement was used, as the goal was to assess participants' knowledge from their own perspectives. Each session was conducted around one "grand-tour," or opening, nondirective question (McCracken 1988) asking participants to explain typical drinking occasions. Probes asked students to elaborate on topics that arose within the conversation. Focus groups lasted approximately 90 minutes.

The depth interviews followed a loosely structured interview guide asking "grand-tour" questions in four topic areas: typical drinking occasions, drinking amounts, decisions about when to quit drinking for an evening, and typical driving decisions. By that nondirective approach, we attempted to ensure not only that the broad topic areas were addressed, but also that participants would respond according to their own assumptions (McCracken 1988). Interviews ranged from 45 to 90 minutes in length.

Researchers transcribed the tape-recorded focus group sessions and depth interviews. All information, including field notes, was analyzed by the analytic induction method as described by Glaser and Strauss (1967) to determine common themes. The first and second authors independently coded the transcripts and agreed on several analytic categories. The third author, who was not involved in data collection, acted as auditor of the final report and made suggestions about how the interpretation could be structured.

At the conclusion of the analysis, the first author conducted member checks with five depth-interview participants. No misinterpretations were reported.

### *Findings*

Our interpretation lends strong support for the salience of the structural and functional approaches to ritual, described by Rook and Driver respectively, within the context of college drinking. We believe that with the exception of the ritual artifacts discussed in the next section, the elements of Rook's framework are best discussed simultaneously with Driver's "social gifts" of ritual. Importantly, neither the elements of Rook's framework nor the three "social gifts," were

ever specifically mentioned to participants. The fact that the findings can still be described within those frameworks therefore lends validity to our belief that college drinking can be understood as ritualized behavior.

## *Contextual Overview*

Our interpretation first supports the structural components of ritualistic consumption described by Rook (1985). For example, alcohol is obviously the essential artifact in our context. However, the specific drink chosen varies by intent and occasion. Beer is most common, primarily because it is relatively inexpensive, especially when purchased during bar specials and by pitchers. Some participants also reported a less severe hangover with beer than with liquor:

I can drink a lot of beer and not even feel it. Once I'm drunk, I can keep drinking and it won't bother me in the morning. Maybe a headache but not bad. Now if you're drinking liquor, that is a different story [male participant].

Likewise, a few participants liked wine or wine coolers, but some perceived those drinks as a choice for underage, inexperienced drinkers (mostly female) who would "move up" to beer once they had acquired a taste for it. Some participants chose liquor over beer to "do shots" and thus get drunk quickly. Others consumed mixed drinks, but rarely did so at bars because of the cost.

Fraternity parties and athletic events on campus are two primary occasions for liquor consumption. Alcohol was prohibited at both campus stadiums, but female students found liquor easy to transport undetected in a purse and male students concealed liquor in a back pocket in plastic zip-lock bags called "zips" or "zippys." At the event, they mixed the liquor with a soft drink to escape detection.

## *Order*

Driver's (1991, p. 132-134) first "social gift" of ritual is order:

... the reinforcement, if not the actual creation, of social order is perhaps the most obvious of ritual's functions ... [ritualizing creates] pathways or channels along which human behavior may move without always having to redesign its course. Ritualization introduces an economy into behavior, setting up routines that become part of a whole repertoire of [actions].

In our study, very definite patterns of temporal and spatial order emerged, as students participated in fairly regimented drinking-related behaviors.

*Temporal Order.* Laitman (1987, p. 103) observes that "among students who are clearly addicted to alcohol, many aspects of daily living become subtly involved in chemicals ... students scheduled classes so as not to interfere with periodic hangovers, [and] gradually changed friends to those who use more alcohol...(If all your friends drink daily, then you are able to justify more easily this as reality!." Even if none of our participants were actually addicted to alcohol, the ways in which alcohol ordered time for college students were very prevalent.

For example, several participants reported pre-drinking changes in mode of dress, meal consumption, and completion of assignments depending on the desired purpose for the evening. One female student revealed:

I and the other girls don't eat much on the day we go drinking because if you have a full stomach, you really can't get drunk. If we're going drinking at night, we eat lunch around noon and won't eat for the rest of the day ... then we go out drinking.

Interestingly, some participants claimed that they made no specific plans for the evening; indeed, such plans would defeat the purpose of drinking. However, given the routinized nature of college drinking, specific plans are not necessary. One female student knew people she could join on any given night of the week, so if she decided to drink on the spur of the moment, she already knew where and when to arrive.

Such regimented patterns of drinking behavior emerged through our participants' discussions of who they chose to go out with, the

days and times of the week when they drank and the events that were drinking-related. For example, each different evening carried the expectation that participants would be with the same people as the week before, and they would see the same people sitting in the same spot as they did the previous week.

Moreover, for half of the participants, the entire week's drinking schedule was determined by the surrounding bars' nightly specials. The object was to obtain a "cheap buzz" and to have some sense of where the evening would begin and end. One male student noted:

We have our routine. We go to one bar because they have a special. When that's ended, we go next door to a dance place because ladies get in free until 12. We stay until 11:30 and we go next door and get in free there.

Time was a particularly important ordering aspect of the ritual, in that many students stopped drinking only because the bar closed. Others planned their drinking around the timing of events. For example, one female student said:

If it is a day game like at 1:00 p.m., we usually start drinking around 11:00 a.m. and just drink throughout the game .... If it was a 7:00p.m. game, it [drinking] would start about 4:00p.m.

Likewise, calendrical considerations influenced order; not only days of the week but entire seasons directed drinking. Several participants felt Fridays were "bar nights" and Saturdays were "fraternity nights," particularly after football games during the fall semester. Still others regarded Saturday as a date night that does not include heavy drinking.

All but two of the respondents regarded Sunday as a non-drinking day (unless it precedes a holiday); the other two students believed that Sunday is exclusively a "guy drinking" day. One student explained, "Well, I *never* drink on Sundays. I can't understand how people drink on Sundays, it's like drinking before an exam, although there are always exceptions." Finally, 11 of the participants suggested that Thursday is a heavy drinking and partying night because Fridays

are usually not heavy class, assignment, or test days. One male student observed:

We are creatures of habit. I tend to go out on Thursdays. It's apparently a tradition. There used to not be classes on Fridays- it's traditional that Fridays are pretty relaxed days so that's why Thursdays are big.

*Spatial (Place) Order.* The places where college students drink have a close connection to the types of activities in which the students participate. As Driver (1991, p. 79) notes, ritual places can help individuals "construct alternative worlds ... different from ordinary life, they move in a kind of liminal space, at the edge of, or in the cracks between, the mapped regions of what we like to call 'the real world'." Further, different places draw different types of performers. One participant said, "geeks go to one place, the 'artsy, eccentric' people go elsewhere to alternative places .... " Yet once students find a comfortable place where they feel they belong, they develop a routine.

People tend to go where they know their friends are going to be versus the places they don't know anyone. It is very much a pattern .... You see the same people every weekend and every night. It's funny.

The difference in atmosphere between drinking places also invokes different consumption scripts. Some places are right for the heavy drinking that occurs among friends, but not right for dates. Several participants said that they usually do not drink heavily when they have dates, nor do they go to the "friendtype" bars. One student reported:

You don't take dates to "those" places. You go somewhere else where you can eat and have a few drinks and go somewhere afterward. I wouldn't take someone out to nickel beer. That would make her a 25 cent date! Bars are mostly meat markets.

Choice of a place also varies by the age of the drinkers. Some bars admit underage drinkers but do not serve alcohol to them. Others admit only people 21 or older. Many of the participants preferred the exclusivity of the more restrictive bars once they had turned 21. Recalling the first years on campus when they were underage drinkers,

some participants found the underage scripts easier to enact at some places than others. When asked how people get into bars if they are underage, one female participant said they use a fake ID or take the chance that they will not get carded.

Off-campus events such as road trips call for very different place scripts than those invoked for drinking at local bars. One male participant said:

When I was in the fraternity, it was not uncommon to rent rooms or go on road trips and just destroy stuff just for the sake of being wild-a Spring Break trip or something like that ... When you go you use somebody's credit card because you don't stop for money .. You just stop by the liquor store and grab what you need and you're on the road. You just start driving, and whatever happens ... You're away from your home and you don't care what happens.

Clearly, then, college drinking behavior imposed order on our participants' lives-from influencing decisions about eating habits during the day, to dictating where and when to drink.

## *Community*

The second social gift that rituals provide is community. Driver (1991, p. 154) observes that ritual "not only brings people together in physical assembly but also tends to unite them emotionally ... ritual activity is interactive and social by nature." Accordingly, one of the current ads for Budweiser beer emphasizes beer's ability to enhance friendship. In the ad, August Busch IV says:

... Beer is about friendship. It's about making friends. It's about relationships. It's about going out and meeting new people, and I don't believe there is a better beverage to do this with than a Bud. It's part of the good life. It's part of a life with friends. It's part of enjoyment, relaxation, sporting events, and ball games. It's part of America. There are 500 million beer drinkers in the world and 80 million beer drinkers in the U.S. They must know something.

Students typically go drinking in small groups of three or four people, but at times group sizes approach 10 people. Most often the groups are friends rather than dates. One male student noted, "Usually you hang out with your group. You usually have a couple of close-knit friends you do everything with."

Drinking together unites people emotionally; it intensifies the relationship and the experience. A female participant commented:

It was fun feeling drunk .. .laughing, having fun and being in a social situation where a lot of people are the same way. Everyone decided to collectively go there for that reason and you have a good time ... .You hear about it in high school...and once you get here it really was fun. It was everything I had heard about.

*Community and Ritual Performance Roles.* Because the creation of community is social by definition, it is not surprising that the ritual performance roles that Rook (1985) discusses, and that emerge in the context of college drinking, pertain to the sense of community that is created. Two roles in particular appear with regularity, the designated driver and the caretaker.

Clearly, one of the goals of the "designated driver" campaign was to impose a "new order" on drinking behavior. In fact, the creator of the campaign, Dr. Jay Winsten of the Harvard School of Public Health, noted that the main contribution of the campaign was that it "promoted a new social norm... [it] gave social legitimacy to the non-drinking role" (Herbert 1993, A25). However, many scholars argue that it appeals to some drinkers because it taps into the American values of sharing and caring (DeJong and Wallack 1992; Glascoff, Knight, and Jenkins 1994). Indeed, if drinking were not a social activity, the "designated driver" concept would be nonsensical.

Participants who discussed their driving decisions at the end of an evening were split as to amount of responsibility they exhibited about securing a ride home for themselves and their peers, even though all participants were aware of the potential consequences of drinking and driving. One male participant summed up the dilemma by saying:

Sometimes we do put ourselves into risky situations as far as driving under the influence. But when the situation arises, how else are we going to get home? I could designate myself as driver, but then I wouldn't have as much fun.

One female participant commented that the dating situation makes the driving arrangements more difficult:

Last Friday I was going on this blind date .... and I was a nervous wreck because I wasn't sure where we were going and how we were going to get there ... I was real nervous about saying anything 'cause I didn't want to sound geeky or whatever .... But definitely, you go on a date and you kinda lose control [of the driving situation].

Participants who did designate a driver usually took turns and made the decision on the basis of who was willing to drink less. For example, a person who has to work early the next day may choose not drink heavily the night before, and becomes the logical designated driver for the evening.

Moreover, students who did name a designated driver, and who felt personally responsible for the physical safety of each of their friends, often perceived negative consequences of assigning that role. One male participant stated:

If I have to drive, I don't drink. But then I feel like I'm not having a good time. With all of my friends drinking and having a good time, you want to be drinking too.

Interestingly, for 18 of the participants, being the designated driver did not mean refraining from drinking. Rather it meant "quitting at 12:00 if the closing time is 2:00" or drinking less. In groups that have a designated driver, others sometimes change their performance as well by consuming more alcohol. As one female participant commented:

If I wasn't driving, I would probably drink more, so yes I would. It is kind of a relief not to have to worry about it. It takes a lot of the burden off.

Both of those behavior patterns-reducing the amount of drinking but not abstaining, and increasing consumption if one has a designated driver, have been found to be prevalent among college students employing that role (Glascoff, Knight, and Jenkins 1994).

Another ritual performance role that emerges from a sense of community is that of the "caretaker." Caretaking can be part of the responsibility of the designed driver, but the role also occurs at other times, such as when students walk rather than drive to bars and parties. One participant said:

If you're with a bunch of people that are drunk and the cars are coming, you're going to pull them out of the way and keep them in line to go home. That's happened to me before. The people who aren't as drunk are going to take care of the other people. I've been the sober one a few times .... I've also been drunk and been crazy in the middle of the street, and my friends have grabbed me.

Another female participant agreed that "if you tell everyone that 'tonight is my night to get drunk,' then we'll take care of them."

A different perspective was voiced by the 11 participants who revealed that many times they did not participate in either the designated driver or caretaker role, because they simply did not care or did not think about it. How they got home was sometimes a mystery, sometimes an accomplishment to brag about, and sometimes a reason to be embarrassed. One female participant explained:

There have been several times when I blacked out and I don't remember a whole lot. There were days when I asked someone how I got home. When I woke up the next day, I never felt like I was in danger-even with the influence of a lot of alcohol.

Clearly, then, the feeling of community may not carry over to a feeling of responsibility for all participants in the drinking ritual-which may be why the designated driver concept was adopted by a little less than half of students in a recent survey (Glascoff, Knight, and Jenkins 1994).

*Community and Peer Pressure.* Male and female participants on both campuses believed unspoken social pressures influenced when and how much they drank. None of the students felt that their peers would berate them for not drinking, but instead did not want to stand out, look different, miss taking their turn buying, or just miss out in general. In fact, being with friends increased consumption even for those who were trying not to drink. One female participant explains:

I've tried several times not to drink, but it's really hard out in the social crowd not to. It doesn't really make sense .... No one I know really enjoys the taste .... So if I'm not wanting to get drunk, there is no purpose to drink. But there is that pressure to drink. I mean if you're out on a Friday night, I guess I'm going to drink. I mean, when you're surrounded by it, it's just the thing to do.

Another felt that the pressure is intensified when a woman is trying to make a good impression on men:

... You don't want the guys to go "Oh, she's not the type of person that likes to have fun." The guys we hang around with think it is cool to have a couple of beers .... You do want to impress them. Girls drink for two reasons. One is to impress them and the other is to loosen up.

Those findings, as well as the literature on college drinking behavior, highlight an interesting gender difference. Gleason (1994, p. 282) argues that women more than men define themselves as successful partially by their ability to form and maintain relationships. Hence, "in their search for intimacy, alcohol may become a vehicle that is readily available and offers the promise of being helpful... women are constantly bombarded by messages from the media that alcohol is necessary if one is to achieve happiness and success and be attractive to men." The promise of community through alcohol therefore may be especially potent for women, even though women actually metabolize alcohol at a faster rate and typically feel its effects more than men (Wechsler et al. 1995).

Proximity to other students and to the surrounding bars also plays a large role in the decision to drink. Nine of the female students

found it easier to buckle under peer pressure when they lived in a dorm because they were in close contact with peers. Indeed, many times friendships are the overriding factor in drinking plans. Students suggested they would drop other plans and schoolwork if invited out by friends. However, once they moved off campus and had just two or three roommates, refusing a drinking offer became much easier.

## *Transformation*

Driver (1991, p. 169) discusses how the search for transformation is not limited to religious or other sacred rituals:

Social life in general...requires ceremonies and rites, those quasi-dramatic enactments that define people's relationships and also make possible their transformation as part of the social dynamic ... these events change things, and do so by the technique of ritual-that is, by magic.

Although Driver was speaking about transformation that occurs primarily through ceremonies, our data support the belief that college students seek an alternative to their everyday existence through their drinking behavior. As Keeling (1994, p. 243) points out, students "know that alcohol both releases inhibitions and induces relaxation, and that alcohol materially shifts the balances and dynamics of relationships, intimacy, and sexual behavior." Two main transformative themes emerged in our study, escape and coming of age.

*Escape.* Our participants reported that their lives were charged with tension stemming from both coursework and social pressures. Therefore, they drank with a purpose and a plan: to forget, to become more comfortable, to relieve stress, to cheer up, to forget about people, and to be part of the social scene. Indeed, one student said she and her friends label the reasons for drinking on a given night.

We call it our mission ... we're in the mood to drink. We're sick of everything ... and then there's the night when it's our mission to meet guys. Then there's the night when we hate guys and it's our mission to go out and drink and forget them.

Others reported that less specific goals guided their escapist behavior:

I just get ripped ... my goal is to forget about stress and just have fun [male participant].

There are some days when you have had a bad day and you just want to go out and get wasted ... [female participant].

The issue of using alcohol as escape is worrisome, for research shows heavier drinkers use alcohol more for that reason, whereas lighter drinkers typically use alcohol for pleasure (Brennan, Walfish, and AuBuchon 1986).

Other participants explained the so-called harmless or positive drinking missions: to have a good time, to meet someone of the opposite sex, to be with friends, to celebrate passing an exam or a difficult class, to get a buzz, or to get "good and drunk." Depending on the mission, the performance varied. However, all of those reasons typically shared the common theme of escaping the daily grind of courses and other responsibilities.

*Coming of Age.* A transformation within the performer occurs with age. Eighteen of the participants reported an unexpected change in their attitudes and drinking behaviors when they reached the age of 21. The students believed that underage drinking not only was more thrilling and risky, but also different because they usually drank much more than they felt they should have. For example, drinking games, such as "quarters," increased their consumption levels as well as their excitement factor. One female participant explained:

The attraction to alcohol is so much more when you're younger .... The joke is once you turn 21, it's not exciting anymore. The thrill of getting through that door and trying to get served is gone because you're legal.

The students believed that the purpose of their underage drinking was to get drunk, yet when they turned 21 drinking became a social event. One male participant commented:

... as a freshman I drank probably six nights a week and you had contests to see who could drink the fastest and the most.

Now I don't even like going to crowded bars .. .I just hangout and talk to my friends.

Indeed, one female participant looking back was embarrassed at her behavior.

It seemed that when I turned 21 it really did change. It gets old and we see all the people on the street and think "Oh God, I was like that as a freshman-slopping around, going to the bathroom and hanging on people." I can't believe it.

Thus, ironically the legal transformation to drinking age appears to have a dampening effect on drinking behavior. The real "rite of passage" that students who want to drink seem to acknowledge is getting away with underage drinking.

## *Summary*

Many factors appear to shape the ways in which the "social gifts" of ritual emerge in the context of college drinking. For example, the cost and availability of liquor, as well as the stigma of particular places and the age of the crowd, influence order. However, the most significant need that ritual order appears to fill for students is *security* knowing that they can go to a particular spot on a particular night and expect a particular experience. In contrast, the need that community appears to fill is *intimacy* at best and *connectedness* at the very least. Finally, the need that the "social gift." of transformation appears to fill is *escape*, and possibly *excitement and adventure*. With the loss of control that binge drinking brings comes the possibilities--good and bad--of nonmundane experiences. In designing PSAs that tap into the "social gifts" of college drinking rituals, those needs must be kept in mind.

## **Implications for PSA Development**

We demonstrate how college drinking behavior can be understood as ritual, in the hope that more relevant and resonant public service messages can be developed to help moderate such behavior. To that end, we present some initial executions based on the ritual framework that could be tested among the target audience.

We carefully studied the recommendations for such messages and used the following guidelines to develop the PSAs for testing:

- Employ a theoretical framework in developing messages, as the most successful PSAs have done (O'Keefe and Reid 1990).
- Make the message imaginative, original, and exciting (Seitel 1992)
- Fashion a suitable "hook" for the PSA (Cohen 1987, p. 205)
- Portray social versus physical consequences of engaging in undesirable behavior, and stigmatize that behavior (Alter 1994; DeJong and Atkin 1995).
- Determine whether your purpose is to inform or to persuade (Newsom and Carrell 1992)
- Most important, create a message that is relevant to the target audience (Albright 1992)

On the basis of those guidelines and our research demonstrating the efficacy of ritual within the context of college drinking, we devised three commercials reflecting the concept of college drinking as ritual, each of which focuses on one of Driver's "social gifts." Each of the commercials has a testimonial format and features members of the target audience---college students---as spokespeople for moderation. At the end of each commercial, a voiceover reinforces the ritual modification that has been suggested. Moreover, to forge the link between the suggested modification of the drinking ritual and the context within which the behavior takes place, all of the commercials are set in bars. Each commercial included phrases associated with drinking rituals, but altered in such a way that the familiar catchphrases associated with college drinking actually become ingrained in moderation messages. For example, a "drinking buddy" no longer is a person who enables binge drinking behavior, but is an extended caretaker who helps the student engaging in drinking to retain control.

### *Commercial 1: "Make Three Your Limit" (Order)*

Our first PSA,(Figure 1) is titled "Make Three Your Limit." Its overall objective is to impose order on the drinking habits of college

students by suggesting an appropriate number of drinks that a college student should consume in an evening. Specifying number-based order is the approach used in commercials for another highly pervasive product, the diamond engagement ring. DeBeers and its agency developed a ritual script suggesting that a couple spend "two months' salary" on a ring (Lowrey and Otnes 1995; Otnes and Scott 1996). Clearly drinking behavior is more habitual than buying engagement rings, and therefore may be more difficult to change, but testing a PSA that articulates a specific ritual script for college drinking would be worthwhile. Other public service campaigns asserting specific behaviors to the target audience, such as "Buckle Up for Safety," have met with some success.

Several key aspects of ritualized college drinking are integrated into the PSA to make its argument more resonant. First, the announcer describes one documented fact of drinking—that older students drink less. Moreover, the commercial presents their behavior as worthy of being emulated by younger drinkers. The reward for the main character's adoption of the "three's the limit" script is the satisfaction of a need that ranks high among many college men—attention from the opposite sex. At the end of the PSA is the implication that drunkenness can actually detract from such attention—an inference that seems justifiable given the findings that women do not drink as much as men and are more likely to consider alternative activities if peer pressure to drink is absent. The final voiceover reinforces both the reward of adopting the behavior and the actual norm that is being suggested.

### *Commercial 2: "A Real Drinking Buddy" (Community)*

In the second PSA (Figure 2), the "social gift" emphasized is community. Specifically, a new social role is suggested for college students that reinforces aspects of caretaking and attempts to increase the chances that college drinking is conducted within a "safety net." The ritual performance role of "drinking buddy" is suggested as a hybrid of the two roles that emerged as salient from our findings—the designated driver and the caretaker. However, the "drinking buddy" includes an added aspect of warding off the aggression and hostility that often emerge in settings where alcohol is being consumed.

The term "drinking buddy" is familiar to the target audience, but what is different is the use of the phrase to describe someone who emphasizes friendship over alcohol consumption. In other words, a "drinking buddy" is often someone who enables the consumption of alcohol, yet the PSA inverts the term to stress the acts of friendship that should surface when drinking gets out of control. The PSA specifies exactly what the role involves, and alludes to the rewards of engaging in such a relationship. At the end of the commercial, the announcer reiterates the three outcomes of the role, and reinforces the inversion of the "drinking buddy" phrase.

### *Commercial 3: "Drink to Remember" (Transformation)*

The final PSA (Figure 3) promises the gift of transformation. Our observations reveal that one of the major transformations sought by college students through drinking is escape. The PSA discusses the negative aspects of escape through alcohol abuse by addressing the fact that overindulgence often leads to loss of memory, and hints at how disturbing and even dangerous that loss can be. Given the increasing occurrence of "date rape" on campus--one study found that one quarter to one third of college women have experienced sexual assault and about 85% of those rapes were date rapes (Simon 1993), and another found that one of every six female college students admitted having been a victim of date rape in the previous year (Koss and Dinero 1989)--women may face more dangers by suffering blackouts than men. The testimonial for the commercial, therefore, is provided by a female college student. Moreover, her presence in a bar reinforces the fact that her message espouses social interaction and moderation rather than complete abstinence, a notion that would no doubt be resisted by the majority of the target audience. Again, the commercial uses the language of the drinking ritual ("drink to forget") and inverts it to hammer home a moderation message. The "call to action" is reinforced through the voiceover at the end of the commercial.

In summary, our proposed public service campaign was designed to build on two key pieces of information: (1) college students describe drinking as ritualized behavior, as supported by our

findings, and (2) both Rook's (1995) components of ritual and Driver's (1991) "social gifts" of ritual can be employed to create PSAs that encourage ritual control.

## *Suggestions for Further Research*

We present a cogent argument for the theoretical viability of the ritual framework as a guide for developing public service announcements to address the problem of college drinking. The relevance of the ritual framework is strongly supported by our findings. Therefore, the obvious next research step is to conduct focus groups or reader-response studies that would enable us to determine which of the "social gifts" seem most suitable for use in PSAs. For example, Parker's (1998) study of life themes and myths in alcohol advertising, in which she instructed participants to write about the meanings of various commercials for alcohol, provides excellent guidance for the type of research that could be conducted in testing the resonance of the PSAs. Moreover, focus groups and personal interviews could also be used to yield frank discussions about the potential contribution of the PSAs in moderating college drinking behavior.

## **Conclusion**

A great number of people ... either take rituals for granted, raising few questions about them, or else try to avoid them. If, however, one begins to ask questions about ritual life, a door is opened to an immense terrain both familiar and mysterious. We are such stuff as ritual performances are made of; and these, like our dreams, would, if we knew the source, tell us much about who we are [Driver 1991, p. 4].

The college years are fraught with ambiguity, confusion, potential peril, and turbulent change. Therefore, it is not surprising that students ritualize an activity that can provide security, fellowship, and possible adventure. As Driver notes, however, because of its emotional and sociological significance, ritual behavior has the potential for going greatly awry. The fact that the main ritual artifact in college drinking induces distinct and dramatic (but sometimes

dangerous) physical and psychological changes makes the college drinking ritual a phenomenon loaded with peril. Given the health hazards that result from binge drinking, we intend to pursue further the study of how conceptualizing college drinking as ritual behavior can lead to the creation of successful public service announcements.

We offer strong evidence of the efficacy of conceptualizing college drinking as ritual behavior through the qualitative study of that behavior. Further, we illustrate how conceptualizing college drinking as ritual validates, and is validated by, Rook's structural framework and Driver's "social gifts" of ritual. Finally, we demonstrate how a theoretical framework of college drinking-as-ritual can be used to create PSAs that can both incorporate aspects of that ritual and invert those aspects to encourage moderation. We believe future empirical work will support our argument that framing college drinking as ritual behavior and designing PSAs to modify that behavior are worthwhile activities, and can contribute to social change.

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**Figure 1**  
**Order Commercial: "Make Three Your Limit"**

Video: MS of male college student sitting on barstool in bar—one continuous shot.

Audio: Y'know, when I was a freshman, I used to go out and get really tanked all the time—like a lot of new college students will do. Funny thing is that the older students—like seniors—drink less. And one day I noticed that the guys who really seemed to have it together—and who had all the really great women—drank like seniors instead of freshmen. I mean, they'd have a couple and knock off for the night. That's when I realized there was more to college than getting to the bottom of another beer. So while I still stay out all night with my friends, I just have three drinks, man. Y'know—three's my limit. And it's funny, ever since I started doing that, I can actually carry on a conversation with a girl. And one told me, "Since when was sloppy drunk ever a turn-on anyway?" [Laughs]. Oops, gotta go—somebody wants to dance!

Video: Zoom to CU—Girl comes from behind and wraps her arm diagonally across his chest, grins over his shoulder. Male student turns after last line spoken.

Announcer: Because sober is sexier...make three your limit.

**Figure 2**  
**Community Commercial: "A Real Drinking Buddy"**

Video: MS of male college student in a bar.

Audio: Hi, my name is Steve, and I'll be your drinking buddy tonight.

Video: Student looks at camera. Zoom to CU.

Audio: No man, I don't mean I'm here to do shots or anything. 'Cause as your self-appointed drinkin' buddy, I'm gonna do three things. Number one—I'm gonna make sure you don't drink too much. So that means if you start getting buzzed, we're gonna slow down, get something to eat, take a break. Number two—I'm gonna make sure you stay out of trouble. So if some sloppy drunk starts picking a fight or acting crazy, we're outta here. Number three—I'm gonna make sure you get home safe. So that means two drinks all night for me, pal. Am I a good buddy, or what? But hey, don't thank me now. Thank me when you graduate, and open that software company, and your company's on the stock exchange in five years. OK, OK, thank me now too if you want!

Announcer: Keep your friends sober, separate, and safe. Be a real drinking buddy.

**Figure 3**  
**Transformation Commercial: "Drink to Remember"**

Video: MS of female college student, sitting in a bar

Audio: Y'know, it's funny. I hear some of my friends talk about how they drink to forget. And of course, thanks to booze, they forget what happened at their winter formals, they forget most of spring break, they forget that screaming match with their boyfriend in the middle of a crowded bar, they forget where they put their keys. Sometimes they even forget who they end up going home with, after a long night drinking...not cool at all these days. And after about the hundredth story like that, I decided I wasn't going to drink to forget. Nope. I was gonna drink to *remember*—and have just a couple of drinks when I go out, so I can actually picture that good looking guy who asked for my number! Because if these are the best years of our lives, I'd kinda like to remember them, wouldn't you?

Announcer: Don't drink to forget. Drink to remember. Drink less and slow down more.