Media Influence

Media influences may include internet information (or misinformation), music video depictions of adolescents with mental health problems, and mental illness themes in television, film, and printed media.

The media influences smoking norms by portraying smoking as desirable or undesirable through overt advertisements, product placements, promotional items, and other communications about smoking seen in television or movie content or through sponsored events. Through these various channels, adolescents are exposed to multiple messages about smoking every day. Research on the influence of the media on adolescent smoking has shown that tobacco advertising and smoking in movies, magazines, and other media increase positive attitudes about smoking, intention to smoke, and smoking initiation among youth.

In concert with developing products that appeal to youth, the tobacco industry has been very successful in marketing brands as desirable and attractive to youth in line with its goal to create lifelong, brand-loyal smokers. Following cigarette marketing campaigns, adolescents are reported to have higher rates of smoking initiation than adults and to smoke the particular brand marketed at a rate three times higher than adults. Adolescents also have a high participation in ownership of promotional items for tobacco products, which has been correlated with susceptibility to smoke, age at smoking initiation, smoking behavior, and cigarette consumption. There is also evidence that point-of-purchase advertising and promotional items influence brand choice among adolescents.

Adolescents also use the media to gauge the prevalence of smoking in society and to identify smoking as desirable or undesirable based on characters portrayed on television and in the movies. Research from tobacco industry documents indicates that encouraging tobacco use and product placements in movies and on television have been part of the industry's promotional strategy since the 1980s. In 2002, the amount of smoking in movies was the same as in 1950, despite numerous reports on the health consequences of smoking. Beginning in 2002, the total amount of smoking in movies was greater in youth-rated (G/PG/PG-13) films than in adult-rated (R) films. Adolescent smoking has been linked to the on-screen smoking status of their favorite movie stars, and increased exposure to smoking in movies is associated with an increased prevalence of smoking initiation among adolescents. The public health community has called for a reduction of smoking in movies, television, and televised movie trailers and has advocated for an adult (R) rating for movies with smoking and screening of antismoking public service announcements prior to movies with smoking to diminish effects on youth initiation.

Prior to the end of 1999, major statewide comprehensive tobacco control programs in California, Massachusetts, Arizona, Oregon, and Florida included media campaigns that were shown to reduce adult and youth smoking; results from evaluations of these interventions indicated that these campaigns had more influence on smoking behavior in younger compared to older adolescents. The 1998 Tobacco Master Settlement Agreement (MSA) in the United States included provisions for reducing youth access to tobacco products and restricted marketing in venues or media attended by youth. Funds were also dedicated from the MSA to create a foundation to develop and deliver national antitobacco messages. The truth® campaign, a tobacco counter-marketing effort launched in 2000 by the American Legacy Foundation, has repeatedly been shown to be effective in reducing smoking among adolescents, specifically younger adolescents. Around the same time, tobacco companies developed youth smoking prevention media campaigns that have been shown to be ineffective, and in the case of parent-targeted advertising, to reduce perceptions of smoking-related harm and to increase approval of smoking and intention to smoke among older adolescents.

**Males’ Views of Female Bodies**

While it is consistently demonstrated that a relationship exists between media exposure and thin-ideal internalization in females, it is not clear whether exposure to media influences males similarly. Are males affected by exposure to unrealistic images of females portrayed in the media? Does exposure to these images shape males’ expectations of women’s bodies? Harrison and Cantor demonstrated that exposure to media messages (in this case, magazines) shaped men’s attitudes and expectations toward women. Hargreaves and Tiggemann examined the influences of thin-ideal images in adolescent boys and found that exposure to commercials depicting ideal females was linked to elevated views that thinness and attractiveness were important in a potential female partner. Harrison reported that the amount of television watching in a group of elementary school boys was linked to negative stereotypes (lazy, mean, and unpopular) of fat girls. The implications of this research are that exposure to ultrathin female models may create unrealistic expectations and beliefs in males about the ideal female body. This may, in turn, perpetuate the sociocultural pressures experienced by women to obtain an ideal body.

**Addictions in Adolescence**

Reviews have shown that media influences play a role in development of substance use patterns. In many soap operas and talk shows, people are smoking and drinking, and motion pictures are often portraying smoking and drinking characters. The extent of the bombardment of substance cues to young people should not be underestimated. A recent study indicates that a sample of more than 500 contemporary box-office hits delivered billions of smoking images to US youth. Despite discussions with Hollywood film producers and regulation of tobacco industry concerning the sponsoring of movies, there were no dramatic changes in portrayals of smoking in movies of the top producer-distributors (e.g., Warner, Sony, Universal) between 1991 and 2008. In a recent report, the US National Cancer Institute concludes that the total weight of evidence indicates a causal relationship between exposure to depictions of smoking in movies and youth smoking initiation. Attributable risk estimates seems to suggest that movie smoking accounts for 30–50% of adolescent smoking initiation.

Broadcasting commercials on TV and in movie theaters, advertisements, direct mail, alcohol and cigarette-branded merchandise, sponsoring of cultural and sport events, and product placement in movies and TV programs are means of the industry to promote their products in the media. The evidence on the impact of marketing on behavior seems to be more mixed than that of substance portrayals in movies. That marketing possibly has less of an impact might be due to people becoming sensitive to the persuasive intent of advertising. Many (young) people believe that there is no commercial intent in movie exposures. As with music videos, the lack of perceived persuasive (commercial) intent combined with the visual and auditory content and drama in movies make this type of exposure powerful. Together with the popularity of some actors, youngsters’ inclination to identify with celebrities and their susceptibility for image appeals, makes what actors say and do in movies and TV programs highly relevant. Young people watch movies primarily on TV and DVD, and in theaters. Despite the mounting use of the Internet in the past 10 years, youth in Western countries still watch TV a lot.

Movies and soap operas mostly portray substances in a positive way by using prototypes of the ideal person in an appealing context. Substance use of leading characters in movies and soaps, as well as marketing and advertisement, might contribute to the widespread social acceptability of substance use. Even young children (3–6-year-olds) recognize alcohol and smoking brands, and exposure to alcohol and smoking portrayals in advertisements and movies is associated with outcome expectancies in children and with proalcohol and smoking attitudes and norms in adolescents. Moreover, ample cross-sectional and prospective research has consistently shown a dose–response relationship between exposure to smoking and drinking portrayals in movies and onset and continuation of substance use in adolescence. In addition, adolescents who favor stars who are engaged in substance use (in films or private life) are more likely to initiate use themselves. Recent research revealed that the effects of smoking by actors might even outweigh the impact of peers and parent smoking models on individual smoking onset.

**Media and Health**

Active Audiences

A common and implicit assumption in the analysis of the media impact on public health is that the public is generally defenseless against the media's influence and gullible populations are traditionally portrayed as easy prey for hype and false hopes. In fact, audiences are far from being passive receivers of the messages of the news media and may prove resistant to the messages of mass campaigns.

The social amplification of risk (SAR) concept pioneered by Slovic has long recognized the active role of the audience in the social construction of risk to health and well-being (Slovic, 1987). Perception of risk has been constructed as a continuous process of blending scientific information and judgment with psychological, social, cultural, and political factors, including social values, trust in regulatory agencies, and the credibility of the sources of information. Messages communicated by newspapers and by scientific papers may therefore be received by different audiences in unintended ways, and risk communication alone cannot make a significant contribution to reducing the gap between technical risk assessment and its public perception. The theory of the ‘active audience’ and the concept of ‘lay epidemiology’ have much in common with SAR.

The ‘active audience’ theory emphasizes the polysemy of the message, which is open to interpretation by those to whom the message is addressed, bringing into play their own personal and collective experiences and beliefs (Philo, 1999). According to the concept of lay epidemiology, people interpret health promotion messages by integrating observations and discussions of cases of illness and death in their personal networks with the more formal and objective evidence provided by educational messages (Frankel et al., 1991). This concept has been brought to bear in explaining why the public tends to give more credence to information received from relatives, friends, and people they trust than from anonymous and more formal sources, including the media and governmental organizations, and why they show skepticism and resistance to educational messages.

The observation that people resist the message does not imply that the media are ineffectual. Sociologists and political scientists have long recognized that the identification of social problems emerges from the competition of different issues in the ‘marketplace of ideas,’ under the constraint of the ‘carrying capacity’ of social institutions (Hilgartner and Bosk, 1988). Examining ‘food scares’ in the British press Miller (in Philo, 1999) argued that news media serve as public fora where a number of interest groups (including government organizations, the industry, medical scientists, etc.) prime emotional responses and compete for public attention in terms of how they frame medical issues, making certain aspects salient and marginalizing others. Frames convey the relative importance of the issue for the different audiences and interest groups and define causal connections and the range of acceptable solutions, identifying who is to blame and who is responsible for the solution. Medical errors, for example, were originally framed as an issue for the courts under the tort law before the landmark Institute of Medicine report To Err Is Human reframed them as a public health issue, amenable to preventive intervention (Institute of Medicine, 1999). Alternative frames compete, but can also be interactive and dialogical, so that competing interest groups may occasionally share common aspects of different frames. Obesity has been alternatively framed as a medical and a public health issue, emphasizing individual health risk and/or collective problems; an esthetic issue, against the accepted model of a thin body; a social justice issue, in terms of nondiscrimination of the obese; and a market choice issue, where responsible consumers are free to make their own informed decisions about eating behavior. Different stakeholders, including the government (mostly interested in the public health and cost-containment angle of the problem), the food industry (promoting the informed free choice approach), and citizen organizations (taking either a public health or a social justice stance), are the major agents competing for the dominant frame resulting from different combinations of the original versions (Lawrence, 2004).

The main conclusions of the analyses of the agenda-setting function of the news media were popularized with the statement that media are not saying ‘what to think’ but ‘what to think about,’ which clearly rejected persuasion as the central organizing paradigm of the relationship between media and the public. The twin concepts of framing and priming (both of which imply an active role for the audience) are captured by a further twist of the phrase, where the news media do not just focus the public attention but also define the problems and their acceptable solutions (‘how to think about’).