

For Your Health:

How Big Tobacco Markets to Youth on Screen Big and Small

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When I was a toddler in the late 1980s, cartoon characters advertising tobacco to children were everywhere. I regularly watched reruns of “Flintstones” promoting Winston cigarettes alongside Betty Boop offering a tray of Camels in “Who Framed Roger Rabbit?”. These are examples of product placement—one of the many crafty strategies tobacco marketers used once standalone cigarette commercials on TV were banned in 1970. At the time, the film producer Robert Richards offered an explanation for why this strategy would be successful when he said, “Film is far better than any commercial that has been run on television or in any magazine because the audience is totally unaware of any sponsor involvement.”

In 1997, after undeniable evidence that the cigarette-selling cartoon character Joe Camel targeted underage audiences, the Federal Trade Commission filed charges against the tobacco company R.J. Reynolds that used Joe for violating federal law. In 1998, 46 states, the District of Columbia, and 5 territories won the case against the four largest major tobacco companies, which ended the practice of cartoon characters advertising cigarettes to children. The settlement that resulted, which is the biggest in U.S. history, is called the Master Settlement Agreement and requires tobacco companies to provide compensation in perpetuity to compensate for their decades-long racketeering.

Nevertheless, 25 years later, the lines between entertainment and tobacco advertising continue to be blurred, with efforts to recruit new smokers among youth still rampant. According to the latest report on tobacco imagery in entertainment from Truth Initiative, America’s largest nonprofit public health organization, among the 15 shows in 2021 most popular among 15- to 24-year-olds, 60% contained depictions of tobacco and exposed 25 million young people to tobacco imagery. Additionally, 80% of the Oscar nominees for Best Picture in 2022 contained prominent tobacco imagery. Furthermore, the 2022 Emmy award-winning TV show, Euphoria, contained 200 tobacco depictions in its 2022 season. These figures demonstrate that the number of smoking and vaping depictions on screen has steadily increased.

In addition to product placement in film and TV, social media has given tobacco marketers a whole new venue for tobacco imagery and disinformation. The U.S. Surgeon General’s 2023 report shows that most teens (95%) use social media, and a 2022 Pew Research Center report shares that more than a third of teens admit to using at least one platform “almost constantly.” As a result, children who use social media frequently encounter images and disinformation about smoking and vaping that make it seem

glamorous, popular, harmless, sexy, and normal, whether posted directly by tobacco companies, or by “influencers” on platforms such as TikTok. A study by the University of Southern California’s Keck School of Medicine used artificial intelligence to analyze “influencer” content on TikTok between 2019 and 2022 and found as much as a 100% increase in posts that promoted e-cigarettes. Another analysis by the University of Southern California and the American Cancer Society found that exposure to tobacco content on social media doubles the odds of tobacco use among young people compared to those who are not exposed.

Furthermore, social media sites like TikTok and Instagram are largely unregulated, which allows for the return of a practice that has been outlawed elsewhere—that is, the renewed use of cartoons by tobacco companies, in which characters like Johnny Chimpo, Smurfs, and Batman depict and promote vaping. Experts know children are easily influenced by imagery in popular media, making them more likely than adults to recall tobacco ads, and therefore, more likely to smoke. A 2020 study in a scientific journal, *Preventative Medicine*, also shows that smoking in movies prompts young people to start using tobacco, including vaping.

With all the ways that Big Tobacco has infiltrated screens both big and small, what can be done to protect our youth from their marketing strategies? Standardized rating systems that identify the presence of smoking and vaping in content is one approach. Enforcement of youth marketing policies on social media platforms is another. Parents and caretakers can also have a role. They can be aware of the presence, messaging, and harmful effects that on-screen tobacco imagery can have on young people. They can also talk to their kids about the images they see of smoking and vaping across the Internet, on TV, and in film. And anyone can use hashtags to flag unmoderated posts by vape influencers to name them what they really are: #ads. The good news is that when it comes to the marketing strategies of Big Tobacco, there is a difference between the past and the present. While in the past, there wasn’t widespread awareness of their subtle and nefarious strategies, in the present, we are perfectly aware of them and their motivation as well—to ensnare youth in habits that are harmful to their health. With that knowledge and awareness, we have the tools to combat their efforts and protect our youth.

The Healthcare Consortium is a non-profit organization with a mission of improving access to healthcare and supporting the health and well-being of the residents in our rural community. The agency is located at 325 Columbia St. in Hudson. For more information, visit www.columbiahealthnet.org or call 518-822-8820.