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Media and advertising influences on adolescent risk behaviour

When we are looking for factors that change behaviour we can look inside the individual for personal characteristics that make people vulnerable to engaging in risky behaviours and we can look outside the individual for features of the environment that encourage these behaviours.

This article briefly examines the way the media may influence the development of risky behaviours (e.g., drug use, sexual behaviour) in young people.

Media effects

The media (television, radio, newspapers, etc.) are an important channel for portraying information and channelling communication. Knowledge about how the mass media work may influence both the promotion of potentially risky behaviour (as in advertising), and for the promotion of health education (such as promoting abstinence or moderation of risky behaviours) (Griffiths, 2009). Much of the research about advertising is carried out by the companies themselves and thus remains confidential.

The media, especially television and film, often portray risky behaviours (e.g., heroin addiction in the film 'Trainspotting', marijuana use in the TV show 'Weeds', gambling addiction in the TV show 'Sunshine', etc.).

Because of this constant portrayal of various risky behaviours, television and film dramas often create controversy because of

claims that they glorify potentially addictive behaviour. The popularity of media drama depicting various risky behaviours requires an examination of their themes and the potential impact on the public and, in particular, adolescents.

The portrayal of sex and drug use in popular movies

A study by Gunsekera and colleagues (2005) analysed the portrayal of sex and drug use in the most popular movies of the last 20 years using the Internet Movie Database list of the top 200 movies of all time. The researchers excluded a number of films including those released or set prior to the HIV era (pre-1983), animated films, films not about humans, and family films aimed at children. The top 200 films, following the exclusions, were reviewed by one of two teams of two observers using a data extraction sheet tested for inter-rater reliability. Sexual activity, sexually transmitted disease (STD) prevention, birth control measures, drug use and any consequences discussed or depicted were recorded.

Findings

There were 53 sex episodes in 28 (32%) of the 87 movies reviewed. There was only one suggestion of condom use, which was the only reference to any form of birth control. There were no depictions of important consequences of unprotected sex such as unwanted pregnancies, HIV or other STDs.

Movies with cannabis (8%) and other non-injected illicit drugs (7%) were less common than those with alcohol intoxication (32%) and tobacco use (68%) but tended to portray their use positively and without negative consequences. There were no episodes of injected drug use. The researchers concluded that sex depictions in popular movies of the last two decades lacked safe sex messages. Drug use, though infrequent, tended to be depicted positively. They also concluded that the social norm being presented in films was of great concern given the HIV and illicit drug pandemics.

Drug use in this context could be argued to illustrate a form of observational learning akin to advertisement through product placement. A similar study by Roberts and colleagues (2002) examined drug use within popular music videos. Whilst depictions of illicit drugs or drug use were relatively rare in pop videos, when they did appear they were depicted on a purely neutral level, as common elements of everyday activity.

The makers of such drama argue that presenting such material reflects the fact that risk behaviours are everywhere and cut across political, ethnic, and religious lines. Risk-inducing behaviours (e.g., addiction) are certainly an issue that impacts all communities. However, it is important to consider possible impacts that it might have on society.

Media influencing behaviours

Empirical research suggests that the mass media can potentially influence behaviours. For example, research indicates that the more adolescents are exposed to movies with smoking the more likely they are to start smoking (Dalton et al. 2003). Furthermore, research has shown that the likeability of film actors and actresses who smoke (both on-screen and off-screen) relates to their adolescent fans' decisions to smoke (Distefan et al. 1999). Perhaps unsurprisingly, films tend to stigmatise

drinking and smoking less than other forms of drug taking (Cape, 2003).

However, the media transmit numerous positive messages about drug use and other potentially risky behaviours, and it is plausible that such favourable portrayals lead to more use by those that watch them (Will, Porter, Geller, & DePasquale, 2005).

Anecdotally, some things may be changing. For instance, there appears to be more emphasis on the media's portrayal of alcohol as socially desirable and positive as opposed to smoking that is increasingly being regarded as anti-social and dangerous (Griffiths, 2009).

Advertising effects

Back in the mid-1990s, the British Psychological Society called for a ban on the advertising of all tobacco products. This call was backed up by the government's own research which suggested a relationship between advertising and sales (Griffiths, 2009). Additionally, in four countries that have banned advertising (New Zealand, Canada, Finland and Norway) there has been a significant drop in tobacco consumption. However, public policy is not always driven by research findings, and the powerful commercial lobby for tobacco has considerable influence.

In her reply to the British Psychological Society, the Secretary of State for Health (at the time) rejected a ban saying that the evidence was unclear on this issue and efforts should be concentrated elsewhere. This debate highlights how issues of addictive behaviours cannot be discussed just within the context of health. There are also political, economic, social and moral contexts to consider as well.

The British government and European Community made commitments to ban tobacco advertising though they found it difficult to bring it in as quickly as they hoped. It is now rare to see smoking advertised anywhere in the UK but there is a new trend in television drama and films to

set the action in a time or location where smoking is part of the way of life (for example the recent US television programme 'Mad Men').

Gambling advertising

Just as the British Government have banned cigarette advertising and banned smoking in public places, they have also deregulated gambling through the introduction of the 2005 Gambling Act. This Act came into effect on September 1st 2007 and allowed all forms of gambling to be advertised in the mass media for the first time. This has led to a large number of nightly television adverts for betting shops, online poker, and online bingo. Whether this large increase in gambling advertising will impact on gambling participation and gambling addiction remains to be seen.

There have been very few studies that have examined gambling advertising and those that have been done are usually small scale and lack representativeness. A worldwide review on gambling advertising and its impact on problem gambling concluded that the empirical base was too small to make any firm conclusions (Griffiths, 2005).

A US study by Youn, Faber and Shah (2000) examined the 'Third-Person Effect' (TPE) in relation to gambling advertising. The TPE postulates that media messages have a greater impact on others than they do on themselves. Youn et al. (2000) hypothesised that some people believe that lottery and casino advertising campaigns adversely affect other people but do not affect themselves. Therefore, those who claim they are unaffected might support censorship of gambling advertising. Youn and colleagues carried out a survey of 194 adults in a US mid-western city where lottery and casino gambling are legal. They were asked about their gambling behaviour, their attitudes about gambling advertising on themselves and other people, and questions concerning gambling censorship.

Most people were defined as 'ordinary' gamblers who gambled two or three times a month. Their results showed a significant relationship between the Third Person perception and gambling advertising (in both casino and lotteries). People did indeed think that casino and lottery advertising had more impact on others in comparison to themselves. They also found that the perceived effects of gambling advertising predicted their desire to censor the advertisements. While this is an interesting study and suffers from the usual limitations (e.g., representativeness of the sample), it fails to differentiate between different advertising forms. For instance, the effect might be more powerful with broadcast media over print media.

Conclusions

A brief examination of the literature on media influence on risky behaviours has led Griffiths (2009) to conclude that:

Glamorisation versus reality is complicated: The issue of glamorisation versus reality is complicated. Although the drama producers hope to depict accurately various risky behaviours, they still need to keep ratings up. Clearly, positive portrayals are more likely to increase ratings and programmes might favour acceptance of (say) drug use over depictions of potential harms.

Research on the role of media effects is inconclusive: More research on how the media influence drug use is needed in order to evaluate the impact of such drama. With media and risky behaviours, it is important to walk with caution, as the line between reality and glamorisation is easy to cross. More research is needed that investigates direct, indirect, and interactive effects of media portrayals on risky behaviour.

Relationship between advertising and risky behaviour is mostly correlational: The literature examining the relationship between advertising on the uptake of potentially risky behaviour is not clear cut and mostly correlational in nature, therefore it is not

possible to make causal connections.

There could be different media effects for different risky behaviours: Although there appears to be some relationship between tobacco advertising and tobacco uptake, this does not necessarily hold for all risky behaviours. For instance, Nelson (2001) claims that virtually all econometric studies of alcohol advertising expenditures come to the conclusion that advertising has little or no effect on market wide alcohol demand.

Research done to date may not be suitable: Survey research studies have failed to measure the magnitude of the effect of advertising on youth intentions or behaviour in a manner that is suitable for policy analysis. As a consequence, policy makers may introduce and/or change policy that is ineffective or not needed on the basis of research that was unsuitable in answering a particular question.

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