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Alcohol and Drug Depictions in Magazines Consumed by Young People

This paper presents an overview of findings from a content analysis of depictions of alcohol and illicit drugs in popular UK magazines read by young people aged 11 to 18 years. Findings are discussed in relation to the potential influence of media representations of substance use on young people's attitudes and behaviours and the potential role of the media in disseminating health related messages to young people.

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Introduction

The expansion of the British Night Time Environment (NTE)¹ has coincided with a new culture of intoxication within which the use of both alcohol and illegal substances has become a normal aspect of youth leisure.² In considering recreational substance use as a popular leisure activity among young people, it can be acknowledged that «the media» have traditionally been understood as an important aspect of youth culture and in the formation of young people's identities.³

Research findings have also highlighted the significant role played by the media in influencing substance-related beliefs and behaviour.⁴ A considerable body of research has conducted content analyses of media portrayals of substances, particularly in relation to depictions in film, television, music lyrics and the news media.⁵ However, less is known about the representation of substances in popular culture magazines.

Given that popular media such as magazines play an important role in young people's lives and in the creation of identities, studying the representations of alcohol and drugs young people are exposed to through their readership is an important area of enquiry. The purpose of this study was to assess the frequency and nature of substance use representations in magazines consumed by young males and females, based on the premise that such depictions may play a role in (re)producing social norms regarding substance use. The below discussion provides a summary of the study's findings. A full account of the findings is available elsewhere.⁶

Summary of findings

Based on findings from a survey of young people's magazine readership, 23 individual magazines published over a one month period were selected for analysis. The study found notable differences

between depictions of alcohol and drug use in the sample. Alcohol was portrayed more frequently than drug use and portrayed as a normalised cultural practice. Of the 1699 articles analysed, 8.1% (n=138, contained at least one reference (n=387) to alcohol. In comparison 1.9% (n=32) of articles contained references (n=32) to illicit drugs. There was an overwhelming emphasis on celebrities among the references identified, with 72.9% of drinking references (n=148) and 53.1% (n=17) of the drug references relating to celebrities. Alcohol use was predominantly associated with glamorous celebrity lifestyles, as well as the risky pursuits of a minority of individuals leading to addiction and related harms. Drug use was primarily portrayed negatively in relation to celebrity addiction and criminality, yet was also depicted as an activity associated with celebrity lifestyles and music culture.

Both alcohol and drugs rarely featured within magazines targeted at a youth audience. Of the total references to drugs (n=32), 9.4% (n=3) featured in magazines targeted at young people, whilst 5.5% (n=22) of the alcohol-related references were found in youth targeted publications. These articles included the dissemination of substance related health advice. However, there was a relative lack of official alcohol and drug information based articles within the sample (n=7). Alcohol advertising was also a common feature in the magazines, as were adverts which featured alcohol use in the promotion of non alcoholic consumer items (n=24). Adverts were solely a feature of magazines targeted at an adult market and as such absent from teen magazines. However, the alcohol industry's sponsorship of football strips was present in magazines targeted at young males (e.g. Carlsberg, n=8).

Discussion and concluding comments

Given the limited amount of educative discourse regarding substances, it may be that young people gain knowledge on alcohol and drugs through celebrity substance use stories that frequently feature in consumer magazines. Inconsistencies in the messages young people receive about celebrity substance use were evident however (i.e. articles reporting both glamorous and negative images of celebrity drinking). With the development of the modern media young people are exposed to a whole range of individuals, including celebrities, who may influence their socialisation into substance use.⁷ There is a public perception, currently untested, that the portrayal of alcohol and drug use by celebrities

in the media is influencing young people's own relationship with alcohol. However, it is unlikely that the influential role of celebrity is as simple or deterministic as is commonly reported, with factors such as popularity, time investment, similarity, and attachment affecting the degree of influence.⁸ Although the concept of «role model» is often used within popular discourse, there is a lack of research that has investigated whether young people are influenced by media reporting of celebrity substance use.

Media representations of alcohol are ubiquitous in modern society and are present in many forms including TV, print and new media. Like all forms of media, magazines contain information which individuals may draw upon in forming understandings and attitudes towards alcohol and drug use. The images of substance use young people are exposed to via the media can be influential in shaping substance use related beliefs and behaviour. However, the process of socialisation into alcohol and drug related beliefs and behaviour is acquired through an accumulation of media messages over time and among other social and cultural factors (e.g. peers, family, advertising, wider social norms). Moreover, young people are active in their media consumption, with the capacity to reject, negotiate and modify the messages they consume. More research is required to examine the degree to which young people relate to media messages around substance use and the exact nature of the influence of celebrities on young people's attitudes and beliefs around substance use.

Given that research has shown that the media can play a role in shaping young people's health behaviours, the media may also be able to assist in delivering healthy messages about alcohol to young people. However, although health promotion campaigns have been shown to increase awareness of such health issues, there is little evidence of effects of behaviour change.⁹ Moreover, media based social marketing campaigns aimed at providing sections of the population with educative substance use messages are competing against «counter-marketing» within commercial markets (e.g. the alcohol industry). It must thus be considered when working with the media in delivering substance-use messages, that the media industry is ultimately a profit orientated organisation that disseminates information for the purpose of entertainment. This may conflict with the aim of using the media

for the dissemination of healthy and realistic messages to young people around substance use. More research is required to examine the possible role of the media in promoting healthy messages around substance use and young people's own perspectives on using the media in health promotion. ●

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Endnotes

- 1 Cp. Measham 2006.
- 2 Cp. Measham/Shiner 2009, Parker/Williams 2003.
- 3 Cp. Gauntlett 2002.
- 4 Cp. Engels et al. 2009, Anderson 2009, Thompson 2005.
- 5 A full list of articles examining the representation of alcohol and drugs in the media is available upon request.
- 6 A full copy of the article is available upon request. Please contact A.M.Atkinson@ljamu.ac.uk.
- 7 Cp. Bandura 1986, Boone/Lomore 2001, Giles/Maltby 2004.
- 8 Cp. Boone/Lomore 2001, Giles/Maltby 2004.
- 9 Cp. WHO 2002/ Babor 2003.