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Marketing the Anti-Drug Message: Media, Source and Message Credibility Interactions

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper investigates the role of media, source and message credibility in the process of preventing/reducing drug use. An original contribution of the study is that this investigation was conducted with a sample segmented by level of marijuana use. The findings raise questions about the effectiveness of traditional mass media campaigns employed by Government agencies to reduce the use of illicit drugs. The following section provides a background to the development of anti-drug campaigns in Australia, and in particular, anti-marijuana campaigns.

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**Illicit Drug Management in Australia**

Drug abuse and the need to control illegal substance usage is a high priority for the Australian Government and many governments around the world. The Australian government has a three-pronged approach to illicit-drug management: supply reduction, demand reduction and harm minimisation. The first two are prohibition measures intended to prevent/reduce illicit-drug use. Supply reduction is the realm of the police and customs departments who seek to reduce drug supplies through detection and conviction of drug suppliers, and preventing drugs entering the community.

Despite extensive efforts to prevent the supply of illicit drugs, prohibition has never successfully eradicated drug availability (Webster, 1998).

Demand reduction is the concerted effort of government to educate the public to reject drug use, and sanction those who use drugs through legal penalties (Commonwealth of Australia, 1994). Prohibitionists believe that strong legal penalties and police enforcement coupled with public education can achieve a reduction in demand for illicit drugs (Australian Parents for Drug Free Youth).

Harm reduction or harm minimisation is a response to the reality that despite the concerted efforts of numerous Governments to achieve supply and demand reduction in an attempt to prevent drug use, people will still obtain and use drugs. Harm minimisation is an approach that strives to reduce the potential harm created by using drugs (Single, 1996).

Social marketing, that is, the marketing of ideas rather than goods or services, has a significant role to play in achieving some of these objectives, particularly the objectives of demand reduction and harm minimisation.

In Australia, the legal status of illicit-drug use has followed the prohibition approach of the United States. The management of illicit-drug use however, shifted in Australia in 1985 with the introduction of the National Campaign against Drug Abuse (NCADA). This was Australia's first formal policy shift toward the concept of harm minimisation (Single, 1996).

Harm minimisation remained a cornerstone of the National Drug Strategic Framework 1998-99 to 2002-2003. This five-year plan for the strategic direction of National Drug Policy clearly states that harm minimisation is the philosophy underpinning its approach to illicit-drug use (Australian Department of Health and Ageing). However, the balance between prohibition and harm minimisation in individual anti-drug campaigns has varied according to the political agenda of the day (Lenton, Ferrante, & Loh, 1996).

We decided to investigate young people's (18-24 years) responses to media campaigns that promote anti-marijuana messages, and specifically asked them about the Western Australian Health Department 'Drug Aware' 1998/99 campaign messages and materials. The campaign had the objective of discouraging use in non-users (prohibition) as well as providing risk information for users (harm minimisation).

We chose to investigate anti-marijuana campaigns because it is the drug most commonly used by young people in our society (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2000; Preboth, 2000). Using marijuana represents the most common form of illegal behaviour undertaken by young people, and in many cases the only illegal behaviour (Lenton et al., 1998). The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2000 statistics are worth noting; (1)Forty-five percent of the total population over the age of 14 years had 'ever used' marijuana (up from 37% in 1995); and (2) Seventy-three percent of 20-29 year olds had 'ever used' the drug, 78.3% of males and 66.9% of females. With such wide usage in youth society, the messages sent to young people must be credible to those who have used the drug, as well as non-users.

## **Method**

Eight focus groups were held, each with 4-8 participants, 18-24 years old, recruited by an independent market research company. All participants were also screened to ensure they had been resident in Western Australia for the past 5 years, and thus had likely been exposed to the same anti-drug campaigns. Non-users were screened to ensure they had never used marijuana. Light use was defined as being users who have used marijuana weekly or less often, over a minimum of the last six months. This definition was designed to filter out experimenters. Heavy marijuana use was defined as consistent use of marijuana more than once a week, over at least the past six months. Ex-users were screened to ensure that they had used marijuana for a period of six months or more and since ceased all use.

Discussion of anti-marijuana campaigns began with unprompted recall of messages and discussion of marijuana use. Participants discussed the sources they trusted, and the sources they felt were not valid. Then the groups were shown and asked to comment on press and radio advertisements from the 1998/99 Drug Aware Marijuana campaign.

## **Results**

We found traditional sources such as parents, school and the Government were highly credible to non-user males and females. However, non-users did not believe that media messages had influenced their decision to reject marijuana use. While some non-users enjoyed receiving negative messages about marijuana because it reinforced their personal values, generally non-users did not believe that they were at risk of using marijuana under any

circumstances. They believed this position would not change if media campaigns advocating rejection of marijuana use ceased to exist.

Non-users held a number of beliefs about the reasons they had rejected marijuana use. Gender appeared to differentiate the experiences of non-users, but there was a consistent belief amongst all non-users that family upbringing was a significant influence on their decision-making. For the female non-users particularly, the decision to reject marijuana use was an issue of self-image; drug use did not fit with their perceptions of themselves as 'good girls'.

Users viewed media campaign messages with an array of strategies that disassociated the message from their personal situation: they were inaccurate; they were funded by government with no knowledge of the realities of youthful drug-use; government sources could not be trusted because they were biased toward a political agenda of prohibition.

The light users generally did not discount the accuracy of the information in the media messages they were shown, but felt these messages only related to heavy users. Light use was not perceived by this group to hold any real risks. The gateway theory risk, that being a light user will lead to heavier use and/or use of other illicit drugs, provoked some strong opposition.

Heavy users were more inclined to discount the accuracy of the information and to reject sources that were perceived to exaggerate the risks.

For users, there was a serious loss of credibility associated with the anti-marijuana messages that claim that marijuana will make you less social. Users in this study saw marijuana smoking as a very social behaviour, something they do with their friends at parties, on weekends or when they have nothing else to do.

The cognitive loss message was received differently depending on individual personal experience of marijuana. Some non-users were very concerned about the potential cognitive impacts of marijuana use. Some users accepted the idea that marijuana use affects motivation though it was considered an individual issue, not something that affects everyone. Some users felt affronted by the message. However, memory loss was one cognitive impact acknowledged as inevitable by most users.

Some users thought that medical practitioners would provide credible information, and both users and non-users felt the Internet

offered a private and confidential method for accessing the information they require.

## **Conclusions**

To conclude, there was very little support from both users and non-users for media campaigns such as 1998/1999 'Drug Aware' Western Australian Department of Health campaign. Both users and non-users felt that they were not influenced by the campaigns, although they may be underestimating the influence of advertising, in line with people's assessment of marketing's influence on them generally. More importantly, segmenting the sample according to levels of marijuana-use provided insight into the way experience with marijuana appears to affect source and message credibility. In our sample, young non-users generally accepted the message and the source but felt that the mass media approach had little or no influence on their decision to reject marijuana use. Young users felt that the messages were either inaccurate or lacked personal salience. Generally, a message relating to the effect on cognitive ability could be seen as believable by users provided it was not exaggerated, as this message was consistent with users' own experience. Government as a source for anti-drug campaigns was seen as unreliable by users.

We suggest that it is worthwhile to consider segmenting consumers of anti-drug campaigns into non-users and users. For non-users the strategy would be similar to the current one. For users, however, the emphasis should be on harm minimisation. The messages should be less alarmist and more credible (eg cognitive impairment) and the source should be more believable.

Alternative sources with more credibility that were suggested by the respondents were medical Internet websites and medical practitioners; these were both considered sources of valid and accurate information, in a confidential environment. There was recognition from both users and non-users that the Internet offered a range of views, and varying levels of accuracy, but there was a perception that balanced information can be found there, particularly from medically based web-sites. Websites can also direct young people to services that are available to assist them when and if problems occur.

Social marketers could use an 'upstream' approach by targeting general practitioners with the suggestion that it would be helpful for them to interact pro-actively with young people about illicit drug use. Education and resourcing of medical practitioners could provide an essential link between young people and important medical

information. Social marketing practitioners could consider using a well-known and admired medical source, such as Professor Fiona Stanley, Australian of the Year 2003, as a spokesperson in anti-drug campaigns.

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