

Film and Music Industries' Role in Promoting Opioid Abuse in Youth

AP Seminar

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Introduction

At first, a small white pill may not seem scary. Soon after, though, that one pill has become endless needles, powders, and gel capsules (*Opioid Facts, 2022*). Only then is it clear that one drug has a much bigger impact. In 2020, almost 92,000 people in the U.S. lost their lives to a drug overdose (*Overdose Death Rates, 2022*). It's no secret that drug abuse is a monumental issue, especially in the United States. According to the CDC, opioids are the main culprit of drug overdose deaths (Mattson et al., 2021). Synthetic pain relievers cause unnecessary loss of life and leave many drowning in the symptoms of addiction. Additionally, the United States Department of Health and Human Services reports that, in 2019, around 10.1 million people aged 12 or older misused opioids (*Opioid Crisis Statistics, 2021*). Many younger users will fall victim to opioid misuse partly because they don't know the power of these drugs. Prescription opioids are continuously falling into the wrong hands and influence certain groups disproportionately. Society as a whole has a responsibility to implement initiatives that will save lives combatting this problem. In order to protect impressionable youth from the glorification of drug use in the media, the American government and society must enforce stricter censorship and guidelines regarding content that depicts illicit drug use.

The Film Industry

Today's movies glorify opioid misuse and don't show the consequences of these actions. Susannah Stern, Ph.D, and her associate Lindsey Morr, published an article in the Journal of Health Communication proving that film today is highly saturated with prescription drug misuse. They studied media produced in 2007, 2008, and 2009 depicting teens. Their results revealed that, in the scenes containing drug use, it was extremely unlikely for characters to turn down invitations to do drugs (Stern and Morr, 2013). In an article for the New Amsterdam News,

Drugs and Movies: Kicking the Habit, it's asserted that, in the most popular and well-known movies, drugs are thrown around aimlessly. The study discussed in this article found that characters are shown partying and laughing, in a euphoric state while doing these drugs. However, none of these films depict the horrible impacts of addiction on those who routinely abuse opioids (Carter, 1999). Amy Bleakely, Ph.D., and Morgan Ellithorpe, Ph.D, conducted a longitudinal study of two thousand American teenagers and found that the majority modeled the risky behaviors they viewed on television. The two explain that, due to an absence of life experience and identity, teens are very likely to imitate the characters they look up to (Sloane, 2016). The authors propose that these shows begin to depict what they call “risk *and* responsibility”, that dangerous actions are paired with their negative consequences. These movies have an influence on many, and the majority of them are creating a false narrative. Brian D. Johnson, a filmmaker and producer, has spoken out on this issue too and argues that Hollywood really only shows the “highs” of using drugs in a party scene, but never shows all the lows (Johnson, 2001). This shows the younger watchers that they can abuse these powerful substances with no consequences. This sets them up for a life of failure and pain, as they become more attached to drugs. It's indisputable that the film industry has not approached the opioid crisis responsibly, which poses a large risk for younger generations. As demonstrated by multiple experts, movies marketed towards teens and young adults have a large impact and should not be taken lightly. Rather, it's critical that these depictions reflect more of reality and are held accountable when endorsing underage drug use.

Music Industry

Aside from cinema, this pattern is also prevalent in music. Music popular among younger listeners contains an unacceptable amount of drug references. Bridget Peteet, Ph.D, writes that

listeners aged 16-25 are most vulnerable when it comes to exposure (Peteet, 2021). However, she does point out that minority youth are less likely to let the music impact their behavior and attitudes. In *A High Note: Drug Misuse in Popular Rap Music*, the author argues that there's a direct correlation between the rap genre and rising substance use. As rap music has become more and more popular, so have drug abuse rates (Stickle, 2021). Ben Stickle researches criminal justice at Tennessee State University and advocates that the rap genre is specifically to blame for the glorification of drugs such as codeine, fentanyl, heroin, and more. His writing demonstrates the negative perspective of many professionals in the field. Additionally, in an article published through the International Society for General Semantics, authors Franklin B. Krohn and Frances L. Suazo explain that the rap community's focus on drugs and violence is their way of taking symbolic action against the challenges they face (Krohn & Suazo, 1995). Whatever the reason, these writers are clearly pushing a harmful perspective on impressionable youth.

Setting An Example

Despite the fact that many forms of media and art are still falsely portrayed drug abuse, many creators have changed the story-line for the better. It's beneficial to examine these successes in order to understand possible solutions to this crisis. Most recently, the hit show *Euphoria* has sparked debate over this topic. The show's main character is a 17-year old girl who's struggling with a drug use disorder (Law, 2022). However, the series shows her both partying and suffering. It dives deep into the relationships that are damaged from her repetitive abuse of opioids, especially fentanyl. The show was extremely popular and many felt as though it responsibly outlined a highschooler's tough journey through addiction. The success of *Euphoria* demonstrates how an ethical approach to this subject can still be a hit. According to Forbes, the season two premiere gained 13.1 million viewers (Tassi, 2022). *Euphoria* is a perfect

example of television depicting the reality of the opioid crisis. This show undoubtedly taught younger viewers about the danger of substance abuse. However, some may contend that watching this show didn't influence the choices that viewers make. Cristel Russel, Dale Russel, and Joel Grube, an impressive team of authors all with Phds, researched adolescent exposure to substance use extensively. They found that teens usually align their views on alcohol consumption, drug usage, and smoking based on the experiences of their favorite characters (Russel et al., 2009). In correlation with Ellithorpe and Bleakely's study, mentioned earlier, their work proves the importance of truth in film. It's critical that teens absorb the consequences of these dangerous actions, rather than watching characters who look just like them at the beginning of a downward spiral. However, a shift in societal and legal standards could be the answer to this issue. By raising awareness about the prevalence of risky media, the social response to it will become more harsh. This applies to both music and film. Additionally, the Classification and Ratings Administration could also take a stronger stance on their requirements.

Conclusion

In order to protect vulnerable youth from the opioid epidemic, greater censorship is necessary to combat false narratives surrounding drug misuse. Many rebut that artists and creators don't have the responsibility of protecting youth under their freedom of speech. While this is true, opioids are taking thousands upon thousands of lives in America each year, so the subject deserves to be dealt with decency and caution (Mattson et al., 2021). Most of society would agree that it's unethical to handle this problem lightly. A shift in perspective and opinion from the public would greatly impact how opioid addiction is portrayed in the media. Though there are many groups put at risk by the growth of opioids, protecting American youth can be fixed relatively simply, all that's needed is a change of perspective.

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