



Alcohol's Role in Sexual Assault: Explanations and Applications for Nightlife Environments

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Funding from the National Institute on Alcohol
Abuse and Alcoholism



Sexual Assault: Prevalence

- Conservative estimate from US studies: 55% of women have been sexually assaulted in adolescence or adulthood.
- At least half involve alcohol consumption:
 - usually perpetrator and victim.



Prevalence in Bars

Women who were regular bar patrons asked about sexual violence “while at a bar or club or after leaving one.”

- 42% had experienced some type of sexual victimization:
 - **10% unwanted contact.**
 - **17% attempted rape.**
 - **15% completed rape.**

Parks and Miller (1997)



Men's Reports

- Male college students about their sexually aggressive behavior at bars and parties:
 - **53% had rubbed or stroked the knee of a woman they didn't know well.**
 - **67% had pressed up against a woman from behind.**
 - **77% had grabbed a woman's butt.**

Thompson and Cracco (2008)



Men's Reports cont.

Community sample of men described the most severe act of sexual aggression they committed:

- 43% reported some act of sexual aggression since age 14.
- **5%** were at a bar with the victim at least part of the interaction:



Two Primary Mechanisms

- Psychological
 - Beliefs about alcohol's effects on behavior.
- Pharmacological
 - Cognitive, affective, and motor impairments.
- Interaction of personal characteristics with situation.
 - Alcohol increases likelihood of crossing personal violence threshold.



Psychological Mechanisms

- Beliefs about alcohol's effects develop based on:
 - cultural norms.
 - media images.
 - peer group norms.
 - personal experience.
- Learned in early childhood:
 - but are modified by experience.



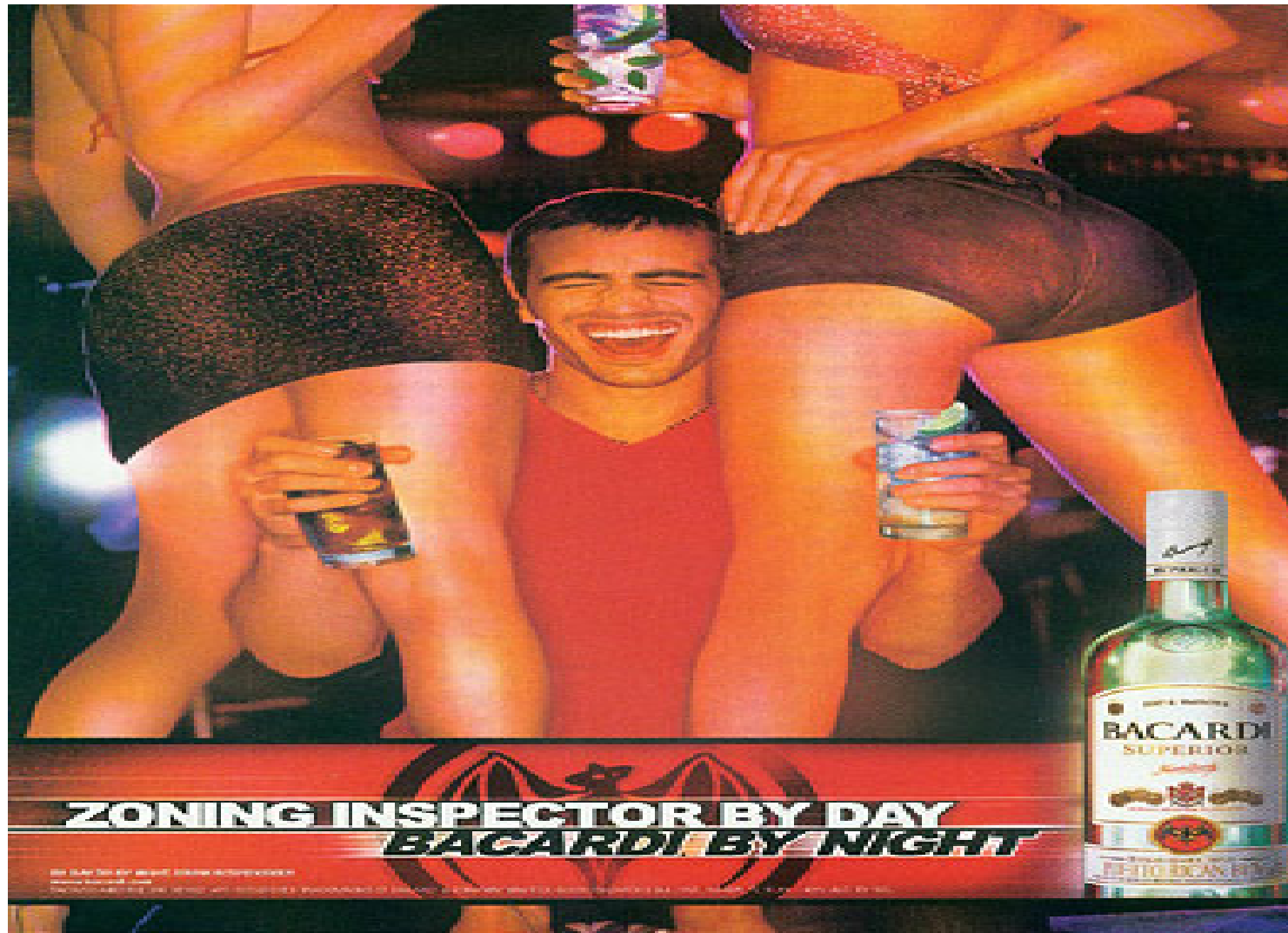
Common Beliefs about Alcohol

- What are common beliefs about alcohol's effects on behavior?

Alcohol makes it easier to talk to people you don't know well.



Alcohol lowers sexual inhibitions



Alcohol increases aggression.

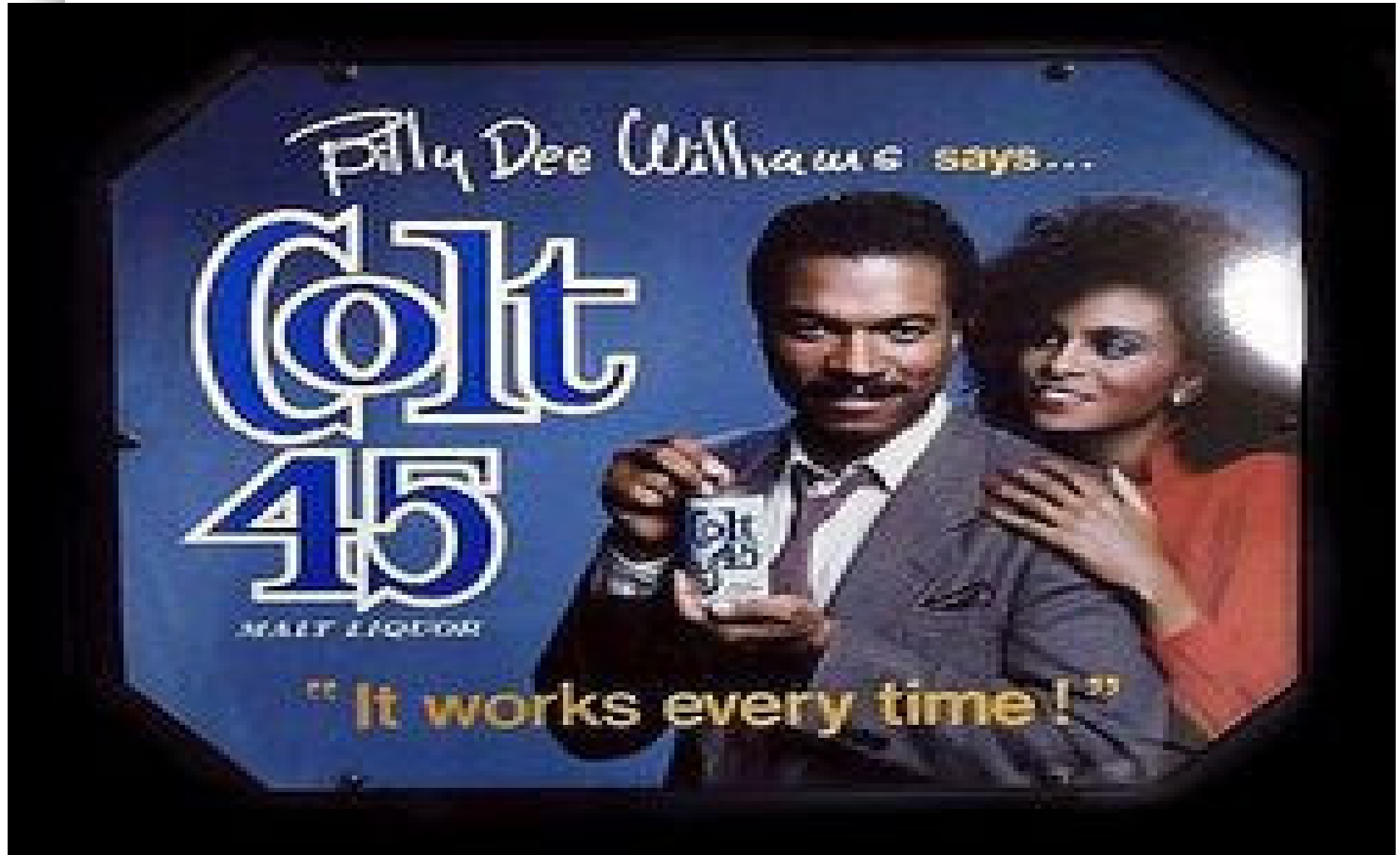




Beliefs about Alcohol

- Why are these beliefs important?

Beliefs guide behavior and become self-fulfilling.





Stereotypes about Drinking Women

- Gender-based double standards regarding sexual behavior and alcohol are still common.
- Bars tend to be viewed as male environments and women who spend time with men they don't know well at bars are viewed as sexually promiscuous and asking for trouble.

A woman who has two drinks is perceived as sexually available.



Abbey et al.; 1995; George et al. 1995



Men's Beliefs about Women in Bars

- Even when sober, men are not good at judging when a woman is sexually attracted to them.
- In bars, men use cues that are easy to observe to make judgments about women's character and sexual availability.
 - **clothing.**
 - **type of drink.**
 - **speed of drink.**

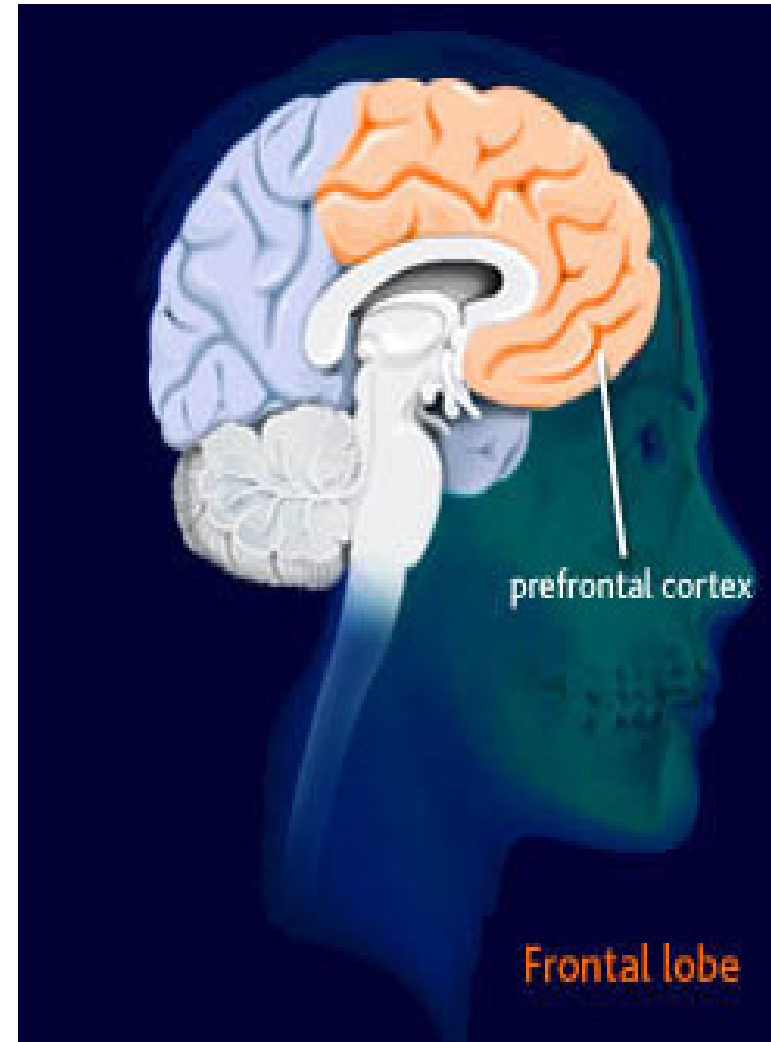
Pharmacological Mechanisms: Cognition

Beginning with **2** drinks,
less able to:

- focus on multiple stimuli.
- perceive errors and make corrections.
- inhibit a desired response.
- recognize long-term negative consequences.

and:

“Short circuits” link between
anxiety and behavior.





Men's Cognitive Impairments Applied to **General** Sexual Aggression

- Intoxicated men who read/hear/watch a date rape scenario are more likely to:
 - believe woman enjoyed it.
 - think man acted appropriately.
 - agree that they would use force in similar situation.
- Especially if they have hostile attitudes toward women.

Abbey et al., 2003; 2009; Bernat et al., 1998; Gross et al., 2001; Noel et al., 2009



Men's Cognitive Impairments Applied to **Bar** Sexual Aggression

- Situation where more impulsive and daring behavior is expected.
- If man is expecting to find a sexual partner:
 - he may feel justified using force if he bought her drinks and then she ignores him.
- Presence of male friends likely to encourage saving face if rejected through sexual aggression.



Women's Cognitive Impairments Affect Risk Perception and Response

- Intoxication decreases likelihood woman will notice or respond to mildly inappropriate sexual behavior.
- When she does respond:
 - **verbally aggressive response is common.**
- Alcohol + provocation → aggression.

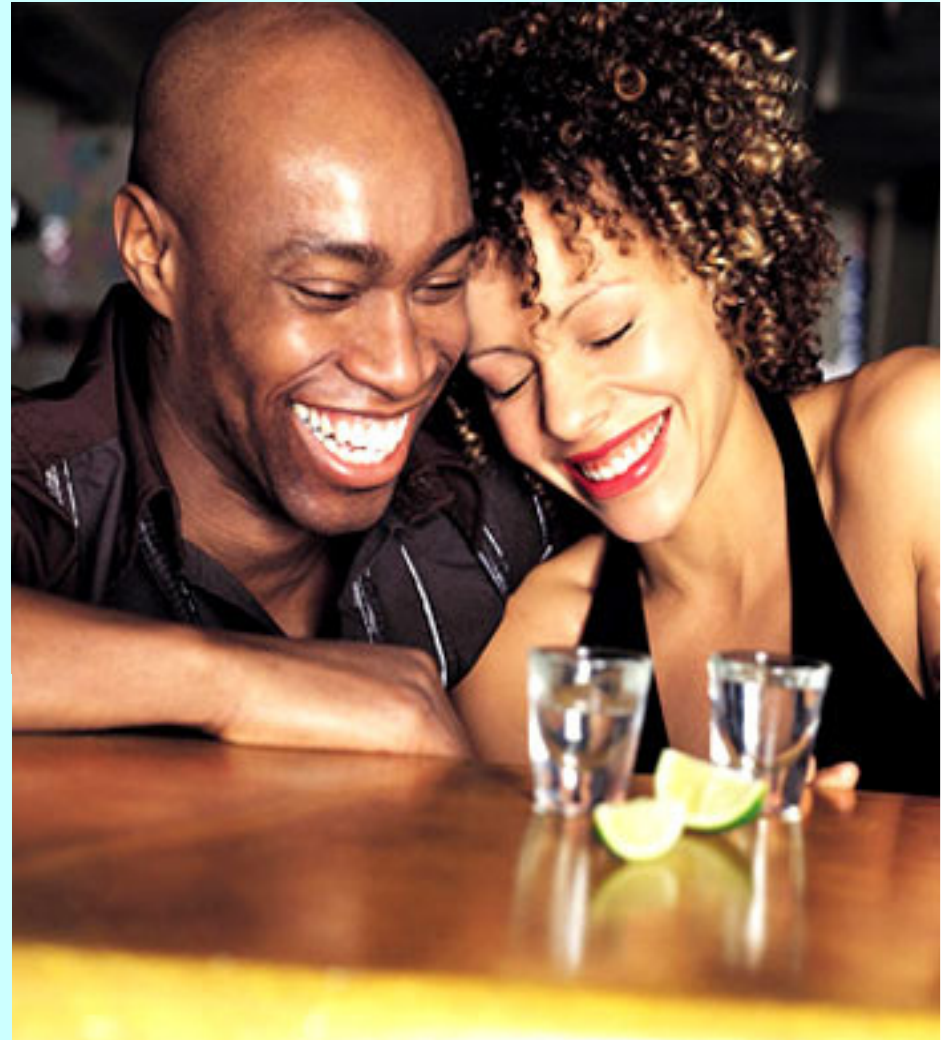


Selection of a Target

- Some perpetrators' use the woman's intoxication as part of their strategy.



may encourage heavy drinking



or take advantage of her intoxication



Recommendations

- Intoxication always impairs cognitive functioning, but how it affects behavior depends on beliefs and the situation:
 - **What beliefs are activated?**
 - **What cues are most salient?**
- Create environments where sexual aggression is not tolerated.
 - **Make nonaggressive cues most salient.**
- Enforce consequences:
 - **Salient negative consequences can deter behavior even when intoxicated.**



Thank you!