6-29-2012

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The Truth About "Truth" and Other Anti-Drug and Anti-Tobacco Media Campaigns Aimed at Youth

Abby Schneider ’08

Tobacco and drug use by the nation’s youth is a major problem facing America. One way in which experts have sought to address this issue has been through the implementation of anti-tobacco and anti-drug media campaigns aimed at youth. These programs have been met with varying success, however, and their effectiveness remains controversial. This paper seeks to explore, through the lens of psychology, the formal and content-based factors that influence the effectiveness of such anti-substance media campaigns.

In terms of health psychology, a major problem facing America is tobacco and drug use by the nation’s youth. According to Medline Plus, a service of the U.S. National Library of Medicine and the National Institutes of Health, nearly 25 percent of high school students in the United States smoke cigarettes. With smoking the number one source of the most preventable cause of death and disease in the United States (Brannon & Feist, 2007; The Foundation for a Smokefree America), this number is quite harrowing. Additionally, according to the National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center, statistics for the year 2000 show that 20 percent of eighth graders, 40 percent of tenth graders, and 49 percent of twelfth graders have used marijuana at least once in their lives. Four percent of eighth graders have used inhalants, while 3.2 percent of eighth graders, 5.6 percent of tenth graders, and 5.6 percent of twelfth graders have used amphetamines; 1.8 percent of eighth graders and 2.6 percent of tenth graders have used MDMA; 2.9 percent of tenth graders have used tranquilizers; 3.2 percent of twelfth graders have used hallucinogens; and 3 percent of twelfth graders have used narcotics. While drugs do not carry as strong a personal health risk as cigarettes (though they do pose some risk, particularly to the respiratory system, and some neurological damage may occur after prolonged use of some substances), the societal problems wrought by illicit drug use are the primary source of concern for illicit substance abuse (Brannon & Feist, 2007). Nevertheless, concerns regarding both health and societal risks are real, and together with the adverse health effects resultant of smoking, cigarette and drug use among America’s youth is an imminent problem that deserves immediate attention, particularly in the form of prevention methods.

One prevalent form of tobacco and drug prevention in the United States has been anti-tobacco and anti-drug media campaigns aimed specifically at youth. Beginning in the 1960s, health campaigns have used public service announcements to encourage people to adopt a number of health behaviors
(Warren, Hecht, Wagstaff, Elek, Ndiaye, Dustman, & Marsiglia, 2006). Between 1967 and 1970, before the ban on broadcast tobacco advertising in the United States was enacted, the FCC’s Fairness Doctrine required television networks to broadcast one anti-smoking ad for approximately every three tobacco ads. During this time, there was an exposure of one anti-smoking ad to every four tobacco ads, and per capita cigarette consumption declined by over 10%, a decline that had only once previously occurred in the century—in 1964 when the Surgeon General first publicized the health hazards of smoking. By the 1980s, these public service announcements had expanded to include such topics as drug abuse, and many of the campaigns addressed smoking. Among the campaigns that have received much attention, particularly from researchers, are the keepin’ it REAL curriculum, a nationally recognized, communication-based, and culturally grounded substance use prevention intervention and the Minnesota Health Program. There have also been a number of mass media campaigns funded by the state and national governments as part of their anti-smoking effort (which also includes school smoking prevention programs, worksite cessation programs, local policy enactment and enforcement, greater access to cessation services, and more). Within the past two decades, and especially since 1998 when Congress allocated $1 billion to the Office of National Drug Control Policy, the ONDCP and the Partnership for a drug-free America have made countless TV advertisements about the dangers of illicit drugs. For example, there is the well known fried egg “this is drugs…this is your brain on drugs...any questions” spot, as well as the Rachel Leigh Cook tearing up a kitchen spot in which the actress rages through a kitchen, yelling “this is what your family goes through. This is what your friends and your money and your job and your respect and your future...and questions?” Finally, there are the anti-tobacco campaigns launched by the tobacco companies themselves. However, despite public service announcements’ ranking as one of the leading communication-based methods used to present prevention messages to large audiences, “their effectiveness remains questionable” (Warren, Hecht, Wagstaff, Elek, Ndiaye, Dustman, & Marsiglia, 2006; p. 213).

The efficacy of the anti-drug and anti-tobacco media campaigns is controversial. To begin with, although public service announcements and videotapes seem to be effective among adolescents, not all age groups within that category respond to these media similarly (Warren et.al., 2006). Rather, anti-smoking advertising has demonstrated more positive effects on those in pre-adolescence or early adolescence by preventing the commencement of smoking (Wakefield et. al., 2003). Research has repeatedly shown that youth within the age range of 12-13 years respond more favorably than do older adolescents aged 14-15 years (Wakefield et. al., 2003). For example, a study of Massachusetts youth found that for younger adolescents (aged 12-13 at baseline), recall of anti-smoking advertising on television in the past 30 days was significantly associated with a lower rate of smoking at a four year follow-up. In contrast, exposure to anti-smoking ads on television had no effect...
on smoking among older adolescents (aged 14-15 at baseline). However, whether this disparity in how different age groups receive the ads is due to developmental differences or is a reflection of smoking experience, or both, is unclear. Some researchers argue that it may even be due to younger adolescents’ perception that smoking is not the norm (Wakefield et. al., 2003), while others suggest that age influences television viewers’ online information processing of substance-abuse public service announcements, as adolescents seem to remember more information from public service announcements and have better recognition than do college students (Lang, Chung, Lee, Schwarz, & Shin, 2005). According to Niederdeppe (2005), younger adolescents may demonstrate better processing of these public service announcements, as older teens may be more resistant to persuasion. In addition, the differential effects of anti-smoking advertising that exist between adolescents and children may be due to these two groups’ different levels of previous experience with smoking, as well as the different immediate social influences to which they are exposed. Yet, despite evidence for the favorable influence of anti-smoking and anti-drug advertising on younger adolescents, some extant research suggests that while anti-smoking advertising can have an impact on tobacco use, these results may not exist for youth. For example, the Stanford Five City Project, a cardiovascular disease prevention trial that used media messages to encourage people to quit smoking, found that while adults aged 25-74 were less likely to smoke if part of the intervention community; however, for youth aged 12-24, there was no significant difference in smoking prevalence between intervention and control communities (Wakefield et. al., 2003).

Yet, anti-smoking and anti-drug ads aimed at adults are not always intended to encourage the adult to modify their substance behavior. Rather, there are now ads aimed at parents to become more involved in their children’s lives as a means to prevent youth from commencing smoking or engaging in illicit substance use. One such ad, known as “Don’t get off my case,” features an adolescent girl who says that she’s at the age where it seems like she hates her parents. However, she admits that when she tells her parents to go away, she doesn’t really mean it, and without parental supervision, she’s much more likely to “smoke pot and stuff.” So, when her parents say that they need to know, and she says “none of your business,” she hopes that her parents don’t try to act like her friends because what she really needs is parents. This ad urges parents to “talk, know, [and] ask” because “parents [are] the antidrug.” According to Alan Levitt (Living with Teens), director of the National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign at the White House National Drug Policy Office, “Don’t get off my case” was aiming for a parent efficacy monitoring message platform. It wants to make parents aware that they are going to receive a lot of pushback from kids, and it seeks to show them that they need to set limits, reminding them that it’s worth facing the challenge they’re going to have with their kids’ pushback, and encouraging them that this parenting style works. According to the Public Health Community and research, parents
are the “single key factor...that would affect their teens’ drug use” (Living with Teens). Thus, when parents are lax, problems ensue. According to Levitt, the message in this ad is different from those in the past because it encourages parents to not only talk with their kids but also to be involved with their lives. In research conducted at the University of Oregon Research Institute, Tony Bigland found that parents’ monitoring their kids’ behavior, such as knowing who their friends are, establishing rules and expectations, and knowing where their kids are after school, is the single greatest factor affecting kids’ drug-use behavior. Levitt notes that this is not a “one size fits all” approach and that there are different ads for certain immigrant audiences that don’t have the same issues as the general population. However, he maintains that the greatest commonality is that “of all the consequences of using drug use [sic], the one that is the most affecting for kids is disappointing their parents.” Thus, encouraging parents to become more involved in their children’s lives so that their children will not want to disappoint them is a promising strategy to combat drug use. As a corollary, producing ads aimed at parents, encouraging them to be more involved in their children’s lives would appear to be an effective anti-tobacco and anti-drug campaign strategy. Nonetheless, finding the proper target audience for anti-tobacco and anti-drug ads has clearly shown to present a challenge to those developing the campaign.

Finding the proper age group to target is not the only challenge met by those seeking to create audio/visual anti-tobacco and anti-drug messages. Even assuming that younger youth are the ideal audience, research exploring the kinds of anti-smoking themes that are best received by youth has found mixed results. There are, however, a number of themes that have consistently found positive results among youth. For example, advertisements that evoke strong emotional arousal, such as those that graphically show the negative consequences of smoking, “often rate highly among teens and adults, and are associated with increased intention not to smoke...” (Wakefield, Flay, Nichter, & Giovino, 2003). According to research, emotional television messages are remembered better than non-emotional messages, as “processing emotion-eliciting messages engages the automatic attentional system both through the allocation of resources to encoding through the elicitation of orienting response and the automatic allocation of resources to storage...” (Lang et. al., 2005; p. 428). Anti-smoking advertising also appears to be more effective when the target audience discusses the message, and ads that present normative information about youth smoking have effectively reduced intention to smoke (Wakefield et. al., 2003).

In addition, the narrative disseminated through public services announcements and videotapes can encourage behavior change among adolescents (Warren et. al., 2006). At the core of narrative theory lies the idea that human thought and behavior can be conceived and organized through narratives. Research has shown that narratives play an important role with adolescents, as they allow adolescents to conceptualize and express their individuality. Moreover, according to social learning theory, adolescents are
more likely to be receptive to models with whom they can identify. Thus, narratives allow them this connection, which can facilitate subsequent behavior change. One anti-substance use program that utilizes this notion of the narrative is the Keepin’ iT REAL (KiR) curriculum. This program, which follows the tenets of communication competence theory in developing messages for resisting drug offers, stresses the importance of narratives in communicating with adolescents about the opportunity for behavior change modeling by building on personal experiences. It also uses a “from kids to kids through kids” approach in which all material used peer narratives and employed slightly older peers in all aspects of video production (Warren et al., 2006; p. 213). This included using students form the participating communities as actors as well as shooting at well-known locations within the community [acting out the main point, as opposed to using a “talking head,” has also shown to be effective, as acting out the message provides a complementary verbal or textual message, which serves to enhance message processing (Niederdeppe, 2005)]. According to Warren et. al. (2006), “[r]ealistic imagery enhance[s] the credibility of both the communicator and then content of a video” (p. 213). This also means placing the videos within a cultural context and the local reality of the audience. As Warren et. al. (2006) argues, using familiar surroundings enhances retention, and transfer occurs more easily when viewers can visualize themselves in a setting where the skill is used. In addition to following communication competence theory, which highlights knowledge, skills, and motivation as the three necessary components of competence, the KiR videos and public service announcements motivate resistance through norms and enacting strategies that allow students to make decisions to resist drug offers competently. This is not unlike implementation intentions in which individuals create specific plans for carrying out certain desired behaviors. In order to help adolescents formulate these plans, the KiR videos present narrative models of resistance skills and norms that the viewers can follow. This is important, as media driven messages in which students picture themselves doing and practicing the presented skills can substantially aid any curriculum geared toward skill building. It is also important for people to see these skills put into action, as modeling behavior is an essential element of successful instruction. Visualization and imitation foster new skill acquisition, and the use of familiar visual representations also benefit the learning process. These same narrative models are then reinforced with repetition through the public service announcements. However, while the videos showed to be effective, the public service announcements did not appear to significantly impact student substance use. Still, overall, researchers found the Drug Resistance Skills Project’s KiR curriculum to be effective in reducing middle school students’ substance use (Warren et. al., 2006). Indeed, “research has demonstrated the effectiveness of videotape in changing knowledge, skills, and behavior for over 20 years” (Warren et. al., 2006; p. 212).

In the past, videotapes usually relied on fear appeals to change attitudes and behaviors regarding perceived risk...
and self-efficacy. However, while some claim that fear-based messages can be “highly effective in motivating change, especially when accompanied by messages that promote self-efficacy” (Wakefield et. al., 2003; p. 241), others argue that this approach has had “limited effectiveness” (Warren et. al., 2006; p. 212). These people maintain that, although fear-based prevention messages, which focus their content on the negative consequences of substance use, such as physical harm or social isolation, are successful at increasing knowledge, there is little evidence that they actually change substance use behavior. This is one reason why the Drug Resistance Skills Project utilized a narrative structure that didn’t reference the negative consequences of use or moral judgments. Nonetheless, this serves to highlight the mixed results that appear when trying to analyze the effectiveness of anti-substance ads.

The effectiveness of certain content in preventing tobacco use is especially questionable now that a number of tobacco companies have themselves started using advertising to promote a message to youth not to smoke. In particular, ads that emphasize the need for teens to make a choice about whether or not to smoke have generally produced the lowest ratings among youth. This is why the Philip Morris Youth Smoking Prevention Campaign has exclusively used this kind of ad, as urging youth to “stop and think” about smoking is likely ineffective.

Unfortunately, the U.S. government, as well, has a long list of failed anti-drug ads. According to the Minimal Effects Theory, not only do media possess little power to change attitudes but also, the mass media may have an opposite effect to that which was intended. This so-called “boomerang effect” is just what the advertisements developed by the government brought about. According to President Bush’s Drug Czar, a five-year government ad campaign has not reduced drug use among American teens, and some of the exposure to younger children may have actually encouraged drug use and initiation of marijuana. Although authorities haven’t identified exactly why the ads had this effect, they speculate that presenting prevention messages to kids who were too young answered questions that the kids did not yet have, and it may have unintentionally conveyed that a lot of kids their age were doing this, and they began to think that they should be doing this, too. Girls, especially, aged 12-13 were more likely to smoke pot after viewing the ads. Another reason why the ad campaign may have failed is because the messages portrayed drugs as being unrealistically harmful, and thus, they were dismissed as being not credible. For example, ads claiming that doing drugs could lead to shooting your friends in the head, running over a little girl on her bicycle, and helping terrorists actually increased drug use. Although the newer ads have attempted to remedy this problem, it seems as though they have found an extreme in the opposite direction.

In a newer public service announcement called Pete’s Couch, a teenage male says how he “smoked weed and nobody died.” As the high school student sits on the couch in a basement with a couple of stoner friends, he looks straight into the camera and explains his story. He says, “I didn’t get into a car
accident, I didn’t OD on heroin the next day...nothing happened...” The couch then morphs into a world where kids engage in sports, but the stoners just sit there, looking bored. The boy then says how he’d rather take his chances out there where he can do things such as ice skate with girls rather than sit on Pete’s couch. He says this enthusiastically and with more energy than the rest of the spot. The ad claims that smoking weed is the “safest thing in the world,” but it urges kids to get off the couch and get into the world. Clearly, this approach is quite different from those taken previously, such as those that employed the vivid images of a brain “fried” by drug use [despite drugs’ general lack of causing damage to the nervous system (Siegel & Biener, 2000)], however, the fact that it is attempting to persuade kids to not do the safest thing in the world brings its credibility into question. According to the Drug Czar, any message telling young people not to do drugs must be direct. Another newer spot, “Whatever,” seems to being doing just that. In this more “truthful” ad, a “straight-edged” kid talks about chaperoning his stoned friends around, acting as a designated driver for his wasted friends (Stevenson). He says how he chooses where they eat, what time they go to the parties, and at the parties, he’s the one “talking to the ladies” while his stoned friends just sit there. This ad acknowledges that it’s okay to be friends with pot smokers rather than calling the cops on them as the older ads suggested. Likely, this more realistic portrayal lends to the message’s credibility and, ultimately, the ad’s effectiveness. Thus, it is clear that the content of the ad has a great influence on the ability of the ad to prevent substance use.

Not only is it important to understand the effectiveness of anti-substance use media in terms of content, but form plays an influential role as well. In particular, the execution of the message is vital in its reception. For example, casting, lighting, sound, voiceovers, the number of frames, setting, and wardrobe may influence the overall message of the ad as well as its memorability, personal relevance, and persuasiveness (Wakefield et. al., 2003). Another formal, as well as content related, aspect of anti-substance messages that plays a large role in the ads’ efficacy is that which revolves around sensation seeking.

According to Zuckerman, “sensation seeking is the need for ‘varied, novel, and complex sensations and experience and the willingness to take physical and social risks for the sake of such experience” (Lang et. al., 2005; p. 422). Because the personality trait sensation seeking is a good predictor of alcohol and drug use, it’s important to design ads specifically targeted toward this population (Lang et. al., 2005; Morgan, Palmgreen, Stephenson, Hoyle, & Lorch, 2003). Fortunately, this is made easier by the fact that high-sensation seekers tend to “prefer all messages, remember more, and exhibit lower arousal compared to low-sensation seekers” when exposed to anti-substance advertisements (Lang et. al., 2005;p. 421). High-sensation seeking is thought to be related to substance abuse because the: biological mechanism that mediates substance-related reward is the same system that underlies sensation seeking. The mesolimbic and...
mesocortical dopamine systems, which hare theorized to activate both appetitive and sensation-seeking behavior...are also activated by amphetamine, cocaine, nicotine, and alcohol, which increases extracellular levels of dopamine in the nucleus accumbens (NA) and other areas within the dopamine system…” (Lang et. al., 2005; p. 424).

Thus, prevention campaigns should strive to create ads that will be effective with this population, as they are predisposed to substance abuse. Specifically, they should create ads that are high in message sensation value (MSV), as high-sensation seekers as compared to low-sensation seekers are more attracted to and persuaded by this kind of message, although high perceived message sensation value have also shown to be effective among low-sensation seekers (Lang et. al., 2005; Niederdeppe, 2005).

For example, message content such as novelty or fear rate highly among high-sensation seekers. The presence of risky substances in messages, either as words or pictures, may also increase the arousal level of a message (Lang et. al., 2005; p. 433). In addition, structural features, such as the use of suspenseful features (intense imagery and a shocking or startling ending) and fast pacing (defined by the number of cuts or edits in a message), have shown to be effective with high-sensation seekers (Lang et. al., 2005; p. 433). In addition, structural features, such as the use of suspenseful features (intense imagery and a shocking or startling ending) and fast pacing (defined by the number of cuts or edits in a message), have shown to be effective with high-sensation seekers (Lang et. al., 2005; p. 430). However, although mental participation forces the viewer to actively process the message, edits that require too many cognitive resources may actually impair memory for the ad. While some research found unrelated cuts to decrease memory for the visual action occurring directly after the unrelated cut, other research found unrelated cuts to increase message processing, as it requires more active attention (Niederdeppe, 2005).

Moreover, arousing content and pacing interact. While pacing increases recognition for calm messages, it decreases recognition for arousing messages, as the combination of arousing content and fast pace “pushes the system into cognitive overload” (Lang et. al., 2005; p. 433). Thus, form and content interact to further complicate the effectiveness of anti-substance advertisements.

Another reason why it is so difficult to determine the effectiveness of anti-tobacco and anti-drug media campaigns is that a number of social and situational factors interact to produce the eventual behavioral outcome. According to Wakefield et. al., (2003), “it is evident that social group interactions, through family, peer and cultural contexts, can play an important role in reinforcing, denying, or neutralizing potential effects of anti-smoking advertising” (p. 229-230). In addition, anti-smoking advertising may work in conjunction with other tobacco control strategies such as school-based smoking prevention programs.

Conversely, tobacco industry marketing that aims to promote smoking can undermine anti-smoking efforts. Some research suggests that it takes one anti-smoking ad to offset the impact of three cigarette ads (Wakefield et. al., 2003). Another factor that influences how anti-substance media messages are received is the television or radio show in which it is embedded. In addition, the novelty of the message plays an important role. While newly commenced anti-smoking advertising campaigns may have fairly high salience, those that have been airing for a longer period of time may be less
effective. Thus, states that have promoted anti-smoking advertising for years must be careful in rotating and scheduling messages in order to maintain message salience and avoid advertising “wear out” (Wakefield et al., 2003; p. 241). Some messages, however, may be more complex and may require a longer duration or higher frequency of exposure to engage the target audience. In general, advertising response functions suggest that advertising has little effect until it reaches a certain level of exposure after which point investment in the campaign pays off to a larger extent. This may be due to the fact that the ads require multiple exposures to optimize impact, however, it may also be due to the fact that larger campaigns can utilize a greater number of media channels and, thus, reach a larger audience. The ads must be able to “break through the ad clutter” in order to attract attention and persuade (Wakefield et al., 2003; p. 242). Finally, a mix of messages may be more effective than just a single message. Thus, “it is important to determine whether teen-directed anti-smoking advertising has an impact on youth smoking in the absence of broader efforts to change the normative environment for smoking through advertising and other policies aimed at reducing smoking among the population in general” (Wakefield et al., 2003; p. 243).

In conclusion, there is some research suggesting that advertising that graphically depicts the health effects of smoking, emphasizes social norms against smoking, and portrays the tobacco industry as manipulative (although this requires a more sophisticated audience) can influence adolescents, however, these findings are not at all consistent (Wakefield et al., 2003). In addition, “the effects of anti-smoking advertising on youth smoking can be enhanced by the use of other tobacco control strategies, and may be dampened by tobacco advertising and marketing” (Wakefield et al., 2003; p. 230). Still, even if anti-substance use campaigns are successful as a whole, whether individual anti-smoking advertisements are effective is debatable. Nonetheless, when considered together, there is “good support for the notion that anti-smoking advertising can influence youth smoking” (Wakefield et al., 2003; p. 242).

Although there is no “single recipe” for anti-smoking advertising, it is apparent from previous research and the above discussion that there are a number of factors that may lead to more effective anti-substance media campaigns (Wakefield et al., 2003; p. 230). Thus, I would propose that future anti-substance media campaigns utilize narrative based approaches that feature peer actors in recognizable locations. The ads should be high in emotionally arousing, intense, graphic, and suspenseful content, and they should seek to appeal to high-sensation seeking younger adolescents by implementing fast pacing and suspenseful features, especially in the case of calm messages. The ads should provide viewers with actual resistance strategies that they can implement, and they should be truthful and more realistic in their portrayal of the effects of tobacco and drug use. Moreover, the ads should be rotated in order to maintain a sense of novelty, and, if possible, they should occur in conjunction with other prevention programs. Utilizing as many of these factors as possible is important for increasing attention, recall, and
comprehension, as well as processing of anti-substance public service announcements, and it is unlikely that using multiple features would lead to lower levels of processing, as the Limited Capacity Model, which argues that people have limited mental resources with which to process information (Lang et. al., 2005), has found little support.

Because research on the effectiveness of anti-substance ads has been met with such inconsistency, research seeking to find corroborating results with any extant data would be well warranted. However, some areas that have received little attention from researchers and that would benefit from scientific inquiry are gender differences in the reception of anti-substance advertising, the influence of sound in anti-substance messages, and the effectiveness of anti-substance ads aimed toward parents. The first area, gender differences, has received a little attention. In one study, researchers found that high-risk girls benefited more from anti-smoking ads than did high-risk boys. However, this is likely because those conducting the study anticipated that the girls would be more likely to be going through puberty during the time of the study and would be more mature, and, thus, they oriented the messages to appeal more to the girls (Wakefield et. al., 2003). It would be interesting to observe gender differences in a less biased study.

The second area, the influence of sound, has also received some attention, however, the results are inconclusive. Some research suggests that loud, fast music and the presence of background noise might increase an ad’s emotional arousal (Niederdeppe, 2005). In addition, there is some evidence that a laugh track or sounds of a crowd cheering might facilitate a positive emotional response (Niederdeppe, 2005). However, other research argues that structural features, such as strong sound effects, don’t contribute much to distinguish the preferences of high-sensation seekers (Lang et. al., 2005). Thus, this would be an interesting area to pursue in greater depth. Finally, although parents have shown to be influential in their children’s lives, and although there are now ads aimed toward parents, urging them to be more involved with their children’s lives, there is a lack of research showing whether these ads are actually effective. If parents do have that much influence over their children, this would be a very important area to investigate. Thus, future research regarding the effectiveness of anti-tobacco and antismoking media campaigns aimed toward youth should address gender differences, the influence of sound, and the effectiveness of messages aimed toward parents. With substance use being such an imposing problem in our society, and with media’s position as a powerful influence, it is important to use this mode to its greatest potential and to conduct research to ensure that we are doing so.
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