

Study highlights benefits of media literacy

Taira Alabi / For the Pitt News | Posted: Wednesday, February 12, 2014 11:17 pm

All around the world, everywhere people look, they are constantly bombarded by media. While much of it is good media, many feel that the constant advertising for controversial substances such as cigarettes is in excess.

Brian Primack, a clinician and researcher at UPMC, conducted a research study between 2007 and 2012 that aimed to determine whether media literacy in teenagers could reduce teen smoking. Media literacy is the repertoire of competencies that enables people to analyze, evaluate and create messages. The Journal of School Health published the study in January.

Primack, who is also the Director of the Program for Research on Media and Health, said he and his team believe equipping teens with the skills to see through the pro-tobacco advertisements and other messages in the media will help them analyze the messages and decide whether or not to smoke.

Primack conducted the study on 1,170 ninth-grade students who were selected at random to take Primack's media literacy class over a semester in three Pittsburgh schools. Primack's media literacy class replaced a normal smoking-awareness class at the respective schools, all of which wished to remain anonymous.

"They are all in inner-city schools," Primack said. "We focused on them because that's where smoking is more of a problem."

The class focused on empowering the ninth graders to analyze and evaluate the messages that the media circulates.

According to Primack, media literacy is an issue that is becoming increasingly important in today's society that exposes teens to messages in social media, television and music.

Brenton Malin, a communications professor at Pitt, said media literacy enables viewers to discern how the media is made and how its messages should be received.

Malin added that media literate viewers should be thinking about what they're seeing and how they're supposed to be seeing it and then determine how the creator of the message wants them to see it.

"Critically thinking about how the media is made forces people to be more skeptical of what they are seeing," he said.

Malin said that regardless of an advertisement's goals, the media still has a heavy effect on individuals.

“Advertising affects everyone directly. It might not be that it gets people to buy products, but it definitely gets people to think things are cool,” he said.

Malin added that smoking has long been associated with being cool and rebellious.

“It’s one of those things that if you want to make someone seem cool, you can show them smoking,” he said.

Advertisements for smoking have been widely curbed by sanctions such as the surgeon general’s warning and the ban of cigarette ads on television. On April 1, 1970, then-U.S. President Richard Nixon signed legislation that banned cigarette advertising on television and radio.

According to Primack’s results, becoming more literate in media could, in fact, alter teenagers’ decisions.

The study showed positive results in terms of responses to media. After the class, students took a survey and participated in interviews with Primack and his team.

Primack’s study found that children who took his media literacy class were less likely to smoke than children who took a standard smoking prevention course. These same children were also more likely to pay attention and say that they liked the class.

“We dealt with smoking because it’s a no-brainer. It’s a no-brainer that it’s a huge public-health issue and it’s bad for you in every possible way,” Primack said.

Pitt students who listen to popular music are familiar with references to marijuana, LSD, MDMA and other controversial drugs.

“Smoking is a good place to start,” Primack said. “The messages are more complex — with substances like marijuana and alcohol — and that makes them more complex to study.”

Rebecca Sappir, a sophomore majoring in accounting and finance, said that while she recognizes media messages, she’s never really been influenced by them.

“I think I am mostly affected by the people I am around,” Sappir said.

Sappir added that she felt media messages could especially affect young people.

“I think that they definitely could be affected, since [the media is] probably targeting these ads at them. As you get older, you are around [substances], and you can make your own opinion,” Sappir said.

Primack explained his goals for the project and how he felt about media literacy.

“The big gap that we were trying to fill was that nobody has really done research demonstrating that there are benefits to media literacy,” Primack said.

Primack added that the more informed individuals are about what is around them, the better they can

evaluate what is presented to them.

“I think that media literacy really does give [teenagers] life skills. I want them to be ready to face what they see every day,” Primack said.