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Unintended Messages in Online Advertising to Youth: Illicit Drug Imagery in a Canadian Sports Marketing Campaign

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: We assessed the potential for harmful messages in online advertisements targeted to youth, using the example of the Canadian “Light It Up” marketing campaign from a large sports corporation.

Methods: We undertook a cluster randomized controlled trial of 20 secondary school classes in Montreal, Canada. Classes were randomly allocated to view a “Light It Up” advertisement ($n = 205$) or a neutral comparison advertisement ($n = 192$). The main outcome measures were self-reports of illicit drug messages in the advertisements.

Results: Of the students, 22.9% reported that the “Light It Up” advertisement contained illicit drug messages compared with 1.0% for the comparison advertisement (relative risk, 22.0; 95% confidence interval, 6.5–74.9).

Conclusions: Although meant to promote sports, youth in this study believed that the “Light It Up” advertisement was related to illicit drugs. The campaign illustrates how advertisements may inadvertently market unwanted behaviors to children.

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IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTION

Companies increasingly market to children and youth, but unintentional impacts of marketing on the Web are rarely evaluated. In this randomized trial of an online sports marketing campaign, youth unexpectedly reported that “Light It Up” advertisements promoted illicit drugs. Marketing to youth online requires attention of researchers and health authorities.

Advertising on the Internet is a large industry. Corporations use the Internet to market their services and products to a wide range of people, including children and youth. Young people in particular spend more time online than adults [1], easily adopt Internet-based technology, and may be more vulnerable to online

advertising [2]. This has contributed to research on the role of the Internet in promoting tobacco [2], alcohol [3,4], and food consumption [5]. Although the extent of influence that Internet advertising has on children remains to be determined, it is well established that advertising through traditional media has a large impact on the behaviors of children and youth [5–8]. There is every reason to suspect that the Internet has a similar effect.

Very little research has focused on inadvertent effects of online marketing to youth. Corporate advertisements are developed to sell a product or service, typically with little effort to assess adverse consequences of the messages being conveyed [9]. Large companies have extensive budgets to develop marketing campaigns that reach their target population, often with little regard for health impacts on the consumer. Furthermore, laws to regulate

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marketing are poorly adapted to the Internet's growing role in marketing to children [2]. These factors together create conditions that can facilitate harmful advertising to children online, even by companies that market safe or desirable products. The objective of this study was to illustrate the potential for unexpected negative effects of online advertising to young people, using the example of a large sports corporation that marketed hockey products to children and youth on the Web in Canada from 2003 to 2004. We analyze secondary data from a previous randomized trial that assessed how youth perceived the campaign [10].

Methods

Study design

We invited two high schools located in metropolitan Montreal, Canada, to participate in a cluster randomized trial. The trial tested advertisements used by the Nike multinational sports corporation in an online hockey marketing campaign called "Light It Up" targeting children and youth in Canada in 2003–2004 [11,12]. The company recruited children and youth at skating rinks, where they provided passwords to the Web site, and invited participants to an online contest that involved viewing "Light It Up" advertisements from home. The campaign elicited concern from public health authorities because of the ambiguous messages and smoke-like appearance of the online advertisements that may inadvertently have promoted smoking [10]. A cluster randomized control trial was therefore designed to determine whether children and youth perceived smoking messages in "Light It Up" advertisements [10]. Data on students' perceptions were collected using open-ended questions that made no mention of tobacco, and results showed that students did indeed perceive smoking messages in a "Light It Up" advertisement compared with a neutral version of the same advertisement containing fewer tobacco-related messages [10]. Post hoc, it appeared that students perceived the advertisements also contained illicit drug messages, an unexpected finding that is the object of the present article.

In the original trial, we randomly allocated 20 classes containing 397 students from grades 7 to 11 to view an exposure advertisement or a neutral comparison advertisement. We downloaded the exposure advertisement from the company's Web site. We selected a typical "Light It Up" advertisement featuring a hockey net, available for youth to download to their computer as wallpaper (Figure 1). To create a neutral comparison advertisement, we changed the "Light It Up" slogan to "Go For It" and digitally modified the color content to attenuate the potentially smoky appearance. The brand name was removed from both the exposure and comparison advertisements. Students responded to an in-class paper-and-pencil questionnaire containing open-ended questions on their perception of the content, appearance, and messages in the advertisements. The detailed study questionnaire is available elsewhere [10]. Additional examples of "Light It Up" advertisements (not evaluated in our study) are available online [11,12] and from the authors on request. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Montreal Hospital Centre. Students and parents provided signed voluntary consent.

Procedures and statistical analysis

For the present analyses, a research assistant extracted responses related to illicit drugs from the questionnaires. There was 96% agreement with a second assistant who extracted messages

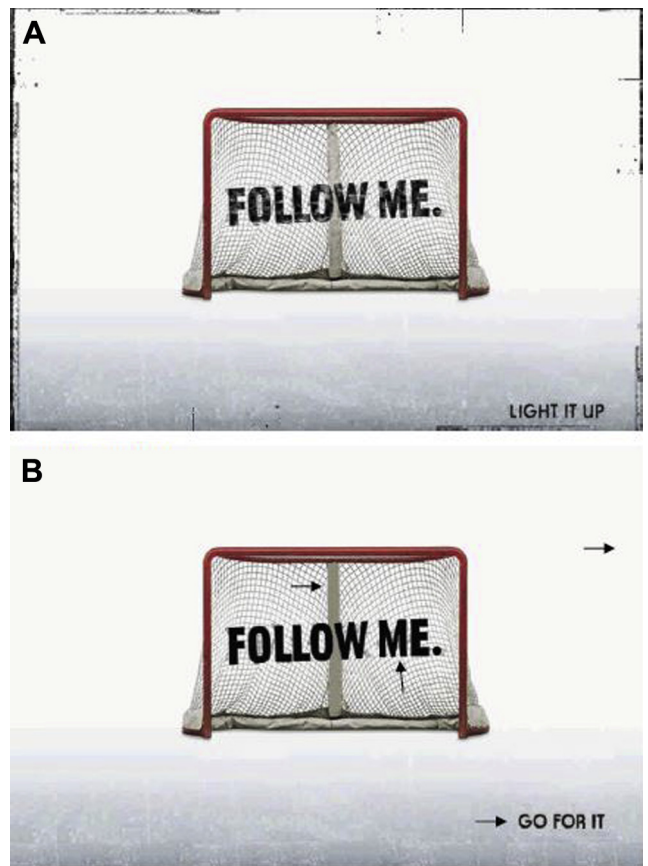


Figure 1. Exposure and comparison advertisements. Images of the advertisements shown to students. (A) Exposure advertisement. (B) Neutral (control) advertisement. Arrows point to digitally modified areas: (1) central pole was colored gray using a shade from the lower part of the pole; (2) FOLLOW ME was blackened; (3) rectangular marks on outmost edges were removed; and (4) LIGHT IT UP was replaced by GO FOR IT. Copyright of the original image: NIKE, Inc. Reproduced with permission from Auger et al. [10].

from a random 10% subsample of questionnaires. Students with any written statement directly referring to illicit drugs were scored as positive responses. We defined three main outcomes, including any report that the advertisement (1) slogan referred to illicit drug use; (2) contained images of illicit drugs; and (3) was promoting drugs. These three outcomes were not mutually exclusive. We therefore included a final outcome category for any report of illicit drug messages (yes vs. no illicit drug content). We calculated the relative risk (RR) and 95% confidence interval (CI) for reports of illicit drug content for the exposure versus comparison advertisements using generalized estimating equations for binary outcomes, accounting for classroom-level clustering. Statistical models were adjusted for sex, grade, smoking status, and parental education [10]. Analyses were undertaken using SAS 9.1 software (SAS Institute Inc., Cary, NC).

Results

Students shown the "Light It Up" advertisement were more likely to report that the slogan referred to drugs compared with the "Go For It" comparison (8.3% vs. 1.6%; RR, 5.3; 95% CI, 1.8–15.9; Table 1). Students reported that the "Light It Up"

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