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Course title

21 March 2011

Media Images of Teenage Drug Use

The modern world is being increasingly altered by the influence of media. Whereas in the previous century the only ways of disseminating information were newspapers, radio and television, now we also have access to the Internet, which can, perhaps, be considered the most potent medium. Besides, due to extensive technological development, the influential power of television has increased as well. In this paper we are going to explore how much these changes contribute to the problem of teenage drug abuse, and what could be done to improve the present state of affairs.

Teenagers, being the most unstable layer of society, are highly susceptible to external influence. It comes to a bigger extent from the family and to a lesser from friends, classmates, music, TV, social networks, etc. In most cases, consumption of drugs, alcohol abuse or smoking appear as an act of emulation after seeing someone else doing it; this someone can be a family member, a friend, a celebrity, or a movie character. Studies show that teenagers living in households, where alcohol is habitually consumed, have easy access to alcoholic drinks. This claim is confirmed by impressive statistical figures: "63 percent of the youth who drink alcohol say that they initially got the alcohol from their own or their friend's homes" ("Statistics on Teenage Drug Use"). This is an indication of the fact that parental attitude towards drinking and drug use can affect that of their child.

In terms of the power of influence on young people's minds, the community of peers used to come right after the family. However, nowadays the trends among teenagers often

originate from the social media – the Internet, music, and movies. While musicians and movie directors usually do not have any commercial interest in propagating alcohol abuse, smoking or drug consumption, they, perhaps inadvertently, often end up doing just that.

Movies tend to portray alarming but charming drug dealers, exceptionally talented artists and musicians who are broadening their minds with drugs in search of inspiration, and silly, half-witted and helpless policemen opposing the smart and trendy gangsters. These images are sufficient even to confuse adults, and the effect they have on impressionable minds of teenagers is enormous.

Christopher Sharrett attempts to track down the portrayal of drug use in Hollywood movies and makes an assumption that cinematography has a destructive effect, disseminating drug use instead of discouraging it: “Hollywood's depiction of the U.S.'s War on Drugs is about as dubious and unpersuasive as the official policies of government power on this terrible social blight” (35). To back up his assertions, Sharrett provides several examples where drugs are employed as either a means to alleviate pain or a token of rebellious spirit, which creates a rather appealing image in the eyes of young people.

Even though the Hollywood attempts to expose the harm involved in drug use and its proliferation, a case in point being Brian DePalma's 1983 remake of *Scarface*, which “ratcheted up both the horrific image of drugs in the contemporary world and the violence and corruption attached to it” (35), drugs are still portrayed as an adverse but inevitable and indispensable element of the American culture. As Sharrett puts it, the film is also “suggesting that crime - the centerpiece of which is drugs - can't be disconnected from the American Dream” (35). Such outlook inescapably works its way into the heads of teenagers, making the idea of drug abuse absolutely acceptable.

Another example of how the media contributes to alcohol consumption among young people is the latest fashionable trend that is the introduction of energy drinks containing alcohol. The main target audience of the advertisements is teenagers, and every method possible is employed to attract their attention: posters, Internet ads, radio and TV commercials. They are propagating an image of a proactive, independent and popular youngster, who allegedly achieved his success owing to a canned caffeinated low-alcohol drink. According to Susannah Stern, models whom viewers consider to be attractive or desirable, such as those who are physically good-looking, financially well-off, and/or powerful, are also more likely to be influential (335). By watching what happens when similar and attractive media models perform activities onscreen, viewers can develop expectations about the consequences that certain behaviors and attitudes will have for themselves. When seeing the positive representation of these products in advertisements, teenagers are tempted to try them out, which can lead to detrimental and sometimes even tragic consequences.

An incident reported on November 18, 2010, by the Ft. Worth Star-Telegram serves as an example. A 12-year-old girl in Dallas area died in a car accident having been thrown out of a vehicle. All of the teenagers involved in the accident were affected by alcohol intoxication. They were illegally consuming *Four Loko*, an energy drink containing 12 percent alcohol and caffeine (Barr 2). The awful event can be attributed not to the effect of the drink itself, but to the fact that the advertisements created an unrealistic image of invincibility, which resulted in a complete lack of restraint on the part of the young people involved.

The reasons why teenagers succumb to drug use, smoking and alcohol consumption are quite different from the ones that drive grown-ups. Adults usually want to escape unpleasant reality, forget about their troubles and experience the delightful oblivion induced by drugs or

alcohol. As a rule, adolescents do not have an unbearable burden of problems; life can seem difficult to them from time to time, but this mood is mostly transient. Unlike adults, they use drugs to create a feeling of self-reliance and independence. For this reason, the effect of media images is so powerful: they provide adolescents with the source of self-confidence, which is precisely what they need most.

As was illustrated in the paper, teenage drug use is considerably pre-conditioned by the images delivered by the mass media. This may not be the prevailing factor, for the attitude of parents still has the most powerful influence, but its contribution is quite significant. Movies and advertisements present at best discrepant and at worst outright positive images of drug and alcohol abuse, which inevitably has impact on teenagers. They are made to believe that by consuming illegal substances they can become more independent and self-confident. The attempts to dissuade young people from such pernicious practices have been mostly futile. A strict censorship of media portrayal of drug use, as well as effective education and anti-drug propaganda in schools, should be enforced as soon as possible, otherwise the harmful influence will only increase and the number of teenage addicts will grow.

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