

DIVERSION

Take one down, pass it around, 98 alcohol ads on the wall: outdoor advertising in New York City's Black neighbourhoods

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A favourite song for US children taking long school trip bus rides is '99 Bottles of Beer on the Wall'. The lyrics, which are repetitive and simple, make for easy entertainment: '99 bottles of beer on the wall, 99 bottles of beer, take one down and pass it around, 98 bottles of beer on the wall, 98 bottles of beer on the wall, 98 bottles of beer on the wall, ...'. One could sing a similar song about outdoor alcohol advertisements in Black neighbourhoods, with the exception that when these ads are taken down, new ones appear in their place.

Alcohol ads and liquor stores are disproportionately located in Black neighbourhoods,^{1,2} and the aggressive marketing of alcoholic beverages has long engendered contestations between community activists and outdoor marketers. Despite some industry concessions in the 1990s, alcohol ads remain stubbornly entrenched in these communities. The potential impact on consumption—and thereby, health risk—is significant, particularly because with outdoor ads, 'you can't turn it off, throw it away, or click on the next page. That means your message is reaching consumers everywhere—all the time, everyday'.³

This photoessay explores the ways in which alcohol is promoted in predominantly Black neighbourhoods in New York City. Photographs were taken between 2004 and 2005, primarily from Central Harlem in the borough of Manhattan, and the neighbourhoods of Clinton Hill, Crown Heights and Bedford-Stuyvesant in the borough of Brooklyn.

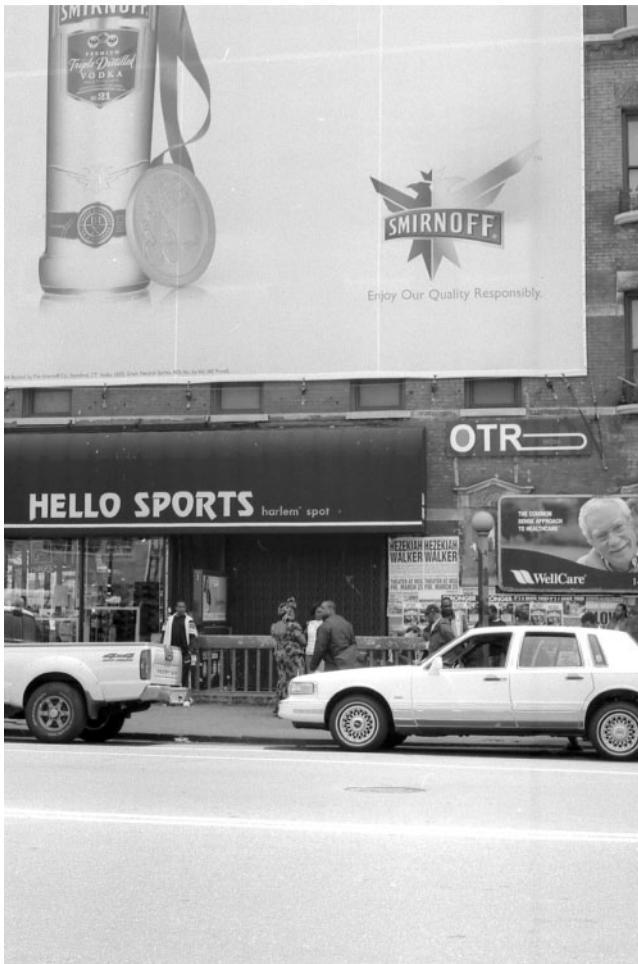
A vacant ad panel displays contact information for the company that owns the space. The website notes that 'All use our service to get there [sic] product and or [sic] service to the Urban community'.⁴ Outdoor marketing ranges from multinational corporations such as Clear Channel to smaller companies, such as that seen here. All offer specialized targeting of 'multicultural' or 'ethnic' populations. In general, 'outdoor's unsurpassed reach and frequency multiplied by its targeting ability (income, ethnicity, trading area) is a golden formula of success'.⁵

Many ads juxtapose alcohol with the penetration of otherwise formidable class barriers. This series for Guinness Beer (Extra Stout) profiles several fictitious Black men who have 'arrived'.

Courvoisier's XO Imperiale features a 'unique blend of very old cognacs resulting in a supremely rich product'.⁶ However, the 'rich' in this ad clearly plays on the notion of Courvoisier as an exclusive product for those with abundant taste and economic resources. The product retails for approximately \$145; this ad appears in a census block group where the median household income in the year 2000 was \$18245. Cognac has increasingly been marketed to Black and low-income consumers: 'Since 1994... marketers have targeted the twenty-something consumer with great success... Much of



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the younger brandy and cognac market skews ethnic—urban African American consumers in particular.⁷

Outdoor marketing company Clear Channel describes wallscapes as an ad format that ‘towers above the streets, creating a spectacular landmark’. Indeed, as seen here, wallscapes can render bottles of liquor the most visually striking feature in the neighbourhood. Two adjacent sides of this building each displayed a wallscape for Smirnoff vodka that

was several stories high. Because these formats are sold for extended periods, exposure levels are high. This ad appeared at the corner of Harlem’s 125th St (a major shopping, motor and pedestrian traffic artery) and St Nicholas Ave. The people in the photo are exiting a subway stop.

Given that blackness and (excessive) sexuality are linked in the US imagination,^{8,9} it is not surprising that sex and romance appear much more frequently in outdoor



advertisements in Black than in White neighbourhoods.¹⁰ Young African American models are frequently depicted, as seen here. Adolescent and young adult viewers are likely to identify with these images, and with the idea that alcohol fosters sexual attractiveness and success.

A relative newcomer to the cognac market compared with Courvoisier's centuries-old heritage, Alizé was launched in the US market in 1986. The product is 'an explosive blend of premium French cognac, fine passion fruit from exotic islands, and vodka'; Alizé Bleu was introduced in 2006, and has the highest alcohol content of the product line.¹¹ The product website features a hip-hop soundtrack and all photos depict African Americans, particularly scantily clad women—leaving no ambiguity in the intended demographic.

Here we see a forgotten bottle of malt liquor at a corner store (bodega) pay phone. Compared with the late 1980s and early 1990s, expenditures for malt liquor have shrunk compared with other beer categories. Outdoor alcohol advertising is frequently

near point-of-purchase locations such as these. Sale prices for Newport cigarettes appear in the bodega window.

Whitewashing campaigns in the 1990s saw the painting over of alcohol and tobacco ads by community residents and leaders in several US cities. Here, one panel of a phone kiosk featuring a Heineken ad is obscured with cardboard. On the other side, white paint was used. These acts pointedly illustrate the extent to which community residents perceive alcohol ads as negative neighbourhood features.

References

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